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Extraordinary *Urbi et Orbi* Blessing in the Time of the Coronavirus Pandemic

Pope Francis

The worldwide coronavirus pandemic is not God's judgment on humanity but God's call on people to judge what is most important to them and resolve to act accordingly from now on, Pope Francis said. Addressing God, the pope said that "it is not the time of your judgment but of our judgment: a time to choose what matters and what passes away, a time to separate what is necessary from what is not. It is a time to get our lives back on track with regard to you, Lord, and to others." Pope

"For weeks now it has been evening. Thick darkness has gathered over our squares, our streets and our cities."

Francis offered his meditation on the meaning of the COVID-19 pandemic and its implications for humanity March 27 before raising a monstrance with the Blessed Sacrament and giving an extraordinary blessing "urbi et orbi" (to the city and the world). Popes usually give their blessing "urbi et orbi" only immediately after their election and on Christmas and Easter. Pope Francis opened the service — in a rain-drenched, empty St. Peter's Square — praying that the "almighty and merciful God" would see how people are suffering and give them comfort. He asked God to care for the sick and dying, for medical workers exhausted by caring for the sick and for political leaders who bear the burden of making decisions to protect their people. The service included the reading of the Gospel of Mark's account of Jesus calming the stormy sea. Then in his message, the pope said, "Let us invite Jesus into the boats of our lives. Let us hand over our fears to him so that he can conquer them." The pope spoke in Italian; a Vatican translation of his message follows, copyright © 2020 by Libreria Editrice Vaticana.

When evening had come" (Mk 4:35). The Gospel passage we have just heard begins like this. For weeks now it has been evening. Thick darkness has gathered over our squares, our streets and our cities; it has taken over our lives, filling everything with a deafening silence and a distressing void that stops everything as it passes by; we feel it in

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Countries fighting the coronavirus pandemic could face deadly consequences if they focus on protecting their economies more than their own people, Pope Francis said.

In a handwritten letter sent March 28 to Argentine Judge Roberto Andres Gallardo, president of the Pan-American Committee of Judges for Social Rights and Franciscan Doctrine, the pope said that some governments that have imposed lockdown measures “show the priority of their decisions: people first.”

“This is important because we all know that defending the people implies an economic setback,” he said in the letter, which was published March 29 by the Argentine newspaper *La Nacion*.

“It would be sad if they opted for the opposite, which would lead to the death of many people, something like a viral genocide,” the pope wrote.

In his letter, the pope said that while he was concerned about the global spread of the COVID-19 virus, he also was “edified by the reaction of so many people — doctors, nurses, volunteers, religious men and women and priests — who risk their lives to heal and defend healthy people from contagion.”

Although lockdown measures implemented in many countries may “annoy” those forced to comply, the pope said that people have realized that it is for the sake of the common good.

In the long run, he said, “most people accept them and move forward with a positive attitude.”

Pope Francis also told Gallardo that he recently met with members of the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development to discuss “the present situation and what comes after” because “preparing for the aftermath is important.”

“We are already seeing some consequences that need to be confronted,” the pope said.

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the air, we notice in people’s gestures, their glances give them away. We find ourselves afraid and lost.

Like the disciples in the Gospel, we were caught off guard by an unexpected, turbulent storm. We have realized that we are on the same boat, all of us fragile and disoriented, but at the same time important and needed, all of us called to row together, each of us in need of comforting the other.

On this boat ... are all of us. Just like those disciples who spoke anxiously with one voice, saying “we are perishing” (v. 38), so we too have realized that we cannot go on thinking of ourselves but only together can we do this.

It is easy to recognize ourselves in this story. What is harder to understand is Jesus’ attitude. While his disciples are quite naturally alarmed and desperate, he stands in the stern, in the part of the boat that sinks first. And what does he do? In spite of the tempest, he sleeps on soundly, trusting in the Father; this is the only time in the Gospels we see Jesus sleeping.

When he wakes up, after calming the wind and the waters, he turns to the disciples in a reproaching voice: “Why are you afraid? Have you no faith?” (v. 40).

Let us try to understand. In what does the lack of the disciples’ faith consist, as contrasted with Jesus’ trust? They had not stopped believing in him; in fact, they called on him. But we see how they call on him: “Teacher, do you not care if we perish?” (v. 38). Do you not care: They think that Jesus is not interested in them, does not care about them.

One of the things that hurts us and our families most when we hear it said is, “Do you not care about me?” It is a phrase that wounds and unleashes storms in our hearts. It would have shaken Jesus too. Because he, more than anyone, cares about us. Indeed, once they have called on him, he saves his disciples from their discouragement.

The storm exposes our vulnerability and uncovers those false and superfluous certainties around which we have constructed our daily schedules, our projects, our habits and

priorities. It shows us how we have allowed to become dull and feeble the very things that nourish, sustain and strengthen our lives and our communities.

The tempest lays bare all our prepackaged ideas and forgetfulness of what nourishes our people’s souls; all those attempts that anesthetize us with ways of thinking and acting that supposedly “save” us but instead prove incapable of putting us in touch with our roots and keeping alive the memory of those who have gone before us. We deprive ourselves of the antibodies we need to confront adversity.

In this storm, the façade of those stereotypes with which we camouflaged our egos, always worrying about our image, has fallen away, uncovering once more that (blessed) common belonging, of which we cannot be deprived: our belonging as brothers and sisters. “Why are you afraid? Have you no faith?”

Lord, your word this evening strikes us and regards us, all of us. In this world that you love more than we do, we have gone ahead at breakneck speed, feeling powerful and able to do anything. Greedy for profit, we let ourselves get caught up in things and lured away by haste.

We did not stop at your reproach to us, we were not shaken awake by wars or injustice across the world nor did we listen to the cry of the poor or of our ailing planet. We carried on regardless, thinking we would stay healthy in a world that was sick. Now that we are in a stormy sea, we implore you, “Wake up, Lord!”

“Why are you afraid? Have you no faith?”

Lord, you are calling to us, calling us to faith. Which is not so much believing that you exist but coming to you and trusting in you. This Lent your call reverberates urgently: “Be converted!” “Return to me with all your heart” (Jl 2:12). You are calling on us to seize this time of trial as a *time of choosing*. It is not the time of your judgment but of our judgment: a time to choose what matters and what passes away, a time to separate what is necessary from what is not. It is a time to get our lives back on track with regard to you, Lord, and to others.

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We can look to so many exemplary companions for the journey, who, even though fearful, have reacted by giving their lives. This is the force of the Spirit poured out and fashioned in courageous and generous self-denial. It is the life in the Spirit that can redeem, value and demonstrate how our lives are woven together and sustained by ordinary people — often forgotten people — who do not appear in newspaper and magazine headlines nor on the grand catwalks of the latest show but who without any doubt are in these very days writing the decisive events of our time: doctors, nurses, supermarket employees, cleaners, caregivers, providers of transport, law and order forces, volunteers, priests, religious men and women, and so very many others who have understood that no one reaches salvation by themselves.

In the face of so much suffering, where the authentic development of our peoples is assessed, we experience the priestly prayer of Jesus: “That they may all be one” (Jn 17:21). How many people every day are exercising patience and offering hope, taking care to sow not panic but a shared responsibility. How many fathers, mothers, grandparents and teachers are showing our children in small everyday gestures how to face up to and navigate a crisis by adjusting their routines, lifting their gaze and fostering prayer. How many are praying, offering and interceding for the good of all. Prayer and quiet service: These are our victorious weapons.

“Why are you afraid? Have you no faith?” Faith begins when we realize we are in need of salvation. We are not self-sufficient; by ourselves we founder: We need the Lord, like ancient navigators needed the stars.

Let us invite Jesus into the boats of our lives. Let us hand over our fears to him so that he can conquer them. Like the disciples, we will experience that with him on board there will be no shipwreck. Because this is God’s strength: turning to the good everything that happens to us, even the bad things. He brings serenity into our storms because with God life never dies. The Lord asks us and, in the midst of our tempest, invites us to reawaken and put into practice that solidarity and hope capable of giving strength, support and meaning to these hours when everything seems to be floundering.

The Lord awakens so as to reawaken and revive our Easter faith. We have an anchor: By his cross we have been saved. We have a rudder: By his cross we have been redeemed. We have a hope: By his cross we have been healed and embraced so that nothing and no one can separate us from his redeeming love.

In the midst of isolation, when we are suffering from a lack of tenderness and chances to meet up and we experience the loss of so many things, let us once again listen to the proclamation that saves us: He is risen and is living by our side.

The Lord asks us from his cross to rediscover the life that awaits us, to look toward those who look to us, to strengthen, recognize and foster the grace that lives within us. Let us not quench the wavering flame (cf. Is 42:3) that never falters, and let us allow hope to be rekindled.

Embracing his cross means finding the courage to embrace all the hardships of the present time, abandoning for a moment our eagerness for power and possessions in order to make room for the creativity that only the Spirit is capable of inspiring. It means finding the courage to create spaces where everyone can recognize that they are called and to allow new forms of hospitality, fraternity and solidarity.

By his cross we have been saved in order to embrace hope and let it strengthen and sustain all measures and all possible avenues for helping us protect ourselves and others. Embracing the Lord in order to embrace hope: That is the strength of faith, which frees us from fear and gives us hope.

“Why are you afraid? Have you no faith?” Dear brothers and sisters, from this place that tells of Peter’s rock-solid faith, I would like this evening to entrust all of you to the Lord, through the intercession of Mary, health of the people and star of the stormy sea. From this colonnade that embraces Rome and the whole world, may God’s blessing come down upon you as a consoling embrace.

Lord, may you bless the world, give health to our bodies and comfort our hearts. You ask us not to be afraid. Yet our faith is weak, and we are fearful. But you, Lord, will not leave us at the mercy of the storm. Tell us again, “Do not be afraid” (Mt 28:5). And we, together with Peter, “cast all our anxieties onto you, for you care about us” (cf. 1 Pt 5:7). ■

“Hunger — especially for people without a steady job (odd jobs, etc.) — violence and the appearance of loan sharks,” who are “the real plague of the social future; (they are) dehumanized criminals.”

As national and local governments have been issuing stay-at-home or shelter-in-place orders to curb the spread of the coronavirus, Pope Francis asked people to pray for and assist those who are homeless.

He offered his morning Mass March 31 for those who are homeless “at a time when people are asked to stay at home.”

At the start of a livestreamed Mass from the chapel of his residence, the pope prayed that people become aware of all those who lack shelter and housing and help them and that the church would “welcome them.”

The pope’s comments came as images circulated on social media of homeless people sleeping on a parking lot in Nevada where officials had painted boxes to remind those sleeping there to keep physical separation.

At an earlier Mass the pope prayed for prisoners experiencing great uncertainty and worrying about their families who cannot visit them due to lockdown measures to contain the coronavirus pandemic.

Dressed in white vestments to commemorate the feast of St. Joseph March 19, the pope expressed his closeness to prisoners “who suffer so much in this moment of uncertainty and pain.”

“Let us pray today for our brothers and sisters who are in prison,” he said at the beginning of his morning Mass. “They suffer so much because of the uncertainty of what will happen inside the prison and thinking about their families, wondering how they are, if someone is sick, if they lack something.”

The pope also invited those

following the livestreamed broadcast of the Mass to make an act of spiritual Communion, and he led them in a traditional prayer for those unable to receive the sacrament.

Saying conflicts can never be resolved with war, Pope Francis added his support to a U.N. appeal for a global cease-fire amid the worldwide threat of the COVID-19 pandemic.

“May our joint effort against the pandemic lead everyone to recognize our need to strengthen our brotherly and sisterly ties as members of one human family,” the pope said March 29, after praying the Angelus in the library of the Apostolic Palace.

“In particular, may it inspire national leaders and other concerned parties to a renewed commitment to overcome rivalries. Conflicts are not resolved through war. It is necessary to overcome antagonism and differences through dialogue and a constructive search for peace,” he said.

The pope said he was adding his voice to support the appeal by U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres for an immediate global cease-fire amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

The pope said he was inviting everyone to take part by “ceasing all forms of military hostilities, promoting the creation of corridors for humanitarian aid, being open to diplomacy and offering attention to those who find themselves in situations of great vulnerability.”

Pope Francis expressed his gratitude to the many men and women who have been inspired to help the poor and accompany the sick and the elderly during the coronavirus pandemic.

“These days, news has arrived of how many people are beginning to have a general concern for others — caring about the families who do not have enough to get by,

Pandemic and Universal Brotherhood: Note on the COVID-19 Emergency

Pontifical Academy for Life

The COVID-19 pandemic has caught entire communities and nations off guard, and the best way to tackle this global crisis is together as a global family, the Pontifical Academy for Life said. “An emergency like that of COVID-19 is overcome with, above all, the antibodies of solidarity,” the academy said in a seven-page note published March 30 on its website, *academyforlife.va*. With experts in the field of science and ethics, the papal academy wished to “contribute its own reflections” in order to foster “a renewed spirit that must nourish social relations and care for the person” during this pandemic, it said. All 163 papal academicians were asked to take part, and the “Note on the COVID-19 Emergency” was the result of that consultation, the academy said in a news release. Archbishop Vincenzo Paglia, academy president, gave Pope Francis a copy of the text during a private meeting in the Apostolic Palace March 30. “The pope confided in me two of his concerns: how to help right now, especially the weakest; and for the future, how to come out of this (crisis) strengthened in solidarity,” including on a global level, the archbishop said. Titled “Pandemic and Universal Brotherhood,” the text highlights what ethical standards must prevail when dealing with the care and support of both individuals and communities in health care as well as more “existential” concerns that often go ignored in a world increasingly focused on individual rights, isolationist national interests and a flood of data divorced from the people it represents. The note follows, copyright © 2020 by Libreria Editrice Vaticana.

All humanity is being put to the test. The COVID-19 pandemic puts us in a situation of unprecedented, dramatic and global difficulty whose power to destabilize the plans we have for our lives is growing day by day. The pervasiveness of this threat calls into question aspects of our way of life that we have been taking for granted. We are living painfully a paradox that we would have never imagined:

To survive the disease we must isolate ourselves from each other, but if we were ever to learn to live isolated from one another, we would quickly realize how essential for our lives is life with others.

In the very middle of our technological and managerial euphoria, we have found ourselves socially and technically unprepared for the spread of this contagion: It has been difficult for us to recognize and admit its impact. And now we are rushing to limit its spread. But if we consider the existential destabilization that it is causing, we see similar unpreparedness — not to say a certain resistance — with respect to the recognition of our physical, cultural and political vulnerability in the face of the phenomenon.

This destabilization is beyond the reach of science and of the technology of therapeutic devices. It would be unfair — and a mistake — to attribute the responsibility for this situation to scientists and technicians. At the same time, it is certainly true that greater depth of vision and the input that comes from more responsible reflection about the meaning and values of humanism has the same urgency as research on pharmaceuticals and vaccines. And not only that. Realizing this profundity and responsibility creates a context of cohesion and unity, of alliance and brotherhood, by reason of our shared humanity that, far from suppressing the contributions of men and women of science and government, greatly supports them and reaffirms their roles. Their dedication — to which is already owed the deserved and heartfelt gratitude of all — will certainly come through this time strengthened and appreciated.

In this context, the Pontifical Academy for Life, which by its institutional mandate promotes and supports the alliance between science and ethics in a search for the best possible humanism, wishes to contribute its own reflections. Its intent is to locate certain elements of this situation within a renewed spirit that must nourish social relations and care for the person. The exceptional situation that today challenges the brotherhood of the *humana communitas* must finally transform itself into an occasion for this spirit of humanism to influence institutional culture at a regular pace: within individual peoples and in the harmonious bonds between peoples.

Solidarity in Vulnerability and in Limitations

First, the pandemic highlights with unexpected harshness the precariousness that radically characterizes our human condition. In some

regions of the world, this precariousness in individual and community existence is a daily experience due to poverty that does not allow everyone access to care, even if it is available, or to food in sufficient quantities, even if not lacking worldwide. In other parts of the world, the number of areas of uncertainty has been progressively reduced through advances in science and technology, to the point where we deceive ourselves by thinking that we are invulnerable or that we can find a technical solution for everything.

Yet, however much effort we make, it has not been possible to control the pandemic that is underway, even in the most economically and technologically developed societies, where it has overwhelmed the capabilities of laboratories and health care facilities. Our optimistic projections about our scientific and technological capabilities have perhaps allowed us to imagine that we would be able to prevent the spread of a global epidemic of this magnitude, so much so that its possibility seemed increasingly remote.

We have to recognize that this is not the case. And today we are even encouraged to think that, together with the extraordinary resources of protection and care that our progress produces, there are also side effects that show the weakness of our system, and we have not been vigilant enough with respect to them.

In any case, it is painfully obvious that we are not masters of our own fate. And science as well is showing its limitations. We already knew this: The conclusions of science are always partial, whether because it focuses — for convenience or for substantive reasons — on certain aspects of reality and leaves out others or by reason of the nature of scientific theories, which are temporary in any case and subject to revision. But in the uncertainty that we have experienced in dealing with the COVID-19 virus, we have perceived with new clarity the gradualness and complexity that are part of scientific knowledge, which has its special requirements with respect to methodology and validation.

Precariousness and the limits of our understanding also appear as global, real and shared; there are no real arguments that allow some civilizations or entities to consider themselves sovereign, better than others and able to isolate themselves when convenient. Now, we are close enough to “touch” our interconnectedness. Indeed, we are more interconnected by our exposure to vulnerability than by the efficiency of our tools.

Contagion spreads very quickly from one country to another; what happens to one per-

son becomes decisive for everyone. This situation makes more immediately evident what we knew but did not adequately internalize: For better or worse, the consequences of our actions always fall on others as well as on ourselves. There are no individual acts without social consequences.

This applies to each individual and to each community, society and population center. Reckless or foolish behavior that seemingly affects only ourselves becomes a threat to all who are exposed to the risk of contagion, perhaps without even affecting the actor.

In this way we learn how everyone’s safety depends on everyone else’s.

The outbreak of epidemics is certainly a constant in human history. But we cannot hide the characteristics of today’s threat, which shows that it can adapt its pervasiveness to our current way of life very well and can circumvent protective measures. With our efficient and wide-ranging transportation and delivery network, we must be aware of the effects of our development models, which exploit hitherto inviolate forest areas where microorganisms unknown to the human immune system are found. We will probably find a solution to what is attacking us now. We will have to do so, however, with the knowledge that this type of threat is gathering long-term systemic potential.

Second, it will be better to address the problem with the best scientific and organizational resources that we have, avoiding ideological emphasis on the model of a society that equates salvation with health. Rather than being considered a defeat for science and technology — which must surely always excite us because of its progress, but at the same time it must make us humbly live with its limits — disease and death are a deep wound to our dearest and deepest affections, but it cannot however impose on us the abandonment of the rightness of those affections and the breakdown of affective bonds. Not even when we have to accept our inability to fulfill the love those affections and bonds contain within themselves. Even though our life is always mortal, we have the hope that such is not the case with the mystery of love in which life resides.

From De Facto Interconnection To Chosen Solidarity

Never have we been called on to become aware of the reciprocity that is at the basis of our life as much as we have during this terrible emergency. Realizing that every life is a life in common, together we make up life, and life comes from “the other.”

the elderly who are alone, the sick in the hospitals — and who pray and try to give them some help,” the pope said March 27 at the beginning of his livestreamed morning Mass.

“This is a good sign,” he said. “Let us thank the Lord for stirring up these feelings in the hearts of his faithful.” The papal almoner’s office announced March 26 that the pope was donating 30 ventilators to “hospitals in the areas most affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.”

Pope Francis offered his early morning Mass March 26 for vulnerable people and health care workers who live in fear that they or their loved ones may fall ill to the coronavirus pandemic sweeping the world.

“In these days of so much suffering, there is so much fear,” the pope said at the start of the Mass, which was livestreamed from the chapel of his residence, the Domus Sanctae Marthae.

Pope Francis spoke specifically of “the fear of the elderly who are alone in retirement homes or in hospitals or in their own homes and do not know what could happen; the fear of workers without a steady job who think about how they will feed their children and see hunger coming; the fear of many social servants who in these moments help society move forward and could get sick.”

Neither Pope Francis nor any of his closest collaborators have the COVID-19 virus, said Matteo Bruni, director of the Vatican press office. In a note March 28, Bruni confirmed that a monsignor who works in the Vatican Secretariat of State and lives in the Domus Sanctae Marthae, where Pope Francis lives, did test positive for the coronavirus and, “as a precaution,” was hospitalized.

Bruni said that as of March 28, the Vatican health service had conducted more than 170 tests for the virus.

The resources of a community that refuses to consider human life as only a biological fact are a precious commodity that also accompanies responsibly all the other activities necessary for care. Perhaps we have thoughtlessly wasted this patrimony, whose value makes a difference in times like these and have seriously undervalued the relational goods that it is able to share and distribute when emotional bonds and community spirit are sorely tried, precisely by our need for the very necessities that protect biological life.

Two rather crude ways of thinking that nevertheless have apparently become commonplace and reference points when we speak of freedom and rights tend to be brought up in discussions today. The first is “my freedom ends where the other’s begins.” This formula, already dangerously ambiguous, is inadequate to the real understanding of experience, and not by accident is it affirmed by those who are in fact in a position of strength: Our freedoms are always intertwined and overlapped, for better or for worse. Rather, we must learn to render our freedoms collaborative for the common good to overcome the tendencies that an epidemic can nourish, to see in the other an “infectious” threat from which to distance ourselves, an enemy from which to protect oneself.

The second is “my life depends solely on me.” — No, it doesn’t. We are part of humanity, and humanity is part of us. We must accept this dependency and appreciate the responsibility that makes us participants and protagonists in it. There is no right that does not have a resultant corresponding duty: The coexistence of those who are free and equal is an exquisitely ethical question, not a technical one.

We are therefore called to recognize with new and deep emotion that we are entrusted to each other. Never as much as today has the caring relationship presented itself as the fundamental paradigm for human coexistence.

The change from *de facto* interdependence to chosen solidarity is not an automatic transformation. But already we have various signs of a shift toward responsible actions and fraternal behavior. We see this with particular clarity in the commitment of health care personnel who generously devote all their

energy, sometimes even at the risk of their own life or health, to alleviating the suffering of the sick. Their professionalism extends well beyond the confines of contractual obligations, thus testifying that work is above all an area of expression, of meaning and of values, not just “transactions” or “merchandise” to be exchanged for a price.

But the same goes for researchers and scientists who put their skills at the service of others. Commitment to the sharing of forces and information has made possible the rapid establishment of cooperation among research center networks on experimental protocol to establish the safety and efficacy of pharmaceuticals.

As well, we must not forget all those other women and men who every day choose positively and courageously to guard and nourish brotherhood. It is the mothers and fathers of families, the elderly and the youth; it is the persons who, even in objectively difficult situations, continue to do their work honestly and conscientiously; it is the thousands of volunteers who have not stopped serving; it is the leaders of religious communities who continue to serve those entrusted to their care even at the cost of their lives, as has been revealed by the stories of so many priests who have died of COVID-19 have revealed.

Politically, the current situation urges us to take a broad view. In international relations (and in the relations among the members of the European Union) it is a shortsighted and illusory logic that seeks to give answers in terms of “national interests.” Without effective cooperation and effective coordination that addresses the inevitable political, commercial, ideological and relational resistances firmly, viruses do not stop. Of course, these are very serious and burdensome decisions: We need an open vision and choices that do not always satisfy the immediate desires of individual populations. But given the markedly global current dynamic, our responses, to be effective, cannot be limited to what happens within one’s own borders.

Science, Medicine and Politics: The Social Link Put to the Test

Political decisions will certainly have to take scientific data into account, but

they cannot not be limited to those factors. Allowing human phenomena to be interpreted solely on the basis of the categories of empirical sciences would mean producing answers on only a technical level. That would end in a logic that considers biological processes as the determinants of political choices, according to that dangerous path that bio-politics has taught us about. Nor is it respectful of the differences among cultures to understand them with a single technical-scientific way: The different connotations ascribed to health, disease, death and health care systems can constitute richness for all.

Instead, we need an alliance between science and humanism that must be integrated and not separated from, or worse, set against each other. An emergency like that of COVID-19 is overcome with, above all, the antibodies of solidarity. Technical and clinical means of containment must be integrated into a broad and deep search for the common good, which will have to resist a tendency to direct benefits toward privileged persons and a neglect of vulnerable persons according to citizenship, income, politics or age.

This applies as well to all the choices made pursuant to a “care policy,” including those more closely connected with clinical practice. The emergency conditions in which many countries are finding themselves can lead to forcing doctors into dramatic and painful decisions with respect to rationing limited resources not available to everyone at the same time.

In such cases, after having done at an organization level everything possible to avoid rationing, it should always be borne in mind that decisions cannot be based on differences in the value of a human life and the dignity of every person, which are always equal and priceless. The decision concerns rather the use of treatments in the best possible way on the basis of the needs of the patient, that is, the severity of his or her disease and need for care, and the evaluation of the clinical benefits that treatment can produce, based on his or her prognosis.

Age cannot be considered the only and automatic criterion governing choice. Doing so could lead to a discriminatory attitude toward the elderly and the very weak. In any case, it is nec-

essary to formulate criteria, agreed upon as much as possible and based on solid arguments, to avoid arbitrariness or improvisation in emergency situations, as disaster medicine has taught us.

Of course, it bears repeating: Rationing must be the last option. The search for treatments that are equivalent to the extent possible, the sharing of resources and the transfer of patients are alternatives that must be carefully considered within a framework of justice. Under adverse conditions, creativity has also furnished solutions to specific needs such as the use of the same ventilator for multiple patients. In any case, we must never abandon the sick person, even when there are no more treatments available: Palliative care, pain management and personal accompaniment are never to be omitted.

Even in terms of public health, the experience we are going through presents us with a serious test, even if it is one that can only be carried out in the future, in less troubled times. In question is the balance between a preventive approach and a therapeutic approach, between treatment of an individual and the collective dimension (given the close correlation between health and personal rights, and public health). These are questions based on a deeper concern about the goals that medicine can set for itself, considering overall the role of health in social life with all its dimensions, such as education and care for the environment. One can glimpse the fruitfulness of a global bioethical perspective that takes into account the multiplicity of interests at stake and the global scope of problems that is greater than an individualistic and reductive view of the issues of human life, health and care.

The risk of a global epidemic requires, in the context of responsibility, the introduction of global coordination in health care systems. Be aware that the strength of the process is determined by the weakest link in terms of speed of diagnosis, rapidity of reaction and proportionate containment measures, adequate structures, systems for record keeping and ability to share information and data. It is necessary that the authorities who can deal with emergencies comprehensively, make decisions and orchestrate communications can also be relied upon as reference points to avoid the communication storms that

have broken out (“infodemia”), with their inexact data and the fragmentary reports.

The Obligation to Protect the Weak: Gospel Faith Put to the Test

In this scenario, particular attention should be paid to those who are most fragile, and we are thinking especially of the elderly and people with special needs. All other things being equal, the lethality of an epidemic varies in relation to the situation of the affected countries — and within each country — in terms of available resources, the quality and organization of the health care system, living conditions of the population, the ability to know and understand the characteristics of the phenomenon and to interpret information. There will be more deaths where already in everyday life people are not guaranteed simple basic health care.

This last consideration, too, on the greater negativity faced by the most fragile, urges us to pay a great deal of attention to how we talk about God’s action in this historical crisis. We cannot interpret the sufferings that humanity is going through according to the crude scheme that establishes a correspondence between *lèse-majesté* against the divine and a “sacred reprisal” undertaken by God.

The mere fact that in such a scenario the weakest would suffer, precisely those for whom he cares the most and with whom he identifies (Mt 25:40-45) forestalls this possibility. Listening to Scripture and the fulfillment of the promise that Jesus accomplishes shows that being on the side of life, just as God commands us, is made real through gestures of humanity for “the other.” Gestures that, as we have seen, are not lacking in these days.

Every form of solicitude, every expression of benevolence is a victory of the resurrected Jesus. Witness to this is the responsibility of Christians. Always and for everyone. At this juncture, for example, we cannot forget the other calamities that affect the most fragile such as refugees and immigrants or those peoples who continue to be plagued by conflict, war and hunger.

Intercessory Prayer

Where evangelical closeness meets a physical limit or hostile opposition,

intercession — founded in the crucifix — retains its unstoppable and decisive power, even should people seem not to live up to God’s blessing (Ez 32:9-13). This cry of intercession from the people of believers is the place where we can come to terms with the tragic mystery of death, fear of which is part of all our stories today. In the cross of Christ, it becomes possible to think of human existence as a great passage: The shell of our existence is like a chrysalis waiting for the liberation of the butterfly. The whole of creation, says St. Paul, is living “the pains of childbirth.”

It is in this light that we must understand the meaning of prayer. As an intercession for everyone and for all those who are in suffering — and Jesus has brought them as well into solidarity with us — and as a moment in which to learn from him the way to live suffering as an expression of trust in the Father. It is this dialogue with God that becomes a font that enables us to trust men as well. From here we gain the inner strength to exercise all our responsibility and make ourselves open to conversion, according to what reality makes us understand how a more human coexistence is possible in our world. We remember the words of the bishop of Bergamo, one of the most affected cities in Italy, Bishop Francesco Beschi: “Our prayers are not magic formulas. Faith in God does not magically solve our problems; rather it gives us an inner strength to exercise that commitment that one and all, in different ways, are called to live, especially those who are called to contain and overcome this evil.”

Even someone who does not share the profession of this faith can in any case draw from the witness of this universal brotherhood insights that point toward the best part of the human condition. Humanity that, for the sake of life as an unwaveringly common good, does not abandon the field in which human beings love and toil together, earns the gratitude of all and the respect of God. ■

Apart but Not Alone: Hope and Strength in a Time of Crisis and Fear

Bishop Farrell

“Let us show each other, that though we may be apart, we are not alone,” Bishop Dermot Farrell of Ossory, Ireland, said in a March 27 pastoral letter on the coronavirus pandemic. “Let each of us, then, live for the other now, let us be a star, let Christ’s gentle light shine through each of us; let us open the door of our world to God: volunteer, reach out, pray for each other and care,” he added. The coronavirus has killed tens of thousands and caused almost the entire world to stay mostly indoors. The bishop of the Kilkenny-based diocese said of the pandemic, “We are learning about the fragility of our lives. We are learning about the depth of our resolve. We are learning about our profound community spirit and, in a real way, we are learning about how we need and depend on each other.” Bishop Farrell noted that the diocese had set up a system for people to email or text their prayer intentions, which would be remembered at the Sunday Mass on the radio. The bishop said, “We pray because we place our deepest hope in a goodness and in a power that transcends our own capabilities. Prayer is hope in action.” Bishop Farrell’s pastoral follows.

“How will people know that you are my disciples? By your love for one another” (Jn 13:35).

We are now living in an Ireland that we could not have imagined a few short days ago. In a very short period of time the ways we move, interact and live with each other have radically changed. Suddenly, we are conscious of our environment in a way that a few days ago we were not.

Our language also reflects this seismic shift, with words and phrases finding for us new combinations and a resulting new meaning: Social is now about distancing — and our standing together means, in a real way, that we must stand apart. But the space we thus

create will keep us safe; it is, as it says in the poem, “the light from the lighthouse that protects as it pushes away” (John Ashbery).

Our Actions Matter for Each Other

We are, then, learning many things in these days. We are learning about the fragility of our lives. We are learning about the depth of our resolve. We are learning about our profound community spirit and, in a real way, we are learning about how we need and depend on each other.

We have come to realize that our true strength is our strength to carry the weak, and our true dignity is our capacity to value every person. Solidarity and global action are absolutely crucial to bringing this pandemic under control. We are seeing the selfless dedication and the immense work of those on the front line.

Of course, these women and men not only do this in times of great trial but in ordinary days as well. We appreciate anew then the contribution of so many — the nurses, doctors, paramedics, care staff, clergy, Gardaí, fire personnel and so many more. In the words of the French novelist Georges Bernanos, “Grace is everywhere.” It is time for us to support them and to encourage them.

As St. Paul reminds us, we are always to encourage one another and build one another up (1 Thes 5:11). In doing this for the other we are collectively stronger. We see the importance of media, local and national — print, radio and TV — in conveying for us important lifesaving messages. “All serious and upright human conduct is hope in action” (Benedict XVI, *Spe Salvi*, 35).

We are learning, too, of the fragile nature of our economy and of how businesses and those who work in them can suffer. We are learning that our big world is, in fact, quite small, and that small actions and simple things are truly lifesaving. Ultimately and importantly, we are learning — and learning in new ways — that our actions matter for each other. The safety of each one depends on the safety of all. Safety knows no favorites.

We are heartened, then, to see the actions of those who have stepped up, those on the front line but also those who in recent days have responded to the call to help — we love with actions and not mere words (1 Jn 3:18). It is

wonderful to hear of the great numbers of people willing to volunteer, to offer their time and talents to help others. Men and women asking what they can do for each other.

It is this other and not the self which lies at the heart of our Christian faith. We are, throughout our history, a people for others. In these days then, let us continue to remember the other. Let us continue to remember those who are poorest and weakest in our communities, their plight has not lessened in these troubling days.

We remember our neighbors for whom simple gestures might now matter, remember those who live alone and who might at this time rejoice in a phone call, remember those afraid who might need reassurance and remember those around us who might need reminding.

Prayer Is Hope in Action

Love is the life of the church. The church lives to the extent that we love. Love is the life of the church, and prayer is the lifeblood of that life. As we pray, we express not only our need but also our care. To pray for someone is to love someone. To pray for our child, a parent, a neighbor, a friend is to express our love for that person. To pray is to love.

When we pray together — as couples, as families, as communities — our individual voices come together and unite us as one to call on God. But our prayer is not only *our* prayer; our prayer is also our response to God’s promptings, to our trust in his hope, our faith in the Lord’s abiding presence. Life teaches us how we depend on each other; our faith shows us how we depend on God. Pope Francis reminds us of the true power of our prayer, “Prayer always changes reality. ... It either changes things or changes our hearts, but it always changes” (Jan. 9, 2019, audience).

My sisters and brothers, let us all pray anew in these difficult and frightening times. Real prayer comes from the heart; real prayer comes from real life. So let us pray as we can. Pray in your own words, pray in the words of others, pray in the words of the Mass, pray in silence.

As our country and our world are convulsed by the COVID-19 pandemic, we know that our lives spill over into others, for better or for worse, and we remain, in these times, united by prayer. So often when we gather to pray togeth-

er we do so for a specific purpose, intention, occasion or anniversary. In these extraordinary times, when we cannot gather as a faith community to celebrate the Eucharist, our diocesan adult faith development group has arranged that we can continue this basic togetherness of our Christian prayer life.

I invite you, then, to email prayer@ossory.ie or text 085-8313100 any prayer intention that you may have in these days. These, then, will be remembered when we come together to celebrate Mass on the radio each Sunday morning. A real coming together of our prayer. We pray because we place our deepest hope in a goodness and in a power that transcends our own capabilities. Prayer is hope in action.

Faith the Wellspring of Hope

The Bible is filled with stories of how women and men found in God a wellspring of hope. Their trust in God and their confidence in him — in other words their faith — became their wellspring of hope. Out of this hope they were able to transform the present. “Faith draws the future into the present” (*Spe Salvi*, 7) so that our future is not just something down the line. As the light before the dawn permits us to see, so our faith and its hope permit us to live in new ways.

The news about this fast-moving virus is frightening and depressing. In this hour of great need, the real hope our faith gives us calls us to a new sense of ourselves — to see ourselves as a community sharing hope out of which we live. This may seem farfetched, but that is exactly what we are called to be: people of hope. “We need the greater and lesser hopes that keep us going day by day. But these are not enough without the great hope, which must surpass everything else. This great hope can only be God, who encompasses the whole of reality and who can bestow on us what we, by ourselves, cannot attain” (*Spe Salvi*, 31).

Our God is a God of hope (see Rom 15:13). Trusting in God calls us to action. Hope gives us the strength to overcome selfishness and indifference. Indeed hope that does not matter to one personally is not true hope. True hope always calls attention not only to life after death but also to what is essential to life on earth.

The Lights and Light of Hope

In these dark days, I have been helped by an image used by Pope Benedict XVI: He writes that life is a journey, “a voyage on the sea of history, often dark and stormy, a voyage in which we watch for the stars that indicate the route” (*Spe Salvi*, 49). In the night, it was the stars that guided the seafarer. “Certainly,” the pope continues, “Jesus Christ is the true light, the sun that has risen above all the shadows of history. But to reach him we also need lights close by — people who shine with his light and so guide us along our way” (ibid.).

Let each of us, then, live for the other now, let us be a star, let Christ’s gentle light shine through each of us; let us open the door of our world to God: volunteer, reach out, pray for each other and care. Let us show each other that though we may be apart we are not alone: “Your love for one another will show to the world that you are my disciples” (Jn 13:35).

We are stronger when we are together, and though apart in these days, we are with each other now in a new way. May Christ, the one who lived most for the other, support us in that task. Let us pray with St. Augustine:

Watch, O Lord, with those who wake
this night
or watch, or weep;
give your angels and saints
charge over those who sleep.
Tend your sick ones, O Lord Christ,
rest your weary ones,
bless your dying ones,
soothe your suffering ones,
pity your afflicted ones
shield your joyous ones.
And all for your love’s sake.
Amen ■

Closeness in the Spirit

Bishop Biegler

“In these days of social distancing, first of all, stay close to God,” Bishop Steven Biegler of Cheyenne, Wyoming, said in a March 28 blog post on the coronavirus pandemic. “It is a time to lean on God

and be renewed in closeness to God,” he added. The coronavirus has killed tens of thousands and caused almost the entire world to stay mostly indoors. Bishop Biegler said that this time “we must resist the temptation to give in to fear.” He noted that “Pope Francis encourages gestures of ‘closeness.’ That is a way of describing solidarity. We will be close to people if we see them as family, as brothers and sisters.” He gave some practical suggestions for showing solidarity: telling others you are praying for them, dropping off a meal for someone who needs it and donating your stimulus check if you can afford it. Bishop Biegler also called people to “see how Jesus’ Spirit has inspired the workers in supermarkets to serve others. See how the Holy Spirit empowers health care workers to help and even risk their lives.” Bishop Biegler’s blog post follows.

How do we put into words what we are experiencing in these days? The number of confirmed cases of COVID-19 continues to rise across the nation and world despite limited testing. Medical personnel are anticipating how to manage a huge influx of patients. Some hospitals are making agonizing decisions about how to triage patients or choose who gets a ventilator. The economic consequences are dramatic. Business owners realize that they may not be able to stay afloat. Last week 3.3 million people filed for unemployment.

I am not trying to paint a pessimistic picture so that you might give up or become fearful. We must resist the temptation to give in to fear. At the same time, it is important to maintain a realistic view of the situation at hand. Being realistic helps us to maintain a balanced perspective.

Some people are refusing to look at the long-term consequences. They continue to gather and socialize as if nothing has changed. So they are increasing the risk of transmission of coronavirus for everyone else. Every one of us can be a carrier to others who are more vulnerable. I urge you to practice solidarity by thinking of the least in our midst — especially the elderly and those with compromised health conditions. Our actions affect everyone around us. We are co-responsible for the common good of society.

Others are on the opposite end of

the spectrum. They spend their time watching the news, and their minds are saturated by it. For them the danger is to be totally consumed by the pandemic and its economic consequences. Overconsumption of the news is also not living in reality. It can block out the reality of God's presence. We can become myopic, focused only on COVID-19 and blind to how the Lord is present in this moment.

Limit your news consumption while taking time to read the daily Scriptures. In the desert one does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of God. Reading the Scriptures is one of the best ways to keep a sane perspective.

In God's providence, the readings for this Sunday offer a hopeful message for those experiencing destruction and death. As Ezekiel wrote the first reading, he was living in exile in Babylon. The Babylonian army had destroyed Jerusalem. They captured the Jewish king Zedekiah and his sons, who were executed in front of their father Zedekiah. Then they blinded him and took him to Babylon with other prisoners.

Imagine how the people of Israel felt! They had lost hope. In fact, immediately before today's first reading, the prophet Ezekiel wrote: "The people keep saying: 'Our bones are dried up; our hope is lost; we are done for'" (Ez 37:11).

They had every reason to give up hope. The city of Jerusalem had been surrounded and under siege for two and a half years. Finally, the city and the temple were destroyed. Then the people were deported to Babylon, where they lived in exile for 49 years. They doubted that God was with them. They doubted God's promise to save them.

Yet Ezekiel painted a future of amazing hope. Through him, God said to the people: "O my people, I will open your graves and have you rise from them, and bring you back to the land of Israel. Then you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves and have you rise from them, O my people!" (Ez 37:12-13).

How could Ezekiel be so upbeat and hopeful? He didn't merely focus on the destruction all around him. Instead, he maintained a balanced perspective by listening to God's voice. How can we be hopeful prophets in our day like

Ezekiel? How can we be a voice of hope to the elderly who are isolated, to the sick, to those working in health care, to those with a devastated business or to the jobless?

This week a reporter asked Pope Francis what he would tell men, women and families who live in fear due to the pandemic, the pope replied: "The last thing I would do is tell them something. ... What I try to do is make them feel that I am close to them. Today the language of gestures is more important than words. Of course, something should be said, but it is the gesture of sending them a 'greeting' that is most important," he said.

Pope Francis encourages gestures of "closeness." That is a way of describing solidarity. We will be close to people if we see them as family, as brothers and sisters. In a time of "social distancing," here are a few ways to express closeness.

—Tell others that you are praying for them.

—Call those who are most isolated or deliver a meal to their doorstep.

—If you are doing OK financially, then donate your check from the federal government to a needy family or to entities that are helping others.

In addition, we can express closeness by being a voice of hope. We need to be close to people with assurance that God is with us. The prophet Ezekiel went into exile in Babylon together with the rest of Israel. He suffered just like them, but he fed them with God's word. He was beside them with steadfast faith. He was a voice of hope because he kept his relationship with God intact.

In fact, we need to help people see that God is using this moment in a powerful way. The coronavirus is a stark reminder of the weakness of human flesh. Our lives are so fragile. Sometimes we forget that. Yet our frailty actually opens us to God's power. It puts us in touch with our need for God.

Aware of human frailty, the psalmist teaches us how to cry out to the Lord with faith. Psalm 130 states, "Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord; Lord, hear my voice!" Yet the psalm ends with the hope that "all shall be well." "For with the Lord there is kindness and with him plenteous redemption; and he will redeem Israel from all their iniquities" (Ps 130:8). All shall be well.

As people who are gifted with the

Holy Spirit, we ought to be more hopeful than Ezekiel and more trusting than the psalmist. St. Paul said to the Romans, "The Spirit of the one who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you" (Rom 8:11). The Spirit who raised Jesus dwells in us. The Holy Spirit gives us Jesus' perseverance in suffering, inspires us with his selfless love and sacrifice, and fills us with enduring hope.

At baptism, the Spirit flooded our hearts; it was strengthened in confirmation. In these days of being deprived of the Eucharist, the grace of baptism and confirmation is as strong as ever. Live your baptismal grace. Let it guide your prayer and your love of neighbor.

We have received the gift that the Lord promised through the prophet Ezekiel. "O my people, I will put my spirit in you that you may live ... thus you shall know that I am the Lord. I have promised, and I will do it, says the Lord" (Ez 37:14). We need to bring to people a "closeness" filled with the Spirit of the one who raised Jesus from the dead.

In these days of social distancing, first of all, stay close to God. The desert is first of all a special place to be with God. It is a time to lean on God and be renewed in closeness to God. The daily Scriptures are a treasure. Let them feed your heart with hope. But don't stop there, then find ways to express closeness to others.

"The Spirit of the one who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you." See how Jesus' Spirit has inspired the workers in supermarkets to serve others. See how the Holy Spirit empowers health care workers to help and even risk their lives. God is using this time to deepen our closeness and compassion. In prayer, ask the Lord for how you might be close and compassionate as your heavenly Father is close and compassionate. ■

National Religious Vocation Conference Study on Recent Vocations to Religious Life: Executive Summary

Mary L. Gautier and
Sister Thu T. Do, LHC

The National Religious Vocation Conference released a new study on religious vocations March 25 that was designed as a follow-up to its 2009 study (Origins 39:12) to “identify and understand the characteristics, attitudes and experiences of the men and women who have entered religious life in recent years.” Conducted by the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate, the study had three phases: a single-informant survey of religious institutes and societies of apostolic life; a survey of individuals who entered religious life in the last 15 years and remain members; and 13 focus groups with individuals who entered religious life in the last 15 years and are still members. The study reports that “there are still a significant number of men and women who are responding to a call to religious life and are hopeful about its future.” It says that although the number of young people entering religious life today is not significantly larger than it was in 2009, they are younger and more diverse. A fourth were born outside the U.S., and 73% attended a Catholic school at some point. They say they were drawn to religious life primarily by a sense of call and a desire for prayer and spiritual growth as well as desire to be of service and be part of a community. Personal private prayer is very important to them and eucharistic adoration “very” important. They “are more optimistic than the superiors in their hopes for the future, perhaps because they recognize their own agency in creating a future for their institute.” To read the full study, visit <https://nrvc.net/509/publication/9180-2020-study-on-recentvocations-to-religious-life>. The

executive overview and major findings follows. It was written by Mary L. Gautier and Lovers of the Holy Cross Sister Thu T. Do, senior research associate and research associate, respectively, at CARA.

This report presents findings from a study of recent vocations to religious life in the United States that was conducted by the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate for the National Religious Vocation Conference. The study is based on surveys of religious institutes as well as surveys and focus groups with recent vocations to religious life. The study was designed to replicate and extend similar research conducted by NRVC and CARA in 2009, so as to identify and understand the characteristics, attitudes and experiences of the men and women who have entered religious life in recent years.

The study is based on three major research components:

—A single-informant survey of religious institutes and societies of apostolic life.

—A survey of those who entered religious life within the last 15 years and remain members.

—Focus groups with those who entered religious life within the last 15 years and remain.

For the first phase of the study, CARA surveyed religious institutes and societies of apostolic life. Using mailing lists provided by the Conference of Major Superiors of Men, the Council of Major Superiors of Women Religious and the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, CARA sent a questionnaire to each major superior with a cover letter from Sister Deborah Marie Borneman, SS.C.M., NRVC director of mission integration, and a return envelope addressed to CARA. The cover letter and survey included instructions to respond only for the governance unit (e.g., congregation or province) for which the superior was responsible and, for international institutes or societies, to respond only for members who entered and are based in the United States.

CARA also sent questionnaires and cover letters to superiors of monasteries of contemplative nuns (who do not belong to either LCWR or CMSWR) as well as to superiors of new or emerging communities of consecrated life using mailing lists that CARA compiled for previous research. The list of emerging com-

munities included some that are public associations of the faithful that are in the process of seeking canonical status as a religious institute or society of apostolic life.

Throughout the report, the term *religious institute* is used for religious institutes, societies of apostolic life and public associations of the faithful that are seeking canonical status as a religious institute or society of apostolic life.

CARA mailed surveys to a total of 755 governance units in spring 2019 and then conducted extensive follow-up by email, telephone and fax throughout spring and summer 2019 to achieve a high response rate. Three religious superiors reported that the study did not apply to them because they are not part of a U.S. institute and all of their formation takes place outside the United States. Another 19 religious superiors declined to participate but did not give a reason.

Altogether, CARA received completed responses from 503 religious institutes for a response rate of 67%. A close examination of the lists and the nonrespondents revealed that some of the congregations and provinces on the original lists had merged or were in the process of merging with others during the course of the research. A few other entities on the lists are neither provinces nor congregations but regions or houses that do not have formation/incorporation in the United States and should not have been included in the survey. Still others, particularly among the contemplative monasteries and the emerging communities, had apparently ceased to exist.¹

CARA estimates that the total number of governance units (i.e., congregations, provinces, monasteries) in the United States is approximately 750. The 503 units that responded account for 42,586 men and women religious, or well over 70% of all women and men religious in the United States. Many of the governance units that did not respond appear to be either small, mostly contemplative communities that may not have had anyone in initial formation for some time or those who are still in the process of becoming institutes of consecrated life.

This initial survey was designed to gather statistics about the membership in the institute, including the numbers in initial formation or incorporation; basic information about vocation promotion and formation in the institute; and basic

data about the institute's ministry, community life and community prayer.

The second phase of the research consisted of a survey of "new members," that is, current candidates/postulants, novices and those in temporary vows or commitment as well as those who had professed final vows or commitment within the last 15 years.

In spring and summer 2019, the questionnaire was sent to 3,318 identified new members and those in formation (emailed to 2,804 and mailed to 514 who had no email address, with a return envelope addressed to CARA). Both mailings included a cover letter from Sister Deborah Marie Borneman, SS.C.M.

A total of 55 email addresses were returned as undeliverable. Another 35 invitees responded via email that they were not willing to participate and another 50 responded via email that the study did not apply to them since they had entered religious life before 2003 (mostly transfers from another religious institute within the last 15 years).

Approximately 100 completed surveys were unusable because the participants reported entering religious life before 2003. When all these are removed from the sample, CARA received a total of 1,933 usable responses from new members and those in formation for a response rate of at least 63%.

The survey of new members was designed to identify what attracted these candidates and new members to religious life and to their particular religious institute or society; what they found helpful in their discernment process; what their attitudes and preferences are regarding community life, prayer and ministry; and what sustains and challenges them in religious life. The survey also asked about their background characteristics as well as their experiences before entering religious life. In addition, the survey included a question asking the respondent if he or she would be willing to participate in a focus group.

The final phase of the research, which included focus groups with new members, was conducted during fall 2019. CARA conducted 13 focus groups with new members in Baltimore, Chicago, Cincinnati, Los Angeles, Minneapolis, Philadelphia, San Antonio and St. Louis. These sites were selected because of the relatively large concentration of new members in each of these areas.

Participants were selected from among the survey respondents who indicated that they would be willing to participate in a focus group and included women and men, ordained and nonordained, contemplative and active, and professed members as well as those in formation.

The focus groups explored issues similar to those examined in the survey. Specifically, they were designed to gather insights from newer members about what attracts, sustains and challenges them in religious life. The discussions were also directed toward understanding the attitudes and experiences of new members and especially toward identifying "best practices" for vocation and formation ministry that would assist men and women in discerning and responding to a call to religious life.

MAJOR FINDINGS

I: Findings from the Survey of Religious Institutes

Religious Life Today

—The study identified at least 2,471 men and women in initial formation and about 1,000 more who had professed perpetual vows within the previous 15 years. The actual number of new members is likely even higher, given that at least a third of U.S. religious institutes did not respond to the survey and/or did not provide information about members who had professed final vows since 2003. The findings from the surveys, and especially those from the focus groups 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.

—Since 2003, over 80% of responding religious institutes have had at least one serious discerner, and nearly 90% continue to accept new members and promote religious vocations.

—The expected demographic shift in total numbers of religious continues, due to the unusually large number of entrants in the first half of the last century. The study reports 11,780 men (a 15% decrease from 2009) and 30,806 women (a 36% decrease from a decade ago).

—The total number of religious institutes and societies of apostolic life (i.e., congregations, provinces, monasteries) in the United States is approximately 750. Fifty percent have less than 50 members.

—Indicating that new membership has remained fairly steady, the number

of men and women in initial formation is not significantly different from that reported in the 2009 study. Superiors report a total of 1,085 women in initial formation (a decline of 10% from 2009) and 1,386 men in initial formation (a decline of less than 1% from 2009).

—Sixty percent of responding institutes have at least one person in initial formation. Having someone in formation and having more than one or two in formation is more common in institutes of men than in institutes of women. For those who entered and then departed from religious life since 2003, the most common time to do so was during candidacy/postulancy, which is part of the discernment and formation process and consistent with 2009 departure rates.

—Eighty-seven percent of men and women in perpetual vows are over age 60, a statistic that is unchanged since 2009, which suggests that the influx of newer members has helped to offset the drastic decline that was anticipated as the unusually high number of members who entered during the first half of the last century age out.

—Almost half of those in initial formation are under age 30, an increase from the 43% who were under age 30 in 2009. Nearly three-fourths of those in initial formation are part of the millennial generation (born in the 1980s or 1990s) and another 6%, born in 2000 or later, could be considered part of the emerging next generation of young adults.

—Those in initial formation are more diverse, ethnically and racially, than those in perpetual vows, as was the case in 2009. However, those in perpetual vows have increased in diversity by seven percentage points since 2009.

—Sixty-seven percent of U.S. religious institutes claim that the majority of their perpetually professed members are located in the Northeast and Midwest.

Vocation Promotion and Discernment Programs

—Seventy-seven percent of responding religious institutes report that they have one or more vocation directors or a vocation team, down from 88% in 2009. Ninety-four percent of vocation directors/teams meet with leadership at least annually.

—The average annual budget for the vocation director/team (excluding salaries) is \$34,039. However, half of

responding institutes report an annual budget of \$14,600 or less for their vocation director/team and some 4% of institutes declare that there is no budget for the vocation director/team.

—Institutes of men are more likely than institutes of women to indicate that vocations is a topic on all or most of the institute's leadership meetings (41% compared to 23%).

—Religious institutes are sponsoring fewer discernment programs than they did a decade ago, but "come and see" experiences continue to be the most common program, offered by 60% of responding institutes.

—The most common vocation promotion approach among responding institutes (78%) is vocation information on the institute's website or a distinct website for vocations. Vocation promotion and discernment programs are most typically targeted toward young adults and college-age students.

Interaction With Others in Formation

—Two in three responding institutes report that their candidates/postulants interact with candidates/postulants from other units of their institute, society or federation, and just over three-fifths have them interacting with candidates/postulants from other institutes or societies. This increase in cross- and inter-congregational initial formation represents a change in formation practices in the past century.

—Almost three in five indicate that their novices interact in an intercommunity novitiate with novices from other units of their institute, society or federation, and more than half send their novices to an intercommunity novitiate with novices from other institutes or societies.

—Nearly 40% of respondents indicate that their institute offers a formation experience for U.S. members in initial formation that takes place outside the United States. Men's institutes are more likely than women's institutes to offer such a program.

Community Life and Prayer

—Among the various factors related to healthy and holy community life, institute leaders in 2019, similar to those in 2009, rated communal prayer and shared experiences with other community members most highly. More than 8 in 10 rate praying with other members and

celebrating holidays/feast days together as "very" important.

—Personal private prayer characterizes the regular prayer life of a majority of active members in almost all responding institutes (95%), followed closely by daily Eucharist and Liturgy of the Hours, reported by nearly 9 in 10 responding institutes.

Concerns of Superiors for New Members

—Major superiors are most concerned about strengthening peer support among new members. They also express concern about the gap in age among institute members and the health care and cultural challenges older members pose for younger members.

—Major superiors raise many concerns about the effectiveness of their formation process and the catechesis of their new members. Some express concern that new members may not have the level of commitment necessary to persevere in religious life or the necessary support to sustain them in their vocation.

—Community life is another serious concern for major superiors. They hope that the new members will see the value of living in a community even if they must do so across communities and cultures.

Support from Major Superiors for New Members

—Superiors recognize that the best way to nurture a vocation is to ensure that it is strengthened by a solid formation experience. Many hold regular meetings with the formation director and individually with those in formation. Many also provide a mentor for those in formation.

—Another way that religious institutes support their newer members is through deliberate engagement of the wider religious community in the accompaniment and formation process. This helps newer members, especially those who may be the sole new member in their unit, to establish the support of peers in formation. This inclusion in the wider community also helps newer members to feel that they have a voice and a place in the community.

—Prayer and spiritual direction are a vital part of formation in religious life. These tools are also essential to the support of newer members in their vocation.

—Perhaps one of the most impor-

tant ways that religious institutes support newer members in their vocation is through listening and dialogue along the journey. Many superiors mentioned this as a way they support their newer members.

II: Findings From the Survey and Focus Groups

Characteristics of New Members

—Respondents to the survey of new members are nearly equally divided by gender; 51% are women and 49% are men. Close to half are in their 30s, compared to just over a quarter who were in this age range in 2009. About 30% are ages 19-29, compared to just 16% who were in this range in 2009. Seven in 10 had considered religious life by the time they were 21. The average age of entrance is 28 for men and 29 for women. This is a little younger than the average age of entrance in 2009, which was 30 for men and 32 for women.

—Compared to finally professed members, those in initial formation are more likely to come from diverse cultural backgrounds: 11% are Hispanic/Latino(a), 13% are Asian/Pacific Islander, 3% are African American/African/black and 3% are of mixed race or ethnicity. About 70% are Caucasian/European American/Anglo/white, compared to about 87% of perpetually professed members.

—One-quarter of those in initial formation were born outside the United States, and a third have at least one parent who was born outside the United States. Among those who were born in the United States, six in 10 grew up in the Northeast or the Midwest regions. Three in 4 speak English as their first language and 4 in 10 speak at least two languages fluently.

—About 9 in 10 were raised Catholic and most (73%) attended a Catholic school for at least part of their education. About half attended parish-based religious education and 10% were home-schooled for at least part of their education. Almost half (49%) earned a bachelor's degree, 17% a master's and 4% a doctoral degree before they entered their religious institute.

—At least 8 in 10 were employed before they entered, usually in a full-time position. Slightly more than half were engaged in ministry, about a quarter on a full-time basis, one-sixth on a part-time

basis and about three-fifths on a volunteer basis. Many were also involved in various parish ministries and/or other volunteer work.

—Among the male respondents, 80% are or expect to become priests and 20% are or expect to become brothers.

Attraction to Religious Life and 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. Most respondents report that they were attracted “very much” by a desire for a deeper relationship with God (86%), a sense of call to religious life (79%) and a desire for prayer and spiritual growth (77%). 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. Women are more likely than men to say they were attracted by a sense of call, a desire for prayer and spiritual growth, and by a desire for a deeper relationship with God. Men are more likely than women to say they were attracted by a desire to be of service and by a desire to be part of a community.

—Newer members were attracted to their particular religious institute by its spirituality, charism, prayer life, mission and community life of the institute. Although the ministries of the institute are also important to most new members, they are less important than spirituality, prayer, community and lifestyle. Millennial respondents are more likely than older generations to be “very much” attracted by the example of the members and the community life of the institute. They are least likely to be “very much” attracted by the life and works of the founder/ess.

—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 (37%). 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 a presentation at a school/parish/youth ministry event.

—Some younger members did not

know anyone in religious life before they sensed a call to religious life. Many found out or learned more about their institute online. Men and women are equally likely to have had religious life formally presented, either in class or in campus ministry, as an option for them to consider while they were in college (nearly 4 in 10). Millennials are also much more likely than older generations to have an experience such as this while they were in college. 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.

—When asked how much various factors influenced their decision to enter their religious institute, respondents were most likely to name the charism and community life of their institute as the factors that influenced them “very much.” Women are more likely than men to be “very much” influenced by prayer life or prayer styles, community life, the way the vows are lived in the institute and the living of the Gospel values. Men are more influenced by the future of the institute, its geographic location and its ministries.

Encouragement, Support in Discernment, in Religious Life

—During their initial discernment, most new members report that they received a great deal of encouragement from institute members, their vocation director or team, and their spiritual director. Most also report high levels of encouragement from those to whom and with whom they minister. Although 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, 70 percent report that support from their family increased after they entered religious life.

—Compared to older new members, younger new members are more likely to report that they were encouraged by institute members, their vocation director or team, parents, family members and 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.

—Seven in 10 report that friends

outside the institute and people in the parish were also a significant source of support. Men were more likely than women to report receiving “very much” encouragement from their parents and grandparents.

Prayer and Spirituality

—Many new members identify personal private prayer as one of the aspects of religious life that is most important to 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. New members in 2019 are more likely than those in 2009 to report that exposition of the Blessed Sacrament/eucharistic adoration is “very” important to them (66% compared to 50% in 2009).

—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 prayer using an app/online resources and ecumenical interfaith prayer such as Taizé.

Community Life and Ministry Setting Preferences

—As in 2009, praying together, living together and sharing meals with other members are particularly important aspects of community life to most newer members of religious institutes. Women are more likely than men to rate doing things together with other members as “very” important to them, which includes praying with other members, socializing/sharing leisure time together and celebrating holidays/feast days together. Women are also more likely than men to report that ongoing formation and lifelong education are “very” important to them.

—Repeating a pattern of enthusiasm indicated throughout the study, millennial generation respondents, in particular, are more likely than older respondents to report that living, ministering, sharing meals and socializing with other members are “very” important to them.

—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, living with members of different ages at or near their ministry site. Younger respondents express even stronger preferences for living with members of their institute in large community settings and for living with other members close to them in age.

Evaluation of Religious Institutes

—New members give their religious institutes the highest ratings on their care and support of the elderly members and are positive overall about the quality of life in their religious institute. The younger a respondent is, the more likely that he or she rates the following aspects as “excellent”: the efforts to promote vocations, the initial formation/incorporation programs and lifelong educational opportunities.

—Overall, women tend to be more positive than men in their evaluation of various aspects of life in their religious institutes. The largest gap (more than 30 percent) in an “excellent” rating between women and men is in their assessment of communal prayer and fidelity to the church within their institutes.

Concerns for Their Future in Religious Life

—When asked to share their thoughts about what most concerns them about their future in religious life, newer members expressed concerns similar to those shared by institute leaders in the first part of this report such as the gap in age between the senior members and the new members and worries about the future of the institute as the communities age and decrease in size. More than 1 in 10 comments from newer members, however, expressed a lack of concern about their future in religious life, and more than a quarter expressed a concern related to personal fidelity to their commitment to religious life.

—The most commonly expressed concern that newer members express about their future in religious life is a very personal concern — that they will have the faithfulness to persevere in this life they have chosen. At least a quarter of respondents shared this concern, although a substantial number worded this sentiment more as a desire than a concern.

—Newer members are also concerned about the changing demographics of aging members and fewer vocations to replace them. They also worry about the necessity to restructure the institute and the effect of restructuring on younger members.

—Closely related to concerns about smaller congregations, many newer members also express concerns about finding balance in their lives. They worry about overwork and burnout. Some also express concerns about stresses related to being called into positions of leadership for which they do not feel adequately prepared.

—Many newer members express concerns related to being able to live an authentic community life. As newer members, they sometimes struggle with challenges related to living in community. Others are concerned with the challenges of intergenerational living. While some institutes struggle with concerns of aging membership and institutes decreasing in size, others are concerned about growth in their institute and the ability to maintain a strong sense of community. Loneliness is another concern expressed by newer members, which is related to their concern for authentic community life.

—A number of newer members express concerns related to adapting to rapid changes in society. Some are concerned about their own ability to adapt, while others are more concerned about the ability of their institute and its members to adapt to social and cultural changes.

Hopes for the Future

—Although cognizant of the challenges and concerns expressed by major superiors in the first part of this report, newer members are more optimistic than the superiors in their hopes for the future, perhaps because they recognize their own agency in creating a future for their institute. Focus-group participants share the same awareness of the challenges and optimism about the future of religious life.

—Newer members realize that they have entered religious institutes that are, for the most part, characterized by smaller congregations and an aging membership. They are realistic about this reality while at the same time optimistic about the future and their role as members of

these institutes. They express hope for renewal of religious life in general and of their religious institute in particular. Newer members realize that more deliberate efforts at networking and collaboration can help them and their institutes to extend their ministry.

—Newer members recognize that the recent past has been turbulent and difficult for religious institutes. They sense that many institutes have been struggling just to survive in light of smaller numbers and increased workload shared among an increasingly aged membership. Their hope for the next 10 years is for an increase in clarity of mission and identity as renewed institutes reemerge from consolidation and restructuring.

—Newer members eagerly anticipate the evolution of religious life in the next 10 years. They look forward to increased collaboration across generations. They also recognize the increased cultural diversity of the Catholic Church in the United States, and they look forward to ensuring that religious life reflects that diversity.

—Newer members recognize the need for additional formation in leadership so that they are prepared to assume leadership in their institutes and in the church. They are eager to move beyond diminishment and to expand the mission of their institute into new avenues for ministry. At the same time, some newer members feel drawn to return to the roots of their institute and to restore a sense of its original charism.

—Newer members desire members of all ages to be committed to living the charism more vibrantly with a greater effort to live in solidarity with the poor and marginalized. Unlike previous generations to religious life, they recognize stewardship involves divesting of empty buildings, underutilized property and sponsored institutions to live more simply utilizing human and material resources to benefit the neediest.

Note

¹ *Reconfiguration* among religious institutes proved to be one of the most challenging issues for calculating a response rate as well as for obtaining historical information about new membership. Responses to questions about reconfiguration in the survey revealed that 13% of the respondents were in the process of reconfiguring at the time the survey was conducted in 2019, and another 17% had reconfigured since 2003. Thus, the number of “institutes” changed while the survey was being conducted. ■

Readers: Due to the coronavirus pandemic, most events are being canceled. The following events have either been canceled or postponed.

April 16-18

Conference: "The Catholic Intellectual Tradition: Challenges and Opportunities for the Catholic University in the 21st Century." Sponsor: Sacred Heart University and Seton Hall University. Sacred Heart University. Fairfield, Conn. RESCHEDULED for Oct. 29-31

April 17-19

Conference: "Rise Up and Walk: Catholicism and Health Care Across the Globe." Sponsor: Center for World Catholicism and Intercultural Theology and the Health Services, Catholic Studies and Mission and Ministry Departments. DePaul University. Chicago, Ill. <https://las.depaul.edu/centers-and-institutes/center-for-world-catholicism-cultural-theology/World-Catholicism-Week/Pages/default.aspx> POSTPONED.

May 3-5

National Association of Church Personnel Administrators Annual Convocation. Theme: "Taking It to the Heights: Justice in the Workplace." Hotel Albuquerque at Old Town. Albuquerque, N.M. www.nacpa.org CANCELED.

May 11-14

National Association of Catholic Chaplains. Partners for Professional Excellence in Spiritual Care. Cleveland, Ohio. www.nacc.org CANCELED.

*May 15

Academic Conference on the History of Catholicism in the American South Commemorating the Bicentennial of the Charleston, S.C., Diocese. CANCELED.

*May 17-21

Annual Convocation of the National Conference for Catechetical Leadership. Dubuque, Iowa. <https://ncccl.org> CANCELED.

*signifies new entry

On File

The Mexican bishops' conference has urged employers to avoid laying off workers as the coronavirus crisis escalates in a country with an already stagnating economy and a weak social safety net. In a March 30 statement, the bishops also called for solidarity, saying, "We're all in the same boat and no one saves themselves," and reminded the wealthy that their accumulated riches "must be at the service of others. Brothers and sisters, we need each other. It's time to join forces with brotherhood and solidarity, with the will to see the best in everyone," said the statement, signed by Archbishop Rogelio Cabrera López of Monterrey, conference president, and Auxiliary Bishop Alfonso Miranda Guardiola, secretary-general. "We urge all believers in Christ ... but especially Catholic businessmen and businesswomen to be aware that, as members of the divine family ... we are responsible to our brothers and sisters." God expects people "to take the path of truth, justice, service, dedication (and) solidarity," the statement continued.

Citing provisions of the \$2.2 trillion federal relief package that will aid poor and vulnerable people as well as workers, small businesses and large corporations, Archbishop Paul S. Coakley of Oklahoma City thanked Congress and President Donald Trump for putting the law in place. Expenditures mandated in the Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security Act, or CARES

Act, also will help people with immediate relief who have been laid off and will have difficulty in finding a new job, the archbishop, chairman of the U.S. bishops' Committee on Domestic Justice and Human Development, said in a March 28 statement. Congress negotiated the relief measure as the U.S. economy has ground to a halt in recent weeks as the new coronavirus has swept through the country. Archbishop Coakley also pointed to other provisions of the CARES Act, such as the \$1,200 in cash assistance to low- and middle-income people and aid to hospitals and charitable agencies, "which will be asked to do more than ever during this crisis."

Administering the sacrament of reconciliation via cellphone is impermissible under church teaching, said the chairman of the U.S. bishops' Committee on Divine Worship. In a March 27 memo to his fellow bishops, Archbishop Leonard P. Blair of Hartford, Connecticut, said Archbishop Arthur Roche, secretary of the Congregation for Divine Worship at the Vatican, informed the bishops that using a cellphone for the sacrament poses a threat against the seal of confession. Even the use of a cellphone to help amplify the voices of a confessor and penitent who can see each other is not allowed, the memo said. Archbishop Blair also said in the memo that in regard to anointing of the sick, the duty cannot be delegated to a doctor or nurse.