
Profiles in Catholicism



An Interview
with
Sister Sharon
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Executive Director of
the National Religious
Vocation Conference

by Gordon Nary

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Gordon: Congratulations on your appointment as the new executive director of the [National Religious Vocation Conference](#) (NRVC). Could you comment on some of the factors that may have contributed to the declines in vocations and what we can do to address them?

Sister Sharon: According to the most current statistics, vocations are again on the rise. I find this news very exciting! In the most recent study from Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate ([CARA](#)) at Georgetown, we see a significant uptick in women and men entering religious life. The Entrance Class of 2016 had 216 women and men who had professed final vows, and 548 potential ordinands from 32 religious institutes and 140 arch/dioceses.

I think this is very IMPORTANT information to be shared and celebrated. We must remember that the huge increase in the numbers of men and women entering religious life during the 1900s was an anomaly of history that will not soon repeat itself. In truth, religious life has historically been the chosen

vocation of only a very small proportion of the Catholic Christian population. What we have seen since the peak in the numbers of sisters, brothers, and priests in the 1960s is a leveling off to what is more the norm. And since 2000, which is set as the benchmark for the 21st century, we have seen an end to the decline and now a slow rise in numbers.\

What this tells me is that the church is doing something right. Young men and women continue to be called to this unique and joyful vocation. What all of us can do is to encourage, nurture, and support vocations, in our families, in our parishes, in our schools. We know from a host of NRVC/CARA studies that family encouragement, participation in the Eucharist and the life of the parish, volunteer service, and Catholic education all help promote vocations to religious life. But, of course, prayer and invitation are at the core of every vocation call.

Gordon:

Parents are often the first people to whom younger people discuss their possible interest in a vocation. How supportive have parents generally been when interests in a vocation are mentioned, and what advice would you give to parents when these interests are mentioned?

For a whole host of reasons—smaller family sizes, unfamiliarity with contemporary religious life, more opportunities for the laity—parents have not taken up the mantle of encouraging vocations. Resistance on the part of parents is a true source of pain for some young people as they take steps to enter religious life. In the landmark [2009 NRVC/CARA Study on Recent Vocations to Religious Life and the Priesthood](#), we found that parents, siblings, and family members were among the least supportive—at least initially—in encouraging a respondent's vocation.

Sister Sharon:

Based on the findings of our [2015 NRVC/CARA Study on the Role of Family in Nurturing Vocations](#), which took a look at the habits and culture of families with children in religious life, I would recommend the following “best practices” for parents: Pray together as a family; attend Mass together regularly; have meals together every day if possible; gather as a family at least once a week for a game, movie, or conversation; have Catholic media—books, movies, periodicals, in the house; stay connected with the people in your neighborhood; and engage in charitable works of some kind. Of course, personally encouraging your son/daughter to consider a vocation to priesthood, brotherhood or sisterhood is certainly a powerful message of support for those lifestyles. These are all proven winners when it comes to planting the seeds of vocations and faith-filled children.

I would also encourage parents who learn that their child is considering religious life to take an interest in their discernment and the religious communities they are in contact with—just as they might with a potential spouse. Visit the community and meet the vocation minister. Offer both emotional and financial support and, more important, spiritual guidance.

Another important point for serious consideration by the church as a whole is the fact that the average age a person first considers religious life is approximately 19, but many congregations will not consider these younger adults until they have more life-experience or education. What we've seen, then, is that vocations get deferred because of work and family commitments

or educational debt—as individuals must be debt-free to enter religious life. So now we have the average age of entrance at 30+ years old. Religious communities are missing out on the energy and enthusiasm that younger entrants bring to the life of the community.

Educational debt is a particular problem that NRVC identified and then sought to remedy. In 2014, through the help of a grant from the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation, NRVC established the [National Fund for Catholic Religious Vocations](#) to address the issue of educational debt as an obstacle to religious vocations. Supporting vocations through financial assistance is another way parishes and parish councils can help ensure future vocations.

Gordon: **How important are social media resources in addressing vocations?**

Social media has been a game changer in vocation awareness. People often keep their desire to know more about religious life private during their initial discernment. Being able to access information about religious life quickly and sometimes anonymously has been a big part of the increase we've seen in vocation inquiries since the turn of the century.

Sister Sharon:

For example, NRVC produces the annual VISION Vocation Guide. Before we created the [VocationNetwork.org](#) website and [VocationMatch.com](#), we received approximately 600 mailed-in inquiries annually for more information about religious communities. The first year we introduced our online services, our inquiries jumped to 5,500 inquiries annually. We continue to average 5,000 inquiries and approximately 360,000 annual visitors, in addition to the engagement we have on Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube.

So we really can't overstate the importance of social media. Because we seek to meet young people where they are, it is essential for vocation directors to stay in tune with the newest forms of communication. That is not always easy. But NRVC definitely tries to help its members in that area. We schedule workshops to train vocation directors on how to use social media effectively and appropriately, and we even show them how to set up an Instagram or Snapchat account and post a picture. We also have a [vocation calendar](#) that let's discerners know of vocation events in their area and a [spirituality quiz](#) that helps them understand the spiritual heritage they are drawn to. And we are looking to develop additional apps and online features to assist people as they consider a call to religious life.\

Gordon: **Each religious order and many dioceses have specific vocation guidelines. How are vocation interests addressed by the Franciscans?**

Sister Sharon:

From my days at the Franciscan Federation, I know there are over 90 different Franciscan religious orders in the U.S. and thousands worldwide. Each order, Franciscan or otherwise, addresses vocations in their own way according to the unique gifts they bring to the church, known as their charism.

So I can't speak for all communities, or even all Franciscans, but for Third Order Regular and Secular Franciscans, we have done a few things in common: We now have a Franciscan Morning and Evening Book of Praise (morning and evening prayer). There is a common novitiate, where

Franciscan communities can send their canonical novices for a common experience in formation. And there is an annual Franciscan Federation Conference that provides ongoing education and understanding of the Rule of Life that is particular to Third Order Franciscans.

We also have a presence on college campuses and in parishes, we advertise our community in vocation guides, we attend youth gatherings, such as the NCYC and World Youth Day, and many Franciscan vocation directors have a fairly active presence online.

A hope of mine for the NRVC would be to develop a guide of charisms to help vocation directors steer individuals to the congregation, theirs or another, that the discernor may be suited for. It would also help discerners get a more in-depth understanding of the charism of the communities that they are in conversation with. When I was vocation minister, we created a charism guide for the Franciscans called "Following in the Footsteps of St. Francis (and now Clare)," which my congregation continues to use and has expanded to share with those who want to walk with us as Associate members.

Gordon: **You have had considerable experience in addressing the faith challenges of people with intellectual challenges. Could you share some of your experiences?**

Sister Sharon: My very first degree is in special education as is one of my master's. But my life experience is greater than any degree. My entire life has been being with and relating to individuals with special needs. I had a biological cousin who was mentally challenged, and a biological brother who was hearing impaired. And I currently live with a woman named Boo, who used to work for me who has some challenges.

Several years ago, Boo's mother became ill and she asked if I would care for Boo. My congregation has always had a commitment to individuals with special needs and still is the sponsor of Clare Woods, a school that serves individuals with special needs located in Bartlett, Illinois. So when I asked about the situation with Boo, there was absolutely no hesitation on my congregation's part; I have had nothing but their support. Boo has lived with me for the past five years. She is an amazing woman. She loves going to Mass and joining in prayer, and her heart is pure gold. I hope one day to have the sincerity of faith that radiates in her smile and joy. I am not only humbled to live with her but consider it an honor that her mother asked me. I always say to Boo, we are sisters from another mother!

My life is continually influenced by individuals with special abilities. When I taught special ed in a Catholic school in Indiana, I was repeatedly asked by parents to assist in the care of their children outside school hours. Sister Gretchen Clark and I soon realized there was a need for respite care, so we co-founded, *Chiara Home, Inc.* that still exists in South Bend. It provides 24-hour/7-days-a-week respite care for individuals with special needs. We thought we were doing this great thing for parents and found out that individuals with special needs needed the respite from care-givers as much the care-givers need respite from their charges. It is a great ministry that could

flourish elsewhere with support from benefactors as families often don't have much money to spare for additional care.

God continues to place special people in my life, and I am always learning. When I was teaching special education I always wondered who was really teaching whom. That pondering continues as I live with Boo. She is the daily holy in my life. As for vocations, I often wonder what it would be like to include a few individuals with challenges into our religious congregations or into diocesan priesthood. A very few communities worldwide are open to welcoming people with special needs. There are built-in challenges and limitations, of course, but also unique opportunities for living out our vocations more creatively and collaboratively. I leave it to the Holy imagination and the inspiration of the Holy Spirit to help us explore these possibilities further.

So as you can see, there are no easy answers to the challenges we face as vocation promoters. But I welcome the collaborative approach of the National Religious Vocation Conference. We strive to create opportunities to join forces with families, educators, parishes, youth ministers, religious communities, and other church organizations to encourage the faith and witness of all people seeking a deeper relationship with God and the best path to live out their baptismal call.

Gordon:

Thank you for your insights into the challenges of religious vocations and your leadership in increasing religious vocations.

Interview conducted 2017