



September 2009

Dear NRVC Member,

We at the National Religious Vocation Conference (NRVC) continue to explore methods in which our members and our religious institutes may deal with the results of our recent landmark study on religious vocations done in collaboration with the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA).

I am pleased to present you with a series of discussion questions that may facilitate the process for religious institutes as they apply the study results to their own reality. The discussion questions below follow each section of the major findings as outlined in the final report's executive summary. These questions were developed with the intent for use by a religious institute's leadership team, vocation and/or formation personnel, or a combination of both. The context for discussion can be within a meeting or day of reflection.

I express my sincere thanks to **Brother Paul Michalenko, ST, PhD**, organizational consultant, **Sister Maria Hughes, ASC**, Director of the Institute of Religious Formation, and **Sister Charlene Diorka, SSJ**, NRVC Associate Director, for sharing their time and expertise in developing these questions.

It is my sincere hope that this process will be of service to religious institutes as they continue to deal with the question of newer membership. With every best wish and blessing, I remain

Sincerely in Christ,

Brother Paul Bednarczyk, CSC

Executive Director

CENTER FOR THE APPLIED RESEARCH TO THE APOSTOLATE

*Recent Vocations to Religious Life:
A Report for the
National Religious Vocation Conference*

Major Findings

Religious Life Today

- There is a great deal of variety and diversity in religious life today not only in terms of the spirituality, charism, and mission of religious institutes but also in terms of their size, composition, and presence of new members. Although most religious institutes in the United States are experiencing aging membership, diminishing numbers, and few, if any, new vocations, some continue to attract new members and a few are experiencing significant growth.
- The study identified at least 2,630 men and women in initial formation and nearly 4,000 who are either in initial formation or who had professed final vows within the previous 15 years. The actual number of new members is likely even higher given that some religious institutes did not respond to the survey and/or did not provide information about members who had professed final vows since 1993. The findings from the surveys, and especially those from the focus groups and interviews with new members, confirm that there are still significant numbers of men and women who are responding to a call to religious life and are hopeful about its future.
- Three-fourths of institutes of men (78 percent) and two-thirds of institutes of women (66 percent) have at least one person currently in initial formation (candidate or postulant, novice, or temporary professed). However, almost half of the institutes that have someone in initial formation have no more than one or two. About 20 percent of the responding institutes currently have more than five people in initial formation. Some of these are institutes that recently merged, bringing together several congregations or provinces that separately had no one or only a few in formation.
- Overall, religious are an aging population. Three in four finally professed men (75 percent) and more than nine in ten finally professed women (91 percent) are age 60 and over in 2009. Among both men and women, a majority of those under the age of 60 are in their 50s. While this presents some challenges for new members, especially those who are younger, it has not deterred those who entered from doing so.

Religious Life

DISCUSSION QUESTION:

How does our vocation reality of the past 15 years compare with the results of this study?

Characteristics of New Members

- Compared to men and women religious in the last century, those coming to religious life today are much more diverse in terms of their age, racial and ethnic background, and life experience. Many come with considerable education as well as ministry and work experience. The diversity among new members presents a number of challenges for formation as well as for life and ministry in many religious institutes.
- According to the survey of new members, the average age of entrance is 30 for men (median 27) and 32 for women (median 29). However, there is a ten-year gap in average and median entrance age between women in LCWR institutes and women in CMSWR institutes. According to the survey of religious institutes, more than half of the women in initial formation in LCWR institutes (56 percent) are age 40 and older, compared to 15 percent in CMSWR institutes.
- Compared to finally professed members, those in initial formation are more likely to come from non-Caucasian/white/Anglo backgrounds: 21 percent are Hispanic/Latino(a), 14 percent are Asian/Pacific Islander, and 6 percent are African/African American. About 58 percent are Caucasian/white, compared to about 94 percent of finally professed members.
- The survey of new members found that about nine in ten were raised Catholic and most (73 percent) attended a Catholic school for at least part of their education. About half attended parish-based religious education. One in seven (14 percent) new members from the Millennial Generation (born since 1982) was home-schooled for at least some of their education.
- Seventy percent of new members had at least a bachelor's degree before they entered. More than nine in ten were employed, usually in a full-time position, and about seven in ten were engaged in ministry, one-third on a full-time basis and about six in ten on a volunteer basis. Many were also involved in various parish ministries and/or other volunteer work.
- More than two-thirds (68 percent) of the new members first considered religious life by the time they were 21, with a little more than half (53 percent) doing so by the time they were 18. Female respondents are a little more likely than male respondents to have thought about a religious vocation at a young age, that is, before the age of 14 (27 percent compared to 19 percent). Men were a little more likely to first consider religious life when they were college-age, that is, between the ages of 18 and 21 (28 percent of men compared to 20 percent of women).

Characteristics

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- **What diversity (i.e. age, educational and ethnic/cultural background, etc.) are we experiencing in the newer members of our religious institute?**
 - **In what ways do our vocation programs reach out to those under 21 years of age?**
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Attraction to Religious Life and to a Particular Religious Institute

- New members are drawn to *religious life* primarily by a sense of call and a desire for prayer and spiritual growth. More than three-fourths (78 percent) say they were attracted “very much” by the former and almost as many (73 percent) say they were attracted “very much” by the latter. More than anything else, they were attracted to their particular *religious institute* by the example of its members, and especially by their sense of joy, their down to earth nature, and their commitment and zeal. Some 85 percent say the example of members attracted them “very much.”

- To only a slightly lesser degree, most new members also say they were attracted to *religious life* by a desire to be of service and a desire to be part of a community. They were attracted to their particular *religious institute* by its spirituality, community life, and prayer life. Although the ministries of the institute are also important to most new members, they are less important than spirituality, prayer, community, and lifestyle. Questions about ministry, especially the possibility of a variety of ministries, tend to be more important to men than to women among new members.
- Younger respondents are more likely than older respondents to say they were attracted to religious life by a desire to be more committed to the Church and to their particular institute by its fidelity to the Church. Many also report that their decision to enter their institute was influenced by its practice regarding a religious habit. Significant generational gaps, especially between the Millennial Generation (born in 1982 or later) and the Vatican II Generation (born between 1943 and 1960), are evident throughout the study on questions involving the Church and the habit. Differences between the two generations also extend to questions about community life as well as styles and types of prayer.
- Newer members in religious life first became acquainted with their religious institutes in many different ways. The most common experience was in an institution, such as a school, where the members served. Other relatively common ways of becoming acquainted with the institute include through the recommendation of a friend or advisor, through working with a member of the institute, through a friend in the institute, and through print or online promotional materials.
- Men are more likely than women to report that they first encountered their religious institute in a school or other institution where the members served. Women are more likely than men to indicate that they learned about their institute through the recommendation of a friend or advisor.
- Older respondents are somewhat more likely than younger respondents to have met the institute more directly, that is, through working with a member or through a friend in the institute. Younger respondents, especially those in the Millennial Generation, are more likely to have first heard about the institute through the recommendation of a friend or advisor or through print or online promotional materials.
- Some younger members did not know a man or woman religious before they sensed a call to religious life. Many of these young religious first learned about their particular institute through the recommendation of a friend or advisor, often a priest, and many found out or learned more about their institute online. Direct experience with the institute and its members through “Come and See” experiences, discernment retreats, and other opportunities to spend time with members are especially important for this age group.

Attraction to religious life

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- **How are our spirituality, prayer, community, and lifestyle consistent with what the study says newer members are drawn to?**
 - **How do our religious institute and our members see itself and themselves in relationship to the Catholic Church and its teachings?**
 - **How would a younger person perceive and experience the members of our institute in “their sense of joy, their down to earth nature, and their commitment and zeal?”**
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Vocation Promotion and Discernment Programs

- Many religious institutes offer a variety of vocation promotion and discernment programs. Most responding institutes report that they use print materials, websites, and or/advertising for vocation promotion, and many report that they target specific age groups, most typically high school, college, and young adults, in their vocation promotion and discernment programs.
- The most common discernment programs are “Come and See” experiences (offered by three-fourths of the responding institutes), live-in experiences and discernment retreats (each offered by a little more than half), and mission or ministry experiences (offered by about a third). New members who participated in these and other programs for vocation discernment generally found them to be very helpful in their discernment process.
- Findings from the survey of religious institutes suggest that using various media (especially websites) for vocation promotion, offering programs (especially discernment retreats, “Come and See” experiences, discernment groups, and ministry/mission experiences) for vocation discernment, and targeting certain age groups (especially college-age and young adults) in vocation promotion and discernment efforts are positively correlated with attracting and retaining new members.
- The data also suggest that having a vocation director, especially one who is engaged in vocation ministry on a full-time basis, and a vocation team are positively correlated with attracting and retaining new members. Although most religious institutes (88 percent) report that they have a vocation director, he or she is full-time in less than half of these institutes (46 percent). Findings from the survey of new members and especially the reflections of participants in the interviews and focus groups suggest that the vocation director and other team members can play a critical role in the discernment process.
- The survey of new members found that the age of the respondent is negatively correlated with how helpful they found most of vocation promotion and discernment resources and programs. Thus, the younger the person, the *more* likely he or she is to say that these resources or programs were helpful in the discernment process. This is especially the case with various types of websites; CDs, DVDs, and videos; and print and online promotional materials. Compared to older respondents, younger respondents are much more likely to report that websites, especially the websites of religious institutes, were helpful to them. They are also considerably more likely to report that discernment retreats and “Come and See” experiences were helpful.
- Although various vocation promotion and discernment programs can play an important role in informing potential candidates about religious life, especially in a particular religious institute, the findings suggest that members themselves play the most important role. New members report that it was the example of members that most attracted them to their institute and that meetings with members and communities were the most helpful when they were discerning. Comments from interview and focus group participants provide further support that it was their experience of members and the way they are living religious life that was most influential in the decision to enter their institute.

Vocation Promotion/discernment

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- **Do we see the value of a designated, full-time vocation director and/or vocation team?**
- **Do we effectively use web communication and media for promotion of our religious institute?**

- **How have we used for vocation promotion “come and see” or live-in experiences, discernment retreats, or mission or ministry experiences?**
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Encouragement and Support in Discernment and in Religious Life

- Many new members did not experience a great deal of encouragement from parents, siblings, and other family members when they were first considering a vocation to religious life. Many also did not receive much encouragement from diocesan priests, people in their parish, or people in their school or workplace. Many report that their parents are now much more supportive.
- Most new members report that they received a great deal of encouragement from members of their institute during their discernment process and that members of their institute continue to be their greatest source of encouragement and support in religious life. Most also report high levels of encouragement from those to whom and with whom they minister.
- Compared to older new members, younger new members are more likely to report that they were encouraged by diocesan priests when they were first considering religious life. They are also more likely to report receiving encouragement from diocesan priests in their life and ministry now. Among other respondents, diocesan priests are *least* likely to be cited as a source of “very much” encouragement.

Engagement and Support

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- **Who supports and encourages our vocation prospects?**
 - **What could be done to generate greater support for those discerning a vocation to our religious institute?**
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Prayer and Spirituality

- Many new members identify common prayer as one of the aspects of religious life that most attracted them and that most sustains them now. When asked about the importance of various types of communal prayer, respondents are most likely to name daily Eucharist and Liturgy of the Hours as the prayer types that are most important to them.
- Millennial Generation respondents are much more likely than other respondents – especially those from the Vatican II Generation – to say that daily Eucharist, Liturgy of the Hours, Eucharistic Adoration, and other devotional prayers are “very” important to them. Compared to younger respondents, older respondents place greater importance on faith-sharing and, to a lesser degree, on non-liturgical common prayer.
- These patterns were reiterated in the open-ended responses as well as in interviews and focus groups in which many younger members mention Eucharist, Eucharistic Adoration, the Divine Office, and Marian devotion as especially important to them.

Prayer and Spirituality

DISCUSSION QUESTION:

How would you describe your members' participation in the various forms of devotional prayer mentioned in the study?

Community Life and Ministry Setting Preferences

- When asked about their decision to enter their particular religious institute, new members cite the community life in the institute as the most influential factor in their decision (followed closely by the prayer life or prayer styles in the community). Most new members indicate that they want to live, work, and pray with other members of their religious institute, with the last being especially important to them. Responses to an open-ended question about what most attracted them to their religious institute reinforce the importance new members place on this aspect of religious life.
- When asked about various living arrangements, most new members prefer to live in a large (eight or more) or medium-sized (four to seven) community and to live only with other members of their institute. Younger respondents express even stronger preferences for living with members of their institute in large community settings. Findings from the survey of religious institutes suggest that that new membership is negatively correlated with the number of members living alone. That is, the higher the number of members who live alone, the *less* likely an institute is to have new members.
- When asked about various ministry settings, most new members indicate a relatively strong preference for ministry with other members of their institute and ministry sponsored by their institute. Again, these preferences are much stronger among younger new members. Very few new members, especially in the youngest age cohorts, prefer ministry with a non-Catholic or non-religious organization or even one that is Catholic but not sponsored by their institute.

Community life and ministry

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- **Do our members have the opportunity to live in medium to large sized (four to seven people) communities?**
 - **Do our members have the opportunity to minister with other members of our institute in a ministry sponsored by our institute?**
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Evaluation of Religious Institutes

- Most new members give their religious institutes very high ratings (“excellent”) for their commitment to ministry. Most also give high marks to their institutes for their faithfulness to prayer and spiritual growth, the opportunities for spiritual and personal growth, and focus on mission. They give their institutes somewhat lower ratings for community life and relationships, opportunities for ongoing formation, and efforts to promote vocations.
- Compared to new members from other generations, those from the Vatican II Generation tend to give their institutes lower ratings on most of the aspects of religious life about which they were asked. Those from the Millennial Generation tend to be the most positive in their assessment of their religious institutes.

DISCUSSION QUESTION:

Are our members positive and hopeful about religious life?

Practices Regarding the Religious Habit

- The responses to the open-ended question about what attracted them to their religious institute reveal that having a religious habit was an important factor for a significant number of new members. Interviews with vocation directors also suggest that many who are inquiring into religious life are looking for the possibility of wearing a habit even in those institutes in which few, if any, members regularly do so.
- About two-thirds of the responding new members are in institutes that wear a religious habit. For a little more than half of those new members (55 percent), the habit is required in all or most circumstances and for another 16 percent it is required only at certain times, such as for ministry or prayer. In the focus group discussions, a few of the participants were either strongly in favor or strongly opposed to requiring habits, while some saw the value of wearing a habit or clerical dress in at least some circumstances.
- Among those who report that the habit is optional, 90 percent of men and 27 percent of women say they wear it at least once in a while, with 14 percent of men and 15 percent of women saying they wear it in all or most circumstances. Among those who report that their institute does *not* have a habit, almost half of the men (48 percent) and almost a quarter of the women (23 percent) say they would wear a habit if they had that option.

Religious habit

DISCUSSION QUESTION:

What is the attitude of the members in our religious institute toward wearing a religious habit?

Most Rewarding and Satisfying Aspects of Religious Life

- When asked what they find most rewarding or satisfying about religious life, new members offered a range of comments about various aspects of religious life. The most frequent responses were about the communal dimension of religious life. Some mention living, praying, and working together while others focus more on the sense of common purpose and being part of something larger than themselves. The frequency of mentions of community life suggests that this is a particularly important aspect of religious life to most new members.
- Many new members also identify some aspect of the spiritual dimension of religious life, such as the sense of following God's call, deepening their relationship with God and with Christ, and/or personal and communal prayer, as providing the greatest sense of reward or satisfaction. In their

responses, many new members specifically mention daily Eucharist, Eucharistic Adoration, the Divine Office, Marian devotion, and other devotional practices as especially meaningful to them.

- Some new members cite the service or outreach dimension of religious life as most rewarding or satisfying for them. Many of these respondents mention ministry, service, or the apostolate while others comment on being a witness to God for others. The fact that comments about ministry, service, or the apostolate are less frequent than those about community and spirituality suggest that these may be less salient to new members.

Most rewarding aspects

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- **What would our members say is most rewarding about the way religious life is lived in our religious institute?**
 - **How does this compare to the study results?**
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Challenges in and for Religious Life Today

- In response to questions about what they find most challenging about religious life, new members identified a range of issues and concerns. Some of these are perennial issues in religious life: the challenges of living in community, overcoming personal weaknesses, faithfully living the vows, and balancing personal, communal, and ministerial responsibilities.
- Some of the challenges identified by new members are more unique to this particular time in the history of religious life in the United States: aging and diminishment in their religious institutes, age and experience differences among new members as well as between new and older members in community, the lack of peers in religious life and in their religious institutes, and differences in theology and ecclesiology, often across generational lines. Some see the polarization within the Church and within religious life as the greatest challenge.

Challenges

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- **How do the challenges faced by our newer members compare to the challenges outlined above?**
 - **How have we responded to these challenges?**
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Hope for the Future

- Although many of the participants in the focus groups and interviews expressed concerns about the future of religious life and the future of their religious institutes, most remain hopeful. Most acknowledge that the numbers in religious life may continue to decline and that their religious institutes may be different in the future. Nonetheless, they believe religious life will persevere and that the Spirit can and will move in that diminishment. Some already see signs of hope, especially in a younger generation that they believe is bringing a new energy and optimism to religious life.
- Findings from the qualitative research also suggest that new members are especially attracted to religious institutes that themselves are clear and confident about their identity and hopeful about their future. Some new members are disheartened by the apathy, pessimism, and fatalism they see in some of the members of their institutes.

Hope

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- **How “clear and confident” is our institute about its identity?**
 - **Are our members hopeful about the future of our religious institute?**
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Best Practices in Vocation Ministry

- The findings from the study suggest a number of “best practices” for vocation promotion. These include instilling a “culture of vocations” and involving membership and leadership in concerted vocation promotion efforts; having a full-time vocation director who is supported by a team and resources; using new media, especially websites and other online presence; offering discernment programs and other opportunities for potential candidates to meet members and learn about the institute; and targeting college students and young adults as well as elementary and high school students to expose them to the possibility of religious life and inform them about the institute.
- Although these practices can have a positive impact on attracting and retaining new members, the research suggests that it is the example of members and the characteristics of the institute that have the most influence on the decision to enter a particular institute. The most successful institutes in terms of attracting and retaining new members at this time are those that follow a more traditional style of religious life in which members live together in community and participate in daily Eucharist, pray the Divine Office, and engage in devotional practices together. They also wear a religious habit, work together in common apostolates, and are explicit about their fidelity to the Church and the teachings of the Magisterium. All of these characteristics are especially attractive to the young people who are entering religious life today.

Best practices

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- **How would we rate the “culture of vocations” in our religious institute as described above?**
 - **How is the “traditional” style of religious life as described in the study experienced in our religious institute?**
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OTHER DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- **What generational polarities (pre-Vatican II, Vatican II, post-Vatican II, and millennial) do we experience in our religious institute?**
 - **What do we need to do to bridge these polarities?**
 - **The study shows that the average retention rate of those who enter religious life is 48 percent; that is, about half of those who entered since 1990 remain. The median and modal retention rates are also 50 percent (*see p. 34 of the report for more detailed information*). How does the retention rate of our religious institute compare with the national average?**
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FINAL INTEGRATION QUESTIONS:

- **What particular areas in the study did I find myself resisting and why?**
 - **What particular areas of the study most excited me and why?**
 - **What are the implications of this study for our religious institute?**
 - **For our leadership?**
 - **For our vocation and formation personnel?**
 - **For our newer members and for those considering life with us?**
 - **For our general membership?**
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