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Building a vocation culture across the globe

About 18 months ago I was at Mass in Lörrach, Germany where my family and I lived while my husband was a Fulbright Exchange teacher. With only a rudimentary command of the language, I missed much of what happened at Mass that year. Yet that Sunday, in the midst of so much that I didn't understand, along came something very familiar. During the homily my husband leaned over to whisper that the priest was telling the congregation how fulfilling his life's work was. I couldn't understand all of his words, but his enthusiasm spoke for itself. At the back of the church hung a bright red banner proclaiming that God calls each of us. It was vocation awareness month. This was something I knew about!

Indeed, in our universal church, the effort to create a "culture of vocation" is underway worldwide. There have now been four Continental Congresses on Vocations, the latest having taken place in Bangkok this past June. Church leaders at all ends of the earth agree that the vocation message must be relayed to the faithful. And so in parishes and dioceses around the world, the message is being taught, preached, discussed, advertised and prayed about.

In some places the effort is stumbling and slow. Other places can point to great progress and increasing interest in priesthood and religious life. This edition of *HORIZON* gives a glimpse of what is happening in vocation ministry in other countries. We also look at the complexities of importing candidates to the U.S. from other countries. I

noticed a few themes emerge from this overview of vocation ministry:

- Whether candidates are plentiful or scarce, vocation ministry involves great challenges. The nature of the challenges vary, but obstacles and difficulties exist everywhere.
- The challenge of cultural diversity exists in many countries. In Canada, the French-speaking and English-speaking populations have trouble working together. In Africa inter-tribal divisions can undermine unity in formation houses. And so the story goes in many parts of our increasingly mobile and ethnically-mixed world.
- Vocation ministers are not alone. No matter where you minister, you are part of a universal church. That means you are connected the sister in Brazil who is dismayed that even an elderly prayer-group member doubts that celibacy can be lived. And you are connected to the vocation ministers in Nigeria who have so many candidates, it's hard to get to know them all.

Whether it's vocation awareness week in Germany or a vocation talk in Ivory Coast, the move to build a vocation culture is underway. Through it all, there is one Lord, one Master of the Harvest, who inspires and sustains our efforts both big and small.

—Carol Schuck Scheiber, Editor

Foreign-born religious bring many gifts to the U.S. church. However, at the same time, the practice of importing members holds multiple perils for religious communities.

How importing foreign-born members is affecting vocation ministry and the U.S. church

by David B. Couturier, OFM Cap.

It is now becoming clear how the American Catholic Church intends to manage its longstanding, multi-generational and chronic vocation shortage. At least for the foreseeable future, it will import and ordain foreign-born students to lead local church communities. A recent study of international enrollments in seminaries found that 30 percent of newly ordained seminarians in the United States were foreign-born (about 140 to 150 per year) and projections suggest that this number will likely rise to 50 percent in the near future.¹ Seminarians are now being imported from Kenya, Nigeria, India, Viet Nam and Columbia (among other countries) to train for leadership in the church. It is also clear that most seminaries and parish communities are ill prepared for the social, cultural, ethnic, economic and religious dynamics that this transition implies.

Religious congregations of men and women have experience with foreign-born membership. This article will tap into that experience by looking at three issues that will emerge for the North American church because of increased foreign-born members and several implications for the work of vocation ministers. We will focus our attention on the psychological and organizational dynamics of this change and provide a socio-analytic perspective on the anxiety that this transition is likely to induce in church communities.²

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Issues for the North American church

On the face of it, the increase of foreign-born members in American religious congregations is a blessing. These brothers and sisters bring with them the spirituality of the nations of the world and demonstrate the incredibly rich theological and cultural diversity of the church. They are the living symbols of our great communion, one that incorporates and transcends every social difference, and they enrich the experience of the local churches of America by bonding them in a concrete way with the issues, concerns and faith of local churches across the globe.

At the same time, the importation of foreign-born members and, in a special way, foreign-born leaders for American congregations, signals a failure of the American Catholic community. When a vibrant and growing church hemorrhages religious leaders in a sustained way at the rate of 40-to-50 percent over two generations, with no sign of amelioration, there are systemic issues at play that need hard thinking and radical measures. When a church community that once supplied its ministries and the world with a more than sufficient number of dedicated and committed vowed ministers can no longer do so and, in fact, must import them just to maintain basic services, that community is in trouble.

This article has a broad context and a narrow focus. The broad context concerns the substantial changes going on in the structural realignment of American Catholicism. A chronic vocational shortage and the reorganization (merging and clustering) of parishes will impact all church communities, including religious congregations. But religious congregations are unique (thus the narrow focus). Those who join provinces,

whether from across the street or across the globe, take on a life commitment and create a religious bond of brotherhood or sisterhood within the community. The motivation to create community is thus stronger, but so are the challenges. As we will see, the importation of foreign-born members for service in American religious congregations may accelerate and focalize trends and experiences elsewhere in the American Catholic community.

The importation of foreign-born members poses three issues for religious congregations in the United States.

The issue is whether the acceptance of foreign-born members will challenge not only community patterns of cultural diversity but, more tellingly, whether they will disrupt the congregational patterns of economic disparity.

They are:

- 1) The shift from the parochial culture and organizational structures of the 19th and 20th centuries;
- 2) The acceptance of the ethical obligations of a global communion; and
- 3) The development of a relational economy within religious congregations by dealing with economic disparity issues.

The shift from the parochial culture

First, the American church is undergoing a profound reorganization of its ministries and a dramatic realignment of its pastoral services. We are moving from the parochial culture of the 19th and 20th centuries to the international mission culture of the 21st. What this means is that the traditional organizational mandate of the local church community to defend the faith of poor immigrants in the neighborhood through the clarity of its doctrine and the strength of its impressive network of locally-based parishes, schools, hospitals and social services is now diversifying. Local issues have global origins and international implications. Parishes no longer manifest the ethnic privacy of previous generations, when Catholics were religiously segregated by their culture or nation of origin. Now Catholics in America are more likely to be economically segregated, even as a

growing number of churches share common space to declare their one faith, in the multiple languages and cultures of Catholicism today. The gap between the concerns of the poor and those of the well-off widens, even in religious communities.³ Increasingly, Catholics are challenged to live out their global communion at the most local level. And yet, the structures and, at times, the attitudes of Catholics are stuck in the parochial culture of previous generations.⁴

Ethical obligations of a global communion

Second, this globalization of our parochial boundaries and worldwide communion comes with ethical challenges and obligations. Peter Phan names three challenges that will face all Catholic communities in the coming years. The first is the increasing and changing form of cultural diversity of American society. The pace of immigration is quickening, and it will transform the complexion and conscience of America, as the flow of immigrants shifts from Europe to Asia, Mexico, Latin America and the Caribbean. Assimilation patterns that once expected newcomers simply to “fit into” the established white, Anglo-Saxon culture are giving way to behavioral patterns of “adaptation” and “incorporation,” requiring everyone to adjust to living in the middle of diverse cultural matrixes with more fluid boundaries and less secure borders.

Another challenge is the recognition that America can no longer realistically claim to be a “Christian nation,” but is, in fact, the most religiously diverse country in the world. As a traditionally and self-consciously religious people, Americans will increasingly need to negotiate the debates of the public square and the common good, as Phan points out, across multiple religious traditions and in interpretive schemes other than Christianity and Judaism, including Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism, Hinduism, and Islam.⁵ Whether Americans interpret this trend as a threatening “clash of civilizations” or as an expected consequence of its founding doctrines of religious freedom and tolerance will shape attitudes toward national security and inherited traditions about the practice of religion in the public square.⁶

The final challenge comes from the political position of the United States as the sole remaining superpower. In the face of “preemptive strikes” and unilateral actions on the world stage, the American Catholic community will face increasing pressure to pro-

claim to the nation the seamless nature of the “culture of life” and define more accurately and ethically the biblical origins of homeland security.⁷ This leads to a third issue for religious communities.

A relational economy that confronts economic disparity

The introduction of foreign-born members into religious communities breaks open these ethical challenges in full view of the congregation. Foreign-born members come with a mortgage of international pain and suffering, even if this hurt is held in silence and remains unseen by the majority. Behind almost every case of immigration and cultural displacement are the untold stories of privation and misery at the point of international or cultural origin. Our foreign-born members bear within themselves the stories of peoples enslaved, women and children trafficked, young people *desparecidos* and whole countries overwhelmed by a crushing and unserviceable global debt structure. The issue is whether the acceptance of foreign-born members will challenge not only community patterns of cultural diversity but, more tellingly, whether they will disrupt the congregational patterns of economic disparity. It is one thing to celebrate the harmony of differences, as long as those differences are largely cultural and linguistic. It is a whole other matter to reconcile the differences that determine who in the world will perish and who will prosper. The introduction of foreign-born members requires a shift in congregational language beyond cultural diversity to a new conversation about economic disparity.⁸ It demands a new look at our own economic arrangements and our commitment to the development of a relational economy within our provinces in the 21st century.⁹

Foreign-born members bring these international ethical challenges to light. They expose the opportunities and threats which globalization would usher in, if congregational members were willing to listen to the tragic stories that impel migration today. This is not to imply that some congregations do not still retain colonial views of foreign-born members, seeing them as a ready resource to cover a generational shortfall in vocational recruitment. Some congregations, as some dioceses, are using importation as a stop-gap solution to a chronic vocational shortage and applauding it as “cultural diversity.” It is safe to say that only the serious engagement of the political, economic and theological aspects of international compassion in today’s religious communities could avoid the colonialization of religious congregations in America.

The impact on religious congregations

Besides the effects noted above and the dynamics outlined in the next section below, the importation of foreign-born members will impact religious communities in specific ways. Religious communities are intense and total commitments. One does not walk away from them at the end of the work day. Therefore the effects and dynamics described in this article for other church communities are intensified in religious congregations.

First, the established beliefs, emotions, and rituals of the province now taken for granted as normative will inevitably be questioned and tested. Religious from other parts of the world and with different political horizons and ecclesial interests will begin to unsettle the compromises and consensus that many provinces have arrived at after much struggle. Approaches to pastoral service, hierarchy, church authority, the role of women, sexuality and intimacy will be re-opened for discussion and debate. Rituals and prayer forms constructed out of and expressive of the cultural concerns of Americans will need to be revised to pay attention to the religious needs and languages of members who may not share or even respect the autonomous accents we, as Americans, place on religious practice.

Second, money issues and financial concerns will take on an even greater role in community discussions, as

Foreign membership implications for religious congregations

- Cultural diversity and assimilation
- Immigration issues
- New ethical obligations
- New rituals for prayer and decision-making
- New financial structures
- New approaches to service and authority
- Multiple religious belonging
- New identity markers
- Concerns about disparity and fairness
- Community ambivalence
- Devaluation of religious life
- New formation methods needed
- Opportunities for international compassion

religious are called upon to renegotiate very basic assumptions about how money is seen and used in the various cultures that will make up our congregations. One basic question will come to the fore: whose money is this? American religious now have a strict and thick boundary around money. Our *egocentric* (versus socio-centric) view of the world means that money in the province belongs to the province. Our siblings have no claim on it and our families have no right to it. History and law keep money under the con-

As religious freely cross borders and establish multiple identities across various cultures, money may no longer be considered such a fixed emotional asset. There may be increasing pressure to reorganize financial commitments across provincial lines in ways that challenge contemporary cultural (and financial) codes.

trol of the provinces. Taxes and donations are the way we share our resources in an international congregation. The importation of foreign members may challenge that assumption.

Today, religious communities speak eloquently and rightly about their charism and mission of “brotherhood” and “sisterhood” in the world and across the globe. And yet, for many their underlying economic principles and structures are still more individual than communal, more competitive than relational, based as they are on the fundamentals and practices of aggressive capitalism. Even members of international congregations that speak of a brotherhood or sisterhood that transcends national boundaries still maintain local economies and local financial controls. Money belongs to the provinces.

As religious freely cross borders and establish multiple identities across the various cultures, money may no longer be considered such a fixed emotional asset. There may be increasing pressure to reorganize financial commitments across provincial lines in ways that challenge contemporary cultural (and financial) codes.

Psychological and organizational dynamics of foreign-born membership

So, what should concern vocation directors as they consider the question of the importation of foreign-born members into their congregations? Clearly the legal issues and restrictions of immigration and the cultural issues of diversity come quickly to mind. These are immediate concerns and are well documented elsewhere. In this article, however, I want to focus on those concerns which are not so immediate and which do not come easily to mind. As a socio-analytic psychologist, I want to discuss the (psychological and organizational) impact that the importation of foreign-born members is likely to have on religious groups and the (anxious) reactions that this transition is likely to provoke, as vocation directors ply their trade.

As noted above, the importation of foreign-born members into American religious communities comes with a host of challenges and obligations. Religious communities, like all groups, are relatively stable organizational systems with defined tasks, roles and authority. Over time, congregations become particular cultures with predictable patterns of beliefs, emotions, rituals and tools. Whether organizationally stable or institutionally chaotic, congregations become comfortable with the *status quo* and, like most systems, will resist any pressure to change their way of doing things. The social defenses that groups employ to avoid organizational change are well defined.¹⁰

The importation of foreign-born members changes things. It reorders cultural beliefs and emotions almost everywhere, in the dining room, the chapel and at chapters. It ushers in new rituals and denotes the inadequacy or insufficiency of inherited resources. To make way for the new and different, the foreign and strange, simple tasks become complicated, roles get reversed, and authority gets challenged from unlikely sources and at inconvenient times. Established communities will expect foreign-born members to assimilate and fit into the conventions of the congregation. Negotiating losses will lead foreign-born members to try to accommodate as well as can be expected to their newfound sense of “multiple religious belongings” and the uneasy realization of several religious and identity markers in their lives. None of this is easy; all of it elicits anxiety, most often at an unconscious level.

If taken up, this transition will require provinces to pay attention to difficult economic, political and cultural issues within the congregation. Soon enough, disparity

issues (experiences of inequality and unfairness) will replace the enthusiasm for diversity. Individual complaints about being treated unfairly will hide the more complicated group adjustments underway, because personal anxiety is easier to manage and less threatening to manifest than feelings of organizational loss.¹¹

Vocation directors are on the front lines of these organizational dynamics. The importation of foreign-born members poses specific challenges to the vocation director. Let me name three of them.

We may find ourselves with a social interpretation and expectation that vocation is a foreign import on which we depend but which we would not consider as a meaningful lifestyle choice ourselves.

Community ambivalence

As noted above, foreign-born members are first and foremost a blessing. They enrich our communion and make concrete our gospel brother-and-sisterhood. But, alongside this positive aspect lie fears of institutional failure and signals of organizational distress. If the institutional fears and organizational anxieties of the group about its future are unacknowledged and unprocessed, one can expect a whole host of community dynamics likely to emerge over the experience of foreign-born members. Among them is a community-wide ambivalence. Neither a wholesale rejection nor an enthusiastic endorsement, the importation of foreign-born members will be accepted as a necessary but imposed common good. This will confuse and confound individuals who take the matter personally. The fact is that the community ambivalence, expressed in subtle gestures of noncompliance, is a statement about the organization and its history and not a judgment about individuals involved, most especially not the community members coming from afar.

Vocation directors will have their hands full with the legal and cultural issues involved in immigration. They will easily get wrapped up in the day-to-day adjustments individuals must make to make sense of their new surroundings and new rituals.

But, vocation directors must also become familiar with the needs and concerns of receiving communities. Even those that consciously endorse the welcoming of foreign-born members may hold some unprocessed feelings about how the congregation arrived at this point in its development and what it means for its future. Expressions of organizational disappointment or social frustration should not be immediately interpreted as cultural or racial bias. If acknowledged openly and publicly, they may actually open new doors of cultural hospitality and social understanding.

The devaluation of religious life

As the number of imported foreign-born members tips beyond the number of native vocations in the community, we may find ourselves facing an extremely uncomfortable (and largely unconscious) vocational recruitment dynamic: the devaluation of religious life as an “import resource.”

As Americans become used to seeing foreigners take up a religious life (and priesthood) to which they themselves are unwilling to commit, we may find ourselves with a social interpretation and expectation that vocation is a foreign import on which we depend but which we would not consider as a meaningful lifestyle choice ourselves.¹² American life is filled with examples of jobs now taken on by foreigners and devalued by Americans of European descent.

Vocation directors may find traditional doors closing as they try to pitch religious life to established communities of faith. This bias is unlikely to manifest itself directly. Its expressions will be subtle and may even be socially unconscious. But, the message should not be missed. The importation of foreign-born members to religious congregations is and should be a value in and of itself, since it expresses in concrete form our international communion and compassion. It does not, however, substitute and cannot solve the crisis that attends a local church unable to recruit from within its own communities of faith. The importation of foreign-born members could actually accelerate the devaluation of religious life in America, if religious leaders are not fully conscious and determinative of the dynamics at play. Vocation directors are called to play a central role in alerting their communities to these dynamics and concerns.

Formation advising

One of the most important ministries of vocation di-

rectors is as the initial formation advisors to those coming to religious life. They are sometimes the first to hear how God is calling an individual to serve the church. They are often the first to help an individual clarify the shape and challenge of that call. The techniques that vocation directors use for this formation advising can range from those found in the fields of pastoral counseling and spiritual direction to the methods of military recruiting and behavioral assessments. One thing is clear. There is no coherent or coordinated system of formation advising in religious communities today.¹³

Valuing cultural diversity is not enough to get a religious congregation through the organizational and institutional challenges involved in the welcoming of foreign-born members. Beyond the attitudinal adjustments that are required are the structural and organizational dynamics that must be attended, many of them at an unconscious level.

What we have is an eclectic mix of methods and techniques borrowed from pastoral counseling, clinical psychology, spiritual direction, ascetical theology and, sometimes, good old common sense. At present, I have been able to locate six different models of formation advising at work in religious congregations, each with a vastly different set of assumptions about how individuals grow in their internalization of the self-transcendent values of religion.¹⁴

This confusion of methods and assumptions is not helpful in an emotionally and culturally charged environment such as ours. Most of the methods we use in Western systems of formation advising are *ego-centric*, focused on the needs and challenges of individuals. Many of those coming to American religious communities from abroad come from *socio-centric* cultures that place an emphasis on a tradition-directed orientation to life issues and a belief in collective, rather than individual, solutions to human and social problems.

In a review of formational methods in inter-cultural settings, Frank Hough encourages seven steps that formators and religious in formation should agree to when working across cultures: (1) a clarity of goals and procedures between the two participants and mutual acceptance of these, (2) an awareness of and respect for the culture of the other, (3) self awareness in terms of one's own culture and reaction to other cultures, (4) mutual checking on the adequacy of communication, (5) an open attitude, (6) patience in terms of not making interpretations of judgments too early, and (7) a readiness to candidly evaluate these processes.¹⁵

Significant adjustments needed

Religious congregations have and will continue to have extensive experience with foreign-born members joining their provinces and communities. For many this has led to an enriching and rewarding experience of communion and the enlivening of congregational mission. And yet for some it has resulted in misunderstanding and division between foreign and native members. Valuing cultural diversity is not enough to get a religious congregation through the organizational and institutional challenges involved in the welcoming of foreign-born members. Beyond the attitudinal adjustments that are required are the structural and organizational dynamics that must be attended, many of them at an unconscious level. Significant adjustments in institutional life create organizational anxiety, and cultural forces shape the social defenses that groups are likely to use to ward off the discomfort that comes when tasks, roles and authority patterns must change.

Vocation directors should not be surprised by the mixed messages they are likely to receive from members regarding foreign recruitment. With the average age of women's religious communities now at 78 and that of men's communities not far behind, many communities are desperate for new members.¹⁶ There will be efforts and calls for help from overseas to shore up America's multigenerational vocational shortage, even from areas of the world with worse priest-to-people ratios than ours.

This does not mean that American Catholics and American religious will be enthusiastic about the prospect of a foreign clergy leading their communities and foreign-born members joining their provinces. Almost 50 years after its vocational situation began to spin out of control, religious congregations and dio-

ceses have yet to find an effective and satisfying strategy to engage ordinary Catholics in the question about their church's leadership needs.

The importation of foreign-born members has all the potential of moving the American church beyond its parochial roots and mobilizing Catholics to take on their new role as agents of Christ's international compassion in a world now ravaged by escalating violence and global expressions of greed. Foreign-born religious members could help move the obstacles to Gospel solidarity by helping congregational members discern more carefully issues of cultural diversity and economic disparity in our communities. They could shake the monopoly that capitalism has on our social imagination and invite us to develop a more relational economy, starting first in our congregations and reaching out to our parishes, dioceses and governments.

Vocation directors are on the front lines of this dilemma. If they allow foreign-born members to be treated as an "import commodity" and as a stopgap solution to a chronic vocational shortage, they will miss a valuable opportunity for evangelization. If, on the other hand, they recognize that foreign-born members are the entrance point to a much-needed but long neglected discourse about intercultural and interreligious living across the globe, our vocation directors will have advanced our ecclesial development exponentially.

As always, our vocation directors are ministers of the Christ who comes, icons of the *adventum* of our good and gracious God, who neither dominates nor deprives. It is in their ministry of welcoming across borders and hospitality beyond boundaries that they reveal the tender God who is rich in diversity and gracious in compassion. ✚

1. Cf. Dean R. Hoge and Aneidi Okure, OP report the present average of 30 percent in "Research Regarding International Priests and Seminarians" (National Catholic Education Association Roundtable on International Enrollments in Seminaries, February 2005). Dr. Brian Froehle, pastoral sociologist, projects the rate of increase to 50 percent. (Private conversation, March 5, 2005).

2. Socio-analysis is a field of study that examines how complex changes in institutions provoke a group-based anxiety, often at the unconscious level. Cross-reference L. Hirschhorn and C.K. Barnett (editors) *The*

Psychodynamics of Organizations (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993) and W.G. Lawrence, "Salient Dynamics in Religious Life," in S. Allcorn, (editor) *Psychoanalytic Interpretations of Organizational Cultures* (Chicago: ISPSO, 1994).

3. David B. Couturier, "Minority and Poverty Eradication," (May, 2003) accessed: www.fi-na.org/prov.html.

4. Peter C. Phan, "Cultures, Religions, and Power: Proclaiming Christ in the United States Today," *Theological Studies*, 65:4 (December, 2004) pp. 699-713.

5. *Ibid*, p. 720.

6. Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (New York: Oxford University, 2002).

7. Bryan N. Massingale, "From Homeland to Biblical Security," *Origins* 32:6 (February 20, 2003) pp. 598-602.

8. David B. Couturier, "From Diversity to Disparity: The Structural Conversion of Religious Life," *HORIZON* 14:4 (Fall, 1989) pp. 23-28.

9. David B. Couturier, *Formation for the Fraternal Economy in the Capuchin-Franciscan Order: A Psychological Analysis* (White Plains: Capuchin Communications, 2005).

10. Larry Hirschhorn, *The Workplace Within: The Psychodynamics of Organizations* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1988).

11. David B. Couturier, "Complaints about Treatment in Religious Communities," *Human Development* 18:2 (1997) pp. 10-15.

12. See Dr. Donald Dworkin's comments on the nursing profession in Gene Epstein, "New Melting Pot," *Barron's*, September 2, 2002.

13. David B. Couturier, "Formation Advising in Seminaries: The Impact of International Enrollments," (Paper delivered at the NCEA Roundtable on International Enrollments, March 5, 2005).

14. Those six types are: (1) the spiritual conference, (2) the therapeutic session; (3) the team approach; (4) the CPE model; (5) the praxis model; (6) the vocational personalism model. Cross-reference Couturier, *ibid*.

15. Frank Hough, FMS, "Working in the Pacific Islands: Grappling with Vocational Issues," in Franco Imoda, SJ, (ed.), *A Journey to Freedom: An Interdisciplinary Approach to the Anthropology of Formation* (Leuven: Peeters, 2000) p. 416.

16. David B. Couturier, "Practicing a Corporate Passion: The Five Skills Religious Must Learn to Get Beyond Diminishment Thinking," (Presentation at Washington Theological Union, February 5, 2005, accessed at: www.wtu.edu).

Many young Nigerians seek religious life. Yet cultural factors, poverty and overtaxed vocation and formation ministers are a few of the challenges.

Nigeria: plentiful candidates bring blessings and challenges

by Rita Schwartzberger, OP

Candidates to religious life are plentiful in Nigeria, but the complete picture of vocation ministry is far more complex than burgeoning numbers alone. Let's begin by looking at the social and religious context for religious communities and their new members. Nigeria is a country of between 120 and 140 million people. Roughly 40-45 percent are estimated to be Christian, and of those, the largest denomination is Roman Catholicism. Thus one can safely estimate that more than 20 million Nigerians are Roman Catholic. Nigeria also has a high birth rate, so there is a large youth population. The lifespan of Nigerians has risen over the last several decades, but with an increase in HIV/AIDS, it will likely lower in the coming years.

Nigeria is a country rich in natural resources. It is internationally known as one of the big players in oil production and export. As a result many people, both within and outside the country, think of it as a wealthy nation. The reality is that, due to internal corruption coupled with external pressures resulting in high debt and unstable economic policies, the majority of the people in Nigeria live in poverty. National debt manifests itself in the deterioration of public services, and the consequent breakdown of social order. The wealth of the few in all ways—access to services, to education, to health care, etc.—stands in sharp contrast to the poverty of the many.

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It is in this context that we consider the question of vocations in Nigeria.

Cultural influences on religious vocations

Despite many factors which increasingly break down cultural and traditional values, Nigeria remains largely a collectivist culture. Family ties, including extended family, are fundamental to a Nigerian. Marriage, with children to carry on the family name and presence, is thus seen as an essential element of the culture. Religious life, with its commitment to celibacy, is seen by many as contrary to their culture, and thus to be denied. At the same time, many young people can no longer stay within the milieu of family activities, because the traditional dependence upon subsistence farming cannot be sustained where land is limited and the population continues to grow. Thus the need for employment, as well as the attractions of city life, increasingly draw young people into urban centers where they face serious challenges to the traditional understanding of their culture.

Culture is, of course, a dynamic concept. Elements of the traditional culture at times conflict with elements of the global consumer culture manifested in movies, clothing, music, etc. Other times seemingly contrasting elements of culture exist side by side, e.g., high value placed on community living alongside the desire for the MP3 player that allows one to live inside one's own world for hours. At times, also, it seems that the traditional value to be like everyone else in the culture (e.g., wearing traditional clothing) is replaced by the desire to be like everyone else in what is seen as modern life (e.g., everyone wanting cell phones).

For young people, whether they live in rural villages or have been exposed to the outside world, there is a desire for a better future. Most of them, considering

their background, economically and educationally, have little chance for such a future.

Religious context for vocations

It is difficult to find any Nigerian family in which religion is not given primary importance. Prayer is an integrated element of daily life. Islamic and Christian religion are taught in the primary and secondary schools as regular subjects. This means young Catholics get a general knowledge of Scripture and some moral principles, but often they do not get grounded in the Catholic faith. This is important in light of the fact that in order to attend school, especially at the secondary level, at times young people live in boarding schools or with another family. Thus they do not gain a more mature understanding of Catholic faith from their parents.

One attractive element of religious life is the possibility of getting higher education, especially the possibility of going overseas. Such opportunities are less and less possible for most young Nigerians, but they are seen as possible for priest and religious.

The church structures in most parishes are huge, and people fill them on a typical Sunday. Many also attend weekly devotions and daily Mass. Instructions in local parishes are often geared toward sacramental preparation, thus once children are baptized and confirmed, little more formal education takes place. Clericalism is strong, and lay “leadership” in the church is very much controlled by the clerics. Churches have charismatic prayer groups, but these are not usually directed toward teaching fundamental elements of belief. Thus there is a deep religious tendency that is often waiting for more direction. At times that direction comes from some of the “mushroom churches” for obvious reasons.

Attractions to religious life

It is within these cultural and religious contexts that young Nigerians are invited to enter religious life. In many ways religious life is an ideal response to many

of the challenges named here. It is not difficult to see what those in vocation ministry and those who are in charge of formation are facing in terms of discerning who is to be admitted and retained. If we take as an example the desire for uniforms, it is not unknown for some young people to be drawn to a religious order because they admire the habit, i.e., uniform. And along with that uniform comes the prestige that goes with wearing it. This can be a rather attractive situation for a young person who has had no recognition in a society where young people are not normally held in high regard. Such factors are not always easily discerned when a young person is in the process of applying or in initial formation.

The young person who is drawn to religious life because of a strong feeling of call may also present several challenges. As noted above, there is often poor religious formation in childhood. This may necessitate a longer period of discernment and even formation as the young candidate must become firmly grounded in the faith. For someone who wants to enter into a religious experience more quickly, this process may be too slow, especially as there may be other alternatives to a congregation that exercises more discretion in its admission of candidates into the congregation. For some congregations, admission requirements may not be so demanding. Thus there may be a high turnover of aspirants.

Another attractive element of religious life is the possibility of getting higher education, especially the possibility of going overseas. Such opportunities are less and less possible for most young Nigerians, but they are seen as possible for priests and religious. Hence the desire to serve God may be tied to the perceived possibility of serving in a way or place that is a dream for most people.

Here one must also consider the type of institute to which an aspirant applies. A fairly large number of international congregations exist in Nigeria alongside some large indigenous congregations with overseas ministries. For an aspirant looking for an opportunity to go abroad, these congregations offer the most attractive option.

On the other hand, a congregation situated in an area with Islamic dominance (where Christians are a minority) or located where the weather itself is a harsh challenge, may find fewer aspirants. A candidate needs a special grace to choose a situation where insecurity may be a reality of daily life.

Retaining new members

Regarding retention of vocations, those in formation face several challenges. One is the general low level of education. This is manifested in two ways. Some candidates have low exam scores and are almost not accepted into religious communities as a result. But their low scores are due to poor teaching because the parents could not afford to pay fees at a higher quality private school. Others have good exam results, but later it becomes obvious that they achieved them by having another person take the exam. The question of education is important because religious congregations need members with solid grounding in theology, psychology, etc., as well as members who can be active, earning participants.

A second challenge in retaining vocations is the concept of religious life and authority. Traditionally a person in a position of authority, e.g., a chief of a village or head of a clan can expect to be served by all those in his domain, whether young or old, rich or poor. This is the normal way of things. Religious life expects superiors to serve others, but superiors are also very much part of their culture and may even unknowingly take on the characteristics and expectations of secular images of authority, expecting to be served by members of the congregation. This dynamic affects the kind of candidates who stay, because some will accept such a situation, while others will reject it. Those who show more independence and maturity may not be seen as suitable by those in authority and thus are dismissed.

Other times misguided motives present a challenge to retention. Candidates seeking more security or personal enhancement, such as higher education, can become disillusioned and leave when they find their desired security missing or discover that personal needs must be subjected to the needs of the congregation or to budget limits. It is not always possible for vocation or formation ministers to detect such desires immediately.

Another factor in retaining new members is tribal divisions within religious communities. Nigerians deeply identify with their own ethnic group, and this figures strongly in both vocation recruitment and in formation. While it is true that Nigerians belong to a collectivist culture, and it would seem to follow that community life would be easier because of this, in reality it does not work that way. In the family people share the same background, the same culture and traditions, etc. In

religious life members live with people of different tribes with different cultures. It is estimated that Nigeria has around 400 tribes with around 250 languages. Tribal identity is very strong, and within the country people are identified by their tribe and place of origin. This distinction operates in all sectors of life. For instance people are considered for a place in the university not according to where they were born or where they live, but according to their place of origin, which is the place where their ancestors lived. The distinctions of tribal identity become a very deep part of the psyche.

While living with people of different cultures is a challenge in all situations, even in the U.S. which considers itself a melting pot, in a place where ethnic languages, modes of dressing, customs and mores have

In a place where ethnic languages, modes of dressing, customs and mores have remained very distinctive, multi-ethnicity creates a unique tension in community life. A candidate who enters a community must learn how to avoid drifting toward the comfortable, in other words, being drawn into a cultural clique.

remained very distinctive, multi-ethnicity creates a unique tension in community life. A candidate who enters a community must learn how to avoid drifting toward the comfortable, in other words, being drawn into a cultural clique. Formation and vocation personnel must consciously seek to be open to all aspirants and candidates, not only those from their own tribe. The community at large needs to develop a multi-cultural awareness that fosters growth through its diversity.

Clericalism is yet another factor when it comes to new-member retention. For men's groups, where not only religious life but also priesthood is possible, there may be a double attraction in ways that may not be healthy. However, that said, there are other ways in which vocations are affected by clericalism. Because there are large numbers of young people, especially young women, who express a desire to enter religious

life, and because in some cases the way religious live their lives is not sufficiently in accordance with the standards of some bishops, the bishops will found their own groups of religious to carry out the ministry as they define it.

How vocations are encouraged

Religious in Nigeria have developed a variety of approaches to interest young people in religious life. A key value for many African cultures is relationship building, so many practices are built on this value. An aspirant to a congregation is encouraged to write to a specific member and build up a relationship with that person. The aspirant is also invited to spend days with either a local community or a novitiate community. Such an aspirant might also be encouraged to seek work in one of the congregational institutions or in an area close to one of the local communities so there can be on-going relationship building. Those in charge of vocations visit the aspirant, especially in the home so that they can become acquainted with the entire family. Days of prayer for aspirants allow them to relate to members of the congregation on a spiritual level. All these practices have relationship-building as a foundational value in encouraging religious vocations.

Another core value in vocation ministry is service. Young people are attracted to religious they know and see offering service. In many cases they voluntarily assist the religious in his or her service to others. Thus they come to know and understand more fully the call to serve, and gradually become more acquainted with community life.

Publications such as diocesan newspapers also help make congregations known to prospective candidates. Other times religious congregations set up vocation displays on selected days and sites in order to introduce young people to their mission and vision of religious life. Many congregations make an effort to minister in either their own or another secondary school in order to attract those in that level of education. Finally, the use of the habit makes religious highly visible, and their presence and witness as students on university campuses can spur interest.

Realities that work against religious vocations

Religious life as it exists within the socio-economic milieu. The poverty affecting the Nigerian society (obviously not evangelical poverty) also affects religious communities. Communities find themselves

struggling for the means to provide for the physical and health needs of their members, to educate them, to care for those in formation and administration, etc. As a result, when a candidate is accepted, he or she is ordinarily given a list of required items to bring. For many who come from poor families, this list is a daunting prospect. For some it may prove prohibitive. For others it may cause them to engage in self-destructive behavior. Yet religious congregations find that they need such assistance in order to accept candidates.

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When the candidates do arrive, the problem of financial insecurity remains. The congregation faces these challenges constantly. Members may be sent out to mission work or to pursue higher education without sufficient funds. In order to succeed they need to find alternate sources of money. Thus they may begin to rely on outsiders, e.g., a local parish priest or a wealthy person, in order to carry out their task. This puts their religious life in danger if those who assist them use the help as leverage for taking advantage of the candidate. Outside "helpers" may require service of different sorts from the religious, for instance expecting the religious to clean their house, do their laundry, or follow other more serious requests.

A usual requirement of a religious institute is that the candidate bring a letter of recommendation from a parish priest. This has also led to abuse where priests have requested special favors from the candidate, creating situations that hinder vocations.

Required testing may also be a factor working against religious vocations. While psychological testing is well-known in the West, in some cases it is rejected because it is not understood and because most psychological tests are Western in orientation. Another test introduced within the last few years is HIV

screening. Again, this causes some candidates to withdraw because they are not willing to undergo such screening. There may be a number of reasons for this. A candidate may feel that such a test indicates that the congregation does not trust him or her. Or candidates may fear that the test will be positive, and they would not know what to do. Others, especially young women, might decline the test because of the taboo against discussing sexual issues. Testing for HIV is a question that religious have discussed at length because of its implications for congregations, especially when a prospective candidate is found positive and is refused admission. What is the responsibility of the congregation to such candidate in terms of information, counseling, etc.?

Many congregations have found it necessary over the past few years to greatly limit the number of candidates they accept. If there are too many aspirants, it is difficult to visit all the families, which is considered an important part of discernment.

Challenges of large numbers of entrants

While in the West vocations are on the decline, in Nigeria the numbers at times are larger than can be accommodated. Many congregations have found it necessary over the past few years to greatly limit the number of candidates they accept. If there are too many aspirants, it is difficult to visit all the families, which is considered an important part of discernment before admission of candidates.

When the candidates enter, it is not possible for formation directors to get to know the candidates personally if there are too many. It is important to be able to discern a candidate's motive for entering the congregation, but if the director is over-extended, a candidate can easily hide his or her true self from the director. In addition, in smaller indigenous congregations where finances have been limited, the person in formation may have had little opportunity to be trained in that ministry, and multiplying the number of candidates in formation makes the novice director's task even more difficult.

As noted before almost all of the congregations struggle to support themselves. Those in formation and administration must be supported by other members of the congregation. Too many entrants make that task even more difficult. It is not easy for any congregation to make choices about whom to admit, but because of past experience and with the assistance of psychological testing, communities in Nigeria are making those choices.

Future of religious life in Nigeria

In the history of the West religious life was a more attractive option when other opportunities were less available. In the foreseeable future, because of the large population in the country, the poverty and the dismal forecast for any noticeable change, it seems as if the future of religious life in Nigeria will continue in somewhat the same manner.

However, that said, several things must be noted. One of these is the spread of HIV/AIDS. As with other countries in Africa, it is likely that a large number of young people will die of the disease. Others will be forced to give up their own plans to care for family members. In some countries, religious have had to leave their congregations in order to care for the children of their brothers and sisters who have died. Unless there is some type of medical breakthrough, Nigeria will be severely affected within the next few years.

Already some congregations are limiting their numbers, as noted above, in order to provide better formation, and others may be forced to do so because of economic reasons. Laity in some instances have begun to complain that they are being put out of church jobs, such as teaching, because religious are brought in. This creates tension between religious and laity, and while it is still largely latent, in the future, if the economic situation does not improve, the conflict may become more overt. With increasing numbers of laity being educated and feeling that they have a voice, there may be more open confrontation.

The ability of religious to leave their institutes, especially women, may also affect religious life in the future. In the past it was taboo for a woman to live alone. Thus anyone who was asked to leave religious life often continued wearing a "habit" (distinctive dress and veil) because it was a protection as well as an aid to getting assistance. But with changing culture, women feel more free to follow their own inner

path, resulting in their own decision at times to leave their congregations. Families, also, do not feel the same sense of shame regarding a child's departure from religious life.

One more challenge congregations need to face regarding the future is the place of the biological family within the religious family. Extended family demands on members can be continuous and extensive, especially on family members with some status and who are working at a paid job. Family members in religious life are not exempt from these demands. The religious themselves often feel caught between the demands of their family and their responsibility to their community. They have been taught to reach out to the poor, and so especially when they are from a poor family, they find themselves in an inner conflict if they feel they cannot help their own.

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God's Spirit is alive

As noted earlier Nigeria is a country with a strong sense of the spiritual in daily life. People on the whole do not conceive of life without religion, and they find it difficult to understand when a person does not believe in God or does not worship at any particular church. For them, believing in God and worshipping together are as essential as the air they breathe. The God to whom they pray is a living God, very much part of their lives. This is the reality in which vocations are located. And it is the reality that is created and reinforced by religious vocations. The church in Nigeria has benefited greatly from the services of religious men and women who have dedicated their lives to God and to the service of others. Despite all the challenges and difficulties faced, the Spirit of God can be seen working through these servants of God. +

British religious congregations are aging, and new members are few. Yet a new optimism and desire for collaboration are taking hold in vocation ministry.

Obstacles and successes in British vocation ministry

by Cath Lloyd, RSCJ and Paul Smyth, CMF

There may be a great fire in your soul, but no one ever seems to come to warm himself at it, and the passers-by see only a little bit of smoke coming through the chimney, and pass on their way. Now... one must tend that inward fire, have salt in oneself, and wait patiently, yet with how much impatience for the hour when somebody will come and sit down near it, to stay there maybe. Let him who believes in God wait for the hour that will come sooner or later.

These words attributed to Vincent Van Gogh at a time when his work was being ignored or completely disregarded, resonate deeply with the experience of many religious congregations in England and Wales. Van Gogh's image of tending inward fires and waiting for others to come round to our world view, is a powerful image for describing the general picture of vocation ministry in England up until about three years ago. Today there is a greater sense of optimism. But a few years back, Van Gogh's picture of passively waiting in hope for someone to step off the road and join us by the fire, seemed fitting.

Many congregations had ceased active vocation ministry altogether. The number of individuals named to

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this ministry were few and far between. They fit their vocations job (and it was often regarded as a job, not a ministry!) around another full-time ministry. Many spoke of the frustration of trying to work without a budget, of the lack of congregational support and the perception that they were "recruiters," failing badly as no one was joining religious life.

The mood among British vocation ministers is more hopeful today, but first, let's look at the context in which the ministry has been operating.

A snapshot of religious life

The dismal state of vocation ministry reflected the general feeling of malaise that had permeated religious life in Britain for some years. In common with other Western European countries, we have experienced a steep drop in the numbers of those seeking to enter priesthood and religious life. While there has been an upsurge in interest in new movements, this seemed to embody a particular vision of church that did not resonate with the vision of congregations that have undergone Vatican II renewal. For many in our society the increasing secularism and the acknowledgement that Britain is a post-Christian society has left people feeling that institutional religion is irrelevant. Of a population of 56 million, it is estimated that only 7 percent of the nation now regularly attend a weekly act of worship. The expansion in possibilities for communication and travel and the influx of immigrants from around the world have all served to make people aware of the wide range of possibilities that exist for spiritual expression. It would be more common to describe Britain as multi-faith rather than Christian. The growth of interest in New Age spirituality has resulted in a post-modern experience of religious practice expressed in a pick-and-mix society.

Within religious congregations, two trends have contributed to religious becoming almost invisible, leaving room for stereotypes to flourish. One trend has been the revision of apostolic commitments which led many congregations to leave the large institutions and projects through which they were easily identified. The other is the loss of religious habits. Many young people in Catholic schools in England might never come across a religious. The aging demographic picture of those in religious life reflects the aging of the population nationwide.

Another trend in Britain at the moment is that there are very few Catholic novices to women's orders. In 2004-5, for the first time since it began, there were no Roman Catholic novices in the inter-congregational novitiate program. A significant number of participants in the programs during recent years are novices brought here from abroad to undergo formation, or foreigners who have settled in England and Wales and have decided to enter religious life here. While a few years ago the majority of entrants to religious life were older people (some even grandparents), in recent years the age profile appears to be going down.

The social context

Following are just some of the elements of the British social context that forms the background from which prospective candidates enter religious life:

- current and constant threat of war,
- pop culture,
- growth of violence,
- growing drug culture,
- family break up and co-habitation,
- information technology revolution,
- terrorism (IRA and post-911),
- technical and medical advances,
- growth of feminism,
- economic boom,
- culture to sue,
- lack of respect for authority,
- green issues,
- broad career opportunities,
- education, university,
- Star Wars, threat of nuclear war,
- one-parent families,
- permissive society,
- awareness of pedophilia and abuses of power,
- debt culture,

- mass communication (mobile phones and Internet).

These changes in society provide the context for vocation ministry, and religious congregations are challenged to find ways of expressing their values and mission in ways that inspire others to explore joining them. Some would say that there is apathy among the young from 18 years of Thatcherism, which spoke increasingly of there being no such thing as society. When Tony Blair was elected prime minister, it was by young voters, energized by the Labour promise. Less than 10 years since that initial victory, more 18-to-25-year-olds regularly vote in the reality show *Big*

It would be fair to say that a new mood of optimism prevails in religious life in Britain, with a clearer understanding of who we are and what we are about. With this comes a new confidence about inviting others to join us.

Brother than voted in 2001 general elections. Young people are politically aware but profoundly disillusioned with party politics and institutions.

To counter the charge of apathy, there are signs of tremendous awareness and support for social and green issues. Within the church many young people seem to find their religious expression in relation to religious movements or pilgrimage experiences, rather than through participation in regular parish life. In recent years campaigns such as Make Poverty History, anti-war marches and the trade justice movement are capturing the imagination of young people.

Vocation ministry today

All of these social factors affect vocation ministry, which itself has undergone something of a sea change in the last few years. The reasons for this are many and varied, but it would be fair to say that a new mood of optimism prevails in religious life in Britain, with a clearer understanding of who we are and what we are about. With this comes a new confidence about inviting others to join us.

British brothers join hands to promote awareness

In February 2005, 12 brothers from seven British congregations gathered in Westminster, England to review the reality and meaning of the vocation of brother today and ways to promote it.

The gathering grew out of frustration with brothers' public image and a desire to shape a positive future. "It was our common experience, even at church gatherings about vocations, to find that the vocation of brother was either ignored, forgotten or mentioned as a hasty and apologetic afterthought when someone whispered to the speaker!" wrote Benedict Foy, FSC and Michael Newman, OH in a report on the meeting. "We feel we are at a point of choice for each of us—to opt for life by really being brothers, or for death, by hanging onto traditional structures and perceptions."

Participants started the day by reviewing an informal survey about brotherhood and how it might be promoted. Foy and Newman reported these conclusions from the discussion of the survey:

- 1) "Being a brother is fundamentally about being relational, about 'standing alongside others.'"
- 2) "Lay spirituality as brothers is an important gift for the church and for society in these days, where so many, especially young people, are unchurched or alienated from the formal structures of society."
- 3) "We wish to stress we are counter-cultural to many values in society and the church, that we are incarnational rather than hierarchical."
- 4) "We want to promote this view of brothers...."

The group concluded that brothers need to be "far more pro-active in introducing ourselves, in offering our services and in cooperating with local initiatives," such as career days and vocation days. Participants decided that brothers should be telling who they are through booklets, leaflets, video, Web sites, etc. They discussed a collaborative Web site depicting brothers as real people, living real lives in the ordinary world.

The meeting concluded with gratitude for the sense of encouragement participants found in coming together and a commitment to further meetings and collaboration.

—Carol Schuck Scheiber

The Ferdinand Benedictine sisters vocations workshop held annually in Indiana has captured the imagination of many congregations around the world, and Britain and Ireland are no exception. Many congregations have sent representatives to this program, and clearly this has helped congregations to re-build the culture of vocation in their own contexts.

Many congregations are now investing in Web sites and updating and improving publicity materials. Most have appointed a vocation ministry team and in some cases, a full-time vocation minister with a budget and a clear brief of his or her role. There is an increasing awareness that vocation ministry is the responsibility of all members of the congregation.

Vocation ministry teams within congregations are becoming increasingly creative about how they approach this ministry. They are, importantly, collaborating more with other congregations and bodies in the church to foster vocations. Furthermore congregations are inviting lay people to play an important part in congregational programs.

All of this is happening against a broader backdrop of what has been taking place in the last few years with regard to vocation ministry in the Catholic Church in England and Wales. One of Cardinal Basil Hume's dreams was to rebuild a culture of vocation in a society which had lost sight of the meaning of that word. He and his successor have wanted to promote a deeper understanding of the vocation of all people as children of God who express their sense of God's love through choices to live as married, single, clerical or vowed Christians. This dream led to the establishment of the National Office of Vocation, which works to raise awareness of each individual's vocation at both the local and national level.

Some might argue vocation ministry today is the last bid for life of a dying organism! In England and Wales the statistics would suggest that religious life in its present form is changing rapidly. There are about 9,700 apostolic and contemplative religious men and women, of whom about 800 are under 55. These figures have profound implications for the future shape of religious life in these islands.

It is important to explore the motives behind renewed congregational interests in vocation ministry. Are we tending our inward fires motivated by a desire to survive, or are we motivated by the desire to continue the work inspired by our respective charisms? Is the strug-

gle to be visible about being seen and identified, or is it about who we make visible and which Gospel values we communicate? The answers to these questions, if we are honest, are complex and probably lie along a continuum between the two ends.

Timothy Radcliffe OP, in a recent interview, spoke about vocations to religious life: “If people see religious life as just a comfortable option, they are not going to be attracted to it. We don’t want recruits because we want to survive. It is not a valid reason. We want individuals to join because we want them to preach the Gospel in China, for example. We want them to do something jolly difficult.”

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Raising difficult issues

The increasing awareness that religious life in Britain in its present form is changing rapidly invites us as religious to face the possibility of our own congregational demise in these islands. Facing the possibility of death and change, which takes us into the unknown, is not an easy process, but it brings a degree of inner peace and releases an energy unencumbered with anxiety. In a recent gathering for religious under 60, space was created to explore the reality of “living in the meantime”—this moment in between the expression of religious life as it was and the expression it will take in the future. “The meantime” was identified as a space of “hoping and coping,” a place of energy and grace. What was clear was the need for networking and collaboration between members of different congregations.

Vocation ministers not only work with potential members but invite congregations to reflect on issues and questions related to call and response. Sometimes

these invitations touch raw nerves and hook into doubt, questions and a low-lying depression that sometimes prevails in our communities and congregations. Vocation ministers move their communities to reflect on tensions and questions about living religious life in a post-Christendom secularized context. One superior general recently suggested that vocation ministry requires a degree of asceticism. “It is a tough job, but because it is tough it doesn’t mean it is not essential or indeed holy.”

We are also faced with the reality that at the moment, despite renewed efforts in vocation ministry, there have been few improvements in the numbers of people entering and staying in religious life in recent years. Perhaps it is too soon to judge? Perhaps we need to begin asking more fundamental questions related to the nature of how we understand our religious life in Britain and how we live out that understanding.

Pilgrim model and new forms of collaboration

One of the models which has captured the spiritual imagination of the 21st century is that of the pilgrim. The pilgrim embodies a deep sense that there is a journey to be made. Pilgrimage is traditionally a journey to a sacred place—a place where saints and other holy people have walked. A place where God has met people as they are and blessed them. Pilgrimage suggests leaving behind what encumbers and what is known and safe. It involves journeying with others, not usually chosen companions. Through shared conversation and silence we can reflect on our lives and our journey toward God.

The image of the pilgrim is important to these islands and seems appropriate as a model for vocation ministry in Britain. It contrasts with Van Gogh’s passive image from the beginning of this article, in which we tend our own fires and wait for others to come to us instead of taking our fire out to others and lighting a way forward with companions. Pilgrimage implies movement, risk and discovery.

One way vocation ministers are lighting a way forward with companions is through increased collaboration among religious orders on vocation projects. Some examples are:

- **Web sites** A general Web site operates as a gateway to sites of individual congregations. It also presents information and resources to help in vocation discernment. See www.godknowswhere.org.uk.
- **School vocation project** Recognizing that many

young people have no contact with religious, materials are being created for use in schools to offer teachers good-quality presentations and information about vocation and religious life.

- **Discernment program** An inter-congregational program called “Compass” is being offered to those discerning their vocation. It offers participants the opportunity to experience community life.

While traditional patterns of religious practice have disappeared, there is still an interest in spiritual matters and church life. Religious life has something important to offer.

Public focus on Catholicism and religious life

In this year a number of events have been quite remarkable in focusing positive attention on Catholicism and religious life. Three events were particularly noteworthy. First, the media coverage of John Paul II’s death was extensive. Prince Charles postponed his wedding in order to participate in the funeral. Secondly, as part of the Make Poverty History campaign, 1,500 religious made their way to parliament on May 18 to talk with members of parliament about their experience and concerns regarding world poverty. Finally, the three part reality television series, “The Monastery,” followed the experience of five men who spent 40 days and nights in a Benedictine Monastery. The program beat its rival “Celebrity Love Island” in the ratings.

These events remind us that while traditional patterns of religious practice have disappeared, there is still an interest in spiritual matters and church life. Religious life has something important to offer.

The future

In looking to the future we do not want to minimize the challenges and risks we face as religious. What we had known has gone, and we are in a time of transition as new ways of witnessing to the values that underpin our lives find expression. As Timothy Radcliffe has

said, “Sure we have a crisis, but we mustn’t be afraid of that. The Last Supper was as much a crisis as anything we’re going through now. Judas had already sold Jesus, Peter was about to betray him. We were born in crisis. The church periodically endures crisis, but this renews us. They shake us up and make us supple again. It would be awfully worrying if we didn’t have periodic crises, so let’s not lose our nerve.”

In our experience of meeting religious in workshops and conferences, we are always energized and encouraged by the sense of hope and energy we experience. †

Notes

Grace Davies is a professor of sociology at Exeter University. She wrote *Religion in Britain since 1945: Believing without Belonging*, Oxford Blackwell.

The Timothy Radcliffe, OP quotes are from lectures and talks quoted in *Briefing*.

Religious life can be a hard sell in Brazil's Amazon region, but base Christian communities and martyrs for the faith are inspiring a new generation to consider church vocations.

Great rivers of grace: vocation ministry in the Amazon region of Brazil

by Nancy Schramm, OSF

The Amazon rain forest has been the center of attention for many environmentalists in recent years. For me, an American Franciscan sister who has spent more than half of my life in this area, it is of an even greater importance. The Amazon area and its people have taught me many important things about life in general and about my life as a consecrated woman in particular.

Since arriving in 1978 with the idea of “helping” the Brazilian people, I have worked at many things, but vocation work and youth ministry have always been a priority. I believe deeply in our Franciscan life and in the witness that a consecrated woman can offer to her people.

Base communities help foster vocations

Naturally vocation work cannot be disconnected from the way people experience the church. The style of church here in northern Brazil is dominated by base Christian communities, which are similar to the early Christian communities to whom St. Paul directs his letters. I believe that church base communities con-

tinue to give a valuable witness to God's kingdom here on earth. In fact statistics show that the majority of religious vocations in the north come from the CEBs (*Comunidade Eclesial de Base*, or Church Base Communities). My parish, St. Francis Xavier Parish in the city of Bacarena, is connected to eight base communities in the city and some 55 communities spread throughout the jungle area and Amazon River islands. Each community has its patron saint and chapel where the life of the community is centered. On Sundays each community holds a Celebration of the Word and Life with a special emphasis on the Bible. In the island and jungle communities, our two priests visit only three times a year, so the Sunday celebrations are a valuable space for the laypeople to exercise their talents in the celebration of the Word. The city communities usually have a monthly Eucharistic celebration, but the lay leadership continues to be very important. Each community has its own catechetical program, although there is a parish coordination team which gives formation and orientation to the communities. According to the leadership available, many of the communities have other ministries, dedicated to youth, children, the sick, tithing, etc. Once a year the communities celebrate their patron saint with a week (or more!) of festivity, including novenas, visits to the families, special preaching, and the selling of typical foods in the community hall. It is a wonderful way to build relations with the members of the community, as well as raise funds for the community's needs.

The face of the base communities is changing, however, in the large city areas of northern Brazil. In Belém, for instance, the base communities have become more centralized in the parish and less active on the base level. City people tend to worship less by geographic parish than by where they feel better, making it difficult to create the same bonds of community

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living that the interior can still nourish. Also, according to the beliefs of the parish priest, the role of lay-people can vary greatly. I have visited parishes where the adults and youth have important leadership roles in all the aspects of parish life. But also I have visited parishes where the adults are mere “cows at the feeding trough” (as we say in Portuguese), simply bowing their heads, saying yes to the priest.

The form of parish life in which young people participate directly influences the type of religious life they seek. In this world of globalization and mass media, our young people are very much like those in the rest of the Western world. They harbor the characteristics

Thanks be to God, Brazil has many current examples of religious who have given their lives in dramatic and not so dramatic ways.

of post-modernity: desire for immediate personal satisfaction, individualism, lack of long-term life projects, desire for the sacred, etc. But when they have been raised in the base communities, they come with certain leadership qualities that influence their choices in life. They are accustomed to being part of decision making in the community. They have organized gatherings and celebrations where they have been the leaders. They are aware of social problems that affect their communities (although they most often feel impotent to change society), and they desire friendship and love (although they are most insecure in this area).

Youth ministry and good role models

While parish life is critical to the formation of young people, youth ministry also plays a role. Brazil has a national youth ministry organization which has proven to be an important instrument in forming Catholic youth. The main objective of this ministry is to help young people be the protagonists of their own history and to evangelize other young people to do the same. Young people need to realize that they are responsible for their lives and their decisions. They have a special mission in the church to help other young people come to these same conclusions. They journey with adults who give witness to this ideal and show them that, in fact, they can contribute to changes in the world.

Thanks be to God, Brazil has many current examples of religious who have given their lives in dramatic and not so dramatic ways, helping our young people realize that they can overcome the many obstacles of modern life. Notre Dame Sister Dorothy Stang was murdered here in Pará in February 2005 because of her stance against cutting down the rainforest and in favor of more equitable land distribution. She is having an influence on our young people. She is an example of faithfulness, having refused to return to the U.S. after receiving death threats, because she knew her people were not being protected either. This year is also the 20th anniversary of the death of Sister Adelaide, a Divine Love sister who was also murdered in Marabá, Pará for supporting the local unions against the large land owners. Father Josimo is another inspiring example. He was a young priest who gave up his life for desiring a land of justice and peace. In our state alone, over 300 men and women who are not famous have lost their lives in the many social struggles. Young people in the base communities reflect upon these examples and are inspired by them.

Religious life in Brazil today

Formed by their parishes and youth ministry and inspired by religious role models, some young adults carefully consider religious life. They face a great variety of communities when they do. It is difficult and perhaps unjust to put people into categories, but to better understand the church here, Brazilian theologians have labeled the “scenes” of the Catholic Church here. There is the traditional scene, the Charismatic scene, the doctrinal scene and the liberation scene. Some parishes are highly influenced by one particular scene, and others are a mixture. Religious life is no different. Since the 1970s the “insertion movement”—which coincides with liberation theology—has greatly influenced religious life. During these years many religious communities concluded that they were distant from God’s poor and heavily involved with those who were not interested in the kingdom. So they decided to “insert” themselves into the lives of the poor by actually living in poor neighborhoods. The key question became: With whom should we use our human and financial resources—our energies, our talents and knowledge? Liberation theology calls for a direct and visible commitment to God’s poor, who are the elect of the kingdom. The strategy and methodology of Jesus is very clear. He walked, taught, lived and revealed himself among the poor of Palestine.

Many large religious communities then began leaving

their educational and health institutions to live geographically among the poor, choosing a life of witness and solidarity and not of great works. Small communities of two or three religious were founded in city slums. In the Amazon areas small communities were founded in the rural areas where the sisters and brothers lived near the poor of the interior. Today, 30 years later, two very different ways of living religious life still exist: in the large institutions and in small communities near the people. Many communities have experienced years of tension and conflict because of this. Some communities have overcome most of the conflict, believing that both ways have their value and witness in today's world.

A senior woman who belongs to the Apostolate of Prayer once asked me sheepishly, "C'mon, Sister, tell me the truth. Aren't you Father's woman?" She had difficulty believing that I could be faithful to my promise of chastity for life.

Lack of faith in religious life and in celibacy

The issue of new membership here in northern Brazil is still very interesting in relation to these models of church and religious life. The majority of those seeking religious life are poor young people from the base communities. Statistics from the United Nations and other non-governmental organizations show that Brazil has one of the most unequal distributions of material wealth in the world. The rich grow richer and the poor grow poorer. The richer classes emphasize careers as doctors, lawyers and business persons to their children, especially to their sons, while the poorer classes realize that their children are unlikely to have access to such careers. Occasionally a poor person does manage to get through the university, but the percentage of those who do is very low. A priest-psychologist who worked with many religious communities once said that religious should be aware of what the middle and rich classes think of religious life. They want their children to attend our schools to receive an excellent education. But these parents do not believe in our life as religious. Nor will they encourage their children to think about a religious vocation.

While wealthy Brazilians are cool toward religious life, celibacy raises problems that cut across social class. Young people today need models who inspire and demonstrate that a life of self-giving fulfills the human person and helps one to become truly a loving member of society. Yet this is a difficult message here. Brazilian culture is one of open sexuality and much confusion about love, sexuality, friendship and affectivity. Premature pregnancies are becoming a common fact. Recently our local newspaper ran an article about this issue, interviewing a 15-year-old boy who was to be a father for the second time. A self-giving life of chastity so as to love in a different way appeals to young people, although many believe it is not possible. Many older people also do not believe in religious chastity. A senior woman who belongs to the Apostolate of Prayer once asked me sheepishly, "C'mon, Sister, tell me the truth. Aren't you Father's woman?" She had difficulty believing that I could be faithful to my promise of chastity for life. Nonetheless, a wholesome, faithful witness to loving chastity continues to attract young people to religious life.

Promoting religious life

In the midst of these realities, where and how does a religious community organize and plan vocation promotion? Most of our religious communities rely on the witness their women and men give in parishes and base communities. Congregations with institutional works, in particular the large Catholic schools, frequently have vocation youth groups that meet about once a month to reflect on various themes. But once again the number of young people who actually decide to enter religious life is very small. Many dioceses in this area have a loosely organized parish vocation ministry. Usually a sister, a married couple, sometimes a priest or a diocesan seminarian form this team and organize vocation reflection gatherings. This has proven very helpful, especially when the team is open to true discernment and has an objective of helping young people to discover their vocations.

Brazil also has a national vocation ministry team that has developed many useful materials for gatherings and for personal reflection. A Vocation Itinerary Process has been developed which helps a young person evaluate his or her motivations (see the box below). The program requires adult accompaniment, usually a member of the parish vocation team. When these steps for discernment are respected, including a reflection on the various religious charisms, the young person is free to choose. Unfortunately some congregations do

not respect the parish vocation teams, making their contact with young people and—before anyone knows, including the parish team—the young person is swept away to a convent or seminary without having taken the necessary steps for a good discernment. Congregations that act this way are usually so worried about numbers that they forget that the young person and her or his happiness is the first concern. This has happened various times in my parish. It is not surprising that most of these young women and men do not remain in the convents or seminaries for long.

Challenges in discernment

A challenge to true discernment that I have encountered frequently here in Brazil is related to the vow of poverty. When I was a young woman seriously thinking about entering the Franciscan community, I recall the tension I experienced in renouncing many material

things. I had to renounce my car, my style of clothes, my job, my personal use of money, etc. However, that experience is sometimes reversed here. Because of the poor Brazilian economy, young people will frequently gain economic security they did not have at home when they enter a community. Certain doors are opened to them in relation to studies, for instance. This is why it is so important to follow the steps of the Vocation Itinerary Program at the parish level before a decision is made to enter. Many times people's motivations for choosing a religious vocation are not clear or are unconsciously connected to other necessities.

Sometimes young men feel pressure from their families to not follow a church vocation. Parents frequently count on the young men to help sustain the family financially, since families are usually large. When a young man feels called to religious life, the feeling that he is abandoning his family when he should be helping can be very strong, making it difficult for him to choose. It becomes even harder when there is no father figure in the family, which is very common here.

Another important challenge for vocation ministry is related to the question of culture. In general the northern part of Brazil has been discriminated against since it is seen as a backward and underdeveloped area. It is truly the periphery of the country. The south of Brazil is the highly industrialized technical and professional center. Until recently little had been done to regain the dignity of the people of the north to value our northern culture, which is a mixture of indigenous, Negro and Portuguese people. During the last 10-15 years many professionals, especially those in education and the arts, have taken tremendous steps to show the beauty and contribution that the north is making to the rest of the country. Still, this feeling of being inferior is imbedded in the very being of our people, including the young. Few religious congregations were founded here in the north (I know of four in the state of Pará), but there are many missionaries from the south of Brazil and from other countries. Most of their formation houses are in the south because they feel that the education possibilities are better there.

During the process of discernment this issue of regional inferiority must be addressed so that the person can truly be free to make a good decision. The regional Conference for Religious (for which I am a board member) has taken conscious steps to improve the formation process, working with the idea of inter-congregational formation, so that young people may

Brazil's Vocation Itinerary Process

The Vocation Itinerary Process includes these steps, which are developed over one-to-two years.

1. **The Awakening Moment** The young person becomes aware that she or he has a calling in life, a mission. Human development is emphasized and reflected on.
2. **The Seeking Out Moment** The person participates in a vocation group where various themes are discussed, such as the calling of baptism, basic theology and different types of vocation.
3. **The Cultivating Moment** Depending on which vocation the young person is attracted to, a sister, priest, or married person begins to accompany her or him.
4. **The Deepening of Relation Moment** The young person seeks a more mature relationship with God, and in the case of a religious vocation, seeks to understand the charism of the religious institute.
5. **The Decision Moment** The young person comes to a conclusion and seeks to begin a discernment experience, such as entering a formation house.

continue to live in this area as they prepare themselves to discern. I am aware of young people in formation who were sent to the south and returned just because they could not adapt to the vast differences and not because they came to a clear understanding of their vocation. One might think this is a sign of immaturity, but being a minority and discriminated against is not easy for young people.

Parents frequently count on the young men to help sustain the family financially, since families are usually large. When a young man feels called to religious life, the feeling that he is abandoning his family when he should be helping can be very strong, making it difficult for him to choose.

God grace as abundant as the waters

In the Amazon area, the rhythms of the waters play a very important role in the lives of all of us. The functioning of our parish, taking of produce to market, traveling to and from villages, finding education, health care, etc. – all these depend on the waters being ready to “take” us where we wish to go. The waters are a vital part of our lives, and God’s grace is like the waters—a vital part of our lives and for religious life in particular. We must do our part and give witness to our way of life, but religious vocations will be coming because God’s grace is the source of all vocation.

Many religious themselves are pessimistic about the future of religious life. Vocation promotion is getting harder and harder. It seems that young people have to be tantalized to be attracted to our way of life. In the future, will there be a religious life? Perhaps future forms may be different but, as long as we continue to give witness and to make ourselves available to accompany young people, they will come. We need to trust our good God and be open to God’s Spirit.

At a recent symposium about the Amazon, a well-known sociologist said that the future of the church (and I add of religious life) will depend on our options for living church. Will we be salt, leaven and light? Or will we seek out large numbers, imagining that rules and norms and filling stadiums will make the church

grow? The northern Brazil habit of appreciating today’s moment, of sitting outside on a wooden bench to chat with neighbors in the evening, of sharing a small cup of *cafezinho* (strong sweet Brazilian coffee), of responding that the next village is “right down the path” (although it ends up being two kilometers!) and of believing in God’s project of justice and peace—these cultural characteristics will be assets for discernment to religious life if we can help our young people value who they are as Amazon youth. The grace of God is given in abundance, just as the Amazon waters are abundant. +

Canadian vocation efforts face challenges of vast geography and language divisions, among others. Yet new vocation promotion projects continue to emerge.

Vocation ministry in Canada today

by Susan Kidd, CND

In order to convey a picture of vocation ministry in Canada today, it helps to understand a little about the country. Canada is huge and diverse. We are the second largest country by landmass, (6.2 million square miles), nearly 5,000 miles east to west, covering six time zones and surrounded by three oceans. Our population is just under 32 million. Like many other countries, our divorce rate is nothing to be too proud of: 45 percent, slightly less than the U.S.'s 49 percent.

Canada's first settlers were Roman Catholic, religious women and men, actually. Many of our judicial and governmental practices have strong Judeo-Christian overtones. This is beginning to change to reflect the diversity of our country. The most recent example of this is our recognition of same-sex marriages, which passed into law in June, 2005. Diversity has been and continues to be our hallmark as Canadians. We are proud of our welcoming attitudes to immigrants and refugees but still have room to improve in accepting them once they are here.

A little earlier than for our U.S. brothers and sisters, news of clergy sex scandals broke in Canada almost 25 years ago, with court settlements leaving many communities and dioceses bankrupt. Trust levels

plummeted, and the church as a "sacred institution" came into deep scrutiny. To this day parents hesitate to encourage a religious vocation for their child because of the painful scandals of the 1980s.

In some Canadian provinces the constitutional charter that guaranteed religious education was opened, and such rights were revoked. Provinces lost their government-funded Catholic school systems. Today some retain education systems based on religious denomination, but not all provinces or all religions. The usual pool of vocation candidates seemed to dry up.

Attendance in our churches seems to be mainly the older population, although World Youth Day 2002 helped. Canada sent twice as many pilgrims to World Youth Day 2005 in Cologne, Germany than we did to the 2000 event in Rome. Supporters claim involvement in our own World Youth Day 2002 in Toronto is the reason for increased participation among Canada's young Catholics.

A surge of energy in 2002

In addition to World Youth Day, 2002 also saw the Canadian church preparing for the Third Continental Congress on Vocations to Ordained Ministry and Consecrated Life. Energy and enthusiasm filled our church and our young people for the years leading up to both events. We religious asked ourselves: How will we get young people to attend? Will they come? What will we do with them afterward? Even before both events were finished, the conversations began regarding follow-up and national initiatives for youth and vocations. There was a spark in the air and it was good!

However, time, other commitments, and finances

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seem to get in the way of the Spirit sometimes. Our Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops felt that vocation and youth initiatives belong better at the local level than the national (besides, it saves money). Many dioceses realized the resources involved in youth ministry meant other areas had to go without. Court settlements have also been part of our Canadian reality. In the months and years following 2002, energy sagged, and enthusiasm dropped. Only now local groups of vocation directors and youth ministers are having conversations about our shared needs and ideas. There is life and some energy being felt where very recently there had been a sense of hopelessness.

Our one religious leadership conference, the Canadian Religious Conference, serves both men's and women's communities and both language groups, French and English. Therefore it is a bridge for many congregations. For religious and diocesan vocation directors it remains a challenge to network across geographic and linguistic lines. The religious and the bishops' conferences have the technical ability to offer simultaneous translation in French and English for various meetings and conferences, but this remains a costly endeavor.

National vocation network links people

The National Association of Vocation and Formation Directors (NAVFD) has shifted its structures in an attempt to create networks for communication. The organization has evolved over the years to meet the needs of our members. This year a process began that encourages our members to be involved at the local level, as well as nationally. In the past we have printed newsletters, hosted national conferences and responded to local needs. More recently we have served as a conference planning association. We are attempting to increase communication between and among our members.

At our most recent national conference, NAVFD hosted 140 delegates, mainly from English Canada. (Currently, French and English-speaking Canada operate independently in areas of vocation and formation ministry—due in a large part to language and sometimes cultural differences.) Our national conference featured speakers, workshops, plenary sessions, and plenty of time for delegates to interact with each other.

For the last three years, we have been pleased to have Paul Bednarczyk, CSC, Executive Director of NRVC with us. This year he conducted a workshop on "Self-Care of the Vocation Director." Response from confer-

ence and workshop participants is very positive regarding having our NRVC partners with us. The Continental Congress on Vocations provided Canada and the United States a wonderful opportunity to work together on a common project. NRVC and NAVFD continue to look for ways to collaborate and help each other. As a co-presenter for the NRVC Orientation Program, I continue to keep my NRVC contacts alive (I'm a former member of the NRVC Board) In program planning NRVC and NAVFD offer different opportunities, thereby encouraging members both north and south to take advantage of both groups.

Home grown vocation initiatives

Vocation and youth ministry in Canada continue to be energized by grassroots projects. Here are just a few examples. Antigonish, Nova Scotia and St. John's Newfoundland have created, printed and distributed

Vocation and youth ministry in Canada continue to be energized by grassroots projects. For instance, in one region, a diocesan vocation committee created, printed and distributed vocation-culture material to parishes.

vocation-culture material to parishes. Various regions in Canada have a mechanism in place for religious leadership to meet with the bishop. In Eastern Canada my provincial leader added "fostering a vocation culture" to the agenda at one such meeting. In response Antigonish has a wonderfully diverse diocesan vocation committee—married and single women and men, religious women, young adults and diocesan priests. This committee researched content and worked to provide pictures to produce a colorful brochure. Brochures were printed, as was described to me, "one for every hymnal."

St. John's Newfoundland diocese hosted a weekend symposium to address the challenges in fostering a vocation culture. The planning committee (religious women of the diocese and committed lay people) worked for more than a year to offer a weekend session for five representatives from each parish. The process included input from two speakers (Len Altilia,

SJ and myself), mixed group interaction, then parish group planning. Local planning happened, and “homework” was assigned for the parish setting. Rural parishes have different challenges than urban ones. As one young adult delegate said, the challenge for them was to have the money to heat the building! Paying a youth director was not possible. Nonetheless, local plans have taken shape, and a diocesan brochure is underway.

Another local group launched a national project. Toronto Area Vocation Directors Association has initiated and supported the growth of a national Web site for vocations, www.vocations.ca, with much assistance from the U.S. and Australian Web pages. Cur-

The Web site and other local initiatives give hope to not only our wounded church but also to our wounded world.

rently this site averages 8,500 visitors a month, with some 1,600 of them bookmarking the site. If you type “vocations” on the Google search engine, www.vocations.ca comes up as the second listing. Our Web site is a premier Canadian resource for all vocation inquirers, including youth, families, parishes, schools and, of course, those discerning a Christian vocation commitment. The Web site and other local initiatives give hope to not only our wounded church but also to our wounded world.

Further challenges

While we Canadians are making strides in promoting vocations, the fact is that an inclusive vocation culture is still a tough sell in parishes. Many people like the inclusive tone of the statement that came out of the Continental Congress: “Vocations to ordained ministry and consecrated life—and to single and married life, to lay ministry and Christian witness in a secular society—will flourish in a Church where each member can identify and concretely live out the Father’s call to life and holiness, the Son’s call to discipleship and communion, and the Spirit’s call to witness and mission” (*Conversion, Discernment, Mission*, page 12). Yet the same people still long for “Father” or “Sister” to come to the door for a visit. Often I have been

thanked, even congratulated for speaking of marriage and single life as vocations, even now, 40 years after Vatican II. Parishioners still want to know how many are in the seminary or the novitiate. I don’t hear, “Father, how many weddings this summer?” Nor does anyone wonder how many committed single people there are these days. We are a mixed bunch, sometimes giving off mixed messages about vocation promotion.

When it comes to our national organizations, sometimes I look longingly at the United States, Great Britain and Wales, or Australia—they seem so organized! There is a freshness in being able to create new structures that meet our needs. We hope to collaborate with the newly organized Canadian Network for Youth Ministers and the already well-established Canadian Catholic Campus Ministers and Canadian Catholic Student Association. The diocesan vocation directors are another group we want to cooperate with. So many options lie before us that we must consider what is really possible.

We have not yet found a way to link with our French-speaking counterparts in this ministry. However, I was invited to our Canadian Catholic Student Association Leadership Conference in January 2005 to present a workshop on vocation culture. This conference offered simultaneous translation, allowing us to bridge the language gap in at least one instance.

The vastness of our country and the lack of networks continue to be challenges. In preparation for the Congress on Vocations, I recall sitting with Father Raymond Lafontaine, the Canadian co-chair for the event, trying to brainstorm a list of people, organizations, institutions and others that needed to be invited. Our Canadian Catholic Directory helped, but it is *so* big! We need a resource bank, a network of who is doing what, what works and what does not.

Slow steps are steps just the same

The good news is that we can participate in an international issue of *HORIZON* with something to say. There are many varied initiatives happening across our country—and this article reflects only what I’m aware of. So we move ahead slowly. As I understand it, the Brazilian church hosted the First Continental Congress on Vocations in 1994 and nine years later, in 2003 had a national Year of Vocation. We hosted the Third Continental Congress in 2002, so it might be worth checking back on Canada in 2011! ✚

Seven years ago this author described the state of vocation ministry in Australia. She can point to dramatic inroads since then in establishing a pervasive vocation culture.

Challenges and successes of vocation ministry in Australia

by Mary Ryan, RSJ

The invitation to write for *HORIZON* about the challenges and successes of vocation ministry in Australia has proven to be a real gift for me. It provided the opportunity to revisit a similar article I wrote for *HORIZON* in 1998. I have been able to compare the portrait then with the canvas of the present, to reflect upon and celebrate the milestones we have reached, and to acknowledge that while much progress has been made, we are still far from having a pervasive, national vocation culture. Hence, I acknowledge, as I did in 1998, that we still “do not have it all together” and that “complacency has no place in our thinking!” (See my original article in the Summer, 1998 edition of *HORIZON*).

Back in 1998 Catholic Vocations Ministry Australia (CVMA) was a fledgling national organization, having been established for less than three years. At our national conference in September 2005 we cut our 10th birthday cake. In my first article I named a number of dreams we had, among which was the hope that we would soon be in a position to establish a national office administered by an executive officer. After much plotting, planning and negotiating, this dream *did* come true, and in 2001 we established Australia’s National Vocations Office, with me serving part-time as Executive Officer. Such has been the growth in the vocation ministry since then that my job is now full-time. CVMA has also been able to generate sufficient funds to employ a part-time administrative assistant (who would be a full-timer if we were millionaires). We

recently moved, having outgrown the office space which seemed so empty and large only four years ago.

Despite the fact that geographically the Australian continent is comparable in area to the United States, we have only six states plus two “territories,” 28 dioceses and a relatively small, but now very multicultural, population of just over 19 million. Approximately a quarter of Australians claimed to be Catholics in the most recent national census. CVMA’s leadership structure is set up, ideally, to mirror the state, regional and multicultural nature of the Australian church.

According to our statutes, CVMA exists essentially—and always within a context affirming the Christian vocation of every baptized person—to support and provide resources to those particularly committed to the fostering and discernment of vocations to ordained ministry, consecrated life and societies of apostolic life.

Our statutes set out seven goals:

1. Educate people about the nature and understanding of “vocation,”
2. Promote, at a national level, the development of vocations ministry,
3. Foster and present a coordinated approach to vocations ministry throughout Australia,
4. Actively promote vocations to the ordained ministry, consecrated life and societies of apostolic life,
5. Foster a sense of unity and collaboration among state, diocesan and congregational vocations ministers,

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6. Support vocations ministry networks through the sharing of resources, materials, skills and achievements, and
7. Help ensure that personnel and resources are most effectively utilized on behalf of the church.

Using these goals as a “frame,” I will paint, in broad brush-strokes, an updated portrait of vocation ministry in Australia, with its recent successes and current challenges.

National Vocations Awareness Week is here to stay, and we expect it to continue to gather momentum in the years to come. It is a major contributor to the systematic creation of a vocation culture across our island continent.

Goals 1-3: education, vocation ministry development and national coordination

An increasing body of evidence assures us that vocation ministry indeed continues to be a “growth industry” in many but not all regions of Australia. Following are some indicators that support this conclusion.

National Vocations Awareness Week

This was instigated by CVMA in 1997 and approved that year by the National Bishops’ Conference. Since then, one week in early August of each year has been designated as National Vocations Awareness Week (NVAW). NVAW provides an opportunity for the entire Australian church to reflect on and give thanks for the rich variety of ways that men and women live their Christian vocations in today’s world. It also provides an opportunity to learn more about vocations to ministry within the church, particularly religious and priestly vocations.

Encompassing the two Sundays which span the feast of Australia’s first saint, Blessed Mary MacKillop, NVAW has a specific focus for the liturgy of each Sunday. The *first* Sunday looks at the general Christian vocation: the call to holiness of every baptized person, and the myriad ways through which lay people

live their Christian vocation. Particular emphasis is placed on single and married vocations and lay ministries. The second Sunday promotes ordained and consecrated life in the context of the bigger picture of the vocation of all Christians.

Between 1997 and 2002, CVMA produced and sold printed NVAW kits containing liturgical resources, homily notes, children’s liturgy ideas, prayers, reflections for parish bulletins, and teacher resources. In 2003 we offered the kit online through CVMA’s Web site, where it was readily accessible for a small fee. This initiative was extremely well received, and this year, the National Executive went one step further, making it available *free of charge* to everyone who visits our Web site during June, July or August.

It is difficult to quantify and evaluate the impact of each year’s annual National Vocations Awareness Week. However the number who accessed the online NVAW resource kits, coupled with the sheer volume of orders for posters and other vocational resources, and the huge increase in the number of visitors and hits to CVMA’s Web site during July and August give us reason to assume that last year’s NVAW was a significantly larger event than 2003 or earlier years. In other words, the vocation culture is spreading! NVAW is here to stay, and we expect it to continue to gather momentum in the years to come. It is a major contributor to the systematic creation of a vocation culture across our island continent.

CVMA’s Web site

www.catholiczvocations.org.au

Our Web site is constantly being reviewed, updated and expanded. Originally set up in 1999 as Australia’s online *National Vocations Directory*, the Web site has seen the addition of many features, including:

- The CVMA Code of Ethics,
- A comprehensive resource for teachers at all levels,
- A collection of real-life vocational stories,
- A “vocations theme” film resource,
- A section advertising events of interest to vocation ministers and young adults,
- An ever-expanding “Frequently Asked Questions” feature with a place to e-mail questions, which is well-used by inquirers and students,
- Annually updated resources for World Day of Prayer for Vocations and National Vocations Awareness Week,

- Seasonal updates on our journal *VocNET*, and an online subscription facility,
- *VocNET* archives, with free downloads of past editions,
- A “notice-board” for vocation ministers, and
- Numerous links with other associated Web sites.

Our Web site has attracted increasing numbers of visitors since it was launched in 1999. Today more than 100,000 people visit the site annually, and we expect the figure to keep climbing. It is reasonable to conclude that this heartening increase, coupled with a significant increase in e-mails emanating from the Web site, is yet another sign of heightened public interest in the whole spectrum of vocations—presumably a growth in the culture of vocation!

Despite the popularity of the Web site and an annual invitation to non-subscribing dioceses and religious congregations to come on board and subscribe to the

There is wide-spread ignorance of current vocational theology among educators, a sense of inadequacy on the part of many teachers who fear to approach this topic, and even a strong resistance and negativity among many religious education teachers.

National Vocations Directory (for an annual fee of \$60), it is disappointing to report that almost half our bishops and congregational leaders do not seem convinced that this would be a worthwhile investment.

VocNET – CVMA’s journal

With the fervour, idealism and generosity characteristic of every new group or organization, CVMA’s first elected National Executive began producing *VocNET*, our quarterly journal, in 1997. It was circulated free to every bishop, priest, congregational leader, and diocesan or congregational vocation director across Australia. Realistically this largesse was not sustainable, and the move to paid subscriptions was inevitable. Now into its eighth volume. *VocNET* has survived the strug-

gle to re-establish itself as a paying proposition. It now has over 2,200 subscribers and finds its way to every Australian diocese, to hundreds of religious communities, and to an increasing number of overseas orders. Many subscribers have ordered multiple copies, which they distribute to local communities or to entire diocesan presbyterates. Irrespective of its specific content, the underlying theme of every edition of *VocNET* is an unequivocal belief in the future of both consecrated life and ordained ministry. The consistently positive feedback from readers assures us that our journal is practical, inspirational and hope-filled. I have no doubt that *VocNET* is making a significant contribution to the growth of vocational awareness across Australia.

Schools and vocation education

We applaud the efforts of individuals and diocesan educators who have gallantly tried to “fly the vocation flag” in their schools in recent years. These, however, would be a minority. For the most part spreading a culture of vocation across the entire Australian Catholic education system is stymied by the presence of some or all of these factors: a very evident and widespread ignorance of current vocational theology among educators, a sense of inadequacy on the part of many teachers who fear to approach this topic, and even a strong resistance and negativity among many religious education teachers who make no secret of the fact that, in their opinion, vocational awareness is irrelevant, and priesthood and religious life have “had their day.”

Australia has a long way to go before we are able to boast that our Catholic education system has a pervasive vocation culture. CVMA thus recognizes the urgent need for on-going dialogue and collaboration with educators at all levels: from diocesan religious education consultants through to the classroom teachers. This is a challenge compounded by the reality that there are so few full-time vocation ministers who might have the time and the inclination to follow through with this issue.

All is not doom and gloom, however. In recent years, especially in the weeks immediately after National Vocations Awareness Week, we have received much positive feedback from teachers who *have* used the NVAW school resource or who have discovered the comprehensive teacher resources section of our Web site. Their messages of thanks and assurance that they have found the materials informative, practical and user-friendly bring us hope in the midst of what sometimes seems like an impossible challenge. They assure

us that at least *some* of our educators are vocationally aware and that our vision of a vocation culture throughout the Catholic education system is at least beginning to materialize.

Sales of vocation resources

CVMA has been proactive in providing resources that foster understanding of both the universal Christian vocation and vocations of consecrated life and ordained ministry. Since 2003 we have offered for sale a range of posters, brochures and other materials. In recent times orders for such resources have been received and dispatched from this office almost daily.

Fulltimers continue to be the envy of the vast majority of vocation ministers who undertake this ministry part-time—often *very* part-time—generally without any specific preparation, support or supervision.

Goals 4-7: vocation promotion, unity, sharing, effective use of resources

CVMA endeavours to fulfill these goals through the following means.

Communication across the board

The user-friendly CVMA database makes possible regular e-mail communication with many groups. Congregational and diocesan vocation ministers or contacts receive regular update bulletins from this office about once a month. These contain information about forthcoming events and useful resources (both print and electronic) and generate many positive and grateful responses. These bulletins go to congregational leaders and bishops as a courtesy and to ensure that, in cases where there is no designated vocation minister, the information is available to leadership. Periodic bulletins are also sent to Catholic education offices, diocesan youth ministers, the Catholic media, and a growing number of overseas vocation ministers. While vocation ministry networks have been estab-

lished in *some* states for many years, there are local historical reasons and other factors, including the tyranny of distance, that have worked against the establishment of networks in *all* states and territories. Mindful of this, members of the National Executive and I continue to communicate with vocation directors and other key players in their respective congregations, dioceses and states, offering a listening ear and encouragement to network and support one another.

Formation and professional development of vocation ministers

Regretfully one thing that has not changed much since 1998 is that Australia still has only a handful of sisters, brothers and priests who are full-time vocation ministers for their congregations or dioceses. These continue to be the envy of the vast majority of vocation ministers who undertake this ministry part-time—often *very* part-time—generally without any specific preparation, support or supervision. Thus, from our earliest days, CVMA has been committed to providing both on-going formation and professional development opportunities and material resources for vocation ministers. Our efforts include:

- The creation and promotion of **CVMA's Code of Ethics**.
- **Biennial National Conferences** which are organized and hosted on a rotating basis by the different state vocation organizations. Over the years, the themes and process of the conference have varied, and we have drawn upon the talents, experience and expertise of both our own Australian presenters and a number from overseas.
- Week-long biennial **National Workshops** for vocation ministers, held every two years in between the National Conferences. We have staged two orientation workshops, a workshop on psychosexual integration, and another on psychological issues from a multicultural perspective is planned for 2006.
- **National Gathering of Diocesan Vocation Directors**. We held the first such event in April 2005 in order to focus specifically on the needs of diocesan vocation directors, whose participation had been lagging in our other events. This networking and professional development event was well attended and well received, and we're considering offering more in the future.
- A **resource lending library** of books, articles,

video and audio tapes has been established in the national office. The resources may be borrowed by anyone from any part of Australia for the cost of the return postage. A catalog in spreadsheet format, which can be sorted according to author, title, topic, date, etc. has been circulated to all vocation ministers, bishops and congregational leaders. The library is proving popular with vocation ministers across the country.

I can smile and celebrate that, while our dream of an all-encompassing national vocation culture is still very much a work-in-progress, structures are now in place to ensure that this culture *will* grow exponentially over the years.

I concluded my 1998 *HORIZON* article with this admission: “There are many issues and challenges that, overall, our church’s leaders, dioceses, congregations, vocation ministers, parishes, families and educators need to address.” Seven years along the track, I *could* conclude this portrait of the 2005 scenario with those exact words, for the issues are still there, and the challenges go on. However, much *has* changed, as is evident from what I have presented here. I have no doubt much will continue to change. Thus, in 2005, I can smile and celebrate that, while our dream of an all-encompassing national vocation culture is still very much a work-in-progress, structures are now in place to ensure that this culture *will* grow exponentially over the years. There are also many more vocationally aware young adult Australians who are willing to seriously consider their future as a sister, brother or priest than there were in 1998! +

New perspective, new initiatives

As a veteran who has notched up 21 years in vocation ministry at all levels—congregational, diocesan, state and national—I’ve seen a shift to a totally different vocational theology from that to which I enthusiastically subscribed in my early days. Then, in the early 1980s, “recruitment” and numbers were the major focus, and the often competitive behavior of vocation ministers (myself included!) reflected this preoccupation. We now celebrate the emergence of the exciting and inclusive Vatican II theology of Christian vocation, pronounced in *Lumen Gentium*, and repeatedly expounded by Pope John Paul II. We lament that this theology has been slow to capture the hearts and imaginations of a large proportion of our Australian Catholic community. However Rome wasn’t built in a day, and I believe that CVMA has made significant beginnings in our quest to create, and then sustain, a vocation culture in every part of our country. Each day I witness many signs that reinforce my conviction that vocational awareness has grown enormously in recent years. Frequently, from across this vast land, I receive energizing reports of Come and See days, discernment weekends (both diocesan and congregational), workshops for vocation ministers, new appointments of vocation teams, the establishment of parish vocation committees.... The list goes on!

Japan sorely needs vocation outreach. While some programs are reaching out to young adults, much more remains to be done.

A brief overview of vocation ministry in Japan

by Ward Biddle, CP

Vocation famine has hit Japan hard. The seminaries that remain open have a much-reduced number of men, quite a few of them older. And many religious orders of sisters, brothers and priests that were accepting and recruiting new members have, it seems, practically resigned themselves to non-existence in the near future here in Japan.

No one involved in this ministry in the past or present claims to know the reasons for the famine, though of course Monday morning quarterbacking is always around. In the last two decades after World War II, both converts to the faith and vocations to the priesthood and religious life were many. New seminary buildings were constructed or existing ones enlarged. Vocations are more of a mystery, I have always claimed, than the Holy Trinity. So who can try to fathom the various factors that contributed to the severe decline? Did the relative ease with which vocations came along in those years right after the war give rise to a false presumption that new members would always join so easily? Or did it just make us lazy in recruiting? Did we take it for granted that all we really had to do was “pray to the Lord of the harvest”? Whatever the answers are, the church in Japan has awakened to the fact that God *does* expect action as well as prayer. After all, did not Jesus himself recruit and call his first apostles? Does he not wish to do so today, too, but now through his ministers?

Ward Biddle, CP has ministered in Japan since 1957. Although his main emphasis has been retreat work, he has remained involved in vocation ministry in one form or another. Currently he ministers at a retreat house and a parish in Hyogo, Japan.

According to a report I received from the major seminary in Tokyo, all but two of the 16 dioceses in Japan have a yearly vocation retreat or gathering for a rather small group of interested young people. In a few cases there is a concerted effort to work with religious women and men in the diocese. It appears that in about half of these vocation programs boys about 15 or younger are targeted, especially Mass servers. However, there seems to be no follow-up that is planned or at least urged on the vocation directors or pastors. I see this as a rather serious deficiency in the programs.

Numbers are down

The Tokyo Archdiocese has experienced several years in which no one has been ordained, although sometimes religious orders in the diocese have ordained men. The Nagasaki Archdiocese has the second largest number of Catholics, and it continues to have some ordinations every year, though not so many as before. In the Osaka Archdiocese, with the third largest Catholic population, there has not been a diocesan priestly ordination in several years. And there are only three major seminarians, of whom one is Korean and one Vietnamese.

Overall the country has some 942 Japanese priests, including religious priests. That is an increase of 10 over the past 10 years. But the number of seminarians during those 10 years has decreased by almost half. This is indeed alarming. (Non-Japanese priests during those years have also decreased by 150.) Additionally, religious brothers have decreased by more than 60, and that of Japanese sisters by 500. This is rather ominous considering the large number of Catholic schools and institutions staffed largely by religious.

Vocation directors are working together

For about 30 years now an organization of vocation directors for religious orders has existed in Tokyo. At times they have had over 25 representatives at the monthly meetings. They form teams and have staged two or three annual vocation retreats of varying lengths. The summer retreat usually lasts four or five days. For more than 10 years they have been assisted greatly by the Taize representative in Japan, an Anglican layman, who has led guitar-accompanied prayer sessions during the retreats, morning, noon and night. Such retreats help participants keep in mind that they, too, are being called by God. This cooperation between the religious orders not only minimizes a competitive spirit, but offers encouragement to the directors in their very difficult job.

A similar group has existed for some 20 years in Osaka. The group is closely tied to the archdiocese without diminishing the activity of its religious members. Retreats have not been very well-attended, but not for lack of effort.

Follow-up needed

I do not find much follow-up to these retreats and programs, something I consider of vital importance once some interest has been shown by a prospect. I know of one case where an interested young man was interviewed over a period of months by several different priests, who apparently never followed through on the young man's interest. He finally was directed to me by a person in his parish. After several meetings I judged the man to be a real candidate who almost fell through the cracks.

Let me hazard a guess regarding recruitment of priestly and religious vocations. I believe that vocation work requires a bit of specialization, or at least concentrated effort. And perhaps needless to say, it has to be whole-hearted, not done mainly out of a sense of duty to appointment. Not all priests or religious, of course, have such an attraction for this ministry. However, this does not make the need for recruiting any less. In the near future, perhaps lay folk may well undertake this work. After all, it is they who benefit from this ministry and are deprived when there is a lack of priests and religious.

My observation over the years has been that, with or without a special charism, vocation directors and coordinators need to meet regularly and exchange both ex-

periences and plans. For few ministries seem to give rise to so much discouragement.

A trend that could offer hope here in Japan is the high influx of Catholic immigrants over the past 20 years. They have come mainly from South America, the Philippines and Vietnam. For about a year now, the number of non-Japanese Catholics here have outnumbered the Japanese. And though they have not yet yielded proportionately many vocations to priesthood and religious life, with prayer and recruiting effort the prospects are quite bright.

It would be encouraging if one heard of more examples of prayer services or movements for the increase of priestly and religious vocations. The Fukuoka Diocese has held regular prayer vigils, attended by laity as well as religious and priests, at the Sulpician major seminary. Certainly many parishes pray for vocations during the prayers of the faithful at Mass.

With Japan and so many areas in the world lacking enough clergy even for monthly Sunday Mass, together with Pope Benedict XVI, hopefully we will find a way to fill the need. +

Catholicism in Japan

Japan was evangelized by St. Francis Xavier in 1549. The faith spread quickly but was outlawed for 250 years, creating an underground church led for centuries by laity. Today the church is small yet has a significant institutional presence.

Catholics in the population:	1 percent or 450,000
Number of priests:	1,627
Number of sisters:	6,195
Catholic hospitals, schools, colleges, orphanages, etc.	1,363

—From 2003 Vatican statistics

Many young men are knocking on this congregation's door in Ivory Coast. They bring great vitality, but at the same time, they face numerous challenges during discernment and formation.

Vocation realities for one religious order in Ivory Coast

by Joseph Tanga-Koti, SMA

One characteristic of the call of Jesus is that he often went out to meet the people he wanted as his followers. He met them wherever they were. He went out to the Sea of Galilee to call Simon and Andrew, James and John (Mark 1:16-20). He met Matthew in his tax office and asked the tax collector to follow him (Matt 9:9). But we also see some disciples who came to him on their own (Matthew 19:16-22, John 3:1-21).

It is the same today in vocation ministry for my religious order, Society of African Missions (SMA). Here in Ivory Coast—in spite of the challenges of poverty and a civil war—we go out to schools, parishes and religious gatherings to meet young people and talk to them about vocations to the missionary priesthood. We bring photos and pamphlets about the Society and its missionaries, both past and present.

We also encourage young men to come visit us in our formation house. When John's disciples asked Jesus where he lived, he replied, "Come and see," and they went and spent the day with him (John 1:35-39). Coming to visit with us for a couple days of prayer, conversation and interviewing is important before candidates are accepted. This gives them a clear idea of what they are choosing. Then, after at least two years of discernment in their own parishes, those who are academically qualified and chosen by an admission board can finally join our formation house.

Joseph Tanga-Koti, SMA belongs to the Society of African Missions. He teaches sacred Scriptures at the Missionary Formation Center in Abidjan, Ivory Coast.

Motives for choosing the priesthood

The first disciples displayed a variety of motives for choosing to serve Jesus. Some followed him because of his signs, others because he gave them bread to eat (John 6:25-26). Similarly, today in Ivory Coast different people have different motivations for choosing missionary life with SMA. Some young men have an ardent desire to serve God. They want to dedicate their whole lives to preaching the Gospel. For them SMA is a means of achieving this goal since we are a missionary society focused on Africa.

Others come to SMA simply because they want to be priests. For them, too, the Society is a means of achieving that goal. In this case any other congregation could serve the purpose, but if they came first to SMA, or if SMA was the first to approach them, they often remain connected.

In some cases, a spirit of urgency motivates young candidates to SMA. For them, Africa is in serious need of missionaries in order to convert people. Most likely, these candidates come from very remote areas where there is still a great need for priests. So they want to come and help solve the serious problem of a lack of priests ... and fast!

Very often candidates come because they know SMA priests they admire and would like to emulate. There are also those who come just to please the priests they admire, as a form of recognition for something these priests have done to help them, for example, paying their school fees or supporting their family through a difficult situation.

Some candidates are coerced into joining us by parents who want their sons to attend the seminary. It is not really the candidate's wish, but so as not to annoy or let down his parents, he may agree to come and go through all the initial procedures as if by his own will.

Surprisingly, there are even "chance" candidates. They are not sure what they want in life, so they try the seminary to see if it will work out for them, and they remain there for as long as they find it better than what they had tried before. These types often have been in contact with one or two other religious institutes or might have a couple of diplomas or certificates before coming to SMA.

We also have candidates whose main aim is to succeed in life. For them, being a priest is sign of success. They might have this impression either from a priest they have observed or from the way people talk about priests. For them, success may be defined as having a car, living in a big house and being able to build a house for their parents. Closely related to this type are those who want to be materially comfortable. They consider the priesthood a secure life and believe a missionary congregation will provide them with all that they desire.

Even this list is not exhaustive of all the motives that may influence a man to seek out the priesthood here in Ivory Coast. However, it is important to say that no matter the motivation of the candidate, his choice is always considered precious, and the goal of formation is to help him examine his motivations, especially if they are superficial, so that he may respond willingly to an even deeper and hidden motivation to priestly and missionary vocation. This is what the Lord did when he sent away the rich young man and told him to go and sell all his possessions and give the money to the poor in order to follow him (Matthew 19:21-22).

Challenges during formation

A young man faces numerous challenges when he makes the commitment to enter the seminary. Some are situational, some personal and others are spiritual. While certain challenges may be common among most men in formation, some are specific to the circumstances of ministry in an African nation.

The SMA formation house in Ivory Coast is a vibrant mosaic of nationalities, individual temperaments and diverse talents. Living here are seminarians from Benin, Ivory Coast, Central African Republic, Democratic Republic of Congo, France, India, Italy, Kenya,

Nigeria, Tanzania, Togo and Zambia. A seminarian who finds himself in such a community for the first time may be surprised, even shocked, by the cultural diversity. Though seminarians everywhere must learn to adapt to the varied personalities in community life, a seminarian in such a culturally diverse house must make an even bigger adjustment. He is challenged to open up to other ways of thinking, of reasoning, of praying, while at the same time freely offering his own

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unique self to the richness of this diversity. It is as if the seminarian finds himself in a foreign country. He realizes that things are not the same as what he is accustomed to, so he must adapt to the way of life in the new country. St. Paul frequently wrote about how important it was for him and for all missionaries to adapt to the people to whom they are sent, without discrimination, in order to win them to Christ (1 Corinthians 9:20; see also Romans 10:12).

Our seminarians must also deal with an unfamiliar language. Ivory Coast is a French-speaking country, so studies at the seminary are conducted in French. For English-speaking seminarians, this is very challenging and is complicated by the fact that the educational system is different here, too. The way exams are administered and grades are calculated is often very unfamiliar to seminarians already struggling with a new language.

While coping with others and with his new circumstances can be trying, a seminarian often finds a greater test in facing himself. Formators guide seminarians in their discernment and meet regularly among themselves to discuss the evolution of each seminarian. The substance of these discussions is then communicated to the superior of the house who subsequently meets with the seminarian. It is always challenging for a seminarian to face an aspect in his char-

acter that may be detrimental to his future life as a missionary priest. At times a seminarian is advised to make the effort to change, and this is not always easy.

In his spiritual life a seminarian may experience moments of dryness, especially when his prayer life is not as stimulating as he would like. It is humbling for a seminarian, who is expected to encourage others to pray, to encounter challenges in his own prayer life. In most such cases, routine daily activities often are at the root of the problem. A quarrel with someone, a poor performance in school, sickness, a bad mood, loss of appetite ... all these can have a negative effect on prayer life if not handled with care and with the help of a spiritual director.

The students are organized into *small communities* of eight people who share weekly duties and work to foster human and spiritual growth. The group's activities include community prayer, Gospel sharing and spiritual direction.

For an idealistic young man eager to serve God, facing one's limits while engaged in pastoral work, especially charitable activities, can be demoralizing. The seminarian encounters situations for which he has no concrete solutions. He may visit a very sick person who needs money to go to the hospital; or prisoners who declare openly that it is food they need and not some useless prayers; or orphans whose only desire is to see their parents alive. At times such experiences may cause the seminarian to feel hopeless, if not useless.

Leaving the life he once knew and embarking on a new and unfamiliar path, the seminarian may experience an identity crisis. Being a young man and in touch with the youth outside the formation house, the seminarian is at times the odd one out. He does not live the way his peers do. As a priest-to-be, his way of life must reflect the Gospel. He strives to be a model of good Christian life, free from all promiscuity and vice. Consequently his old friends may avoid him if they engage in activities he would not agree with. This frustrates the young seminarian who feels left out. If

he is not careful, he might give in to peer pressure to avoid losing his old connections. Sometimes the situation can be more serious, especially for a young man in a country with very pressing problems. He may decide to keep silent when he should speak out, not only on matters of faith, but also concerning morals and even politics. For example in Ivory Coast we have been living in a difficult political crisis for a number of years now. Most of the youth have taken a very radical position against the rebels, the French citizens and even some of the ethnic communities from the north, part of the zone occupied by rebels. They consider anyone who tries to reason with them to be an enemy. This can be very difficult for a young seminarian who attempts to reach out to them as a peer.

Life in the formation house

Despite all the challenges a seminarian may face, there is usually a smile ready for anyone who approaches him. There is a hidden spirit somewhere in the house that teaches each person how to handle these challenges, most of the time with the help of others. As a society of apostolic life, we in SMA try as much as possible to live according to the model of the early Christian community (Acts 4:32-35); we pray together, eat together, play together and even go to school together. Each academic year the formation team draws up a "*project of life*" which emphasizes key values for community life, such as brotherhood, charity, forgiveness, humility, service, openness, simplicity. When these values are respected in the community, life is good, especially when individuals do not lose the value of private prayer.

The students are organized into *small communities* of eight people who share weekly duties and work to foster human and spiritual growth. The group's activities include community prayer, Gospel sharing and spiritual direction. These are very important moments for the seminarian who understands that he is preparing himself to work in spreading the Word of God and that he should develop his personal relationship with God. A *spiritual companion* accompanies each student to help in self awareness and to clarify his motivations.

While most of the time in a formation house is devoted to *studies*, seminarians are also assigned household chores and *pastoral work*, such as teaching catechetics, visiting the sick or those in prisons, ministering to street youth or assuming parish responsibilities. Pastoral responsibilities enable the seminarian to experience firsthand the reality of missionary life.

Future of religious life in Africa

This preparation of our SMA seminarians takes place in a changing global context. For centuries the cradle of religious and missionary vocations was in the West. Western countries have given the church thousands of missionaries, some of whom totally dedicated their lives to the evangelization of Africa. Until the early 90s, Europe and America still had thousands of missionaries in the field. Now, the reality is drastically changing. Western countries no longer attract as many missionary vocations as before. Now it is in Asia, South America and especially Africa that vocations are sprouting rapidly. The church in these continents is relatively young, and there is a lot of energy and vitality in its communities.

Unfortunately even with the increase in new church members, there is still the problem of religious syncretism in Africa. Many Africans do not know how to separate traditional and Christian beliefs, especially when the two are contradictory. Faith that is not deep and followed up by an active engagement cannot last (James 2:26). This is a big challenge for us African missionaries today.

Economic autonomy is another challenge for us. Most of our missionary societies still depend greatly on the generosity of now decreasing benefactors from Europe and America. Much still remains to be done to make Africans understand that they must support their own missionaries. If this is not accomplished soon, it will be difficult to keep our missionary institutes alive.

An even bigger question we face is whether the church in Africa, with all its new vigor, will be able to keep the faith for as long as our Western ancestors did. Will religious life maintain the current level of fervor for as long as the Western churches maintained theirs? At present the future seems promising. The number of active missionaries is increasing, and the young men and women who want to become missionaries are numerous. Moreover there is goodwill and strong commitment in the spirits of the young missionaries. They are ready to work, and some are already holding important responsibilities in the various missionary institutes. This is a good sign that the future of religious life in Africa is bright. ✚

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