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New life in the midst of grief

HORIZON
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Editor
Carol Schuck Scheiber

Consulting Editor
Jesús Leyva

Design Consultant
Patrice J. Tuohy

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773-363-5454 | nrvc@nrvc.net | nrvc.net
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THE NATIONAL RELIGIOUS VOCATION CONFERENCE is a catalyst for vocation discernment and the full flourishing of religious life as sisters, brothers, and priests for the ongoing transformation of the world.

Award-winning member of the Catholic Media Association.

Editor's note

Endings and beginnings

I'M FEELING THE THEME of this edition full force these days. I'm learning that for me, retirement holds a mix of both sadness at endings and excitement at new possibilities—grief and new life. When I first envisioned this edition, I didn't realize I'd soon be gripped by mixed emotions very similar to what our articles address.

On the one hand, vocation ministers are mourning the losses that are part of this era in religious life—losses of beloved people, properties, and ministries. On the other hand, vocation ministers continue to cultivate new life, promoting consecrated life and inviting a new generation. It's a tricky balance, but as our writers deftly point out, that combination of death intertwined with new life is core to our faith.

One theme our writers bring up is the importance of gratitude in the face of grief, and that is true for me as I pass the torch of HORIZON editor on to Jesús Leyva. I'm grateful that a talented man of faith is stepping into this role. And I'm incredibly grateful to the many wonderful men and women I've worked with over the last three decades. You've inspired me, made me laugh, made me think, and helped me to stretch and grow in my faith. Thank you.

Now it's time for me to lean on all that I've learned about discernment as I carve out my next steps. You all have taught me to listen to my heart, listen to the community and its needs, and listen to God. I'm honored to now be among the vocation ministry "cloud of witnesses"—people who once served in this vital ministry who continue to uplift the notion that God calls us each by name. Onward!

— Carol Schuck Scheiber, editor

HORIZON is an award-winning journal for vocation ministers and those who support a robust future for religious life. It is published quarterly by the National Religious Vocation Conference.

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Updates

STUDIO32, PIXABAY

Five online workshops offered this October

The NRVC is offering the following vocation ministry workshops via Zoom this October. Participants will receive hard copy materials by mail, and these virtual classes will be structured and paced for effective learning. Details and registration are at nrvc.net.

ORIENTATION PROGRAM FOR NEW VOCATION DIRECTORS
October 6-10, by Sister Deborah Borneman, SS.C.M. and Brother Mark Motz, S.M.

UNDERSTANDING THE LASTING IMPACT OF CHILDHOOD TRAUMA AND ADVERSE CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCES ON CANDIDATES FOR RELIGIOUS LIFE
October 13, by Kathy Galleher, Ph.D.

CULTURE MATTERS: ARE WE LISTENING WITH TODAY'S DISCERNERS?
October 14, 21, and 28 (only Tuesdays), by Brother Ernest Miller, F.S.C., Katherine Angulo Valenzuela, and Father Patrick Keyes, C.Ss.R.

BEHAVIORAL ASSESSMENT 1
October 15-17, by Father Raymond P. Carey, Ph.D.

ETHICAL ISSUES IN CANDIDATE ASSESSMENT
October 29-30, by Father Raymond P. Carey, Ph.D.

Resources for Jubilee Year, including Jubilee of Consecrated Life October 8-9

The NRVC has created a variety of resources that can be used throughout the Jubilee Year as well as for the Jubilee of Consecrated Life on October 8 and 9. Go to jubileeyear2025.org to find background information, prayers, a downloadable logo, articles, and more.

In addition, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops has created a packet of information about the October Jubilee of Consecrated life. Find it at: tinyurl.com/jubilee-packet.

HORIZON and VISION receive 9 awards

NRVC publications recently earned nine awards for outstanding editorial and online content from the Catholic Media Association. HORIZON received awards for best in-depth writing, analysis, reporting, and feature writing. VISION was recognized for best feature, photo, photo story, and web and print package. Its managing editor was among those honored as editor of the year. ■

Courtesy of the Conventual Franciscans

Loss can be easier to bear when communities remember the many lives they have touched—and when they continue to connect with faith-filled young people. Pictured here is Father Tony Vattaparambil, O.F.M.Conv. giving a young adult retreat.

Some shifts in perspective and approach may help vocation ministers carry on during a time of loss.

Death and new life in religious communities today

By Father Kevin Zubel, C.Ss.R.

Father Kevin Zubel, C.Ss.R. is provincial superior of the Redemptorist Denver Province. Following his ordination in 2017, he served briefly in New Orleans before engaging in Hispanic outreach ministry in the Mississippi Delta Region and Baton Rouge, Louisiana.

BLINKING MY EYES, I thought I saw him in the pew. Eleven years had passed, but I could envision my family all seated together, my dad smiling faintly as my classmate and I professed our first vows as Redemptorist missionaries. A heartbeat later, I was carried five years forward to the memory of my family stationed in that same pew during my presbyteral ordination, my dad folding his hands reverently in prayer. He would pass away a little less than three years after that crisp January morning. So, too, would Father Richard Thibodeau, C.Ss.R., a friend and mentor who vested me in the chasuble during the liturgy.

Snapping back to the present moment, I found myself in the presider's chair of Holy Ghost Church in Houston, a sacred place of cherished memories. No longer a newly professed missionary or a fresh priest with hands still fragrant with chrism, I was presiding in my role as provincial

superior. My emotionally charged duty that morning: to solemnly accompany the faithful in a Mass of farewell as we Redemptorists formally withdrew from this mission after 77 years.

When the time comes to conclude a mission or withdraw from a ministry site, we in religious life experience these moments like a death in the family. These times of departure and withdrawal make us wonder if we, too, are coming to an end in our history. Many in religious life today must contend with the closure of ministries alongside the deaths of dear sisters and brothers who were part of an unusually large generation in consecrated life. These losses can leave us feeling like we're gasping for air. Meanwhile, leaders like myself tread water in a sea of studies, strategic plans, actuarial charts, and other administrative tasks bundled into the starkly named phenomenon of "managing decline."

If we take Christ by the hand, allowing him to pull us out of the sea, we will discover that the church and the world still need consecrated women and men. We can face difficult facts and demographic realities, but not without hope.

What new life can we create with God?

It is in these moments, however, that we remember how Jesus took Peter's hand before he could sink into the turbulent sea. Jesus gently corrects Peter—and us—in words meant to empower, not belittle: "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" (Matt. 14:31). Never forget it was Christ who first breathed the Spirit into our charism and purpose. Our Lord never lets us drown in the storm but extends his hand to rescue us from the waters, guiding us, as he did in our baptism, from death to new life. The demographics do not lie, and signs of smaller, leaner religious communities are unavoidable. But if we take Christ by the hand, allowing him to pull us out of the sea, we will discover that the church and the world still need consecrated religious women and men. We can face difficult facts and demographic realities, but not without hope. The Spirit's grace empowers us to ask, "Okay, Lord, what new life will we create together?"

In my first six months as provincial superior, I supervised our withdrawal from three parishes. Confronting sadness, confusion, and, at times, anger from the faithful who felt abandoned, these departures were moments of mutual grief, shared deeply by my confreres who had accomplished great things in these missions and had loved the people they served.

However, the passing of our elder members gives the most human face to these times of demographic change. During my two years in leadership, I have accompanied 11 of my confreres to their place of final rest, including influential mentors and heroes whose time seemed cut short. While we believe that for God's faithful, "life is changed, not ended," the emotional wake of these deaths is stirred deeper by the realization that few remain to take up the banner of mission these sisters and brothers courageously held aloft.

Taken together, grief for the double loss of missions and missionaries provokes anxiety about the future as well as a reckoning with the past. Was all our effort for naught? Will anyone remember what we achieved together in the Spirit? Was it some failing on my part, such as a lack of faithfulness, that brought us to this harsh demographic reality?

Confronting this dilemma and its spiritual and emotional toll, I have reached out to souls wiser than me. Reflecting on their counsel, I have come to accept that these anxieties flow naturally from mourning over the loss of religious life as it once was. Nonetheless, these are the wrong questions if we seek pathways of hope. The first step toward new horizons begins by asking the right ones.

Let us grieve prophetically

Several years ago, I was fortunate to catch an episode on Krista Tippett's "On Being" radio program entitled "Living the Questions." It engaged the question: "How can we be present to what's happening in the world without giving in to despair and hopelessness?" How can we honestly accept the sobering facts of our challenges without permitting them to extinguish our spirit? The conversation broke open the truth that both the world we long for and the world that breaks our hearts are, in their manner, realities. Our call is to live in the liminal space between these realities, holding fast to the many ways the Spirit has revealed God's love, compassion, and healing mercy. There is a bolder way of naming the world we long for: the reign of God.

Our consecrated life proclaims the reign of God as the living and true reality, the shining light that the darkness can never overcome. Our struggles in religious life come from the continual tension between the reality of the Reign and the reality of despair fomented in a world

Courtesy of the Adrian Dominican Sisters

By allowing members to share their wisdom with young people, communities showcase the ongoing relevance and need for their charism—and they benefit from the vitality of young people. Pictured here are Adrian Dominican sisters with prayer partners from Siena Heights College, one of the community's sponsored ministries.

insistent on using exclusion and violence to create prosperity only for some and power for even fewer. Religious life lived with integrity, audacity, and creativity goes against the rising currents of a world that revels in disinformation and manipulation designed to keep us isolated from one another and blind to the suffering of those on the peripheries.

Simply stated, if we focus on demographic decline as the cause of our grief, we will struggle to discern clearly how the Spirit calls us to animate our charisms today. Our call is to grieve prophetically, insisting on the values and virtues of the reign of God against the social and cultural tides that push against the principles of sacrifice, generosity, and compassion. When we recognize this tension within our grief, we quickly discover that the living Christ weeps with us. By joining our anguish with Christ's—taking up our crosses as he said—we can follow our Redeemer to the place of Resurrection, where consolation comes from the Spirit who "is making all things new" (Rev. 21:5).

Helping professions report shortages

Another shift in perspective comes from looking at the current social landscape. I propose that our aging membership and the small number of new entrants are not dynamics particular to religious life. Taking a more global view, we discover that almost every other helping profession suffers from critical shortages in vocations. For example, a recent report from the Institute of Medicine called for an 80 percent increase in the number of registered nurses to ensure basic patient safety. Schools of all levels warn about the lack of qualified teachers, and communities across the country report shortfalls in those training to become first responders.

Studies report that the emotional stress of many caring and service professions, coupled with inadequate compensation, makes it hard to recruit young people to these critical roles. Feeling economically left behind by earlier generations, many young people have adopted a coldly pragmatic, transactional view of the social contract.

This creates an internal conflict in many young people I encounter in my ministry. Eager to connect on a human level with others, young people still profess a desire to be a force for good in their communities. However, distrust for institutions, especially a church still bearing the scars of scandal, naturally limits interest in religious life as a way to serve. Meanwhile, loneliness is recognized as an emerging health crisis, especially among young men. Teenagers spend less time with friends than they did just 20 years ago.

Other social realities among the young also cause concern. One is economic nihilism, the practice of

spending money on pleasurable things as soon as it is earned and saving little for retirement because there is little hope for the future. A reluctance to make lifelong commitments is manifested not only in fewer entrants to religious life but in fewer couples getting married.

Consecrated life completely opposes the cynical view that downplays our responsibility to our neighbors. It rejects hopelessness about commitments and the future. Through our vows, consecrated women and men embrace Jesus' instructions when he teaches, "Without cost you have received; without cost you are to give" (Matt. 10:8). Lived intentionally and prophetically, our common life taps into springs of living water that can overcome the forces that have left arid and dying the fields of caring professions and ministry. This is good news and a firm reason for hope as we discern how to live our religious life in ways that attract young people to share in the mission.

Even when vocation ministers give substantial time to a prospective new member who later stops responding to messages or chooses another path, the Emmaus walk of accompaniment offers young seekers moments of vivifying grace.

How, then, might we embrace this hope we have in the Spirit while helping young people discern a vocation to consecrated life? I offer four themes for reflection.

1. Emphasize faithfulness

First, we do well to remember that although our charisms bear fruit through works of hospitality, charity, mercy, and prayer, our consecrated life is not rooted in the tasks we accomplish but by our faithfulness to the spirit underlying our mission. In *The Law of Christ*, the eminent Redemptorist moralist Father Bernard Häring noted, "The consecrated life is not primarily about renouncing the world, but about embracing Christ's love in such a way that one becomes a living witness to His presence." He concludes, "Love, not mere duty, is the heart of every vocation."

Emphasizing love as the foundation of a call to religious life, vocation ministers cultivate young people's innate generosity and hopefulness. Even when vocation ministers give substantial time to a prospective new member who later stops responding to messages or chooses another path, the Emmaus walk of accompaniment offers young seekers moments of vivifying grace. By introducing prospective new sisters and brothers to the beauty of God's reign—especially its foundation in God-who-is-community—vocation ministers apply a healing balm to young souls wounded by dehumanizing algorithms, misinformation, and trendy pessimism. Even when a pool of seekers dwindles to just a few candidates, vocation ministry proves invaluable in advancing the broader goals of evangelization.

Furthermore, if we see faithfulness as our primary goal, we find a treasury of hope because we discover that the vitality of our charism does not depend on the number of our members or their youthfulness. Regardless of age or capacity for activity, all professed members can give witness to the heart of our mission in Christ.

2. Connect grief to gratitude

As our senior sisters and brothers confront the loss of religious life as they knew it, another way forward is to connect our grief to gratitude. Paul reminds us, "Rejoice always. Pray without ceasing. Give thanks in all circumstances, for this is the will of God for you in Christ Jesus" (1 Thess. 5:16-18). An empowering way to demonstrate gratitude to our senior sisters and brothers is to invite them to share with us and with discerners their experience of what the Spirit has achieved through faithful living of the charism.

In my conversations with our senior missionaries, I learned that countless adventurous and innovative ministries went unnoticed in the days when there were significantly more members. Thankfully, there is still time to thank and celebrate our members' legacies. I hope to distill these experiences into biographies or case studies that will open the eyes of younger confreres and lay partners to mission opportunities they might not yet see.

Connecting our grief to gratitude confidently affirms our belief that the Spirit still has much to accomplish through our way of life. By gathering young people to listen to the stories of our senior brothers and sisters, vocation ministers often serve an essential role in building these bridges between legacy and possibility.

Father Henri Nouwen, in *Turn My Mourning into Dancing: Finding Hope in Hard Times*, counsels "holding lightly" to dreams and fears about the unknown. He writes, "You can be open to receive every day as a new day and to live your life as a unique expression of God's love for humankind." Taking each day as a gift and accepting that our share in the mission, however small, is a cause for joy may seem simple, if not naïve. However, by

doing this, all members share in witnessing the true reality of the reign of God and, in so doing, can overcome the dissonance of the false and cynical reality that hardens the hearts of young people today.

When speaking with vocation prospects, we cannot hide the truth that they will bear responsibility for caring for one generation of members while discerning new ways of living the charism. The invitation to us is to discover how to harness the power of gratitude for the accomplishments of the past as a springboard for new ideas for the future.

However, rather than focusing on the structures and brick-and-mortar institutions that thrived in a different era, we give thanks for the lives touched, the souls healed, and the relationships restored. We direct our attention less on the things we are losing, and more on the treasury of wisdom that grows in value over time. Rather than recruiting replacements for existing commitments, the vocation minister's fundamental mission is to invite young people to join their story to a living legacy of lives transformed by God's mercy, compassion, and grace.

3. Advocate for religious life in general

The next theme for reflection follows naturally from the first, as a personal commitment to our charism makes us advocates for consecrated life in general. Some consecrated religious have made the difficult decision not to pursue new vocations in their congregation or local units. These religious families of sisters or brothers testify to the monumental role that consecrated life has served in the past while making a compelling case for its importance for the future of the church. As we meet young people in a variety of contexts, we are called to give witness to the graces and joys that flow from the *esprit de corps* cultivated around a common charism and mission. Put simply, we are co-responsible not only for the vitality of our charism but for consecrated life in general. Even if someone is not called to our institute, we can implant the seed of apostolic life in common, trusting that "God will give the growth."

I am reminded of the witness of our Redemptoristine Nuns in Missouri, who, when the time came to close their monastery, did not see the moment as an end. Rather, they looked to the convents they helped establish in Thailand and the Philippines as a continuation of their story. Institutes, units, and orders that choose not to accept new members still live on in the legacy of lives changed; they can still bear witness to what the Spirit accomplishes through apostolic or contemplative life in common. In this way, these communities can continue to promote vocations to consecrated life.

4. Nurture communal life

Finally, we will realize the hopeful potential of our future only if we boldly and frankly address the obstacles to zeal for our charism. Here, we confront an essential question regarding the health of our community life and apostolate: what sort of life are we inviting young people to share with us? Implicit in this question is the call to create the necessary space for honest reflection, interiorly and within our communities, on what is getting in the way of healthy common life and collaboration for ministry. As Dorothy Day wisely observed in *Loaves and Fishes*, this is fundamentally a question about "how to bring about a revolution of the heart, a revolution that has to start with each one of us."

This can feel daunting. Too often, we diminish the importance of the communal aspects of our religious life, minimizing our common acts such as prayer and recreation. Yet, I am learning that these fundamental aspects of religious life are precisely what young people long for when they first show interest in our communities. It is never too late to make a personal recommitment to the communal life and charism that first inspired us to dream of serving God and neighbor.

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I am hopeful for the future of my congregation and for religious life in general. Why? Because in an era that promotes fear of the other, consecrated life boldly proclaims the fundamental goodness of brothers and sisters who "dwell together in unity" (Psalm 133:1). Consecrated life may be foolish and naïve against a cynical and transactional view of our responsibility to our neighbors. But Saint Paul proclaims to every age that "the wisdom of this world is foolishness in the eyes of God" (1 Cor. 3:19). It is natural and right to be saddened by the loss of brothers and sisters we love and the ministries for which we sacrificed. But this is neither a failure nor a judgment against the viability of religious life. Consecrated life, lived faithfully and intentionally, is wildly out of fashion in an era where trends point toward isolation and hopelessness. The Holy Spirit called us together to share the Lord's dream of redemption and liberation in our time and place and believes that we can accomplish great things. Do we have as much hope in ourselves as the Spirit has in us? ■

Pieta by Michelangelo, Wikimedia

Three professionals who minister to religious reflect on loss and hope.

A central concept of the Christian faith is that grief and loss can bear gifts in the same way that Christ's death led to resurrection and redemption.

Dealing with grief while continuing to minister

By Nancy Santamaria, Erik Ranstrom, and Jillian Tutak

Nancy Santamaria is a spiritual care advisor at Saint John Vianney Center. She holds a master's in holistic spirituality and in art.

Erik Ranstrom is the manager of spiritual care at Saint John Vianney Center. He holds a Ph.D. in theology.

Jillian Tutak is a spiritual care advisor at Saint John Vianney Center. She holds a master's degree in theology and ministry.

From a spiritual care point of view

"Woman, why are you weeping?" Jesus asks Mary at the tomb. These words seem pertinent now, considering the challenges many religious communities are facing. The realities of smaller communities, relinquished ministries, and painful losses of beloved members are there. And yet, we can hear Jesus asking us, "Why are you weeping?" It is a reminder that Christ Jesus is our Lord, and he has the future in his good hands.

Most of us tend to grieve the way life *was*. We want back that person, that community, that ministry, that projected future. Even the person with an addiction wonders what life will be like in recovery without the addiction, which was like a friend, and without the people who were involved in the addictive behaviors. Will life really be better without the substance that helped soothe depression, anxiety, perfectionism, or another condition?

Change is difficult for a lot of us. We fear the unknown, and no matter

how well we strategize, the future is ultimately unknown. We must plan ahead, and religious communities are very good at that. It is the emotional upheaval of grief and loss that can cause sadness, isolating behaviors, hopelessness, or languishing. Jesus asks, "Why are you weeping?" He does not command, "Stop weeping."

"Grief must be expressed," says David Kessler, author of *Finding Meaning: The Sixth Stage of Grief.* The healthy griever finds avenues for expressing grief, sharing it, and learning from it. This might be through counseling, in a grief support group, by writing a letter to a soul-friend, in prayer and journaling, or through many other options. We find resilience in a community of grievers because loss can function as a great people-connector. With others who have endured a loss, we can experience our grief in a safe place and recognize that we are not the only ones feeling as we do, even if we have our own unique experiences.

Grief is part of the human experience. It is a powerful emotion and a mystery. We never get to the bottom of it. Grief can be faced, coped with, and suffered through. There can be new life on the other side of it. Grief cannot be ignored, delayed, or abbreviated. If it is, it can become a dangerous emotion surfacing at unexpected times and in unrecognizable ways, such as angry outbursts, depression, or addiction. These can disrupt caring relationships, backfiring on the griever who needs those compassionate relationships more than ever.

Grief takes time. It has its own calendar. We must be attentive to our grief and not be told we should be over it. And yet, we need to listen if someone close suggests that we might see a counselor for our grief. It can become depression if we are not careful. Everyone grieves differently, and it takes different amounts of time for the acute grieving process to move forward.

Jesus asked Mary, "Woman, why are you weeping?" and he also asks, "Whom are you seeking?" We could ask ourselves, "Whom or what am I seeking?" Are we being invited to seek God and God alone? Is it helpful to seek the way life was? In his book, *The Five Things We Cannot Change and the Happiness We Find by Embracing Them*, David Richo names the first of what he calls the five givens of life: everything changes and ends. Life changes. We cannot stop that.

In our Christian contemplation, we might ask ourselves if God is inviting us to something new. We might ask God for eyes to see new life and hearts to appreciate it fully. Those in vocation ministry have the opportunity to meet young people who are sorting out their life direction. As young people work through how to offer their lives to God—wherever that takes them—can vocation ministers relish the "something new" that is emerging? Can they value and celebrate their role in young people's lives? Can communities join them in affirming the gifts of new life received in accompanying the young (and sometimes the not-so-young)?

These questions change the perspective. We might focus our energies in the grieving process on what God is creating in us. There might be suffering; it might be very painful, and yet, there might be some new life that comes from the separation, loss, or death. Is that not resurrection? Could it be that letting go of prior ministries, properties, and ways of being can let a new generation in religious life create new ways for our charisms to be alive in the world? Vocation ministers can keep these questions before their communities and encourage them to look at the broad picture of religious life.

This is part of the great mystery that grief is. It is a precious, faith-strengthening, and yes, life-giving mystery. Not one we wanted, and perhaps not one we chose, but still life-giving. God sends surprises to help us through. Along the path, there can be new insight, new purpose, new meaning, and gratitude. We may find deep gratitude for what was and hopefulness about what is to come—all of it part of being alive, vital, and human. Jesus calls our name as he called Mary, and we can recognize him and help write the new chapter of our story.

—Nancy Santamaria

From a theological and personal view

In the current context of religious communities in the United States, there are unmistakable absences of what was known, beloved, and cherished. Many works, ministries, traditions, and—most importantly—beloved persons have now passed on. These absences are felt by those in religious life not only physically and institutionally, but also spiritually, emotionally, and psychologically. Faith assures us that resurrection is part of our story as Christians. But being human requires us to acknowledge that the death is a death. We can only keep vigil with each other in the space between these two understandings.

Before I share my own experience of faith and loss, allow me to reflect theologically on death and the very foundation of Christianity. Christianity's origin is intimately bound up with the death of Jesus of Nazareth, and thus, with grief and loss. The potential of this rich insight for our Christian, human lives has been regrettably weakened by the legacy of Enlightenment-era

modern thinkers who pathologized the grief response of early Jesus followers to create a reductionist version of Christian origins. This view of grief created a discomfort around our faith tradition's primal relationship to the human experience of loss, and perhaps led to shyness or even avoidance of the centrality of grief in the birth of the Christian experience.

Yet, it is undeniable that in Roman Catholicism especially, grief is integral to many of the tradition's most cherished aesthetic treasures: Michelangelo's Pieta, Palestrina's "Lamentations of Jeremiah," and the Passion Façade of La Sagrada Familia, to name just a few. The contemporary reimagining of traditional devotions—such as a Stations of the Cross for the Earth and Stations for the University of Central America martyrs—were born from a proper theological instinct: that the wider Body of Christ is inscribed in the self-same Paschal Mystery of Jesus, which is itself sealed into creation.

Absence and presence are two sides of the same coin, inseparably linked. Sacramental presence is mediated through Christ's absence.

Of course, there remains the danger of phrases like Paschal Mystery becoming pseudo-entities, cut off from our very human lives. However, death and dying are not only aesthetic elements of Christian art. Instead, they point back to the disorientation and disillusionment of loss, and they must remain so if the Eucharistic celebrations are to be true liturgies of the people. For we congregate, pray, and minister in a world saturated in loss, a world we are integrally part of, and it is as part of this world that we make our "spiritual sacrifice of praise" (Heb. 13:15).

Absence is an enduring feature of this world, and accordingly, it is part of the context for the presence of God. Thus, for the French sacramental theologian Louis-Marie Chauvet and the American biblical scholar and theologian Carey Walsh, absence and presence are two sides of the same coin, inseparably linked. Sacramental presence, Chauvet suggests, is mediated through Christ's absence, and he points to the Emmaus story as an illustration (Luke 24:13-35). It is only because of this absence that sacramental presence is made possible, and one might dare say, humanly credible.

"But I tell you the truth, it is better for you that I go," Jesus says (John 16:7). We could put this another way: grief and loss bear divine and human presence. There is no direct, immediate realization of presence, but only one where we must struggle with the strangeness of that presence as mediated through absence. "He has been raised; he is not here," says the angel (Mark 16:6). Other scriptural texts come alive under this hermeneutic. Did Jesus not say he would be found in the suffering and the stranger (Matt. 25:31-46)? Did Jesus not disappear from the disciples after they consumed him? (Luke 24:31) Were the disciples not admonished by the angel for looking at the sky for Jesus' return? (Acts 1:11). Or what of Saint Teresa of Avila and her lovely poem that begins, "Christ has no body now but yours"?

In my own experience, I spent hours upon hours, year upon year, in the pew gazing at the Crucified One before Mass. While visiting loved ones in the cemetery as a child—always on a gray, overcast day it seemed—I was confronted by large, melancholic depictions of Calvary. Jesus on the Cross. Mary, the Beloved Disciple, and the women surrounding him. Mourning and weeping. At times, as a child, this was too much for me to take in; yet I was drawn to it. *Mysterium tremendum et fascinans.*

This is the Catholicism of the "Stabat Mater," the hymn to the suffering Virgin Mother. Some argue that this Catholic theological aesthetic privileges death rather than resurrection. Yet, it formed me interiorly to receive events of loss and absence in my life. I would not have known then that the long time my mother would have us in church before Mass each Sunday, with quiet time to behold images of Christ's body, would inculcate this sensitivity. I am aware each time I sit in a church before a crucifix to be present to death in its many iterations, and not only physical death.

This perspective itself becomes complicated, for if I presume that the grief and darkness bear a gift, I am by that fact shielding myself from the tomb, which reveals itself as a womb only in that mysterious convergence of time, desire, and healing.

The Triduum of our lives knows no shortcuts.

—Erik Ranstrom

From the view of someone enriched by religious

Throughout my life, I have had the honor and privilege to be impacted by vowed religious. Before I left for college, I sat down with Father Har-

old, a priest at my home parish who was a dear friend of my family. I was apprehensive about moving away from home and being in full control of my spiritual life for the first time. I was born and raised Catholic, and going to Mass on Sunday was never a question for me. This was a ritual I was determined to keep up, but I was nervous about getting caught up in the college scene and letting my faith fall to the back burner. His advice to me that day was to receive the Eucharist as much as I possibly could, and the rest would follow.

Taking that advice to heart, I went off to college and started going to daily Mass. That is where I met Father Philip, the university chaplain. He met me where I was and made the chapel feel like it was my second home. He gave me space to ask questions, seek healing for parts of myself I didn't realize I had buried, and helped me find the true grace in the sacrament of Confession.

I then started getting more involved in campus ministry and got to live out my faith by serving at soup kitchens, going on mission trips, and becoming the head sacristan of the university. I developed a deeper relationship with the sisters and lay campus ministers, and their impact truly made me the person I am today. Through their guidance and encouragement, I went on a pilgrimage to Rome and Assisi to follow the lives of Saint Francis and Saint Clare, and it was there that I had a true spiritual awakening and experienced a desire to pursue my vocation in ministry.

I have been blessed with incredible role models of faith to turn to throughout my life, and I am eternally grateful for the ways they exemplify God's love and mercy to me each day. The quotation popularly attributed to Saint Francis of Assisi, "Preach the gospel at all times, and when necessary, use words," is a Franciscan value that I keep in the forefront of my mind. For me, Franciscans have been the Gospel personified. They have been a constant presence, inviting me to enter more deeply into relationship with God by attending Mass and having open and honest conversations about faith. Franciscans made me feel part of the community.

I am a product of what is possible when extraordinary collaboration among priests, religious, and laity is encouraged. I hope to be part of that continued collaboration of faith for all those I encounter.

I know fear and grief can be wrapped up in the changes and loss that religious communities are experiencing today. Our church is changing, and that can be scary, especially for those who have dedicated their entire lives to service and the church. As a laywoman who has been shaped by those in religious life, I hope this message can provide hope: your legacy lives on in me and in all those you've touched. ■ *—Jillian Tutak*

Newer members of religious communities find many sources of inspiration to be a pilgrim of hope in this Jubilee Year.

By-studio, Adobe Stock

What it means to me to be a pilgrim of hope

Embracing pilgrim qualities

By Sister Tracey Horan, S.P.

What does it mean to be a pilgrim? Pilgrims live peacefully with an incredible amount of uncertainty. They may not have much clarity about where they're going. They will have to depend on others along the way and cannot carry much with them. They will say many hellos and goodbyes as they journey from one place to the next.

As a newer Sister of Providence, parts of the pilgrim archetype resonate with the life I live, and others remain aspirational for me. I am no stranger to movement, to hellos and goodbyes. I have lived in six different community settings in four cities in 10 years. With every move, I have become more determined to travel lightly, as I recognize the burden it is for a pilgrim to be weighed down by belongings. I have said goodbye to a number of sisters I have known as friends and mentors, and I have also had the joy of welcoming new vowed members who have decided to journey with us. All this movement—greetings and letting go, putting down tender shoots with care wherever I am, knowing they may soon be uprooted—is part and parcel of what it means to be a pilgrim.

Now a decade into my religious life, I find hope as a pilgrim in a moment when we women and men religious are being called into deeper dependence and interdependence beyond the confines of our own congregations. Pilgrims are often forced to get creative in meeting their needs for food and shelter. For me, this is not a reality to fear but an adventure to embrace. When I felt a strong call to minister at the U.S.-Mexico border but had no success recruiting Sisters of Providence to build a community with me, I found a way to respond to this call: depend on the generosity of another religious congregation that opened its doors to me.

While I have embraced the creativity involved in intercongregational interdependence, the vulnerability and dependence of the pilgrim is still a growing edge for me. It can be a challenge to be a vowed member in my 30s and to acknowledge having needs, especially when I see the increasing dependence of my elders. There is a temptation to try to be as "needless" and independent as possible, to somehow counterbalance the neediness of women in my congregation who have given so generously of themselves for decades. Yet in this Jubilee Year,

I find a hopeful model in the pilgrim who builds community through her neediness. In the words of musician Sara Groves, "Thank God for our dependence, here's to our chasm of need, and how it binds us together, in faith and vulnerability." When a pilgrim humbly requests food or shelter, when she is willing to reach out and invite the generosity of others, she creates the space for a loving response. The beauty of leaning into the pilgrim way in community is that we are not alone in our human dependence. We can support one another in our movement, in hellos and goodbyes, in realizing our need for the support of others on this journey.

Finally, there is the pilgrim's peace with uncertainty. When I look around at newer members in my own congregation and beyond, I see this virtue in abundance. We are closer than our elders to what brought us here, and this has a way of grounding us in our general intention for the journey. I have yet to meet a woman who joined her congregation because of a motherhouse building or a piece of land or a particular sponsored ministry. We come because of what is *alive* in these places, because of our desire to aspire to Gospel values in a focused way and in community with others.

Sister Tracey Horan, S.P. is a Sister of Providence of St. Mary-of-the-Woods, Indiana, and currently ministers in education and advocacy at the U.S.-Mexico border.

Moving forward with an open heart

By Brother Christopher Campos Erran, O.S.C.

When I first heard about the Jubilee Year focus on pilgrims of hope, I couldn't help but pause and smile. I thought, "Yes, that's exactly what I am." Not just because I'm a newer member still finding my footing, but because my whole life has been a pilgrimage of hope, often walking in trust before I could see what lay ahead.

Born and raised in South Phoenix in a strong Mexican-American family, I was shaped by faith, struggle, and perseverance. My parents, married for nearly six decades, taught me what resilience and unconditional love look like in action, my dad a former migrant farmworker and my mom a hardworking woman of great wisdom and faith. Our family didn't have much materially, but we were rich in faith. We prayed, we hoped, and we carried each other through.

As a first-generation college student and then a higher education professional for 20 years, I carried that hope into the world, walking with students of color, first-generation scholars, and single parents trying to change their lives. I loved that work. I thought that was my lifelong path.

But God had other plans.

In 2020, amid the uncertainty of the pandemic, I heard the clearest call of my life: "It's time to let it all go and follow me, Christopher." And just like that, I found myself on a new road, one that led to the Crosiers, whose charism of touching suffering with hope mirrored my own heart. Saying yes meant leaving behind a home, community, career, retirement plan—and stepping into a life of prayer, community, and deep listening.

Now, as I journey through initial formation, I realize how profoundly hope shapes my daily life. Hope is in our morning prayers when we lift up the pain of the world. Hope is in our elder confreres who have walked this road faithfully for decades. Hope is in quiet spiritual direction sessions, where I accompany others through their valleys and mountaintops.

I think of hope as a kind of holy stubbornness, a refusal to believe that darkness gets the final word. It's the lens through which I now see my ministries, whether I'm tending to an aging brother, helping plan a development campaign, or guiding someone in prayer, I'm constantly invited to hold space for possibility, healing, and new life.

Being a pilgrim of hope also means embracing the unknown with trust. As I prepare for my clinical pastoral education with our local Veterans Affairs hospital, I feel the stretch again. Will I be enough in the face of people's pain? Will I be ready to meet suffering with gentleness and strength? The questions linger, but so does the Spirit's quiet encouragement: "You're not walking alone."

And I'm not. My Crosier brothers, my family back home, and the communion of saints walk with me. The beauty of religious life is that we never journey in isolation. We walk together, offering each other glimpses of grace along the way.

This Jubilee Year reminds me that being a pilgrim doesn't mean having everything figured out. It means moving forward anyway, with a heart open to God's surprises. It means trusting that the One who called me will continue to lead, even when the road bends unexpectedly.

So here I am, a brother in formation, a spiritual director-in-training, a product of South Phoenix, a child of God, walking this road with my eyes set on hope. Not because I have all the answers, but because I believe in the One who does. And for now, that's more than enough.

Brother Christopher Campos Erran, O.S.C. is in formation with the Crosiers.

Hope can be gritty and tough

By Sister Audra Turnbull, I.H.M.

Recently, I attended a workshop in which the speaker shared a poem by Caitlin Seida called "Hope Is Not a Bird, Emily, It's a Sewer Rat." The poem reflects on the gritty, tough nature of hope, and it caught me off guard. As I pondered further, the words started to resonate within me. I usually look for hope in traditionally beautiful surroundings, but as I reflected on my life as a Catholic sister, hope often came from ugly places in both my ministerial and communal life.

Hope doesn't gracefully fly high above us like a bird. Hope comes out of nowhere and scampers by our feet, sending chills down our spines. Hope is much closer than we think and much harder to eradicate than we expect. Hope doesn't know how to die. It comes back day after day, living in conditions most virtues wouldn't dare go. Like a sewer rat, hope lives in dark, smelly, and oftentimes dangerous conditions. I find that hope thrives in these places.

In my ministry as a professional guardian for adults, I have found myself in these dark and dangerous places, places where no human should live but where more and more people are found every day. I've witnessed the hope in these vulnerable adults that tomorrow will be better than today. There is a belief that with the right help, their lot in life can improve. It's humbling to be a part of that help. A prayer I often pray is, "God, help me, help them." Our Catholic faith implores us to be in these places and challenge the systems that often force people here. This focus is backed up by my congregation's charism, which is to be and become the liberating mission of Jesus Christ. This charism continues to inspire and challenge me to this day.

What also brings me hope—and helps me be a pilgrim of hope this Jubilee Year—is that God continues to work through not only me but my sisters in community. At times being in community can be just as messy emotionally as living in a sewer. There have been times I have been deeply hurt by my own sisters, and there are times I have hurt others as well. Living in community often means being shown areas of yourself that are just plain ugly.

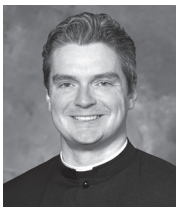
When I first entered my community I wanted to show my formators and sisters that I was a beautiful and graceful bird. I quickly learned that I had flaws I could not hide and other flaws I did not even know I had. Every configuration of community life has revealed some part of who I am, for better or worse. Even with all these flaws, I have continued to receive love and support from my sisters. Like a persistent sewer rat, we show up for one another in the darkest of times. Our love for one another and our shared charism is tenacious and fierce. In these dark and uncertain times, our grit becomes our most valuable trait.

We women religious are ordinary humans after all, still striving to be better humans than we were the day before. We are still seeking new ways to bring about the liberating mission of Jesus Christ. This journey of discovery doesn't end in old age. I know sisters well into their 90s who haven't lost the willingness to learn new things. They may not be walking through the physical sewers, but they hold in their prayers all of us who do. We have a saying in the IHMs: "Where one IHM is, every IHM is there as well." It gives me hope that I'm not alone in this journey of trying to navigate the physical and spiritual sewers of our day.

Sister Audra Turnbull, I.H.M. is a member of the Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, and she ministers as a professional guardian for Compassionate Companions in Monroe, Michigan.

Questions and grace

By Brother Nathaniel Pierce, S.J.C.



The Jubilee Year hadn't been much of a consolation coming into Holy Week this past spring. I was in my first year at seminary, my fourth with the Canons Regular of St. John Cantius. It's been a largely diocesan formation—busy, much busier than when I'm back with my community. The formation has been geared toward seminarians who will one day be on their own in a parish.

Consolation seemed to have faded as God was forming me into a public figure. *Are you doing this, Lord, to show me something?*

They say we hope in things unseen, that this is a principle in the spiritual life. God withdraws consolations. I once heard it described as no longer giving the dog the milk bone when he sits.

There's a church just down the street from the seminary—a Jubilee church with Holy Doors. I tried getting in several times, but each time it was closed. You have to make special arrangements or go during Mass. It was

never just open when I was driving by and could easily pull over and step inside. It seemed like every Holy Door this Jubilee Year was either inconvenient or hidden.

Adding to my frustration, four years into my formation, I still find myself sitting in chapel with questions about what the future holds for me. I seem so resolved to stick with it that I wonder sometimes if I'm even listening.

How do we hear God's voice that we may become pilgrims of hope? Dietrich von Hildebrand says we must conform to objective values with an integrated intellect, mind, and heart. The heart, the affective center of the human person, is, he argues, the fundamental part of who we are. We encounter objective values in the world, and we respond to them with rightly ordered affectivity. Here at Mundelein Seminary, they call it affective maturity. I'm still figuring out what that means. How do you make an objective response with your heart? What intensity of feeling is enough to be appropriate? Still, it's the best idea I've come across at seminary this year. A powerful idea, it seems, if integrated.

My uncle died on Spy Wednesday. We hadn't talked much since I had entered religious life. We'd grown apart. I've grown apart from a lot of people I used to be close with, one of the sacrifices of religious life, I tell myself. But I know better. I could have done better. I could have written or called him more. I rather like being ensconced away from the world. Regrets don't disappear when you enter religious life. They often feel sharper. I failed to respond to the objective value of my uncle—he, as a subject, as a thou.

But hours before he died, my cousin got him last rites. I had prayed a Saint Joseph novena thinking he needed a miracle to receive the sacraments. And he did receive them—a miracle for him, a fallen-away Catholic. And all that the Jubilee Year promises—reconciliation, hope, conversion, a new beginning—suddenly became real for me. The Paschal Mystery. Christ's redemptive suffering.

On Holy Thursday, I managed to get through some Holy Doors. All I could think about on Good Friday was that Christ ransoms us. That was enough. Redemption never made sense like it did that day. It was a grace of the Jubilee Year with its emphasis on pilgrims of hope. Then came the seven readings of Holy Saturday, and the dots connected. I felt God stooping down to me, to my uncle, to all of us. A privileged time, sanctified in God's mercy.

Brother Nathaniel Pierce, S.J.C. is a member of the Canons Regular of St. John Cantius of Chicago currently preparing for the priesthood at Mundelein Seminary in Illinois.

We walk together

By Sister Katty Huanuco C.C.V.I

A few months ago, I spent part of my Monday in line, waiting to update my driver's license. It was one of those lines that tests me. We stood and moved slowly in unison. The wait stretched on for almost four hours. Some people chatted softly, others scrolled through phones, a few just stared ahead. Some people smiled at me, and those smiles lightened the weight of my wait. We were different in so many visible ways: age, language, clothing, posture. But we all had something in common: we needed to be there. We had chosen to wait. We were all hoping for something we needed, something that would allow us to continue on our way. And it struck me: "This, too, is what being a pilgrim of hope looks like."

Just as I waited at the Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV) for something not yet in hand, a pilgrim of hope walks toward a future shaped by trust, not certainty. So, how do I live a life of faith that stays in motion, even when I do not see the full picture? As a Peruvian Sister in the United States, I often feel like I, too, am in a line: learning how to listen, how to speak, how to stand with those whose hope has been denied or delayed, how to remain open to the unknown rhythms. But, thank God, pilgrimage is never just about me!

Many of us these days find our current pilgrimage is not always consoling. Our common home is marked by exhaustion, injustice, and despair. Some members of our own religious communities feel like everything is overwhelming. Others may get stuck. Yet it is precisely here that we are called to walk as pilgrims of hope. There are many sisters and brothers who are eager to serve. There are many around the world who keep us moving. They show us the line is moving, and we must move, even when we do not see any progress.

Indeed, being a pilgrim of hope is a call to recognize that we walk with others. We walk a path shaped by the footsteps of others. And hope can be lived in spaces of uncertainty, discomfort, and delay. It is not grand, but it is persistent and communal. As a pilgrim of hope, I have been nourished by those who keep walking with me, even when the line is long. So many have shown me how to embody a ministry of presence and solidarity.

"Hope speaks to us of a thirst, an aspiration, a longing for a life of fulfillment," Pope Francis writes in *Fratelli Tutti*. We, as sisters, are committed to keep standing

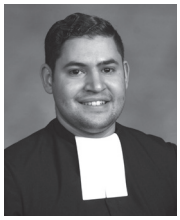
where we are called to stand. We live in shared spaces, with different stories and different timelines. Our communities can be circles of care where others might glimpse the possibility of not standing alone.

The DMV was a space where people from different walks of life stood side by side, united in vulnerability and in a desire for renewal, recognition, or simply forward movement. Like those in line, maybe we are invited to wait, to hope, because we believe. So, being a pilgrim of hope, for me, means standing in places of delay and longing, walking with others who are also waiting. It is trusting that even there, something is unfolding. It means being intentional about nurturing moments of joy in the waiting. It is believing that hope is not just something we feel; it's something we choose, together.

Sister Katty Huanaco, C.C.V.I. is a Sister of Charity of the Incarnate Word, San Antonio. She is pursuing a Ph.D. in social and public policy while serving as director of her community's initiative, the International Justice, Peace, and Integrity of Creation Ministry.

Those who help me be a pilgrim of hope

By Brother Luis Ramos, F.M.S.



By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, yeah, we wept, when we remembered Zion / When the wicked carried us away in captivity, required from us a song / Now how shall we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?

These verses from Boney M's 1978 hit cover "Rivers of Babylon" incorporate words from the Psalms. They perfectly describe how I felt during parts of 2024 and 2025. This time was packed with significant experiences for me: moving from one school ministry to another, preparing for my final profession, and losing two grandparents within a few months, both in difficult ways. It was also an election year, with news and commentary adding a weight to the background of my life. It felt like the world was frenetic, never still, never stable. Transition, grief, and world events can do that to you. I tried to remain hopeful, but I was definitely a pilgrim in what felt like a "strange land."

Joys and difficulties pass across each of our doorsteps. No one is exempt. Even with joys at school and in formation, it seemed like my own hope was being depleted. When I found myself feeling low, I'd think, "All right Luis, there are things to be grateful for," and, "God, how do I work with this? I'm in a rut!" As I contemplated, I realized that three groups of people help me to be a pilgrim of hope.

First, God speaks through our youth. For the past six years, I have had the privilege to be a high school teacher. It has built up my patience and made me a quicker thinker, a better listener. Young people are honest and willing to share, traits that show up in a special way through their humor and discussions. They are at an age of deep discernment and self discovery.

As a religion and Spanish teacher, I've been able to listen to young people articulate their faith journeys and aspirations—their pilgrimages. Their questions, curiosities, and motivations are deeply moving. Unknowingly, they have helped me discern my own vocation. They possess a wealth of talent and faith activating before my eyes.

Another group that helps me be a pilgrim of hope is my community. Last summer, I began a year of preparation for final vows. This prompted reflection on the origins of my vocation. I met the Marist Brothers at Mount Saint Michael Academy in my hometown, the Bronx. Their passion for ministry and openness to new membership excited me as a student. Each brother had his own identity, but the Gospel mission joined them together.

Additionally, they were *normal*. They laughed, spent time together, and shared faith. As the only member of my "group" (young and Latino) when I entered, my brothers were supportive, including me as a full member. And more have entered since I did.

Finally, my grandparents inspire me to be a pilgrim of hope. Losing two of them has been a great difficulty, but their example sets me on a path of hope. When I consider their lives, I think of how they shared their resources, energy, faith, and love. They exemplified love of God and neighbor. I carry their witness with me daily.

My hope, then, in this Jubilee Year is to be receptive to God's call as a brother, specifically by listening to those I serve, those I join with in community, and those who have gone before me. Another verse in Boney M's cover says, "Let the words of our mouth and the meditations of our heart be acceptable in thy sight here tonight." If I can make that my goal, I can press on as a pilgrim of hope—even in a strange land.

Brother Luis Ramos, F.M.S. belongs to the Marist Brothers and teaches Spanish at Mount Saint Michael Academy in the Bronx, New York. ■

Father Lawrence Lew, O.P., Flickr

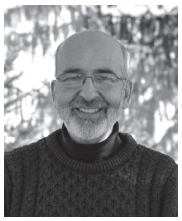
Learning about and attending important feast days for different cultural groups can help build relationships and foster sensitivity. Pictured here are preparations for a Mass in honor of Our Lady of Guadalupe, whose feast day is important to Mexican American Catholics.

Building bridges between cultures in vocation ministry

By John Feister

WHAT ADVICE WOULD Servant of God Sister Thea Bowman, F.S.P.A. have for vocational ministers? A Mississippian and a Franciscan Sister of Perpetual Adoration, she was a tireless worker during the middle of the last century for an ethnically inclusive church. For her, that included bringing people of color into religious life, "black, red, yellow, brown!" she would say. If she were around today, I think she would admire the work of Father Juan Molina, Sister Nicole Trahan, F.M.I., and Father Adam McDonald, S.V.D. We'll hear from each below.

I interviewed Sister Thea for articles twice in the 1980s. (She died of cancer in 1990.) In one, we talked about intercultural challenges in the church. I asked her for advice on behalf of vocation ministers. Her answer: "When I went into formation, most women felt, 'We're all alike. What's good for one is good for all.' But my background as a Black Catholic was radically different." Her suggestion for those trying to cross ethnic divides in their ministry: "Get in touch with Black spirituality and history, and become comfortable with Black people."



John Feister is a veteran Catholic journalist and Catholic Media Association's St. Francis De Sales Award winner. He and Sister Charlene Smith, FSPA., coauthored *Thea's Song: The Life of Thea Bowman* (2009, Orbis Books), which was the winner of a Christopher Award in 2010.

Courtesy of The Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration

What advice would Servant of God Sister Thea Bowman, F.S.P.A. have for vocation ministers? "Get in touch with Black spirituality and history, and become comfortable with Black people."

Create a sense of home

Father Juan Molina, president of the Mexican American Cultural Center, is a priest of the San Antonio diocese who once was the vocation director for the Trinitarians. He says one of the hardest challenges for religious communities is to develop a truly intercultural understanding. But it's not just understanding, he says. It's about living. The more successful communities are "more open to welcoming and making non-Anglos feel at home," he says. That's not just handshakes and smiles. It has to do with food, with liturgy, with daily prayer.

"That feeling at home, feeling welcome, is probably the first step for anybody discerning an application [to join a community]." Molina offers the example of a young seminarian he knows from San Antonio. "Fully bilingual, he's very much at home in a bilingual context. Yet his food is very different than the food that [he] would get if his diocese would send him to a seminary that doesn't allow much food variety." Familiar food is always one sign of home.

"You have to feel something of yourself in the congregation," he says, "in the way it discerns, in the way that it handles authority, in the ways that it makes food, and even in the way that it has parties!"

For a Latino applicant, feeling at home in a religious congregation includes his or her family having a connection to the community. Molina says, "Your congregation will be part of your family, and your family will also be part of your congregation. These are relationships that go not only with the individual." He gives another example from San Antonio of the Missionaries of the Holy Spirit community (the current archbishop of San Antonio is a member). They have an associate program, and many times new members come from families that are associates of the congregation. Parents see it as natural that their son would become a priest with the Missionaries of the Holy Spirit.

"You grow in the family; not only in your blood family, but you also grow in this culture of a religious congregation," Molina says. "And as you grow up, your parents have been going to meetings, to special Masses and anniversaries, all of these things. It's only natural for you to then say, 'I want to be like them as well.'"

The bottom line for Molina is that religious communities need to learn and affirm multiple cultures in day-to-day living and community prayer. "A community needs to understand them better and to understand that culture is an important aspect not only of one's individual existence but also an important aspect of vocational recruitment." We're not inviting individuals, he adds; we're inviting the whole family.

Some practical tips for religious communities? "You have to force yourself to go out into the community, learn the other language, even if you don't learn it perfectly. People don't care that you don't know it perfectly. They care that you're there with them," Molina says.

He recalls his own experience many years ago as a seminarian. He was befriended by a Glenmary Home Missioner student, Neil Pezzulo, who became a lifelong friend. "He was always open to me and supportive," says Molina. "I had an accent (I still do!). Not everybody was as sensitive. He understood that I have different struggles. He would recognize that, yes, you can have different struggles, and you have a right to express that your experience is different." Many years later, both men still look back on that moment.

Pezzulo, now a Glenmary pastor in rural Southwest Georgia, in a community growing in international membership, says, "It comes down to a simple idea: The Jesus I love, the Jesus I try to follow, is of a different type, place, and culture than me, you know? It's not complicated. Other people make everything more complicated on this! I think it takes some emotional intelligence. But you build personal relationships." He states the obvious: "People among us have different cultures, different questions, and radically different ways of doing things."

Molina knows that sometimes those entering a religious community hear a different message: "You're the newcomer, and therefore, you are expected to comply.

Courtesy of Sister Nicole Trahan, F.M.I.

Sister Nicole Trahan, F.M.I. (right), says "It's not so much about recruiting; it's about just building those relationships and getting to know people." Be curious, she advises. Don't make assumptions. Here Trahan and Sister Rose Rucoba, F.M.I. take part in the 2024 National Eucharistic Congress.

And in reality, it's the complete opposite." And that is one of Molina's key insights: "It really is you. You're co-creating a new community. In whatever diocese, parish, or religious congregation that people enter, whether those people are Vietnamese or Indian or Latin American. You're literally co-creating a very different community!"

Overcoming barriers

The same dynamic plays out in many women's communities. It's surely not as extreme as what happened to young Sister Thea Bowman in 1953 when she applied to the Franciscans and became the only Black person in her community (indeed, in the whole city of LaCrosse, Wisconsin). Her classmate Sister Charlene Smith, F.S.P.A., writes that an older sister told newcomer Sister Thea, "You know, Black people go to nigger heaven, together with the dogs and other animals." That's shocking to hear today, but racism persists in more subtle ways. It can still be a challenge for communities of white people to be truly welcoming across ethnic lines.

Ask Sister Nicole Trahan, F.M.I., former vocation director for the Daughters of Mary Immaculate, a part of the Marianist family. "I think one of the main challenges is if people of color who are discerning the possibility of religious life don't see someone with whom they can identify in a religious community." That's a serious barrier, but one that can be overcome. "I think if a community has never welcomed someone from a particular ethnic background, there might be some implicit bias or prejudice that they're not even aware of, one that impacts their behavior and makes it difficult for the person who's entering," she says.

It seems like a chicken-and-egg problem, not being able to welcome people of color because you lack members of a similar background. But Trahan has an approach for vocation ministers: "Part of it is building relationships. One of the things that I have said to congregations in the past is that people are not going to just pick you out of a catalog and show up to enter!" She says it is critical to "be in spaces where you can build relationships and meet people who are from a different ethnic background."

One example is getting into diverse parishes and building relationships. "It's not so much about recruiting; it's about building relationships and getting to know people." Perhaps among those more involved in the parish you might find someone considering religious life, she offers. And, she says, it's not only the vocation minister's role to build bridges. Everyone in the community has to be on board.

"That requires doing the work of conversion, looking at ourselves and getting in touch with our implicit biases and prejudices, understanding how those impact our everyday lives. That's a huge thing!" says Trahan. In many ways, it's not so different from the obstacles that Sister

Thea Bowman confronted in her time. They just might not be so obvious.

"Microaggressions are a big thing," adds Trahan, speaking of the non-obvious. "That's something that is said or done based on a stereotype or a prejudice that might sound innocuous. It might sound innocent, but it's insulting to the person who's receiving that," she explains. And it's typically not intentional, yet racism is institutional. A white community member might seek to praise an African American by suggesting that she is "very articulate," says Trahan. "No doubt, as an African American, she has perceived that below the surface lies an implicit suggestion: "We're better [more articulate] than you, and you're making progress in overcoming that." That sounds pretty bad, but prejudice, unexamined, untreated, can be like a quiet, infectious disease, both unseen and toxic.

> "You have to force yourself to go out into the community, learn the other language, even if you don't learn it perfectly. People don't care that you don't know it perfectly. They care that you're there with them."

Another microaggression: a white community member telling a Latino newcomer born and raised in the United States that their English is very good. It sounds like a compliment, but actually, probably unintentionally, it serves as a put-down. Whether a potential or newer member would even feel free to confront it is complicated. Did the comment come from a peer? Or from someone in authority? Those can be determinants, says Trahan. "Thanks," the Latino newcomer might say, "Why wouldn't it be!"

One way through issues related to language might be a common open acknowledgment that accent differences take time to accommodate. "To adapt is a process," says Trahan, "and it's okay to overcome a little bit of difficulty!"

She also has advice for communities bringing in members from abroad: "The first thing is to recognize that the cultures are different. Even within a country like Kenya, where you have different tribes, those cultures are different. You can't paint people with a broad brush and say just because their skin color is the same, they're the same." Be curious, she advises. Don't make assumptions.

"I would say it's important, especially when you're working with people from another country, to know things about that country and the culture before the person comes to live in the community. I think we run into some issues when people assume that folks coming from the African continent, from African countries, are the same as African Americans. And that's just not true. These are completely different cultures."

Parable of the Sower

Father Adam MacDonald, S.V.D., is the vocation director for the Chicago Province of Divine Word Missionaries. For more than a century, his congregation has desired to be interethnic in the United States, says MacDonald. Their seminary in Bay St. Louis, Mississippi, has graduated several Black Catholic priests and brothers, four of whom became bishops, including the now-retired Bishops Terry Steib (Memphis, Tennessee) and Curtis Guillory (Beaumont, Texas).

The congregation has developed an "interethnic lens" that continues to shape its vision in vocations, MacDonald says. He suggests the Parable of the Sower and the Seeds (Mark 4:1-8) as a paradigm for inclusion: "How generously do we extend that invitation? Are we like the sower of the seed in the parable? Who's willing to throw that seed wherever it lands, regardless of rocks and thorns, giving everyone a chance to hear that word, and whoever has the desire to respond, we'll bring that to fruit. Or do we kind of pick and choose, and say, well, we're only going places where we think there's a greater likelihood of a response? Granted, we have limited resources. We can't go everywhere and do everything all the time. But sometimes, I hear complaints that [vocation ministers] don't get responses. If you look at where they're placing an invitation, it's too tightly focused."

Authenticity is critical, too. It's that chicken-and-egg problem again. You want to draw new people from ethnicities you haven't welcomed before, but there is no one familiar. But you can't fake it, says MacDonald. He speaks of a community creating brochures using stock images to imply diversity that isn't there. That leads to trouble once an inquirer looks more closely. On the other hand, images showing diversity among the people who are *invited* to retreats and events can communicate an openness to all.

"We need to put the invitation out there authentically," says MacDonald. "Let's say that someone hears the invitation, responds, and wants to enter, whether it's for a visit or to stay. It raises those questions of what adjustments we might be willing to make to help someone feel welcome in our midst."

One of the big adjustments may be spending time and resources on language. Newcomers from En-

glish-speaking countries might need training to learn or improve an American-English accent. On the other hand, the community may need to learn more about those home countries and learn to practice patience. Spanish-speaking newcomers might need to gain more English proficiency, while the welcoming community members might need to learn and improve their Spanish.

"We need to offer candidates opportunities to bring the richness of their culture to bear upon the entire life of the community," says MacDonald. "That means scheduling opportunities to celebrate cultural and national feasts important in the cultures of origin of the people who join us." His community, for example, celebrates the feast of Saint Josephine Bakhita, the enslaved African woman who was brought to Italy and established her freedom. "She has become a real patron of our African, African American, and Caribbean sisters and brothers, of whom we have a significant number." These celebrations bear fruit with everyone over time.

"When I look at our community celebrations, I see our members, for instance, from Haiti who are just as involved in helping cook for and decorate for and celebrate Lunar New Year or the Asian Cup [soccer championship]. And when we have our Josephine Bakhita celebration, our Asian and our Latin American confreres are just as invested and interested in preparing for and being present at the celebration. We encourage our members to wear a national dress or costume during these celebrations." Some community members even join in wearing international attire from a country other than their own.

"It's not for show or sort of like a token; it's a sign of respect and appreciation for how these things enrich our lives, how we want to share in them together," MacDonald notes. "It's not just a Vietnamese or an African celebration, but it's something that we really value together."

When it comes to discernment, MacDonald recommends a team approach. Rather than have only one ethnic group represented on a vocation team, try to have vocation staff from the cultures where you are in contact with candidates. MacDonald reinforces two themes Father Juan Molina brought up: "We have a very intentional way of walking with the young men that inquire, which means that we will eventually go to try to meet them and their families and understand that the families will be part of that journey as well.

"And I can tell you it makes such a difference when we're able to communicate, removing that limitation that might otherwise be there. It communicates to the families that this congregation cares enough and invests enough to value and respect the cultures that we are willing to learn those languages."

Courtesy of Father Adam MacDonald, S.V.D.

Vocation director Father Adam MacDonald, S.V.D. (center) is joined by two S.V.D. seminarians, Baruch Zinsou (left) and Pedro Saveia (right), at the 2024 National Black Catholic Men's Conference.

MacDonald stresses the importance of being present at ethnic conferences in the United States, such as the National Black Catholic Congress, the National Association of Burmese American Catholics, and the annual Vietnamese Marian Days gathering in Carthage, Missouri. In the end, he says, it's not only about a poster or brochure; it's about building relationships.

Servant of God Sister Thea Bowman advocated the same. Building relationships, developing trust, nurturing a multicultural sense of the church—she spoke of these in our 1988 bedside interview: "I think the church is universal, and for such a long time people misunderstood universality. They thought it meant that everybody had to be alike. But I think the beauty of the universality is that the church is able to speak to the people in whatever language they best understand. And when we say language, we're not just talking about verbal language. We're talking about ritual, we're talking about music, we're talking about gesture, we're talking about story. And, you know, the kind of witness to the Good News that happens when they see us coming together in Jesus' name. One Lord, one faith, one Baptism, all within the diversity of our histories and our experiences and our cultures, our arts and our rhythms. For me, that's the fun of it!" ■

What holds communities back from embracing vocation ministry? Here are fresh ways to think about this ministry and see it as a force for good in religious life and the world.

Young people continue to be called by God to live their faith fully. Vocation ministers provide a valuable service by helping them know about the option of religious life, listening to their hopes and dreams, and providing discernment guidance. Photo: Halinskyi Max, Shutterstock.

Vocation ministry has lasting value and impact

By Sister Deborah Borneman, SS.C.M.

Sister Deborah Borneman, SS.C.M. belongs to the Sister of Saints Cyril and Methodius. She has served in vocation ministry for more than 20 years and has been part of the National Religious Vocation Conference team since 2011. She currently serves as NRVC's director of mission integration.

AT THE NATIONAL RELIGIOUS VOCATION CONFERENCE, we specialize in vocation ministry with confidence that God continues to call women and men to holiness. Ours is a ministry of active listening, of helping people to hear and respond to God's endless call. Over the past two decades, I have come to believe vocation ministry is both timeless and desperately needed in a world filled with brokenness and beauty. Just as people dedicate their lives to ending food insecurity, generational poverty, human trafficking, and illiteracy, vocation ministers are missioned to accompany women and men who seek a deeper relationship with God and humanity, who are searching for meaningful service, and look to us to provide direction on how to respond to God's call.

Walking with discerners

Vocation ministry beckons us to hear God's voice throughout our lives, not

just once in vocation discernment. God's call is precious and sacred in a world filled with digital devices and automated voices like Alexa and Siri. Vocation ministry asks each of us to pay attention to our own story of call to be able to invite others to follow the Risen Christ. Hearing and responding to God's call requires a lifelong attentiveness to the voice of God. Pope Francis elaborates in *Christus Vivit* (257), "Your vocation inspires you to bring out the best in yourself for the glory of God and the good of others. It is not simply a matter of doing things, but of doing them with meaning and direction." In an age of constant app alerts and instant technology, we can forget the sound of God's timeless voice. When we get too busy, we can gradually lose our desire to dream, to hope, and to invite others to be with us. Yet, our very vocation is a living reminder to each generation to work for justice, build community, and listen to God's dream for us, for our community, for the church, and the world.

In our North American culture, which stresses achievement and growth, vocation ministers must counter the narrative that equates numbers of applicants with success or failure. Yet numbers can ground us to face fierce realities about changing demographics for all vocations, institutions, and organizations. The NRVC-CARA *Study on Recent Vocations to Religious Life* asserts that religious life is a vivid story of emergence and transformation. The grace of perseverance is not a cliché. The study shows that our newest members often see the oldest members as role models. It further reveals that the diversity of women and men religious is one of the hallmarks of consecrated life. With varying spiritualities, missions, and charisms, the incentive to promote vocations is a belief that the charism of a religious institute is relevant in the 21st century and that new members want to enter religious life even as it continues to evolve.

Although the NRVC challenges the notion that the number of new members is the way a community should evaluate vocation ministry, the aggregate numbers for the United States are telling a positive story that we don't want to miss. Since the start of the global pandemic in 2020, over 1,500 (1,554) women and men have entered religious life. The number of entrants increased from 279 in 2023 to 362 in 2024 (a 30 percent increase!). Newer entrants began initial formation in 123 religious institutes in 2024.

In addition to the many people who have entered religious life, we can also take heart in those who have stayed with it all the way through final vows. The "Profession Class of 2024 Report" by the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (the most recent available) indicates that in 2024, 194 women and men made perpetual profession, 50 more than the previous year! Since the pandemic shutdown and shelter in place in 2020, we can collectively celebrate that 860 women and men professed final vows.

Of course, we can focus on how many religious institutes did not have someone enter, but vocation ministry reminds us to collaborate, not compete, for entrants. Most seasoned or former vocation directors can recall discerners who decided to enter a different community for a variety of reasons. Most will also recall discerners who moved forward to choose the beautiful vocation of being single or married. Accompanying discerners to make informed decisions is always a success and never a failure on the part of the vocation director and community.

Accompanying discerners to make informed decisions is always a success and never a failure on the part of the vocation director or community.

Animating the community beyond statistics

Although I've just presented important numerical facts, this constant counting of entrants and vowed members can easily reduce us to data points with anticipated expiration dates that miss the narrative of a lifetime commitment to vowed communal life. Religious life has been changing since it started, and transformation is never complete. We have built and closed missions; we have started ministries and let them go, and, yes, many of us have attended more funerals than professions. In workshops and publications over the past 50 years, religious are told repeatedly that religious life is diminishing, and now the narrative is that religious life is coming to completion. At the same time, these words are not used for the vocations to marriage and the priesthood, both of which are also experiencing declines. Sometimes we can get stuck using phrases that paralyze our minds and limit our invitations instead of cultivating what is possible.

Let me compare two common phrases: The "diminishment of religious life" and the "shortage of priests." With all due respect to our ordained priests, I have not heard the phrase, "the diminishment of the priesthood." I hear about the "severe shortage of priests," which implies

a collective urgent request to involve everyone. In reality, the number of priests has not increased, but no one is talking about the completion of the priesthood.

Who would ever consider telling an engaged couple to reconsider marrying because Catholic marriages are coming to completion? Catholic marriages have declined 63 percent in the past 30 years. Pope Francis wrote in *Christus Vivit*, (44) that "[Mary's yes] was the "yes" of someone prepared to be committed, someone willing to take a risk, ready to stake everything she had, with no security than the certainty of knowing that she was a bearer of a promise." Today's applicants to religious life, like Mary, are willing to take a risk, ready to stake everything they have on a future that will be as uncertain as their friends who are walking down the aisle in a Catholic church to be married. When we see a broader picture of how words and phrases affect our mindset, isn't a narrative of emergence and transformation more fitting for religious life?

Member involvement—and fears that hold them back

Vocation directors are steeped in skills of accompaniment, assessment, and application. Yet, one of the most difficult responsibilities is to animate members of the community to assist in vocation ministry. What members do matters! Members should never underestimate the power of their prayer with inquirers, the impact of their invitations, and the value of their encouragement. When a member invites a person to consider a vocation to religious life, that person is twice as likely to consider it as compared to someone who never receives such an invitation. And when three different people invite someone to consider religious life, a person is five times more likely to consider it.

Fears related to inviting and accepting new members seem to fall into the following categories.

COMMUNITY AGE AND SIZE

In recent years, some religious have been sounding the alarm about whether it is ethical to accept new entrants based on the median age of the community, the size of the religious institute, and the ability to welcome new members. The 2024 CARA report on new entrants shows that 16 percent of major superiors say that their religious institute no longer accepts new entrants (115 out of 723).

Some say the young will not have anyone to relate to, and yet of those who entered religious life between 2003-2018, only 16 percent stated that the age of members influenced them "very much" (other factors like charism and community life were much more influential). Likewise, the majority of newer entrants are not influenced by the size of the religious institute. Only 11 percent said the size of the institute "very much" influenced their decision. (These last two points about age and size come from the 2020 NRVC-CARA S*tudy on Recent Vocations to Religious Life.)*

The CARA *Profession Class of 2024* report backs up this data about the size of a community not being a major factor. It indicates that among the institutes with perpetual professions in 2024, three in 10 (31 percent) have fewer than 50 professed members, four in 10 (42 percent) have 51-150 professed members, and just three in 10 (27 percent) have more than 151 professed members.

QUALITY OF COMMUNAL LIFE

The more disconcerting reason to not accept new entrants is inadequate community life to welcome new entrants. Vowed communal life is the distinguishing factor of our vocation. If there are not enough households with quality community life for new entrants, perhaps the priority needs to be improving community life for those living it now, rather than using that issue as the reason to no longer accept new members.

A reality check is helpful, too. Think back to your own experiences of initial formation. Was it paradise, a genuine utopia of welcome from everyone? Ask anyone who entered religious life, and you are bound to hear real and exaggerated tales of formation. While most of us either thrived or survived initial formation, we are charitable enough to forgive the people who hurt us with their unconscious biases, inappropriate behavior, or poor hospitality. All of us can also remember members who genuinely cared, faithfully nurtured, and authentically formed us despite any oddities we endured. Our communal life flaws do not have to become our reason for not accepting new members, especially given the collaborative formation programs across congregations.

NEW MEMBERS ENTER ALONE

Entering alone or with a few others has been common for the past 50 years. It is not a new concern. Talk to current golden jubilarians, and you may well hear stories of coming alone or being among the few who stayed. Discerners are more likely to experience jubilees than professions as an entry point for meeting members of religious institutes. They can see us as we are—smaller and older—yet can still decide to come if our door is open. The majority

of new entrants are already networking across congregations at vocation discernment events before they enter. Many attend intercommunity formation programs, and they network across congregations in ministries after profession.

DOWNSIZING PROPERTIES

Some communities feel it's wrong to accept new members while they focus on downsizing properties. However, newer members are less stressed than their older counterparts about right-sizing buildings because most had to dispose of significant belongings like cars, homes, and financial investments before entering. Older members had to purchase items to fill their trunks at entrance, accumulated belongings over the years, and witnessed the growth of community buildings.

We *do* need to resize our properties and simplify our belongings, yet we can become so preoccupied with planning for an emerging future that we can forget to be attentive to young people who are searching for a meaningful way of life. Our charism may be what they seek.

Let's take risks for the ministry

Vocation ministry is a *ministry*; it is not a sales job with a quota. No one can be forced or pressured to complete an application for entrance to religious life. Canon 219 in the *Code of Canon Law* states, "All the Christian faithful have the right to be free from any kind of coercion in choosing a state of life." Vocation directors understand through canon law and the *NRVC Code of Ethics*, that theirs is a ministry of invitation, not manipulation.

What if the easiest answer is to no longer accept new entrants? What if you have the audacity to accept new entrants? We all know valiant community members who stay active in ministries beyond the typical retirement age because they have a passion for it, the physical ability to engage in it, and a capacity to serve. As with any serious discernment about continuing a ministry, a community considering letting go of vocation ministry and ceasing to accept new members will want to ask itself important questions. Here are four significant questions for a community in these circumstances.

1. Do you believe God is still calling women and men to holiness? If not, stop accepting new members.
2. Does your congregation believe in religious life for the future and the relevance of your charism? If not, stop accepting new members.
3. Is there at least one member willing to be a vocation minister on a part-time basis? If not, can the congregation either partner with a community that has a similar charism or hire a vocation director? If not, stop accepting new members.
4. If there is at least one member willing to be a vocation minister, or if the community can hire one or partner with another community, *why not* be open to new entrants?

When communities make the decision to end vocation ministry for their religious institute, one less person is available to be present with young people. One less person with ministry skills is able to assist those discerning God's call. As mentioned earlier in this article, counting members and ages to determine whether to ac-

cept new members is not helpful because newer entrants are less influenced by size or age than by other qualities. They are attracted to the charism, community life, prayer life, Gospel values, form of living the vows, and the vitality of members. Seeing vocation ministry as a *ministry* reminds us it is never about our numbers. A response to the call to religious life is neither hollow nor ridiculous. Religious life is about our continuous response to God's endless call.

Accompany young people into the future

Vocation ministry is focused on accompanying the next generation of Catholics in discerning their response to God's call, regardless of the path they choose. Vocation is a mystery and a gift, for it is God who calls and we who invite. This involves risking hope because our invitations can be ignored, dismissed, and minimized in a culture that finds it difficult to pause and ponder. Perhaps vocation ministers see with a different lens because they are immersed in relationships with young people who are searching for significance, representation, and purpose. Vocation ministry invites every member to be intentional about making invitations, to participate in the events and activities of vocation ministry without expecting to acquire a list of contact information from inquirers.

In the United States, the average age a person first considers a vocation to religious life is 18. The average age of entrance—and of marriage—is 28. This means today's discerner was born in 2007 and only knows who we are today, not who we were in 1980 or 2000. The majority of discerners take at least one year to discern; 35 percent take more than two years. During this time, who is praying for them, inviting them, encouraging them? Most come without being steeped in Catholicism or religious life, so they ask questions out of curiosity. We know that the information they seek can be easily accessed on their many devices. Toddlers are using tablets before they can say complete sentences, and they learn to swipe before they can read. For young people, conversation by phone or in person may cause anxiety, so patience is necessary. The upside is that young adults are searching to belong and be connected beyond a screen, but some struggle with the lost art of small talk and introductions.

God is still calling women and men to holiness, so how are we encouraging them before and after they enter? Over the years, without steady entrances into our communities, we can become discouraged and weary, yet none of us answered a call to complacency. Vocation ministry is less about creating programs and events than about building relationships. Vocation directors cannot be lone rangers, rather they need the community.

The NRVC's research indicates that newer members rank "meeting with members" of the institute as the most helpful action in their discernment process.

The NRVC's research indicates that newer members rank "meeting with members" of the institute as the most helpful action in their discernment process—more than talking with their pastors or using websites or social media. Likewise, the "example of members" is more influential than the ministries of the religious institutes. Certainly, advertising, social media, discernment events, and talks with parish personnel help discerners connect initially with community members, but once connections are made, positive interactions with members are essential. During initial discernment, newer entrants received the most encouragement from members of their institute, their vocation director or team, and their spiritual director.

At the 2024 NRVC convocation, members and guests gathered from various religious institutes to share the deep rewards and inevitable difficulties in vocation ministry. Among the many conversations, one caught my attention: a vocation director congratulated someone in a different community on their recent profession, asking to see their profession ring. I smiled at their shared delight. We really do celebrate each other's new members. Here was vocation ministry at its finest.

Take a closer look at *your* profession ring. This poignant symbol reminds us of our public profession of vows. Similar to a wedding ring, a profession ring is circular, symbolizing connection, community, and unity. It has no beginning or ending but encompasses both what is ending and what is emerging. While we may retire from ministry, this unending circle suggests that our vows are meant to be lived until our last breath.

Thus, regardless of age or year in profession, we are meant to be a living advertisement for religious life, not with a fake joy but with vitality in how we live the charism, engage in community, pray, and minister. Vocation ministers remind the world that God's call is endless. The impact of our ministry goes beyond our religious institutes and provinces to the entire church and the life of the world. ■

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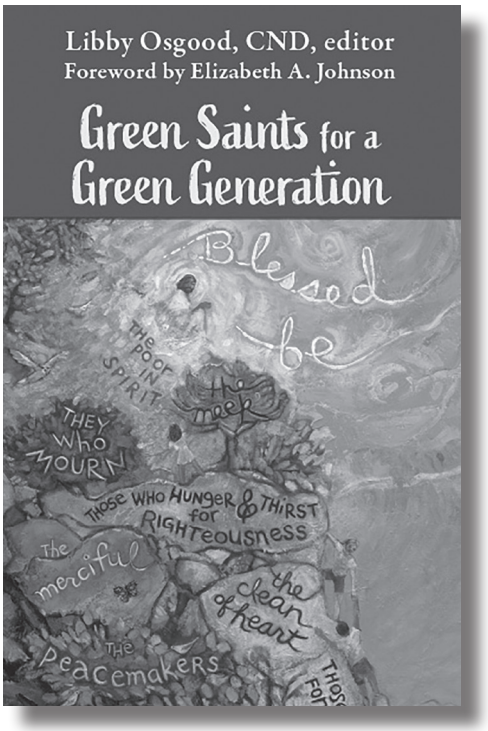
Catholic eco-awareness deserves attention



By Philip Nahlik

WHILE I WAS A JESUIT in formation, I had the privilege of taking part in several Zoom meetings with hundreds of religious sisters focused on ecology. In my time with these communities, and in my research in ecology education, I was surprised to learn that many seemingly novel ideas about caring for the planet have roots in religious and scientific concerns from the 1970s. Whether through prayer, questioning, preaching, or ministry, the sisters I met on Zoom carry forward the spark of ecological action that has resurfaced in recent years. As I look to the future, it's clear that we will need new stewards to preserve and foster this interest in ecology within the church. It's also clear through my peers and work in education that Catholics in their 20s and 30s are already concerned about environmental issues. In light of these realities, the book *Green Saints for a Green Generation* (Orbis 2024) provides an opportunity to hear a variety of young Catholics reflect on environmental responsibility from a faith perspective.

The book's editor, Sister Libby Osgood, C.N.D., gathers essays from 11 other women, including a graduate student friend of mine and several religious sisters, whose ecological outlook is informed by faith and scholarship. Sister Elizabeth Johnson, C.S.J., provides a foreword to the collection, outlining the theological underpinnings of the ideas of sainthood and ecology while also showing the intellectual continuity with this newer

Philip Nahlik is a science education researcher and practitioner who spent eight years in formation as a Jesuit.

generation of scholars. The essays range from the meaning of the bouquet that Our Lady of Guadalupe provided to Juan Diego to Thomas Merton's connection to Indigenous eco-theology.

Each essay focuses on one or more green saints, canonized or not, who reveal an aspect of Catholicism's connection to caring for our common home. Amid the variety of subjects, several key threads weave through the essays. Each includes personal anecdotes from the authors in a refreshing shift from many academic texts. The authors write not only from their studies but their lived experience and spirituality. In one chapter, Sister Réjane Cytacki, S.C.L. shares her personal encounters with Sister Paula Gonzalez, S.C., who worked mainly in Cincinnati to inspire others in ecological action. In another chapter, Flora X. Tang writes about her experience of daily practices in an immigrant family that is practical, spiritual, and incidentally ecological. This communal approach highlights experiential wisdom alongside expertise in science and theology, which also appear in the essays. Readers are invited to reflect on their encounters with nature and how faith might call them to deeper engagement.

Another unifying theme is resilient hope amid a stark consideration of reality. A frequent concern in current ecology education is how to address high rates of ecological despair among young people. As Osgood notes in her introduction, all the writers express their concern for the planet through the lens of their generation, whether they are Millennials or Gen Z. They speak to past and future generations of Catholics, including the younger members of Gen Alpha who share an even more heightened concern for environmental issues.

But more than expressing the specific tenor of these generational concerns, the essays reveal the deep well of tradition within the Catholic Church to help young people encounter these deserts of despair with clear sight and actionable steps. For example, Sister Jessi Beck, P.B.V.M. shares several tools from Saint Ignatius of Loyola that provide practical and spiritual guidance, with reminders to "stay the course, resist paralysis, know you're not alone, and patiently look for hope." In her chapter, Osgood shares the story of Saint Marguerite Bourgeoys, founder of the Congregation of Notre-Dame of Montreal, the first uncloistered congregation in North America, one that included two Indigenous women from the Huron and Onondaga nations. Especially in a country like Canada that has grappled with a brutal history with Indigenous communities, Osgood presents a model of a green saint as a beacon of reconciliation and ecological stewardship.

In one of my favorite chapters, LaRyssa D. Herrington explores the ecological themes in the writing of Toni Morrison. I only recently learned of Morrison's Catholic faith, which is not often recognized as an influence in her life. In fact, as Herrington shares, Morrison's pen name of Toni comes from her baptismal name of Anthony, which she chose at age 12. Herrington traces how Morrison uses color in her work to express ecological and theological concepts, such as "a brown ecology of fertility, a green ecology of healing, an orange ecology of death and renewal, and a blue(s) ecology of resistance." The chapter reveals the theology present in Morrison's work, seeing it as an inspiration for our own Catholic lens on suffering and the natural world.

Finally, the book's essays share four main threads of ecological wisdom that can be woven into our Catholic faith.

- *Humans as part of nature* As suggested in Aquinas' vision of the holiness of all creation, we exist as part of nature rather than separated from it.
- *Intrinsic value of creation* Every aspect of creation possesses worth beyond its economic or instrumental value.
- *Environmental justice and solidarity* The people who suffer most from environmental damage are often the poor and marginalized. Care for creation must include the Catholic social teaching of solidarity with the most vulnerable.
- *Personal action and structural change* Daily choices can contribute to our spirituality of ecology even while larger structural changes are essential to have a noticeable impact on global issues.

Green Saints for a Green Generation could be an excellent resource in discussion groups for discerners. Many essays could spark conversation about how our Catholic faith can connect with ecological principles. Readers could also compare and contrast the ecological concerns and hopes across generations. Finally, religious community members might find inspiration in these young Catholic essayists, who blend academic, theological, and ecological wisdom into a seamless garment of care for creation. ■

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