



*Pray therefore the Lord
of the harvest
to send out laborers
into his harvest
(Matt. 9:38)*

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BEST PRACTICES

For attracting and retaining new members

THE MOST successful institutes in terms of attracting and retaining new members at this time:

- Those that follow a more traditional style of religious life.
- Members live together in community, participate in daily Eucharist, pray the Divine Office, and engage in devotional practices together.
- Members wear a religious habit, work together in common apostolates, and are explicit about their fidelity to the Church and the teachings of the Magisterium.

All of these characteristics are especially attractive to the young people who are entering religious life today.

BEST PRACTICES

For vocation promotion:

- Instill a “culture of vocations” and involve membership and leadership in concerted vocation promotion efforts.
- Have a full-time vocation director supported by a team and resources.
- Use new media, especially websites and other online options.
- Offer discernment programs and other opportunities for potential candidates to meet members and learn about the institute.
- Target specific groups—college students, young adults, elementary and high school students—to increase awareness and provide information about religious life and a particular institute.

—From Study on Recent Vocations, p. 15

Study on Recent Vocations to Religious Life: A Report for the National Religious Vocation Conference (NRVC)

Published by the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate, August 2009

SUMMARY OF MAJOR FINDINGS

prepared for the UNITED STATES CONFERENCE OF CATHOLIC BISHOPS

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THE STUDY ON RECENT VOCATIONS TO RELIGIOUS LIFE in the United States conducted by the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA) for the National Religious Vocation Conference (NRVC) was designed to identify and understand the characteristics, attitudes, and experiences of the men and women who are coming to religious life today as well as the characteristics and practices of the religious institutes that are successfully attracting new candidates and retaining new members.

Religious Life Today

- Most religious institutes in the United States are experiencing diminishing numbers, but some continue to attract new members and a few are experiencing significant growth.
- Nearly 4,000 men and women are either in initial formation or professed final vows within the previous 15 years, which confirms that there are still significant numbers of men and women who are responding to a call to religious life and are hopeful about its future.
- 78 percent of men's communities and 66 percent of women's have at least one person currently in initial formation (candidate or postulant, novice, or temporary professed).

Characteristics of New Members

- Those coming to religious life today are much more diverse in terms of age, racial and ethnic background, and life experience. Many come with considerable education and ministry and work experience. More than 90 percent were employed, usually full-time, and nearly 70 percent were engaged in some form of ministry.
- Among new members, the average age of entrance is 30 for men (median 27) and 32 for women (median 29).
- 21 percent of those in initial formation are Hispanic/Latino(a), 14 percent are Asian/Pacific Islander, and 6 percent are African/African American. About 58 percent are Caucasian/white, compared to about 94 percent of finally professed members.
- Nine in ten were raised Catholic and most (73 percent) attended a Catholic school for at least part of their education.
- More than two-thirds (68 percent) of the new members first considered religious life by the time they were 21.

CHALLENGES IN AND FOR RELIGIOUS LIFE TODAY

■ New members identified a range of challenging issues and concerns. Some of these are perennial issues:

- Living in community,
- Overcoming personal weaknesses.
- Faithfully living the vows.
- Balancing personal, communal, and ministerial responsibilities.

■ Others are more particular to this time in the U.S.:

- Aging and diminishment in their religious institutes.
- Lack of peers in religious life and in their institutes.
- Differences in theology and ecclesiology,
- Polarization within the Church.

HOPE FOR THE FUTURE

■ Most new members acknowledge that the numbers in religious life may continue to decline. Nonetheless, they believe religious life will persevere and that the Spirit can and will move in that diminishment.

■ New members are especially attracted to religious institutes that themselves are clear and confident about their identity and hopeful about their future.

—From Study on Recent Vocations, p. 14

RESPONSE RATE

THE RESPONSE RATE to the study surveys was at least 66 percent based on the CARA estimates that the total number of units (congregations, provinces, monasteries) in the U.S. is fewer than 900. However, the responding entities account for 62,250 religious, or well over 80 percent of all religious in the U.S.

Many of the institutes or other entities that did not respond appear to be either small, mostly contemplative, communities that may not have anyone in initial formation, or those who are still in the process of becoming institutes of consecrated life.

Attraction to Religious Life and to a Particular Religious Institute

- 85 percent say the example of members attracted them “very much,” especially their sense of joy, down-to-earth nature, and commitment and zeal. Sense of call and a desire for prayer and spiritual growth are other primary draws.
- Most new members were attracted to their particular religious institute by its spirituality, community life, and prayer life.
- Significant generational gaps, especially between the Millennial Generation (born in 1982 or later) and the Vatican II Generation (born between 1943 and 1960), are evident throughout the study on questions involving the Church and the habit, with younger respondents drawn by a desire to be more committed to the church and wear a habit.

Vocation Promotion and Discernment Programs

- The most common discernment programs are: “Come and See” experiences (offered by three-fourths of the responding institutes), live-in experiences and discernment retreats, and mission or ministry experiences. New members who participated in such programs generally found them to be very helpful in their discernment process.
- Many new members did not experience a great deal of encouragement from family members, diocesan priests, parishioners, or friends when they were first considering a vocation to religious life. Younger respondents were more likely to report receiving encouragement from diocesan priests.

Prayer and Spirituality

- Many new members identify common prayer, particularly Eucharist and Liturgy of the Hours, as what most attracted them to religious life. Millennials also mentioned Eucharistic Adoration, the Divine Office, and Marian devotion as especially important.

Community Life and Ministry Setting Preferences

- Most new members indicate that they want to live, work, and pray with other members of their religious institute.
- Most new members prefer to live in a large (eight or more) or medium-sized (four to seven) community and to live only with other members of their institute. The higher the number of members who live alone, the less likely an institute is to have new members.

Evaluation of Religious Institutes

- Most new members give their religious institutes “excellent” ratings for their commitment to ministry, and high marks for their faithfulness to and opportunities for prayer and spiritual growth, and focus on mission. Institutes received lower ratings for community life and relationships, opportunities for ongoing formation, and efforts to promote vocations.

Practices Regarding the Religious Habit

- Having a religious habit was an important factor for a significant number of new members. Interviews with vocation directors suggest that many inquirers are looking for the possibility of wearing a habit even in those institutes in which few, if any, members regularly do so.

Most Rewarding and Satisfying Aspects of Religious Life

- New members offered a range of comments about the satisfying aspects of religious life, including living, praying, and working together, being part of something larger than themselves, following God’s call, deepening their relationship with God, and being a witness to God for others. Comments about ministry, service, or the apostolate were less frequent.

—Excerpted from the Executive Summary of The Study on Recent Vocations, pp. 1-15