

**Center for Applied Research on the Apostolate
Georgetown University
Washington, DC**

***Recent Vocations to Religious Life:
A Report for the National Religious Vocation Conference***

Executive Summary

This report presents findings from a study of recent vocations to religious life in the United States that was conducted by the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA) for the National Religious Vocation Conference (NRVC). The study is based on surveys of religious institutes as well as surveys and focus groups with recent vocations to religious life. The study was designed to replicate and extend similar research conducted by NRVC and CARA in 2009, so as to identify and understand the characteristics, attitudes, and experiences of the men and women who have entered religious life in recent years.

The study is based on three major research components:

- A single-informant survey of religious institutes and societies of apostolic life
- A survey of those who entered religious life within the last 15 years and remain members
- Focus groups with those who entered religious life within the last 15 years and remain

For the first phase of the study, CARA surveyed religious institutes and societies of apostolic life. Using mailing lists provided by the Conference of Major Superiors of Men (CMSM), the Council of Major Superiors of Women Religious (CMSWR), and the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR), CARA sent a questionnaire to each major superior with a cover letter from Sister Deborah Marie Borneman, SS.C.M., NRVC Director of Mission Integration, and a return envelope addressed to CARA. The cover letter and survey included instructions to respond only for the governance unit (e.g., congregation or province) for which the superior was responsible and, for international institutes or societies, to respond only for members who entered and are based in the United States.

CARA also sent questionnaires and cover letters to superiors of monasteries of contemplative nuns (who do not belong to either LCWR or CMSWR) as well as to superiors of new or emerging communities of consecrated life using mailing lists that CARA compiled for previous research. The list of emerging communities included some that are public associations of the faithful that are in the process of seeking canonical status as a religious institute or society of apostolic life.

Throughout the report, the term “religious institute” is used for religious institutes, societies of apostolic life, and public associations of the faithful that are seeking canonical status as a religious institute or society of apostolic life.

CARA mailed surveys to a total of 755 governance units in spring 2019 and then conducted extensive follow-up by e-mail, telephone, and fax throughout spring and summer 2019 to achieve a high response rate. Three religious superiors reported that the study did not apply to them because they are not part of a U.S. institute and all of their formation takes place outside the United States. Another 19 religious superiors declined to participate but did not give a reason. Altogether, CARA received completed responses from 503 religious institutes for a response rate of 67 percent. A close examination of the lists and the non-respondents revealed that some of the congregations and provinces on the original lists had merged or were in the process of merging with others during the course of the research. A few other entities on the lists are neither provinces nor congregations, but regions or houses that do not have formation/incorporation in the United States and should not have been included in the survey. Still others, particularly among the contemplative monasteries and the emerging communities, had apparently ceased to exist.¹

CARA estimates that the total number of governance units (i.e., congregations, provinces, monasteries) in the United States is approximately 750. The 503 units that responded account for 42,586 men and women religious, or well over 70 percent of all women and men religious in the United States. Many of the governance units that did not respond appear to be either small, mostly contemplative, communities that may not have had anyone in initial formation for some time, or those who are still in the process of becoming institutes of consecrated life.

This initial survey was designed to gather statistics about the membership in the institute, including the numbers in initial formation or incorporation; basic information about vocation promotion and formation in the institute; and basic data about the institute's ministry, community life, and community prayer.

The second phase of the research consisted of a survey of "new members," that is, current candidates/postulants, novices, and those in temporary vows or commitment as well as those who had professed final vows or commitment within the last 15 years. In spring and summer 2019, the questionnaire was sent to 3,318 identified new members and those in formation (emailed to 2,804 and mailed to 514 who had no email address, with a return envelope addressed to CARA). Both mailings included a cover letter from Sister Deborah Marie Borneman, SS.C.M. A total of 55 email addresses were returned as undeliverable. Another 35 invitees responded via email that they were not willing to participate and another 50 responded via email that the study did not apply to them since they had entered religious life before 2003 (mostly transfers from another religious institute within the last 15 years). Approximately 100 completed surveys were unusable because the participants reported entering religious life before 2003. When all these are removed from the sample, CARA received a total of 1,933 usable responses from new members and those in formation for a response rate of at least 63 percent.

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life, prayer, and ministry; and what sustains and challenges them in religious life. The survey also asked about their background characteristics as well as their experiences before entering religious life. In addition, the survey included a question asking the respondent if he or she would be willing to participate in a focus group.

The final phase of the research, which included focus groups with new members, was conducted during fall 2019. CARA conducted 13 focus groups with new members in Baltimore, Chicago, Cincinnati, Los Angeles, Minneapolis, Philadelphia, San Antonio, and St. Louis. These sites were selected because of the relatively large concentration of new members in each of these areas. Participants were selected from among the survey respondents who indicated that they would be willing to participate in a focus group and included women and men, ordained and non-ordained, contemplative and active, and professed members as well as those in formation.

The focus groups explored issues similar to those examined in the survey. Specifically, they were designed to gather insights from newer members about what attracts, sustains, and challenges them in religious life. The discussions were also directed toward understanding the attitudes and experiences of new members and especially toward identifying “best practices” for vocation and formation ministry that would assist men and women in discerning and responding to a call to religious life.

Major Findings

Part I: Findings from the Survey of Religious Institutes and Societies of Apostolic Life

Religious Life Today

- The study identified at least 2,471 men and women in initial formation and about 1,000 more who had professed perpetual vows within the previous 15 years. The actual number of new members is likely even higher, given that at least a third of U.S. religious institutes did not respond to the survey and/or did not provide information about members who had professed final vows since 2003. The findings from the surveys, and especially those from the focus groups with new members, confirm 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.
- Since 2003, over 80 percent of responding religious institutes has had at least one serious discernor and nearly 90 percent continue to accept new members and promote religious vocations.
- The expected demographic shift in *total numbers* of religious continues, due to the unusually large number of entrants in the first half of the last century. The study reports 11,780 men (a 15 percent decrease from 2009) and 30,806 women (a 36 percent decrease from a decade ago).

- The total number of religious institutes and societies of apostolic life (i.e., congregations, provinces, monasteries) in the United States is approximately 750. Fifty percent have less than 50 members.
- Indicating that new membership has remained fairly steady, the number of men and women in *initial formation* is not significantly different from that reported in the 2009 study. Superiors report a total of 1,085 women in initial formation (a decline of 10 percent from 2009) and 1,386 men in initial formation (a decline of less than 1 percent from 2009).
- Sixty percent of responding institutes have at least one person in initial formation. Having someone in formation and having more than one or two in formation is more common in institutes of men than in institutes of women. For those who entered and then departed from religious life since 2003, the most common time to do so was during candidacy/postulancy, which is part of the discernment and formation process and consistent with 2009 departure rates.
- Eighty-seven percent of men and women in *perpetual vows* are over age 60, a statistic that is unchanged since 2009, which suggests that the influx of newer members has helped to offset the drastic decline that was anticipated as the unusually high number of members who entered during the first half of the last century age out.
- Almost half of those in *initial formation* are under age 30, an increase from the 43 percent who were under age 30 in 2009. Nearly three-fourths of those in initial formation are part of the Millennial Generation (born in the 1980s or 1990s) and another 6 percent, born in 2000 or later, could be considered part of the emerging next generation of young adults.
- Those in initial formation are more diverse, ethnically and racially, than those in perpetual vows, as was the case in 2009. However, those in perpetual vows have increased in diversity by 7 percentage points since 2009.
- Sixty-seven percent of U.S. religious institutes claim that the majority of their perpetually professed members are located in the Northeast and Midwest.

Vocation Promotion and Discernment Programs

- Seventy-seven percent of responding religious institutes report that they have one or more vocation directors or a vocation team, down from 88 percent in 2009. Ninety-four percent of vocation directors/teams meet with leadership at least annually.
- The average annual budget for the vocation director/team (excluding salaries) is \$34,039. However, half of responding institutes report an annual budget of \$14,600 or less for their vocation director/team and some 4 percent of institutes declare that there is no budget for the vocation director/team.

- Institutes of men are more likely than institutes of women to indicate that vocations is a topic on all or most of the institute’s leadership meetings (41 percent compared to 23 percent).
- Religious institutes are sponsoring fewer discernment programs than they did a decade ago, but “Come and See” experiences continue to be the most common program, offered by 60 percent of responding institutes.
- The most common vocation promotion approach among responding institutes (78 percent) is vocation information on the institute’s website or a distinct website for vocations. Vocation promotion and discernment programs are most typically targeted toward young adults and college-age students.

Interaction with Others in Formation

- Two in three responding institutes report that their candidates/postulants interact with candidates/postulants from other units of their institute, society, or federation and just over three-fifths have them interacting with candidates/postulants from other institutes or societies. This increase in cross and intercongregational initial formation represents a change in formation practices in the past century.
- Almost three in five indicate that their novices interact in an Intercommunity Novitiate with novices from other units of their institute, society, or federation and more than half send their novices to an Intercommunity Novitiate with novices from other institutes or societies.
- Nearly 40 percent of respondents indicate that their institute offers a formation experience for U.S. members in initial formation that takes place outside the United States. Men’s institutes are more likely than women’s institutes to offer such a program.

Community Life and Prayer

- Among the various factors related to healthy and holy community life, institute leaders in 2019, similar to those in 2009, rated communal prayer and shared experiences with other community members most highly. More than eight in ten rate praying with other members and celebrating holidays/feast days together as “very” important.
- Personal private prayer characterizes the regular prayer life of a majority of active members in almost all responding institutes (95 percent), followed closely by daily Eucharist and Liturgy of the Hours, reported by nearly nine in ten responding institutes.

Concerns of Superiors for New Members

- Major superiors are most concerned about strengthening peer support among new members. They also express concern about the gap in age among institute members and the healthcare and cultural challenges older members pose for younger members.

- Major superiors raise many concerns about the effectiveness of their formation process and the catechesis of their new members. Some express concern that new members may not have the level of commitment necessary to persevere in religious life or the necessary support to sustain them in their vocation.
- Community life is another serious concern for major superiors. They hope that the new members will see the value of living in a community even if they must do so across communities and cultures.

Support from Major Superiors for New Members

- Superiors recognize that the best way to nurture a vocation is to ensure that it is strengthened by a solid formation experience. Many hold regular meetings with the formation director and individually with those in formation. Many also provide a mentor for those in formation.
- Another way that religious institutes support their newer members is through deliberate engagement of the wider religious community in the accompaniment and formation process. This helps newer members, especially those who may be the sole new member in their unit, to establish the support of peers in formation. This inclusion in the wider community also helps newer members to feel that they have a voice and a place in the community.
- Prayer and spiritual direction are a vital part of formation in religious life. These tools are also essential to the support of newer members in their vocation.
- Perhaps one of the most important ways that religious institutes support newer members in their vocation is through listening and dialogue along the journey. Many superiors mentioned this as a way they support their newer members.

Part II: Findings from the Survey and Focus Groups of New Members in Religious Institutes

Characteristics of New Members

- Respondents to the survey of new members are nearly equally divided by gender; 51 percent are women and 49 percent are men. Close to half are in their 30s, compared to just over a quarter who were in this age range in 2009. About 30 percent are ages 19-29, compared to just 16 percent who were in this range in 2009. Seven in ten had considered religious life by the time they were 21. The average age of entrance is 28 for men and 29 for women. This is a little younger than the average age of entrance in 2009, which was 30 for men and 32 for women.
- Compared to finally professed members, those in initial formation are more likely to come from diverse cultural backgrounds: 11 percent are Hispanic/Latino(a), 13 percent are Asian/Pacific Islander, 3 percent are African American/African/black, and 3 percent are of mixed race or ethnicity. About 70 percent are Caucasian/European American/Anglo/white, compared to about 87 percent of perpetually professed members.
- One-quarter of those in initial formation were born outside the United States and a third have at least one parent who was born outside the United States. Among those who were born in the United States, six in ten grew up in the Northeast or the Midwest regions. Three in four speak English as their first language and four in ten speak at least two languages fluently.
- About nine in ten were raised Catholic and most (73 percent) attended a Catholic school for at least part of their education. About half attended parish-based religious education and 10 percent were homeschooled for at least part of their education. Almost half (49 percent) earned a bachelor's degree, 17 percent a Master's, and 4 percent a doctoral degree before they entered their religious institute.
- At least eight in ten were employed before they entered, usually in a full-time position. Slightly more than half were engaged in ministry, about a quarter on a full-time basis, one-sixth on a part-time basis, and about three-fifths on a volunteer basis. Many were also involved in various parish ministries and/or other volunteer work.
- Among the male respondents, 80 percent are or expect to become priests and 20 percent are or expect to become brothers.

Attraction to Religious Life and to a Particular Religious Institute

- New members are drawn to *religious life* primarily by a sense of call and a desire for prayer and spiritual growth. Most respondents report that they were attracted “very much” by a desire for a deeper relationship with God (86 percent), a sense of call to religious life (79 percent), and a desire for prayer and spiritual growth (77 percent). To only a slightly lesser degree, most new members also say they were attracted to religious life by a desire to be of service and a desire to be part of a community. Women are more likely than men to say they were

attracted by a sense of call, a desire for prayer and spiritual growth, and by a desire for a deeper relationship with God. Men are more likely than women to say they were attracted by a desire to be of service and by a desire to be part of a community.

- Newer members were attracted to *their particular religious institute* by its spirituality, charism, prayer life, mission, and community life of the institute. Although the ministries of the institute are also important to most new members, they are less important than spirituality, prayer, community, and lifestyle. Millennial respondents are more likely than older generations to be “very much” attracted by the example of the members and the community life of the institute. They are least likely to be “very much” attracted by the life and works of the founder/ess.
- Newer members in religious life first became acquainted with their religious institutes in many different ways. The most common experience was in an institution, such as a school, where the members served (37 percent). Men are more likely than women to report that they first encountered their religious institute in a school or other institution where the members served. Women are more likely than men to indicate that they learned about their institute through a presentation at a school/parish/youth ministry event.
- Some younger members did not know anyone in religious life before they sensed a call to religious life. Many found out or learned more about their institute online. Men and women are equally likely to have had religious life formally presented, either in class or in campus ministry, as an option for them to consider while they were in college (nearly four in ten). Millennials are also much more likely than older generations to have an experience such as this while they were in college. Direct experience with the institute and its members, through “Come and See” experiences, discernment retreats, and other opportunities to spend time with members are especially important for this age group.
- When asked how much various factors influenced their decision to enter their religious institute, respondents were most likely to name the charism and community life of their institute as the factors that influenced them “very much.” Women are more likely than men to be “very much” influenced by prayer life or prayer styles, community life, the way the vows are lived in the institute, and the living of the Gospel values. Men are more influenced by the future of the institute, its geographic location, and its ministries.

Encouragement and Support in Discernment and in Religious Life

- During their initial discernment, most new members report that they received a great deal of encouragement from institute members, their vocation director or team, and their spiritual director. Most also report high levels of encouragement from those to whom and with whom they minister. Although many new members did not experience a great deal of encouragement from parents, siblings, and other family members when they were first considering a vocation to religious life, 70 percent report that support from their family increased after they entered religious life.
- Compared to older new members, younger new members are more likely to report that they were encouraged by institute members, their vocation director or team, parents, family

members, and diocesan priests when they were first considering religious life. They are also more likely to report receiving encouragement from diocesan priests in their life and ministry now.

- Seven in ten report that friends outside the institute and people in the parish were also a significant source of support. Men were more likely than women to report receiving “very much” encouragement from their parents and grandparents.

Prayer and Spirituality

- Many new members identify personal private prayer as one of the aspects of religious life that is most important to them and that most sustains them now. When asked about the importance of various types of communal prayer, respondents are most likely to name daily Eucharist and Liturgy of the Hours as the prayer types that are most important to them. New members in 2019 are more likely than those in 2009 to report that Exposition of the Blessed Sacrament/Eucharistic Adoration is “very” important to them (66 percent compared to 50 percent in 2009).
- Millennial Generation respondents are much more likely than other respondents—especially those from the Vatican II Generation—to say that daily Eucharist, Liturgy of the Hours, Eucharistic Adoration, and other devotional prayers are “very” important to them. Compared to younger respondents, older respondents place greater importance on faith-sharing and, to a lesser degree, on prayer using an app/online resources and ecumenical interfaith prayer, such as Taizé.

Community Life and Ministry Setting Preferences

- As in 2009, praying together, living together, and sharing meals with other members are particularly important aspects of community life to most newer members of religious institutes. Women are more likely than men to rate doing things together with other members as “very” important to them, which includes praying with other members, socializing/sharing leisure time together, and celebrating holidays/feast days together. Women are also more likely than men to report that ongoing formation and lifelong education are “very” important to them.
- Repeating a pattern of enthusiasm indicated throughout the study, Millennial Generation respondents, in particular, are more likely than older respondents to report that living, ministering, sharing meals, and socializing with other members are “very” important to them.
- When asked about various living arrangements, most new members prefer to live in a large (eight or more) or medium-sized (four to seven) community, living with members of different ages at or near their ministry site. Younger respondents express even stronger preferences for living with members of their institute in large community settings and for living with other members close to them in age.

Evaluation of Religious Institutes

- New members give their religious institutes the highest ratings on their care and support of the elderly members and are positive overall about the quality of life in their religious institute. The younger a respondent is, the more likely that he or she rates the following aspects as “excellent”: the efforts to promote vocations, the initial formation/incorporation programs, and lifelong educational opportunities.
- Overall, women tend to be more positive than men in their evaluation of various aspects of life in their religious institutes. The largest gap (more than 30 percent) in an “excellent” rating between women and men is in their assessment of communal prayer and fidelity to the church within their institutes.

Concerns for Their Future in Religious Life

- When asked to share their thoughts about what most concerns them about their future in religious life, newer members expressed concerns similar to those shared by institute leaders in the first part of this report, such as the gap in age between the senior members and the new members and worries about the future of the institute as the communities age and decrease in size. More than one in ten comments from newer members, however, expressed a lack of concern about their future in religious life and more than a quarter expressed a concern related to *personal* fidelity to their commitment to religious life.
- The most commonly expressed concern that newer members express about their future in religious life is a very personal concern—that they will have the faithfulness to persevere in this life they have chosen. At least a quarter of respondents shared this concern, although a substantial number worded this sentiment more as a desire than a concern.
- Newer members are also concerned about the changing demographics of aging members and fewer vocations to replace them. They also worry about the necessity to restructure the institute and the effect of restructuring on younger members.
- Closely related to concerns about smaller congregations, many newer members also express concerns about finding balance in their lives. They worry about overwork and burnout. Some also express concerns about stresses related to being called into positions of leadership for which they do not feel adequately prepared.
- Many newer members express concerns related to being able to live an authentic community life. As newer members, they sometimes struggle with challenges related to living in community. Others are concerned with the challenges of intergenerational living. While some institutes struggle with concerns of aging membership and institutes decreasing in size, others are concerned about growth in their institute and the ability to maintain a strong sense of community. Loneliness is another concern expressed by newer members, which is related to their concern for authentic community life.

- A number of newer members express concerns related to adapting to rapid changes in society. Some are concerned about their own ability to adapt, while others are more concerned about the ability of their institute and its members to adapt to social and cultural changes.

Hopes for the Future

- Although cognizant of the challenges and concerns expressed by major superiors in the first part of this report, newer members are more optimistic than the superiors in their hopes for the future, perhaps because they recognize their own agency in creating a future for their institute. Focus group participants share the same awareness of the challenges and optimism about the future of religious life.
- Newer members realize that they have entered religious institutes that are, for the most part, characterized by smaller congregations and an aging membership. They are realistic about this reality while at the same time optimistic about the future and their role as members of these institutes. They express hope for renewal of religious life in general and of their religious institute in particular. Newer members realize that more deliberate efforts at networking and collaboration can help them and their institutes to extend their ministry.
- Newer members recognize that the recent past has been turbulent and difficult for religious institutes. They sense that many institutes have been struggling just to survive in light of smaller numbers and increased workload shared among an increasingly aged membership. Their hope for the next ten years is for an increase in clarity of mission and identity as renewed institutes reemerge from consolidation and restructuring.
- Newer members eagerly anticipate the evolution of religious life in the next ten years. They look forward to increased collaboration across generations. They also recognize the increased cultural diversity of the Catholic Church in the United States and they look forward to ensuring that religious life reflects that diversity.
- Newer members recognize the need for additional formation in leadership so that they are prepared to assume leadership in their institutes and in the Church. They are eager to move beyond diminishment and to expand the mission of their institute into new avenues for ministry. At the same time, some newer members feel drawn to return to the roots of their institute and to restore a sense of its original charism.
- Newer members desire members of all ages to be committed to living the charism more vibrantly with a greater effort to live in solidarity with the poor and marginalized. Unlike previous generations to religious life, they recognize stewardship involves divesting of empty buildings, underutilized property, and sponsored institutions to live more simply utilizing human and material resources to benefit the neediest.

Introduction

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Organization of this Report

The report is divided into two main parts:

- Part I provides an overview of religious life in the United States based primarily on the survey of religious institutes and societies of apostolic life.
- Part II presents the results of the survey of new members. It also draws on findings from the focus groups and personal conversations with new members.

Copies of the two survey questionnaires, with the percentage responses for each close-ended item, calculated out of 100 percent, can be found in Appendix I. The percentage of non-respondents to each item, calculated separately out of 100 percent, is also shown on the questionnaires in Appendix I. A complete transcription of the responses to the open-ended questions that were included in the survey of religious institutes and the survey of new members can be found in Appendix II. Copies of the protocol that guided the focus group discussions can be found in Appendix III, which also includes a complete transcription of the proceedings from each of the focus groups. Due to size, Appendix II and Appendix III are bound separately from this report.

Interpreting this Report

Most of the questions on the survey used four-point response scales (for example, “not at all,” “only a little,” “somewhat,” and “very much” or “poor,” “fair,” “good,” and “excellent”). Two of the responses in these scales may be interpreted as relatively more “negative” (“not at all” and “only a little,” for example) and the other two as relatively more “positive” (“somewhat” and “very much,” for example). Tables summarizing responses to questions that use these scales usually include two columns. The first column presents the percentage for the combined positive side of the scale, that is, the percentage of respondents saying *either* “somewhat” or “very much,” for example. The second column lists the percentage for the most positive category only, that is, the percentage of respondents saying “very much,” for example, since the most positive response sometimes distinguishes important contrasts in level of support. This is especially useful for this survey since many respondents tended to give “positive” responses but not always the *most* positive

responses. Readers may also wish to compare the difference between the two extreme responses. These comparisons and others may be drawn by referring to the complete percentage responses for each question, listed on the copies of the questionnaires in the Appendix I.

In addition to summarizing the responses to each question for respondents as a whole, the report also compares the responses of religious institutes and new members from several subgroups. Part I examines differences in responses of institutes of men and institutes of women. Part II examines differences in responses of men and women as well as those from different generations. Throughout the report, the tables and charts that compare differences between and among these various subgroups typically present only the percentages of those who give the most positive response.

Because this project deliberately replicates and extends the original research on new members to religious life that was conducted by NRVC and CARA in 2009, care is taken throughout the report to compare current findings to those from the 2009 study. Where appropriate, the report points out important similarities and differences in the findings from the two studies.