



*How we connect with younger adults to advance our mission and ministries*

# *Voice of Vocation*

The Chapter of 2018 affirmed the recommendation “that members of the Congregation engage in the development of a Culture of Vocations.” Below is an article that you might find helpful as we grow together in this recommendation. Although at times it is directed to “vocation ministers,” its message is relevant to all of us as we have all committed ourselves to the work of creating a culture of vocations.

## ***Encountering Difference: Creating Unity: Accompanying Younger Seekers in Vocation Ministry***

By: Celeste Mokrzycki, SSJ and Mary Rowell, CSJ

How often vocation directors hear the lament that young people are not interested in religious life or only want to enter congregations with habits. Extensive current vocation research in the U.S., Canada, France, U.K., and Australia shows that “young adults are drawn to religious life primarily by a sense of call and a desire to grow in prayer and spirituality.” Many are already engaged in service, prior to entrance, and are now attracted to a radical living of the Gospel which they see expressed and strengthened through communal living, common prayer, and corporate ministries. Additionally, numerous responses on the online Vision Vocation Match Survey indicate an attraction and desire for

more traditional prayer forms such as Eucharistic Adoration, Lectio Divina, the Rosary, and other devotional prayers. When these more “traditional” candidates desire to enter a less conventional congregation, the vocation director faces the challenge of finding ways to bridge the expanding gap that sometimes appears between the members of the congregation and these prospective vocations.

The majority of our members are 65 years of age and upwards and live singly; or in small communities that have been together for a very long time, or in larger, somewhat more institutional living situations, often former motherhouses. They may resist the inquirers’ desire for communal living as a thing of the past and sometimes connect external signs, such as habit and traditional prayer practices, with their former, often negative experiences, and a Pre-Vatican II understanding of religious life. These members associate the wishes of younger people as a harking back to uniformity, immaturity and rigidity and complain that these newer members would not carry on the vision of Vatican Council II. Yet, some of these differences may be more generational than ideological since many of these seekers were not even born until after the Council.

The experience of church is a different reality for this new generation of Catholics. “Many have had periods where they rejected the church, sought meaning elsewhere, and have come back to the Catholic community with vigor and a great desire to become part of something greater than themselves.” Some of the devotions that many Religious have discarded are new and meaningful to this younger generation and may provide the only “quiet” that they experience in their sometimes noisy and hectic lives.

How does the vocation director or team bridge this widening gap between somewhat traditional seekers and the members of their communities who may want, in the extreme, only those who “fit” in with “us,” our theological views, spiritual expression, and current lifestyles? They sometimes find themselves caught in a “limbo” as they walk with discerners who have a sense of a holy calling and are on fire with the excitement of living the Gospel more radically. At times congregational members may even create a climate that lacks “hospitality” to this new life that may be different from their present reality. In this milieu of “gaps” potential newer members, and often the vocation minister too, may experience a lack of openness, a sense of doors closing.

Simultaneously, established members may become anxious that all they have worked so hard to achieve, important liberation and essential maturity, vibrant new horizons, is possibly threatened. As Fr. Chris Gibson, C.P. puts it, “Tensions can simmer in communities — with older people wondering why the vocation director is bringing in people so different from them, and younger people perplexed by older members’ coolness and even mockery toward their desires.” Here, Fr. Gibson brings in a touch of reality — it was always thus. “Baby Boomers also had difficulty with the older generation of their time” and the history of the Church is replete with instances of difference and disagreement. In his behavioral assessment workshop, Father Raymond Carey, warns, however, “that a community that expects newcomers to completely ‘adjust to us’ is destined to die out” (personal communication, July, 2014). All of this can be quite challenging to those of us in vocation ministry and concurrently provides a great opportunity for self-reflection and humility.

During the initial discernment process, vocation directors are mindful of their sacred responsibility of walking with a child of God; therefore, they try to be respectful and reverent of the candidate as they look for concrete signs of a vocation to religious life. When this becomes clearer, the focus of the discernment process shifts to whether the candidate is called to this particular congregation. Since there are relatively few applicants to religious life, vocation ministers and congregational leadership need to be attentive to their own interior freedom to keep from being influenced by the pressure to increase numbers. Good supervision with a peer group or another professional is highly recommended for vocation directors to help them identify significant questions to explore with the candidates in order to assess their readiness and capacity for religious life.

One of these key questions that needs to be answered by the vocation minister is: Does the applicant display qualities, behaviors, and characteristics that are part of the unique identity of this congregation? Ensuring appropriate fit is an important part of the vocation minister's role as gatekeeper for the wellbeing of the community as a whole and as a sensitive companion to individuals experiencing a call and desiring admission. "In recent vocation research, newer members identified two most vital influences their initial choice and fidelity in religious life: first, a sense of call from God, and second, the charism of the institute." Subsequently, it would be extremely helpful to vocation directors, if the congregation, leadership and vocation ministry engaged this question as a whole to provide objective and behavioral criteria for assessment.

While considering a candidates' fit within a congregation, the vocation minister needs to be attentive to signs of rigidity whether the discerners are drawn to more traditional rituals and practices or not. Intransigence will limit the ability of any newer member to become a truly mature religious capable of living the life, Gospel, and mission. However, in a recent workshop for formators, Michel Sy, Assessment Team Leader at the Southdown Institute in Ontario, Canada, cautioned us not to see conservatism and rigidity as the same. They are "different and distinct." He further stated: "Conservatism (what, in this article, the authors are calling a more traditional understanding and practice of faith) is about belief while rigidity concerns behavior." Rigid behavior in any candidates will inevitably lead to problems regardless of the type of community they enter, but conservatism is like all beliefs, a starting point, and when candidates are open to the transformation of God's grace and development through study, discernment and dialogue, they will grow in new understanding and experience. In this the congregation accompanies them with respect and love while being patient with the slowness of growth, an evolving process.

We have all become aware that contemporary understandings of cosmology, along with evidence from history, remind us of the constantly evolving nature of all things, including religious life and our perceptions and living out of it. As John Haught put it recently in an interview for LCWR, "Now that science has shown us that the universe is still emerging, it has become possible for the first time in human history to view this universe as dramatic rather than static. More specifically, we may now look at the cosmos as a drama of awakening, freedom, faith, and love."

As Sisters of St. Joseph, a central part of our very identity embodies this spirituality of unfolding, of listening and of becoming. We know it to be a process, informed by our “Ignatian seeding,” calling us to an unfolding openness to “the more.” It is so clearly entailed in Maxim 73, “Live out your life with one desire only: to be always what God wants you to be, in nature, grace and glory, for time and for eternity.” This is our nature and our gift; and it is how we communicate and effect the beauty to which we are called.

Reflecting on this, we realize again that we are all called to a transformative process, individually and communally, to question whether this is “a time for something new to be happening in our own lives and in the life of our ministry.” This call must be directed at the way in which we perceive and practice vocation ministry. Neither established members nor new inquirers can remain in a state of stasis. Do we see potential for mutual acceptance as being “on the way”? How are we to work toward this acceptance from our current generational gap?

Fr. Chris Gibson, C.P. suggests a very helpful way of going forward by reflecting on Pope Francis’ concept of a “culture of encounter” born out of his experiences of the Church in Argentina. Fr. Gibson says, “No doubt fears are real and understandable, but only in a ‘generational culture of encounter’ where true dialogue takes place will we see the light ahead of us and be able to move forward.” Letting go of the progressive-liberal-traditional and conservative labels and assumptions allows a new pattern of relating to emerge that seeks common ground for the good of the whole, yet respects and appreciates differences. This is our charism of unity, not uniformity, fleshed out in meeting others, whoever they are and wherever they are; allowing ourselves to be transformed by them and they by us. While sometimes challenging, a culture of encounter requires that conflicts be honestly admitted and responded to with sensitivity. “It bears in mind that closing in on one’s own way will only lead to death”. These encounters take patience and a generous giving of the precious commodity of time, quality time.

How should religious communities respond to these ecclesiologies and spiritualities of young adult Catholics who are possible candidates for religious life? Perhaps we can begin by planning respectful and sensitive conversations between established and newer members. Perhaps we can invite younger people to come into our homes to hear their hopes and desires, their concepts, their needs, their gifts, and generous hearts. In turn they can hear members speak of their journeys, their struggles, and endeavors for a true freedom of the Gospel and spirit.

Established members and those discerning religious life sometimes speak of the same topics but given their respective life experiences they look at those same things from different standpoints. Examples of this abound. When newer members appear attracted to externals, such as habits, they are seeking an important sense of identity that they have never before experienced. Current and older members have worked hard to grow out of rigid identities that hampered human development and freedom for mission. When we seek common ground, we can all agree that in order to grow and mature we

need first a strong sense of identity that becomes a springboard for such essential development.

Might we also make some compromises in praying together by creatively finding ways to combine traditions which, at this point, some younger members seek, such as Divine Office, adoration, rosary with faith sharing, contemplative time, meditation? Might those of us who are already members discover some lost riches and might younger people grow into more openness, into lives of prayer rather than words of prayer? More importantly we might also achieve by these means a “catechesis” for today’s world so much needed by the younger generation today.

At times, candidates may need to expand their understanding of liturgy, scripture, their faith and its traditions, social justice teachings of the church and how these teachings connect with Catholicism’s ecclesial and theological foundations. In addition to professional study, established members and the newly initiated could bridge the gap between them by engaging in theological reflection. Both would share their personal experience of God’s presence in their life and ministry, grow in their ability to discern how God is being revealed in their midst, and to situate this experience within the rich Catholic Christian tradition. As they share their understanding of God, Christ, the church, the world, and ministry, differences will arise, but at the same time, they will discover common ground. The newer members, who once held onto a rigid Catholic identity, could move to an owned faith that is more inclusive of all faiths because they have a clearer understanding of their own. Additionally, the opportunity of theological reflection will help those in initial formation to articulate their Catholic beliefs more effectively when asked by others in their ministries.

Younger members also express a desire to live in community, but existing members commonly identify this yearning as a harking back to the sometimes oppressive, binding, and often immature manner of living experienced in former days and institutions. Vocation directors often hear comments such as, “they (discerners or newer members) just want security!” That is a comment that may be far outside the perceptions of a younger generation, most of whom have, after all, probably worked far from home and owned or rented their own homes with all the responsibilities, insecurities and gifts that entails. They are not seeking security, but perhaps in this age of individualism they yearn to become a prophetic witness in the atomistic society in which so many people find themselves alone, lonely, abandoned.

In the book, “In Our Own Words: Religious Life in a Changing World”, written by newer members of a variety of women’s religious communities, Sister Virginia Herbers, ASCJ, states: “What’s the most rewarding part of religious life? More often than not, as I ponder the question, the answer comes back swiftly, community living. Being surrounded by women who have given their entire lives as a gift to the service of God’s people, returning home each evening to a praying community, waking up each new day to launch into a mission founded on a common charism: these are gifts beyond measure; and the accumulation of those gifts over the years is nothing short of true grace.”

Reading these words may well elicit a degree of cynicism in current members, who are now perhaps living singly, and many of whom have lived in such small communities as

described by Sister Virginia that can only be described as “a nightmare”! It should be noted, however, that Sister Virginia is no idealist. When responding to what is the hardest part of living religious life, she is quick to say “community living.”

As stated above, it appears that young adult candidates for religious life and newer members desire to form deep and supportive relationships with community members. However, many of our communities have not been influenced by a large enough number of new members, so relationships among the sisters have been formed over the years and lifestyles may have become somewhat static. Congregational leadership sometimes struggles to find a “formative community” for those in initial formation, and newer members sometimes find it challenging to become part of already established relationships. Yet, the integration of new candidates into religious life is a process of establishing and deepening relationships in their local communities, congregation, and ministries.

Are we ready to reflect honestly and deeply about our community life together? Can we identify how individualism influences our lifestyles and address what hinders unity because the world needs to see that it is possible to live in communion? The attraction to religious life for newer members, essentially the future of religious life, depends on the authentic and faithful witness of our lives and whether we respond prophetically to the desperate cries of the world. Can we encounter one another in true dialogue, open to the Spirit speaking in each one of us, so as to move beyond our roadblocks to the future? In his 2014 Apostolic Letter to Consecrated Persons, Pope Francis reminds us that “we are the witnesses and architects of the plan for unity which is the crowning point of human history in God’s design”. For the sake of the future and of healthy, vivid vocation ministry, the responsibility of all members, we need to enter into opportunities of encounter. Encountering then holds out many possibilities.

In her article, “Our Witness to Communion,” Mary Pellegrino, CSJ, reminds us of the prophetic nature of communal life by stating “to the degree that our lives flourish and are not diminished by the consequences of all that we’ve relinquished, then we can say that our communal life is prophetic, and that each of us contributes to the vision of what the kingdom of God will be in its perfection: where everyone has enough. Everyone is loved. Everyone is free. And everyone belongs”. Are we willing to commit to a lively encounter admitting of diversity and seeking unity? We are called to lives of integrity and authenticity where we can embrace differences from a stance of hospitality that welcomes the color and richness that is woven into the tapestry of our communities. People do not leave their entire lives and cultures behind to become what they are not. We need to affirm the giftedness and diversity that prospective members bring to us, the newness of their experiences, their questions of “why do you do that.” Then together we may discover the communion that is the Real Presence of Christ in our world. What an invitation to live the Sisters of Saint Joseph’s charism of unity and reconciliation into the future.

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