

# HORIZON



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# HORIZON



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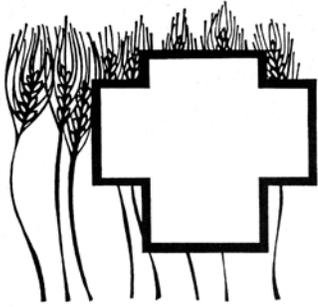
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*HORIZON* serves as a resource:

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# EDITOR'S NOTE

## Deepening our wisdom about discernment

I HAD A TASTE OF VOCATION MINISTRY myself last year. When my son was wrestling with a choice between two universities, both very distinct, I found myself in the role of helping him to discern. I encouraged him to pray. I urged him to imagine the decision was made—how did he feel about it? I helped him list the pros and cons of each college. I found that as his confidant, I, too, had to wrestle and pray and gather and list information, just as he did. In the end, after plenty of prayer and consultation with others, my husband and I realized that our son needed a push. He needed and wanted our advice; we gave it, and that tipped the decision.

That experience showed me that accompanying a person in discernment can feel like as much effort as being the discerner. You need the same skills and then some because you're expected to teach the other the art of listening to God and understanding one's self. Discernment is a skill and an art that is honed over a lifetime, that becomes part of our way of life. My son will face many more important decisions, and I hope as he matures he'll get better at it.

Because discernment is so central to vocation ministry, we have devoted this edition to looking at it

from a variety of perspectives. We ask what wisdom the Franciscan and Benedictine traditions have to offer on the subject. How do one's feelings fit into the process? What should vocation ministers understand about Latino young adults to better accompany them? A campus minister shares her experience of teaching college students how to develop their own personal discernment models.

In addition to our theme articles, vocation ministers from the Milwaukee area outline a successful model for bringing together congregational leadership and vocation and formation ministers to examine how they are conducting this ministry. We also present the message that NRVC executive director Brother Paul Bednarczyk, CSC gave to Milwaukee area leaders and ministers.

May the collected wisdom in these articles help all of you who have the sacred duty of walking alongside those who are making life decisions. May your own skill and judgement increase so that a new generation can listen and respond to God's call.

—Carol Schuck Scheiber, editor



St. Francis and St. Clare left some hints about how to discern God's call. Their three-fold way calls for conversion, intimacy with Jesus and union with the larger Christian community.

# Discernment with a little help from Francis and Clare

BY FRIAR GILBERTO CAVAZOS-GONZÁLEZ, OFM

**A**CCORDING TO THE DICTIONARY, discernment is the process of coming to insight and comprehension; it is the ability to grasp and understand what is obscure or unclear<sup>1</sup>. The word comes from the Latin *discretio* (discretion, prudence, good judgment). In early Christian tradition *discretio* was tied to the concept of "discernment of spirits" found in 1 Corinthians, 12:10 and 1 John 4:1. *Discretio* may have been a practice borrowed from the Essenes at Qumran. For this monastic community, discernment of spirits meant examining the spirit and actions of the candidates to their way of life<sup>2</sup>. People in the first Christian century believed that people could be possessed by either good or evil spirits. These spirits were the attitudes and inclinations that motivated a person's words and deeds. They had to be scrutinized and judged by their fruits.

In the New Testament Jesus himself recommended discerning between true and false prophets (Mark 7:16). In his first letter John warns us not to trust every spirit, rather we are to put them to the test (John 4:1). This discernment involves examining them against the Spirit of God. The Spirit acknowledges Jesus Christ come in the flesh. Any spirit that recognizes the Incarnate Word of God in Jesus is of God. These spirits are enlightened by the Holy Spirit, and according

to Paul they produce good fruit: charity (love), joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, forbearance, compassion and self-control (Galatians 5:22-23).

In the Middle Ages discernment of spirits focused more on one's own interior disposition. Christians could not be satisfied with living a good life based on external rules and norms of behavior. As they grew in faith they hopefully would come to the desire to follow God's call (vocation). They would need to be guided by internal, elevated principles as they sought to follow God's will.

In our day discernment of spirits is meant to help us assess the inspirations, intuitions, impulses and affective states that motivate the overall direction of our lives. Discernment is about coming to an awareness of God's call in our lives. This call is often unclear and requires the insight that only faith and the Holy Spirit can give. For Franciscans discernment is about knowing whether or not one has the Spirit of the Lord.<sup>3</sup> The Holy Spirit inspires us both from within ourselves as well as from outside of ourselves. Therefore discerning the Spirit's movements requires looking closely at our interiority and our relationships, both of which can be the instrument of God's call.

## Francis, Clare and the spirit of the Lord

Both St. Clare and St. Francis gave great importance to the Holy Spirit in the lives of all believers. Their early biographers describe them as people who were enlightened by and filled with the Holy Spirit. In his Rule of Life Francis invites the friars to desire to have the Holy Spirit operating in their lives, so they might persevere in their calling to follow the Gospel.<sup>4</sup> This perseverance that only the Spirit of God can

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give is something that Clare writes about in her second Letter to Agnes of Prague. Besides help in perseverance, Clare and Francis both looked to the Spirit of God for instruction and inspiration so that they might fulfill God's plan for their lives.

As a Franciscan I find that discernment of God's plan in one's life is threefold. First there is the initial discernment process that brings one to religious, married, clerical, or single life. Secondly there is a discernment that leads one to a job, a task and/or a ministry. Finally there is an ongoing discernment that permeates the first two with hearing God call in the routine, day in, day out and sometimes special experiences we call daily living (*cotidianidad* in Spanish).

## My discernment story

Before going any further I'd like to share my initial discernment to Franciscan life. Like most Catholics, as a young man I had no idea that there were different types of priests in the church. I simply found myself attracted to priesthood. When I got to high school, I began looking into how to become a priest. My parish priest sent me to a vocation director, and upon graduation I found myself in a diocesan seminary. After three years I still felt called to priesthood, but I was miserable with diocesan life.

I was blessed with a terrific spiritual director who gave me a book on St. Francis of Assisi and the early Franciscans. I devoured the book. Around the same time a friend took me to see the movie *Brother Sun, Sister Moon*, which happened to be at a local theater. Afterward I went back to my spiritual director wanting to know if the Order of Friars Minor still existed. He laughed and pulled out a Catholic directory. I was faced with two pages of addresses for Franciscan vocation

directors for men. All I had to do was choose. But how to discern between so many addresses? I chose a discernment process that was simple and fair. I covered my eyes and pointed to an address.

I wrote and got invited to visit a friary. Once I again I was blessed. God had me point to the address of the Franciscan province of which I am still a member.

Whenever I am asked how I knew this was the right vocation for me, I respond that somehow I knew where God was leading me. In a year-long process God kept opening the way: a spiritual director, a book, a movie, pointing to an address, an invitation to "come and see." All these things eventually got me to a friary in San Antonio, TX for an initial visit. My desire to join the brothers grew, despite the fact that being a friar minor would mean not living close to my family.

Every discernment needs a confirmation. It was during my visit to St. Joseph's friary that I got my confirmation. The Old Testament reading for the first Mass I attended with the friars was the call of Abraham in the Book of Genesis. As I heard the words, "Go forth from the land of your kinsfolk and from your father's house to a land that I will show you" (Genesis 12:1), I felt that the Franciscan way of life was indeed the land God had in mind for me. I no longer felt called to be a secular priest; in my discernment, I realized I was called to be a friar minor.

I imagine some might question the seriousness of my discernment process. It seems to be based on signs and happenstance more than reflection and meditation. I have

The Holy Spirit inspires us both from within ourselves as well as from outside of ourselves. Therefore discerning the Spirit's movements requires looking closely at our interiority and our relationships.

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to admit that as a graduate school professor I question the discernment process God took me through to bring me to the Franciscan family. It just doesn't seem all that rational. Still I cannot deny that I am happy as a friar. God has a rationality that we do not understand.

## The triple Franciscan way

As a friar in initial formation I was introduced to the life of

Franciscan discernment is not something that we can do alone. In addition to the illumination of God's Spirit, the assistance of the friars, sisters, the people of God and the hierarchy of the church is also needed.

Francis, Clare and some of the early friars. I was pleased to note that their initial discernment process involved hearing God's voice in the Sacred Scriptures, especially the Gospel. A year-long series of events took Francis to Mass on February 24, 1208. It was there that he heard Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew proclaim:

"Do not go into pagan territory [...] As you go, make this proclamation: 'The kingdom of heaven is at hand.' [...] Without cost you have received; without cost you are to give. Do not take gold or silver or copper for your belts; no sack for the journey, or a second tunic, or sandals, or walking stick. [...] As you enter a house, wish it peace. If the house is worthy, let your peace come upon it; if not, let your peace return to you" (Matthew 10:5-13).

Francis was overjoyed, because he had found what he was looking for; what he wanted with all his heart. Friar Tom Speier sees in this event of Francis' life the key for all Franciscan, if not Christian discernment<sup>5</sup>: "What is it that I want with all my heart? What is my heart's desire?" The "heart's desire" is the key to and the "governing grace" of the discernment process. For in my heart's desire I find the call and plan of God for my life.

Basing himself on the work of St. Bonaventure, Tom describes the ongoing discernment process in terms of the Threefold Way.

1) The **purgative way** is the way of conversion, and

purgative discernment involves the search for Christian identity. In Francis' life this discernment happened in misinterpreted dreams of greatness, in misunderstanding the voice of the crucifix at San Damiano, in kissing the leper and in stripping before his father. In Clare's life the purgative way happened in her pre-conversion encounters with Francis, her helping the poor; her flight to the Portiuncula and her eventual enclosure at San Damiano.

2) The **illuminative way** is the way of discipleship, and illuminative discernment requires building intimacy with Jesus Christ. For Francis this led him to hear Jesus' call in Matthew's Gospel, in his life with the brothers. It also led him to ask Clare and Sylvester to help him discern between the ministry of preaching or a life of prayer, as well as to discern many other life choices. For Clare this led her to hear God's call in the struggles she had with Francis and the pope as to her way of life, and in her life with the sisters. It also led her into correspondence with Agnes of Prague.

3) The **unitive way** is the way of communion, and unitive discernment invites us to share the Lord's Spirit with the larger Christian community and the world around us. In Francis' life the unitive way led to preaching, writing the Rule, letting go of leadership, receiving the stigmata and creating the "Canticle of the Sun." In Clare's life the unitive way led to her miracles of liberation, writing the Rule, accepting leadership, years of illness and her mystical writing.

As you can see there is a progression in discernment and growth. Once they had discerned a call to abandon the "world," Francis and Clare had to espouse the ongoing process of discernment of choosing between goods. Francis had to discern between a life in hermitage or preaching. Clare discerned between traditional monastic life or a life of poverty. In their lives the way of conversion, the way of discipleship and the way of communion became integrated into one way of life. Because of this, they are held up as the models of Franciscan discernment.

## Helping one another discern

Franciscan discernment recognizes one's poverty and limitations. We are a part of a reality called the world around us, the church we belong to and the brotherhood and sisterhood we share as members of the Franciscan family.<sup>6</sup> Franciscan discernment is not something that we can do alone. In addition to the illumination of God's Spirit, the assistance of the friars, sisters, the people of God and the hierarchy of the church is also needed. This assistance often includes prayer,

struggle, dialogue, listening and even misunderstanding. But eventually it needs to lead to what one's conscience dictates. Ultimately Franciscan discernment respects the individual before God without sacrificing the communal. In this process we are called to purge each other of anything that might keep us from possessing the Holy Spirit and his operation in our lives. We are also called to mutual illumination about where we feel God is calling each other, and finally we are called to union because what the individual brother or sister is called to do will necessarily affect the whole community.

We Franciscans belong to communities and are very much involved in each other's lives. Oftentimes we see our brothers and sisters undergoing a process of discernment. We may even be invited to participate in it. Such seems to be the case of Francis and Leo. Leo was a younger friar to whom Francis was very close. They spent a lot of time together and would often talk about how to best serve God. From Francis' letter to Leo one can surmise that they must have had a disagreement as to how Leo could better live the Gospel. Leo probably felt called to something that Francis did not understand. Francis was older, wiser and often stubborn. He would have tried to convince Leo to see things his way. Leo resisted.

According to Francis' Rule and to Clare's Form of Life, we are to love each other with a love that surpasses that of a mother. In this spirit Francis begins his letter to Leo, "I am writing to you as a mother would her son." Francis realizes that he has been acting like a bossy father to Leo and he is sorry. Leo and all of us have only one Father and that is God. In medieval Europe the task of the mother was to prepare the children to do the father's will. In taking the maternal role Francis is reminding all the friars and sisters that when it comes to helping another discern, we can only help prepare them for an encounter with God. God will tell them what to do.<sup>7</sup>

In Leo's case Francis has to come to grips with the reality that God seems to be calling Leo in ways that Francis does not comprehend. So he writes in his letter: "In whatever way you feel that you can best do God's will and follow in his footprints and in poverty, do so with God's blessing and my obedience."

Francis had to love Leo as a mother and even more than a mother; he had to love him like a brother and maybe even learn from Leo's understanding of what God wanted. Franciscan discernment doesn't end with this letting the sister or brother go and do what God wants. In Francis' letter it ends with an invitation: "If it is necessary for your soul and

consolation to come to me, Leo, come!" Being both mother and sibling to one's spiritual brothers and sisters requires that discernment of God's will be a mutual and continuous walking together in the way of the Spirit. ■

1. "Discernment," Merriam-Webster's Online Dictionary, <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/discernment> (accessed July 23, 2008).

2. Much of the information for this and the next three paragraphs can be found in J. Pegon,

R. Studzinski, "Discernment, Spiritual," *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, 42nd ed. (Washington DC: Catholic University of America, 2002), 765-767.

3. Admonitions 12.

4. RnB: Non Approved Rule 10.

5. Friar Tom Speier, OFM, Francis of Assisi sources: *A Franciscan Approach to Spiritual*

*Direction and Directed Retreats*, 4th ed. (Cincinnati: St. Francis Friary, 2001), 11-13; 57-62. Clare of Assisi sources: *A Clarian approach to Spiritual Direction and Directed Retreats*, 2nd ed. (Cincinnati: St. Francis Friary, 2001), 22-25; 89-97.

6. Sister Margaret Halaska, OSF "A Model of Discernment: The Experience of a Franciscan," *Review for Religious* 43 (1984): 260.

7. Friar Gilberto Cavazos-González, OFM, "Greater than a Mother's Love: Kinship in the Spirituality of Francis and Clare of Assisi." Pars Dissertationis. *Facultas Theologiae Lectio Spiritualitas Thesis ad Lauream* 383 (Romae: Pontificium Athenaeum Antonianum, 2001), 166-167.

Franciscan discernment recognizes one's poverty and limitations. We are a part of a reality called the world around us, the church we belong to and the brotherhood and sisterhood we share as members of the Franciscan family.

Sorting out our calling involves a balance between contemplative, inward listening *to* our hearts and outward, socially-engaged listening *with* our hearts to the needs and pains of the world.

# The heart's calling: feelings in vocational self-discovery

BY JOHN NEAFSEY

**A**S A PERSON WHO WORKS both as a practicing clinical psychologist and as a college theology teacher, I have an interdisciplinary interest in the psychology and the spirituality of vocational self-discovery, especially in the ways these come together in the affective dimensions of our inner experience, because vocation is very much a matter of the heart. Callings come to us, first of all, by way of the heart. We “hear” them by listening to our hearts or with our hearts. In my clinical work and in my teaching and mentoring of students, I am often in the privileged position of helping young people learn to listen to their hearts for clues to life directions that hold the potential for deeper joy and meaning, greater emotional and spiritual health.

I'm also interested in the moral and social and political dimensions of these matters of the heart. In recent years, especially since the 9/11 attacks and the onset of the Iraq War, I have found myself increasingly preoccupied with the deep connection between personal calling and social conscience, with the ways that the inner voice of conscience speaks through the feelings that are evoked in our hearts by trouble and suffering in the world.<sup>1</sup> Since vocation is not only about

“me” and my personal fulfillment but about “us” and the common good, we must seek a discerning balance between contemplative inward listening and outward, socially-engaged listening, between listening *to* our hearts and listening *with* our hearts for the ways that the needs and pains of our world are calling out for intelligent, compassionate attention. In Frederick Buechner's words, our callings are found in the places where our “deep gladness” and the “world's deep hunger” meet, on the holy ground where our heart's desire comes together with what the world most needs *from* us.<sup>2</sup>

I would like to offer some reflections on affective dimensions of vocational self-discovery that I think are relevant to discernment in any important matter of love or work or conscience. My hope is that these thoughts might also be helpful to vocation ministers and others who are in a position to assist men and women in discerning whether they are called to vowed religious life. Although I am not involved in vocation ministry, I have had considerable experience working through the process of psychotherapy with men and women who are considering religious life or who are members of religious communities, some of whom are experiencing a “vocation crisis” and find themselves wrestling with high-stakes questions about whether religious life is fitting for them.

## Listening to feelings

Careful attention to our feelings is one of the primary tools we have for discerning our callings, for hearing the still, small voice of the Spirit that calls us to become the unique persons we are meant to be, to do the particular things that only we are meant to do during our short lives on this earth. This is consistent with the core insight of St. Ignatius Loyola, whose Spiritual Exercises center around the simple but profound

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insight that thoughtful consideration and interpretation of the interior inclinations and desires of our hearts can help us to discern God's unique will for our lives.<sup>3</sup>

Carl Jung, an unconventional psychological theorist with a deep interest in spiritual matters, understood the sense of vocation as an urge to self-realization originating in the deep, unconscious, inner self of the human person. From his perspective, the voice of vocation is the voice of our inmost self or conscience, which, for him, was the psychological equivalent of God.<sup>4</sup> In Jung's view, the Self (he capitalized the word to distinguish it from our everyday ego identity and to highlight its association with things deep and sacred) functions like an inner voice that calls and guides us from within through a life-long process of self-discovery and self-realization that he called *individuation*.

The affective promptings of our inner self help to orient and guide us on the path to healing, wholeness and meaning. "The Self is the principle and archetype of orientation and meaning," wrote Jung. "Therein lies its healing function."<sup>5</sup> More and more it seems to me that the central task of both psychotherapy and spiritual discernment is to get oriented, to discern a healthy, fitting and worthy sense of direction in life. This emerges only through careful and thoughtful consideration of the life options and directions before us to discern whether they are in accord with the authentic desires and inclinations of our deeper self.

On a psychological level, the inner voice makes itself known through the emotional urgings and resistances of our own hearts. We hear a "yes" or "no" from within our very being about whether or not a path is right for us. On a spiritual level, when we move in the right direction we experience the kind of affective stirrings of peace and joy that Ignatius referred to as "consolation." Such feelings can be interpreted as indicators that we are moving in a direction that is in tune with God's will

for us. On the other hand, when we move in a direction that is wrong for us, we experience a sense of inner darkness or "desolation."

In *Listening to the Music of the Spirit*, David Lonsdale, SJ provides a helpful summary of the Ignatian view of how our feelings can give us important information about where we stand in relation to God:

The practice of discernment relies on the fact that all the different dimensions of the human person are interconnected and interact with each other. When, at the deepest level of being, we move toward God or in opposition to God, this movement has its repercussions in our affective life: our conscious feelings, moods and desires are touched. Similarly in the other direction: when our feelings are stirred by our experience of the world around us, this has its repercussions at the deeper level of how we actually stand in relation to God. Thus our affective movements and responses, which we can relatively easily be aware of and name, are signs of how we actually stand in relation to God at a deeper, more hidden level of ourselves.<sup>6</sup>

More and more it seems to me the central task of both psychotherapy and spiritual discernment is to get oriented, to discern a healthy, fitting and worthy sense of direction in life.

## Authenticity and rightness

At the heart of discernment is the *authenticity* question, "Who am I?" and the *desire* question, "What do I really want?" We cannot answer one without the other.<sup>7</sup> The secret of vocation, according to Father Michael Himes, is to "discover what it is you most truly and deeply want when you are most really

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and truly you.” Desires that orient us in the direction of our true calling originate in our true self or “best self.” “When you are at your best,” Himes asks, “what is it that you most truly desire?”<sup>8</sup> From a spiritual perspective, it is possible to see our deepest and most authentic desires as God’s desires in us or for us. James Fowler put it well: “What God wants for us and from us has something central to do with what we most

An authentic calling should feel right, and so a crucial criterion is the degree of intuitive rightness we experience in connection with the direction before us.

deeply and truly want for ourselves.”<sup>9</sup>

In my experience, one of the most useful affective criteria to consider in vocational discernment is the degree to which we experience a *sense of authenticity* in relation to any particular life choice or direction we are considering or pursuing. In certain

situations or activities, or with certain people, we experience a felt connection to our personal emotional truth, to our “real self” or “true self.” In a letter to his wife William James wrote of the sense of emotional vitality and integrity and wholeness that accompanies such experiences:

I have often thought that the best way to define a person’s character would be to seek out the particular mental or moral attitude in which, when it came upon them, they felt most deeply and intensely active and alive. At such moments there is a voice inside which speaks and says, “This is the real me!”<sup>10</sup>

Such experiences can serve as important touchstones or reference points in our efforts to discern whether the paths we are considering are consistent with who we really are—with the “real me.” In contrast are the times we experience a jarring sense of inauthenticity or inner dissonance—a disconnect from the “real me.” In such moments it is as if we catch ourselves in the act of trying to be someone we’re not.

The felt sense of authenticity can also be seen as an intuition of the degree of “rightness” or fit of the path we are considering. An authentic calling should *feel* right, and so a crucial criterion to consider in our discernment is the degree of intuitive rightness we experience in connection with the direction before us. Put very simply, if it is right or fitting for us, we feel “right with God.” And we also feel right with ourselves. On the other hand, if something is not right or

fitting for us, to one degree or another we feel out-of-synch, at odds with ourselves. On a deeper spiritual level we feel at odds with God.

Intuition is itself a kind of inner voice that can give us useful information and guidance from within. For example, we might have an uneasy feeling that a particular career move or relationship is simply not right for us. Something feels “off.” We may not be able to explain it; we just know it. On the other hand, in a moment of blessed clarity, we might experience a consoling intuition that a particular course of action or relationship is just right for us—a sense that things are “meant to be.” “To be meant,” says James Hillman, “implies a transcendent power that calls, chooses or means something with one, a power that gives meaning.”<sup>11</sup>

Joseph Campbell’s famous advice that we should “follow our bliss” in matters of vocation is based on the assumption that we possess an intuitive capacity to recognize the kinds of things that give us personal joy and meaning—and the kinds of things that *don’t*.<sup>12</sup> And so there is a kind of emotional or spiritual intelligence we can bring to bear in important decisions about the direction of our lives.

Vocational discernment, however, is not just a simple matter of trusting our hearts, because intuitions and feelings are sometimes wrong. Consulting our hearts is essential when making important choices, but there is certainly also a place for our “heads” in making complex, high-stakes decisions. “Discernment and decision-making demand a balanced perspective,” writes Michael O’Sullivan. “Put simply, it is all right to trust our feelings as long as we use our heads.”<sup>13</sup>

## Personal vocation and social conscience

There are also moral and social and political dimensions to these matters of the heart. In recent years I have found myself increasingly preoccupied with the deep connection between personal calling and social conscience. I’m especially interested in the role of conscience in callings to compassionate service, social justice, peacemaking and responsible global citizenship. In my book, *A Sacred Voice is Calling: Personal Vocation and Social Conscience*, I explore some especially challenging issues of conscience and calling for American Christians in relation to contemporary issues such as global poverty, the Iraq War, torture and the marked erosion of respect for human rights in our country in the years since 9/11.<sup>14</sup> In discerning our callings it is particularly important to pay attention to the issues and people in our world that move our hearts to passion and compassion,

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because the inner voice often speaks through the “moral tug” on our heart that pulls or draws us in one way or another, to do this instead of that, to be this kind of person versus that kind of person as we make our way through the world.<sup>15</sup>

## Sizing up our social reality

Vocational discernment pertains to more than personal efforts to evaluate and interpret the complex crosscurrents of our inner experience. It also involves cultivating a critical and discerning consciousness about our social reality. Just as we attempt to discern the various competing and sometimes contradictory spirits and inclinations within ourselves, we must also evaluate the origins and aims of the forces and trends operating in our social world so that we can know which to support and which to resist. We must learn to read the signs of the times in order to differentiate between the authentic voice of vocation and what Buechner calls “the great, blaring, boring, banal voice of mass culture.”<sup>16</sup> Our ability to size up and critique our social reality helps us to discern our social responsibilities within it, and it helps us figure out how to best use our energies and talents for the common good.

Father Jon Sobrino, SJ, the Jesuit liberation theologian from El Salvador, offers an evocative view of vocation as hearing the word of reality. “If reality speaks,” he says, “and God can speak in it, especially when it cries out, then listening to it is a necessary way of realizing our humanity.”<sup>17</sup> By “reality” he means particularly the reality of social suffering—especially the painful reality of people who are suffering needlessly in unjust poverty or because of unjust war. One of the most important ways we “hear” the cry of the poor and the oppressed is through our heart’s response to their need and pain. Sobrino says the natural response of the human heart to injustice and inhumanity always consists of some combination of compassion and indignation.<sup>18</sup>

Compassion is a particular kind of feeling we experience when we are moved by the need or suffering of others. We feel for the sufferers, or with the sufferers, and our heart response is always accompanied by an inclination toward action—a desire to do something to relieve the suffering. Compassion is also often accompanied by a sense of indignation—a kind of holy anger or outrage that people should even have to suffer needlessly in such situations in the first place. With indignation comes an inclination to do justice—to do something to change or remove the unjust social conditions, policies or ideologies that are causing the hurt or deprivation

in the first place. Callings to service and justice originate in these stirrings of compassion and indignation in our hearts.

On a deeper spiritual level, feelings of compassion and indignation can put us in touch with the heart of God. This is because they help us to know something of God’s grief and heartache over how badly things are going for so many of God’s children in this world. Jeremiah, the grief-stricken prophet, is a poignant example: “For the hurt of my poor people I am hurt.”<sup>19</sup> In the spirit of Jeremiah the vocational question could be framed as identifying the people for whom we hurt.

“What matters,” writes José Garcia, “is that the world should touch the heart and that the heart should go out towards the world.”<sup>20</sup> To whom does our heart go out the most?

We tune into such feelings not for the sake of getting depressed and overwhelmed by the world’s problems, but with the aim of opening ourselves to “hearing the word of reality” so that we can discern what we are called to do about it. Discernment of which particular social responsibilities or issues we are called to take on always begins with this kind of attention to the movements or inclinations of our hearts so that we can see what is stirring and where we are drawn. Dr. Paul Farmer, an inspiring American doctor who has made an option for the poor by founding Partners in Health to provide medical care to the destitute sick in Haiti and elsewhere, believes that we should always consider how any important vocational choice we make will affect the poor. He suggests that we reflect on the following question in our discernment: How is this relevant to the suffering of the poor and to the relief of that suffering?<sup>21</sup>

Although it is easy to become discouraged at a time when our country appears to have lost its moral bearings, there are signs of hope all around. One of the most encouraging is the growing number of young people who appear to be experiencing genuine callings to a great variety of forms of countercultural service to the human community. Sometimes this occurs within the countercultural context of religious life, but more often it takes place through various forms of secular ministry in the world. Some find themselves called to engage in principled opposition and dissent against some of the unfortunate directions our country has taken in

Vocational discernment involves cultivating a critical and discerning consciousness about our social reality.

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recent years (e.g., antiwar activity, advocacy against torture, etc.). Initial inklings of such callings are often experienced on an emotional level, e.g., through feelings of anxiety or anger or shame or guilt or grief or sorrow. These feelings

Feelings of compassion and indignation can put us in touch with the heart of God. This is because they help us to know something of God's grief and heartache over how badly things are going for so many of God's children in this world.

can be understood as the emotional echoes of the inner voice of conscience resonating in the hearts of many young men and women today.

In dark times like these, our consciences should be uneasy, our hearts should be troubled. Such feelings are indicators that our consciences are in good working order, that we have a heart, that we are human. In a global

situation of expanding inequity and injustice, and in a nation caught up in a war regarded as unwise and unjust by most of the world, it may be that an uneasy conscience is one of the best places to listen for the whisper of the Spirit that calls us to a better way. ■

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1. Much of the material in this article is drawn or adapted from my book, *A Sacred Voice is Calling: Personal Vocation and Social Conscience* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2006).
  2. Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Seeker's ABC* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1993), 119.
  3. The psychology of discernment in Ignatian spirituality is examined in my chapter "Psychological Dimensions of the Discernment of Vocation," which can be found in *Re-Visiting the Idea of Vocation: Theological Explorations*, edited by John Haughey, SJ (Washington, DC: Catholic University Press, 2004).
  4. C.G. Jung, *Memories, Dreams, and Reflections* (New York: Vintage Books, 1965).
  5. Jung, *Memories, Dreams, and Reflections*, 199.
  6. David Lonsdale, SJ, *Listening to the Music of the Spirit: The Art of Discernment* (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 1992), 72-73.
  7. Father E. Edward Kinerk, SJ, "Eliciting Great Desires: Their Place in the Spirituality of the Society of Jesus," *Studies*

- in the Spirituality of Jesuits, 16, no. 5, (November 1984):1-34.
8. Father Michael J. Himes, *Doing the Truth in Love: Conversations About God, Relationships, and Service* (New York: Paulist Press, 1995), 56.
9. James Fowler, *Weaving the New Creation: Stages of Faith and the Public Church* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991), 123.
10. Henry James, ed., *The Letters of William James*, (Boston: The Atlantic Monthly Press, 1920), 199. I have taken the liberty of using gender-neutral language in the quotation.
11. James Hillman, *Insearch: Psychology and Religion*, Second Revised Edition (Woodstock, CT: Spring Publications, 1967/1994), 66-67.
12. See "Sacrifice and Bliss" chapter in Joseph Campbell (with Bill Moyers), *The Power of Myth* (NY: Doubleday, 1988).
13. Michael J. O'Sullivan, SJ, "Trust Your Feelings but Use Your Head." *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits*, 22, no. 4, (1990): 36.
14. Neafsey, *A Sacred Voice is Calling*.
15. Enda McDonagh speaks of the "tug of the moral" in our lives. See his essay, "The Structure and Basis of Moral Experience," *Introduction to Christian Ethics: A Reader*, ed. Ronald P. Hamel and Kenneth R. Himes (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1989), 106-119.
16. Frederick Buechner, *The Hungering Dark* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985), 29.
17. Father Jon Sobrino, SJ, *Where Is God? Earthquake, Terrorism, Barbarity, and Hope* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2004), 45.
18. Father Jon Sobrino, SJ, "Human Rights and Oppressed Peoples: Historical-Theological Reflections," in *Truth and Memory: The Church and Human Rights in El Salvador and Guatemala*, ed. M. A. Hayes and D. Tombs (London: Gracewing, 2001), 134-158.
19. Jeremiah 8:21-9:1.
20. José Garcia, "The School of the Heart," *The Way*, 42, no. 2 (2003): 10.
21. Paul Farmer, *Pathologies of Power: Health, Human Rights, and the New War on the Poor* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003). Farmer's fascinating and inspiring personal story is told in a recent biography by Tracy Kidder, *Mountains Beyond Mountains: The Quest of Dr. Paul Farmer, A Man Who Would Cure the World* (New York: Random House, 2004).

When vocation ministers understand and embrace the rich cultural traditions of Latinos, they can better accompany them along the road to religious life.

# Making a vocation journey with a Latino young adult

BY FATHER ROBERT JUÁREZ

IT'S A NICE SATURDAY AFTERNOON, and the vocation director is on his way to make a family visit at the home of a Mexican-born young man who has decided to apply to the seminary. This 23-year-old was a self-starter and quite successful in his landscaping business. He was brought to the U.S. as an 8-year-old child, and his family never had the financial means or perhaps the sophistication to address immigration issues. Therefore he was unable to work in the public sector because he lacked the necessary documents. But that did not stop him. His entrepreneurial spirit gave him a legitimate and wholesome way to make a livelihood for himself and his family.

He is a very bright young man. He makes time to accomplish college courses even with a full-time business. In fact he graduated from his university studies with a 3.5 grade point average. He also has plenty of pastoral experience and a loving heart for serving God and God's people. Not a hint of entitlement has touched this young man's spirit; on the contrary, he is the first to express gratitude for the least that is afforded to him in his vocation journey.

Well, the vocation director arrives at the house. He has a bouquet of flowers in hand to present as a gesture of gratitude to the parents. The vocation director knocks on the door, and the young man welcomes him. The vocation director greets

the mother and the younger siblings since the older siblings and the father are out. Filled with joy at this "great catch" of a young man, the vocation director proceeds with his speech of gratitude on behalf of the church for the gift of their son and brother ... when all of a sudden, everything changes! The mother's face turns from joy to complete fear and anxiety as she hears for the very first time that her son wants to become a priest! Seeing the mother fall apart in tears, the younger siblings join her, and the joyful vocation director suddenly is filled with terror as he realizes that his perfect young man has not yet shared his vocational dream and plans with his family!

## Realities of the Latino candidate

I was not the mortified vocation director from the story above, but I recount it because it reveals much about Latino culture. Depending on what part of Mexico or Latin America a candidate comes from or is influenced by, the men generally are raised to be independent. They are expected to take up their roles as men with the decisiveness and certainty of their elders. Men grow up thinking that they can make decisions on their own. Whether they are dating, working, studying or socializing, many Latino men make decisions independent of parental consent or even advice. When they make errors, however, the parents intervene—oftentimes with harsh reality checks for the young man—but they will help him find his way out. This will not be a smooth ride. In fact in Spanish we might say "*con golpes y jalones de orejas*," which translates to "with strikes and pulling of ears"! In other words the parents will be there no matter how independently the young man makes his bad decision.

Women, on the other hand, are much more watched over by the parents. In some cases, the young woman is not even

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allowed to go on a date without a chaperone approved of by the parents, usually the father. Based on Mexican stereotypes, some parents fear that if their daughters join a religious community, they will wind up cooking and cleaning. Modern

Parents fear that the influence of the dominant Anglo society that they see in church people, such as priests and religious, will literally change their son or daughter into someone who will no longer relate to them.

Latino parents encourage their daughters to be educated but to stay close to home. While this reality varies greatly among Latino families, the tradition is that she stays close to home, under her parents' watchful eye, and it would be very common that she live in her parents' physical home until she marries.

The men's and women's realities, of

course, have their many variations. But these are the general expectations for Latino young adults. For a woman to choose her livelihood without parental consultation is very rare, while it is more or less the norm and expectation for the man.

## Family front and center

As in the case of the young man in the opening story, many Latino families look to their older children, both male and female, to play a role in the economy of the family—whether or not both parents have an income. In the case of this particular young man, his mother and younger siblings looked to him for the majority of their economic stability. This is a case where divorce separated the parents. The family was very large, and the older siblings were themselves married and had their own family obligations. The young man was a middle child with three younger siblings who depended on him, the youngest being 10 years old at the time. So the mother not only perceived that she was “losing” her son, but she also felt she was losing essential family income in one quick sweep. No wonder she was filled with anxiety. And while many may say that she has to be open—she also has to support her remaining children. In the traditional Mexican household, the older, unmarried siblings have this obligation as well.

For most Latinos, the family is the most influential part of their lives. Their need to be connected to the family cannot be undervalued by vocation and formation personnel. The

values and customs they live need to be respected and not undermined. For example, in many mainstream American families, it is expected that a son or daughter upon reaching the 18<sup>th</sup> birthday, get a job, perhaps pay rent, but certainly contribute to his or her own needs. While a similar ethic applies to Latinos, the option to move out of the parents' home before marriage is not an option at all. In fact for the Latino family, to do so would cause a meltdown between the young person and the parents.

On several occasions Father Virgilio Elizondo, STD, founder of the Mexican American Cultural Center in San Antonio, Texas, has commented that for the Latino family, especially the Mexican family, giving up a son or daughter to religion is experienced as losing them. This is not because of the physical separation, although that is part of it. Rather, Elizondo asserts, it is because they fear that the influence of the dominant Anglo society that they see in church people, such as priests and religious, will literally change their son or daughter into someone who will no longer relate to them. Many of us who entered the seminary or convent at a young age back in the 1950s, 60s, and 70s can attest to that reality. I recall not too long ago speaking with a U.S.-born friend who is a religious sister. When she entered her Ireland-based religious order, everything about her novitiate formation was Irish, from the dinnerware to the proper pronunciation of words like “refectory”—always with an Irish accent!

About 18 years ago I was at a workshop in Berkeley, CA with Father Elizondo where we listened to the testimony of a young Latino seminarian from a religious congregation. He shared how hard it was for him to adjust to religious life until he went to study in Chicago. There he found people like himself with whom he could relate. In his novitiate setting, however, everything had been completely different from what he knew, causing him loneliness, suffering and grief. Even to this day, formation personnel in some seminaries and congregations underestimate the value of young Latinos staying connected to the Latino community. Then when these disconnected Latinos are professed or ordained, superiors can't understand why they feel more comfortable serving in non-Latino settings!

As the young seminarian continued his story, both Father Elizondo and I were astonished to find ourselves identifying with him, realizing that after years of forming Latinos in our own formation programs, things seemed not to have changed very much. Father Elizondo is 15 years my senior, and I had been ordained about 10 years when we heard this young man speak. So we were reflecting on no less than 25

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years in the U.S. church, yet the same cultural disconnection we experienced was reflected in this young man's story. His experience took place in 1990. Thus the question for us today is: Are we there yet? And if we haven't arrived at cultural literacy in our vocation and formation programs, what can bring us closer? I would argue that understanding and openness to different ways are essential.

## **Friegas y obstáculos (Tough times and obstacles)**

Knowledge of the context in which Latinos live also is crucial. The 1986 U.S. Immigration Act complicated immigration issues for many Latino individuals and families. For many pro-immigration reformists, the 1986 act is considered "bad law" because it does little to protect immigrant rights or wellbeing. The additional strain created by new laws since September 11, 2001 has even further complicated matters. Creating new laws upon "bad laws" can only further jeopardize peoples' wellbeing, while hindering true justice.

Many of our Latino young people were brought to the U.S. as children. They were raised and educated here and know no other reality outside of the United States. They are, in effect, as "American" as any of their peers born here. Some rhetoric suggests and even demands that young people without legal documents "return home," but the only home they know is the U.S. This scenario presents major legal issues, which, as Roman Catholics, we see as matters of social justice. Catholic social teaching suggests that we pay less heed to legal considerations and focus more on what is truly just. However, then we are faced with the "worldly realities" of immigration, which bind us and create new sets of problems while challenging our consciences.

Putting this aside for a moment, it helps to look at statistics from the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' Secretariat of Hispanic Affairs:

- 72.6 percent of Hispanics in the U.S. are Catholics
- 20.6 percent of U.S. parishes have a majority Hispanic presence.
- 39 percent of U.S. Catholics are Hispanic.
- 6.3 percent of priests in the U.S. are Hispanic; of that group, just 17 percent are U.S. born.
- 13 percent of seminarians in the U.S. are Hispanics.

These numbers present many challenges. For one, we must remember that not all but *some* of those large numbers of Latino Catholics are undocumented. Thus when we are looking at the Latino community for possible candidates, we need policies in place that are just and that clearly articulate how we can incorporate those outside of normal legal status. Even if they are not citizens or permanent residents, many are still U.S. young people who know this reality and no other. So to lead them on to believe that they have a chance in the project of our dioceses or congregations, and then drop them because of legal concerns, is simply unjust and unchristian.

Oftentimes we want to begin talking to the young person about independence and living one's own life. However, it is rare that Latino young persons will turn their backs on their parents.

## **Costumbres y moralidad (Mores and morals)**

Here is another vocation story. A young woman confides in a vocation director that she is attending a discernment event without her family's knowledge. When the vocation director inquires why, she stops the conversation. She becomes very frightened that the vocation director is going to judge her or her family for having to keep this decision on her part a secret. The vocation director, however, continues to prod her for more information, and she finally breaks down and tells her. "My father is a very hard man who has strong opinions about the church. My mother is very submissive to him to keep the peace." This young woman is a brilliant law student. Her father is very proud of her and loves to tell his friends that he cannot wait for her to become a lawyer. She is sure that he will fly off the handle if he knew that she was feeling these "inquietudes" (nudges) towards religious life.

When we vocation directors see something like this, we oftentimes want to begin talking to the young person about independence and living one's own life. However, whether a woman or a man, Latino young people are raised with the idea that their parents must be pleased. It is rare that Latino young persons will turn their backs on their parents. Even though men are usually independent in their movements, as

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discussed earlier, their independence cannot contradict the parents. To do so, even in our modern society with all its expressions about “self-actualization,” would be considered unacceptable. It will often be the individual’s siblings who will side with the parents and put enormous pressure on

Latino parents believe firmly in their rights over their children and that not the church, in fact not even God, should have the ability to take those rights away.

the young person so that the parents are made happy.

Helping a Latino person emancipate himself or herself has a very different meaning than it might for non-Latino young people. Expectations of “making their own decisions” may not

even compute when it is said to them. How can they make a decision without the family agreeing? I recall when I was in high school, and I wanted to go to the college seminary, my uncles had a talk with me, trying to sway me away from the idea of going to the seminary. Talk about family intimidation! This is because my dad was not in agreement with my going to the seminary. He wanted to see his son become a successful, well-to-do man in the work force. Being a lifelong union worker, my dad had dreams for me to become a union executive and help the cause of unionizing others—especially Latinos.

The well meaning parish priest (in those days they were the vocation directors) spoke to my parents about how important it was for them not to be “obstacles to God’s will” in my life. Now my parents were both born in the U.S. They did not have as much of the strong-willed Mexican mindset that many newer-immigrant parents have. Had they had it, I suspect I might not be a priest right now, or at least I would not be ordained as long as I have been. My parents were swayed by the priest’s words, so my dad had to succumb to “God’s will.” But trust me; it was not easy for him or me! Years went by before he actually accepted what I was doing. Eventually it came to pass, but I know that his heart felt defeated for a long time. I can’t help but to think that part of the defeat was that he felt he had lost his rights over his son. This is a major aspect of parenting for Latino parents. They believe firmly in their rights over their children and that not the church, in fact not even God, should have the ability to take those rights away from them. Some Latino parents might even say that if God gave them

their sons and daughters, then God needs to be open to what their will is for them!

## Asuntos delicados (Delicate issues)

Most Latino young people are likely to trust a religious figure with sensitive issues, such as sexuality, if they feel that they will not be judged. I recall one time taking the sexual inventory of a young man, using the behavioral assessment method as promoted and taught by Father Ray Carey. This model works well with Latino young people since it allows them to speak for themselves and avoids confusing questions, examples and scenarios. I have found it an invaluable tool.

When I was listening to this young man, I made a mistake that Father Carey warns us about. I made a value judgment when the young man was talking to me about autoeroticism. Thinking that I was helping him by suggesting that he was being too judgmental about himself, I made a big mistake for two reasons. One is that using assessment time for “pastoral counseling” is not helpful to get an accurate assessment. Secondly, and this is the main blunder, in taking the inventory, the vocation director wants the person’s honest revelation, and part of that is his or her world view, and where he or she fits into it. By making a value judgment and pastorally counseling the individual, I was influencing his self revelation. I suspect I may even have confused the young man. His Latino perspective was being somewhat invalidated by my intervention.

Sister Kathleen Bryant, RSC, a former longtime vocation director for the Archdiocese of Los Angeles, learned from her years of working with Latino men and women that sexuality and self-discovery in Latino young people is one of the most sacredly guarded experiences of their lives. She is quick to point out that they often grow up in large households with little space to call their own. Not only do siblings share a room, they often share a bed with more than one or two others. As children, bathing and changing clothes is often a communal experience. She has cautioned vocation directors on many occasions about using their own frame of reference when judging the realities of the Latino young people they interview, citing that their experience of normal upbringing may contrast greatly with what is experienced by their non-Latino peers in the U.S.

Latino men have some clear ideas about themselves, their sexuality and their sense of others—especially with personal relationships. Women come from a similar perspective. With the exception, perhaps, of third- or fourth-generation Latinos,

their perspectives about sensitive issues will be influenced greatly by their Latino religious and social upbringing. It's important to respect that, let it be what it is, and if an adjustment or personal growth about these issues is needed, it will hopefully be part of a well-integrated program of human formation. At the point of discernment and journey, however, Latino young people need their perspective of self both received and respected—especially in the area of sexuality.

## Espiritualidad (Spirituality)

First an honest-to-goodness story: one of my Latino students once shared with me how as a teen he had attended a healing Mass at a parish, where he recalled being deeply moved by the priest presider. He talked about the priest's preaching, the power of his prayer and several other things and added that the healing Mass was the first time he had thought of becoming a priest. He said, "I wanted to be holy like him." Then he said, "His name was like yours, except in Spanish." I began reflecting back as he was talking, and eventually I realized that I was that priest! So, with a smile on my face, and a hint of child-like joy, I told him, "That priest was me!" He looked at me with absolute shock and said, "No, Father, this priest was holy; it couldn't have been you!"

Latino young people are moved by spiritual moments when these moments reach the level of feelings. It is not enough to have theology or pious explanations for things. Everything about their spirituality is expressed in feelings more than in knowledge or theology. Thus they'll use expressions like: "God spoke to me," "I saw Jesus walking toward me," "I felt the Holy Spirit," "The 'santísima virgen' told me," etc. Some psychological inventories, such as the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Index, need to be nuanced when analyzing the results to make sure that the measurement of a person's sense of reality is not distorted because of this aspect of Latino spirituality. At the same time, many Latino youth will become almost areligious in seasons of their lives and not seem too shaken up by it.

I am perplexed by how some Latino young people can seem almost to live double lives. While it is possible that they live dual realities, closer to the truth is what I referred to earlier—the independence of Latino young people, particularly the men. It is not out of character for a Latino young man to be almost fanatically religious one minute, then completely at the other extreme the next. I have seen candidates attend a discernment retreat or event and seem completely sold on the idea and then not return my next five

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phone calls over the following two months. Then out of the blue, he will call to say he wants to continue. When I would ask what happened and why he didn't return the calls, he might say something like, "Oh I got busy and had things to do." And that is maybe all you, as the vocation director, are going to know. He had "things" to do. As a formation director, I have seen the fluctuation of religious fervor in the Latino seminarian. I have learned to simply ride with it. Sometimes there is no logic involved. It's all about the feelings.

As with all cultures, there are redeemed and unredeemed qualities in Latino cultures with all their variations. Ultimately the question is: Does the mission of your congregation or diocese truly incorporate all aspects of the Latino reality? If the answer is "yes," then let Latino young adults be who they are, and you will get to know these wonderful young people! Then they will integrate the goals of the formation programs into their lives, and God willing, new sons or daughters of the church will be ready to serve God's holy people. ■

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*Preparing people to lead extraordinary lives*

St. Benedict emphasized *listening* in his Holy Rule. Those who are seeking their calling in life would do well to listen to Scripture, to their own hearts and to the church community.

# Listening for God: a Benedictine approach to discernment

BY BROTHER CHRISTIAN RAAB, OSB

**S**T. BENEDICT BEGINS his Holy Rule with the word “listen.” By this choice he communicates a belief that listening is the starting point for the spiritual life. Before we ever think of wondering who we are or asking what we are supposed to do, one is calling us. Our lives, when they finally do speak, are a response emerging from our best comprehension of the voice heard, the voice of God. I would like to suggest that *listening* is the best way to understand Benedictine discernment. St. Benedict means for us to listen to the Word of God, to the spiritual movement within our own hearts and to the ecclesial community. It is in listening to these three sources that we come to understand God’s will for our lives and know how to respond with integrity.

## Listening to the Word

Among prayer forms the Opus Dei (the work of God, the liturgy of the hours) and Lectio Divina have pride of place in Benedictine spirituality. St. Benedict expected his monks to gather seven times a day to recite psalms. He said, “Nothing is to be preferred to the Opus Dei” (RB 43.3<sup>1</sup>). As for Lectio Divina, St. Benedict allotted monks up to three hours a day for this practice.

The point was that the monk was supposed to be engaged in consistent, if not constant, dialogue with the Word

*Brother Christian Raab, OSB is a monk of St. Meinrad Archabbey in Southern Indiana. He serves his community as associate vocation director. He entered his community in 2003 after working as a high school teacher and campus minister in Chicago.*



of God. Through the Opus Dei and Lectio Divina the monk would engage in a regular flow of listening to the Word and responding to it. The monks’ eyes and mind would be focused on Christ—the way, the truth and the life.

Because Benedictine prayer is so scriptural, it makes sense to explore the role Scripture plays in discernment. We assume a Christian anthropology. The Word of God is present in the heart of every human being in a unique way. In encountering the Word in Scripture, a recognition between ourselves and the text can occur. This happens, for example, when we read a Scripture story that illustrates our particular vocation. When our truth is revealed externally by the written text, the Word outside meets the Word inside and reveals us to ourselves. Our latent potential becomes evident and we want to bring the Word to life.

Cistercian monk Michael Casey explains: “A person becomes aware of an aspect of the truth of his being by recognizing himself reflected in the world around him. Finding his heart is a matter of perceiving its mirror-image in the objects of experience.”<sup>2</sup> It is like a child who has a gift for teaching. He sees a school teacher and begins to play school. He encounters something in external reality that elicits desire, and he wants to bring it to life.

Among the encounters that can prompt such a response, says Casey, “none is more effective than the traditional practice of Lectio Divina well done.”<sup>3</sup> He goes on, “The whole object of applying oneself to the reading of the Scriptures (and other texts which mediate truth) is not to gather information but to place oneself in a situation where one might hear the divine call and begin to put it into practice.”<sup>4</sup> Thus Lectio and the Opus Dei serve the purpose of returning us consistently to the Word, which engages us at our depths and calls us to particular actions and particular ways of being, according to the dialogue between Scripture and our own

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unique vocation. We encounter God, and the Word asks to bear fruit in us in a particular way.

## Listening to the heart

Already implied is the fact that attention to the written text requires us to be attentive as well to the Spirit moving in our own hearts. This is not always easy because alternative voices, such as inner compulsions, the expectations of others

St. Benedict's bias  
toward communal  
discernment is evident  
throughout his Rule.

and the work of darker forces compete for our attention. This is a reason the monastic tradition values practices such as silence and asceticism, because they are ways to tune down this noise so that we can better

hear “the voice from heaven that every day calls out.” (RB Prol. 9). Furthermore St. Benedict assumes his monks will be engaged in spiritual direction or some form of master/disciple relationship (RB 4.50 and 7.44). According to this practice a wiser person is let in on our inner dialogue so as to help us grasp what comes from God, what comes from ourselves and what comes from elsewhere.

St. Benedict does not provide a systematized set of rules for discerning spirits. He encourages his audience to gain familiarity with the works of John Cassian, who more explicitly takes up that task (RB 73.5). Nonetheless Benedict does acknowledge markers for recognizing God's work in the hearts of believers. These are joy, persistence and desire.

In the prologue St. Benedict describes God's call. He writes: “What, dear brothers, is more delightful than this voice of the Lord calling to us?” (RB Prol.19). For Benedict the voice of the Lord is clearly associated with positive feeling. The word “delightful” connotes joy, happiness, attractiveness, peace, even ecstasy. Benedict asks the question rhetorically, assuming his hearers share a felt presence of God.<sup>5</sup> There is a touchstone experience of grace demanding response from the person.<sup>6</sup>

Later he describes the monks' feelings as they respond to their calling, “as we progress in this way of life and in faith, we shall run on the path of God's commandments, our hearts overflowing with the inexpressible delight of love” (RB Prol. 49). According to Benedict's vision, not only the initial calling but also the human response to that calling should be accompanied by consolation. Both the reception of God's

grace and its unfolding in our lives is “delightful.”

Much as a would-be suitor must be tested by his beloved, the heart of the newcomer must be tested by the community. In Chapter 58, St. Benedict outlines the process of accepting a new monk into the community. The newcomer must stand outside the door and knock. “If at the end of four or five days he has shown himself patient in bearing his harsh treatment and difficulty of entry, and has persisted in his request, then he shall be allowed to enter” (RB 58.3). Once in, St. Benedict continues, the new monk “should be clearly told all the hardships and difficulties that will lead him to God” (RB 58.8). Perhaps Benedict's advocacy of “harsh treatment” and a lesson in realism is intended to weed out those who have arrived out of vainglory or romantic notions. A true heart will be durable enough to withstand these trials, while a false one will not. The one who persists in a request to enter the community despite resistance and in the face of realism gives evidence of belonging there.

Benedict also looks for desire. “The concern must be whether the novice truly seeks God and whether he shows eagerness for the work of God, for obedience and for trials” (RB 58.7). While persistence is important, it isn't enough. Persons of a stubborn nature, or those who are motivated by a scrupulous sense of moral obligation or some other compulsion can stand firm in the face of resistance, but they cannot easily feign sincere love. The community is looking to see if there is any passion and zeal for this life. If desire is present, the novice will have eagerness to pray and live and suffer for Christ. It isn't enough to be simply showing up. There must be evidence that the heart is engaged in this project. There must be evidence of love.

## Listening to community

A third factor in discernment is listening to the community. In an age as individualistic as ours, where honoring the self has become the paramount criterion for decision making, St. Benedict poses a significant challenge.

St. Benedict's bias toward communal discernment is evident throughout his Rule. In Chapter 3, concerning the abbot, St. Benedict offers this advice: “as often as anything is to be done in the monastery the abbot shall call the whole community together and himself explain what the business is, and after hearing the advice of the brothers, let him ponder it and follow what he judges the wiser course” (RB 3.1). This is a vision of reality where God's will is communicated through the members of the body. The best way to know the right

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course is not to simply look inside oneself, but to enter into discussion with others.

Benedict seems to have a keen appreciation that everyone can be affected by blind spots. This is one reason, as we have already seen, he assumes his monks will be involved in some form of spiritual direction relationship where a wiser person is let in on each monk's interior dialogue to help sift through the voices (RB 4.50 and 7.44). The same insight can be seen in the respect he says should be allotted to the observations of visiting monks (RB 61.4) who may be able to see the community more objectively, and even in the way he insists that monasteries should be accountable to outside authorities (RB 64.4). St. Benedict is wise about the way individuals and even communities can fall into complacency and tunnel vision. He strongly holds that others can help clarify our perceptions and challenge us to be what we are called to be.

Listening to community also involves listening to the members' needs. Discerning the will of God may mean simply seeing what is called for in our communities and responding as we are able. In the context of monastic life this is a matter of obedience. In St. Benedict's vision the demands of the abbot hold pride of place, since "he is believed to hold the place of Christ within the monastery" (RB 2.2). However in Chapter 71 St. Benedict expands the vision. "Obedience is a blessing to be shown by all, not only to the abbot but also to one another as brothers, since we know that it is by this way of obedience that we go to God" (RB 71.1). Chapter 72, "the rule within the Rule," continues: "They should each try to be the first to show respect to the other, supporting with the greatest patience one another's weaknesses of body or behavior, and earnestly competing in obedience to one another. No one is to pursue what he judges better for himself, but instead what he judges better for someone else" (RB 72.4-7). Hearing the needs of community members and responding is, for St. Benedict, a holy conversation carried out in the daily life of the monk. If we are looking to know and respond to the will of God, we can start by examining the needs of those around us and answering them.

Importantly a preferential option for the poor can be detected in St. Benedict's Rule. In Chapter 31, for example, we read of the monastery cellarer: "He must show every care and concern for the sick, children, guests and the poor, knowing for certain that he will be held accountable for all of them on the day of judgment" (RB 31.9). Chapter 36 states "care of the sick must rank above and before all else" (RB 36.1). St. Benedict teaches us that ultimately it is charity that should govern action, and the ones who have the most claim on us

are the ones who most need us. Discernment can never simply be a matter of looking in the mirror and attempting to live authentically. There is a real sense in St. Benedict that the right thing to be done is the thing that needs to be done.

Nonetheless St. Benedict does not demand the same response from all. He acknowledges that the abbot should take individual weaknesses into account when assigning work (RB 48.24), and those who do not have the right gifts to fill a need are exempt from particular tasks (RB 47.3). The

Rule as a whole is well known for its tolerance of humanity and caution in making excessive demands on individuals. Benedict envisions a cooperative approach in which the unique strengths of the various members are drawn upon for mutual support and for the sake of the common good.

Seen in this light discernment is not so much finding our own song to play but more like finding our instrument within a symphony. We discern a role that complements the parts played by others. The monastery, like the church, is a diverse collection of folks who have shortcomings but who also possess a wealth of complementary personal gifts. It is with these "good gifts which are in us" (RB Prol.6) that we are called to serve. The community works best when each member recognizes unique strengths and weaknesses, perceives a role among the others and makes an offering based on that knowledge. When these diverse personal offerings come together, something beautiful happens. ■

Discernment is like finding our instrument within a symphony. We discern a role that complements the parts played by others.

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1. All quotations from the Holy Rule come from Timothy Fry, ed., *RB 1980: The Rule of St. Benedict in Latin and English with Notes* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1981).
  2. Michael Casey, *The Undivided Heart: The Western Monastic Approach to Contemplation* (Petersham, MA: St. Bede's Publications, 1994), 38.
  3. Ibid.
  4. Ibid, 38.
  5. Augusta Raabe, OSB, "Discernment of Spirits in the Prologue to the Rule of Benedict," *American Benedictine Review* 23, no.3 (1972): 411.
  6. Ibid.

In the context of a college course on the theology of discernment, this campus minister helped each student create a personal discernment model.

# Helping college students create their own discernment models

BY MELANIE-PRÉJEAN SULLIVAN

ONE OF THE MOST SIGNIFICANT STEPS in the rite of passage from childhood to adult faith is the step we take in response to the call we believe God issues to us—the call to holiness in a particular field or state of life, our vocation. Jesus must have had a sense of his own destiny as evidenced in his delay at the temple following what we might call his bar mitzvah. We know it was the beginning of something significant, that the writer seems to see it as pivotal, noting, “Jesus advanced in wisdom and age and favor...” (Luke 2:46-47). This step toward maturity in wisdom, age and grace—this synthesis of mind, body and spirit—came together in a time and a place to propel Jesus into the fullness of his ministry.

College provides such a time and place for many young people. Campus ministers can testify to profound changes between the nervous, first-year students and the more confident graduating seniors. In four short years they become adults and embark upon exciting careers, begin graduate studies, travel in service, marry or leave for the seminary or religious formation. It is a time we campus ministers are honored to witness.

We walk with students through these four years when they are asking themselves questions and struggling to listen to God’s specific call. We listen, counsel and journey with our students on the paths we recognize as their paths of discernment. Because God is involved, it becomes more than

a pro and con decision-making model. Sometimes we are asked to name it for them. Although many college students have heard the term *discernment*, few we know could define it easily. Many, in fact, limit it to “something people do who think they have a call to religious life.” We ask in response, “Are we not all called to holiness?”

How many times have we delayed teaching about discernment until we met a student who had already begun to discern a call and sought our assistance in testing the clarity of that call? Such delay depicts discernment as a noble process meant for only a select few, a mystical journey, or an unusual gift. Yet do we not as faithful Christian Catholics expect everyone to have the capacity to engage in discernment? More than a year ago I pondered whether we could create a culture of discernment more effectively if we taught a course in what it means and how individuals participate in this divine communication.

For my doctoral project in 2007 I chose to study discernment because I thought it was time we taught more college students about it. It was time to consider moving it from quiet, one-on-one conversations between a discernor and a spiritual director into a classroom, with all of the potential chaos and splendor that setting could bring. I taught “The Theology of Discernment” to college juniors and seniors in the fall of 2007 at Bellarmine University in Louisville, KY. In the process I discovered many of our students are starving for this kind of practical theology, this kind of hands-on, hard work of discovering their authentic or “true self” to which Thomas Merton so often referred.<sup>1</sup>

Twenty-five students participated in the course to learn about different methods of discernment. They studied models ranging from those presented in *VISION* magazine to classic works by St. Ignatius. Students practiced *Lectio Divina* and other types of scriptural discernment models. They read the lives of saints, prayed the prayers of many within the

Melanie-Préjean Sullivan is Director of Campus Ministry at Bellarmine University in Louisville, KY. This article presents a portion of her doctoral project, “The Theology of Discernment: A College Course in the Exploration of God’s Call.” Louisville Seminary, Spring, 2008.



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tradition, learned about The Rule of St. Benedict, and heard the vocation stories of priests, sisters and lay and ordained ministers of many Christian traditions. At the end of the course part of their final assessment was to create a Personal Discernment Model (PDM) based upon all they had learned—through study and through their own journals.

The primary on-going assignment for the course, in addition to readings from texts and supplemental materials, was to journal as often as daily, but at least three times a week. From their journal entries, they were expected to find and trace key developments, to search for the “aha” moments when their writing revealed something they hadn’t expected. They also were to discern for themselves what their personal tastes and God-given preferences were, which would lead them to be able to create the PDM.

I created a series of questions or guidelines for students to use in creating their models, but I left the format up to them. In general their models included an introduction, advice about when or where they would set aside time to journal or contemplate important questions, favorite prayers or Scripture passages on discernment, and reminders about how their particular temperaments were conducive to different models or prompt-questions we had studied. They included specific notations from their journals to support their advice about discernment or to remind their future selves of surprising revelations. Here are some of my observations about the different parts of their PDM, gleaned from their journal entries, class discussions and assignments:

### **Personal discernment model: purpose and introduction**

This portion of the PDM was to cover the students’ understanding of discernment, including definitions, as well as more informal explanations they might use to explain the

process to a beginner. They were to introduce the concept as if the reader knew nothing about the term or the process. They were to introduce models which they might use at some later stage for their own critical life decisions.

Thus their PDM served several functions. It was a review of what they had already learned and practiced, a guide for their continued use in the present, a reminder for them to use it in the future and a model that might be used to teach others who were unfamiliar with the process. All models had to use some form of journaling as the basis for tracking or analyzing their thoughts and prayers and movements of the Spirit.

### **Space and time**

Most students found a particular ambiance was the most conducive for journaling. They noted specific conditions that assisted them in their most difficult questions. For some it was a quiet residence hall balcony or their room. For others it was the grotto, the chapel, a prayer room, or even a study carrel in the library. We discussed the ways our bodies respond to repetition and ritual—how our bodies help our minds study in upright postures, rather than reclining (which tells the brain to rest or sleep). We discussed rituals of light and sound—a candle, incense, soft instrumental music, the chirping of crickets or the coo of a mourning dove.

Several included advice about the best time of day for them to commit to the prompt-questions. For most it was the end of the day, late in the evening before bed. Others found it helpful to take a break between dinner time and study. Still

It was time to move discernment from quiet, one-on-one conversations between a discerner and a spiritual director into a classroom—with all of the potential chaos and splendor that setting could bring.

others found the early morning sunrise opened their eyes to possibilities. (Admittedly it is rare to find a college student who is a self-described “morning person,” but there were a couple.)

## Prayers, prompts, quotes and Scripture

Throughout the course I found the students appreciated a prompt-question to “jump start” their journaling. Some of the questions were taken from the primary text we used.<sup>2</sup> Others

Students gave examples of how biblical characters discerned their calls. From Moses to Samuel and from the Blessed Virgin Mary to Peter, they analyzed ways in which our ancestors heard and answered God’s call.

were taken from events in our nation or on campus which called us to question, “Where is God in this?”

Each class session began with a prayer brought by a student who had signed up to lead. Students brought in prayers that were their favorites from childhood, new prayers they had discovered, original ones created specifically for their

personal discernment, or ones they found while searching online sources.

Whether they used a form of Lectio Divina or biblical commentaries and research, they gave examples of how biblical characters discerned their calls. From Moses to Samuel and from the Blessed Virgin Mary to Peter, they analyzed ways in which our ancestors heard and answered God’s call. Some felt that the Gospel from Sunday Mass or the readings of the day were useful as a type of prompt. Others searched the Bible for passages directly related to specific questions about their lives and the directions they were contemplating.

Some students included as an appendix to their PDM a collection of favorite quotes, passages and prayers they wanted to remember for future moments of life discernment. Because Thomas Merton is such a part of our tradition at Bellarmine University, I had opened the first class with his prayer, “My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going...”<sup>3</sup> It was not surprising to find this prayer was one most often included because it so eloquently expresses the hopes and fears of those trying to walk God’s path.

## Psychological profiles, gifts and talents

Students were invited to consider any and all assessments with which they were familiar. If they had taken the Myers-Briggs or other personality or career-counseling tests, they were invited to analyze those results prayerfully within their journals. One student was able to articulate how her introversion drives her to specialize in a specific aspect of her field in order to give her a comfort level. She noted how she needed a more obvious push, to help her to step out of

### *Discernment in action*

One of my students graduated with honors as a double major in biology and music. Because he was equally gifted in both disciplines, his professors encouraged him to pursue graduate work in their respective fields. During the course of the fall semester he pondered his gifts in interesting ways and from several different directions. He could pursue a career with the opera; his voice is amazing. He could pursue a career in medicine, pharmacy or academics. He could continue his undergraduate research, trying to combine both fields. One of his observations about himself was how comfortable he was when he was helping fellow students grasp a difficult concept and how thrilled he was to share their delight when they mastered the challenge. After the course was complete, he continued to discern that he was called to teach biology at the high school level and to serve as a cantor for church as an avocation. This fall he will teach at a local high school, take courses for his masters of arts in teaching, and coordinate music ministry as part of a graduate assistantship. His personal discernment model involved Merton’s prayer and a disciplined approach to journaling. He asked and answered questions for himself, approaching thoughts methodically (as a scientist) and looking for creative, imaginative alternatives (as an artist). His model reflected his interests and his personality to meet his discernment needs.

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that zone. Another saw how his desire to please others had put him on the path to a career he had not actually chosen for himself. One of our sources asked us to consider whether our career path was part of an unconscious desire to please our parents.<sup>4</sup> During the semester these kinds of revelations prompted lively discussions and several journal entries about the role of psychology and of the community in discernment. Some of these same journal entries that illustrated how background affects behavior appeared in a prominent place within students' PDM papers.

During the summer prior to the course there was a rumor of a security breach in a national medical school admissions test. As the news unfolded several students on campus who had taken the exam received disappointing results. Especially for those in the course who had taken the exam, it sparked discussion and an invitation to use their journals to process this unsettling news and to consider whether they really were called to be physicians. They analyzed their personalities and preferences. For the first time they thought quietly, carefully and deliberately about what it would be like to be in medical school and newly married, to be in medical school with small children, and to be in practice with a family. Two discerned that they were called to continue on their paths as originally planned. Two discerned a call to graduate school instead of medical school.

One of the most obvious "inventories" I encouraged was to have students list their gifts and talents. They were to log compliments about themselves that they heard often, such as insightful, compassionate, thoughtful or daring. They assessed whether they preferred risks to security or a balance of the two. Students who included these kinds of questions in their PDM gave specific examples of how others invite us to become our best selves. What others see as our gifts often gives us clues to our call in life.

## Advice, assurance and community

For the course each student had to shadow someone in ministry and make a report to the class that included a vocation story. Students asked for advice to pass along to others in discernment. There was a wide range of suggestions. For example one senior pastor said, "Just say, 'no.' God will pursue you if you refuse at first." That, he suggested, was when you would discover what you were called to do. Another suggested using the scriptural metaphor of Gideon's fleece to seek a sign (Judges 6: 36-40). Students who included this in their PDM referred to it with the advice to decide what

your fleece will be, place it out for God to act upon it and patiently observe what transpires. One of the students had not scored well on the medical school admissions test the first time she took it. She decided to take the test a second time (her fleece) and did well enough to qualify for both admission and a special scholarship. After medical school she will return to work in rural Kentucky.

One of our class exercises included a bit of imagination. I asked the students to pretend they had already made a

decision and then to live with it for two or three weeks. One example was, "Pretend you are married and have to give up a trip to Chicago with your friends. Or pretend you are a teacher and have to stay home to grade papers and prepare your lessons. Are you still as excited about being married or being a teacher? How do

One of our class exercises included a bit of imagination. I asked the students to pretend they had already made a decision and then to live with it for two or three weeks.

sacrifices for your choice make you feel?" Marriage had been the focus of several classroom discussions, so many chose to imagine themselves with one or another potential mate. A handful of students chose to reflect upon that imaginary experience in their PDM. It became more real to them as they imagined their entire days different because of those decisions.

This imagined experience was one way to show how assurance assists those seeking to know whether they are going in the right direction or making the right decision. A chapter in the primary text listed the "fingerprints of God" or ways in which individuals notice God's hand in their lives (e.g., clarity, persistence, progression, conviction).<sup>5</sup> Most of the students used specific examples of these in their PDM, especially the feeling of peace or tranquility, which is often a good indicator of the appropriateness of our choices.

Students included advice to themselves for the future about postponing decisions and avoiding the urge to rush to conclusion. One particular reference was most helpful for them, a diagram about the way in which we typically make decisions in everyday life. The authors of this exercise looked at change in organizations and noticed how decisions are often made after evidence has been collected. Such a typical decision is made as if you were at the point of a "V" or making a rapid turn in direction. They concluded that a better model

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for decision making (or discernment) is a “U” where there is a longer period of being present in the “bottom of the U.”<sup>6</sup> This waiting or postponing change was challenging to the students, but all who mentioned it in their PDM felt it was worth remembering as a critical part of discerning any life choice.

Finally the role of the community formed an important piece in most of the students’ papers. We had looked at methods of reporting conversations verbatim, outlining critical incidents, sharing theological reflections and other methods of seeking the wisdom of the community. The majority of the PDM reports referred to the need to seek advice and confirmation from other sources.

## Summary and evaluations

As I read through the Personal Discernment Models I was more than pleasantly surprised at the commitment each student displayed. They treated it as more than “just another assignment,” as it had immediate and significant meaning. It was personally rewarding for them to see their progress through journaling and personally affirming for me to see how grateful they were to have learned practical theology. All of their models were extremely well-done.

The course evaluations at the end of the term were superlative. Whether they took the class merely to satisfy an elective or chose it for its topic, they invested their time and energy into the class in outstanding ways. They also expressed appreciation in the university’s evaluation form and in the project evaluation. All were engaged in the discussion and committed to the journaling process. Even those students whose academic records were less than stellar, seemed to spend extra time on the assignments. Some students suggested the course be offered every term or be mandatory for every student, recommending it, “highly.” One said it provided “a great wealth of information so I can understand myself better and how I make decisions. Also it made me consider different, possibly more effective ways to include God in my daily life and decisions.”

This is what I had hoped to give students, the ability to see discernment as a life-long, worthwhile practice, not confined to a few chosen moments or to one kind of life decision. Other students remarked that the class gave them more than help with their personal struggle with discernment. One noted that it gave “additional insight into my own faith” and helped “put events in my life into better perspective.”

Early in my doctoral studies I discerned a call to pursue this project. Positive responses by the students were part

of the affirmation for me of that call. Since the course, I’ve had several students ask to take it the next time it is offered. Friends in vocation ministry encouraged me to publish the curriculum. (See the box below.) My hope is that others will be inspired to bring the topic of discernment into the classroom. I am convinced it is a valuable way for us to create a culture of discernment on every campus. We can teach methods of practical theology, satisfy curricular or academic requirements and enrich the lives of our students. ■

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1. Thomas Del Prete, *Thomas Merton and the Education of the Whole Person* (Birmingham, AL: Religious Education Press, 1990), 50.
  2. Ben Campbell Johnson, *Hearing God’s Call: Ways of Discernment for Laity and Clergy* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 2002).
  3. Thomas Merton, *Thoughts in Solitude* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1958), 79.
  4. Wilkie Au and Noreen Cannon Au, *The Discerning Heart: Exploring the Christian Path* (New York: Paulist Press, 2006), 23.
  5. Johnson, 57-63.
  6. Peter Senge, C. Otto Scharmer, Joseph Jaworski, and Betty Sue Flowers, *Presence: An Exploration of Profound Change in People, Organizations, and Society* (New York: Doubleday, 2005), 219.

### ***Interested in the curriculum guide for the Theology of Discernment course?***

The guide is tentatively expected to be published in late fall 2008 and be available for less than \$20. For more information, contact the author at the address below.

[mpsullivan@bellarmine.edu](mailto:mpsullivan@bellarmine.edu)

# ***Soul Inquiry: a vocational discernment tool***

*Following is a series of questions developed by Sister Cindy Kaye, RSM to help young women in discernment. Sister Cindy uses this “Soul Inquiry” tool with those who are in the initial stage of searching for their calling in life. She also uses the tool much later, during the last four or five months before a woman enters.*

## **Life questions for reflection**

In your present way of life, what are you spending and being spent for? What or who is receiving your best time, attention and energy? What goals, dreams, relationships, works, are you currently pouring out your life for? In your daily life, what power or powers do you fear or dread? What power or powers do you rely on and trust?

To what or to whom are you committed in life and death? At present, with whom or with what group do you share your most sacred or private hopes and dreams? Where do you find intimacy? With whom do you share a sacred trust? What are the most sacred and compelling hopes and dreams in your life right now? Where are you on your journey?

## **Spiritual inventory**

What helps you to be aware of the basic mystery of life? How do you celebrate and respond to the basic gift of life? What has caused you to awaken to the movement of God in your life? What is your practice of prayer? How do you pray? When, where and how do you encounter God? When you pray, to whom are you conscious of praying?

What nurtures your relationship with God and helps you to continue to grow in that relationship? What daily practices help you to be aware of God’s presence? What intrudes on your relationship with God?

To whom or what are you deeply attracted and why? What blocks do you experience that keep you from being free? What grace or truth from God would set you free and bring you peace? What do you feel is God’s intention for you at this time in your life? What are your priorities? How are they aligned with God’s intention for you to love?

To what is God calling you? What are you being summoned to be or do? What is motivating you to say yes or no? How are your relationships honored and given quality time? How do you find holiness in them? What daily rhythms keep you healthy, imaginative and playful? What gives you hope?

## **Call, response and change**

What is dying within you? How have you experienced death or denial within your life? What images come to mind when you reflect on dying into life? What are you clinging to? How are you being called to a greater freedom?

## **Impact, decision making, rhythm of life**

What does the decision to pursue religious life say to you about your relationship with yourself, with others and with God? In what ways are others going to be affected by your decision?

What are the benefits and the costs of you saying yes or no? In your imagination, how will your life be if you say yes? No? What are the barriers? What are your unanswered questions? What are your gifts? Limitations? Competencies? How will this choice influence choices of the future? Does your choice of yes or no limit your growth or the growth of others? What are your alternatives? Which alternative stimulates? Stifles?

Through this discernment, who do you hope to become? What are your current rhythms of life that support a call to religious life? What are your current rhythms of life that challenge a call to religious life? How does this direction coordinate with your life’s internal and external rhythms? How does this chosen direction foster the embracing of others and God’s creation?

Milwaukee area vocation ministers took the kernel of an idea—"let's talk about our ministry with leadership"—and ran with it. Here's the step-by-step planning that resulted in a day of fruitful exchange.

# How we organized a Day of Discussion for leadership and vocation directors

BY FATHER SCOTT JONES, SDS; SISTER BARBARA LINKE, SSND; SISTER ROSE SEVENICH, OSF; AND FATHER JOACHIM STUDWELL, OFM

**T**O ENCOURAGE DISCUSSION among key players in vocation ministry, Milwaukee area vocation ministers hosted a Day of Discussion in March 2008 for elected congregational leaders, vocation ministers and formation ministers. The gathering included a keynote presentation by NRVC executive director Brother Paul Bednarczyk, CSC (published on page 32); presentations by vocation directors on key aspects of vocation ministry; large-group discussion; and small-group interaction. All who participated left affirmed in their respective ministries, energized with hope, and challenged to go deeper into congregational reflection regarding vocations to religious life.

Because participants found the Day of Discussion fruitful, we, members of the Vocation Ministers of the Milwaukee Archdiocese (VMMA), want to share with others how we organized this day.

## Beginnings

The idea for a Day of Discussion began with an observation and a question from a VMMA member. During a spirited

conversation at our November 2006 meeting about blessings and problems connected with vocation ministry, a first-year VMMA member exclaimed: "We have such great sharing among ourselves regarding vocation ministry. Our congregational leadership needs to hear these things! How could we do this?" Immediately there was interest in including our leaders in such a discussion. At our next meeting in January 2007, we appointed a subcommittee comprised of two women religious and two men religious who volunteered to explore this idea.

During our first subcommittee meeting in February 2007, we brainstormed about the idea VMMA had so enthusiastically embraced. Although we originally envisioned a gathering of only leaders and vocation ministers, during our conversation the inclusive, collaborative charism of VMMA surfaced. As a result we decided to invite formators as well. From our experience we knew that vocation and formation personnel and elected leaders are linked together in a ministry of congregational leadership whose responsibility is preparing and moving the congregation into the future.

Next we clarified our goals for the Day of Discussion. Our first goal was to have VMMA members and community leaders gather to discuss these areas of vocation ministry:

- application process,
- marketing,
- health and age of potential candidates,
- educational requirements of potential candidates,
- debt of potential candidates,
- international applicants and visas,

*Father Scott Jones, SDS; Sister Barbara Linke, SSND; Sister Rose Sevenich, OSF and Father Joachim Studwell, OFM appear here from left to right. They are members of the Vocation Ministers of the Milwaukee Archdiocese. For details see [www.howdoiknow.org](http://www.howdoiknow.org).*



- transition from potential candidate to first year of formation,
- vocation outreach, and
- education of congregational membership about vocation ministry in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Our second goal was to educate congregational leaders about the organization of VMMA.

The subcommittee also began to design the gathering. We set forth these ideas for the day's activities:

1. Share what VMMA members are doing on the above topics.
2. Choose two or three different approaches to the above topics to be shared in a brief presentation.
3. Allow time for discussion, questions and answers.
4. Utilize a facilitator (our first choice for this position was Brother Paul Bednarczyk, CSC, executive director of NRVC).
5. Allow time for break-out sessions according to topic interest.

Realizing that congregational leaders have dates on their calendars often a year or more in advance, we decided to aim for a gathering in March 2008. Our plan was to ask VMMA members to hold two dates open in March until a facilitator could be determined.

We left the first subcommittee meeting with a sense of direction and the conviction that our enthusiasm for the

gathering would be affirmed by VMMA.

The subcommittee came together again in March 2007, after VMMA had met and affirmed our plans. Our main goal

was to firm up a facilitator for the Day of Discussion. Since all of us were together, we decided to contact Brother Paul by phone. To our wonderment he answered the phone, had time to speak with us and was available for our March 2008 date.

During the phone conversation we clarified that Brother Paul's role would be to give a 30-minute keynote presentation about the national picture of vocations and facilitate discussion as needed.

After the phone conference, we divided up other tasks such as serving as the contact for Brother Paul, providing all details in writing, securing meeting rooms, updating VMMA members, locating addresses of the congregations participating in VMMA, and creating an invitational flyer and letter to mail to congregational leadership.

All of us agreed that leaders needed to respond to our invitation prior to the May 2007 VMMA meeting. While this date seemed far removed from our proposed event date of March 12, 2008, we wanted to determine whether congregational leadership would be available to attend the gathering. If only a few leaders expressed interest, then we would discontinue planning for what we agreed to call the "Day of Discussion for Leadership and Vocation Directors."

The next task before us was to gather information from VMMA members about the questions to address at the Day of Discussion. At our first subcommittee meeting, we had listed topics, ranging from marketing to the application process.

All who participated left affirmed in their respective ministries, energized with hope, and challenged to go deeper into congregational reflection regarding vocations to religious life.

We decided to survey our members via a questionnaire about their specific concerns surrounding each topic. We would ask questions ranging from, “How do you advertise or market your community? What have you found particularly useful?” to “How do you assist applicants in transition into their first year of residential formation?” (See the questionnaire on page 31.) From the responses we would choose VMMA members to share their experience with various aspects of vocation ministry.

We then decided on the following timeline:

- May 16, 2007—Announce the questionnaire as part of our subcommittee report at the regular VMMA meeting.
- September 2007—Send the questionnaire to VMMA members electronically and remind them to connect with their congregational leadership regarding the Day of Discussion.
- Prior to November 2007—The VMMA questionnaires would be returned to us.

## Responses to invitations, questionnaires

By mid-May 2007 more than 25 congregational leaders had already accepted our invitation to the Day of Discussion, and one of our members had written the questionnaire.

### *Schedule for Day of Discussion*

10 - 10:30	Welcome, Announcements Opening prayer Keynote address by Brother Paul Bednarczyk, CSC
10:30 - 11:30	Presentations by VMMA members
11:30 - 11:40	Break
11:40 - 12	Feedback from Brother Paul
12 - 12:30	Large group discussion facilitated by Brother Paul
12:30 - 1:30	Lunch
1:30 - 2:15	Break-out sessions by topic
2:20 - 3:00	Concluding session led by Brother Paul Closing prayer

During meetings in May and August, we firmed up the Day of Discussion schedule (see below) and came up with cost estimates for the gathering. We also decided to present each participant with a packet at the Day of Discussion containing: a folder with a VMMA business card, a pen (a gift from Serra International with whom VMMA collaborates in planning an annual “Life Directions Weekend”), a pad of paper with the VMMA logo printed on it, the mission and goals of VMMA, a list of VMMA members and Day of Discussion participants, and a copy of all the responses to the questionnaire.

During our November 2007 subcommittee meeting, which turned out to be our longest, we reviewed the questionnaire responses from VMMA members. In order to represent diverse approaches to vocation ministry, we chose communities whose responses were very different, selecting a men’s community and a women’s community to present briefly on each set of questions. Naturally we couldn’t present information about all VMMA members, but every community that responded to the questionnaire would have its written response included in the packet. (Some communities asked to revise their responses upon learning that the questionnaire-responses would be distributed to all participants.)

In January 2008, three months before the Day of Discussion, we ironed out more of the specifics of the gathering, including the environment and set up of the room. We decided to invite VMMA members to bring their vocation display boards to set up around the perimeter of the room. Although we had originally considered inviting the media to cover the Day of Discussion, some of our congregational communicators advised against it, pointing out that the gathering was focused on internal affairs. We divvied up tasks for the day of the event and planned to e-mail leaders a reminder about it.

At our final subcommittee meeting two days before the Day of Discussion, we assembled packets and reviewed every aspect of the gathering from beginning to end. At this time we wholeheartedly and unanimously agreed that following the Day of Discussion we would have a celebratory meal together.

## The day arrives

March 12, 2008 dawned sunny and with no snow predicted. Already we saw this as a gift of God’s providence. The meeting began about 8:30 a.m. when VMMA members came to set up their display boards and a film presentation of VMMA congregations (with help from the Archdiocese of Milwaukee Vocation Office).

## Questionnaire in preparation for the Day of Discussion

*Organizers asked members of the Vocation Ministers of the Milwaukee Archdiocese to answer the following questions. Later they chose respondents with distinct approaches to give short presentations at the Day of Discussion.*

1. What are the basic steps you take in bringing someone through the discernment and application process? Approximately how long does the process take? What do you feel is most helpful during this period?
2. How do you advertise/market your community? What have you found to be particularly useful (Web sites, DVDs, blogs, print advertising, etc.)?
3. What approach does your community take regarding the age and health of applicants?
4. What approach does your community take regarding educational requirements?
5. Does your community accept international applicants into its U.S.-based formation programs? If so, what are the challenges you have experienced regarding cross-cultural formation and U.S. visa requirements?
6. How do you assist applicants in transition into their first year of residential formation? Do your candidates/postulants work, or do you provide for their needs? What kinds of programming do you have? What challenges do you experience in working with first-year residential programs, and how do you respond to them?
7. How do you involve other community members in vocation promotion? When you have invited community members to collaboration, what has their response been? What were the challenges?

As participants arrived a spirit of enthusiasm and ease filled the room. After a welcome and a prayer asking the Holy Spirit for guidance, the Day of Discussion began. Brother Paul shared a most challenging and informative presentation. Several participants requested a written copy of it to continue the discussion within their congregations. (Brother Paul's address appears on page 32.)

Vocation ministers then presented two-minute reports on various vocation topics. (To help each speaker stay on schedule, we gave signs at 40 seconds remaining and at the end of two minutes.) Following the presentations, Brother Paul offered comments and fielded questions. During breaks participants perused the displays and shared ideas about marketing.

The noon meal took place in the meeting room, which spared us the additional time involved with moving 60 people. After the meal small groups gathered according to topic for about 45 minutes. Upon their return to the large group, Brother Paul acted as facilitator for further insights and questions. The day ended with a prayer of gratitude and a blessing.

In one way the Day of Discussion had ended, and in another way it had only just begun. During the last two years, VMMA has purposefully worked toward collaboration among its members. We have developed a common display board, diocesan newspaper ad, Web site and handouts. In our conversations we have reflected that our form of life—community life—embraces collaboration. When VMMA agreed on this principle, we began looking for ways to model this as an organization. Looking back on the Day of Discussion—both the preparation and the event—we realize it was not only a constructive time together but also a positive experience of collaboration.

We encourage other communities to consider sponsoring a Day of Discussion for themselves. We found the experience is well worth all the plotting and planning, sharing and learning. Our hope is that your experience will be as fruitful as ours. ■

Let's believe in a future for our congregations and make vocation ministry a top priority.

# The current state of vocations and where we go from here

BY BROTHER PAUL BEDNARCZYK, CSC

*This article is the written form of the presentation the author gave at the Day of Discussion, a gathering of congregational leaders and vocation and formation ministers held in the Milwaukee, WI area in March 2008. (See the article about the Day of Discussion on page 28.)*

**T**HANK YOU FOR THIS OPPORTUNITY to speak with you this morning. I also thank you for your support of the National Religious Vocation Conference and the work that we do on behalf of the church and religious life in the U.S. and abroad.

In addition, I want to congratulate you and the planning committee for your efforts today to gather vocation, formation and leadership personnel to discuss what I believe is one of the most significant topics in religious life today—new membership.

I have worked with many religious communities over the years, and if the message was not clear five years ago, the message is certainly clear now. If we do not do something about vocation ministry and new membership in our religious institutes today, for some communities it will be too late five years from now. At the same time I acknowledge at the outset that I have been extremely impressed with many religious congregations in their commitment to invest personnel and finances in the vocation promotion programs they have developed. Their eyes continue to remain on the future and the possibilities it may bring.

*Brother Paul Bednarczyk, CSC is the executive director of the National Religious Vocation Conference. He is a member of the Congregation of the Holy Cross, Eastern Province of Brothers. He has worked in vocation ministry in various capacities since 1993.*



The task, though, that I have been given this morning is to offer you my perspective of the vocation scene from where I stand as the executive director of the National Religious Vocation Conference. I would then like to offer some reflections on the importance of leadership and vocation ministers working together for the benefit of their communities.

## Media reports on rising vocations

In November 2006, *TIME* magazine published an article entitled “Today’s Nun has a Veil and a Blog.” Some of you may be familiar with it. Although the article was not without its weaknesses, generally speaking it was a positive piece on religious life for women. The gist of the article was that younger women are beginning to re-look at religious life again as a possible life option. After reading so much about the diminishment of women religious, it was refreshing to read about some communities that are attracting young and talented women.

After this article was published, I received numerous phone calls from both secular and religious media inquiring whether or not it is true—“are there really more nuns?” Even Matt Lauer of NBC’s *Today Show* introduced one program segment that profiled a newer community of Dominican Sisters in Michigan. His opening remarks were that “convents are bursting at the seams!”

Although such media interest and coverage of religious life is positive, it only highlights one portion of truth. From my perspective, anecdotal evidence suggests that the full truth is that there are some communities of men and women that are receiving several, and in some cases, numerous candidates on an annual basis; then there are some communities that receive candidates on a sporadic basis, and then there are other groups not receiving anyone at all.

The reality is that we do not have any accurate data on how many men and women have recently entered religious life, nor do we have data on those who stayed or left. Because this information is critical to separate the facts from the fiction regarding the state of contemporary religious vocations, with the assistance of a major grant from an anonymous donor, NRVC is in the process of conducting a research study, in collaboration with the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA), on the state of religious vocations in this country. No study of this magnitude has been done before.

## Study about new membership underway

The entire research project will consist of the following four components.

**1. A survey to all major superiors** of both men's and women's canonically recognized religious institutes and societies of apostolic life in the United States. This would also include those emerging communities (public or private associations of the faithful) that are aspiring for canonical recognition as a religious institute. This survey would focus on the characteristics of the religious institute (e.g. its canonical status and form of religious life), the lifestyle of its members (e.g. local community life, common prayer and primary ministries), the characteristics of its vocation and formation programs, including the number of candidates/postulants, novices, temporary and finally professed who entered in the last 15 years, including those who left in the same time frame.

**2. A separate survey will then be sent to every new member** (novice, temporary professed and finally professed within the last 15 years) in each religious institute (congregation, province or monastery) that responded to the previous questionnaire. This survey would focus on the demographic characteristics of the new members, what

attracted them to religious life and their particular religious institute, and what sustains and challenges them in the religious life.

**3. Focus groups of new entrants** from selected religious institutes around the country will be held to understand more fully the perspectives that surfaced in the second survey.

**4. An in-depth study will be conducted of approximately five to seven religious institutes that have been especially successful** in attracting and retaining new members in recent years. Our ultimate goal is to identify best practices in vocation promotion and formation. We expect to complete the project in spring 2009.

In the meantime, because of the media pressure for vocation statistics, and since I could not wait for the results of our CARA study, I needed quick information that would either affirm or disclaim the theory that vocations are on the upswing. As a result, in February of 2007, and again in February of this year, NRVC, with the assistance of Patrice Tuohy and TrueQuest Communications, conducted an online survey of our *VISION* magazine advertisers and those discerners who completed profiles for VocationMatch.com.

For two years in a row the results have been fascinating to me. This year, out of a potential 1,096 discerners, 320 responded to our survey. Out of a potential 476 *VISION* advertising communities, we had 225 vocation directors respond to our online questions.

What we found is that religious institutes reported on average a 30 percent increase this past year in the number of individuals in initial formation. In addition 62 percent of participating communities reported an increase in vocation inquiries in the past year. We also found:

Do we believe that what we have to offer the church and the people of God is valuable, and that young people today can find enrichment and fulfillment in religious life, just as we have?

- 53 percent of those inquiring are under 30 years of age.
- 10.9 percent are between 30 and 39.
- 18.8 percent plan on entering a formation program within the next 12 months.
- 34.1 percent are 40 or older.
- 64.4 percent are seriously exploring a religious vocation.

Say what you want, but something is definitely happening. For years we have been praying for more vocations to religious life—could our heartfelt prayers finally be bearing some fruit?

Although these statistics are both positive and encouraging, I am still unclear how all of this is going to pan out for religious communities in the future. While the interest in re-looking at religious life as a possible life option may be increasing, it is too early to tell whether or not this interest will actually translate into newer members.

I now would like to review with you the discerners' ranking of what most attracts them to a particular religious community. A total of 320 discerners ranked the following qualities as essential or very important in determining which community they would choose to enter:

- Praying with members of a community—73.2 percent,
- Devotional prayer—73.6 percent,
- Being able to do ministry with other members of the congregation—63.7 percent,
- Wearing a religious habit—50.3 percent,
- Living in community—67.3 percent,
- Justice and peace outreach—64.2 percent,
- Living a life of faithfulness to the church and its teachings—90.1 percent.

This *VISION* survey focuses on those who are discerning religious life. On the other hand, the CARA study NRVC is conducting will specifically focus on those who have already made the commitment to entering religious life within the past 15 years. I will be interested to see if there is a correlation between the responses of today's discerners and those who

have already entered religious life in the past 15 years.

I share these statistics with you because I believe they highlight for most religious institutes today the disconnect that exists to varying degrees between what today's contemporary candidate is looking for in religious life and what our present vowed members are seeking in their own religious life and in the life of the congregation. This reality, I believe, poses both opportunities and challenges to those in leadership, whether you are a major superior, vocation director or formation director.

Looking at these statistics, while not being naïve to the reality of some of our religious institutes, I offer you the following thoughts for your own reflection. And as I was asked to do in this presentation, most of my reflections pertain to the role of religious leadership.

Before any vocation plan is implemented, or before any formation program is structured, I do think that there are two essential questions that need to be discussed by both leadership and by the membership at large.

## Willing to sacrifice for vocations?

**Why do we want vocations?** Do we want vocations to maintain our present institutional commitments and ministerial commitments? Do we want new members to make us “feel good” knowing that the life we have chosen is worthwhile after all? Or do we want candidates because we believe that our charism is a gift to the church, and without it the church would be a much poorer place? Do we believe that what we have to offer the church and the people of God is valuable, and that younger people today can find enrichment and fulfillment in religious life, just as we have?

**If we say we want vocations and a future for our congregations, what sacrifices are we willing to make in order to ensure that future?** We are men and women of the Gospel who have freely chosen to follow Jesus Christ in a most radical way by living the vowed life. The Gospels teach us that new life, rebirth and resurrection await us at the end of the long road to Calvary. During this Lenten season we are reminded that the path is a road of sacrifice, letting go, and yes, suffering. What is it that God asks us today to sacrifice or to let go of in order to bring new life to our institutes?

We would be deluding ourselves if we thought that vocation and formation ministry has not changed over the years. Those of us who have been in this ministry for some time would also attest that the type and quality of candidates have also changed. No matter what we may think about

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the younger generation, their values, hopes and desires, we cannot ignore them if we want a future.

Take a moment to recall what it was like when you entered religious life. You had idealism; you had some ideas of how you wanted to live this life and what possibly needed to be changed; you wanted to be part of a group and to fit in comfortably, and, most of all, you wanted to be loved and accepted.

None of that has changed for today's candidates, but today's candidates have changed from when we entered, because their experiences of the world, the church, the culture and the society in which we live have changed. Generations are supposed to change because that is what they are meant to do. Some of our members, however, may not like the changes that they witness in our younger generation. They react when they see them talking a different language, moving towards more traditional practices and trying to reclaim aspects of a life that older members worked hard to renew.

Think back to 30-40 years ago. The world, the church, the culture and society were changing, and many of our older brothers and sisters in community also did not like the changes they were seeing in the younger generation. These young upstarts were talking a different language; they were moving toward non-traditional prayer styles and community life, and they were trying to renew a life that longevity had already proven to be constant and divinely inspired.

## Asking hard questions about our lives

My brother and sisters, how have we become our mothers and fathers in community? Although generations may change, as I get older, I realize more and more that human nature remains the same. In looking at some of the statistics I just shared with you, some of you may be ready to throw your arms in the air in total exasperation! I only ask that you not react to what is being said, but rather listen to what is being said in these *VISION* survey results.

Rather than reacting and saying that we are not all going to dress the same again, or that we are not going to legislate Eucharistic adoration or common rosary, or that we are not going back to large-group living, can we just take a breath, and see the results of this survey as a possible opportunity for personal and communal examination of conscience?

We might ask ourselves: What is the quality of our prayer life in our local communities, and how does it reflect our faith and community tradition? In reviewing what we may have let go of in our former community and personal prayer practices,

what did we replace it with, and has it made us more prayerful men and women?

How do we give public witness to our consecration as vowed religious, and is it effective in today's world? How do we define and live out community today? How does personal choice affect our responses to the communal needs of the congregation and its members? How would a newer member fit into our style of community life?

Since we deepen our ecclesial commitment by virtue of our religious vows, how do we see ourselves and our community in relationship to the church at large and its teachings?

In our professional ministries, evaluation processes and accountability are clearly articulated in our job descriptions. They are viewed as opportunities for professional growth and ongoing education. My own experience of nine years in leadership in my own religious community has taught me that although such accountability is deemed acceptable in our professional or ministerial lives, members can resist such accountability when it comes to their own personal and religious lives, even though its value is clearly outlined in our constitutions. If anything, the recent sexual abuse scandals in the church have taught us that we are not exempt from being held accountable to the standards and life we have embraced.

A disconnect exists to varying degrees between what today's contemporary candidate is looking for in religious life and what our present vowed members are seeking in their own religious life and in the life of the congregation.

## Leaders can build common vision

I would hope that you do not interpret these *VISION* survey results as an indictment of the present state of religious life. Again I believe it is much less threatening to see them simply as an opportunity for personal and communal self-examination. If this is what younger candidates are presently looking for in a religious congregation, and if we want a future for our congregation, we must honestly answer these deeper questions, not for mere window dressing so that we may be more attractive, but more importantly, because it is simply what we do as religious in order to live our lives with

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greater integrity and authenticity. Leadership is integral in helping to make this happen, even if the questions or answers make us uncomfortable.

Should a community determine that there is a future, I believe that the next step is to come to a common understanding of what that future is going to be. This is where leadership is essential—to help facilitate a process in which a common vision of the religious institute is clearly articulated and agreed upon. If leadership and membership are all over the ballpark regarding the direction of the community,

Can leaders make a conscious choice to give some quality planning, strategizing and discussion time to our futures and newer membership?

attracting new members will be problematic simply because of the lack of clarity in the group's identity.

I also encourage both leadership and vocation personnel to be in frequent communication with one another. Major superiors would agree that

they often get bogged down with issues of maintenance or retirement. Can leaders, though, make a conscious choice to give quality planning, strategizing and discussion time to our futures, to newer membership? Vocation directors have the obligation to keep leadership informed about their activities, the number of men or women with whom they are in contact, the “come and see” retreats they are planning, as well as the trends that they are seeing in vocation ministry. I often hear from major superiors that they look to their vocation director for information, direction and guidance regarding vocations.

## Believe in a future, prioritize vocations

Finally I would encourage the major superiors who are present to make vocation ministry a priority during your leadership tenure. The 2002 North American Congress on Vocations spoke about building a vocation culture in our church. I believe that in some respects we need to rebuild that same vocation culture within our religious institutes. Because of a dearth of vocations, some of our members have given up hope for a future, have forgotten how to invite a young man or woman, consider themselves too old to be of use in vocation promotion, or are simply unsure or unclear about the church and religious life and its direction, so choose not to invite.

As religious leaders, you may not get everyone on board with you, but if you get the majority to believe that we just may have a shot for a future, I think you are moving in the right direction.

I was raised in community hearing the stories of our older brothers who were pioneers in our missions, who built new schools, who taught their classes and then slept on classroom floors because the brothers' residence was not yet finished before the beginning of the school year. I heard about the great sacrifices, both in personnel and in finances, made in the name of the mission. I was in awe of our priests' and brothers' sense of mission, their heroism and selflessness in building great schools, colleges and universities of which we are truly proud today. The older brothers would often say that they didn't have much, but they knew that they were all in this together. Unfortunately, we tell these stories with a sense of fond memory and nostalgia of a bygone day.

The challenge before us today is not about building schools or hospitals—rather it is about rebuilding our institutes, not only with newer members, but with a renewed sense of commitment and mission reflective of the needs of our time. How do we generate in our members that same sense of zeal and enthusiasm for building a future for our religious congregations as our ancestors had in the past for building our many institutions? The needs may have changed, but the mission and commitment remains the same.

So, how do you build a culture of vocation within your religious congregation? First of all, by believing a future is possible. If you are not convinced yourself that there is a future, then you are not going to convince your membership. No matter how religious leadership is exercised or perceived by the membership, when a major superior speaks with conviction, the membership usually listens.

They may not always agree at first, but they will listen, and that in itself is a beginning.

There are definite ways in which leaders can demonstrate that new membership is a priority. I would encourage you to speak publicly about vocations as often as you can, raise the question during your annual canonical visits with your sisters and brothers, appoint your best people to vocation and formation ministry, and invest both time and money into a viable vocation plan and program.

I see us as having two options regarding newer membership. We can sit back, do nothing and simply remain on life support until it is finally time to pull the plug on our religious institute, or we can tackle the issues, ask the difficult questions and determine how much we are willing to sacrifice

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and risk for an uncertain future. We may conclude, like some religious congregations have already done, that there is no future. We have served well and we will continue to do so until our last breath. Our time had come, and now it has gone. In looking at the history of religious life, this has been the story of many religious communities over the centuries.

On the other hand, we may ask the questions and may not have all of the answers, but we may conclude that it just may be worth it to give it another chance. Vocation ministry is not just about attracting new members—it is also about nurturing, renewing and deepening the vocations that we already have. In so doing, we become more authentic, more joyful, more in touch with God, more loving, more compassionate and understanding and more giving. As a result, we may discover that we and the life we have chosen have become more attractive to younger men and women who long for the same things in their own lives.

August 2008 marks 33 years since I first entered community. I say to you today with all my heart, I truly love religious life and my own Congregation of Holy Cross. I know my life would be very different today had I not responded to God's invitation to be a Holy Cross Brother. Like you, I have had my own struggles, but all in all, my religious life has been a wonderful, life-giving journey. I know this because I have the witness of the many men and women who have gone before me and who have given witness and testimony that this life is worth living.

If they, like you and me, could be so blessed in this life, I am hard pressed to think that others like you and me could not find similar fulfillment in this life and in the congregations we so passionately love.

When we read the Gospels, we see that Jesus never missed an opportunity to invite people to join him on his journey. He constantly extended an invitation to those whom he encountered because he was convinced of his mission and believed in it. As men and women religious, we publicly profess a radical commitment to the Gospel. If we believe in the Gospel message, how can we not do the same and invite others to join us in our life and mission?

In the words of Deuteronomy, I encourage you, therefore, "to choose life...that you and your descendents may live" (31:19). I pray that you not only choose it, but embrace it and live it well for the next generation to follow. ■



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# BOOK NOTES

## Searching for the common good

BY SISTER PATRICIA KENNY, RSM

VOCATION MINISTERS may not be consciously thinking about it when they interview prospective candidates, but the question of competing goods is very much part of the interview. Candidates are sometimes torn between several attractive options open to them. Both candidates and vocation ministers might spend serious time considering how their own self interest fits the best interests of the other. Are the candidate's goals and dreams consistent with the charism and the realities of the community? Is a community's understanding of itself, its charism and realities in tune with the hopes and expectations of the aspiring member?

What do we do when competing goods collide? Does the common good have a chance in an age when self-fulfillment, ambition and realization of one's dreams are encouraged and celebrated, and ongoing attention to how one's own dream intersects with the interests of others takes second place?

Chris Korzen and Alexia Kelley have written a book that explores these questions of the common good in the political context, but I suggest that the authors have a message for those who are members of a religious community or who are considering religious life. Both are called to "live justly, love tenderly and walk humbly before God." In so doing they need to understand the balance between those things that will enhance our

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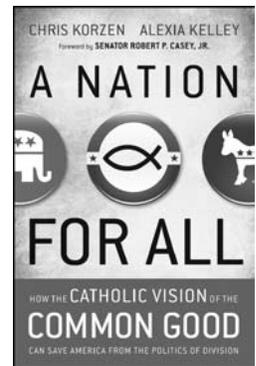
Sister Patricia Kenny, RSM is a Sister of Mercy of the Americas and currently a member of the communications department at the Mercy Sisters' office in Silver Spring, MD. She is now the feature editor of the internal publication, ¡Viva! Mercy, and served as editor of an earlier publication, "Living Mercy."



lives and the lives of those with whom we share the planet. A commitment to the common good must be part of religious community life (including the vocational search), and it must be part of how we members of religious communities approach questions of public policy.

Chris Korzen and Alexia Kelley have given significant portions of their lives to working for the common good; Korzen cofounded Catholics United, a nonpartisan online advocacy group and was a director of the Catholic Voting Project in 2004-2005. Kelley is cofounder and executive director of Catholics in Alliance for the Common Good. She worked for almost a decade at the Catholic Campaign for Human Development and co-edited *Living the Catholic Social Tradition: Cases and Commentary* and authored *Call to Family, Community and Participation*. Foundational to the book is their grasp of the political and economic landscape of our time and the insidious ways in which Americans of all faiths are being sucked into putting individual rights and needs first and the welfare of the many second.

They begin with the dreams and documents with which America was born, the threats it has endured and survived and the many times when leaders have called citizens to be both self-reliant and altruistic. Their premise is a belief that the unity and strength for which America has been known is facing a very real threat. Under siege both at home and abroad, we tend to close in, stop caring about one another and look out for ourselves.



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The authors call this behavior the politics of division. We witness it every time we are encouraged or choose to put aside the qualities and things we share, believe and rely upon together and focus instead on our differences. They compare this behavior to a popularity contest in which the winners are seldom the “best” contestants. They tend to be the ones who “fight the dirtiest.” Those who benefit are those with power and money; those who lose are considered collateral damage in a culture war.

Korzen and Kelley wrote this book because they believe they have a solution to the politics of division based on the belief that we are called, as Americans and as Christians, to build a society that benefits *all* the people in it. They acknowledge different definitions for the “common good” and explore the religious and philosophical roots from which they have grown.

While the book is written for a predominantly Catholic audience, there are several references to secular documents, e.g. the United States Constitution, which begins, “We the people,” and speaks of our need to “promote the general welfare.” Chapter 3 is devoted to “church and state” and explains that the establishment and free exercise clauses in the Bill of Rights are general but not absolute principles. They ensure that religion stays distinct from politics but not to the degree that we deprive our politics of its very soul.

The distinction between religion and faith is addressed particularly well. The authors point out that we often use these terms interchangeably and miss the subtle difference between them. Nearly everyone has faith; not everyone has religion. There is no need to be part of a particular faith tradition to be faithful to spouses and to put families first. Faith is a powerful force that drives human action, compels us to do the “right thing,” to try to make the world a better place. A better term, Kelley and Korzen suggest, might be values. While some values are informed by established churches, many people have convictions that spring from their own sense of ethics. This chapter could provide dynamic substance for group discussion.

The last two chapters attempt to answer the central question: how can we get beyond the politics of division and reclaim our nation’s historical commitment to the common good? The writers propose an agenda for the common good that addresses specific issues that divide us in deep-seated, emotional ways, often precluding

serious efforts to look beyond personal convictions. The subjects of abortion, the global climate crisis, health care, war and immigration are each developed carefully with references to documents that undergird basic convictions about human rights. The authors cite poverty, however, as the root of all the problems that confound us today and reference Scripture, history, secular and faith-based efforts to address systemic injustice.

The final chapter brings the reader face-to-face with the hard business of pursuing the common good. They point out four requirements: public policies that put the needs of everyone above

the interests of the few; a culture that places concern for one another above materialism, greed and excessive individualism; an economy measured by the status of the poor instead of the size of the stock market and profits of corporations; and a commitment by individuals to live in ways that reflect a profound concern for one another.

Catholic social principles and tradition are separated into clear and manageable parts and are explored in considerable depth, given that this book is just 176 pages. This book would make an excellent reference or could provide readings for groups ranging from high school students to senior citizens. The style and language are contemporary, the references current and the pace is fairly brisk. There are no footnotes, but abundant resources are listed in categories, including books, encyclicals and organizations.

This is a book that might well become required reading in Catholic schools and universities, a concise compendium of the facts, logic and analysis that can inform the thinking and decision-making of young minds as they face a world that sometimes appears to be in a downward spiral.

As newer members in our religious congregations learn the history and charism that inform their ministry and life in community, this small volume could provide an opening for conversation and be a source of inspiration for them. The search for the common good is ever before us, and that is true of our lives in religious community as well as our lives within the “community” of our nation. ■

We are called, as Americans and as Christians, to build a society that benefits *all* the people in it.

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