

This Benedictine community of women has benefited from its openness to candidates over age 40. Learn how and why it has worked.



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How my community has welcomed midlife vocations

MOTHER OF GOD MONASTERY is a community of 52 Benedictine women ranging in age from 40-94. We have one sister in her 40s who made final vows three years ago. We have several sisters in their 50s, a number in their 60s; most of us (including myself) are in their 70s and 80s, and we have a few sisters in their 90s. This sounds familiar. Most communities I know have a profile that looks a lot like this.

Where we differ from many communities is our willingness to welcome into community women in their 40s and 50s who believe God is calling them to religious life. In my 10 years as vocation director, after a rigorous application process, our admissions committee has invited 13 mature-age women (that is, women over age 40) to enter our community. Discerning with them, supporting their entry into community, and walking with them as sisters has been a blessing for them and for us. I'll explore later what has happened with each of them, but first I want to emphasize that women have spotted "a treasure hidden in our field and

are willing to sell all to buy this field.” In addition these women in their 40s and 50s may provide a “bridge generation” that could possibly help make us a viable option for women in their 20s and 30s.

Why are mature-age women attracted to religious life? Certainly they seek a deeper relationship with God. They long to experience community life with other women who seek God. The desire for a deepened living faith compels them. Many had thought about religious life in their earlier years, and even felt a call; but life’s circumstances led elsewhere. They are still listening to a patient God, who is drawing them toward religious life. Perhaps God was even preparing them for religious life by leading them through their previous life experiences. They speak, sometimes, of “God writing straight with crooked lines.” Often they enter because they long for meaningful ministry and a simpler, more focused lifestyle. A Benedictine lifestyle, which stresses a balanced life of prayer, work, study, and sacred leisure, within community, seems especially attractive to this age group.

Structures and formation practices that aid midlife vocations

How does a vocation or formation team tend the growth and development of these seeds, so that they become mature plants ripe for harvest?

What is our community’s experience in working with mature-age women? It is a *joy* to work with women whose spiritual life is well-advanced and grounded in a God who is Love. The journey into Benedictine life is a journey into a liturgically-based, Scripture-saturated spirituality. The Rule of St. Benedict is Benedict’s synthesis of how to live a Bible-based life of prayer, study, service, and community.

Mature-age women are ready for formation in Benedictine spirituality. Their psychological, social, and professional identities are well-established. The task of formation, therefore, is to plunge deeply into Benedictine spirituality and community and thereby discern whether Benedictine life, and in particular the soil of our community, can bring out the best of who God created them to be. At any age of entry, this is the discernment question; but it is differently nuanced for those whose psychological, social, and professional identity has been previously formed over 40 or 50 years of life.

What do they do with their assets? How do they leave their professions? If God is calling women to community, they feel a call to uproot. Most sell their homes and bank their assets. If they are renters, we require that

they have sufficient savings so that they are as free to leave the community as they are to enter.

Discernment of their call requires freedom; therefore if they have nothing saved, and are living paycheck to paycheck, or have debts (other than possibly educational debt) they are not eligible to discern with us. Those who have taken early retirement deposit into their own accounts any monthly payments or pensions they receive during initial formation. This additional money will assist them to restart their lives should they leave community before the time of final vows. They are not free to spend these accounts down without explicit permission of our prioress. After final vows any monthly payments, Social Security, etc. come to the community.

How have mature-age women coming into community changed the formation process? We have become more conscious of treating women in formation, not as the adolescents of the community, but as the mature adults they are! Younger women also need to be treated as adults; so the mature-age women’s presence in community helps us nurture the growth of younger women also. I think our vocation/formation team and the entire community have grown in a number of ways through the lived experience of welcoming and forming mature-age Benedictine women:

We have always had a handbook that gives direction to our daily lives. A household of 30-35 women needs more structure than a small group. The handbook spells out many procedures, such as:

- requesting a car and returning it filled, with the gas receipt;
- knowing who coordinates decisions about moving furniture, plants, and house decorations from one place to another;
- knowing procedures for recycling;
- understanding how to make requests for maintenance and repairs.

This level of organization, can seem especially tedious to women who have lived independently for many years. The handbook needs to be presented, not as rules for rules’ sake; but as guidelines based on principles of human behavior conducive to living a healthy monastic life, principles such as:

- Preserving an atmosphere of reflective peace, one that is respectful of each individual search for God;

- Accepting responsibility for one's role in the quality of our community's life and mission;
- Empowering each one to become meaningfully engaged with life, and also wholesomely disengaged for times of creative restoration of body, mind, heart, and spirit;
- Realizing that each sister, including oneself, is an incomplete reflection of God's image; we are all both shadow and Spirit; gift and task. We expect to be in a dynamic of forgiving and being forgiven;
- Viewing one another through the lens of love, seeing first the blessing each is to the other; then dealing compassionately with each one's weaknesses of body and character;
- Remembering that 50 or more adult women who seek God together in community do so only through the grace of God whose loving presence is the foundation of our life together.

As the years have passed, the new life mature-age women have brought to our community speaks for itself.

Since we accept mature-age candidates, we are more careful to assess each new member's prior learning, and we adapt the formation curriculum to each one's educational needs in the areas of scripture, Christology, church, documents of Vatican II, and the social encyclicals.

Mature-age women have a deep desire to use their well-developed life skills in service. It is good for them to take on leadership roles that match and stretch their skills and passions. For example, because she had years of experience in directing parish liturgies, and is also a gifted musician, our Sister Terri became assistant liturgy director and choir director as a postulant. She was appointed full-time liturgy director when she made first profession. This was good for her and very good for the community.

What was required of the community for this to happen? A willingness of the well-established former liturgy director to move over and make space for a newcomer, and the community's willingness to accept direction from a new member!

Another of our mature-age new members, Sister Nancy, is an excellent nurse, as well as an experienced hospice administrator. As a novice she became our community nurse. The tenderness and skills of her ministry to the sick and to our dying sisters has been a blessing

that has enriched our community beyond anything words can express. Less than a year after her first profession she was appointed administrator of our independent-senior apartments and assisted-living facility. She took on this ministry at a low-point in its history, and has brought it back to full strength. Her gifts to this community are immeasurable.

Sister Denise is another mature-age entrant, currently in temporary profession. She has brought a Benedictine teaching presence back to a school which, until three years ago, had always had a Benedictine teacher on the faculty. Sister Denise, as a teacher and former school principal, gave our community an opportunity to re-build a relationship of mission and ministry that we have had from the day of this school's founding.

Two of our mature-age entrants, Sister Terri and Sister Nancy, have also recently completed a two-year course in spiritual direction; therefore, we have added their skills to the ministry capabilities of our Spirituality Center.

Preparing the soil for older vocations

Clearly our members who came to us in midlife have had the opportunity to blossom at a personal level and have contributed much to our community. At the same time our community had to make an effort to nurture these new relationships. How has our total community worked to increase the nutrients in our soil?

Before we accepted women who are mothers and grandmothers into community we had a conversation with the sisters in our home community (about 35 of us). We talked about the feelings we would have when we realized these new women have had the blessing of motherhood and grandmother-hood. Would we resent that? Would resentment come out sideways? Would we be jealous because they "have their cake, and have eaten it too?"

The general feeling of the community was that we are grateful that we were called to religious life at a much younger age and have had many years of rich community life. We also agreed that we could acknowledge the pain of never having given physical birth without carrying resentment toward women entering the community as mothers. We expressed a desire to receive mature-age members warmly, enjoy their children and grandchildren when they come to visit, and experience the blessing of their new call to our community. Talking



Novice Barb sprinkles sand from her hometown into a planter as part of a ritual for welcoming new members. Her daughters and grandchild also attended the event.

this issue through gave us all a broader perspective on the issue, and brought us to a place of pretty strong harmony. That does not mean everyone in the community wholeheartedly embraced the idea of mature-age women joining us; but it did provide an opportunity for the consensus of the group to emerge. As the years have passed, the new life mature-age women have brought to our community speaks for itself. Even those who were here only for a year or two, then chose to leave, yes, even these women brought us life, hope, and energy.

Our newest mature-age entrant, postulant Barbara, drove her car from Florida to South Dakota. One day later her two daughters and little granddaughter flew in from Florida and Louisiana to help their Mom/Grandma unpack the car and move into her new home. They brought with them some fresh soil from their backyards, and Barbara brought some sand from the Florida Panhandle. We had a ritual of mixing the soil of their lives with ours and planting new seeds of vocation in this mixed soil.

One other much-younger postulant, who arrived the same day, also had 12 members of her family here for dinner and this ritual. They also brought soil from their North Dakota family home, and from the backyards of her two siblings and their families living in South Dakota. During this ritual, each sister of the monastery, a lay employee, two new postulants, and 15 of their family members, all added their own soil to the new mix. Then

we planted new seeds, symbols of their new vocations, in this mixed soil. And, of course, eight little kids delighted us as they each squirted water on the planter full of new seeds—the water a symbol, of course, of the waters of Baptism, the source of our spiritual growth. This ritual had power beyond words to help both the new postulants and their families understand that all of us, community and family alike, have a part to play in nurturing Barbara and Alicia's new vocations. In addition now their families feel at home here too. That matters! It matters for all new members, whatever their age, but, I believe, it is crucial that we make special efforts to help children and grandchildren of new members understand that they are always welcome in their Mom or Grandma's new home. Little children's interpretations are precious. Sister Nancy's little grandchildren were awed when they saw that their Grandma had a church inside her new house—and they thought their Grandma Nancy was very generous to let all of us live in her house with her!

Our community soil, of course, has some thorny patches. A conversation we should have had before admitting mature-age women has to do with our retirement fund. There is some feeling, expressed by a few sisters now and then, that newer, mature-age members will be drawing from our retirement fund without having contributed a lifetime of service to the community. We should have talked this through, because remarks have been made that indicate some sense of dis-ease

with that reality. We may still need to deal with this in a community conversation to dispel the uneasiness these attitudes create among both new and seasoned members of the community. It is a more difficult issue to discuss openly because of confidentiality issues around financial details regarding individual candidates. I believe it is an area where our vocation/formation team needs to be more pro-active in periodically restating the guidelines we use in determining what happens to pensions, retirement funds, and Social Security. Furthermore all the sisters need to understand that the guidelines we follow are based on canon law and the guidelines established by the Resource Center for Religious Institutes.

The right seeds for our soil

Our experience with 13 women whom we have invited to community is admittedly a small sample from which to draw great generalizations; therefore I write strictly from this experience, not from any analysis of the experience of others. That being said, in *our* experience, mature-age women seem to adjust to community life more easily if they have been married and have children. Women who have raised children alone; worked full-time to make

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ends meet; and have juggled jobs, children, and household management, have developed patterns of behavior rooted in sacrificing themselves for others.

Women who have matured in their relationship with God recognize God's role in bringing them through the painful experiences of divorce, job losses, problems their children have faced,

and the many and varied crises they have lived through. These women have become strong women of faith. They are used to accommodating their schedules to meet others' needs. They know how to change plans on the spur of the moment. They can adjust—it's a well-developed habit. They have lived in community the greater part of their lives. They have learned to work through difficult moments with a God who pours out inspiration, support, and steadfast love along life's journey.

In the 10 years since I have been vocation director we accepted into community seven formerly married

women with children and grandchildren. Two have left (one as a postulant, one as a novice). Five are community members (one has made final vows, one is preparing for final vows, one is in temporary profession, one is a novice, and one is a postulant). We have assisted them to stay in community by making accommodation to ensure that they have time to be with their children and grandchildren. We know that when God calls them to religious life, God is not asking them to abandon their commitment as loving mothers and grandmothers. God is calling them to juggle two life-commitment calls. Those who have stayed with us are good jugglers! They've had years of practice.

By contrast, the mature-age women who have the hardest time adjusting are the women who have always been single and who have lived alone for the greatest part of their adult lives. During the same nine years we accepted into community six mature-age single women. None are currently community members. One decided at the last minute not to enter. One stayed two months and decided she could not become a postulant. One left during her postulancy. Two left during their novitiates. We asked one to leave because she could not sustain sufficient health to contribute full-time to the mission of our monastery.

We are still open, though, to giving all mature-age single women an opportunity to test their call. After all, the postulancy and the novitiate are times for discernment; and even though they may not enter or stay, they have learned and grown through their times of discernment with us, and, the community has also grown.

Good health, good screening are crucial

Health issues: Those who enter in their 40s and 50s need to be in very good health when they enter. This is true of younger women also, but it is especially true of those of mature-age; because we want to reasonably expect that, barring totally unforeseen circumstances, they will be able to contribute actively to the mission of our Monastery at least until age 75. The biggest issue is obesity. We have required some to lose weight before they entered; and we have been pretty strong about this because those in their 40s and 50s who are obese really increase their risk of a shorter life span. In addition they are at greater risk for joint replacements, heart disease, and a host of other physical issues related to obesity.

Some seeds will not grow in our soil, nor will they enrich the soil by their presence. There are literally hundreds who are trying to call themselves to community.

They are lonely, living with mental and physical disabilities, and are unable, and occasionally unwilling, to hold down a full-time job. They are religious and desire a relationship with God; they desire a life of companionship and security; but they are incapable of fully entering into an interdependent relationship.

What do we do about this? We must screen carefully. We do behavioral assessment, psychological assessment, a thorough health assessment, and written references with all applicants. We are looking for women who are healthy, God-seeking, and motivated by a sense of God's call. With mature-age women we are especially careful about four areas:

- 1) What is their relationship with their children? Are their children healthy and able to live independent lives? Do they desire to stay in relationship with their children and grandchildren?
- 2) What is the status of their parents? Are they apt to be called away to care for aged and disabled parents within a few years of their entry?
- 3) Have they matured spiritually and psychologically, as well as chronologically?
- 4) Have they had a history that indicates ability to negotiate life's challenges successfully?

We let anyone on disability know clearly that our rule is that they must be off disability and working full-time a minimum of two years before we will discern with them. We explain that the demands of religious life are 24/7, and, the reality is, our life in community can be more demanding than a full-time job. (Lots of them imagine themselves praying before the Blessed Sacrament many hours a day, but they have very little concept of the cooperative energy it takes to build a vibrant community of women, whether at the monastery or out on mission. Some women are even shocked to learn that religious communities are financially self-supporting.)

I explain that, because of diminishing numbers in religious life, they have to be capable of taking on some type of leadership role in the future.

I give inquirers who are not realistic candidates clear, honest reasons why I believe they are not called to religious life. My purpose is to discourage them from continuing to shop for another community with more

lenient entrance requirements and to suggest to them that God is probably not calling them to religious life. I am also pretty clear that they need a regular spiritual director to assist them in sorting out the difference between a call that comes from God, and a call that originates from a need inside themselves.

When they have psychological issues and wounds, I suggest they see a counselor and deal with these issues, so that they are able to hear and respond to God's call with wholeness and clarity.

We never let a woman open an application process until she has spent a week or more at the monastery. This one week minimum includes a structured

five-day discernment retreat to give a woman maximum opportunity to pray, eat, recreate, and communicate in small groups with the community. Our discernment retreats also have five two-hour reflection sessions with the four-person vocation/formation team. We can assess their spiritual strengths and weaknesses. The retreat includes three one-on-one spiritual direction sessions, with one of the three spiritual directors on the vocation team.

Our vocation/formation team meets weekly. As vocation director, therefore, I have a team that assists me constantly in assessing and advising. I spend a lot of time on the telephone because the spontaneity of these conversations gives me the best assessment of the woman who is discerning.

I pray daily for the gifts of the Holy Spirit, and I rely greatly on the Spirit of Jesus to never leave me alone. I try to be aware that I am deeply loved, and so is every woman with whom I work. I do my best; then I try to turn my mistakes into lessons and work hard not to take personally the wounds and frustrations that sometimes get vented in my direction. I want to leave every woman with a word of hope and a useful next step. Most often the discerning woman expresses gratitude, even when I have given her a word she did not want to hear.

I encourage other communities to be open to what God is doing among mature-age women because God is calling them to religious life. Mature-age women are a treasure. I reflect sometimes on what our community would be like without our women of mature age, who all entered in their 50s. We would be here. We would be alive and joyful; we would be gathering daily to pray for the church and for the world; we would be faithful to God's love for us. But we would be so much poorer—and we would not even know what we were missing! ■

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