

# HORIZON



JOURNAL OF THE NATIONAL RELIGIOUS VOCATION CONFERENCE

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## VOCATION MINISTERS & RECONCILIATION

### CONVOCATION 2012

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# HORIZON



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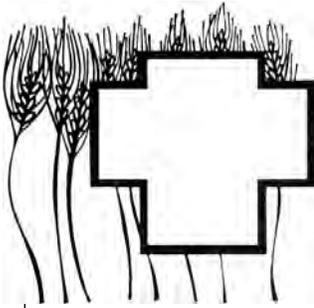


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# HORIZON

*HORIZON* began as a vocation journal in 1975. Today, as a quarterly publication, it serves a readership of more than 2000 in the U.S. and other English-speaking countries.

## *HORIZON* serves as a resource:

- To assist vocation directors in their professional and personal growth as ministers;
- To educate and engage educators, directors of retreat centers, formation personnel, community leadership, bishops, campus ministers, librarians, priests, religious, laity and anyone interested in vocations and their role in vocation ministry.

## *HORIZON* has a threefold purpose:

- To provide timely and contemporary articles relative to vocation ministry;
- To provide an opportunity for the exchange of ideas on pertinent issues in the field of vocations;
- To highlight some of the current resources available.

## National Religious Vocation Conference

*HORIZON* is published by the National Religious Vocation Conference (NRVC). The NRVC is an organization of men and women committed to the fostering and discernment of vocations. It provides services for professional vocation directors and others who are interested and involved in vocation ministry. It proclaims the viability of religious life and serves as a prophetic, creative, life-giving force in today's church.

To accomplish this, NRVC provides opportunities for professional growth and personal support of vocation ministers; facilitates regional, area and national meetings for its members; sponsors workshops, seminars, conferences and days of prayer; publishes materials related to vocations for a wide variety of audiences; engages in research, study and exchange on issues of current concern; publishes a quarterly professional journal, *HORIZON*; maintains a Web site; and cooperates with other national groups essential to the fostering of vocations. For further information, contact: NRVC, 5401 S. Cornell Ave., Suite 207, Chicago, IL 60615-5698. E-mail: [nrvc@nrvc.net](mailto:nrvc@nrvc.net). Web: [www.nrvc.net](http://www.nrvc.net).

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# EDITOR'S NOTE

## Answering the call to reconciliation

“GEEZ, YOU'RE SO LOUD, you woke me up!” “That is really stupid.” “You left behind a big mess for me to clean up.” “Aren't you going to help me here?”

Hang around my house long enough, and you'll be sure to hear complaints like this. We offend, we forgive. We offend, we forgive. (In the best of times, we also extend an honest apology.) In fact I think 70 times seven—a mere 490—is much too small a number to put on how often I need to forgive and be forgiven.

I'm guessing that this reality isn't very different for people in religious communities. Living together and working together inevitably produce friction and thus the need to forgive and be reconciled.

This need for reconciliation extends far beyond interpersonal squabbles right into every level of the church, where one can find polarization, name-calling, conflicting visions and outright injustice. While a big family like

the church will inevitably have disputes, some quite grave, just as inevitably its members must work toward reconciliation to be true to our faith.

Thus it is fitting that the theme of the November 2012 convocation of National Religious Vocation Conference was “Vocation Ministers as Ambassadors for Christ: a Reconciling Presence.” If vocation ministers are to invite others into the heart of the church, to be the public face of the church, then they cannot avoid the need for reconciliation in the church and in their very own communities.

The 300-some participants at the November NRVC convocation in Plano, Texas had four days to learn about, discuss, reflect on and pray about themes of reconciliation. In order to share some of that richness we bring you in this edition the two keynote addresses from the convocation. We also present the major findings (and a commentary on them) of a vocation study recently completed by the U.S. bishops—data which was presented at the convocation.

May these pages move you to whatever steps toward reconciliation you need in your own life, in your community's life, in the life of the larger church. Our efforts for reconciliation mean that our invitations to join religious life will ring with a truer sound.

—Carol Schuck Scheiber, editor, [cscheiber@nrvc.net](mailto:cscheiber@nrvc.net)



VOCATION MINISTERS AS AMBASSADORS FOR CHRIST:  
A RECONCILING PRESENCE



# UPDATES

## News from the vocation world



*Vocation ministers at NRVC's Summer Institute 2012. From left to right are Mr. Ed Murphy of the Order Friar Servants of Mary, Mrs. Emily Dawson with the Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration, and Dr. Nan Brenzel vocation minister for the Dominican Sisters of San Rafael.*

### **NRVC offering four summer workshops**

NRVC will be offering four workshops at its Summer Institute in downtown Chicago. Online registration is now available at [nrvc.net](http://nrvc.net) for the following professional development opportunities.

**THE HEART OF MULTICULTURALISM IN VOCATION MINISTRY**  
by Mr. Arturo Chavez, Ph.D., July 5-6

**ORIENTATION PROGRAM FOR NEW VOCATION DIRECTORS**  
by Brother Paul Bednarczyk, CSC & Sister Deborah Borneman, SSCM, July 8-12

**BEHAVIORAL ASSESSMENT I**  
by Father Raymond P. Carey, Ph.D., July 15-17

**CONTEMPORARY ISSUES WITH YOUNGER INQUIRERS AND OLDER CANDIDATES**, by Father Raymond P. Carey, Ph.D., July 18-19

### **Sisters gather to study, address issues related to vocations**

Sisters from dozens of religious communities have come together to learn, reflect and begin to strategize about new membership at the first two of three gatherings of "Women Religious Moving Forward in Hope." Well over 100 sisters have taken part so far in the event, which occurred in Chicago at the end of November and was re-



*Sisters take part in evening prayer at the first of three "Moving Forward in Hope" gatherings for women religious.*

peated in Burlingame, CA in early January. The event will be offered for a third time in Latham, NY, March 5-7.

At each gathering keynoter Sister Mary Johnson, SNDdeN, a sociologist, has presented an overview of generational, cultural and ethnic realities for Catholic women and new members. Participants have taken part in table discussions, prayer, liturgy and reflection. After the final event in March, NRVC will publish a document about the gatherings prepared by “listeners” Sisters Lorraine Reaume, OP and Anne Walsh, ASCJ. This series of gatherings has been made possible thanks to a grant from the GHR Foundation.

## List events on VISION online calendar

VISION Vocation Network offers free online listings for events of interest to those considering religious life. Listings need not be specifically vocation-related. Calendar items should be



activities that religious communities are sponsoring or participating in. They include short- and long-term service opportunities, “Come

and see” events, discernment retreats, online chats, evening talks, community prayer nights and more. Go to [vocationnetwork.org/opportunities](http://vocationnetwork.org/opportunities) to submit an entry.

## Grant to fund men’s “Moving Forward” gatherings and study on multiculturalism

NRVC announced in November, 2012 that it has been awarded a \$178,000 grant by an anonymous foundation to fund the following projects.

### Men Religious Moving Forward in Hope

NRVC will convene two workshops in the fall of 2013 for both major superiors and their vocation directors to study contemporary research pertinent to religious vocations for men and the opportunities and challenges they present for vocation promotion. An application process for these workshops will begin in the spring. The workshops will emphasize what men religious need to do together in order to ensure the vitality and viability of religious priesthood and brotherhood in the future. These workshops will be similar to the “Women Moving Forward in Hope” events.

### Study on the Integration of Multicultural and Multi-ethnic Candidates into U.S. Religious Institutes

According to the 2009 NRVC-CARA study, 94 percent of final-

ly professed religious are white Caucasian, compared to only 59 percent of newer entrants. In collaboration with the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate, NRVC will study all women’s and men’s religious institutes to:

- identify best practices for incorporating and integrating multicultural and multi-ethnic candidates into religious life, and
- learn what future materials and resources are needed to assist institutes with this integration.

## See the latest photos of NRVC activities at Flickr site

More than 150 photos of events sponsored by NRVC—or in which NRVC members took part—are posted for public viewing at [flickr.com/photos/nrvc](http://flickr.com/photos/nrvc). Pictures of the November 2012 NRVC Convocation, the 2012 National Conference on Catholic Youth Ministry, the “Keys to the Future” workshop held in June 2012 and more can be viewed and downloaded.

## International vocation pilgrimage to St. Peter’s Tomb slated for July

An international pilgrimage to the tomb of St. Peter will take place in Rome July 4-7 for novices, seminarians, and “those on a vocational journey.” The pilgrimage is hosted by the Pontifical Council for the Promotion of the New Evangelization as part of the Year of Faith. It will include visits to Christian sites, prayer, celebration, worship, vocational testimonials, and more. The pilgrimage will culminate with Mass led by Pope Benedict XVI in St. Peter’s Square. Registration is required; learn more at [www.annusfidei.va](http://www.annusfidei.va) in the “Events” section. ■



The tomb of St. Peter, located below the altar pictured here, is the destination of an international pilgrimage for those discerning or beginning religious life or priesthood.

Photo by Jonathan Acierio, [acephotog.com](http://acephotog.com)

Reconciliation is at the heart of the Gospel, and it is urgently needed in today's church. Vocation ministers have ample opportunity to promote unity alongside promoting religious life.

# Vocation ministers as ambassadors for Christ: a reconciling presence

BY ARCHBISHOP JOSEPH TOBIN, CSSR

*The following article was the first of two keynote presentations at the biennial convocation of the National Religious Vocation Conference, held in Plano, TX November 1-5, 2012.*

**T**HERE ARE AT LEAST THREE REASONS why I am so pleased to speak with you today. First, I am aware that vocation directors are on the front lines of religious life today, a place where you are required to speak on the virtue and value of our vocation to an often skeptical or disillusioned audience. Years ago, a Redemptorist confrere who was engaged in vocation ministry asked me how one might define an optimist. His answer: "a vocation director with a beeper." I am not here simply in an attempt to encourage you. Rather, I look forward to our conversation over the next days because I am confident

*Archbishop Joseph Tobin, CSSR was installed as archbishop of Indianapolis, IN in December 2012.*

*From 2010 to 2012, he was secretary of the Vatican's Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life. A member of the Redemptorist Fathers, he has also served two terms as general superior of his religious congregation.*



that you have much to say about the present state and future prospects of religious life in the United States today. I am grateful to have the chance to learn from your experience.

Secondly, I am grateful to participate in a convocation that is sponsored by the National Religious Vocation Conference. Over the last two years, a time when I served as part of the dicastery of the Holy See that has the mission of accompanying religious life across the world, I had many opportunities to review the work of the NRVC and to cooperate with its executive director, Brother Paul Bednarczyk, CSC. The research, formation strategies and networking of this group are very impressive; in fact, I cannot think of an organization in the church that is making a similar contribution to vocation ministry among institutes of consecrated life or societies of apostolic life of a single country. When Brother Paul invited me to speak, I quickly accepted, buoyed by gratitude for my own vocation, as well as the certainty of being useful to you in some way. As my paternal grandmother from County Kerry used to observe: everyone is useful for something, even as a bad example.

Finally, I have looked forward to this convocation because its organizers have chosen a crucial and timely theme: "Vocation Ministers as Ambassadors for Christ: A Reconciling Presence." The theme is crucial, since reconciliation lies at the very heart of the Gospel. It is timely because there are circumstances within the church and diffused throughout

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contemporary society that threaten to blunt the full force of reconciliation, the principal effect of Christ's passion, death and resurrection.

## Reconciliation a timely theme

A reflection on reconciliation is particularly appropriate as the church commemorates the 50th anniversary of the beginning of the Second Vatican Council and begins to profit from the reflection of the October, 2012 Synod of Bishops, which focused on the "New Evangelization for the Transmission of the Christian Faith." On the one hand, it is clear that in his opening address to the bishops assembled in St. Peter's on October 11, 1962, Pope John XXIII deliberately set a conciliatory tone and task for the Council. In fact reconciliation is a key to understanding the subsequent doctrine of the Council in such areas as the divine liturgy, as well as the Catholic Church's relationship with other Christian churches, non-Christian religions and the modern world.<sup>1</sup>

On the other hand any attempt at a New Evangelization will soon wither before the frigid force of the polarization existing in the church. Hence, it behooves Catholic Christians to hear afresh the call to be reconciled in order that our witness might be credible. Jesus prayed that "they may all be one, as you, Father, are in me and I in you, that they also may be in us, that the world may believe that you sent me" (John 17:21).

The guiding theme of this convocation invites you to recognize that in your ministry as vocation directors you serve not only as ambassadors for your communities but also for the Catholic

Church and, in a sense, represent the vast spectrum of specific vocations which are commonly grouped under the rubric of "religious life." It is possible that, amid the divisive forces that threaten to undermine a church of communion, vocation directors may serve as bridge builders, even as ambassadors for Christ, who consciously work for healing within the household of God.

How do I hope to use the time that has been allotted to me? First I invite you to consider the gift of reconciliation in the rich theology of the apostle Paul. Then we will examine some conditions in American society that make the appropriation of this gift more difficult but, nonetheless, ever more urgent. We will then think about a few of the consequences of the gift of reconciliation and look at what it means for vocation promoters to act as "ambassadors." Finally I might be able to offer some suggestions that flow from this consideration. The best part, of course, comes afterward, when we will have time for a conversation and the chance to learn from each other.

It is possible that, amid the divisive forces that threaten to undermine a church of communion, vocation directors may serve as bridge builders, even as ambassadors for Christ, who consciously work for healing within the household of God.

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## Be reconciled to God!

The theme of this convocation suggests an obvious point of departure for our reflection: the 20th verse of the fifth chapter of St. Paul's Second Letter to the Corinthians: "So we are ambassadors for Christ, as if God were appealing through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God."

The Second Letter to the Corinthians probably is the most subjective of all the epistles of the Apostle to the Nations. It was written in Macedonia (2 Corinthians 2:12f; 7:5-8; 8:1-4; 9:2ff), most likely in the autumn of the year 57 AD dur-

The free gift of reconciliation with God gives us both the possibility and the motivation for becoming reconciled with one another, even when we have every reason to remain as enemies.

ing the course of Paul's third missionary journey. Paul's emotions remained very close to the surface as he wrote this letter. He is at once affectionate and easily hurt, yet happy when he can affirm his audience.

However he does not hesitate to challenge his readers. In the just-cited passage Paul offers a practical exhortation that reads something like

this: reconciliation can be lost; therefore those who have accepted the Gospel must always permit it to exercise its effect upon them.

What is this "reconciliation" to which Paul is referring? Throughout his writings Paul uses a number of expressions to describe the lasting effects that are produced by Christ's passion, death and resurrection, in which we share through faith and baptism. These effects include the reconciliation of men and women with God, the expiation of their sins, their redemptive liberation and their justification.

The main effect of Christ's passion, death and resurrection is the reconciliation of human beings to God, that is, the restoration of men and women to a state of peace and union with the Father.<sup>2</sup> This effect is called "reconciliation" and is expressed most often by the Greek word *katallage*, which derives from the verb meaning "to make peace" (after a time of war). In a religious sense this word denotes the return of human beings to God's favor and intimacy after a period of estrangement and rebellion through sin and transgression.<sup>3</sup>

The gift of reconciliation underlies much of Paul's "Gospel" (cf. 1 Corinthians 9:16), but it is developed explicitly

in the passage we have just cited from 2 Corinthians, as well as in Romans 5:10-11; Colossians 1:20-21 and Ephesians 2:16. By the favor of Christ Jesus, the sinner has access to the presence of God; he is introduced, once again as it were, into the royal court of God himself (Romans 5:2). Christ has become "our peace" (Ephesians 2:14), for he has broken down the dividing wall between Jews and Greeks and abolished the law's commandments. He has made "one new man" out of Jew and Greek and has reconciled them to God in one body. In just a moment, I will return to the striking metaphor for reconciliation as the destruction of a sort of spiritual "Berlin Wall."

Through his cross, hostility has come to an end, and Christ has brought "peace" (*eierne*) to the human race. In a number of letters Paul will insist, "Since we are justified, we have peace with God" (Romans 5:11; cf. 2 Thessalonians 3:16; Galatians 5:22; Philippians 4:7; 1 Corinthians 7:15). Reconciliation is also a cosmic event (2 Corinthians 5:19), embracing "all things whether on earth or in heaven."

In summary by the free gift of reconciliation, we who were once enemies of God are reconciled to him through his Son's death. Now reconciled, we shall be saved—indeed we boast of God and the close union we have with him through Christ (Romans 5:10-11). The English word "atonement" aptly expresses this Christian condition—"at-one-ment" with God.<sup>4</sup> The free gift of reconciliation with God gives us both the possibility and the motivation for becoming reconciled with one other, even when we have every reason to remain as enemies.

This consequence of reconciliation receives evocative expression in the Letter to the Ephesians, where Paul speaks about the saving plan of God in Jesus Christ (Ephesians 2: 1-22). The second chapter of that letter is filled with sharp contrasts between human weakness and the consequences of God's mighty power. Jews as well as Gentiles were under the power of sin. The Gentiles were in fact dead (2:1) and the Jews cannot boast that they were superior (2:3). But God,

who is rich in mercy, because of the great love he had for us, even when we were dead in our transgressions, brought us to life with Christ (by grace you have been saved), raised us up with him, and seated us with him in the heavens in Christ Jesus, that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus (Ephesians 2: 4-7).

Here three verbs are used to express the saving effects of God's plan: *brought together*, *raised together* and *enthroned together*, and each verb is prefixed by the preposition "with":

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with Christ brought together ... with Christ raised together ... with Christ ... seated in the heavens. Thus the writer brings out forcibly the intimate association of the Christian with Christ.<sup>5</sup>

## Christ is the unifier

Christ himself is the bond of unity, the one who has finally succeeded in bringing Jew and Gentile together. Here Paul inserts the example of the “dividing wall” of the Jerusalem Temple as he reminds his Jewish and Gentile readers alike: “For he [Christ] is our peace, he who made both one and broke down the dividing wall of enmity, through his flesh ...” (Ephesians 2:14).

The famed Romano-Jewish historian of the first century, Titus Flavius Josephus, describes this wall as a stone partition “3 cubits high” (approximately four-and-a-half feet) that separated the outer court of the temple from the inner court. On this partition were signs prohibiting, under pain of death, any foreigner from going any further.<sup>6</sup>

Like the Berlin Wall or similar constructions along the border of the United States with Mexico, the “dividing wall” has both a physical and a psychological meaning. The stone wall was but a token of a whole system of separation that went into every phase of life. Since the Jews were God’s holy, consecrated people, they were to keep themselves from all defiling influences. The Gentiles were defiled with idol-worship, which was associated with immorality (cf. Romans 1:23-24). Therefore the preservation of true worship and a good moral life required separation from subverting influences, and the law was a protecting fence for the Jewish people.<sup>7</sup>

Only the body of Jesus accomplished the miracle of bringing together such disparate groups (Ephesians 2:15). We might well see a reference to the Eucharist here. The law, which is considered to be a dividing force among human beings, has been removed by Christ. He has become the “access” (*prosagoge*) who took two separated children, Jews and Gentiles, united them as brothers and sisters, and brought them into the intimacy of God’s family so that they have become “members of God’s household” (2:19).

So the Letter to the Ephesians illuminates and enriches our understanding of the gift of reconciliation, helping us to see that the gift of peace with God makes possible a profound understanding among disparate groups of human beings. What is more, the vision of Revelation, indeed, the whole story of the Bible, leads us to look forward in hope to a creation restored to wholeness. Every facet of it is to be brought back

to what God has intended for it. And within that glorious fullness and perfect wholeness, there is a place for us. Redemption is cosmic in its scope and will only be complete when all things are brought together in Christ (Ephesians 1:10). Until that time we experience only partial reconciliation, but live in hope. It is within this framework of vertical, horizontal and cosmic reconciliation that we are to see the Christian mission.<sup>8</sup>

## Our current situation

However, as Paul reminds us in Second Corinthians, reconciliation can be lost. We should ask ourselves whether this possibility is not a consequence of new walls that are being erected in the church today. What is happening? I believe that a good deal of the acerbic dissonance among American Catholics is a product of the way the church is presently embedded in this society. Let me use an experience from another nation to illustrate what I mean.

The whole story of the Bible leads us to look forward in hope to a creation restored to wholeness. Every facet of it is to be brought back to what God has intended for it.

In 1993, while serving as an assistant to the Superior General of the Redemptorists, I visited our Province in Chile. Another assistant and I arrived in the capital, Santiago, a day or two after the election of the provincial superior. The new leader had just been elected on the 35th ballot of the provincial chapter; he had received practically no votes on the first 34. One does not have to be a brain surgeon to recognize that we were visiting a seriously divided group of religious, who would make Mr. Obama and Mr. Romney look like bosom buddies.

A day or two after our arrival, I took a walk in the garden of the provincial residence with the newly chosen sacrificial lamb; Padre Raúl tried to explain what lay behind the circumstances of his election. He said, “José, in this country we suffered under a military dictatorship that began in 1973 and lasted until just a few years ago. We hated the government, we preached against it, we took to the streets against it, some of us even went to jail in protest—we put our lives on the line to topple the dictatorship. But, without us being aware of it, their way of thinking penetrated us, and now we treat each other like *militares*. As a result, when a new “junta” assumes

power in the province, it exiles all the “enemies of the state.”

Raúl suggested to me the dark side of inculturation, a dynamic that induced my brothers to appropriate unwittingly the very values that they opposed with such passion. I believe that something similar happened among confreres in Eastern Europe, where the Redemptorists learned a great deal from their opposition to the Communist Party—and not all of it was good. If you are at all familiar with religious life in South Asia, you know that the sort of fundamental equality that is so prized among us religious in fact is often seriously undermined by a caste system which is over 4,000 years old.

So I wonder whether some of the acrimony, name-calling, labeling and intolerance

I wonder whether some of the acrimony, name-calling, labeling and intolerance that appear to increasingly characterize the American political discourse passes unchallenged into the heart of the American Catholic Church.

that appear to increasingly characterize the American political discourse passes unchallenged into the heart of the American Catholic Church. Furthermore, there is evidence that the new information technology, far from providing a catalyst towards a richer conversation among different groups, whether in the public square or in the church, instead exacerbates the ideological divide and aggravates

alienation by allowing us to discover quickly which sites and blogs favor our point of view, while isolating us from contrary opinions.

Another cultural trend that may be exerting a deleterious effect within the church is a tendency to oversimplify what are really complicated questions in the hope of discovering whom to blame. The global economic crisis has been caused by higher taxes. The decline of religious vocations is due to the infidelity of religious themselves. What Pontius Pilate and the Pharisees once were to Jesus of Nazareth, the Vatican and the hierarchy are to religious today.

Such simplifying and blaming probably has been around since the tragedy of Eden, where Adam blames Eve, who, in turn, accuses the snake (Genesis 3:9-13). At the present moment this behavior helps contribute to the Balkanization of American Catholics into so-called right-wing and left-wing or “traditional” and “progressive” factions, who point fingers



Convocation participants celebrated Mass with Archbishop Tobin.

at each other. In my opinion finger-pointing does great harm to religious because it makes us defensive, and defensiveness harms religious life in a fundamental manner. If our life is truly “evangelical,” that is, a life that takes as its ultimate norm the following of Christ set forth in the Gospels,<sup>9</sup> this life is at risk if we feel constantly compelled to defend ourselves against other “parties” in the church, since such self-protection will make it less likely that we will humbly examine the distance between our ideals and the present moment, which is the point of departure for a life of continuing conversion.

In his homily at the funeral of Cardinal Carlo Maria Martini, SJ, the present archbishop of Milan, Cardinal Angelo Scola, noted that diversity is a pre-condition for communion. If we are all the same, communion is impossible. Yet there is an unmistakable impression that new walls are being erected and exponents of competing ideologies seem to accept the cost: the creation of increasing marginalization within the people of God.

This “place” is being dramatically created, even expanded, through a process of “boundary maintenance” in both society and the church. The French social thinker Émile Durkheim proposed that law and crime function to mark the boundaries of acceptable and unacceptable behavior in any large-scale society. That is, they represent broad social guidelines for people’s behavior. As historians know, boundaries, be they cultural, ethical or geographic, can be revised. This is not necessarily a bad thing. I think that the Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15), the Nicene Creed and the doctrine of Vatican II all

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represent some sort of boundary maintenance, insofar as they are efforts to clarify the identity of a group by elucidating its essential norms.

I believe we can agree that both society and church are engaged in a process of boundary maintenance. In part this movement has been provoked by post-modernity—understood as a set of cultural circumstances that signifies the “obliteration of boundaries and the confusion of categories.”<sup>10</sup> Societies experience globalization and the mass migration of peoples; the church wrestles with relativism and an often rapid catechesis. As a result new lines are drawn in the sands of the Sonoran Desert, while clear doctrinal statements and moral litmus tests seem to short-circuit or devalue dialogue.

Fresh or reinforced boundaries create new spaces in which the marginalized are consigned. In a clear contradiction of the norms and cultural practices of the Judaism of his time, Jesus healed the sick, expelled demons and multiplied loaves and fishes in pagan territory, a place that could not be seen from the heights of Jerusalem. But this “space” existed also within the traditional territory of Judah. Otherwise how can we understand the consistent accusation that was leveled against Jesus, a charge that probably led to his death: that he shared table fellowship with those beyond the pale? “Why does your master eat with tax collectors and sinners?” (Mark 2:16).

It is easy for the church to overlook this action of Jesus. I was a member of the 2005 Synod of Bishops that was concerned with the Eucharist. The synod lasted nearly a month, and you might imagine the number of speeches that were shared and the vast range of Scripture that was reviewed. To my shame, it was only afterward that I realized that in no debate was reference made to any verse that spoke of Jesus sharing table fellowship with sinners. Before pointing the finger at other members of that synod, I accuse myself of a scandalously bad memory.

Lest I be misunderstood, let me repeat clearly that boundaries are not intrinsically evil. A lack of personal boundaries or an unwillingness to respect the distinctiveness of another person are often indications of psychological pathology. God intends that the church have identifiable characteristics, such as the four we profess each Sunday and solemnity: one, holy, catholic and apostolic church. However, lest we be too quick to exclude others, Jesus insists that the world will recognize us as his disciples, first and foremost, by our love for each other (John 13:25), and he prays that we will be one “so that the world might believe that you have sent me” (John 17:2).

## Ambassadors for Christ

Religious men and women who work in vocation ministry are not simply talent scouts, recruiters or salespersons of spiritual snake-oil. First and foremost you are members of institutes of consecrated life, and as such you are called to manifest the “characteristic features of the life of Jesus” as well as “the mystery and mission of the Church.”<sup>11</sup> While divine in its institution, the church necessarily is rooted in time and must recognize how the Gospel is challenged in every era. In fact one of the two great principles for the authentic renewal of religious as mandated by the Second Vatican Council is our “adaptation to the changed conditions of our time.”<sup>12</sup>

The present discourse within the American Catholic Church, insofar as it promotes division and marginalization among the faithful ... merits the special attention of all religious.

I will argue that the present discourse within the American Catholic Church, insofar as it promotes division and marginalization among the faithful, is a “changed condition of our time” and, as such, merits the special attention of all religious in this country.

If religious who serve in vocation ministry wish to make their own a privilege that Paul claimed for himself—that of being an “ambassador for Christ”—then your ministry ought to understand the construction of new walls in the Catholic community in light of the principal consequence of the passion, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ: reconciliation with God. This fact also makes possible reconciliation among separated human beings and the final reconciliation of the whole cosmos with its Creator. Not only will you not tolerate the construction of “dividing walls”; you will do all in your power to dismantle any such works in progress. You do so because as ambassadors you represent, not only your particular religious family and the Catholic Church but also God, who is appealing through you (2 Corinthians 5:20).

You almost certainly recognize that this last exhortation begs a pretty important question: But what is a vocation minister to do?

In light of recent events, I believe the theme of this vocation, “Vocation ministers as ambassadors of Christ: a reconciling presence,” is providential. It is not an easy proposal.

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But your ministry has never been very cushy. If once it was true that a vocation minister had to live with unrealistic expectations by the other members of her institute, even a sort of unspoken annual “quota,” today she must try to integrate new members into a community in which many of the members have a very different experience of church from theirs. How do we reconcile the reality of our religious congregations with the dreams of those who discern with us? Given the polarization in the church, how do we effectively reach out to the “other” in openness, charity and love? Our community members look to us for hope. How do we reconcile Gospel-centered hope in a ministry that may challenge our own hope?

Let me offer a few suggestions. I am counting on you to add your own.

## Propose religious life as “sequela Christi”

The first suggestion flows from an insight of Pope Benedict XVI. On a number of occasions the Holy Father has insisted that Christianity is not “a moral code or a philosophy, but an

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encounter with a person.”<sup>13</sup> All of the church’s life is intimately related to that encounter.

In meeting Jesus Christ, we come to glimpse ever more clearly the *missio Dei*, which is essentially a mission of reconciliation. Through the Son, God has brought reconciliation to the world, overcoming sin, disobedience and the alienation we have

wrought. Christ reunites us with God through his saving death, which God confirms in the Resurrection and the revelation of transfigured life. The Holy Spirit empowers the church to participate in this ministry of the Son and the Spirit in reconciling the world. The church itself is in need of constant reconciliation, but becomes the vehicle for God’s saving grace to a broken and disheartened world.<sup>14</sup>

Seen in the light of Christ, the polarization in the church can become a *felix culpa* (fortunate fault), insofar as human sin can be forgiven, dividing walls can be dismantled and enemies can become sisters and brothers. Living in the memory

of what Christ has gone through—suffering and death yet not forgotten and indeed raised up by God—is the source of our hope. Hope allows us to keep the vision of a reconciled world alive, not in some facile, utopian fashion, but grounded in the memory of what God has done in Jesus Christ.<sup>15</sup> Paul captures this well in another passage in the Second Letter to the Corinthians:

But we hold this treasure in earthen vessels, that the surpassing power may be of God and not from us. We are afflicted in every way, but not constrained; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying about in the body the dying of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our body. For we who live are constantly being given up to death for the sake of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may be manifested in our mortal flesh (2 Corinthians 4, 7-11).

## Avoid labels

A problem for consecrated life in the United States may be that we are slow to recognize the religious aspirations of young people today. We should admit that there is no excuse for such ignorance, given the valuable research of groups like the NRVC.<sup>16</sup> Let me try to illustrate this problem with two examples, taken from the experience of other countries. A few years ago I was speaking with Father Timothy Radcliffe, then Master General of the Dominicans, about the situation of his order in France. Timothy astounded me by saying that on that particular day the Dominicans had 45 or so professed students in that country. He added that the Toulouse province had an average age of 47, if my memory serves me right.

Once I saw that Timothy was not joking—I had the impression that there were not 45 men in formation among all the religious institutes and dioceses in France—I asked him to explain the Dominicans’ apparent success. He first reminded me that a vocation always remains a mystery and resists being reduced to one or several causes, but he did suggest that there were two critical elements behind this flourishing. First, the order had made concrete decisions aimed at clarifying its identity in France. Secondly, as Master of the Order, Timothy had to get between the young professed and confreres from the so-called generation of *soixante-huit*, the grizzled veterans of the enthusiasm and upheaval of the 1960s. Otherwise the older confreres would eat these young alive, judging that their appreciation for wearing the habit, regular order and common

prayer was simply a reactionary fantasy that would result in the Order reassuming the “chains” that had been justly discarded decades before.

I later found a similar logic in units of my own congregation. I remember taking part in a provincial chapter in Australia seven or eight years ago. The province had received no more than two professions in the previous 15 years. When I asked about candidates, a number of capitulars agreed in quite dismissive terms that the only type of inquirers the province was then receiving were what they characterized as “right-wing kids.” I suggested that they might call the young people “different” and asked whether we were able to afford a new generation the same privilege that the Baby Boomers had so avidly claimed: the privilege of being distinct from our elders.

We recognize that the “culture” of the community is crucial, and a vocation director alone cannot change it. Hence it is vital that you work closely with the members of your respective governments. The sisters and brothers in leadership should recognize that ideological divisions within the community not only threaten the communion that should distinguish the baptized members of the Body of Christ, but almost certainly will obstruct the young from considering seriously the possibility of joining one’s religious family.

## Gratitude is the attitude

A final suggestion addresses how we see our own vocation today. The vitality with which any institute of consecrated life



*Archbishop Tobin takes a moment during the convocation for a smile with some of the NRVC staff. From left to right are administrative assistant Debbie Prieto; Archbishop Joseph Tobin, CSSR; executive director Brother Paul Bednarczyk, CSC; and associate director Sister Deborah Borneman, SSCM.*

pursues its mission depends on the number and quality of the candidates who seek admission to the community. For that reason, each one of us, out of love and appreciation for our own vocation, should zealously engage in the apostolate of fostering vocations to our particular institute.

I am convinced that gratitude is the attitude that will make vocation ministry credible. In the hope of illustrating what I mean, let me share two stories from my own religious family.

Years ago senior members of our community spoke often about a character named Father Willie. Father was not known for giddy enthusiasm for the Redemptorist way of life; yet, during meals, he would frequently sigh, “I wish I were a novice again.” Other confreres wondered what this apparently pious desire might mean; one day a brother asked him why on earth he wanted to return to his days as a novice. Father Willie quickly and vehemently enlightened him: “Because then I’d quit!”

In a certain sense, Father Willie had already quit. I imagine that most of us here realize that it

is possible to leave our institutes and still reside in one of our houses. An absence of gratitude for our own vocations will certainly be noticed by young people. Other things will be noticed as well.

Lest I be too hard on Father Willie, I recall my early days in ministry, a time when I proudly intended to be available to the people of an inner city parish 24/7. I took perverse pleasure when parishioners would comment on how tired I looked. “Certainly,” I thought to myself, “I am tired because I am pouring myself out for you!” I rethought this attitude one day, walking through the parish. A young mother came out of her home to chat a bit. At one point she astonished me by saying, “Father Joe, our whole family loves you. But I would never want any of my boys to become a Redemptorist.” Puzzled and a bit hurt, I asked why. She said gently, “Because you are always tired.”

Shortly thereafter I began to play ice hockey again. I also

Each one of us, out of love and appreciation for our own vocation, should zealously engage in the apostolate of fostering vocations to our particular institute. I am convinced that gratitude is the attitude that will make vocation ministry credible.

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thought a great deal about gratitude and thereafter tried to miss no occasion to give thankful witness for the gift of my own vocation.

During 18 years of service in the general government of my congregation, I had the privilege of meeting many grateful confreres. One gave a particularly vivid testimony of his gratitude, an example that remains with me today.

Father Peter had spent nearly 60 years in Southeast Asia. Originally from Ireland, he had lived for decades in the Philippines. I met him in the mid-1990s, a time when his vice-province was about to become a province, and the leadership would pass from the pioneering Irish to the younger Filipino confreres. The incoming council was a bit anxious to learn the intentions of the Irish missionaries. Were they going to remain in the country or return home?

An assembly of the vice-province was held and each confrere was invited to share his state of mind. Some signaled that they were ready to return to the Emerald Isle, others committed themselves to remaining for a determined period: a year, two years, five years, etc. The last one to speak was 83-year-old Father Peter, who smiled and said, “Boys, put me down for 10 years ... and make it renewable!” I might add that God apparently took Peter at his word. He died in Cebu in 2006—11 years later—and the confreres still speak gratefully of him.

Vocation ministry ought to show young people how grateful we are for our own vocations. We need to provide opportunities for other members of the community to share with candidates their own gratitude. At a time when religious are aware of the prophetic dimension of our vocation, I am not convinced that prophetic anger alone will attract young people. The young may be momentarily curious about what has gotten us so upset, but they will move on. They need to hear that we are also grateful: to the point of wanting passionately to invite others to share our life.

## Final prayer and blessing

Permit me to conclude this reflection with a prayer and a blessing. The words are taken from the Letter to the Ephesians (Ephesians 3:14-21), shortly after Paul has contemplated the gift of reconciliation. His words are my wish for you and for all who serve in vocation ministry:

For this reason I kneel before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, that he may grant you in accord with the riches of his glory to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in the

inner self, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; that you, rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend with all the holy ones what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

Now to him who is able to accomplish far more than all we ask or imagine, by the power at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen! ■

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1. See the excellent reflection by John W. O'Malley, SJ, “Modernity Made Manifest” in *The Tablet*, 13 Oct. 2012, p. 8-10.
  2. See Joseph A. Fitzmyer, SJ, “Pauline Theology” in *The Jerome Biblical Commentary*. Ed. Raymond E. Brown, S.S., Joseph A. Fitzmyer, S.J. and Roland E. Murphy, O.Carm. Volume II. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1968, p. 79, 80-82.
  3. *Ibid.*, p. 81.
  4. *Ibid.*, p. 82.
  5. Joseph A. Grassi. “The Letter to the Ephesians” in *The Jerome Biblical Commentary*. Op. cit. p. 20, 56.
  6. Grassi, p. 22.
  7. Grassi.
  8. Robert Schreiter, CPPS, “Reconciliation as a New Paradigm for Mission,” *SEDOS Bulletin* 37, July-August 2005, p.107.
  9. Second Vatican Council, *Perfectae Caritatis*, (28 Oct. 1965) 2a.
  10. John Milbank. *Being Reconciled: Ontology and Pardon*. London: Routledge, 2003, p. 187.
  11. Pope John Paul II. Apostolic exhortation *Vita Consecrata* (25 March 1996), 1.
  12. *Perfectae Caritatis*, 2.
  13. See, for example, his weekly audience of September 3, 2008.
  14. Schreiter, p. 107.
  15. Schreiter, p. 109.
  16. See NRVC's research at [www.nrv.net](http://www.nrv.net).

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Fifty-five years ago Sister Mary Carolan, BVM sacrificed herself to save her students during a horrific fire at a Chicago Catholic school. So, too, do vocation ministers sacrifice for the sake new life in their communities. It is the way of Christ.

# Vocation ministers walk forward in faith to welcome new life

BY BROTHER PAUL BEDNARCZYK, CSC

*All Souls' Day occurred during the 2012 convocation of the National Religious Vocation Conference, and this reflection was given during the liturgy.*

For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep in Jesus. — *1 Thessalonians 4:14*

**T**HIS PAST MAY, hundreds of people gathered in Old St. Patrick's Church, a historical landmark in Chicago, to celebrate and thank women religious, past and present, for their sacred witness and generous contributions to the archdiocese. After welcoming a standing room only

*Brother Paul Bednarczyk, CSC is executive director of the National Religious Vocation Conference. A member of the Congregation of the Holy Cross, Eastern Province of Brothers since 1978, he has more than 19 years of experience in vocation ministry. Brother Paul has spoken widely on vocation ministry and has given workshops in North America, Europe, Australia and New Zealand.*



congregation, Father Tom Hurley, the pastor, poignantly recalled the heroic story of Sister Mary Carolan, a Sister of Charity of the Blessed Virgin Mary, who was a survivor of the horrific 1958 fire at Our Lady of the Angels School, which is only a short distance away from Old St. Pat's.

Ninety-two children and three sisters lost their lives that cold December day as a raging fire rapidly swept through the school building, trapping both teachers and students in their classrooms. The heartbreaking photos, stories, and images of this sad day over 60 years ago have left an indelible mark on the memories of those Chicagoans old enough to remember. The heroic stories are numerous, but the particular story of Sister Carolan is exceptional.

When smoke came into her 7th grade classroom, Sister Carolan immediately lined up the students and led them to the nearby stairway. The stairwell was quickly filling with heavy smoke, choking the panicked and gasping students. Without hesitation Sister Carolan began pushing them down the stairs with the reassuring words: "Don't be afraid. Nothing will harm you." When the last of the students reached the bottom, Sister Carolan followed only to discover that 14 more of her students were still trapped in the classroom.

Seeing her children call out to her from the windows, she immediately she ran back into the building and crawled up the stairs. In the dense smoke she called for the children

to follow her voice and to hang on to each other. Once again she rolled the students down the stairs and carried others to safety.

Sister Carolan saved all 70 of her students that tragic day. Her courageous actions, however, were at great personal sacrifice. After suffering severe injuries to her back, and after three corrective surgeries, she remained handicapped for the rest of her life.

Later a doctor was examining her and noticed several bruises on her legs. "What are those?" he asked. "Those are my scars of victory," she said.

I share this story of Sister Carolan, because in light of our convocation theme, for me her selfless actions have become an iconic image of what vocation ministry means today and why our church and world need the witness of women and men religious.

## Multi-faceted vocation ministry

As you know, contemporary vocation ministry is much more complex than it was 20 or 30 years ago. It is not just about getting new members into our religious institutes; it is about evangelizing youth and young adults who are less and less steeped in their Catholic faith than the generations preceding them. It is about finding common ground with candidates and

congregations who may share different spiritualities, approaches to church, or ways of living this life in the future. It is about positively representing both the church and religious life well to a general public in a society and

culture that often looks at us with suspicion, if not derision. It is about inviting and welcoming people into our lives in a most profound way when some may feel alienated, unaccepted or unloved in the church they call home. It is about listening with a discerning and loving heart to women and men sharing their life journey, their search for God, and their place in the scheme of divine providence.

As I said, vocation ministry today is about much more than just getting new members into our religious institutes. Sister Carolyn, literally, lay down her life so that her students could have the gift of life. She became for those young children the bridge between a precarious reality and an unknown future. She physically experienced the tension, the pain, and the distress of bridging death and life, and she was marked with it for the rest of her days. She sacrificed greatly for life, but she had no choice.

As vocation ministers we figuratively lay down our lives, faith, values, and integrity for the sake of the church, religious life and our religious institutes. Like Sister Carolan, we become the bridge from the current reality to our shared, hoped-for future.

And neither do we. As vocation ministers, in a far less dramatic way, we figuratively lay down our lives, faith, values, and integrity for the sake of the church, religious life and our religious institutes. Like Sister Carolan, we become the bridge from the current reality to our shared, hoped-for future. To our discerners we are a compass who gently guides, and when the time is right, we give them a little push or shove with the reassuring words, “Don’t be afraid.” We do it out of love, and sometimes, with great sacrifice, because we know that life depends upon it—in this case, the life of the church, the life of the discerner, and the life of our institute and its members.

## Seeking signs of hope

But this is not always easy. While our ministry is one of guidance and leadership, we find that we also need guidance.

Like Sister Carolan, we become the bridge of the current reality with our shared, hoped for future. To our discerners, we are a compass who gently guides, and when the time is right, we give them a little push or shove.

There are times we feel like the 7th graders of Our Lady of the Angels, gasping and looking for a way out of the darkness of diminishing numbers, the scandal of sexual abuse, the troubling exercise of authority, and the cynicism of those both in and outside of the church. We wait to hear that reassuring voice—“Have no fear”—and similar to our discerners, at times we too need that extra shove to

push us forward in hope even though we do not know what awaits us.

Today the church commemorates the solemn feast of All Souls’. It is the day that we recall and pray for the dead so that they may receive the joy of eternal life. In this brief reading from I Thessalonians, St. Paul reminds us of our faith’s foundation—that Jesus died and rose from the dead. If we believe this, then God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep in Jesus.

During those times when we find ourselves grasping and groping for a way forward, it is important to remember that we are part of a marvelous legacy we call consecrated religious life. We walk with those who have gone before us, those who stand by our side today, and those who we hope will some day fall into our step. We have the inspiration of saints, some



Photo courtesy of Archdiocese of Chicago Archives and Records Center

*Ninety-two children and three sisters perished in the 1958 fire at Our Lady of the Angels School in Chicago. Here mourners flood the church to pay their final respects to the deceased.*

recognized and others whose holiness is known to God, who, like Sister Carolan, walked by Easter’s light, whose prophetic living of the Gospel witnessed to a life that can only be of God. Their example and sacrifices inspire us to continue our own journeys faithfully, because our faith teaches us that the glory of Easter can only be found on the road to Calvary. We walk that road because we have no choice—if we seek new life, then we must walk the way given to us by Jesus.

To do this faithfully and confidently becomes even more important during this Year of Faith. According to a recent survey of the Pew Forum, more than one quarter of American adults have left the faith in which they were raised in favor of another religion—or no religion at all. There are presently more former Catholics than there are practicing Catholics in the United States. Among Americans ages 18-29, one in four say they are not currently affiliated with any particular religion, the largest number ever.

This is the desert landscape in which we do our vocation ministry. Pope Benedict in his homily for the opening Year of Faith said: “...in the desert people of faith are needed who, with their own lives, point out the way to the Promised Land and keep hope alive. Living faith opens the heart to the grace of God which frees us from pessimism. Today, more than ever, evangelizing means witnessing to the new life, transformed by



*The Sisters of Charity of the Blessed Virgin Mary staffed Our Lady of the Angels School and are shown here at the funeral of their three members who died in the 1958 fire. Others, like Sister Mary Carolan, BVM, were injured. All made sacrifices in order to ensure life in the next generation of Catholics, just as vocation ministers today give themselves up in order to nurture the next generation of religious life.*

God, and thus showing the path.”

Jesus was convinced of his mission. He had a charism and he spoke with conviction, and that is what made him attractive to others. He offered people something that spoke to the yearning of their hearts’ desires. He promised a different life, a life of joy, peace, and love even in the midst of suffering. His healing, his preaching, his companionship, his humility, his respect for the poor and lowly—it gave them such hope, a hope that can only be of God. People recognized God in the person of Jesus, and they followed.

## Witnesses of life lived for God

As consecrated religious, in a most profound and radical way, we incarnate that spirit of Christ for others. Sister Carolan did this, and her students followed. They held on tightly to one another, and they followed her voice to safety. By choosing poverty, chastity and obedience, like Jesus Christ, we witness that there is more to this world than money, sex and power. By giving ourselves totally and freely to all humanity, we become a prophetic reminder that true life can only be found when it is lived for God and others and not for ourselves. Finally, to find joy, peace and fulfillment in this life, which in secular terms makes no sense, we remind people that true life can only be found in something greater, in an all merciful God whose love is unconditional and everlasting. Without God and Jesus Christ at its center, yes, this life would not make sense.

That is why the church needs men and women religious, and in particular, vocation ministers who preserve this unique gift of discipleship in the church by discerning with those who feel called to embrace it in the future. By living our call faithfully and joyfully, in the words of Pope Benedict, we point out the way to the Promised Land and keep hope alive for others. Sister Carolan pointed out the way for her students. She became their lifeline as they held tightly to one another and followed her voice to safety. Women and men religious have always served as that lifeline for the faithful in the church. Whether it was St. Francis of Assisi, Blessed Mother Teresa of Calcutta, Sister Dorothy Stang, the Jesuit martyrs of El Salvador—through their lives and good works, people had a glimpse of the sacred, a glimpse of the incarnation of Christ, and brought hope to a church and world in need. Hope is concomitant with our vocation.

Today, as we remember the souls who have gone before us, we need to heed the words of St. Paul, who reminds us that the promise of Christian hope lies in the resurrection—but resurrected life comes with a price. Jesus Christ proved this, and the saints and other holy women and men confirmed this. As religious, we live by this conviction and give witness to it every day. We may even have the scars to show for it. But that is the sacrifice we make for life and for a future. May our sacrifices become like those of Sister Carolan, when one day, by the grace of God, like her, we will be able to look back and say with confidence to those who follow us, “These are my scars of victory.” ■

After Paul was thrown from his horse, he had to let go of his old story about Jesus and open himself to Mystery. In their role as reconcilers within the church, vocation ministers must do the same.

# Vocation ministers can follow St. Paul's path toward reconciliation

BY SISTER KATHRYN J. HERMES, FSP

*This article was the second of two keynote presentations delivered at the November 2012 convocation of the National Religious Vocation Conference held in Plano, TX.*

**W**E COME HERE to this 2012 convocation for vocation ministers with many hearts beating as one heart, together. We come looking to the future, aware of the past, grateful for the present—for today, for this wonderful time in the church that we are living. We are grateful for every woman or man we accompany on a vocational journey, trusting in the Lord who walks with us and among us, before us and beside us. We are in awe of the immense privilege of helping the next generation of men and women religious hear the voice of God.

We come here like Paul, knowing that these are urgent times. Like Paul, vocation ministers have a knack for cutting through the shadowboxing and confusion in order to

*Sister Kathryn J. Hermes, FSP is a member of the Daughters of St. Paul. She is director of electronic publishing at Pauline Books and Media, as well as the author of multiple books, a spiritual director, presenter and retreat leader. Sister Kathryn holds an MTS from Weston Jesuit Center for Theological Studies and an advanced certificate in Scripture.*



announce the one thing necessary: Christ. Looking back on his life, the Damascus event loomed large in Paul's memory as a flashpoint, a fire that consumed his personal agendas and plans, the moment in which he knew that it was God's relationship to him that was his true identity. Plans, dreams, expectations, ambitions, conflicts, agendas—all those things that kick up the inner dust of thoughts, feelings and memories—had held him captive until that moment in which he was personally addressed by Christ, who called him by name.

Each of you witnesses this moment over and over again in your pastoral work for vocations. You live it in your daily prayer. You desire it for your communities and congregations and monasteries. You know the tender power of the glance of the Christ, and you are witness also to how difficult it is to respond to the need for personal and communitarian reconciliation in your congregations, to respond to the many obstacles which can deflect candidates from responding to the One who has loved them.

Paul, reconciled and an ambassador of reconciliation, lived out his ministry in the context of the response of persons and communities to the in-breaking of God and his kingdom in their lives. Each letter of his, written to specific communities made up of unique individuals with their own constellation of personalities and perplexities, is an attempt to apply the medicine of reconciliation for the purpose of breaking open tired stories to the wildly trusting mercy of God. As vocation ministers you also are such ambassadors of reconciliation in your communities and for your candidates. You have

to become experts at naming what I call the stories that help us side-step the searing force of God's ever-present embrace of our world.

## I. Vocation minister at the intersection of stories

Today I want to concentrate on story ... both a potentially negative and positive concept. I believe too many of the stories we tell ourselves today as women and men religious—stories about ourselves, our communities and institutes (or those of others), stories regarding our experiences or the texture of U.S. religious life today—carry a certain disenchantment. In a polarized atmosphere these stories spring up in the midst of, and often are the reflection of, conflict or taking sides. They can promote depression and cynicism. They can become obstacles to the in-breaking of the narrative of mystery woven by the Son of God into the very fiber of Christian discipleship. Paul was a master at re-framing story in this narrative of mystery in order to break open cynicism and divisions. In his second letter to the Corinthians he states that the light shining on the face of Christ alone can open up the future (2 Corinthians 3:1-18).

What has this to do with our theme, "Vocation ministers as ambassadors for Christ: a reconciling presence"? I will try to explain. The vocation minister stands at the intersection of the multiple stories being told in the church, and you, like Paul, have the possibility of ministering to us all,

there, as ambassadors of reconciliation, precisely by holding well the tension of these multiple stories. Let's explore the stories about religious being told today.

The vocation minister stands at the intersection of the multiple stories being told in the church, and you, like Paul, have the possibility of ministering to us all, there, as ambassadors of reconciliation, precisely by holding well the tension of these multiple stories.

## The stories religious tell about each other

None of us sitting here today is naive. We have inherited 40 or more years of stories about each other regarding the way our congregations and others live our consecrated identity in our various communities. Sometimes we react for reasons we can't explain to the words and behavior of a sister from a different generation. We find ourselves resisting the ideas of a brother with a different ecclesiology. We can label negatively the behavior of a community that doesn't live up to our expectations or our values. It takes a lot of energy to understand cultural differences in our communities or face day after day the clashes we can experience between members of the community who have received different formations.

A candidate visiting one religious community stated simply how relieved she was that during her stay she hadn't had to listen to criticism of other religious communities as conservative, or liberal, or faithful, or unfaithful. Probably these labels had been used as a type of shorthand to describe

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communities or individuals. Often young people today are wearied by these stories because these aren't their issues. We have our own version of the Corinthian factions: "I follow Cephas!" "I follow Apollos!" "I follow Paul!" "I follow Christ!"

## The stories told about us

Besides the stories we tell about each other, we have to deal today with the stories told about us: stories created by headlines in newspapers, both secular and Catholic, that are inaccurate or slanted, stories that are told through articles that subtly pit congregations against each other in a sibling rivalry,

The media culture can focus on generalizations and project stereotypes. It becomes the vocation minister's challenge to give flesh and blood and spirit to religious life.

measuring their worth by numbers of vocations, stories in television programs and movies. Young women and men come to us now with stories which, before we've even spoken to them, have shaped their vocational journey.

Sister Marian Batho, CSJ, delegate for Religious of the Archdiocese

of Boston, told me of a vocational conversation in which a young man said to her, "I certainly want to enter a community that is faithful to the Magisterium."

She responded, "Can you tell me one that isn't?"

These young men and women come to us with stories reduced to tweets and status updates, stories repeated with little understanding, out of context, without compassion or openness to development, unaware of the dynamism of history, and often empty of real meaning. Any issue today can be encapsulated in 140 characters or less and shared with thousands of friends. The media culture can focus on generalizations and project stereotypes. It becomes the vocation minister's challenge to give flesh and blood and spirit to religious life. Instead of dashing off a status update, you sit with the candidate, settle, wait, explore, deepen, pray, question, challenge.

## Different stories told within one's own community

Some vocation directors feel that the real difficulty is that not everyone in their own congregation is living and sharing the same story about religious life. Some members have a more

traditional view of religious life. Others tell a more moderate story. Then there are those who are writing still another story with their life and mission, one very different from that of the community itself. When a candidate visits the community you, as vocation director, become the one who weaves the stories together into a whole.

## Stories are our teachers

I can tell stories. You can tell stories. Based on these stories we act certain ways around sisters and brothers who represent to us the "other." These stories affect the way we treat them and ourselves.

I will always be grateful for the wonderful experience I had in the mid-90s as a member of the Diocesan Team for Vocation Ministers in New Orleans. For two years I met with a group of very diverse men and women religious. To this day I tell the stories of how I have been edified by some of them. Because I had the gift of prolonged time to listen, learn, share, understand and pray together with them, my appreciation and respect increased for religious life across the spectrum.

The stories we tell *about* each other are often just made up stories, stories not yet broken open by encountering the other. The stories we tell *with* each other are funny and moving because they're real. They are not just opinions and blind ideas and prejudices that arise from lack of knowledge of each other or an attempt to justify our own ideas or quiet our fears. We all have the greatest stories about novitiate. And they're the same stories about entering the convent, formation house or monastery. And then there are stories about our ministry. Vocation directors often tell the best stories, the glories and struggles of animating our congregations, ministering with youth and young adults, visiting schools, campuses and parishes. And we tell stories about people whose lives were cracked open by grace somehow, through a word or gesture or service we offered.

We can be absolutely certain that any criticism, any complaint about another person in religious life, about other congregations, has no truth in reality. That is hard to swallow. It's embarrassing. We religious, who, like Paul, have been called to be ambassadors of God who is reconciling the world to himself, sometimes get lost, distracting ourselves, and not doing the work for which we are called. Every story contains within itself a projection. Every complaint or accusation we have of the other is, in some sense true of ourselves. Every story can become our teacher.



*Sister Kathryn responds to questions and comments from vocation ministers who listened to her presentation at the November 2012 convocation of the National Religious Vocation Conference, held in Plano, TX.*

## II. Lessons from Paul

In your work as vocation ministers you are at the intersection of stories. You are navigating and integrating in the church, in your institute, in the community, the stories of the candidates, your own story, your community's story, the church's story. You are a contemplative who teases out the strands of truth, of mystery, fear, agenda, love ... all strands that make up the stories we tell. You are a companion, like Paul, to each one's struggle to ultimately reframe stories within the larger narrative of Mystery being accomplished by God in and through our very humble daily realities.

And so it is here, in this central place, at the heart of the church's mission, where you live and labor and love, that I want to speak to you this morning.

Today's theme of the vocation minister as an ambassador of God and a reconciling presence comes to us from the fifth chapter of the second letter of Paul to the Corinthians. I would like to believe that "story" was important to Paul. He probably told his own story often since it is recounted three times in the Acts of the Apostles (see chapters 9, 22 and 26), and he reflects on it in his letters (1 Corinthians 15:3-8; Galatians 1:11-16).

## Paul's experience with telling stories

Paul knew all about stories and the chaos they could create in a community when they were made up of projections, misunderstandings and fear. He knew what could happen when people clung to their own story vis-à-vis other stories or the larger narrative of Mystery God wanted to work in an individual or a group's life. As a young rabbi he had composed a story, and based on that story he created a project. He had a story, an idea, a belief, about the followers of the Way. He had a story about Jesus. Paul had it all figured out. Paul was convinced that these Jewish followers of this "so-called Messiah" were jeopardizing the security of the Jewish people under Roman domination, and because of them the identity and clear boundary markers of their nation were being dangerously blurred. Paul maintained

It took a revelation from God and a "good hard fall from a horse(!)" to convince Saul that his hardheaded determination to see things his own way, to insist on his story about what was happening in the Jewish community, was actually obstructing God's plan for them all.

his story, even to the point of assisting at the death of Stephen (Acts 7:58) and imprisoning those who believed in Jesus (Acts 9:1-2). It took a revelation from God and a "good hard fall from a horse(!)" to convince Saul that his hardheaded determination to see things his own way, to insist on his story about what was happening in the Jewish community, was actually obstructing God's plan for them all.

By accentuating differences and magnifying factions in the Jewish communities, Paul was actually building his life on his own "reality," which was not reality. It was just a story he had made up, and it made sense to him. But it was confining Paul in a box, shutting out his light, blowing out the flame of transcendence and becoming an obstacle to everything he most deeply believed and desired.

Paul's letters also manifest his respect for the story of others, how they saw reality, what they were living, how they were developing. The story of the community and of the church was important to Paul. The Apostle came to see his own story in communion with the stories of others, taken up in the greater story of salvation being enacted and offered by God through Christ. The letters to the Corinthians, I suggest,

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can basically be read as stories, an intersection of different stories, a study in different ways of telling and reading story.

## Stories at work in the community of Corinth

It is important to note that a backdrop to Paul's response to the Corinthians is a story addressed in the beginning of Paul's first letter to them. The community has divided itself into factions, formed groups, sided against each other and aligned themselves with different leaders whom each group exalts and pits against the others.

For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there are quarrels among you, my brothers and sisters. What I mean is that each of you says, "I belong to Paul," or "I belong to Apollos," or "I belong to Cephas," or "I belong to Christ." Has Christ been divided? Was Paul crucified

Paul embeds his and the community's story in the larger narrative of Mystery and salvation being accomplished in the world by God in Christ.

for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul? (1 Corinthians 1:11-13)

We know what happens when people take sides and set up camps. Concentrating on bolstering arguments to prove one position over another unconsciously narrows the horizons where spirits

can roam. It is less likely that one will be unexpectedly exposed to and thus be invited to curiously entertain an opposing point of view. There is a hardening rather than a flowing of thought.

Factions and divisions, as well as other problems in the Corinthian community, spark a tempestuous period in the relationship of the Apostle Paul with the Corinthians. We will focus specifically on exploring Paul's second letter, since it is from that letter that we receive the concept of ambassador of reconciliation. The second letter indicates that the Corinthians were hurt and that they doubted the genuineness of Paul's apostleship since, among other things, Paul hadn't fulfilled his promise to return and visit them as planned.

## Paul's narrative of Mystery

Paul then explains why he hadn't visited them as he had hoped. Paul had sent a messenger whom the Corinthians had

deeply offended. Next Paul had written the so-called letter of tears (2:4). Then he had sent Titus, who concluded his visit successfully. Paul's second letter conveys to them explanations for his change of plans—in short, the story from his point of view.<sup>1</sup>

However, if Paul had remained on this level of conversation, he would have allowed the Corinthians to frame the issues, and there would have been no room for anything other than each side trying to justify its respective point of view, the very behavior Paul was trying to address as problematic within the Corinthian community. If he had done this, Paul would have been drawn into a story that had no memory and no future.

Instead Paul embeds his and the community's story in the larger narrative of Mystery and salvation being accomplished in the world by God in Christ. He uses several images. Four of these images are: Paul is the fragrance of Christ (2 Corinthians 1:14-17); he is the minister of the new covenant in glory written of the Spirit (Corinthians 3:1-18); Paul sees himself as fulfilling a ministry that was mercifully given to him to preach Christ, not himself, carrying this treasure in an earthen vessel with trials of every sort (2 Corinthians 4:1-5:11); Paul is an ambassador of reconciliation, trying to persuade people that Christ died for all so that all might live not for themselves but for Christ.

Rather than trying to win esteem for himself, he no longer sees anyone from a human point of view since anyone who is in Christ is a new creature. The old has passed away and a new world has come. Reconciliation is God's work, which is why Paul is only an ambassador of the reconciliation God is effecting in the world by appealing to the Corinthians. Paul says, "Let God reconcile you" (2 Corinthians 5:11-21). God is doing it, not you.

Paul tells this larger narrative of Mystery which has opened his own heart so that they too might open their hearts to him. By this time in Paul's life, story is a function of love, of acceptance, of communion, of the growth of the one body of Christ where all have their part to play in concretely continuing the history of the existence of Jesus Christ in the world. This is a far cry from the Paul whose story had propelled him to Damascus to imprison the followers of Jesus.

## III. Insights for vocation ministry

What can we learn from Paul about how to stand at the intersection of stories in vocation work today? I humbly offer five suggestions for your consideration.

## 1. Engage the stories

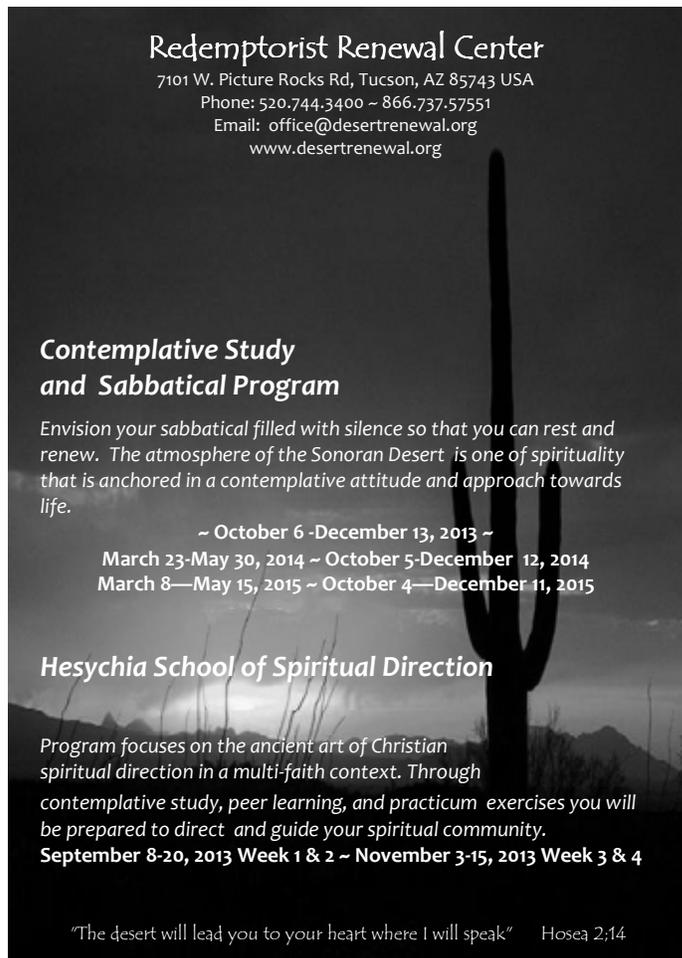
Stories have to be examined, pondered over, purified of dross and selfishness and fear. This takes a degree of maturity and a life-time of spiritual discipline. The first step is to engage the stories. Why? We see from the Corinthian correspondence that the unexamined story divides. Such stories wound both the storyteller and the subject of the story. Stories blur the truth and confuse the situation. The result of storytelling is often either aggression or isolation within a community.

In his letters to the Corinthians Paul directly engages the stories being told and the divisions being created. In fact, just as Jesus had directly addressed him on the road to Damascus, this direct style of engagement had become Paul's own mode of communication. Paul had learned this from the mercy he had been shown by God. Paul knew that Jesus had personally spoken truth to him, telling him the divine story and correcting his own story. Paul understood that Jesus had reached out to him, offering peace and reconciliation, not anger and judgment. "When the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of any works of righteousness that we had done, but according to his mercy" (Titus 3:4f).

Paul must have meditated many long hours on the way he had been loved by God and then built his personal communication style on the reconciling style of God's communication. He wrote, "All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation" (2 Corinthians 5:18).

Paul had his share of disagreements with others as documented in the New Testament. The remarkable thing is that Paul never cut off communication. He always went toward the other party. He travelled to Jerusalem to explain to the elders there his Gospel as he had preached it to the Gentiles. His letters to the Corinthians manifest his perseverance in addressing a relationship that was fragile and ready to break. Countless other examples can be found in his letters to the Galatians, Philemon and the Philippians. Paul never again made up stories about the people with whom he disagreed. He preferred dialogue and sustained engagement.

When we grapple with the stories of others with whom we disagree, we are actually grappling with the mystery of ourselves and of our own vocation. In the second letter to the Corinthians Paul doesn't just give an explanation of his behavior and then say, "I'm right. You're wrong. Come over to my side." Instead we watch Paul in this letter struggle with expressing who he was and his ministry as an apostle in the face



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*"The desert will lead you to your heart where I will speak" Hosea 2:14*

of a story not his own, of challenges, accusation and hurt. In the writing he clarified himself. In the writing he was healed. We all need this experience of struggling to reformulate who we are. It is healthy to have to do this and that is why we need to stay in the discussion even if we are writing a proverbial "letter of tears."

"Corinthians! I have spoken to you frankly and I have uncovered my inner thought. My heart is wide open to you, but you feel uneasy because of your closed heart. Open your hearts wide also" (2 Corinthians 6:11-13). Paul was more concerned about the other person or community's growth in Christ than he was about his own reputation or feelings.

## 2. Immerse yourself in the salvation plan God is effecting in and through you

Permit me to start by recounting a dream. The night cloaked my room with a darkness that was penetratingly cold. The

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alarm clock pierced the silence with its loud, unwanted announcement of the coming sunrise. I fumbled quickly through my desk for a paper and pen to write down a dream I had had. I never remember my dreams, but this one had been too vivid to allow it to slip back into the mists of my subconscious. In my dream I was in a room with a friend and had made it clear to her that we were not permitted under any conditions or for any reason to rearrange the furniture. While I was getting my coat in another part of the house, my friend had begun to move the furniture around with no particular attention to

We need to allow our stories to be transparent to Mystery if we are to stand in the truth.

where it landed. An immediate panic seized me when I realized my friend had not only changed the position of bed, table and chairs, she had created an interior decorator's nightmare.

I jotted down the seemingly simple symbols and the following week shared them with my spiritual director, who encouraged me to bring the symbol of the furniture to prayer. "The Spirit often speaks to us through dreams, especially those that are so vivid."

In our conversation we decided the panic at the moving of the furniture definitely symbolized feeling out of control as my friend challenged my stodgy life decisions. I've got everything figured out and nailed down and don't need anything new to upset things, thank you. A tiny flicker of freedom lit up the otherwise foreboding panic of change that was symbolized by the furniture now lying helter-skelter around the room in a disorganized maze.

Through the next weeks, as I prayed the dream image developed in my prayer, and I realized that the room was flying—a symbol of transcendence—and that the door was open, that my friend in the room was actually God, that God was now pushing the furniture out the open door, and, to my horror, that God was actually trying to push me out the door. "Ah," said my spiritual director, "so God is not afraid to push the old man out the door..." I ignored the comment.

Grasping the meaning of the furniture became a contemplative odyssey. The symbol had layers of meaning. One transformative discovery I made was that the furniture was my self-concept, my labels, my points of view, my expectations. God was saying, "Out the door with it all. I have no use for it. It has no real meaning. It is confining both of us in a box. It is prohibiting our relationship from developing."

So with the furniture gone, the room was empty. Only

God and I were left in the room, and I bowed before him. As I remained in God's presence I kept dropping my analyses and judgments as they emerged, returning to a simple, receptive awareness.

We need to allow our stories to be transparent to Mystery if we are to stand in the truth. The only way to break up the stranglehold of our opinions, prejudices, fears and judgments is to allow the "furniture to be rearranged," so to speak. This is what Paul learned. After he encountered Jesus on the road to Damascus, Paul was led by the hand into the city where he waited for God's next move. In these three days there was no longer his story between him and his God. He remained in the darkness of unknowing as he waited for the healing and cleansing waters of baptism at the hands of Ananias.

Paul no longer told a story made up of his points of view regarding Jesus or those who followed him, stories based on reactions, accusations, assumptions. If we look carefully at the three times the Acts of the Apostles narrates Paul telling his story (chapters 9, 22, 26), we see he says three things about himself:

- 1) Paul saw himself as living in the vastness of the history of salvation, not acting out a story on the stage of his fears, grief, or anger.
- 2) Paul realized that his life was unfolding within what God was doing. He was no longer the protagonist of his own story. Instead Paul revered the story that God was writing with his life.
- 3) Paul knew that he was being used by God in the unfolding of the plan of salvation history.

Paul's encounter with the God who called him on the road to Damascus, his realization that his story about Jesus wasn't reality, that Truth was much bigger than his prejudice, was a seismic shift in Paul's self-consciousness and his mission. To be an "ambassador of reconciliation," therefore, is not just to proclaim the story of salvation. It is to live within the framework created by the intersection of stories with a soul so vast it can touch and articulate a deeper narrative, one we have known in the depths of our soul, a witness to the Mystery of having been reconciled by God who is sending us to others in order that God may continue this reconciling ministry. To be an ambassador of reconciliation is to offer reconciliation by struggling with being a reconciler day after day. Reconciliation includes within itself, therefore, a certain tension.

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### 3. Be present without judgment to the many stories confided to you

Father Rocco Puopolo, SX of the Xaverian Missionaries shared with me a wonderful image: The vocation minister, he said, is a bridge builder between stories. He or she is a bridge and allows both the community and the candidate to walk all over him or her. That is the purpose of the bridge. This facilitation of a vocation encounter with the community is not easy. The candidate has expectations, and the community has expectations. The vocation director is the one who bears the cross of making sense of these expectations so that the stories of the two can intertwine. The encounter means the two become one without losing their identity.

It is the vocation director who tries to make sense of what are at times unspoken stories in the minds and hearts of candidates.

It is the vocation director who explains the story of the charism to the young women and men with whom they work. They are the watchful ones who sometimes have to carry out the delicate work of damage control when a community member has told stories without responsibility, outside of the proper context, without reflection of how the story might be received or interpreted.

It is the vocation director who has to do the remedial work of telling the church's story to a generation that often is very deficient in knowledge of the faith, in experience of the joy that flows from a rich sacramental life, and in understanding and appreciation of the demands of following Christ.

It is the vocation director who must respect what his or her community or congregation is living, as well as the reality being lived by the candidate.

Often it is the vocation director who gives others the vocabulary to name and understand their story. To interpret a person or group's story is to name an experience.

The vocation director knows how to use stories to engage the heart. Ultimately storytelling is a process of falling in love. It is the vocation director who stays awake at night wondering how to tell a community's charismatic story in a way that engages young people. She or he prayerfully devises ways to get inquirers to share and reflect on their own stories in light of the community's charism.

It is the vocation director who, in today's mediated culture, wonders how to make the story of the community's life and mission the fire in the heart of each member, accessible and attractive to young people through film, Facebook, Twitter, blogs, websites, podcasts, radio programs and any other

form of communication used by the youth of today.

It is the vocation director who interprets the cultural story of young people to his or her community: their language, experiences, expectations, values, needs. It is the vocation director, then, who bears the cross of watching the community attempt to speak to young people's story or reject it altogether.

How do you find the strength to be this bridge? How do you access the story of salvation in an experiential way, in your heart, not just intellectually but in what you have been given to live?

Paul, I believe, would say this to you: trust that you are important. God has reconciled you, the vocation minister, and has sent you as an ambassador of reconciliation to the church. I, Paul, know how hard it is to hold so many sometimes disparate stories from your sisters and brothers, candidates, the media, the church, and

at the same time have to grapple with allowing God to move around your own story, dislodging points of view, rewriting the description of the characters who play a large part in the story you are holding onto, and tearing up entire chapters you've written. It is the way of freedom. To stay in the process of storytelling, to minister by healing the stories you witness and listen to, is to build communion, to heal the church, and to do so means losing power. It means the foolishness of the cross I spoke about to the Corinthians in my first letter to them. But isn't this The Way? Isn't this the way of communion, vulnerability and love, the way of the Trinitarian dance? On the road to Damascus, I learned that true power is never certainty or the ability to impose your viewpoint. True power is love. You can't control the story of religious life, what a candidate will encounter during a visit to the community, what will occur on her or his formative journey, just as I couldn't control the situation in Corinth. You want to know the outcome. I understand. That was me before the road to Damascus. I had it all figured out. I grew in the years following to appreciate the Mystery and to allow Mystery to write its own story with my life. This is when I discovered my true story.

It is in sitting with the anguish, aggression, uncertainty or grief that emerges when our own stories or our commu-

St. Paul might tell us: You can't control the story of religious life, what a candidate will encounter during a visit to the community, what will occur on her or his formative journey, just as I couldn't control the situation in Corinth.

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nity's are dislodged, when the furniture is thrown out the door and we seem to have nothing left, that what IS arises. Reality is allowed to be.

We will develop a storyteller's ear, be able to pick out the outlines of a candidate's or community's story, challenge it gently, be compassionate with the fear others experience when their meaning is threatened, and point them to the larger narrative of Mystery.

Like Paul, when we face our own emotional reaction to having our story questioned and we need to re-write that narrative in order to make meaning of what is happening, then we will develop a storyteller's ear. With that ear we will be able to pick out the outlines of a candidate's or community's story, challenge it gently, be compassionate with the fear others experience when their meaning is threatened, and point them to the larger narrative of

Mystery. This will help them restructure their self-concept in the context of God's plan of salvation working in and through them.

#### 4. Allow God to be the protagonist of your own story

Paul realized that his story was unfolding within the mystery of God's activity. He was no longer the protagonist of his own story. Instead Paul revered the story that God was writing with his life.

In light of this Paul gives us another clue into how he was able to live as an ambassador of reconciliation. He no longer saw anything from a "human point of view" (2 Corinthians 5:16). He writes,

From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God.

—(2 Corinthians 5:16-18)

Paul consistently writes about what God is doing in and through him. This is a secret for emerging from behind the

safety of the judgments and the plans and the control, so as to live in the now, in the real and in the new. The word "new" indicates to the Corinthian community the new eschatological age that they experience in the Spirit and which will be consummated when Christ returns. They have received the down payment of the Spirit (2 Corinthians 1:21-22), which is transforming them from within into the image of the glory of the Lord, from one degree of glory to another (2 Corinthians 3:18). In the Corinthian correspondence, Paul shows us what it is to live as a new creation, how to be reoriented toward the spiritual realm and to no longer live based on worldly standards.

We cannot be naïve. Along with the Apostle Paul we have experienced that living in communion among women and men religious of different ages, institutes or ministries can be painful at times. We know how hard it is to have faith, to strengthen ourselves in disillusionment and fear. As vocation ministers, however, you are moved by the passionate, hopeful, trusting gaze of young men and women eager to commit their hearts and lives to Jesus with us and among us.

Can you live with your heart wide open? This is not just a spiritual question. Sometimes we need to acknowledge that we have needs that are not being met, and which result in our having small hearts, scared hearts, hearts poor in hope. A vocation director needs life-giving experiences and relationships that respond to her or his need for transcendence and presence, for security and purpose, for authenticity and peace of mind, for connection and balance.<sup>2</sup> When these life-enriching needs are met, you will be better able to give yourselves as reconciling persons in your communities. You will have the strength and profound love to give to the women and men who look to you to see what consecrated life today means: open hearts, hearts hopeful in the future, trusting the God who has reconciled us to himself and called us to be the messengers in the world of God's love and mercy.

#### 5. Encourage storytelling as a way to make meaning

Paul told his story to make meaning in the turbulent situation he was living with the Corinthian community he had founded. He had been rejected and his sincerity questioned. Usually when people are hurt or frightened, they hide: "When God was looking for Adam, he asked him, 'Where are you?' Adam responded, 'I was frightened so I hid' (Genesis 3:10). And we've been doing it ever since. We hide from each other behind walls and groups and ideas. We hide behind labels which

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**NATIONAL RELIGIOUS VOCATION CONFERENCE**

serve mainly to keep our own stories intact and unquestioned. It's important to encourage people to come together to tell their stories. This can create anxiety, for to share our stories is to open ourselves to conversion.

You have the humble and difficult role of existing at the flash point of differences of opinion within a community, differences that have ramifications for candidates. You can encourage your sisters and brothers to look at the places of conflict. That isn't easy since one has her way of doing things and another has his. To protect our individual ways and our stories we build walls between us to hide behind. We are afraid, afraid mainly of having to modify our own story.

Communication is vital, but as was true for Paul, it requires someone to take the first step, to put him- or herself on the line. As an ambassador of reconciliation, that would be you. The exercise of communion is to love, to help another to grow in freedom, to move from fear to trust. It requires a

listening heart. It means to enter into another's story so that there is dialogue and trust. It's a long road because once our stories are broken open to mystery, once we discover the painfully exhilarating relief of freedom, we want to have our stories always open to the divine Author's hand, until we truly are no longer ourselves, but have become Christ (Galatians 2:20) and live no longer for ourselves but for him (2 Corinthians 5:15).<sup>3</sup>

When we live in the narrative of Mystery, when our story, no matter how faulty, searches for its meaning in the story of God's love—when we hand over our stories to the One who came to teach us a different Story—we see once again the enchantment in religious life, the fascination of religious consecration today. Without these contemplative eyes, it is all too easy to settle for cynicism, to be afraid that there is nothing there, no future for religious life, my community, the church, or vocation ministry. As Father Richard Rohr, OFM

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quoted in his book *Everything Belongs*, “Someone rightly said, ‘The problem is no longer to believe in God, it’s to believe in humanity.’”<sup>4</sup>

It could be a temptation in vocation ministry, as it was no doubt for Paul in Corinth, to believe that all the work is to no purpose. We can be tempted to believe that religious life has lost its purpose and direction, that our community and future may be riddled with too many uncertainties. But this language never entered into Paul’s discourse. He kept doing what was his to do. He spoke from his experience of union with the Master; he took to the road again and again for endless miles continuing to preach the wisdom of the cross; he wrote letters to his communities to help them wrestle with how to live Christ in the midst of their situation. He didn’t need to be Cephas or Apollos, and neither do we need to be Mother Teresa or St. Benedict. We need to do what is ours to do.

At the end of the day may the stories we heard and witnessed and which we lift up in prayer be also our teachers, breaking open our story to the narrative of God’s love reflected in and through us in a myriad of colors, hues and textures.

You, as vocation ministers, *are* Christ, walking among us, telling us what you see in us . . . the fingerprints of the Father. You offer us hope. You heal us with your listening. Your faith keeps us from slipping into depression. Your youthful joy, purified at the foot of the cross as you’ve held the feet of Christ in the life-struggles and wounds candidates and your community have shared with you, warms our hearts. We need you. We need you to be you. We all need you. The church needs you to show us what Love sees when it looks at us.

I plead with you as ambassadors of Christ. Clearly we are at a crossroad in religious life today. How do we see one another? How do we see our future? How do we see the church? How do we present this life to young people today? It is no longer about us. It is about the next generation, and don’t we want young women and men to have the same opportunities we have had to serve the church and the world? No matter what we are living, we have been greatly blessed. We need to communicate how wonderful religious life is.

What does our culture need from us now? In every heart in this room, shaped by so many different charisms of religious life, there is a different answer to this question, a dream different from any other. Can we respect the Mystery in the different responses and the glory in all of our lives of consecration? That’s all we need. All of us here . . . all of us together . . . all of us in Christ. We’ve said our YES to him. Now our “yes” needs to mean YES. We need to be out there among those who will be blessed with the charism we pass on to them.

As Paul said: “It is all God’s work; he reconciled us to himself through Christ, and he gave us the ministry of reconciliation. I mean, God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, not holding anyone’s faults against them, but entrusting to us the message of reconciliation” (2 Corinthians 5:18-19).

So be ambassadors for Christ; it is as though God were urging us, through you. In the name of Christ you appeal to us, all of us in the church, all of us in your communities, all of religious in the United States today, to be reconciled to God. For our sake he made the sinless one a victim for sin, so that we all might become the righteousness of God in him (cf. 2 Corinthians 5:20-21).<sup>5</sup> Amen. ■

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1. Paul tells his side of the story in these passages: 2 Cor 1:8-2:13, 17; 5:11-13; 6:1-13; 7:2-16; 8:1-15 [explanation of the gift for Jerusalem]; 10:1-11:33; 12:13-13:10.
  2. Inspired by the work of Marshall Rosenberg, Ph.D. and Manfred Max-Neef, Ph.D., Chilean economist. © 2005 peace-works Jim & Jori Manske, CNVC certified trainers in nonviolent communications, cnvc.org.
  3. At this point in the presentation, the following YouTube video was shown: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l2zHk95UnsE>.
  4. Richard Rohr. *Everything Belongs*. New York: Crossroads Publishing, 1999, p. 83.
  5. Whatever richness there is in this presentation is due to the 17 women and men religious who listened to drafts of the talk and shared with me and with each other their stories: Sister Avalina Raiwaleta, SMSM; Brother Brendan Corkery, MM; Sister Elaine Lachance, SCIM; Brother Greg McDonald, FMS; Sister Jane Newcomb, SUSC; Sister Joan Grumbach, MMM; Father Joseph Matteucig, SX; Sister Margaret Sullivan CSJ; Sister Marian Batho, CSJ; Sister Marilyn Gignac, SUSC; Sister Margaret Jackson, O.Carm.; Sister Mary Corripio, SND; Sister Mary Sweeney, SC; Sister Mary Theresa O’Reilly, CSJ; Sister Palepa Ioane, SMSM; Father Rocco Puopolo, SX; Father Terrence Devino, SJ. To each of them, and in particular to Sister Marian Batho, CSJ, I express my deepest gratitude.

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A study commissioned by the U.S. bishops reveals characteristics of never-married Catholics who have considered priesthood or religious life. It also points to both vocational challenges and strengths among Hispanics.

## Study looks at vocation consideration; challenges among Hispanics

In 2012 the U.S. bishops commissioned a survey of never-married Catholics about their consideration of a vocation to priesthood or religious life. This has provided a look at data never before collected, and it allows people to examine closely how Hispanics have related to the question of vocations—a particular concern because Hispanics are under-represented in the priesthood and religious life. This latest survey provides insights distinct from those uncovered in the 2009 survey conducted for the National Religious Vocation Conference, which concentrated on the experience of newer members of religious communities. The following article has been compiled from the executive summary of the report, “Consideration of Priesthood and Religious Life Among Never-Married U.S. Catholics,” by Mark M. Gray and Mary L. Gautier of the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate. The full report is available online at [www.usccb.org/vocations](http://www.usccb.org/vocations).

**T**HIS STUDY IDENTIFIES SUBGROUPS in the never-married Catholic population—including teens and adults—and compares those who have considered a vocation at least “a little seriously” to those who say they have not considered this or who say they did so but not seriously.

Overall, 12 percent of male respondents say they considered becoming a priest or brother at least a little seriously. Ten percent of female respondents say they considered becoming

a religious sister at least a little seriously.

Several subgroups were associated with higher rates of vocation consideration. It is important to clarify here that correlation does not equal causation. For example someone who participates in Eucharistic Adoration may be more likely to consider a vocation. But is it this participation that led to the consideration? Probably not. Instead there is likely some third factor (e.g. religiosity) that leads the individual to both participate in Eucharistic Adoration and consider a vocation.

### Four key factors for vocation consideration

That said, the four key subgroups to have considered a vocation are:

1. those who **attended Catholic educational institutions** at any level (excluding parish-based religious education),
2. those who were **encouraged to consider a vocation** by someone else (e.g., family, friends, clergy, religious),
3. those who **personally know priests and men and women religious** (in their extended family or outside of it),
4. those who **participated in parish youth groups**.

Other important subgroups associated with vocation consideration are those who:

- attend Mass weekly (now and in high school),
- lived in households where parents talked to them about religion at least once a week,
- say their faith is the most important part of their life (now and in high school),
- participate in prayer and devotional activities, groups or programs (e.g., Bible study, Eucharistic adoration, retreats or prayer groups),
- pray the rosary at least weekly (alone or in a group),
- belong to a group that encourages devotion to Mary,
- regularly read the Bible or pray with Scripture,
- have participated in parish ministry (e.g., lectors, ministers of holy communion, youth ministers),
- have participated in World Youth Day or a National Catholic Youth Conference,
- have recently accessed religious and spiritual content in traditional or new media.

### *Quick survey facts*

- ◆ **Commissioned by** Secretariat of Clergy, Consecrated Life and Vocations of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, with financial assistance from the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation
- ◆ **Conducted by** Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate, which partnered with Knowledge Networks in May and June 2012
- ◆ **Survey participants** 1,428 never-married Catholics aged 14 or older. Average age: 26-28.

## Age and ethnic differences

The study also showed there are generational differences in the consideration of vocations. A low point appears within the post-Vatican II generation (i.e., those born 1961 to 1981). Fewer than one in 10 male and female respondents of this generation say they have considered a vocation at least “a little seriously.” Vocational consideration appears to rebound slightly among the Millennial generation (i.e., those born after 1981), particularly among men of this generation.

There are few differences related to race and ethnicity. Hispanic respondents—both male and female—are no less likely than others to say they have considered a vocation. The one notable ethnic difference is that Asian Catholic women are about 9-to-10 percent more likely than white or Hispanic women to have considered a vocation.

## Combined influences

Many of the results above are based on rather simple comparisons—whether or not one does something or whether one has or has not been encouraged. The study also weighed the relative importance of each of these factors as being potentially influential to vocational consideration simultaneously—controlling for the effects of all other factors to discern what is most important and to weed out influences that are related to a common cause.

The study revealed that neither ethnicity nor age is a strong predictor of who will consider a vocation, with an exception being that Asian women tend to consider a vocation more than other groups. Among men of all types, Millennial teens (those ages 14 to 17) are less likely than never-married Catholics of the oldest generation (those born before 1943) to say they have considered becoming a priest or religious brother.

## Men who have considered a vocation

Among male respondents, a few characteristics emerged in association with vocation consideration. After controlling for all other factors, those who **attended a Catholic secondary school** (grades 9-12) are more likely to have considered becoming a priest or religious brother. Compared to those who did not attend a Catholic secondary school, these respondents are more than six times as likely to have considered priesthood or religious life.

**Participation in a parish youth group** during primary



Father Shawn McKnight, executive director of the U.S. bishops' Secretariat of Clergy, Consecrated Life and Vocations presented an overview of the study on vocation consideration at the NRVC convocation held in Plano, TX in November 2012.

school years (grades K-8) is also strongly related to vocational consideration. These respondents are more than five times as likely to consider a becoming a priest or religious brother than those who did not participate in a parish youth group. Given that 75 percent of male respondents who have considered a vocation report that they first did so when they were 18 or younger, these two results provide some of the strongest evidence of a possible causal effect.

**Encouragement from others** is also important for men. Respondents who have one person encouraging them are nearly twice as likely to consider a vocation as those who are not encouraged. Each additional person encouraging these respondents increases the likelihood of consideration. The effect is additive. Respondents who had three persons encourage them would be expected to be more than five times more likely to consider a vocation than someone who was not encouraged by anyone.

**Knowing someone who has become a priest, religious sister or brother, or seminarian** also has a positive effect. Respondents who personally know one of these individuals are more than one and a half times more likely than someone who does not to consider a vocation themselves. This effect is also additive, and knowing more of these individuals would

be expected to increase the likelihood of a respondent considering a vocation.

**Attendance at youth events, namely World Youth Day or a National Catholic Youth Conference** has a positive effect for male consideration of a vocation. Those who attended either of these events are more than four times as likely to say they have considered becoming a priest or brother as those who have not.

Finally those who have recently **used traditional media (television, radio, print) to access content about religion** or spirituality in the 12 months prior to the survey are more likely than those who did not to say they have considered a vocation. Note, however, that this media use in most cases occurred well after their initial consideration. Thus, what this more likely demonstrates is that people who have considered a vocation are more likely than those who have not to use television, radio or print media to follow religion and spirituality.

Seventy-five percent of male respondents who have considered a vocation report that they first did so when they were 18 or younger.

Those who have used one type of traditional media in the last year are nearly twice as likely to say they have considered a vocation than those who have not used these media recently. The effect is additive, so use of two or three traditional media to access religious or spiritual content is associated with an even greater likelihood of vocational consideration. This finding is potentially useful in understanding how male never-married Catholics who have considered becoming a priest or religious brother can be reached now.

Note that for men neither generation nor race and ethnicity is statistically significant in the full model. Thus, nothing about a man's age or race and ethnicity is associated with lower or higher likelihoods of vocation consideration, controlling for all other factors. Any disproportionality in the race and ethnicity of men who decide to become priests or religious brothers is, in part, likely to be related to being less likely to attend Catholic schools, being less involved in youth groups, being encouraged less, or not personally knowing clergy or religious. Racial and ethnic disproportionality could also be related to factors that are important *after* individuals consider a vocation, such as meeting requirements for entry into a formation program.

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## Women who have considered religious life

The results for female respondents are parallel in many ways with the men. But there are some differences.

Whereas secondary school is important for male vocational consideration, it is **attendance at a Catholic primary school** which is important for female vocational consideration. Female respondents who attended a Catholic primary school are more than three times as likely as those who did

Women who participated in a parish youth group during their teen years are more than nine times as likely to consider becoming a religious sister.

not to consider becoming a religious sister. Parish youth group participation is also important for female respondents. However, unlike males, it is participation during high school years rather than primary school years, that has an effect. Women who participated in a parish youth group during their teen years are more than

nine times as likely to consider becoming a religious sister.

Similar to male respondents, **encouragement** is also a positive factor. With nearly the same effect as is demonstrated among men, women are nearly twice as likely to consider a religious vocation when encouraged by another person to do so.

Also parallel to men, women who have used **traditional media in the last year to consume or follow religious or spiritual content** are more likely than those who do not to say they have considered a vocation.

Among the adult women surveyed (18 or older) who say they have considered a vocation, most report that they did so between the ages of 13 and 24. Additionally, one in four Catholic females who have considered becoming a religious sister did so before they were a teenager.

Although most Catholics who are becoming priests, religious brothers, or religious sisters now are typically in their 30s or even older, it is likely that the roots of these vocations were established in their teen years or even earlier.

## In their own words

Respondents who said they had never considered a vocation were asked in an open ended question, “Why do you think you have never considered this?” Their responses to this question were coded into categories based on the content.

Among male respondents who have never considered a vocation as a priest or religious brother, the most common responses to the question were related to a general lack of interest (39 percent), celibacy (18 percent), not having a calling to seek a vocation (8 percent), having other life goals (8 percent), and having some doubts about their faith or not feeling religious enough to seek a vocation (8 percent). One percent of comments referenced the issue of sexual abuse of minors by clergy.

Among female respondents who have never considered a vocation as a religious sister, the most common reasons cited were related to a general lack of interest (31 percent), celibacy (16 percent), not having a calling to seek a vocation (11 percent), discomfort with the lifestyle they would need to adopt (10 percent), and having some doubts about their faith or not feeling religious enough to seek a vocation (9 percent).

## Challenges, strengths among Hispanics

Among dioceses and religious communities, the low level of Hispanic vocations is a concern, and this study sheds some light on both challenges and opportunities among this population. According to data from the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA), 35 percent of adult Catholics are Hispanic. But—to take a snapshot of a single year—among those professing perpetual vows in 2011, Hispanics accounted for only 10 percent of women, and 0 percent of men. In dioceses, Hispanics made up just 15 percent of the men ordained in 2012.

The recent study about vocation consideration shows that Hispanic men, in particular, are less likely than their white counterparts to seriously consider life as a priest or brother. Nine percent of non-Hispanic white men who have never married report having “seriously” or “somewhat seriously” considered a vocation. For Hispanics, that number is just five percent.

For women the percentage of those who have seriously considered religious life is the same for both Hispanics and non-Hispanic whites: five percent.

Over the last several years Hispanic vocations to religious life and the priesthood have increased, but their numbers remain disproportionately low. Hispanics are the fastest growing segment of both the U.S. population and the U.S. Catholic population. In his book, *Latino Catholicism: Transformation in America's Largest Church*, Timothy Matovina notes, “No past or present group has had such a dearth of clergy vocations relative to its size as do Latinos.”

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## Less involved in college, Catholic schools

What else does the study of vocation consideration find in regard to Hispanics? Several areas are worth noting, beginning with education. To the degree that vocational formation programs have educational prerequisites including college, Hispanic adult Catholics who have considered a vocation may face additional challenges because Hispanic respondents are the least likely to report attending college or obtaining a college degree. Hispanic respondents are also the least likely to indicate enrollment in a Catholic school at any level of their education. The results of the study suggest that this makes it less likely that they will consider a vocation.

## Devotional life a strength

At the same time, Hispanic respondents are among the most likely to participate in devotional practices and other prayer that is associated with a greater likelihood of considering a vocation. For example a majority of Hispanic adults and teens (63 percent and 53 percent, respectively) indicate that they pray the rosary. By comparison, less than four in ten non-Hispanic white adults and teens say they do so (36 percent and 32 percent, respectively).

## Encouragement lags, citizenship a concern

While their devotional life is strong, Hispanic respondents are among the least likely to report that they have ever been encouraged to seek a vocation. This may be in part because they are less likely to be enrolled in a Catholic school or registered with a Catholic parish. Among Hispanic males who have not considered a vocation seriously, 37 percent agree “somewhat” or “very much” that they have never felt invited by the Catholic Church to consider this. By comparison only 22 percent of non-Hispanic white male respondents indicate this. Lastly it is also the case that family members of Hispanic respondents are less likely to encourage vocations.

Lack of citizenship and desire for children can also be barriers for Hispanic men. One in five Hispanic respondents (21 percent) indicate that citizenship requirements prevented a serious consideration of becoming a priest or religious brother. Two-thirds of Hispanic never-married males (66 percent) agree at least “somewhat” that their desire to be a father prevented them from seriously considering a priestly or religious vocation. By comparison only 51 percent of non-Hispanic white male respondents indicated this.

## Next steps

Although many speak of priest shortages and steep declines in the number of men and women religious, the survey of reveals that there is no shortage of individuals who seriously consider these vocations among never-married Catholics in the United States. Three percent of men say they have “very seriously” considered becoming a priest or religious brother and 2 percent of women indicate they have “very seriously” considered becoming a religious sister. This is equivalent to 350,000 never-married men and more than 250,000 never-married women. Including those who have married, an even larger number of Catholics have very seriously considered a vocation.

Shepherding more of these individuals on the path to seeking a vocation would likely require a combination of greater outreach from the church, encouragement from others, assistance in obtaining educational prerequisites, and the resolution of other issues, such as student loan debt and citizenship status.

Father Shawn McKnight, executive director of the U.S. bishops’ Secretariat of Clergy, Consecrated Life and Vocations, points to four key areas to focus on in light of the study results.

1. Increase the number of people who seriously consider a vocation.
2. Work to move more of those who seriously consider a vocation to take the next step—that is, to talk with someone, get a mentor or spiritual director, etc.
3. Help serious discerners—especially Hispanics and other minorities—to negotiate the challenges of applying to enter a diocesan seminary or a religious community.
4. Create a seminary/novitiate experience that is culturally sensitive and nurturing for all candidates. ■

Hispanic respondents are also the least likely to indicate enrollment in a Catholic school at any level of their education. The results of the study suggest that this makes it less likely that they will consider a vocation.

The latest vocation study provides valuable information about Hispanic never-married Catholics. Nonetheless vocation ministers do well to look at the particularities of sub-groups within the larger Latino population.

# Latino diversity: complex but important to vocation ministry

BY FATHER GARY RIEBE-ESTRELLA, SVD

**I**N THE RECENT STUDY commissioned by the U.S. bishops on vocational discernment among never-married Catholics, the generalizations about why a disproportionately low number of Latino men and women enter priesthood and religious life in the United States ring true: lower attendance at Catholic schools, lack of being invited to consider a vocation; citizenship obstacles.

However, as always, generalizations about Latinos do not reveal the complex diversity of this segment of the U.S. Catholic population. Generalizations engage in the overview, while effective vocation promotion deals with the very concrete groups of potential vocations which populate the Catholic landscape. Effectiveness in vocation ministry relies on identifying the very specific characteristics of each group and of the individuals within it. My intention in this reflection is not to criticize the current study, which adds decisively to what we know of vocational discernment among Latino Catholics who have never married. Rather, my hope is to encourage those engaged on the ground with vocation

promotion to shape strategically their approach to specific segments of this population. This approach could help intensify the effectiveness of their efforts.

There are a number of salient characteristics of the Latino participants in this survey which, were they known, might help vocation directors develop tools better suited for approaching a particular group of potential Latino vocations. I list just a few of these as examples of the need to use a targeted approach to vocation promotion among Latinos.

**U.S.-born Latinos** are more likely to have had their primary experience of church within the framework of a geographic parish. In many cases this may have been an experience of cultural exclusion rather than of inclusion. For this group, vocation literature might want to highlight notes of welcome and of cultural sensitivity in order to be effective. **Non-U.S.-born Latinos**, on the other hand, may have less experience of the institutional church in the U.S. With perhaps fewer negative experiences and with a more family-based religious experience, they might respond to approaches that affirm the value of that particular religious experience.

**The Cuban population** is by far the most well-educated and prosperous segment of the Latino community in the U.S. In this context vocation directors might want to mount vocation programs in Catholic schools in Cuban neighborhoods and to emphasize the richness of the educational training for priesthood and religious life. Latinos of Mexican ancestry, as well as Puerto Ricans, are, on the whole, less well-off and have less experience of education. Reducing their anxiety about the difficulty of achieving

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*Father Gary Riebe-Estrella, SVD belongs to the Divine Word Missionaries and is dean emeritus at Catholic Theological Union in Chicago. A focus of his as a scholar has been theological themes from the experience of U.S. Latinos. He has also worked with congregations admitting people of color.*



educational success in preparing for priesthood and religious life, as well as clearly pointing out what economic resources might be available to help during the discernment period, would be critical.

The majority of Latinos experiencing difficulties with **legal status** in the U.S. are Mexican, since Puerto Ricans are U.S. citizens by birth, and many Cubans have immigrated through special status programs. Issues of legal status should play a far less significant role in vocation promotion among these latter groups, but citizenship should be addressed forthrightly among Latinos of Mexican descent since so much fear and uncertainty surrounds this issue.

The language differences between newer immigrants and native-born people needs to be attended to by vocation directors. However, studies show that the way both groups think about God and the sacred—that is, their **religious imagination**—is more connected with their roots than with the length of their presence in the United States. As a result, vocational materials in English need to reflect the religious world of Latinos. Correspondingly, materials in Spanish cannot simply be translations of materials used for non-Hispanics.

Latino priests and religious are **not interchangeable parts** when it comes to serving as role models to inspire potential candidates to think about a vocation to priesthood or religious life. U.S.-born Latinos do not readily identify with foreign-born Latino priests and religious. Attracting U.S.-born Latino/as to vocational discernment requires the strategic use of their native-born counterparts. The growing number of

non-U.S.-born priests and religious in this country should not raise unrealistic expectations of a rise in native-born vocations.

I encourage vocation ministers to begin learning about the Latino populations that would be a natural part of their outreach. A good place to start might be talking to your members who minister with Latinos. What sub-groups of young Latinos do your members already have contact with? What are the needs of these Latino populations? If your community is in specific geographic areas, consider talking to staff at the diocesan Hispanic Ministry Office or Multicultural Office about the local realities. The more you know about the population that you'd like to invite, the more effective your outreach can be.

What I'm attempting to highlight in this reflection is that, while the recent study done for the U.S. bishops gives us some general factors to pay attention to in all vocation promotion with never-married Latinos, the effectiveness of this promotion will in great part depend on vocation directors getting beyond the overview to see specific characteristics of the Latinos they contact. For effective vocation promotion the layers of diversity within with Latino community need to be peeled back and strategies developed to address the particularity of each group. Just as a one-size-fits-all approach to vocations does not work for the overall population, neither does it work for Latinos ■

For effective vocation promotion the layers of diversity within with Latino community need to be peeled back and strategies developed to address the particularity of each group.

# BOOK NOTES

## Book is a substantive guide to spiritual growth

BY SISTER PATRICIA KENNY, RSM

**T**HE TITLE OF THIS BOOK by Father Daniel Horan, OFM, *Dating God*, is intriguing. Its primary audience is young adults, and the book grew from a primary question: How can I know and love God today? (The full title is *Dating God: Live and Love in the Way of St. Francis*, published by St. Anthony Messenger Press, 2012.)

Daniel Horan is 29, a product of the 80s and 90s, and a member of the Millennial generation. His idea of “dating” God might raise an eyebrow among an older generation, but it is easily understood by Millennials, who are likely to find in this book a helpful guide to spiritual growth. Dating is a way of getting to know someone, finding meaningful connections and taking a natural step in the process of “being in relationship.”

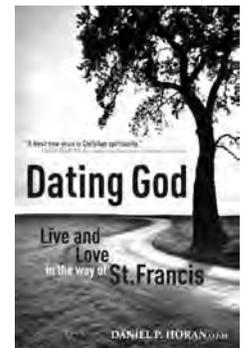
Sister Patricia Kenny, RSM is a Sister of Mercy of the Americas and serves as publications editor in the communications department at the Institute of the Sisters of Mercy office in Silver Spring, Maryland. Her experience living a consecrated life spans more than 50 years and includes ministries in education, housing, leadership and care for retired sisters.



Love grows out of desire; so to speak to young adults about spirituality is to speak about desire. This book reminds us that we learn about love by seeing and sharing love as children, and as we grow up, our desire for love widens. We discover new loves by spending time with them, getting to know what they love, what they desire. Our basic need for love comes from our Creator, the One who plants the seed of love and desire in every heart and waits for that desire to lead that heart back to the Creator.

Horan has written numerous articles on Franciscan spirituality, Thomas Merton and contemporary systematic theology. He taught in the religious studies department at Siena College, has given retreats for young adults and has lectured extensively. He understands the desires of young adults and he knows first hand how their desires for relationship predicate their lives. This is where he begins.

What is a relationship? Where does it start? How does it develop? Why do we seek relationships? Want them? Need them? These questions the writer wants to answer first, and then he gently guides the reader to the real question: why do we seek a relationship with God?



But before we can address these questions, there is yet another question: how do we understand the dual nature of relationship—in this case God and the True Self who is seeking this relationship? True Self is a term coined by Thomas Merton in his book, *Seeds of Contemplation*. He claims that every person is shadowed by an illusory person, a false self, a “man I want myself to be but who cannot exist because God doesn’t know anything about him.” Horan, himself a Merton scholar, devotes the entire second chapter to the importance of finding the person God knows and the challenge this poses in our high-powered, digital-driven, competitive age. The need to meet others’ expectations, to create a persona that will attract favorable attention, or to escape a self-image one does not like can consume all one’s energy. It leaves little or no time and space to find the person God knows and loves.

In subsequent chapters the writer explores the problems and setbacks that can impede one’s search. The first is a natural but disabling fear of loneliness. Our world today is so frenetic, loud, high-powered and high-pressured, we cannot imagine a time free of these attributes. But genuine solitude, extended times of isolation and silence are essential in this search. Planning such times, making that kind of space in a busy life is like making a date with God. The writer relates his own first experience of living in a hermitage for a week with no conversation, no TV, radio, phone or Internet. As an extrovert he wasn’t sure he could do it. But it is powerful to read about his gradual awareness that God was there, just waiting for Horan’s slow but steady awareness of him.

Another chapter is devoted to the place of Scripture in discovering the God who is not only an historic figure, a master teacher and the Messiah—but also a lover. He calls Scripture God’s love letters to us. His chapter on “being for others as God is for us” is a remarkable weaving together of the two faces of the same coin which we know as action and contemplation. “We cannot live a Christian life alone,” Horan asserts. “We must live as active and engaged members of the community of believers.”

The author also insists that a shift in our lifestyle is essential: i.e. deliberately placing ourselves among those we serve and breaking with the cultural ties and social class values that can inhibit our search for a relationship with God. This perspective may give many a seeker pause, just as it did when Jesus spoke to the rich young man who sought a closer tie—a fuller spirituality—but could not accept the price.

In the final chapters the writer describes the choice the seeker must recognize in his or her perception of the world: seeing creation as either “humanity’s playground” or “God’s house.” The former is the “dominion” model that prevails in the modern world where humanity sees itself as lord and master of the world. The other is the “kinship” model in which humanity is not just a caretaker but intimately connected to the whole cosmic family. Living in relationship with God means embracing the whole, living gladly and peaceably with Brother Sun, Sister Moon and Mother Earth, with all creatures great and small and with one another.

As a Franciscan, Horan leans toward a Franciscan view of the world, nature and human relationships, but this in no way diminishes the relevance of his message. He acknowledges Francis of Assisi’s rejection of the wealth and power that characterized success and his desire to isolate himself from the frivolities of his day. But Horan also warns against the dangers of letting this search for relationship become a “God and me” thing. He insists that it should overflow to be a life-giving source of service to the whole human family. I cannot think of any apostolic religious community that might disagree with that. Contemplative communities also maintain a focus on the needs of the whole human family and adopt ministries to provide service, albeit indirectly, to the people of God.

*Dating God* is not a self-help book. It is a series of reflections on the meaning of prayer and relationships for those who seek God today. It is written in a way that is familiar to young people. Yet it spares no hard truths, makes no attempts to sugar-coat the potential pitfalls, both those we encounter along the way and those we bring with us. It lays out the essential steps and invites the seeker to risk the journey.

As a resource for vocation and formation ministers, this book offers anecdotes and examples that could prove helpful in discerning a candidate’s readiness to “move on” as well as lecture or conversation material that blends contemporary analogies and age-old wisdom. Each chapter is followed by a series of reflection questions equally suitable for private meditation or group interaction. Franciscans will find more familiar stories and references perhaps, but young adults and those in search of a serious relationship with God whatever their affiliations, will find this highly recommended little book a welcome companion in their journey. ■

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