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Discernment for one and for all

One of the bonuses of being involved in vocation publishing for the last 13 years is that I—a lay-woman with a husband and three kids—can glean the best elements of religious life and think about whether or how to make them work in family life. Some things are best left to the celibate lifestyle. (Babies—for instance—have a habit of interrupting regularly scheduled prayer times.) But other elements of religious life can enrich all of us in the church. The notion of discernment is one of those elements. As vocation directors well know, discernment—careful, prayerful consideration of life decisions—is for everyone.

Vocation ministers should pat themselves on the back for their role in moving the church toward a “discernment culture.” The entire church stands to gain from a widespread concept that life decisions deserve to be made in light of Gospel values. A systematic process for praying through life choices is of tremendous value to the entire body of Christ. As my children move into their teen years, I look forward to teaching them how to discern decisions about which high school and college to attend, what to study, what career path to pursue, how best to give their lives to God. I expect I’ll be flipping through some back issues of *VISION* and *HORIZON* to copy the same articles I once copy-edited.

As I reviewed the articles for this edition of *HORIZON*, I found myself contemplating major life

decisions I’ve made. Without calling it “discernment,” I realize that I often instinctively followed the steps our writers suggest. I can even recall my own experience of “false fears,” and I’m grateful to Warren Sazama, SJ for naming the anxiety that attacked my husband and me as we embarked on a lay mission commitment. An older and wiser lay missionary validated our choice and reassured us that “being called” wasn’t just for priests and nuns.

I applaud vocation ministers’ efforts to share discernment skills with others in the church, through programs like Linda Bechen’s “Christian decision making workshop” outlined on page 29. The Catholic “culture of discernment” that you now promote as vocation ministers will make us a better church—both today and tomorrow. Discernment skills in the minds and hearts of young adults will help bring people into the fold of your communities. *And* they will make for better marriages, career choices, parishes—a stronger church.

Before you get to our discernment articles, however, you’ll find a final treat from Catherine Bertrand’s last days as executive director of the National Religious Vocation Conference. Our editorial board asked her to share her thoughts about new and old directions in vocation ministry, and she has left us with some substantive reflections.

—Carol Schuck Scheiber, Editor

Taking stock of vocation ministry: Where have we been? Where are we going?

by Catherine Bertrand, SSND

The end of June, 2002 may hold no special significance for most people, but for me it meant the end of my 10 years as executive director of the National Religious Vocation Conference. Before I left I was invited to write about my observations, gleanings, learnings and projections. What a challenge and what a unique opportunity. It occurred to me that this article could be cathartic for me, but first and foremost I wanted it to be helpful for readers.

Although the official description for this next phase of my life is called “sabbatical,” right now a more accurate word would be “transition.” I just spent several days cleaning, sorting, and packing. I’m writing on my laptop, surrounded by boxes ready for moving in a week or so. These are anything but my favorite activities, but I always find that some surprises are unearthed in the sorting. One was the text of a talk I had been asked to give about 18 years ago, shortly after I became a vocation director. I shared my guiding principles in working with candidates, involving community members, and in staying healthy in this ministry.

I found myself smiling as I read what I had written, recognizing that I still believe in what my much younger self had said. My final two statements were these: “I am convinced that there is life after vocation ministry, so I need to be aware of how long is a good amount of time to be involved in this work. I hope to make this work look so exciting that others will be standing in line to do it.”

Almost 20 years later, I’m compelled to say that this ministry has been a graced experience and that these last 10 years in particular have shaped and changed my life in a variety of ways. I had no idea what it would mean when I said “yes” to this invitation in 1992. Nor did I ever imagine that I would serve in this

position for 10 years. I came to NRVC convinced that this was a ministry worth doing for the sake of God’s people and future church, and I intended to contribute in any way I could. I can honestly say I have as much enthusiasm for this ministry as when I started. As I leave I hope this article provides encouragement and points of consideration for vocation ministers. I want to share some observations I’ve made over the years in areas that have serious impact on religious life and vocation ministry, and I want to raise some questions as well. This is not an exhaustive list of important topics, nor am I the last word on the subject.

Community life

I have concluded that in considering many factors, nothing impacts the religious life vocation scene as dramatically as religious life itself. When I began as director of NRVC, my first major task was to finish planning the upcoming NRVC Study Days, an event which took place biennially. David J. Nygren, CM, an organizational psychologist, and Miriam Ukeritis, CSJ, a clinical psychologist, were the presenters, having recently completed the Religious Life Futures Project.¹ This study addressed the question, “What changes must yet occur if religious life is to remain a vital gift to the church into the next millennium?” The conclusions from this study indicated that if religious life was to continue to be a vital force in the church and world, dramatic changes needed to occur in most religious

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congregations in the U.S. Fidelity to the spirit of the founder and responsiveness to critical, unmet needs are basic to the ongoing mission of religious communities. The authors went on to say, "While most congregations have engaged in much study and have made great efforts, the absence of corporate commitment to meeting currently unmet needs in the light of Gospel imperatives stands in contrast to the collective vision and action inspired by God that marked the birth of most congregations."

In meeting with many, many communities of women and men these last years, there is indeed a renewed effort to see value in community life and to choose it. There is an obvious desire in women and men reli-

If we are ever going to choose or re-choose community life in whatever expression that may take (under one roof or not), we are in desperate need of new skills for living with and relating to each other.

gious (especially active apostolic communities) to define themselves by the life they live as much as by the work they do. These efforts are reflected in further conversation and exploration of the major aspects of community life including the definition and understanding of community, place and space for adult community living, common prayer, corporate ministry commitments, what constitutes membership, etc. Many communities are engaging in the process of theological reflection as a way to address tough issues which can be divisive.

I continue to be convinced that if we are ever going to choose or re-choose community life in whatever expression that may take (under one roof or not), we are in desperate need of new skills for living with and relating to each other. This conviction prompted my writing an article for *HORIZON* suggesting 10 areas for possible skill development.² Of course the prevailing question is whether or not we are willing to learn new skills. Have we settled for happy indifference in relating to each other at times? How much do we want to re-choose each other in community? How can we achieve a deeper integration of our life and ministry

within the context of active apostolic, monastic, or contemplative religious life?

Other attitudes and concerns surrounding vocation ministry are expressed in a variety of ways. I hear concern expressed by some religious that the attention given to community life is too "self-focused" and somehow detracts from the emphasis on mission and ministry. Although space does not allow for specifics, I also want to mention that how men's communities address community issues differs in a number of ways from how women choose to do so. The Futures Project asked this question, "Are the necessary changes occurring which affirm that particular congregations, and religious life as a whole, are vital gifts to the church today and for the future?" I see this as a key question that continues to beg a response.

Image of religious women and men

If I had been paid for every discussion or meeting I attended that focused on the image of religious, I would be very wealthy. The question about image is multifaceted. One facet focuses on the visibility or lack of visibility of religious. Due to the increased questions raised by young people interested in religious life, this is a front-burner question that will not go away. Who are we and where are we? Many communities now have communications directors, and some hire public relations firms in order to find ways to effectively tell the public about their way of life. Many communities make real efforts at ongoing communication between vocation ministers and communication directors. Many religious communities have Web pages, and some have chat rooms for interested young people. Although opinions vary about the value of advertising, I just talked with two young women who are considering my own congregation, and it was in reading *VISION* magazine that the seed was first planted. The quality of advertising by both men and women religious has vastly improved over the years.

Recently several groups collaborated to explore the image question further. This effort involved the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, the Conference of Major Superiors of Men, the National Communicators Network of Women Religious, and the National Religious Vocation Conference. The group conducted additional research with young adult Catholics. The findings seem to indicate that although young people feel positive about religious women and men, they have very little knowledge about religious life to

support that positive sense. The next steps of this collaborative project are in the making.

Anecdotal information continues to indicate that many young people desire a greater visibility for religious, but it is more than a matter of whether or not people wear habits (especially veils), and there is little or no evidence indicating that dress alone determines which communities are able to draw and sustain people. This is an area where some communities would prefer to let sleeping dogs lie. Today's young people seek visual symbols and signs that can speak to them and to others. Are community members willing to hear and respond to their questions in exploring ways of expressing who we are?

Preferential option for the young

There is a growing awareness that in many communities members are no longer in ministries or situations where there are young people. Many religious are involved in ministries focusing on urgent needs but that allow little contact with young people. Some communities are consciously choosing ministry in order to reconnect with the young. This is not just about future members, it is about future church. And religious also need what young people can offer. At the same time, many religious are realizing just what a challenge it is to reconnect with the young. It means going where they are and not waiting for them to come. It means taking serious strides to understand Generation X and the Millennial generation.

Yes, older candidates who are some of our newest members are indeed a gift, but there is a tremendous need for the new life that comes in younger people, with the world view and experience that they bring. After so many years in this ministry, I can say with conviction that the concern regarding the need for new members and younger members is not just one issue among many. It is fundamental to the future life and mission of a community, if in fact that community still believes in the value of and need for vowed membership. I continue to hear questions about other "forms" of membership, temporary commitment, etc., and I know there are communities exploring these possibilities. Many communities continue to invite associates, and they do indeed embody the charisms of so many communities in a variety of ways. But an overwhelming number of religious, both women and men, believe that permanent vowed commitment is still viable and attractive. The flip side of this coin is acknowledging that many young people find it insulting to be seen as

incapable of permanent commitment. The bottom line seems to be: are we willing and committed to inviting another generation to consider this way of life?

I continue to believe that with this Millennial generation there is much potential for future religious life

I've often encouraged congregations to invite young people for an afternoon before extending the invitation for a lifetime. Although I say this somewhat in jest, many communities are out of practice in knowing how to be with young people. "Just us" has become all too comfortable and predictable.

and future church. However, if communities accept younger people, they will be challenged to allow them to grow up in the community, and community members need to ask themselves how willing they are to be stretched and changed in the process. I've often encouraged the congregations with whom I've met, especially those who haven't experienced younger people in community for a number of years, to invite young people for an afternoon before extending the invitation for a lifetime. Although I say this somewhat in jest, many communities are out of practice in knowing how to be with young people. "Just us" has become all too comfortable and predictable. If young people are being drawn to our communities, we need to find ways to assure them in some way of contact with their peers. Young people today are accustomed to amazing diversity—in age, race, sexuality, and culture. Are communities really ready to receive them well?

Many religious have tremendous energy in choosing the future. Age is not an obstacle. Our senior members play a key role in vocation efforts. And young people seem eager to explore religious life. Yet, here we are in one of the worst scandals that the American church has ever experienced. I've heard vocation ministers comment that never before has there been such a need for a national ad campaign to say something about ourselves when so much is being said about us. Vocation ministers are dealing with many of the questions that parents and young people are asking in regard to this scandal. It is too early to judge the impact that this will have on the vocation scene, but anecdotal infor-

mation seems to indicate that for a variety of reasons, many young people aren't particularly affected by what is happening.

Tom Beaudoin, a Generation X theologian, pointed out in a recent article, "Before the present crisis, young Catholics were already very likely to make up our own minds about church teaching, to claim 'spirituality' against 'religion,' to express dissatisfaction through detachment rather than dissent, to choose a privatized Catholic identity over protest. The sexual abuse fiasco will only deepen these already-existing trends."³ Unlike the response of young people, we may be back to square one when it comes to some parents.

The greatest stumbling block that I see preventing carefully selected and well-suited vocation ministers from doing effective vocation ministry is that they are expected to wear too many hats. They are asked to be involved in too many ministries.

Again it is too early to be certain, but there are some early indications that parents will be more hesitant in encouraging their children to consider priesthood or religious life.

As religious we hope that we are known primarily by who and how we are as a community, carrying out mission through ministry. It demands real creativity, and perhaps even some soul searching, to find ways to share with people, especially the young, just what it means to be engaged in mission together. Members of religious communities are being challenged to make a preferential option for the young. Vocation ministers are constantly encouraging members of their communities to be in relationship with young people, because they can't choose what they don't know. My hope is that even with all of the recent allegations, we will not be afraid to reach out to the young and to their parents.

Tom Beaudoin in the previously cited article says, "There are understandable reasons for letting our mission to young Catholics lie fallow at this time. Yet I think the opposite is the wiser but more difficult course. We can take this time to listen. We can take this opportunity to teach about Vatican II's notion of

the hierarchy of truths, about celibacy (as a unique charism), and about sexuality (as both gift and mystery)."

Candidate assessment and vocation resources

How we help potential religious life candidates move through a discernment and application process has changed by leaps and bounds in the years I've been in vocation ministry. I believe that NRVC members see themselves as belonging to a professional organization where certain standards are expected. There are numerous workshops, in-service experiences, convocations, and summer institutes which provide vocation ministers with opportunities for on-going education to develop the skills and confidence for doing the critical and privileged work of assessing candidates. Now, more than ever, communities are challenged to carefully select vocation ministers, and also to see that they have the necessary background to do the work being asked of them. Under the direction of Father Ray Carey, many vocation ministers are now trained to use the behavioral assessment approach in working with candidates. And of course NRVC has a vocation directors' manual that one can only hope to lift.

The greatest stumbling block that I see preventing carefully selected and well-suited vocation ministers from doing effective vocation ministry is that they are expected to wear too many hats. They are asked to be involved in too many ministries. Communities with personnel shortages are faced with the challenge of selecting a vocation minister who is full time. I continue to be convinced that it is not a part-time ministry.

In the last 10 years, countless vocation awareness programs and materials have been created, broadening the base of involvement in vocation ministry to include just about everyone. This is due to a large extent to the National Coalition for Church Vocations (directed by Diane Poplawski, OP), in which NRVC serves as a partner. The NRVC standing committees have also played a key role in developing resources that can be used in a multitude of ways, especially in the work with young adults, parents, and with candidates of the Asian-Pacific, Latino-Hispanic, and black cultures.

A number of years ago, the board of NRVC concluded that we could no longer be concerned just with vocation ministers without including other key people and groups in the conversation. We have held fast to that commitment in focusing our recent convocations on young adults, parents, community leaders and mem-

bers. The recent Continental Congress for Vocations was one more opportunity to bring many key people together. I'm confident that this will continue. The collaborative way is the only way to do vocation ministry.

Community involvement in vocation ministry

This is an area of profound change over the last 10 years, and it is so exciting to see. Community leaders have played a major role in helping this to happen and holding members accountable for the future of the community and its mission.

A phrase that has been coined is "creating a vocation culture." We also are hearing about the need to create a culture for discernment. Basically, new efforts are being made to create an environment in which adult Catholics feel supported in helping young people explore the options that are available to them. In turn, young people will feel supported in their response to how God is working in their lives. Priesthood and religious life are viable options in this vocation culture. Many community members are participating in the creation of a vocation culture in which they help young people learn about, experience, and perhaps even choose this way of life.

In the last several years, many religious have reclaimed the fact that this is a life worth living and worth sharing with others. Many religious have a deep desire to respond to the yearning of young people who clearly make it known that they are looking for a way of life, not just a way to work. Along with that, many communities of women and men have addressed the question, "Do you believe that you have a future, and if so, what will you do about it?"

I have shared in another article the common elements I've found in communities that are able to attract and sustain new members.⁴ We cannot say now as perhaps we could 10 years ago, that we don't know how to respond to the reality of fewer members coming to communities. It is indeed God who invites, but we *have* a pretty good idea of what it might take to be able to attract and sustain new members. The key question is whether or not we are willing to *do* what it takes. Busyness is an issue, and the fact of the matter is, new members take time and energy, and for that matter, they deserve our time and energy. Some communities are making commitments to "tithe time for vocations." There is no lack of good will among religious, but is there enough energy, desire, and trust that this is worth it, so that we are moved to action?

Recently I read a book by Margaret J. Wheatley, *Turning to One Another...Simple Conversations to Restore Hope in the Future*. One chapter is entitled, "What is my faith in the future?" She points out that for many serious problems, human ingenuity has already discovered a solution. We aren't lacking solutions. What we lack is the will to implement them. She goes on to point out that the gap between knowing and doing is only bridged by the human heart. "If we are willing to open our hearts to what's really going on, we will find the energy to become active again."⁵

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Collaboration, hope and gratitude

As I bring this article to a conclusion, I ask myself the question, what else do I most want to say to those who may read this? I've said plenty already about what I've observed and experienced in this ministry. And I've included some questions, considerations, and future challenges that hopefully will invite more conversation and action. There are three words that in a sense tie all of this together for me: collaboration, hope, and gratitude.

I find the word "collaborate" tremendously overused. I'm tired of it, but I'm no less committed to the profound reality that it suggests than I was 10 years ago when I began this ministry. In fact I've jokingly said to people, "Please write on my tombstone, 'She did her best to collaborate.'" It has probably been the most challenging aspect of these 10 years and the most rewarding. I have had the unique opportunity to work with so many leaders of other national organizations in this country and beyond—campus ministers, Serrans, parents, young people, other religious, bishops, educators, dioceses and eparchies, and the list goes on. I have been invited time and again to share what I have to offer, but I have been profoundly touched by how others have gifted me and taught me. And sometimes the gift came from the person and place I least expected. Collaboration is worth it, but it comes with a

high price tag. The search for common ground is essential and needs to happen honestly and with a willingness and ability to deal with conflict. It can make us a better, and hopefully, a holier and healthier church.

I was asked to write an article a few years ago called "Hope in vocation ministry is not an oxymoron."⁶ In that article I said that in my experience vocation ministers are the most hope-filled, enthusiastic people you will ever find. I still believe this, and I'm convinced that vocation ministry is a privilege. Yes, it has its challenges, but even at this critical time in our church's history, I can honestly say I am hopeful about

I'm convinced that vocation ministry is a privilege. Yes, it has its challenges, but even at this critical time in our church's history, I can honestly say I am hopeful about the nature and work of vocation ministry in the next years, and I am hopeful about the contribution that vocation ministers can make to religious life and to our suffering church.

the nature and work of vocation ministry in the next years, and I am hopeful about the contribution that vocation ministers can make to religious life and to our suffering church. As we are reminded so often, this is not just a numbers game, but there is renewed interest and enthusiasm on the part of so many—young and old alike. As we strive to create a vocation culture, I pray that we will be a more humble and honest church into which we will invite young people to live and minister. I hope that as religious communities we will be more committed to being about the mission of Jesus in the diverse expressions of our founders as these charisms find life in the living members today. God will not abandon us.

It happened that the last three days of my 10 years were spent facilitating and presenting at a vocation symposium of the School Sisters of Notre Dame. In so many ways, it seemed an appropriate way to conclude this ministry. At the end of the symposium, I was given an engraved, framed picture of our founder, Blessed Theresa. The inscription includes a quote from one of our founder's letters and it reads, "Cathy, never

let the gratitude for your vocation die in your heart, since it is a special grace from God."⁷ These 10 years have indeed been a grace from God, and it is with a grateful heart that I give thanks. +

1. *Origins*, September 24, 1992, Vol. 22, No. 15.

2. *HORIZON*, Spring 1998, Vol. 23, No. 3 .

3. *America*, June 3-10, 2002.

4. *HORIZON*, Fall 2001, Vol. 27, No. 1

5. Wheatley, Margaret J., *Turning to One Another: Simple Conversations to Restore Hope in the Future*, Berrett-Koehler, 2002.

6. *HORIZON*, Fall 1999, Vol. 25, No. 1.

7. Letter no. 5304.

Discerning a religious vocation: some reflections

by **William A. Barry, SJ**

How do we help someone who has heard the word “discernment,” but has no clue what it refers to? First, let me note that “discernment” has become a buzzword that often seems just a pious-sounding term for “decision-making.” I want to use the word from an Ignatian standpoint. In the *Spiritual Exercises* Ignatius worked out rules aimed at helping people discern the difference between various movements that can roil a person who is trying to live a life in harmony with God. We presume that a person who is wondering whether he or she has a vocation to a particular form of religious life is trying to live in harmony with God. But we need to note some assumptions in order to help.

First, the question of discernment in an Ignatian context presumes that God is actively at work in this world to bring about God’s intention in creating it in all its particulars. God has a purpose in creation and is actively working out that purpose. I have argued that God’s purpose or dream is to draw all of us into God’s own relational life, to draw us to live in friendship with God, and in harmony with all other human beings and with the whole created universe. Anyone who wants to discern a vocation from God has to have a real belief, not just a notional belief, that God has a purpose in creation, a purpose we can at least dimly discover. Secondly, we can be in tune with God’s purpose or out of tune with it. That is, we can live in harmony with God’s purpose or dream, or out of harmony, or somewhere in between. The latter is probably our ordinary state; parts of our lives are in tune, parts out of tune. The person who wants to discern a vocation from God needs to have a strong desire to live in tune with God’s purpose in creation. Third, it is not easy to live in tune with God’s purpose or dream. We have divided hearts, for one thing. We want to be

in harmony with God’s dream, but we also want things that are inimical to that harmony. For example, I want to be a Notre Dame sister, but I also want to continue my affair with John. Ambivalence is our middle name when it comes to desire to live in tune with God’s purpose. In addition, Ignatius believed, as did Jesus before him, that our hearts are a battleground fought over by God and the evil spirit. God’s Spirit tries to lead us into harmony with God’s dream; the evil spirit tries to throw us out of tune. Anyone who wants to discern whether he or she has a calling from God has to be aware of the divided nature of the human heart. Fourth, discernment requires attention to inner states, to the movements of one’s heart and mind. Ignatius’ own first foray in discernment illustrates all these assumptions.

Learning from Ignatius’s experience

As he lay on a sickbed recovering from battle wounds that almost ended his life, he began to read, not the romantic novels he craved, but the only books available, a life of Christ and a book of lives of saints. Ignatius was a great daydreamer. In one set of daydreams he engaged in great deeds as a knight to win the favor of a great lady. After he began reading about Christ and the saints, he engaged in another set of daydreams in

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which he imitated the saints in following Christ and did even greater deeds than the saints. For a long time he did not notice any difference in his reactions to these two sets of daydreams. Yet there was a difference. During the daydreams of doing great deeds of valor as a knight he felt exhilarated, but after them he felt “dry and unhappy.” During the daydreams about imitating the saints, he also felt exhilarated, but after these he “remained happy and joyful.” He then says:

He did not consider nor did he stop to examine this difference until one day his eyes were partially opened and he began to wonder at this difference and to reflect upon it. From experience he knew that some thoughts left him sad while others made him happy, and little by little he came to perceive the different spirits that were moving him; one coming from the devil, the other coming from God.

Note that Ignatius came to believe that God was communicating to him in these daydreams, that God wanted to draw him in a certain direction, that God’s Spirit and the devil were at work in his heart and mind, and that he needed to pay attention to the movements of his heart in order to find the direction of God’s leading. Note, also, that his discernment turned on the quality of his feelings—happiness or sadness. From this experience and others that occurred as he tried to follow God’s lead, Ignatius distilled rules for discerning the spirits and deciding which of the many movements of his mind and heart are from God, which not. (An aside: Ignatius’ love of the examination of conscience derives, I believe, from this need to be discerning about God’s active presence in our lives.)

Now, how can we use the rules he developed to help young people desiring to discern whether God is calling them to religious life? First, we have to help them to grasp the truth of the assumptions and to begin to pay attention to what is happening in their inner world. This will take some time since so much of our culture is geared to block out awareness of our inner life. But God is active, trying to get the attention of everyone to his presence and purpose in creation. Vocation directors need to spend time helping young people to pay attention to their inner experience, to take time for quiet and contemplation, to become aware of their deeper desires. Second, if they themselves are not experienced spiritual directors, they need to have the names of directors who believe in the assumptions mentioned and want to help people to pay attention to their experience and to develop a more profound and intimate relationship with God. In spiritual direction people will be encouraged to ask God to enlighten them about their place in God’s purpose for the world.

First, examine your ordinary life

Now let me turn to what I call “rules of thumb” for discernment. The first rule of thumb I suggest is that one look at one’s ordinary orientation with regard to God and to one’s life as a Christian. Do I try to lead a good Christian life insofar as possible? Or am I someone who cuts corners in my Christian life? As an example of the latter, think of a young man who sleeps around and does not take any relationship seriously. Suppose that he were to try to engage in prayer. What do you think would happen in his prayer periods? Probably he would begin to feel pangs of conscience as he became aware of how good God has been to him.

Vocation directors need to spend time helping young people to pay attention to their inner experience, to take time for quiet and contemplation, to become aware of their deeper desires.

He might also feel some relief from these pangs of conscience with thoughts like this: “Sex is a God-given gift, and no one is hurt by my behavior.” Ignatius would say that the pangs of conscience come from God and that the rationalizations that give relief come from the evil spirit or from the man’s own unwillingness to change his lifestyle.

What about the person who is trying to live a decent Christian life, even if not perfectly—say a young woman who is wondering whether she has a religious vocation? When she begins to pay attention to her inner life, she might feel great joy and peace and look forward to periods of prayer. Then she might experience some anxieties, feeling that she is not holy enough to expect God to speak to her, or that taking time for prayer like this is a luxury she can ill afford. I remember a woman who had three very moving and wonderful days of prayer on a retreat but suddenly had the thought, “This is too high-falutin for the likes of me.” As a result her prayer became dry and boring until she realized that fear of too much closeness to God had produced the disturbing thought. Ignatius would say that in a case like this the positive experiences come from God, or the good spirit who wants to make everything easy for her, and that the troubling thoughts come from the bad spirit, or from her fears of close-

ness to God. God is always inviting us into intimacy, to join in his purpose for creation. That means that even the likes of us are being drawn into a relationship of intimacy with God.

So the first rule of thumb urges one to establish the general orientation of one's life. If I am not in tune with God in my life, I can expect that God will try to get me to change my life; I will feel pangs of conscience about some of my behavior. These pangs of conscience, however, will not lead to anxious, scrupulous examination of all my motivations; they will gently point out where I have gone wrong. They will be trying to get me to notice the rhythms of life that make me more alive and deeply content. In my own life I had been having niggling questions about the amount of my drinking, but I did not take them seriously until one day in retreat I realized that my use of alcohol was getting in the way of intimacy with Jesus. The bad spirit or my own desire not to change will try to whisper blandishments in my ear to convince me that all is OK. For example, in my case I would push away the niggling thoughts by noting that I was able to carry on a full and active life and never got drunk. On the other hand, if I am trying to live in tune with God's intention, God will console me, help me to move forward and encourage me in my efforts to live a good life. But the bad spirit or my own fear of closeness to God will try to make me leery of developing a closer relationship with God, as in the example of the woman who thought, "This is too high-falutin for me." Another example of thoughts and feelings that are not from God: I am trying to live a good life, but I am plagued by worries and anxieties about past sins and about whether I have confessed them enough.

Second, be aware of God's consolation

The second rule of thumb follows from the first. God wants us to be happy and fulfilled. He wants us to dance to the divine music and rhythm, even through the difficult days. But the only way we can be happy and fulfilled is to be in tune with God's desire for the world and for us. For those who are trying to lead a life in tune with God's intention, consolation is the order of the day, for the most part. This does not mean that life will be without pain and suffering; it means that God wants to be a consoling presence to us even in the inevitable pains and sufferings life has in store. If this is true, then the terrible mental agony and torture scrupulous people go through is not from God. After all, scrupulous people are trying to live in tune with God. Ignatius himself, during his early days in

Manresa, was plagued by scruples, fearing that he had not confessed all his sins. Things got so bad that he contemplated suicide. But at this point in his life he was trying, with great fervor, to live his life in accordance with God's intention. He finally came to the conclusion that these scrupulous thoughts could not be from God.

I hope that these reflections have taken some of mystery out of the question of discernment. Discernment is about paying attention to our own experience and deciding which experiences are from God, which are not. Young people can learn to pay attention to the move-

Discernment is about paying attention to our own experience and deciding which experiences are from God, which are not. Young people can learn to pay attention to the movements of their hearts and minds in order to discover how God wants to be present in their lives.

ments of their hearts and minds in order to discover how God wants to be present in their lives. As they grow in attentiveness and learn to enjoy God's presence, they will also grow in sensitivity to what leads them toward greater life and deeper happiness. In the process they will discover whether they are called to religious life or not.

Let me add one caveat. This kind of discernment process only works for people who are free enough to realize that discernment of a vocation is not a simple matter of the person deciding what to do with his or her life. As I try to discern how God is leading me, I have to keep in mind that God is the mysterious Other who cannot be manipulated or cajoled to cater to my desires. I must want to know God's desires. In addition, I have to keep in mind that the religious congregation also has a role to play in the vocation discernment. It may be that I discern a vocation to be a Religious of the Sacred Heart, but that the congregation decides that I do not fit their charism. It could be that the congregation has made a mistake; I must still get on with my life without living in a constant state of resentment. Discernment of spirits requires a mature spirit of freedom. ✚

Discernment as an experience of the Holy Spirit

by **Quentin Hackenewerth, SM**

Among the most moving experiences in life is the moment of recognizing that the Holy Spirit is indeed at work within one's inner life. Many people never become aware of the movements of God within them, and therefore miss the experience of living the energy of the Spirit in their life. Discernment of one's vocation can be done in such a way that it becomes an experience of the Spirit of God giving meaning and direction to one's life. That is the point I will attempt to make in this article.

Before saying anything more, I suggest the reader review the excellent article by Leonard Altilia, SJ in the Winter 2002 issue of HORIZON entitled, "Discernment with and for adolescents." In that article, Father Altilia makes some very helpful distinctions in the discernment process. I will use one of his distinctions as my starting point.

Father Altilia says: "It is important to distinguish between discernment and decision-making. The latter is an intellectual process of weighing alternatives and assessing the relative strengths and weaknesses of various options. While discernment includes this, it goes well beyond it. The process of discernment is a spiritual process that is built upon and utterly dependent on a regular and well developed prayer life. The skills of decision-making can help in the discernment process, but without prayer, genuine spiritual discernment is impossible."

The point is that in the discernment process there are two levels of activity: the human level of our intellect, will and sentiments, and the spiritual level of the movements of the Holy Spirit. As Father Altilia says, the movements of the Holy Spirit take place in our human process but go beyond it. The Spirit adds some-

thing distinctly different to it. But since the Spirit works in the human process, it is easy to focus only on the human process and thus miss the experience of what the Spirit is doing. This is where the vocation director, accompanying someone discerning his or her vocation, plays an essential role. The vocation director will probably have to teach the one discerning how to "focus in faith" on the discernment process in order to live the experience of the Holy Spirit.

A focus in faith means that we look at the human process of discernment with certain beliefs, with certain convictions. If the vocation director has these convictions of faith, it is possible to communicate them to the one discerning vocation. I believe this falls within the "developed prayer life" of Father Altilia, because I think it is safe to say that without an active focus of faith, "genuine spiritual discernment is impossible." One will not experience the action of the Holy Spirit, but only one's own human movements.

God chooses and invites

Let's look at four faith convictions that help give shape to what one experiences in the discernment process. First is the conviction that God chooses certain persons and invites them to a new way of life. If this happens to someone, it is because Jesus loves him or her as he loved the young man in the Gospel. "Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said to him, 'You are lacking in one thing...'" What motivated Je-

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sus to call this particular young man was his love for him. The call is a new way of God being present in one's life and a new way of experiencing God that one did not know before. Now God's love for that person can be experienced in the sense of being called to a particular way of life or to some mission.

To focus on the action of the Spirit, we ask: How does the one discerning feel when he or she reflects on such a call? Sad, like the young man in the Gospel who lived only his human reaction, or a certain joy that comes from believing that God loves me enough to give me a special call? If the one discerning can live this love of God within, he or she will probably feel an eagerness to move ahead in the discernment process with a certain sense of God being present in his or her life. This presence sharpens the sense of being called at the same time that it cultivates an incipient call.

When God chooses someone, the Spirit takes possession of his or her life. That person now belongs to God in a new way. As God says through Isaiah: "I have called you by name: you are mine."

The Spirit possesses us

A second important faith conviction is that when God chooses someone, the Spirit takes possession of his or her life. That person now belongs to God in a new way. As God says through Isaiah: "I have called you by name: you are mine" (Isaiah 43:1). In calling someone, God so makes a person his own that one feels his or her existence is being altered. God sometimes changed the name of those called in order to manifest their new state. "You will be called by a new name, one which the mouth of Yahweh will confer," God said to Isaiah (Isaiah 62:2). In the book of Revelation (2:17), the Spirit says that those who persevere in following Jesus will receive "a stone with a new name written on it, known only to the one who received it." The new name signifies a new life, an altered existence.

In discerning one's vocation, it is important to picture concretely some of the ways in which one's life will change radically. One will take on a new lifestyle and by that fact will become a symbol for others of certain Gospel values. One's life will become centered in a

mission, which requires leaving aside all that does not contribute to that mission. Jesus will become the central presence in one's life. When thinking about these changes in one's way of living, what are the reactions inside? Is there a certain excitement to take up the challenge, even if there is some fear and anxiety? Is there a certain eagerness to make the sacrifices involved, even though it hurts? Those feelings would be movements of the Holy Spirit to be lived fully at the same time that they are confirmations of a call from God.

God's call includes a mission

A third faith conviction is that God's call always includes a mission, a sense that Jesus wants to accomplish something through the one called. This is not a sense of ego-centered self-importance or of being made more important than others. It is a sense of humble gratitude that Jesus loves me so much that he intends to do some of his works of salvation through me. It is not necessary that the one discerning have a clear sense of exactly what he or she is to do, but only that God wants to do good through one according to the guidance of the Spirit. God's divine providence will present the needs and opportunities that will make the mission concrete in God's own time. This conviction of mission fosters a sense of responsibility in the one discerning and the feeling of the absolute need of God's grace to accomplish the mission. At the same time, it is a confidence that the Spirit will guide one's life as part of Jesus' work to save the world and is, in fact, already guiding it. This sense of mission leads one to be attentive to the inner inspirations and providential signs as indications of the Spirit to "do whatever he tells you" (John 2:5). This action of the Spirit within gives the one discerning a sense of purpose in life, a purpose that will be lived often in pure trust in the Spirit.

God gives what we need for the call

There is yet a fourth faith conviction to be lived in the discernment of one's vocation. It is the conviction that, in choosing us, God will become the source of everything we need to live our call. There is danger that once one feels called to a radical life or to a mission, one feels burdened because one is trying to follow the call with only his or her own resources. There is a temptation to establish one's own importance or look for self-worth in the approval of others. But God calls to a life far greater than the possibilities of one's own resources, and therefore the Spirit offers to become the

source of everything. When God calls, the Spirit gives all that is necessary to follow that call. "Jesus called the 12 together and gave them power and authority..." (Luke 9:1). Jesus was the source of all they needed. However, to experience fully that new power and authority, the 12 had to leave aside their own way of accomplishing things. "Take nothing for the journey..." (Luke 9:3). They had to be careful that their own attachments, their own way of doing things, even their own resources, would not be obstacles to experiencing the power of the Spirit at work in them. This leads the one discerning a vocation to a great trust that the Spirit is providing whatever he or she needs. At the Last Supper, Jesus said to the 12: "When I sent you out without purse or haversack or sandals, were you short of anything? No, they said" (Luke 22:35). What a beautiful reality was at work in them! As this fourth conviction operates in the discernment process, the one discerning can begin to live that same experience of God's providence giving him or her all that is needed to carry out God's call.

So, then, discernment of vocation is not just an exercise of the mind and good judgment. It is that, of course, but it is more. As the faith focus becomes active in the discernment process, the one discerning begins to sense the presence of the Spirit within. In the discernment process itself, the one discerning is already beginning to live the basic elements that form a vocation. One becomes more aware of the personal love that moves God to call one and that waits for a response of personal love, a sense of freedom in responding to that love. One begins to sense that the call is already orienting one's concerns and desires toward a life that is radically different and that will require changes. Perhaps one is already forming an attitude toward making those changes. One might already feel a certain sense of being responsible for acting in the name of Jesus. Even though the mission is not yet clear, one begins to live the attitudes necessary for accepting a mission and carrying it out. Certainly one can begin to feel the providence of God shaping one's life in a way compatible with the call one is discerning. If one does not begin to experience and live some of these basic spiritual elements of vocation, most probably that person is not being called or is not open to receive a call. The discernment process itself, with a faith focus, will cultivate the incipient call from God.

Cross is part of the call

Even if one experiences something of each of the four elements mentioned, how does one recognize that the

experience is more than human projection? Vocation is always a matter of walking on water with pure faith and confidence in God. However, there is one sign that is a trademark of God's call: paradoxically, it is the cross. Young people often tend to think that they have a vocation when everything goes well in regard to their call. But when all goes well and according to one's likes and desires, there is indeed a possibility that the desired vocation is a product of one's own liking. If one's desire to follow a call continues in spite of difficulties or opposition, there is most probably a

In a sense, the cross is necessary to validate that a call is from God and to protect it from the deception of egoism and self-indulgence.

grace present beyond one's human fashioning. If one is inclined to follow a call when it means sacrificing things that human nature tends to cling to, it indicates that the inclination comes from beyond one's human nature. In a sense, the cross is necessary to validate that a call is from God and to protect it from the deception of egoism and self-indulgence. Jesus said that if anyone wishes to accept his call, he or she must "take up the cross daily and follow me" (Luke 9:23). The cross will always accompany God's call, but the grace of the Spirit will likewise be present and will be experienced as overcoming the adversity of the cross. Instead of being a denial of vocation, the cross becomes a confirmation of the presence of a special grace in one's life. A young woman discerning her vocation was having many difficulties during her formation year. But she was convinced that she had a vocation to religious life. When I asked her why she thought so, she said simply: "I'm still here. That's a sign."

It is not the cross itself that is the sign of a call from God, but rather the reaction of the person experiencing the cross. Enthusiasm in spite of setbacks, desire to serve when it costs the ego, urge to continue when one has good reasons to quit: all are indications that a grace is at work beyond normal human resources. An important part of the discernment process is the paradoxical sign of the cross which confirms the work of the Spirit in the one being called. ✚

False fears: How evil can undermine God's call

by Warren Sazama, SJ

In my experience in dealing with people in the vocational discernment process, I continue to gain increasing respect for St. Ignatius of Loyola's rules for the discernment of spirits and in particular for his descriptions of how the evil spirit tends to work to derail the vocational discernment process. I find Ignatius's descriptions of how the good and evil spirits work in people to be uncannily accurate and as applicable today as ever.

Sometimes friends try to console me regarding my work with candidates in discernment by telling me, "It's all in God's hands." If it were in God's hands alone, I'd feel very secure indeed. And, ultimately, of course, it is in God's hands. But if a person is called by God to religious life or priesthood, I believe there are three actors in his or her vocational discernment process.

God certainly is the first actor, for God stirs a person's heart with a desire to consider religious life or priesthood. (In the rest of this article I will not mention priesthood explicitly but it is implied.) God, of course, works through people. So God's call often comes through the mediation of religious who inspire the discernor by the joy and fruitfulness of their lives, who invite them to consider religious life, and who nurture their call from God in various ways. We vocation directors and our community members play a key role here. God can even use our Web page to aid the invitation to a potential discernor!

The second actor is the discernor, whom God stirs, but does not force to respond. The person called can simply not listen, dismiss the call, or even actively run from it. I'm convinced that many people might be called by God to religious life but never allow them-

selves to consider it. Of course, the discernor can also open up to God's call and try to respond generously. Usually that requires help, which is why we encourage discernors to get into regular spiritual direction, join vocation discernment groups, participate in Come and See weekends, discernment retreats, and the like.

The third actor, often unrecognized, is what Ignatius refers to as the "evil spirit" (however we might understand it). The trouble with not recognizing the action of the evil spirit is that, unrecognized, it can wreak havoc on the vocational discernment process without being countered. It's like having an undetected computer virus. Things don't seem to be working right, but we can't figure out why.

When is the evil spirit present?

St. Ignatius suggests ways to detect the work of the evil spirit and counter it. For example, one simple countermeasure Ignatius mentions is for the discernor to bring his or her temptations out into the open by sharing them with a spiritual director or some other spiritual person. Once in the light of day, these temptations can often be recognized for what they are. Ignatius points out a number of ways in which the evil spirit can undermine a good person's discernment process. But the most common way I have observed is to tempt the discernor, who is usually early in his or her spiritual life, by preying on a fear that the cost of following God's call is too high to bear. This shifts the focus to all the problems and difficulties of responding

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to God's call, rouses a false sadness for things that will be missed, and instills anxiety about personal weakness and the inability to persevere in response to God's call.

In this dim light, all the obstacles to joyfully saying yes to the call are deviously highlighted and the rewards obscured. Examples could be: "I could never be celibate!" "I want to have a family." "I could never give up my independence." "The church is too messed up for me to even consider getting involved." All this is powerful ammunition which our American culture strongly reinforces, making the path to religious life clearly countercultural. Integral to the process is addressing the question of when these fears are really only false fears coming from the evil spirit and when they might be legitimate fears coming from God, indicating that a person may indeed not have a vocation to religious life. When a discerner gets really serious about the vocational discernment process and is at the brink of making a decision to apply, floods of fears and questions often surface. These questions can be present throughout the vocational discernment process but often greatly intensify at the point of making a final decision.

Aspects of this questioning are healthy and good. If people are going to give their life to a something, they had better think it through and look at all the implications and consequences. We all desire a life companion and to have a family. God made us that way. To consider giving this up shouldn't be taken lightly. But, it's also necessary to explore when these healthy questions might get distorted into false fears.

Discovering one's deepest desire

Here again, Ignatius offers helpful guidelines. Before looking at these, let's first look at how God, as opposed to the evil spirit, works in the discerner and assists the process. Ignatius observes that the Holy Spirit, in contrast to the evil spirit, works to strengthen, encourage, console, inspire, and give inner peace to the person who is trying to respond generously and openly to God's call. Personal resolve strengthens with a sense of joy and a feeling of rightness about the choice being contemplated. By focusing on the rewards of religious life, the discerner grows in the courage of his or her convictions and trusts that all obstacles can be overcome with God's help. Thus God's action in the discerner is diametrically opposed to the false fears engendered by the evil spirit. Ignatius provides a great tool with which to tap these positive

inner movements and deal with false fears raised by the evil spirit. This tool comes in the form of three Ignatian principles of discernment that can be applicable here. They are to ask the following questions: (1) What is the discerner's deepest desire? (2) Where are these fears and questions leading? (3) Where are these fears and questions coming from?

What is the discerner's deepest desire? This is a key Ignatian question, and, I would say, probably one of the most helpful questions in the vocational discernment process. As I said earlier, we all desire a life's companion and a family, since that's the way God

A legitimate fear is really pointing to a deeper desire. Whereas a false fear is a negative spirit holding discerners back from abandoning themselves to God's call.

made us. Yet, at the same time, the discerner feels a desire for religious life. Otherwise he or she would not be in a discernment process with us. Our task is to help the discerner determine which of these desires is deepest in his or her heart and soul.

This inner conflict is illustrated by my own ambivalence before ordination when I doubted whether I wanted to be celibate for the rest of my life. Not coincidentally, I found myself in love with a fellow student at the ecumenical theological union I attended, and she had similar feelings. So my choice was concrete. Given my dual desires for Jesuit priesthood and marriage, my spiritual director wisely asked me what my deepest desire was—to marry Dee or to be a Jesuit priest? While it was a heart-wrenching decision, in my heart of hearts, I knew that my deepest desire was to be a Jesuit priest. Thankfully my decision has been confirmed by a happy life of 25 years as a Jesuit priest. Dee, by the way, was very supportive and has been happily married for around the same length of time.

Legitimate fears point to deep desires

I think it is safe to say that fear in the negative sense of "giving into one's fears" can never be one's primary path to discovering God's will. A legitimate fear is really pointing to a deeper desire. Whereas a false fear is a negative spirit holding discerners back from abandoning themselves to God's call.

Where are these fears and questions leading? Another way to recognize whether an inner movement is from God is to see where it leads us. An inner movement, inclination, or desire that is from God leads in a good direction. Conversely, the evil spirit leads in negative directions, even though they may at first give the false impression of being good paths. So we must pay careful attention to where a given course of action would lead to tell whether its source is from God or not. For example, would following his or her fears lead the discerner to love more or less? Would it lead to a more joyful, giving, expansive life or to a more restricted, self-centered one? Would it bring the discerner closer to God and others or isolate him or her?

Consequently, even if the discerner is genuinely being called by God to religious life he, or she may still get “cold feet” and a sense of feeling stuck, indecisive, anxious, discouraged, and tied in knots. But if moving counter to these fears and moving ahead with the decision to join religious life eventually leads to a feeling of peacefulness and a sense of “rightness,” this is a clear indication that moving toward religious life is in sync with the Holy Spirit.

Test fears with a leap of faith

My experience of working with discerners, and that of many other vocation directors, is that sometimes the only way to tell if these fears are legitimate or not is for them to take a leap of faith—to follow what they believe is their call. In matters of the heart, we rarely have 100 percent certainty in this life. So at times, we just need to decide as best we can. That is why we have novitiates and other formation experiences before vows to test candidates’ vocations, to see if they are genuinely called by God.

If candidates are called by God to our community, God will confirm their calling with a sense of rightness and peace over time. On the other hand, if they are wracked with a sense of anxiety, depression and sleeplessness even though they are giving themselves to the formation experiences as generously as they can, God is letting them know that our community is not their calling. Sometimes we just need to encourage discerners to give it an honest try. I think this is especially true for the Generation X discerners who often struggle with decision-making and commitment. We’ll have to wait and see how this works for the Millennial generation.

Where are these fears and questions coming from? Be-

sides being aware of where an inner movement is leading us, it is also important to notice where it is coming from. For example, is our motivation coming from inner humility, love, openness to God, and a desire to serve? Or are we motivated by selfish desires for a more comfortable life in which challenges and sacrifices are things to be avoided?

In summary, it is not uncommon for a person in a vocational discernment process to falter when the time for making the decision approaches. This is the time when the evil spirit especially tries to discourage the discerner with false fears. In order to remain true to God’s call, the discerner must work to recognize these temptations for what they are—discouragement coming from a negative force that is trying to tempt him or her away from God rather than toward God’s peace.

In closing, Ignatius offers some very practical advice to discerners in the grips of such discouragement and desolation.

- Avoid making new decisions or reversing old ones during such periods.
- Continue to pray, go to Mass regularly, and prayerfully reflect on one’s experiences.
- Don’t be tempted into keeping doubt secret. The best way to address doubt is to explore it and bring these temptations into the light of day by sharing them with one’s spiritual director, confessor or some other spiritual person. This helps counter the power of these temptations with sources of personal support.
- Be aware of one’s points of habitual temptation. Since the evil spirit attacks areas of greatest weakness, it is important to be vigilant and pay attention to these vulnerable areas. It takes a certain amount of spiritual maturity to have this level of self-awareness, but it is clearly very helpful in recognizing various temptations for what they are. For example, does the discerner have a hard time making commitments? If this is the case, he or she must recognize this temptation to keep options open and act counter to it.
- Cultivate an attitude of patience during times of spiritual desolation and discouragement. It is helpful to recall that everything has its time and that the consolation experienced in the past will again be God’s gift in the future. All that needs to be done is to patiently, prayerfully, and faithfully wait. ✚

A general approach to guiding vocational discernment

by Michael Scanlan, TOR

I counsel and guide men and women from ages 18 to 45 on vocations. I've been doing this for 35 years, and since I moved from the position of president to chancellor of Franciscan University of Steubenville, I'm regularly meeting with more than a dozen people at any given time. I want to outline here a general approach I try to follow. This is not a checklist I run down with everyone who consults me. Every person and every situation is different, but these are the areas I try to touch upon.

You *can* be at peace

I try to assure people who bring a difficult decision to me that they will be able to know what God is calling them to do. They will know in their deepest being, in their heart of hearts, that something is right to do. Many people need this reassurance. They are not sure they will ever know God's will or, if they do, that this will necessarily bring them peace.

When someone comes to me for vocation counseling, we begin with prayer. I quote two verses from the Psalms that are favorites of mine for these situations: "Take delight in the Lord and He will give you the desires of your heart" (Psalm 37:4) and "I am your servant. Give me wisdom that I may know your decrees" (Psalm 119:125). We pray the prayer to the Holy Spirit together: "Come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of the faithful..." We add other prayers appropriate to the situation. We ask the Holy Spirit to inspire us and lead us to true wisdom.

Use your mind

I advise people that in the ordinary course of events they are to use their minds to reach conviction in their hearts. I read the beginning of Romans 12: "I urge

you, therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God, your spiritual worship. Do not conform yourselves to this age but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and pleasing and perfect" (Romans 12:1-2).

We talk about renewing the mind—centering the intellect and the will totally on God and what he wants for us. I like to quote Scripture to reinforce this point, including the greatest commandment: "Love the Lord your God with your whole heart, your whole mind and with all your strength; and love your neighbor as yourself" (Mark 12:30-31). The purpose of our discussion, indeed, the purpose of our lives, is to seek out and live God's will for us.

What are the options?

I ask the person what he or she thinks God wants them to do. If they present alternate possibilities, I ask which one they are inclined to think is God's will. From students and younger people, the possibilities I hear most frequently are: Should I marry? Should I be a religious or a priest? Should I break up this relationship with the person I'm dating? Should I change my major course of study in school? Should I spend my summer in volunteer missionary work, or should I take a job at home? Should I room with these particular

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people? Should I direct my future career into work for the church?

From recent graduates and older people I hear: Is God calling me to move and change my job? Should I go back to school? I thought I was called to marriage, but it's been many years and I haven't found anyone to marry. Should we adopt children? Should I join a lay community or apostolate? How do I deal with my strong attraction to the married person at work who seems to be flirting with me?

If the person prefers one alternative from among the many possibilities, we discuss it and test it. A couple of Scripture passages I use to set the right tone for this discussion are: "Test everything, retain what is good

In applying the conversion test, you lead the person through his or her spiritual history. You both consider how the proposed action fits into this history. Will it bring the person closer to God and a life of virtue or will it lead further away?

(1 Thessalonians 5:21) and "Discern what is of value so that you may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ" (Philemon 1:10).

Does it conform to God's law?

Most serious Catholics will readily submit to the commandments of God and the teachings of the church. Indeed, the question is usually, "What does *God* want?" Seldom will a proposed course of action be inconsistent with God's law. However, a careful review of the priorities involved in the person's state of life will frequently cast a helpful, new light on the proposed decision or change. Such statements as, "I am first called to be a wife and mother," or "My first priority as a priest is to serve the people God has given me" will clarify the matter if a new direction threatens to undermine these commitments or make fulfilling them more difficult.

You can also review secondary commitments such as "God has called me to be a teacher" or "My main service to the church is in the area of respect for life." Deeply held commitments of this kind lay a foundation for future actions.

Will it assist conversion of heart?

The key to testing the specific vocational call is the test of *conversion*. Our response to the vocation involves converting our life more deeply and fully to the Lord. The call to religious life means a special call of service and self-surrender. The call to marriage always means a conversion from a self-centered life to a life centered on a spouse and children. Being "in love" is important but not sufficient. Marriage, as well as the religious vocation, involves a commitment to the loving service of others. In applying the conversion test, you lead the person through his or her spiritual history of turning away from sin and growing in love of God. You both consider how the proposed action fits into this history. Will it bring the person closer to God and a life of virtue, or will it lead him further away? Look at how it will change supportive relationships. Will it increase occasions of sin? Will it be easier or more difficult to practice the disciplines of a spiritual life, such as regular prayer, Mass and sacraments, sharing faith with others, and having spiritual directors and models of holiness?

Sometimes the process of discernment will end here as the conversion test shows that a proposed decision will make it harder for the person to grow in holiness. After going through this review, people will say, "I can see now that the Lord doesn't want me to do this." (More often, however, this conclusion comes after the next test—consistency.) At the same time, a new direction that involves considerable additional responsibility should not be ruled out simply because it might raise new temptations and challenges. Perhaps meeting and overcoming new challenges is precisely what's needed for the next stage of the person's spiritual growth.

Is it consistent with the way God has dealt with me before?

The discussion moves to the consistency test: How has God led the person to this point? The difference between the conversion and consistency tests is often blurred. In both, you are discerning a pattern of spiritual growth. Does the plan under consideration fit in? Can the person see his or her life leading to this point? Does the person have the time, energy, and resources to fulfill more demanding commitments?

Sometimes we know we are called to marriage or the religious life long before we find someone we would like to marry or a religious order we would like to en-

ter. Sometimes we understand our vocational call only when we meet the people we would like to spend our life with. In any case, the call will be consistent with what has gone on before in our lives.

The consistency of the vocation will be tested over a period of time. A couple will go through years of acquaintance and courtship to discern the vocation. People discerning religious vocations will spend years in seminary and formation before making vows for life. We say that married people are “made for each other.” We say that priests and nuns and brothers “have a vocation.” What we are saying is that they pass the consistency test.

The same is true for vocations to the single life. Many people are called to actively embrace singleness in order to care for family members, join a lay apostolate, or lead another life of service. There must be consistency among the service, the person, and the call to singleness, just as there must be conformity to the gospel and an awareness of how the call will lead to a greater conversion of one’s life.

As people discern a life vocation, it’s important to *live* consistently. They should start living now what they believe is their vocation. Eliminate the contradictions. As a decision about marriage approaches, both partners would stop dating other people and devote their attention exclusively to each other. Men and women might date in the early stages of thinking about a religious vocation. As they move toward a decision, however, it’s important to begin to live the celibate call, without romantic relationships.

What, if anything, confirms the wisdom of the proposed action?

Usually the individual will tell you several ways that his or her course of action appears to be confirmed. Friends will endorse it. Circumstances will change in surprising ways to make the act possible. They may have detected special spiritual signs that seem to affirm it. A life vocation is a two-way street. In large decisions—marriage, religious vocation—the confirmation of another party is required. Two parties, not one, make marriage vows. The religious community, as well as the individual, assents to a call to a religious vocation.

The lack of a confirming invitation can cause great anguish. Lovers say their hearts are broken when their

love is not reciprocated and a proposal of marriage is turned down. The same thing happens to people who think they have a call to the religious life. The call to a religious vocation is mutual. Both the individual and the church must hear it. Since the mutuality of a religious vocation is often less well understood than the mutuality of marriage, I would like to say a bit more about it.

Dealing with the church can be difficult. Sometimes we don’t like what we hear from a priest or sister or

We say that married people are “made for each other.” We say that priests and nuns and brothers “have a vocation.” What we are saying is that they pass the consistency test.

religious brother. The novice director or the head of the seminary can misunderstand, fail to connect. They can even give bad advice. But the church is the institution the Lord established to carry out his work—including the work of discerning vocations to the religious life. God became man. He entered into human life. He works through human beings and human institutions.

You will often encounter knotty problems in this discussion of confirmation. What does it mean when the signs are negative while the disposition of the person’s heart is positive? Parents and family are opposed, circumstances seem to block action, but the person still thinks the proposed course is the right one. Is this a question of timing, should the whole matter be re-examined, or should the signs be disregarded?

What is the relative importance of confirming signs—or the lack of them? How important is the approval of others? What does it mean when it looks very easy, or very difficult, to implement the decision? Be careful not to let the discussion of these complexities overwhelm the discernment process. Difficulties tend to become more complex the longer they are discussed. Move expeditiously to the final test—conviction of the heart. This is the decisive test.

In my experience, it is often helpful to write down the most important items of confirmation—or lack of it. In fact, it is usually a good idea to summarize the conclu-

sions you reach at each stage of the discernment process for later prayerful consideration.

Interpreting spiritual signs

Signs have their place. Signs appear frequently in Scripture. “And this will be a sign for you: You will find an infant wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger,” the angel told the shepherds (Luke 2:12). Gideon repeatedly prayed for signs that God wanted him to lead his small force against a greater army. Jesus’ miracles were signs of the coming of the Kingdom. At the same time, St. Paul explicitly warns against relying on signs rather than on the faith we have received (1 Corinthians 1:22).

In my experience, a person’s account of spiritual signs is more useful as confirmation of the desire in the person’s heart, than as a confirming sign in itself. Often, the individual is fully convinced that he or she should go ahead; the spiritual signs are incidental or ambiguous points of confirmation.

What does your heart say?

The test of conviction is the decisive test. What does the person sense about the moral certainty of the rightness of the call? Engage the person in a discussion of their deepest values and desires. Ask a question like this one: “Putting aside all other considerations, including difficulties in implementation and other complexities, do you believe that this is the right thing to do?” Or ask: “When you prayerfully think about going ahead with this, do you experience a deep ‘yes,’ a release and a pouring out, or do you experience hesitation and deep uncertainty?”

The standard of moral certainty is high in life commitments such as marriage and religious vocation, where the commitment is for life and time is not a great factor. The standard of the conviction of rightness is lower in matters where the individual has to choose the best of several alternatives in a certain period of time. In these cases, moral certainty is a practical conclusion that this is the right course of action, as far as I can see at this point, as a Christian in submission to the Lord.

Pray, pray, pray

The key to obtaining conviction is prayer. The Lord himself—through the Holy Spirit’s action and presence—is the source of true conviction. We all need to

pray daily for God to lead us in obedience and faithfulness.

Discerners and those who guide them need patience. Neither they nor the rules are in charge ultimately. Courtships can be lengthy. Religious vocations can take a long time to unfold. There can be false starts. The process of making a life commitment is easily described. It’s messy and imperfect in reality. We are dealing with sinners, not angels. The man and woman at the altar are two imperfect people exchanging vows of love and faithfulness. Every religious community and diocese is populated by people marred by sin. We shouldn’t look for the perfect spouse or perfect community. Even if we found the perfect partner, the marriage wouldn’t be perfect after we joined it.

Be careful not to let the discussion of complexities overwhelm the discernment process. Difficulties tend to become more complex the longer they are discussed.

Those in discernment will change. Those who are too rigorous, legalistic, rigid, set on things being a certain way, will learn to adapt and be flexible. Those who like things to be loose and informal, never settled, will learn the joys of discipline and structure. Those who escape into the spiritual to avoid the natural and the physical will learn how to embrace the messiness of real life. Those who are too cautious and careful will learn how to leap ahead with God’s call. Risk-takers who leap before they think will learn the skills of caution and reflective deliberation.

Our life vocation is a treasure buried in a field, the pearl of great price. The grace is in the calling. Pursue it at whatever the cost. ✚

You're not alone: Journey groups bring discerners together for support and prayer

by Carolyn Jost, SSND

“You’re kidding!” “You? Really? No way!” “Why would you ever want to do *that*???”

Men and women interested in religious life report these reactions from family, friends and co-workers as they share the news of their hopes and dreams. These responses can be discouraging to someone who is excited about God’s call. They create a sense of isolation, of being alone in one’s search. How do vocation directors help inquirers know that they are not oddities and that others *do* share their interest in life as a priest or religious?

To answer this question, the Vocation Directors in CAVA (Chicago Archdiocesan Vocation Association) and JAVA (Joliet Area Vocation Association) created a program to assist those discerning a call to service in the church. The “Journey Discernment Program” enables participants to explore their lives and the future to which God might be calling them. Through prayer, input and sharing, members of Journey Groups experience support and gather information as they move through the process of discernment. Here I hope to share information on the goals and specifics of the program with those who may be interested in starting Journey Groups in their areas.

Goals of the Journey Program

- A. Foster a supportive environment for participants, helping them realize that they are not walking alone; others are on the journey.
- B. Deepen the participants’ sense of personal and communal prayer through faith sharing and prayer experiences.
- C. Give input on topics that will move the participants forward in their discernment process.
- D. Provide a safe place where questions can be asked

and where fears can be expressed and dealt with.

- E. Make available resources that will enhance the participants’ spiritual growth and vocational choice.

Who, when, where

Journey Groups are planned by vocation directors who volunteer to serve as leaders. At present, Journey Groups are scheduled to meet at seven locations throughout the Chicagoland area. Each site usually has two directors who work together to organize the sessions. In this way, if one director can’t be present, the group can continue to meet. Collaboration is modeled whenever possible by having a woman and man religious share responsibilities for leading the group.

Meetings are held monthly and last about two hours. Having a clear time-frame and structure to the meetings is very important. When they assemble, the members of the group set the day of the week and the time for their gatherings.

Publicity

Ongoing publicity is a priority for the Journey Program. At least once a year each parish receives an announcement about the program requesting that it be placed in their bulletin several times during the year. Camera-ready ads, flyers and posters are included in the mailing. Flyers and posters are sent to college cam-

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pus ministry offices and retreat centers. They are also given out at discernment retreats, such as RSVP (Reflect and Share Vocation Possibilities) and Life Directions, and at various archdiocesan events, such as Theology on Tap, Parish Leadership Day and youth conferences. Members of religious congregations are also encouraged to have those they are in contact with attend Journey groups.

Resources for Journey Groups

Prayer

Praying together is an integral part of each Journey

Participants often remark that the chance to nourish their prayer life and to share their faith at a deeper level is an aspect of the Journey program that touches their lives in profound ways.

meeting. The leaders usually plan a prayer service for the beginning of each gathering. These services are designed to include a variety of prayer experiences, i.e. lectio divina, centering prayer, liturgy of the hours, faith sharing and personal reflection. Using different prayer forms leads to “teachable moments.” In preparation for prayer, the leaders can explain the richness of the church’s prayer and give instructions where necessary on ways that may be new to the discerners. Participants often remark that this chance to nourish their prayer life and to share their faith at a deeper level is an aspect of the Journey program that touches their lives in profound ways.

Scripture

Scripture stories, especially call stories, are a great source of inspiration for inquirers. Selecting a relevant passage and designing faith-sharing questions can lead discerners to a deeper understanding of their own hesitations, concerns and feelings. A suggested format could be:

The Call of Samuel

1. Read 1 Samuel 3:1-11.
2. Reflect on these questions:
 - a. At first Samuel did not recognize the Lord’s call. Have you ever had this experience of lack of recognition or understanding?

- b. Samuel’s response to the call was, “Here I am, Lord.” What do you think of that response? How does it fit with your response to God’s call?
- c. Samuel said, “Speak, your servant is listening.” Why do you think that might be a risky response? Could that be your response?
- d. What if you respond and hear nothing back? What do you do then?
- e. Is there anything else you would like to add?
- f. Other passages that are significant to discerners are: The Call of the Disciples, The Annunciation, The Call of Abraham, Moses and the Burning Bush. Often the Gospel Reading for the Sunday Liturgy fits marvelously for a discernment theme and can be used as a source for reflection.

Articles

At times the leaders select an article as the topic for a Journey meeting. Participants find articles on prayer, vocation, discernment, the vows, the meaning and future of religious life, witnessing to the gospel, etc. especially helpful in their exploration. Having guide questions, based on the readings, for personal reflection and group sharing focuses the group and leads to fruitful discussions. Good sources for these materials are *HORIZON*, *VISION*, *U.S. Catholic*, and *Review for Religious*. The *Vocation Director’s Manual* published by NRVC has an extensive list of articles that are also very suitable for Journey groups.

Discernment materials

There are many good resources available. *Vocations Anonymous* and *Discern: Mission and Ministry*, both by Kathy Bryant, RSC, are classics for those discerning their call. By putting together a more complete bibliography for the Journey group members, the leaders guide them to materials for personal reflection, processing and integration.

Challenges of the Journey Program

Increasing participation

One of the ongoing challenges the vocation directors face is getting the word out about this valuable program. Despite efforts to publicize Journey, the number of participants at each site could be greatly increased. The agenda for the coming fall meeting of our vocation associations will include discussions on how to enhance the Journey program and find creative ways to let potential candidates for religious life

and priesthood know that this resource is available to them.

Reaching out to multi-cultural groups

At present, one Journey group is offered in Spanish and English with bilingual leaders. The number of participants at that location has not grown as we had hoped. We're keenly aware that we need to do more outreach to multi-cultural groups, particularly to Hispanic women and men.

If characteristics are exhibited that raise red flags, Journey leaders need to encourage those discerners to withdraw from the group and from further inquiry into the possibility of religious life.

Saying no

The reality of working with people in discernment is that at times candidates come forward who lack the potential for religious life or priesthood. Since the Journey group is often the first step of inquiry for a discerner, it is important that the leaders are completely honest with participants. Gently, but firmly, the

directors need to address any issues they see for participants. If characteristics are exhibited that raise red flags, Journey leaders need to encourage those discerners to withdraw from the group and from further inquiry into the possibility of religious life. Saying no to someone is never easy. But for the sake of healthy ministers for the future church and for vibrant community life, it's a critically important part of vocation ministry.

Vocation directors who've had the privilege of being Journey group leaders realize the value of the program. It is an honor to walk with women and men who are looking at the possibility of dedicating their lives to God through religious life or priesthood. Moreover, it is wonderful to see how a person's sense of vocation can be nurtured in a group setting. The support of others, the sense of not being alone, the consistency of prayer and input on vocational topics all contribute to a participant's growth in awareness of God's movements within him or her. Being able to speak honestly and openly about things that are in one's heart also enables a participant to grow in self-knowledge. This awareness of God's call and the awareness of how to respond, can encourage discerners to take the next step toward seeking affiliation with a congregation, knowing that others are on the journey with them! ✚

Extending the circle of community: forming a house for sisters and laywomen

by Mary Beth Minges, SCL and Amy Willcott, SCL

An informal NRVC survey last year about houses of discernment turned up tremendous interest in the subject. Houses of discernment come in many shapes and sizes—but no matter how they're structured, the idea is that some of the lay residents (but not always all of them) are there to explore their vocation while living in a community setting. They come for moral support, to see what community living feels like, for the prayer and companionship. In this article, the 1995 co-founders of a house that includes women in discernment tell how they did it.

The Xavier Community concept developed as a direct result of interest on the part of young adult women and the willingness of the Sisters of Charity of Leavenworth to sponsor an intentional community made up of both vowed and non-vowed women. The seeds for the Xavier Community were planted by a small group of college students at St. Mary College (sponsored by the Sisters of Charity) who were looking forward to graduation with both anticipation and apprehension. Although they were looking forward to the “real world,” they did not want to leave the experience of community they had known in college. They were interested primarily in working in social services of some kind and had a desire to further develop their spiritual life. They were not necessarily interested in a volunteer experience and discovered that what they were looking for simply did not seem to exist. In response to this expressed need, we approached the leadership of our community and asked if we might work to create an option for community living that addressed these specific interests.

In planning for the house and in the proposal addressed to our community leadership, we made it clear that the Xavier Community was not to be open only to women who were discerning religious life, but rather to any young woman who had a desire to live in community and specifically in the kind of community that

we would build together. We recognized the benefit of sharing prayer and a common life for any person, no matter what life choice they might make in the future. As a result the women who have been and continue to be members of the Xavier Community come with many different stories and choose to live in community for a variety of reasons. Some of the reasons have included discernment, and the community has provided a good place for that to happen. Of the 14 women who have lived in the Xavier communities, eight of them expressed no interest in religious life and six have come with a serious desire to discern.

In it together: discerners and non-discerners

The presence of “non-discerners” made the process a bit more free for those who have discerned while living in a Xavier community. Not only has it seemed more acceptable to their family and co-workers, but it seems to have given the discerners an inner sense of freedom. They have not made any long-term commitments; the future has remained open to them, just like the others who live in the house. This broader perspective has at times relieved them of some of the pressure that seems to be a part of the discernment process.

When we were planning, we did not know of any other community with quite the same intention, and so we began to formulate a basic structure based on our own experience and the expressed needs of the young women who had made a commitment to the commu-

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nity before it was even approved. We were confident that the Xavier Community would be a place in which there would be real benefit for all those who participated. We did not see ourselves as directors of the house, but co-members with the women who would make a year-long commitment to live in community. We hoped our religious community would benefit from an infusion of young ideas and energy. We also believed that we had something of value to offer. Our Vincentian spirituality, our prayer, and the way we understand the responsibility and gift of living in community—all these were worth sharing with others.

One of the most important aspects of forming the Xavier Community has been finding and screening young women. Two sources have proven vital in this process: our sisters and a local Vincentian Volunteer community.

The first Xavier Community opened in Denver in the summer of 1995. We chose Denver because of the many connections there to Sisters of Charity ministry and community, and we hoped it would be an inviting city for young women. The location of the house proved to be very important. Initially we rented a house in a suburb of Denver, because it was available and had enough space for five adults. From the beginning, though, we sensed this was temporary. All of us drove a considerable distance to work, and we all shared an interest in living in the central city. Another house became available very close to downtown, and with lots of physical work on our part to make it livable, we moved after one year in the suburbs. The new location made a big difference. The young women who came to live with us were in general much more interested in living in the city, and more opportunities for volunteer service became available to us because of our location. Our lives were simplified by living in the city, and we were able to become more involved in the concerns of the neighborhood.

Although all those who lived in the Xavier Community would share the ongoing living expenses, the initial costs of a new community were funded by the Sisters of Charity. With help from the motherhouse, the local communities in Denver, and even our families, we put together furniture and household items to sus-

tain a community of five, and we opened our doors.

What we expect of members

From the beginning those who came to live in the Xavier Community were asked to make a commitment for one year. This commitment also included a willingness to live simply, share in a common life and identify community as the primary relationship in their lives. The women who live with us are free to date and make independent choices in regard to their time and money, but their choice to live in community must remain a priority in their lives. Women may live a second year in the community, which has proven to add an important element of continuity to the community. Although the specifics have varied from year to year, in general members of the community share meals and prayer on a regular basis and participate in a variety of communal activities. Some of these activities have included cooking at a local soup kitchen, weekends in the mountains, assisting one another in work related projects, and attending events sponsored by the Sisters of Charity.

Each member of the community is also responsible for contributing to the common cost of the community. Specifically these costs include food, rent and utilities. The total amount paid by each member has depended on the costs of living for that particular group but generally have ranged between \$250 and \$350 a month. Members are also expected to contribute their time and energy to the ongoing life of the community. Everyone shares in the household chores, cooking, and planning common prayer. Leadership of regular house meetings is shared among all the members of the community, as well as responsibility for planning community activities. There is a natural tendency to identify the vowed members as the leaders, but we found a tremendous value in communicating clearly the shared responsibility expected in community life.

Finding young women to join us

One of the most important aspects of forming the Xavier Community has been finding and screening young women. Two sources have proven vital in this process. The first is our own sisters. Many sisters work with or have contact with young adult women. Our sisters often encourage these women to consider living in Xavier Community. And in Denver the Xavier Community became associated with a local Vincentian Volunteer community. Because of our shared spirituality, we welcomed a number of young women after they com-

pleted a year of volunteer service. The screening process is composed primarily of an interview process with one of the vowed members of the community and a letter of recommendation contributed by someone who can speak of the woman's strengths and weaknesses. Ideally the woman would be able to visit the Xavier Community and meet members before making her choice.

It has also been important for us to communicate honestly what is expected of our own sisters who come to live in Xavier Community. In general we say that a sister who lives in Xavier Community must have a good sense of humor, be flexible, tolerant, willing to share her own story as well as listen to the stories of others, and have a genuine love of young people. In truth it is not much different from what is expected in any other community, but one must be willing to teach and, even more importantly, to learn.

A healthy environment for discernment

In the seven years since the first Xavier Community began, a second house was opened in Kansas City in 1999. A total of 14 women have participated as members of both houses. Of this number, six came with some intention of investigating and actively discerning religious life. For some the experience helped them to see more clearly that vowed religious life was not the best choice for them. Two Xavier Community members entered the Sisters of Charity of Leavenworth in 1998, a third woman began initial formation the summer of 2001, and a fourth member formally entered the community in August, 2002. In general the context of the Xavier Community has proven to be a healthy environment for discernment. Those who are considering religious life are able to get a first-hand look at the way we live community without actually entering the community. In this way they have the chance to consider how they might fit in the congregation, how their spiritual life is nourished, and whether or not they are attracted to the charism of the Sisters of Charity of Leavenworth without the emotional and even material risk that entrance sometimes requires.

Although more than half the non-vowed members of the community have come without any interest in religious life for themselves, we have found them to be very supportive and helpful to their peers in the discernment process. In fact we think they are some of our best vocation promoters! In addition, these

young women also have seen and experienced women religious from an "insider's" point of view and have come to know us as regular human beings. In turn, we have come to know their families and friends. These connections have expanded our own horizons and shaped the perspective of those with little first-hand experience of women religious. Such awareness makes religious life seem a bit less mysterious and enables others to see it as a viable way of life.

Something that the friends of Denver's Xavier Community have come to expect is our weekly evening of "Extending the Circle." For almost three years we have invited people to join us for a simple supper

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and prayer on Thursday evenings. Included in our group of guests are often friends of our current Xavier Community members, former community members, Colorado Vincentian Volunteers, co-workers and Sisters of Charity. Extending our circle of community allows others to experience a piece of community they may not have in their busy lives. They know they are welcome in our home, not just on our official nights of Extending the Circle, but anytime.

Challenges

Living in a Xavier Community often provides a good share of challenges. Many of them are typical of community life in general: dirty dishes left in the sink, conflicts in schedules and lack of communication. There are however some challenges that are unique to this kind of intentional community. The sisters in the house can find themselves in the role of formation director, which is not helpful. The women who live in the house are not seeking incorporation, yet often seek guidance concerning the skills of community life. It is often a delicate balance to maintain and requires honest communication and feedback. Living in a Xavier

Community also requires a serious commitment of time and energy. Those involved in ministries requiring frequent evening and weekend commitments may find this kind of community particularly challenging. Since these are the times when “community” usually happens, being available is essential. Relationships outside of the community have also offered some struggles. It is important to note the distinction of commitments made by the vowed and non-vowed members and be able to be both supportive and challenging. Outside relationships have at times caused

Obviously it is wonderful simply sharing life with young people. There are always new ideas to be considered, risks to be faced and energy that is fresh and alive.

some realistic struggles within the Xavier Communities. One young woman chose to leave the house after only a short period of time because she met a man with whom she believed she wanted to develop a serious relationship. Because of the time involved in that kind of relationship, she knew she could not fulfill her commitment to the house and made the decision to move out. We would certainly never discourage anyone from developing relationships outside of the community, and we have always worked hard to create a sense of hospitality, so that all of us feel welcome to invite our friends into our home.

As with any other endeavor, we’ve also made mistakes. Many of them have been circumstantial. For example one summer we opened our house to a college student who was working as a volunteer in the city for the summer. It was not a good experience. For a variety of reasons she did not really enter into the community but seemed to view the house simply as a place to live. But a few summers later another young woman in almost the exact same circumstances came to live in one of the houses for the summer, and it was a great experience. She added a great deal to the community and responded with tremendous enthusiasm to every invitation that was offered. So it wasn’t necessarily a mistake to let someone live in the house for a short period of time, but rather those that do must understand more fully what is expected of them.

Plentiful rewards

Despite the seriousness of these challenges, we have

found that the benefits far outweigh any sacrifices. Obviously it is wonderful simply sharing life with young people. There are always new ideas to be considered, risks to be faced and energy that is fresh and alive. The gift of this young life has been shared not only with the sisters who live in the Xavier Communities, but also with those sisters who live in the region. We have always been grateful for the hospitable spirit of our sisters; they have welcomed Xavier Community members to participate in a wide variety of activities.

We have also appreciated the wonderful experience of witnessing young people discovering both the challenge and the gift of living in community. We have watched the continued development of excellent leadership. We have seen young women discover their own gifts and struggle to find a place in the church where they can be shared. Most importantly we have shared in the journey of spiritual growth and have witnessed the power of God at work in the lives of others and in the life we share.

The model presented above is simply that, a model. As we lived out this model, we made changes frequently, and we learned a great deal with each different group. In the same way, it would be expected that individual religious communities would need to make various adaptations to fit their own charism and style. But we do certainly believe that the basic framework of the Xavier Community offers a viable option that answers the need and interests of many young people today. ✚

Giving young adults discernment tools: Christian decision-making workshops

by Linda Bechen, RSM

At the 2000 Convocation of the National Religious Vocation Conference, Tom Beaudoin issued an invitation to vocation ministers to “create a culture of discernment.” This invitation was raised not as a gentle nudge. Rather, it was a nagging challenge to widen the parameters and to broaden our perspective of how we engage young people in vocation ministry.

Tom’s invitation hinted that discernment should be an integral component and an on-going process within people’s lives, not relegated to a few specific and choice moments of decision-making. Those of us in religious life have been schooled in discernment skills and processes. Ministerial, lifestyle and living choices have honed these skills often and well, and facilitating discernment is a critical role of vocation ministry.

Tom’s concept intrigued me and caused me to ask further: What does a culture of discernment look like? How can we tool young people with discernment skills? What resources do young people need? What support systems are needed to assist young people with discernment?

This led me to raise this question with Sara Kane, the campus minister of Mount Mercy College in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. Sara’s experience affirmed that students can easily become overwhelmed by the multiplicity of options available to them in making career, personal, or lifestyle decisions. She further observed that often students did not give themselves adequate time to utilize the data that they had readily available or contextualize this within their own values or spirituality. As a result, sometimes students made poor choices which had long-term implications. This was further highlighted by a junior named Christina who noted: “I think college students hunger for guidance in decision making. Sometimes it feels like we’re inundated with life-altering decisions ... and it’s pretty scary.”

To this end, I scheduled three consecutive Wednesday evenings with a group of nine students to delve more deeply into discernment—the art of Christian decision-making. The purpose of our evenings together was three-fold:

- to describe the process of discernment and outline its specific components;
- to present a discernment tool which can be utilized in making decisions in the future; and
- to begin utilizing the tool in their lives.

Each of the sessions was rooted in prayer, gave some basic input, and offered students time to reflect on the data of their own lives within the input they had been given. A primary resource I utilized during these sessions was Pierre Wolff’s book, *Discernment: The Art of Choosing Well* (Triumph Books, Liguori, Mo.). It gives the basics of discernment, and I found it very user-friendly.

The first session asked the students to look at themselves as decision makers by asking: what was a good decision (choice) they had made in the past, and why was it a good decision? What was a poor decision they had made and why they would rate it as a poor decision?

I found this an interesting exercise and a learning experience for the students. They were readily able and willing to share the good decisions of their lives. It was much harder for them to share the shadow side of that experience. One student said, “I don’t often go

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back to those times of poor decisions and probe them at the deeper level.”

As a group, the students were asked to reflect on what made the decisions good ones. They were able to name adequate amount of time, good data, conversation with others, and adequate information as some of the measurable criteria. After this exercise I briefly outlined the components of discernment and highlighted the importance of each of these in the process: time, values, head, heart, faith.

After reviewing these elements, I shared two questions which are the barometer of any discernment:

- To whom do I want to entrust my life?
- To what do I want to entrust my life?

These questions are not my own but those shared by Cathy Bertrand, SSND, former head of National Religious Vocation Conference, in a talk she gave to the National Catholic Student Coalition in Louisville, Ky. in December, 2000. These questions resonated with the young people gathered. In talking with them during and after the event, they reiterated how they had used these two questions as a follow-up to the gathering. The two questions seem to capture the essence of discernment.

To help the students get at the data of their lives, I gave them a resource that asked them to look at the data of their own lives, reflect on it over the week, fill out a form, and bring it back to the next session.

This tool asked them to look at the data of their lives by answering questions like:

- What three values do I hold dear?
- What are my dreams?
- What would I *really* like to do, be, become?
- What do I need to be happy?
- What frightens me?
- What is one thing I'd like to do in the next three years?
- What is one thing I would like to learn in the next three years?
- What am I good at?
- Three areas in which I need to grow are ...

As we began the second session, I invited each student to share with the group two things they learned about themselves from this exercise. It was enlightening for each of them, and it revealed some valuable data that could serve them in the future.

I utilized a scenario to enliven the discernment elements and the questions from the previous session. The scenario was based on a real life choice: whether to go to graduate school or find a job with their current level of education. We considered job possibilities with or without the graduate degree, as well as the question of extending or beginning to pay off education debt. This was a working session which allowed

“These sessions reminded me that I need to be making decisions with God in mind. It’s not that he should be a factor—he should be *the* factor,” said a student.

the students to ask questions, raise concerns, probe the process, and gain a deeper understanding of how the Christian decision-making process can work in their own lives. It also offered an opportunity to look at some obstacles to the process.

During the last session I presented them with a discernment resource using Scripture and focus questions to aid them in uncovering the values, head, heart issues as they made decisions. I also shared with them an eight-step discernment process from *God’s Design*, a vocation resource from the Archdiocese of Los Angeles. One of the students that evening was facing a decision about a summer experience. We gave him input to assist him in making the decision. This proved to be a graced time, not only for the student but for the group as well.

After the last session, I asked the students if they would like to continue meeting, and they agreed to continue gathering once a month for the rest of the school year. This afforded them a group within which they could use the discernment tool in making decisions.

Were the evenings successful? I would respond with a resounding *yes*. The students tasted what discernment can be, and that can have a life-long impact. Christina reflected on her experience: “These sessions reminded me that I need to be making decisions with God in mind. It’s not that he should be a factor—he should be *the* factor. The question, ‘For whom do I live my life?’ really stuck with me. The sessions also provided me

with some practical ways to weigh the decisions I face. They were also laced in prayer, which is invaluable for discernment. After attending discernment sessions, I was able to make a decision about a job that, in retrospect, I really think was the right choice.”

This was further underscored by student named Josh who reflected, “At a critical time of great decision-making in my life, Sister Linda helped me understand discernment. She explained that discernment begins with asking yourself the question, ‘For whom do you

want to live your life?’ This question encouraged me to examine my options and make a decision that would allow me to live for God.”

Since this experience, I’ve modified the workshop into a three-hour twilight retreat experience in the Archdiocese of Dubuque, which has been equally successful. It is my firm conviction that any time we can give young people the tools for making good decisions, we not only help them now but will affect them and the church far into the future. +

Current books, music and videos for discernment

BOOKS

Doing the Truth in Love, by Father Michael Himes. This basic and engaging theology of God, human relationships and service assists readers in reflecting more faithfully and more theologically on their own lives, particularly if they are involved in pastoral ministry or service projects. Published by Paulist Press, 1995.

Following God’s Call, by Judette Gallares. This book is a series of Scripture meditations on God’s call and the path of discernment. Available from Sister Janice Bemowski, sr.janice.m.bemowski@usa.net.

Friends in the Lord: Exploring Consecrated Discipleship, by Thomas Feeley, CSC. The author explores consecrated life through the lens of love and from the perspective of friendship with the Lord and with others, allowing the vows, community life and ministry to take on new dimensions. Published by Daughters of St. Paul, 2001. Available from Pauline Books and Media, (617) 522-8911, www.pauline.org.

God Moments: Why Faith Really Matters to a New Generation, by Jeremy Langford. A Gen-Xer examines his own and his generation’s search for meaning and purpose. Published by Orbis Books, 2002.

In Good Company: The Fast Track From the Corporate World to Poverty, Chastity and Obedience, by Father James Martin, SJ. With humor and heart, this Jesuit priest tells the story of his own journey from the business world to religious life. Published by Sheed and Ward, 2000.

Inner Compass, by Margaret Silf. This book provides an introduction to the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola. It’s designed to help readers discover their individual selves and their relationship with God through prayer, discernment, and reflective living. Published by Loyola Press, 1999.

Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation, by Parker Palmer. The author invites readers to listen to the inner teacher and follow its leadings toward a sense of meaning and purpose. Published by Jossey Bass, 1999.

Novena to Follow God’s Call (booklet) This Scriptural novena helps to open hearts to the Word of God and to the work of God by reflecting on the lives of men and women of the Old and New Testament who also heard the Lord’s call and responded to it. Published by the Daughters of St. Paul, 2001. Available from Pauline Books and Media, (617) 522-8911, www.pauline.org.

On the Way to Priesthood, by Sister Kathleen Bryant, RSC. This book assists men considering the possibility of priesthood. Published by National Conference of Diocesan Vocation Directors (NCDVD), 2000. Available in English or Spanish from NCDVD, ncvocdir@aol.com or (843) 280-7191.

Pastores Dabo Vobis (I Will Give You Shepherds), by Pope John Paul. The pope expounds on the gift and mystery of the call to the priesthood. II. Published by Daughters of St. Paul, 1992. Available from Pauline Books and Media, (617) 522-8911, www.pauline.org.

Paying Attention to God: Discernment in Prayer, by William A. Barry, SJ. “I am convinced,” says Barry, “that we

encounter God in a mysterious way and that God wants a personal relationship with each of us." Helping people pay attention to these encounters is the purpose of this book. Published by Ave Maria Press, 1990.

The Discerning Heart: Discovering a Personal God, by Maureen Conroy. This book explains how St. Ignatius' Rules for Discernment can help individuals understand their relationship with God in a personal way, and it offers guidelines for daily living. Published by Loyola Press, 1993.

This Our Exile, by James Martin, SJ. The author paints a vivid picture of overseas mission while telling of his experience working with African refugees while a Jesuit "in training." Published by Orbis Books, 1999.

Vita Consecrata (On the Consecrated Life) by Pope John Paul II. The pope reflects on the gift of the consecrated life to the church focusing on the vows, community life, the call to mission, the centrality of prayer and the journey in holiness. Published by Daughters of St. Paul, 1996. Available from Pauline Books and Media, (617) 522-8911, www.pauline.org.

Vocations Anonymous: A handbook for adults discerning priesthood and religious life, by Sister Kathleen Bryant, RSC. This book tells what people need to hear--but frequently don't know how to ask-- regarding the process of making prayerful vocation decisions. Published by National Coalition for Church Vocations (NCCV), 1996. Available from NCCV, 1-800-671-6228 or NCCV400@aol.com.

Weeds Among the Wheat: Where Prayer and Action Meet, by Thomas Green, SJ. The author explores discernment, seeing it as a function of your relationship with God; the closer you are to God, the more you understand what he desires for you. Published by Ave Maria Press, 1984.

What Does God Want? A Practical Guide to Making Decisions, by Father Michael Scanlan, TOR. and James D. Manney. The authors present clear, simple guidance for those considering religious life. Published by Franciscan University Press, 1996.

When God Asks for an Undivided Heart: Exploring Celibacy in Love and Freedom, by Andrew Apostoli, CFR. Offers an in-depth look at the call to celibate chastity. Published by the Daughters of St. Paul, 1995. Available from Pauline Books and Media, (617) 522-8911, www.pauline.org.

Why Not Be a Missioner? edited by Michael Leach and Susan Perry. Young lay and religious missionaries tell about their search for meaning, the rewards of a life of service, and the spirituality that nurtures their endeavors. Published by Orbis Books, 2002.

MUSIC

A Sacred Place, CD by Rufino Zaragoza, OFM. Available from OCP Publishers, 1-800-Liturgy.

Affirmation, Savage Garden, CDs by Savage Garden

All the Way: A Decade of Songs, Let's Talk About Love, CDs by Celine Dion

Breathe, CD by Faith Hill

Bridge to Glory, CD by Sister Mary Roy Weiss, SSND. Available directly from the artist, maryroyweissnd@juno.com.

...But Seriously, CD by Phil Collins

Circle of Life, song by Elton John (on ***The Lion King Soundtrack*** CD).

Farthest Shore, Hold It Up to The Light, songs by David Wilcox, (on ***Big Horizon*** CD)

Hero, song by Mariah Carey

Human Clay, Weathered, CDs by Creed

I Hope You Dance, song by Leanne Womack

Something for Everybody, song by Baz Luhrmann.

The Dark Night of the Soul, song by Loreenna McKennitt (on ***The Mask and the Mirror*** CD)

The Deer's Cry, song by The Pilgrim

The River, song by Garth Brooks

VIDEOS

The Mission Depicts a Jesuit mission in Paraguay during colonial times.

Keeping the Faith Explores the friendship and life choices of a priest, rabbi and single woman who are good friends.

Dead Man Walking (Also originally a book) Portrays the relationship between Sister Helen Prejean and a death row inmate, showing how the personal relationship moves her toward social activism.

From VISION 2003, published by National Religious Vocation Conference through TrueQuest Communications, 800-942-2811, www.visionguide.info.

Survey shows Busy Person's Retreat holds some value for vocation ministers

by Gayle Rusbasan

One of the constant challenges for vocation ministers is finding new and different places to meet young men and women who may be interested in religious life or priesthood. One possibility is the Busy Person's Retreat (BPR), which is often conducted in conjunction with college and university campus activities. Retreatants meet individually with a guide (vocation ministers frequently play this role) for an hour at a time over several days. This retreat is not directly geared toward vocations and discernment, however. It aims to help retreatants grow in their relationship with God. The question then is, "Does this particular type of retreat warrant vocation ministers' involvement, particularly as a forum for vocation outreach?"

The National Religious Vocation Conference conducted a survey to explore this very question, and found that while only about a third of the retreats have a direct vocation component, many vocation ministers (as well as campus ministers) find these retreats a valuable way for priests and religious to be present to college students.

Distinct surveys were sent to campus ministers and vocation ministers who have participated in the Busy Person's Retreats. The main goal was to determine whether or not the retreat offered an opportunity for vocation awareness. The campus minister survey consisted of various questions, including how they may be interested in having a vocation minister more involved in the retreat. It also asked what value campus ministers saw in the retreat and left room for individual comments. Responses were received from 47 campus ministers and 230 vocation ministers.

The results

According to those surveyed, the **number of years** the retreat has been held varies, with the **majority**

being held for three years. In general, the retreats for this survey have been conducted in the recent past. However, the responses are favorable, so it seems likely many of the campuses will continue to hold the BPR..

The **number of students involved** in the BPR also varies, though the majority reported **10 or more** for each retreat. Various factors, such as the size of the campus, likely affect these numbers. Response regarding attendance is mostly positive.

One of the questions on both the campus minister and vocation minister survey asked whether the retreat included an evening session focused on **vocation awareness.** About **one-third do.**



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Several of the campus ministers with a vocation component to their retreats added written comments about the value of continuing the BPR. Here are some of their comments:

- Great opportunity for students to deepen their faith. Have also had BPR “alumni” enter formation program.
- It is a good way to bring about awareness of religious life.
- It is an excellent opportunity for students to have one-on-one contact with a priest or nun.
- Vocation awareness—we have sent men to the seminary through this experience and women to the convent.

Interestingly, of the 63.2 percent of campus ministers without a session on vocation awareness, 43 percent of them include written comments with some mention of vocations and the importance of the presence of priests and religious. Some comments under the same question from respondents without a vocation awareness session are as follows:

- They are greatly appreciated by the students and valuable in terms of spiritual growth, as well as in connecting them with religious sisters, priests, and brothers—many for the first time.
- I see a great deal of value in continuing these retreats. It assists the students with their prayer life, helps them draw closer to God. It helps a few with vocation discernment.
- Helps to build awareness of church vocations and encourages active ministry on campus.
- In this day when so few students even meet a sister or personally get to know a priest, I think it’s a great opportunity to know men and women religious.
- I also believe that these retreats are valuable in terms of vocation ministry because I am convinced that before a young person can respond to questions in terms of a specific vocation lifestyle, he or she needs to be aware of the call of each person to be in relationship with God and how to nurture that relationship ... and the Busy Person’s Retreats, especially with the format of personalized direction and flexible scheduling, are very helpful with laying this foundation.

Benefits for vocation ministers

Following are the comments of vocation ministers

from the question “As a vocation director, what benefits for vocation ministry do you see in the Busy Person’s Retreat?”

- Opportunity for students (young people) to meet and establish relationships with religious and priests of different communities.
- Helps men and women religious to be visible and to be in contact with young adults (or parents of possible vocations) and campus ministers—build relationships, plant seeds, understand the faith and culture of young adults, especially with those interested in religious life; opportunity to put out vocation material. Being able to put a positive face and attitude on religious life/priesthood and ministry; they find out that we are human.
- Provides students the opportunity to ask questions they might not venture to ask otherwise; and talk about vocations in a “safe” place.
- Opportunity for vocation ministers to collaborate with campus ministry.
- Provides an opportunity to invite students to other activities, such as evenings of prayer with the community and Come and See’s.

Campus ministers identified several ways they would like to see vocation ministers involved on campus. Quite a few left this portion of the survey blank, but this gap is not necessarily negative. It may indicate that they view the presence of vocation ministers at the BPR as adequate involvement. The two areas vocation ministers in which would be most welcome on campus are **praying with Scripture** (28 marked this) and **giving input on discernment skills** (26 marked this). Other areas checked off less frequently (13-16 times) were: discernment ministries, Come & See’s, facilitate a discernment group, miniseries on psychosexual development, participation in regularly scheduled events, participation in service projects.

Several campus ministers voiced **concerns about involving enough students** to make the effort worthwhile. One respondent said, “Programming is hit-or-miss. I wouldn’t want to occupy the calendars of vocation directors and have no-shows. It happens over and over.”

Another campus minister stressed the importance of the awareness of all vocations saying, “Some kind of vocation panel might be beneficial, tying in faculty, staff, sisters. The focus could be not only on religious vocations, but the spirituality in all vocations.”

Conclusions

The survey results seem to indicate that, direct or indirect, there is some element of vocation awareness at the majority of the retreats. Whether or not the retreat had a specific section on vocations did not deter the respondents from affirmatively commenting on the positive presence of priests and religious. As a whole, there was not a large percentage of campus ministers who wanted further involvement by the vocation min-

isters in the areas mentioned in the survey. Based on the number of positive comments from both vocation and campus ministers, vocation ministers may want to consider the possibility of participating in a Busy Person's Retreat. Many vocation ministers are finding that whether or not vocations are promoted during the retreat, being a guide puts them in touch with religiously-oriented college students—the population they want to understand and reach. +

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