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ENCOURAGING QUALITY DISCERNMENT

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HORIZON



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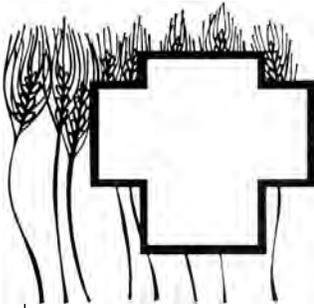
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HORIZON

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

HORIZON serves as a resource:

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

HORIZON has a threefold purpose:

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

National Religious Vocation Conference

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

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

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EDITOR'S NOTE

Season of hope

IN A CASUAL CONVERSATION one day with two other moms, I was taken aback that both of them hate the spring. It turns out that muddy dogs are the bane of the season for them. But, not being a dog owner, I cling to the tradition that spring is a season of hope and positive thinking. Here in the North, we have witnessed early blooms, teasing days of shirtsleeve temperatures, and, of course, the joy of the Easter celebration.

We're still in that period before wilting heat of summer erodes our glee about feeling the sun on our shoulders. Basking in that fleeting glow, I'm directing my hope outward to all of the readers of *HORIZON*. My wish is that this edition be one of the hopeful aspects of the season for you: that our writers stir within you a sense of the possibilities of your ministry. Whether you are an official or unofficial vocation minister for your religious community, may your efforts to share the good news of religious life be strengthened by learning more about walking with discerners (pages 4 and 12), reaching out to parents (page 17), using social media (page 21), main-

taining hope (page 27), organizing a pilgrimage (page 30) or reading about the cultural context of discernment today (page 35).

I also want to call your attention to a short feature on page 11 urging you to go online and discover the riches of previous editions of *HORIZON*. Because many dynamics of vocation ministry remain largely the same from year to year, our past editions contain a great deal of practical help and wisdom. I do hope that subscribers will follow the instructions on page 11 for accessing our online archives and will take advantage of the abundant resources in past editions of *HORIZON*.

Those past editions and the one you hold in your hands right now essentially offer you the quality upon which all vocation ministry rests—a belief in a “future full of hope” for religious life. It is the Easter season. It is the moment to roll up our shirt sleeves, feel the warmth, praise the Lord and continue build the future for religious life.

—Carol Schuck Scheiber, editor, cscheiber@nrvc.net

Making a prayerful vocation decision can be *the* pivotal moment in a person's life. An experienced vocation minister offers insights about the process of accompanying someone in discernment.

Discovering “what God wants” during vocation conversations

BY BROTHER JOEL GIALLANZA, CSC

IN ONE OF HIS MANY LETTERS of spiritual direction, speaking of God's will, Saint Francis de Sales wrote:

Here is the most important point: find out what God wants, and when you know, try to carry it out cheerfully or at least courageously; not only that, but you must love this will of God and the obligations it entails. Little by little train your will to follow God's will.

“Find out what God wants.” However simple and straightforward this directive may appear to be, it is a significant challenge with which vocation ministers and spiritual directors regularly contend, both for those they are accompanying and for themselves. The main work of these ministers and directors is to accompany others on the spiritual journey and to assist them in discovering God's will. It is precisely

because they walk in this sacred territory that the wisdom of Saint Francis' words apply to vocation ministers and spiritual directors, for they, too, must be attentive to what God wants in and for their own lives.

Finding out what God wants is not so complex that it should be relegated to the impossible; such a relegation ignores the power of grace. However, it is not so simple that it can be characterized as a casual and quick activity; such a characterization devalues the significance of human effort in response to grace.

Finding out what God wants is referred to as discernment traditionally. Vocation ministers and spiritual directors engage and guide others in discernment discussions. Vocation ministers, because of the nature of their work, are probably involved in such discussions on a very regular basis, more than spiritual directors. I hope to examine the nature of these discussions in the context of vocation ministry.

Brother Joel Giallanza, CSC is a member of the Congregation of Holy Cross and serves on the Provincial Council for his community. In addition, he works in retreat ministry and spiritual direction. His book, The Seven Sorrows of Mary: A Meditative Guide, was recently published by Ave Maria Press.



Spiritual direction and vocation ministry

There is common ground between the vocation ministry and spiritual direction ministry, but that does not make them synonymous with one another. There may be as many definitions and descriptions of these ministries as there are people serving in them. Rather than add to that, what is presented here is simply a general distinction based on what transpires in each.

Vocation ministers accompany others in determining the way of life that will enable them to live their faith and their relationship with God as fully as possible. Whether this accompaniment is in the context of religious life or diocesan diaconate or priesthood or the many types of lay ecclesial ministry, the challenge for vocation ministers is to be open to whichever way the discussions lead the individual who is making the determination. Vocation ministers must be skilled in recognizing that what is determined may lead the individual in a way that was not perceived or expected at the beginning of the discussions.

Spiritual directors also accompany others, but onto a broader terrain. They assist others in discovering the direction in which God is leading them through the whole of life. Every dimension of life becomes part of the spiritual direction process since God can communicate through any aspect of the person's activities and responsibilities. The challenge for spiritual directors is to remember, as Saint John of the Cross teaches in "Living Flame of Love," "the principal guide is the Holy Spirit, who is never neglectful of souls."

Spiritual directors must be skilled at recognizing God at work in the person, at recognizing preferences the person may have that could hinder this work, and at recognizing his or her own predispositions about how the person's spiritual journey is progressing. Saint John says bluntly, "if they [spiritual directors] do not recognize this, they should leave the soul

alone and not bother it."

Discernment is necessary for both vocation ministry and spiritual direction to be truly effective. That does not, however, make discernment a generic exercise applicable in the same way to every individual or circumstance. Much more is it a custom-made reality, incorporating questions, recommendations and suggestions that build upon the discerner's personality, gifts, faith and hope.

Discernment becomes a means for perceiving and recognizing God's works and ways in the midst of all the busyness of daily life. It is a way of sifting what is of God from what is not of God.

What exactly is discernment?

The dictionary definition of discernment refers to perceiving or recognizing something as being different or distinct. The etymology of the word, though, offers deeper levels for consideration. The linguistic roots of discernment are drawn from ancient terms meaning to sift and to decide. The sifting process separates elements from one another so what is being sought can be seen more easily, leaving the rest aside. Discernment is a way of deciding what is to be retained and what can be discarded.

When this deeper meaning is interpreted from the perspective of faith, discernment becomes a means for perceiving and recognizing God's works and ways in the midst of all the busyness of daily life. It is a way of sifting what is of God from

what is not of God. Discernment is a way of finding out what God wants regarding a specific situation to be addressed or a major life decision to be made, such as a vocational path to

The “guarantee” approach to discernment insists that the end result should be the absolute, bona-fide, certified will of God. This leaves very little, if any, room for a major component in the process—faith.

follow. Discernment is useful on occasions in spiritual direction when important decisions need to be considered and made. In vocation ministry, however, it is a regular part of what is done in working with individuals interested in exploring and possibly pursuing a specific way of life. Three aspects of discernment will be examined here: the ele-

ments involved, the nature of the process and the influences on that process.

Elements of discernment

Finding out what God wants is the primary purpose of discernment. A regular oversight made when entering into a discernment process is to assume that two principal elements are involved: God and self. In fact three elements are involved in a valid discernment: God, self, others. In this context “others” refers to the faith community in the broadest sense; for example, close friends, prayer partners or group, spiritual director, companions who know the person in more than one context, and, ultimately, the religious community being considered. So, while a discerner may say, “I believe I am called to religious life in a particular institute,” the vocation minister has the responsibility to explore how the person has come to that belief while being attentive to the three elements.

The role of the self is obvious since the discerner must be the one actually moving toward and making the decision regarding a vocation. The other two elements, however, run the risk of receiving less attention than necessary. If God is neglected in the process, then any decision about religious life is built on a consensus between the individual and others with no solid basis for knowing that this is God’s will. If others are neglected in the process, then a type of fundamentalism emerges in which “God (or Jesus)-and-me” becomes the sole criterion for determining any direction to be taken in life. If

God and others are neglected in the process, then the end result is little more than an exercise in pride, self-righteousness and self-centeredness.

In discernment discussions, in terms of these elements, the vocation minister should explore the following with the discernor:

- What factors lead you to consider religious life as a vocational path?
- What role have faith, prayer and a personal relationship with God had in shaping that consideration?
- What encouragement and affirmation have you received from others regarding your consideration of this vocation?

These initial questions can point to additional ones that the vocation minister may want to explore with the discernor to assure that the three elements of discernment are part of the discussion.

Nature of discernment

Discernment is about finding out what God wants and then doing it. The process of discernment is serious and must be taken up with sincerity, with the expectation that God will respond in some way and with the willingness to do whatever emerges from the process. It is assumed here that the discernor is entering the process with a genuine openness and without a pre-packaged understanding of the decision that will be made after the discernment. Lack of openness reduces the process to a mere formality with no meaning, or at least with insufficient meaning on which to build one’s life. Because the very nature of discernment is linked to discovering and doing God’s will, some notes can be made about what is contrary to that nature.

First, discernment is not magic. The “magical” approach to discernment is to pronounce some words or pray some prayers or perform some acts and then expect to pull God’s will out of a hat. More often than not, that expectation includes the specifics of God’s will. Discernment can and sometimes does have aspects of surprise and the unexpected. The basic posture, then, must be anticipation without specification. Anticipating that God will respond is not determining how and when God will respond.

Second, discernment is not endless. The “perpetual” approach to discernment is to look for some obvious manifesta-

tion of God's will or movement of the Spirit and thus delay any decision or action until that is in sight. The discerner may say the process needs to continue in an open-ended way; the vocation minister, eventually, should consider this a type of spiritual constipation which serves as a tactic for avoiding the decision to be made. When a discernment process begins, it is appropriate to establish a time line at the end of which a decision will be made. The time line can be reset if, for some unforeseen reason, the process is interrupted. In general, though, the process should be unbroken.

Third, discernment is not guaranteed certainty. The "guarantee" approach to discernment insists that the end result should be the absolute, bona-fide, certified will of God. This leaves very little, if any, room for a major component in the process—faith. The end point of discernment is a decision in faith, not a determination by fact. The discerner must believe that the decision to be made is consistent with God's will. It is a matter of faith and trust, for these are at the very heart of the Christian life, and so of the religious life, and so of the discernment for considering this way of life.

Fourth, discernment is not automatically pleasant. The "pleasing" approach to discernment is to assume that the discovery and content of God's will are necessarily agreeable in every way. Jesus' experiences of Holy Thursday evening and Good Friday demonstrate otherwise. Besides pointing to God's will, discernment can reveal previously unknown or un-confronted aspects of the self that are less than agreeable. Discernment seeks the truth, regardless of what may be uncovered. If God's will is truly the goal, then there must be a willingness to discover it along with whatever else may emerge.

In discernment discussions, in terms of this aspect of the nature of discernment, the vocation minister should ask the discerner about expectations at several points during the process to monitor the impact of any contrary points. When one or more of these contrary points appear to be at work, the vocation minister should address that directly. The discerner's understanding of the nature of the process of discernment is itself part of the process and can be a help or a hindrance.

Influences on discernment

Finding out what God wants does not take place in a vacuum. It is contextual, shaped and influenced by all that goes on in the discerner's life. While the following points are not exhaustive, they can significantly influence the discernment process.

First, the **personality** of the discerner is a determining factor in the way that the discernment unfolds. Discernment

is not a disembodied exercise; quite the contrary, it is incarnational and so reflects the discerner's history and relationships, perspectives and preferences, willingness to explore and ability to make decisions. All these and more will affect the content and the pace of the process.

The vocation minister, in discernment discussions, should assess the person's self-knowledge. Does this person have a realistic understanding and image of self in terms of religious life? Are there any outstanding personality issues that need to be addressed prior to pursuing religious life or issues that would preclude that pursuit altogether?

Second, the **spiritual life** of the discerner influences discernment. The person's knowledge, understanding and practice of faith should reflect the place and priority given to God. Similarly, the role given to the faith community and regular participation in it demonstrate the discerner's sense of the communal dimension of the spiritual life and faith development.

The vocation minister, in discernment discussions, should determine the person's readiness for religious life in terms of catechetical preparation, faith practice, image of God, image of self in relationship to God, openness to varying theological perspectives. Is the discerner inquisitive and open to learning? Are there any religious dispositions or prejudices that would make learning new or alternate perspectives difficult?

Third, the discerner's **understanding and image of the church and religious life** are important considerations to be explored. Realism is a priority here. The person must be realistic in looking at the church and religious life. This does not mean there is no place for high ideals and hopes for the future; indeed, there must be. But there must also be a sense of the humanity of the church and religious life, of the reality of sin, of the goodness of humanity, and of the transformative power of grace.

The vocation minister, in discernment discussions, should explore these points with the individual, not in terms of theological expertise, but from the perspective of events and experiences shaping the person's current thinking. How

Discernment seeks the truth, regardless of what may be uncovered. If God's will is truly the goal, then there must be a willingness to discover it along with whatever else may emerge.

does the person perceive the church and religious life? What are the person's expectations and hopes for the church and religious life?

Fourth, the discerner's **present situation**, at times, can be a determining factor in the discernment process. The person's availability, suitability and capability must point toward religious life as a genuine possibility. If the person is not at a sufficiently healthy point in life to enter wholeheartedly into discernment, then the process should be delayed with some determination of when or if it can resume.

When the vocation minister can learn something about what the person truly desires, then the motivation for and image of religious life will be evident and can be evaluated in terms of their truth.

The vocation minister, in discernment discussions, needs a first-hand verbal account of the person's present situation, apart from whatever written biographical material or reflections may have been submitted previously. Is the person able and free on all levels—physically, relationally, emotionally, medically, financially—to enter into a discernment regarding religious

life? What is the principal motive the discerner articulates for considering religious life?

These four influences, and others that the vocation minister may identify in discussions with an individual, are interwoven. They are separated here only to highlight their importance; in truth, they flow in and out of one another. The vocation minister, as much as possible, must come to know the discerner as a whole person precisely because that is who is considering religious life. Vocation ministers should be alert to any lack of openness or partial communication from the discerner, especially regarding those aspects of life the minister knows are of particular importance for religious life in general and for life in the specific institute being considered. The vocation minister's task is not to get perfect people but to identify and invite those who are truly being called by God to build religious life in and for the future.

Discernment discussions

Discernment discussions may not be the only contexts in which vocation ministers encounter and so come to know

those who are considering the possibility of religious life. Other opportunities such as retreats or discussion groups or come-and-see experiences can reveal much about a discerner. Nevertheless, these discussions are especially important because they are focused and provide the vocation minister with a forum in which to explore specific points regarding the person's understanding of religious life and the particular institute. In addition to the explicit points that the vocation minister wants to cover during the discussions, there are implicit points that may be gauged more by intuition than information.

First, in listening to and engaging the discerner, **what does the vocation minister sense about this person's motivation and desire in life?** The vocation minister is not to be a clairvoyant or an analyst, but intuition may reveal more about the purity and honesty of the person's motives than the words used or the data provided. Saint Alphonsus de Liguori, patron of vocation ministers, makes an interesting statement in his writing, *The Practice of the Love of Jesus*. "Some people make the mistake of supposing that the ecclesiastical state is simply another career by which a person advances in honor and wealth." Though he is speaking about vocations to the priesthood, his words have broader applications. When the vocation minister can learn something about what the person truly desires, then the motivation for and image of religious life will be evident and can be evaluated in terms of their truth.

Second, in listening to and engaging the discerner, **what does the vocation minister sense about this person's ultimate goal in life?** This would emerge, to some extent, with what has just been said about motivation. The discerner should have some clarity about the goal to be pursued. The finer points of the lifestyle may not be completely known to the person; it is the task of formation to address that. However, the larger points – vows, community, ministry, prayer – should be clear in the person's general view and understanding of what this way of life involves. That view and understanding may be more evident to the vocation minister's intuition than through more sensate channels. From that intuition, the minister can formulate further questions and observations to advance the discernment process.

Third, in listening to and engaging the discerner, **what does the vocation minister sense about this person's capability and adaptability for religious life?** While the minister cannot project into the future and know the transformations that the person may experience, the minister can have a sense of this person's capacity for the basic components of religious life. The discerner's vision of those components may or may

not be marked by reality. The vocation minister can be of tremendous help in confirming what should be nurtured and in challenging what should be reconsidered. The discerner's response to such help is itself part of the discernment process and further reveals the individual's realism about personal capability and adaptability for religious life.

Trust your gut

Discernment discussions include more than is touched upon here. Still, the discerner's purity of motivation, clarity of goal and reality of capability are important areas to be observed. Vocation ministers should trust their intuition. This is not to say that no further information should be sought; but a persistent intuition about some aspect of the discerner's life or perspective should be respected and explored further.

Discernment discussions can cover a wide range of topics within and about the person's life. While those discussions should not be scattered, neither should they be scripted. The vocation minister, in general, should follow the lead of the discerner, offering guidance, asking questions, making suggestions when necessary, so there is no risk of leading the person toward or away from a specific decision. For a discernment process to be valid, the decision must come freely from within the one doing the discernment.

Aiming for clarity, not certainty

After Saint Francis de Sales presents the challenge to "find out what God wants," he reiterates its importance by noting, "In this practice lies the very bull's-eye of perfection at which we must all aim." Vocation ministers recognize that this does not happen all at once. Discernment takes time; patience is needed for both the minister and discerner. Saint Francis teaches, "Little by little train your will to follow God's will, wherever it may lead you." Discernment discussions can be part of that training, part of aiming for the bull's-eye, as the discerner explores where God is leading in terms of religious life.

Discernment discussions are a regular feature in vocation ministry. Some basic principles are common to spiritual direction and vocation ministry, especially when ways of life are being considered. (See the box on this page for a list of principles useful for discussions with vocational discerners.) These few principles do not exhaust all those that could be incorporated into discernment discussions; others may emerge from the charism and heritage of particular institutes. These and other principles can assist vocation ministers in formulating

A few principles for discernment discussions

GENERAL PRINCIPLES

1. All legitimate human work can contribute to building and spreading the reign of God.
2. Knowledge of God's will is a matter of conscience, built upon faith; it is not a controlled experiment having scientific results.
3. God leads people through ordinary channels to which they must be attentive: natural abilities, interests, the types of life and ministry to which they are attracted.
4. The way of life which is of greater service to building God's reign on this earth should be preferred.
5. The way of life in which personal talents and abilities can be of the most service should be preferred.
6. Flexibility and openness are essential for genuine discernment.

PERSONAL PRINCIPLES FOR DISCERNERS

1. I should be aware of what the Lord is saying to me by reflecting on the patterns I have discovered and am discovering in my life.
2. Given equal possibilities, I should choose that which is most helpful to my continued spiritual growth.
3. Given equal possibilities, I should choose that which best uses my gifts and abilities.
4. I should not dread the possibility that my life may lead down the same paths as Jesus' own: persecution and death. I should realize this is a possibility.
5. I should be willing to confirm my choices and decisions with my spiritual director and with those who know me well.
6. The fundamental determining factor for a choice of life is that I believe something is God's will for me in conscience.

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questions and suggestions for discerners. The more focused and direct those questions and suggestions, the clearer the discernment. As noted earlier, certainty is not an appropriate expectation in discernment because the process commences and concludes in the context of faith. But clarity about a decision to make or a direction to take can be achieved through honest and sincere discussions between the vocation minister and the discerner.

In the course of those discussions issues may emerge within the discerner that require the expertise of a spiritual director or counselor or confessor. The vocation minister should refer the discerner to the appropriate person—someone else—even if the minister is skilled in any or several of those areas. The vocation minister-discerner relationship will be most effective when it remains focused on the discerner's consideration of religious life.

Discernment leads to a decision, made in faith, trusting that what is decided reflects God's will. And with that faith and trust, action should be taken to implement the decision. The blunt wisdom of Saint Francis de Sales in his *Letters of Spiritual Direction* offers support here.

Once we have reached a decision in a holy manner, we must never doubt the holiness of carrying it out; since it does not depend on us, this holiness cannot be lacking. To act otherwise would be a sign of great self-love, or of immaturity, or of a weak or foolish mind (ibid).

Vocation ministers bring many gifts and skills to discernment discussions. Those gifts and skills reflect their wisdom and insight, born of their experiences as religious and their expertise in accompanying discerners. However, the greatest gift they give to discerners will be in guiding them and encouraging them to "find out what God wants." ■

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YOU BELONG to the National Religious Vocation Conference. You talk to other vocation ministers, you attend meetings, you read *HORIZON*. But where do you turn when you want to better understand an area of this critical ministry?

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- 2) Once logged in, go to "Publications," then "*HORIZON* archives."
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If you can't find anything on a subject you would like to know more about, feel free to make a suggestion. *HORIZON* ideas are always welcome; write the editor at cscheiber@nrvc.net.

Subject areas that *HORIZON* has covered include, but are not limited to:

- How to get membership more involved
- Theology of discernment
- How to create a strategic plan for vocation ministry
- What young adults are seeking in religious life
- Admissions guidelines for mental or physical health
- What does the NRVC-CARA study of new membership mean?
- How to communicate your vocation message
- Working effectively with leadership
- Nurturing communities that welcome new members
- How vocation ministers handle new inquiries
- Using popular film and music in vocation ministry
- Cultivating hope
- Understanding and welcoming diverse ethnic groups
- Sexuality and new membership
- The meaning of the vows and new membership
- Contemporary young adults
- Best practices in vocation ministry
- Vocation realities in other countries
- Assessing and encouraging faith development with young adults

Art, poetry and photography can speak directly to the heart and open up channels of communication about sensitive topics—including vocation exploration.

Using art to explore vocation

BY KATHLEEN HOPE BROWN AND DAVID M. ORR

IN MARGARET WHEATLY'S BOOK, *Turning to One Another: Simple Conversations to Restore Hope to the Future*, she writes:

I believe we can change the world if we start listening to one another again. Simple, honest, human conversation. Not mediation, negotiation, problem-solving, debate or public meetings. Simple, truthful conversation where we each have a chance to speak, we each feel heard, and we each listen well.¹

Vocation directors know well the importance of such conversation. It is in such conversation that we hear another person's story and come to know them as unique individu-

als called by God. However, conversations about a person's experience of call and vocation, conversations that come from the deepest part of a person's heart and soul, are often the most delicate. They can touch fragile emotions and subtle, barely-understood movements of the heart. They also bear the weight of a person's very sense of self.

St. Francis DeSales was a spiritual guide for many people, religious and lay. He listened with great compassion and gentleness. He held the hearts of others with reverence and considered a heart's depths sacred and holy ground.

He always listened with unhurried calmness and for as long as people felt they needed to talk. People longed to have a taste of that great sweetness and serenity of heart which he invariably gave them and which helped people to open up to him with great confidence, especially when they wanted to talk about spiritual things.²

St. Francis DeSales was known for his ability to walk with people on their spiritual journeys. He is said often to have begun conversations not with the question, "How are you?" or "What's happening in your life?" but with the question, "How is your heart?" Right away, with a question that was like a warm and loving embrace, he would open the door to sharing a person's experience of God's voice speaking within the heart.

An invitation to conversation about spiritual things is not assured of a response, however. Two factors can make conversations about call and vocation especially difficult. One is

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fear of the vulnerability such deep sharing entails. Another is unfamiliarity or discomfort with the vocabulary of heart and imagination that is necessary to express the experience of call and vocation. Inviting a response requires creating a space in which people are free to share and where the movements of the Spirit can be felt.

Creating the space

Space, as the word is used here, does not mean primarily physical space, although that is important. Certainly a place that is quiet and free from interruptions, like a place for prayer, is most conducive to deep sharing. However, creating an interior stillness, a feeling of comfort and sense of trust opens the way for having meaningful and deeply personal conversation. Such a space welcomes and encourages deep encounter, opens a person's heart to share, treats a person's story with reverence, and invites the heart to speak and be heard. The creation of the space in which such sharing can happen has much to do with the way of being, the openness and non-anxious, non-judgmental presence of the vocation director.

Perhaps leading with the question "How is your heart?" might not be comfortable with a person the director hardly knows, but an equivalent beginning might be something like, "I'd really love to hear your story and perhaps share with you some of my own." In this way the director communicates a willingness to listen and hear, to engage in sharing with his

or her own heart open, and the vocation director invites the inquirer to do the same. Vulnerability and risk are involved, and such a beginning acknowledges their presence, which then allows trust to begin to develop.

As the conversation unfolds, it can sometimes be tempting for the director to prompt and unintentionally put words in someone's mouth or lead them down a path that is not the path they need to take. Because of the mutual vulnerability in these conversations, the director should communicate, in word and in manner, that he or she is on holy ground when listening to this story. On that ground, the Spirit is speaking and all are being called to transformation. Respect, gentleness, and reverence are required.

Quiet may be needed at first. While a period of quiet time might seem like delay, it can actually help to begin the conversation. The director might say, "Why don't we both take a few moments of quiet, and just listen to what the Spirit might be saying?" Silence permits prayer to happen and allows the voice of the Holy Spirit to be heard.

Jesus often used quiet, gentle, prayerful words to join his heart, and those of his followers, with the Father's. He communicated his own openness and vulnerability, and he invited

"I'd really love to hear your story and perhaps share with you some of my own." In this way, the director communicates a willingness to listen and hear, to engage in sharing with his or her own heart open, and the vocation director invites the inquirer to do the same.

others to open their hearts by sharing their stories, praying with him, laying down their burdens and becoming renewed. Think of the encounter with the Woman at the Well in the Gospel of John, Chapter 4, or his prayers at the Last Supper and the Garden of Gethsemane.

Come to me, all you who labor and are overburdened, and I will give you rest. Shoulder my yoke and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble of heart; and you will find rest for your souls.³

A place of vulnerability needs to be a place of gentleness and comfort, a place where one can rest. Fear of the vulnerability inherent in this kind of sharing points to the need for affirmation. Sadly, many people's sense of their own dignity and worth has been buried under the pain of

As a director listens, she or he should be listening for those places, events, movements in the inquirer's life where the Spirit may be speaking and moving the inquirer to some action.

self-doubt, neglect, rejection or abuse. If the director is quick to name the grace, goodness and beauty in the inquirer, ready to recognize and affirm the action of God he or she hears in the inquirer's story, the director stands in the image of the God who desires to

be that place of gentleness, warmth and rest. So, as a director listens, she or he should be listening for those places, events, movements in the inquirer's life where the Spirit may be speaking and moving the inquirer to some action. The vocation director can gently name and affirm areas where God may be working, drawing the person closer, to discerning his or her call, whatever it may be.

Opening the language of heart

Conversations about a person's experience of God, his or her feeling of call and vocation, require the language of the heart and imagination. Whenever we speak of our experience of God, we quickly can come up against the limits of our everyday vocabulary. Ordinary prose is often inadequate to express the deep experiences and passions of the heart. Similar to expressing the experience of being in love, for

which people have always turned to poetry, music and art, we need to open new language when giving expression to our journeys of faith.

The language of the heart is the expression of love, delight and joy, as well as longing, sorrow and hope. Engaging the language of the heart can in itself become a means of experiencing the Spirit within, of understanding ourselves in relation to God and the world. Expressing what is in the heart requires engaging the imagination, because it goes beyond what is visible and literal. The language of the heart and imagination evokes more than it describes.

Young people who are only beginning to be aware of the call of God in their lives can struggle to give it expression, as can more mature people who simply have not found a comfortable way to speak of their experience of God. The language required becomes especially difficult in this age of rapid, electronic communication, in which words are few and often not even spelled out. The language of the heart and imagination doesn't lend itself to being truncated or abbreviated. In fact, because it issues from the deepest place in the human heart where the Spirit dwells, it yearns, longs and needs to be poured out.

We have given many retreats over the past several years and have found ways to tap into the language of the heart and imagination using poetry and visual art. The methods we have used and the insights we have gained might be helpful to vocation directors who want to help inquirers express the call of God that is their vocation, so we offer them here.

Poetry and art are vocabulary to express experiences and feelings that are too deep and complex for our everyday ways of speaking. Here are a poem and a photograph that we have found effective in giving people language to express their feeling of call and vocation:

A RIVER BEGINS

Early summer
in these mountains
after rain, the water flows
faster than usual
stirs the ground beneath
turns over and upon itself
cuts a deeper path than usual
spreading, feeding,
creating a new earth
filling empty spaces
washing sorrowful faces

and quenching many thirsts
on its course to meet the sea.

Last winter, I waited,
silent for a whole season
as snow and ice fell
to form a frozen waterfall
falling from a place I knew
was there but could not see;
I wanted to climb it
to scale this wall of ice
leading back toward heaven
but instead I followed it down
looked forward to a spring thaw
hoping I might join the water
become part of the melting.

Now, as I watch
this narrow stream, its spray
cascading down the mountain
I can only think of dancing
imagine water with emotion
its pure delight in falling free
so clean, so fresh, at last released
from peaks by warmth of sun
to fly, to plummet, to rejoice
in being one of many drops
that sparkle so a silly man
standing on the ledge below
might find himself renewed.
©2007 David M. Orr



Photo courtesy of Christopher S. Brown

Beginning the conversation

Our process has worked best in small groups since a certain feeling of safety comes in doing this with others. For those discerning a call to religious life, this translates into potential for deep sharing among those discerning a similar call. The poem and photograph become tools for reflection and prayer. They open the door for the Spirit to work in the hearts of those who read, hear or see.

The poem is first read aloud, perhaps even as a prayer, and an invitation is given to reflect in silence for a short time. Then, in a manner similar to *lectio divina* or *visio divina*, people are asked if there is a particular word or phrase in the poem, or something about the photograph, that speaks to them. Some people will respond to the words of the poem

more readily, others to the picture image.

If the topic of call and vocation has not yet surfaced in their initial responses, a more specific question can be posed, perhaps about something in the picture or the poem that speaks to them. The poem above can evoke feelings of desire, of surrender or of being part of something larger and more powerful than one's self. The photograph can evoke feelings of refreshment, being fed from a powerful source or of surrender.

With promptings by the facilitator kept to a minimum, people have responded with surprising openness, clarity and depth about their experience of God at the innermost core of

their being. As group members quietly and prayerfully reflect upon specific words or phrases in the poem or look at the photograph, they often find the Holy Spirit speaking to them about their own faith journeys and plans. Vocabulary that otherwise might be unfamiliar is provided in the conversation. Images of river water cutting deeper paths than usual, filling empty spaces, washing faces, or quenching thirsts, or of being frozen in winter, struggling, waiting for thaw, or the image of a waterfall where water appears to let go and be carried, to join the dance and delight and sparkle in freedom often move people to reflect deeply. As they speak of how their hearts are moved, they share what is going on in their life or faith journey at the moment, where they may feel God calling them. Sometimes, such images put participants in touch with something from the past that needs to be named and addressed. Hearing people speak of their own inner responses gives others permission to do the same and graced sharing is the result. It is remarkable how the Spirit engages hearts and connects them. It is clear evidence of God working where two or more are gathered.

For a vocation director, this process can work with a single inquirer rather than a group, but in such a setting, there might be a different starting point. The lyrics of a song are poetry put to music. An inquirer might be asked to bring with him or her a song or photograph that is meaningful and at the meeting the director would reflect along with the inquirer on the song or photo, asking the inquirer to express why they are important. Other items of art or literature, such as sacred art or Scripture, might also be used to start the conversation. What issues forth will be the vocabulary of the heart and imagination because the conversation will be about something evoked from deep within.

Heart speaks to heart

In the early 17th century, St. Francis DeSales was a master of the use of poetic imagery. He engaged language of the heart and imagination in his writing, sermons and conversations, and became the patron saint of writers. He expressed well the need for communication of this kind:

Our words must be set aflame not by shouts and unrestrained gestures, but by inward affection. They must issue from our heart rather than our mouth. We must speak well, but heart speaks to heart, and the tongue speaks only to men's ears.⁴

In a conversation about call and vocation, heart must

speak to heart. Both hearts need to be willing to share, to accept vulnerability, and to listen for the promptings of the Spirit in the midst of the exchange. This requires a space of openness, gentleness and acceptance, and it requires the vocabulary of the heart and imagination. Poetry and art can provide that vocabulary, because they are evocative of the movements of the Spirit. ■

1. Margaret Wheatly. *Turning to One another: Simple Conversations to Restore Hope to the Future*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 2009. p. 7.
2. St. Francis DeSales. *A Testimony by St. Chantal*. Trans. Elizabeth Stopp. Hyattsville, MD: Institute of Salesian Studies, 1967, p. 138-139.
3. Matthew 11:28-29. *New Jerusalem Bible*.
4. St. Francis DeSales. *On the Preacher and Preaching*. Trans. John K. Ryan. Chicago: Henry Regnery Co., 1964. p. 64.

Discernment reading

- *Catholics on Call: Discerning a Life of Service in the Church*, edited by Father Robin Ryan, CP
- *A Sacred Voice Is Calling: Personal Vocation And Social Conscience*, by John Neafsey
- *Awakening Vocation: A Theology of Christian Call*, by Edward P. Hahnenberg
- *The Call to Discernment in Troubled Times: New Perspectives on the Transformative Wisdom of Ignatius*, by Father Dean Brackley, SJ
- *Becoming Who You Are: Insights on the True Self from Thomas Merton and Other Saints*, by Father James Martin, SJ

Holy Cross priests are successfully building bridges with parents of discerners by holding Come and See programs designed to include both parents and their sons.

How Holy Cross reaches out to parents

BY FATHER JAMES T. GALLAGHER, CSC

ONE OF MY EARLIEST REALIZATIONS as I began my time in the Holy Cross Office of Vocations was how powerful an informal visit to the seminary can be. Important interactions happen with vocation prospects over the phone or via e-mail, but none are as helpful in discernment as a visit. It is a chance for the prospect to get a sense of the rhythm of our life, to meet the personalities in our community and to come to know some people in formation. It also allows the men an opportunity to ask questions of Holy Cross priests, brothers and seminarians. In the end, the experience gives inquirers an all important gut reaction. If they connect with the people and the place, nothing is more powerful in providing the encouragement to continue discerning with the community. If that internal

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connection is made, a good bit of the work of initial discernment is done.

That was one of my first lessons. A close second lesson was that there was something possibly more powerful than a young man's gut reaction. It is the reaction of his parents. How a young man's parents react to their son's news that he is discerning a vocation to religious life or priesthood goes a long way toward encouraging or dampening that inclination. This is true for almost any age group, but it is most especially true for young men in high school considering a college seminary.

This influence of parents over a child's willingness to engage in discernment in college was noticed by those working in our Office of Vocations long before I joined the team. It is now four years that we have had a parents' component to our Come and See weekends. These weekends are offered for high school seniors and juniors. Parents are very interested in their son's future and often do not know much about life in a college seminary. During our Come and See weekends we seek to provide each young man with an opportunity to get a good experience of life in our Old College Program (the formation program for undergraduate seminarians) while at the same time giving their parents a good sense of our community and our formation programs.

The Come and See weekend contains two tracks; one for the prospect and one for the parents. The prospect stays at Old College with the undergraduate seminarians. Parents stay

on the other side of campus at Moreau Seminary, which houses our graduate seminarians. Several events are planned with both the parents and the prospects, while other parts of the weekend happen separately. A good bit of time is spent talking with parents, answering their questions and explaining the many aspects of the formation program, while the majority of time for prospects is spent shadowing men in Old College.

The weekend begins on a Thursday evening and lasts through noon on Saturday. Our experience over the past few years has been that the young men tend to walk away with a better sense of whether Old College is a program for them. The parents tend to walk away feeling more comfortable with the prospect of their son entering a college formation program.

With the hope of sharing the benefits of the format of our Come and See weekend, I will outline below the flow of the weekend as it moves from day to day and try to draw out what

I perceive to be the key components that help to ease some of the concerns of the parents. In this description I will focus particularly on the track for the parents.

Thursday: arriving, setting the tone

Parents and sons are asked to arrive on Thursday afternoon around 4 p.m. Thursday evenings are a community night in which the men of Old College join the Moreau Seminary community for Mass, dinner and night prayer. It is a time when the whole formation community on campus comes together, and it provides a great opportunity for vocation guests to see how those in formation interact. At their arrival parents are settled into their guest room at Moreau Seminary and the high school prospect is taken to Old College and introduced to an Old Collegian who will be his host for the weekend. Parents and prospects come to the Mass and dinner that evening, yet are encouraged to sit apart from each other. The idea is to give the prospect an opportunity to connect with the men of Old College. At dinner the parents sit with the vocation director and have the opportunity to get to know one another and begin to learn about Holy Cross and the formation program. After dinner the vocation director meets with just the parents and gives an introduction to the weekend, to Holy Cross and to the formation process. The introduction is followed by an informal time for questions and answers. After this meeting the parents then join the seminary community for night prayer. The rest of the evening is free.

Friday: begin to meet community

In the morning the parents have the opportunity to join the Moreau Seminary community for morning prayer and breakfast. This allows them to meet some of the other members of the Holy Cross community as well as the seminarians in graduate studies. Around mid-morning we bring the parents and prospects back together for tours of the college campuses. The prospects would have spent the night at Old College and would have a chance to attend an early morning class. Those in the Old College program either attend the University of Notre Dame or Holy Cross College, located across the street from one another. Campus tours are given by seminarians who attend each institution. They give parents and prospects a sense of what classes are like as well as what opportunities are available to seminarians on either campus. In the afternoon the vocation director has individual meetings with each young man, and the parents have some free time.

Our two formation programs

Old College is a small residence at the heart of campus at the University of Notre Dame. It houses up to 25 undergraduate men, a director and assistant director. The young men are enrolled at the university or at Holy Cross College and take most meals in the dining hall with the rest of the student population. They pray together on a daily basis and have a structured formation program. With the free time they have outside of school and formation they can join clubs and activities on campus.

Moreau Seminary is on the edge of campus and is home to our pre-novitiate program (including seniors from the Old College program and college graduates) and our temporarily professed members engaged in theological studies. Moreau has its own schedule of prayer and meals. Men at Moreau Seminary take classes at the University as well.

The group comes back together for the campus Mass at the Basilica of the Sacred Heart where Old Collegians regularly attend Mass on Friday evenings. From there the parents and vocation prospects join the Old Collegians and the vocation director for dinner at the campus dining hall. The Old Collegians take most of their meals at the dining hall on campus, and this gives the parents a sense of the dining hall experience. Often parents will have more questions for the vocation director during or after dinner. Following dinner the parents have the evening free, and the vocation prospects spend the evening with the men of Old College.

Saturday: Mass and formation briefing

This final morning of the weekend the parents join the vocation prospects and the men of Old College for their regular Saturday morning, which includes morning prayer, Mass, and Adoration. Following prayer, the parents meet with the director of the Old College Program, who talks about the weekly schedule and formation goals. Following another opportunity for questions, the official program is concluded. Participants then gather their things and return to Moreau Seminary where the vocation director is available to answer any last minute questions and to wish them well before departing.

It is a relatively short weekend, but it allows high school students to spend plenty of time at Old College and to get a feel for the place and the men who live there. It also gives parents time to meet Holy Cross members and ask questions.

Time with parents

Over the two years I have been involved with this program, four aspects have emerged as key to the weekend's success. Often the parents of these young men have not had opportunities to get to know a priest or religious on a personal level. Just spending time with them helps them to see a priest and religious as a real person and not a caricature. They come with many questions and concerns; giving them plenty of time to voice these and talk about them is important and appreciated.

We make it clear that we are interested in their son's best interests. It seems at times that the parents wonder if Holy Cross is just looking for warm bodies to fill the seminary. One of the most important things we do is to reassure parents that the community cares about the best interests of their son. If he has a vocation to be a religious, we are interested in helping him grow in his understanding of that vocation. If he does not have that vocation, we are not going to try to convince

him to stay; indeed it is in both our interests that he not stay.

We assure parents that we are interested in forming their son into the best person he can be; challenging him in his academics, in his spiritual life, and in his development as a person. We let parents know that we can never match their concern for their son's well-being, but we will do our best to come close because of the benefit it will have for him, for Holy Cross and for the Catholic Church.

We give parents a chance to meet and learn about the commu-

nity. Often parents do not know much about the seminary, religious life or the priesthood. Spending the weekend with us gives them the opportunity to experience our rhythm of community life and prayer. It gives them the opportunity to meet members of the community and current seminarians. They walk away with names and faces to go with this community that their son is conversing with. They become familiar with the community and maybe a little more comfortable with the idea of their son joining our community.

One of the most important things we do is to reassure parents that the community cares about the best interests of their son.

Parent misgivings

- Distrust of church, particularly institutional church, following sex abuse scandals.
- Concern that child will be unhappy in lifestyle.
- Desire for grandchildren.
- Lack of familiarity with religious life; ideas about religious life based on negative stereotypes.
- Lack of positive, personal contact with members of religious communities.
- Concern that communities will pressure men into priesthood.

We give them time to sit with the notion of their son's vocation: Often parents are shocked by their son's revelation that he is considering a vocation to the priesthood or religious life. It is outside of their realm of expectations for him, and they are unsure of what to do with it. The weekend gives them some quiet time away from the business of their life to sit with the notion.

It also gives them the opportunity to connect with other parents who are experiencing the same thing. As well, it offers

A man does not leave his family when he joins our community; rather a man's family and our community both grow. That being the case, we are quite interested in finding ways for the two families to meet.

a chance to talk to the vocation director about how they can best direct their son.

Before and after the weekend, I try to make the prospect the main point of contact. This is his vocation and so I want him to be the driving force behind it and the one providing most of the initiative. So it is usually the high school student who is sending his registration, and he is

the person I encourage to extend the invitation to his parents.

Yet when the weekend itself comes, it is often the parents who are the focus of my time and attention. The young men are mostly interested in getting to know the men of Old College and getting a sense of the life there; so except for the one-on-one meeting with me, the young men are mostly spending time with their seminarian hosts. The parents get the majority of my attention because they need someone to get to know, someone to elicit and respond to their questions. The prospects do not think about practical matters quite like their parents do, and they are not quite as worried as their parents are about what the future may bring.

While I am able to answer many of the parents' questions, there are always some that cannot be answered. Yet sitting and talking and spending time with them helps reassure them that we take this process very seriously, and we appreciate that they may be experiencing a whole variety of emotions at the prospect of a son who is a priest or religious.

(our post-graduate, pre-novitiate program) we do not have a formal weekend that includes parents. This is due in part to the fact that those who are looking into the Candidate Program are from a range of ages and backgrounds. For them parents still play a prominent role in their discernment but not quite to the extent that parents do for those in high school considering Old College. While we do not have a formal program for parents to meet our community, we seek to always remain attentive to the role that a prospect's family plays in his discernment. We remain open to meeting and talking with parents at any time in the discernment process.

It regularly happens that we will spend time with a parent if he or she is the one dropping the prospect off for a visit. We have also spent time talking with parents after a young man has been accepted into the Candidate Program. Many parents do not meet the community until after the applicant has been accepted and has come to the Candidate Program.

We are blessed with a good number of guest rooms at Moreau Seminary, and so families are welcome to spend a couple days with the community after a man enters. We hold to an understanding that a man does not leave his family when he joins our community; rather a man's family and our community both grow. That being the case, we are quite interested in finding ways for the two families to meet. We regularly find that once families have a chance to spend time with us, they quickly become comfortable with their son's presence in our community.

In the end, the decision, the application process and the formation needs to be done by the young man himself; no one can do it for him. Yet it is important to acknowledge that there are more people involved in the process than just the man and the community. Parents are interested in the process, and they have every right to be. The Come and See weekend, along with the other ways we welcome and work with parents, acknowledges their right to be involved in the process and illuminates what may have been an unknown possibility for their son. In our experience, parents tend to walk away from these experiences grateful for the time and attention they have received and with several of their fears relieved. One cannot stop a parent from worrying about a son, but reassuring parents that others care about his well-being goes a long way. ■

Parent contact with older candidates

For those considering application to our Candidate Program

Social media of all types are ubiquitous. Here are tips from a seasoned and well-wired vocation minister on choosing and using this powerful technology.

Using social media to further vocation goals

BY SISTER PATRICIA DOWLING, CBS

A RAPIDLY GROWING PERCENTAGE of people now expect to communicate with others through the Web and hand-held devices. In fact, studies and anecdotal evidence even suggest that hand held devices—phones, iPads, personal digital assistants (such as Blackberries, Androids and iPhones), etc., are quickly replacing reliance on computers in many cases.

Where once we only used the Web for getting information, today, thanks to newer technologies and Web 2.0—also known as the “participatory Web”—we have moved beyond online sites that offer one-way information, to sites that allow

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users to interact with each other. The purpose of these “social networking sites” is to build community with an intended audience. Hundreds of sites exist, and a market analysis company named InStat announced in April 2011 that there are now more social network accounts in the world than there are people. (Of the 10 billion social network accounts, however, only 4.5 billion are active.)

If you Google “social networking sites,” you will find an ever-changing list. Which sites are beneficial? Who uses each site? What are the costs involved? For vocation ministers, the question is: given constant developments in technology, which social networking sites have the greatest potential, especially knowing that each vocation minister has limited time? With those questions in mind, I’d like to share my experience in working with these tools and some of the knowledge I’ve gained from others with more expertise.

As a vocation director, I do not think of my ministry as marketing but rather as evangelization to educate about religious life and raise awareness of the Gospel. How can inquirers choose what they don’t know? The potential to “be known” online is nearly limitless. Many vocation ministers already have a presence on social networking sites. This presence offers a whole new horizon to their ministries: social networking can foster a deeper collaboration with members

to gain commitment to vocation goals; it can reveal additional resources and improve communication between vocation ministers. And most importantly, social networking offers an interactive platform by which vocation ministers can reach prospective candidates and can guide those in discernment.

Planning your social media presence

If your community has a communications director, you'll probably want to work closely with this person as you establish your social media presence. Most social networking sites are free. The hidden costs are your time and effort to research material and develop interesting content. If you have not yet begun using social media, it helps to step back and consider—with your communications director, if you have one—what

The very people we are looking for are trying to find us! They are already participating online, seeking to broaden relationships with their contacts and access information at their fingertips. We just have to locate them.

you'd like to accomplish with this technology. It's helpful to look at how many hours a day or week it will take to manage, maintain and report on your social networking presence. You'll want to figure in how much of the communication director's time will be allocated to assisting you both up-front and on an ongoing basis. Your community will want to budget accordingly. You may have to set limits.

Perhaps you want to consider stretching your "people resources" by finding capable people willing to volunteer their time to help you out.

Some valuable sites do actually charge a nominal fee for membership. One reason is to separate legitimate users (those willing to pay a few "bucks") with casual or prankster users. Another reason is that the site may offer valuable online tools or access to "client lists" consisting of business owners also registered with that site. To some, the worth is inherent in the list of live, local, participating human beings. Remember, though, if you are obtaining a list of demographic information on one of these sites, then you are more than likely also on a list of demographic information.

Some who enter the realm of social networking believe that merely being present on these sites will in itself be

enough to attract potential "followers," "friends" or "contacts." However, no magic is involved in this process. It simply takes time and effort to build the relationships.

Once you know what is possible with different social media sites, you'll probably want to narrow your focus. You'll want to ask: who are we trying to reach? For most vocation ministers, the target audience consists of the very demographic responsible for creating social networking in the first place! The very people we are looking for are trying to find us! They are already participating online, seeking to broaden relationships with their contacts and access information at their fingertips. We just have to locate them.

Start with your current contact list (the people you've made contact with at events, through inquiries, etc.). See if you can find any of them online through a Google search. Where are they spending time online? With which sites are they registered? Are they active in forums or chat rooms? Do they have blogs?

Find out what is available and being utilized by your target audience because each tool has its advantages. For those just venturing into the social media arena, here are a few words of encouragement: most social networking tools and sites are user friendly, thus they are appealing to those with little computer or Web experience. You can learn as you go.

What are others doing?

It is helpful to go online and find benchmarks. What other vocation offices have an online presence? Are they on Facebook or Plaxo? Be attentive to the materials that those directors are providing through online networking sites. How many participants are on the sites they are utilizing? As vocation directors, our awareness of how young adults meet, connect, communicate, search for and exchange information will allow us to stay relevant to the next generation.

All that said, in the end, even with the plethora of social networking sites and their benefits, technology cannot replace personal, face-to-face contact that inspires, supports, and accompanies an individual who longs to understand God's call. Social media tools can aide us in evangelizing, but they can't replace personal invitation, and we know from experience, as confirmed by the NRVC-CARA National Vocation Study, that it is the personal invitation that makes a difference in whether someone considers the option of religious life.

When I began an online marketing plan in 2008 for my community, the Sisters of Bon Secours, we really did not know what was working and what wasn't. So our overall goal

became Internet saturation. On a purely trial and error basis, we saturated the Internet at every viable opportunity, from conducting search engine optimization (to get the community Web site to appear in as many Web site searches as possible), to redesigning our Web site, to beginning use of Twitter and Foursquare. We updated statuses on various forms of social media Web sites until we were blue in the face, all the while tracking our responses. We sat, month after month, reviewing the statistics: the friend counts, fans, uploads, views, etc. Based on that experience, I offer to you suggestions of sites with which to begin.

Ins and outs of Facebook

Facebook is *the* most popular social networking site. It was launched in 2004, and by February 2010, 400 million users had set up personal pages; five months later it celebrated 500 million users. Chances are you or someone you know is already on Facebook (FB). For the Sisters of Bon Secours, the “friends” on our group FB page include individuals of all ages from around the world with differing backgrounds. We are finding that the longer we are on FB, the younger the average age of new friends has become. We use our FB group page to engage others in discussions, announce events such as Come and See weekends, provide vocation related resources, share information about religious life, the church, etc., inspire, support, and even raise awareness about social justice issues. I was really pleased that the last time we did a Come and See weekend, we announced it on our Sisters of Bon Secours vocation Office page as an “event,” and we were surprised to discover nine RSVPs from women who had connected with us using our Vocation office FB page. Some vocation ministers have multiple FB presences: as individuals, as vocation offices, as a general community of sisters, etc. Each page is used a little differently, and though the “friends” or “members” may overlap, the fact is that many people are staying in touch with us and making new connections with us, and we can broadcast for free all of our vocation events.

Facebook experts suggest you provide quality, regular content and encourage discussion and engagement. With this in mind, new FB users also need to decide who is going to manage and maintain the content. And they must decide on the type of account they will set up. Users may set up a personal account, a group, or a community page. FB itself ex-



plains the differences between these types of accounts on its Web site in the “help” menu.

A **personal page** is just as it sounds. It relays information about an individual person. It is also required prior to setting up a community or group page. Whoever will facilitate the account, and anyone else who will have editing rights, must set up a personal page/profile prior to creating a group.

Groups can be created by any user about any topic. A FB group page offers a place for people to discuss opinions and interests about a topic. Your information is listed as the administrator of the site and you have the authority to make a group private or keep it public. As a vocation director, it makes sense to use a FB group to communicate directly with “members” (your inquirers and contacts, that is) about special events, latest news, items of interest, and useful links to other sites. You can also host discussions, and upload photos to keep the content fresh. Be creative!

Community pages, or “official business pages,” differ from groups. Until recently, they were referred to as “fan pages.” A page can only be created about a real, existing business, organization, celebrity or band by an official representative of said entity. Pages are used to help organizations establish a professional presence online and communicate publicly. FB also integrated Wikipedia information to populate community pages, so, before beginning a community page, conduct a FB search and make sure pages about your congregation do not already exist.

Facebook provides additional tools that allow users to create and advertise events, or post a cause and accept donations or raise awareness. Each of the FB functions mentioned provide a “Wall” or an open space for commentary where all posts are visible.

A final option is setting up a **business account**. These are used to administer pages and ad campaigns. Beware: these accounts do not have the same functionality as personal accounts and have limited access to information on the site. You can’t view the profiles of users or other content on the site not

We use our Facebook group page to engage others in discussions, announce events, provide vocation related resources, share information about religious life or the church, inspire, support, and raise awareness.

present on the pages you administer. Also, business accounts cannot be found in search and cannot send or receive friend requests.

For those who are just establishing a FB presence for the first time, I suggest creating a profile page for yourself (you will need to supply an e-mail address). Once you have established a profile page for yourself, check to see if you're comfortable with the privacy settings. Your content (profile information, photos, etc.) can only be seen by the groups and

The maxim, "It's not always about you," applies to Twitter, too. Be genuinely interested in others, and find out what they are interested in. There are great Twitter applications to help with this.

individuals you choose to allow according to your privacy settings. The most cautious approach is to set your "privacy settings" high so that only your "friends" (people you will approve on FB) can see what is on your wall, in your profile, and in your photos.

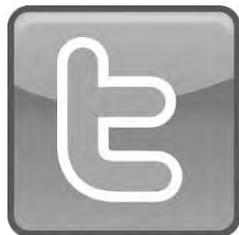
Another nugget of advice for starting in Facebook is to have somebody who uses this social media site fre-

quently and in depth help you get started. Having a guide can take much of the mystery away and help you use the potential of this site.

Twitter to extend your reach

Twitter.com is another popular, free, social networking site, with over 100 million users who create messages of 140 characters maximum. Why a limit of 140 characters? Because SMS (phone text messaging) limits messages to 160 characters, and Twitter takes 140 characters, reserving 20 for your username. Twitter profiles display a short bio paragraph that can include a link to your Web page and show both the number of your followers and which Twitter accounts you are following. Someone interested in your Twitter page could become your "follower" and automatically receive notification when you update your status (also called a Tweet). In turn, you can follow others.

Twitter can connect you with your inquirers in a very different way. Followers have the opportunity to respond,



re-tweet your posts, or interact with other followers. The messages are all short and concise, much like the schedules of "Gen Y." This technology is an informal communication tool that allows me to create friendly messages and also listen to and engage followers in a casual way.

As a vocation director I use links in my Twitter posts to draw followers to our Web site, to my blog, to my Facebook page or to other social networking sites. I've used Twitter as a personal travelogue to describe an interesting trip or experience with the intent to highlight religious life.

The maxim, "It's not always about you," applies to Twitter, too. Be genuinely interested in others and find out what they are interested in. There are great Twitter applications to help with this. Remember, social media is meant to connect, to be a back and forth network of communication. Be genuinely interested in the conversation.

The Sisters of Bon Secours also announce events and share links to relevant vocation sites or links to our blog. Twitter users can also keep up with what others are doing, which may be helpful in understanding a younger generation. One word of caution: just because newspapers, TV news stations, and other large businesses Tweet to keep people abreast of the latest news, don't get caught up in thinking you have to build 5,000 followers to be effective. It's far better to have a small group of followers and build genuine conversational interest than to have a large but disengaged Twitter base.

As with most of these social networking sites, Twitter is also available as an application on iPhones, Blackberries, Androids and other cell phones, allowing for interaction from just about anywhere at any time. In addition, this tool lends itself to integration with other existing online tools such as Facebook and LinkedIn.

I have queried college students about using Twitter and found they don't use it much, mostly due to time constraints. They prefer Facebook. Our Twitter followers bear this out and tend to be a bit older, with varied backgrounds—ranging from Catholic ministers (youth, young adult, parishes, etc.) to writers, activists and professionals from around the globe.

LinkedIn to connect with professionals

LinkedIn.com is a free professional social network and has over 100 million members with half of the members being international. It lists a million company profiles, similar to a user profile. There are strict guidelines for connecting—connections are confirmed on both sides. As a professional networking site you can create a professional profile visible

to others, as well as maintain connections (“these are called “business contacts”), search for jobs, find potential “clients” (such as potential inquirers), and advertise or find business opportunities (e.g. Come and See weekends). You can also develop groups, join groups and link your account to other networking vehicles, such as FB, or Twitter.



I communicate in a way that our contacts can relate to (these are mostly post-college professionals of all ages and backgrounds). For example, in the Bon Secours Health System, professionals appreciate reminders of what drives our mission; this keeps them grounded in the reasons they came to work for a Catholic sponsored ministry. They appreciate what inspires and motivates them to continue in difficult economic times. As a vocation director, I have the opportunity to provide meaningful resources and articles, but as it relates to their profession in health care or human service. There are potential vocations in our sponsored ministries, and this is one way to visibly convey how women religious continue to address the needs of people and communities and to show that God continues to call people to religious life.

My invitation to connect is well received by co-workers and contacts of past and present. LinkedIn has benefited us as a vehicle for alerting others to our vocation activities and for sharing community news or events. Word of mouth is a very powerful tool. Contacts often respond to an article about our community or about one of our sisters, telling us how their life has been impacted. Asking others for suggestions is of benefit too. Again the only cost to participate in LinkedIn is personal time and effort, but the exposure can be priceless.

YouTube to share videos

YouTube.com is a free video hosting site that allows you to upload videos to your account, or “channel.” As of September 2010, 160 million viewers watched a video on their mobile phone alone. Your channel displays your profile, which can link to your Web site. Your channel also allows others to become subscribers, so they can automatically be alerted when you post a new video. Investing in video equipment used to be somewhat expensive, but with today’s digital technology, you can spend as little as \$150 for



a Flip video camera that comes pre-loaded with video editing software that lets you upload directly to YouTube.

YouTube has raised its video limit to 15 minutes per video—which is a lot of time. There are tags to give your videos keywords, used by searchers on the Internet. For instance, if someone searches for “final vows ceremony,” and you have a video tagged as “final vows ceremony,” your video should come up during a search. YouTube also allows people to embed their videos on other sites, such as Facebook or a blog. You can post a video link on Twitter, as well. Subscribers can leave comments about your videos. While I do not use YouTube to network with potential candidates per se, I do use it to raise the visibility of our congregation. You may want to use it to highlight a vow ceremony or to even discuss how one discerns a vocation or to share how a new member of your community took steps to understand God’s call.

The type of people who watch our YouTube videos run the gamut, but YouTube allows us to connect to viewers who want to know more about religious life or who are looking for something spiritually enriching. For example, during the last two weeks of Lent I uploaded a Lenten reflection video. I was surprised that out of countless YouTube videos related to Lent, our reflection was viewed over 600 times. It obviously met a need. YouTube has the potential to promote religious life, to invite others to consider a vocation and to invite others to reflect on their relationship with God.

Blogging to establish a public face

A **blog** (short for “web log”) can be set up on one of many free or pay-for-service host sites. Some blogging host sites are grouped by themes, e.g., blogging sites for journalists, heavy media uploads, etc. Some favorites are WordPress, Blogger, Posterous, Tumblr and Livejournal.

I use blogging to have a visible, public face that is accessible and that allows interaction with others. The entertainment world has created an image of religious life that often does not serve us well in witnessing to the Gospel. Blogging is an opportunity for us to demystify these images and portray men and women religious as committed individuals who feel called to give their life in service to others. The benefit of blogging is that it allows online readers to get to know us and our lifestyle as religious; it engages participants in learning and can provide valuable resources to assist them in understanding religious life and vocations. Blog readers provide feedback on content, offer comments, exchange ideas, clarify thoughts and ask questions.

People of all ages and background blog and follow bloggers based on their interests. Ask yourself, What can I share about my life as a religious? What helpful information can I share from my own spiritual life—perhaps how I discovered my vocation, how my ministry touched someone’s life, how I find God in the every day, etc. We vocation ministers have the potential to reach and influence many prospective candidates to religious life by sharing our stories and resources and helping individuals to discover their own vocation through interactive Web sites.

Blogging requires making a commitment to write weekly, being real, honest and yourself. It’s best to avoid jargon and let your feelings speak. We’re flesh and blood, so a blog lets us be personal. It’s good for bloggers to get inside the mind of their

A blog doesn’t have to be long, but it does have to be of interest to the reader.

audiences. If your focus is on potential inquirers, then find out what they know about religious life and vocations and what more they want to know. What will be helpful to them? What are they feeling? What are they

reading, and what can you recommend to help them in their discernment of a vocation?

You may want to ask your readers for feedback on your blog or ask them what they want to hear about. You can hold a discussion on a topic you received feedback on. It is good to find ways to engage inquirers and to be passionate about what you write. If others believe you are interested in them as individuals, they will return to find out more. A blog doesn’t have to be long, but it does have to be of interest to the reader.

Texting gets the message out fast

Text messages On average “Gen Y” users send and receive upwards of 740 text messages per month! Astonishing? If my niece Rebecca is any example, I can say I’ve heard it from her too. After all, you only need a phone, and texts can provide immediate results. For people of all ages, keeping connected with others through texting is convenient and inexpensive. Busy vocation directors may want to use this technology, too. Whether it’s answering a question, setting up a visit, deciding on a time to call or sharing a resource, texting enables us to stay in touch over distances once we have made the first contact. We can also text a message to a first-time inquirer inviting an inquirer to connect by phone or e-mail. Texting is sec-

ond nature for younger people, and even young professionals use a handheld devices to stay in contact with not only their offices but their favorite Web sites. Just consider the phenomenal communication growth that occurred after the unveiling of the iPhone and the thousands of applications that followed. For vocation directors, texting lets us keep the people we want to stay in touch with updated and informed.

One new application for phones, at Zemble.com, allows a person to easily text message a group. If you want to promote your Come and See weekend among inquirers, you log into Zemble.com and create a new “Zemble” by entering the topic, e.g., Come and See weekend and description. Next, you select which friends you want to receive the messages. Then on your phone you text message and send it to the unique URL for your topic. Your message is then sent to everyone you selected, and this allows you to text message back and forth. You can also link to YouTube, Twitter and a few others through this site.

Other group text messaging sites include Mozeo, 3jam and Twitter. All provide the flexibility to be interactive while sitting in an airport or elsewhere. However, the primary benefit of using this technology is the ability to be accessible to Gen Y and to be able to communicate directly with them about events and other vocation-related information.

One tip to minimize time spent online is this: use a tool such as Hootsuite or Twitterdeck (through Twitter) to automatically update your status on several sites simultaneously. There are also hundreds of apps within FB and Twitter to link accounts as well. You’ll likely want to recycle content from one social media site to another.

Finally, once you have your accounts set up and information filled in, do share your social networking presence with your friends, community, inquirers and others. Be sure to tell them how you are going to use the social networks. Advertise your presence on FB and other social networking sites whenever possible, including on your community Web site, and make sure you are following along regularly so that there are no missed opportunities.

A recent behavioral study suggested that Gen Y spends more time on social networking than on any other single online activity. On the other hand, the same study said Gen Y would rather give up social networking than e-mail and texting. This seeming contradiction just proves one thing: it is important we know which tools to use and how to use them to be relevant online. We must identify potential candidates and provide valuable resources and expanded avenues of communication by means of social networking online. ■

Religious can find plenty of reasons to feel anxious today, but our Christian roots offer a balm.

Hope in an anxious age

BY SISTER DORIS GOTTEMOELLER, RSM

Not long ago I received a letter from a sister in one of our Mercy hospitals. Now in her mid-80s and in fragile health, Sister has ministered most of her life in health care, as a nurse, as a supervisor, as a mission leader, and, in recent years as a volunteer. She wrote from retreat, where she had come to the insight that God might be calling her to move to one of our retirement centers. As soon as I could find another sister to take her place, she would like to leave, she told me. She followed this with a list of the 10 or 12 tasks she does which need to be covered: ministering to the migrant population in the area, and serving as Eucharistic minister, patient visitor, ethics committee member, administrator of the fund for needy employees, local parishioner, etc. I mentally noted that when I met with her, I would have to remind her that there are no sisters qualified and available to take her place.

No doubt this story is replicated in your congregation.

Sister Doris Gottemoeller, RSM, is the senior vice president for mission integration at Catholic Health Partners in Cincinnati. She previously served as president of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas and of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious. She was an auditor at the Synod on Consecrated Life in 1993. She has written and lectured throughout the United States and abroad on topics of ministry, ecclesiology, and religious life.



Ministries in which your members have worked for decades or even a century or more will soon be without your presence, if they aren't already. There is a sadness about this. No matter how well we have formed the laity to follow in our footsteps, no matter how many new and challenging ministries community members have launched, we can't leave a long-standing ministry without regret. We may have been outstanding in our service, admired and cherished for our spiritual depth, but memories will dim, and a generation from now we will be part of history.

I remember writing to one of our vocation ministers when I was in congregational leadership. A young sister she had mentored through the entrance process had recently left the Sisters of Mercy. I recognized that most of the young women with whom the vocation minister had worked had followed this path, so I wrote to her to affirm and to thank her for her efforts and to reassure her that they had borne fruit, even if God's mysterious plan is not clear to us. She told me later that I was one of the few persons who recognized the impact that the young sister's departure had on her.

Our vocation ministers are among our most generous and faith-filled members today. They are our ambassadors to the young people who are potential new members. They tell our story and invite a generosity of spiritual response in venues that most of us rarely frequent. They do this with integrity and a freedom of spirit, despite the diminishment described above. Further, they have continued on during the recent apostolic visitation into "the quality of our life" initiated by the Vatican.

Age of anxiety for religious?

Without a doubt many things contribute to a sense of unease in our congregations: the aging of our communities, the precipitous drop in membership, our diminished public visibility, and the sense of a lack of ecclesial affirmation. Some may choose to ignore these signs of our times, but for most of us there is a free-floating anxiety attendant on them. Many congregations are also going through processes of merger and reorganization. On the one hand, these efforts indicate courage and creativity, taking charge of our future. On the other hand,

We might like to trade our challenges for those of former days—but we don't get to choose! And God's grace is no less available to us than it was to our 19th century founders and 20th century predecessors.

they can be disorienting. Cherished motherhouses are abandoned and long-standing customs are changed. All of this takes its toll on a congregation's sense of security. Finally, some congregations have decided not to accept any new members, thus ensuring their demise within a generation.

A recently-professed sister with whom I live shared with me her anxiety. As a candidate, she said she was afraid that

she wouldn't "get it right." She had been a successful educator and professional woman before entering, and she was confident in those roles, but she didn't know how to be a candidate in a religious congregation. After she grew comfortable being a candidate, she was anxious about being a novice—"Is this the way it's supposed to be?" And, not surprisingly, the same questions arose after profession and when she moved into different communities: "Am I getting it right?" Most of us are of an age where we don't have those anxieties, but we may be anxious about a ministry assignment, a relationship, a health issue, or some congregational issue, up to and including whether or not the congregation is on the right path. What are our resources in the face of this generalized anxiety?

The history of every congregation is filled with heroic stories. Founders crossed oceans and continents (with one-way tickets); established missions in the wilderness, in city slums, and in far-off countries; learned new skills and new languages; and, in general, gave the American church its distinctive character. They overcame prejudice and poverty.

They passed on to new members ideals of prayer and the religious life. In my early days in the Sisters of Mercy we were busy opening new parish schools, building new high schools, colleges, hospitals and nursing homes and integrating large groups of new members each year. We assumed we could expect a trajectory of continued growth. Moreover, that growth implied public affirmation and God's blessing.

Instead, today we are faced with diminishment in many quarters. We might like to trade our challenges for those of former days—but we don't get to choose! And God's grace is no less available to us than it was to our 19th century founders and 20th century predecessors. Like them we have to listen to the voices of the poor and act with compassion. Like them we have to marshal our resources and act with courage. Like them we have to renew our purpose and act with confidence. What do we need to remember as we go forward?

Three "must have" spiritual gifts

I would like to suggest three spiritual gifts that are more relevant now than ever before. They correspond to three theological virtues, although not in the usual order. The first is the **surpassing love of God and neighbor** to which our way of life bears witness. The evangelical counsels are more counter-cultural than ever before. No one embraces a life of voluntary poverty and simplicity, of chaste celibacy and of obedience, and lives it with integrity and generosity unless she or he is motivated by a great love. Furthermore, living well in community witnesses to a care for one another that flows from values far different from economy or convenience. Ministry, in turn, is a daily practical expression of love of God and neighbor. Speaking of the components of religious commitment in this way might suggest that they are semi-independent parts of the vocation we have embraced. On the contrary, they are all interdependent, constituting a "way of life" that is unified by a shared spirituality of love.

The world needs this witness as never before, but we may need to overcome a certain reticence in sharing it. There are tens of thousands of active religious in the United States today, but most people's experience of us is limited to an occasional headline describing an extraordinary event or some dispute with the hierarchy. We need to speak of our local communities in our workplaces in the same way that our fellow workers speak of their families, sharing stories and demonstrating the love and affection that unites us. I find that whenever I mention something as simple as what I'm fixing for dinner for the community that evening, it garners an interested response.

We need to occasionally invite others to share our morning or evening prayer, so that they can experience the love of God and neighbor that animates it. Every vocation minister should be able to bring visitors into local communities with little or no prior warning, with confidence that the rhythm of community living will be evident. Lives transparent to the love of God and neighbor are our primary witness.

The second reality guiding our journey forward is our deeply held **faith in God and God's plan**, which doesn't require a blueprint for validation. Having served in congregational administration, I have a great appreciation for planning. We need to identify challenges and opportunities, estimate resources, and organize our responses in an orderly and intentional way. But there is a deeper reality to our lives which eludes this administrative approach. It is the domain of faith. Having vowed our lives to Jesus Christ, we believe, we know, that He is faithful. Jesus doesn't assure us that things will always work out as we had planned, but that He will be with us to the end of the age. A life of faith is open to surprise. (In fact, in the Morning and Evening Prayer of the Sisters of Mercy, on the fourth Tuesday, the response to the morning petitions is "God of Surprises, show us your face." This prompts some interesting dinner table conversations on Tuesday evenings, as sisters share what surprises their day has brought.)

How many times has your faith been tested by surprise? I expected to be prepared for nursing, and I became a teacher. I expected to be hired by a particular university, and I was turned down. I expected to be elected to one office, and I was elected to another. In each case the surprise—and initial disappointment—opened a new path on which God was more present than I could have imagined. God's plan for each of us, and for our congregations, is broader and deeper than any of us imagine. Faith does not exempt us from responsible choices, but it assures us that Someone else has a bigger plan.

The third reality—arguably the most pertinent to our present anxiety—is the **virtue of hope**. Benedict XVI makes a close connection between faith and hope in his encyclical, *Spe Salvi* (2007). He points out that in several Scriptural passages the two words seem interchangeable, e.g., the Epistle to the Hebrews (10:22-23) closely links the "fullness of faith" to "the confession of our hope without wavering." (#2). Grounded in faith, we have the reason for our hope. What we long for and aspire to is not only the perfect union with God which will only be achieved in the hereafter—but also for those means which will help us reach that goal, namely, faithfully living the way of life to which God has called us. Pope Benedict points

out that the first essential setting for learning hope is prayer. "[Prayer] is how we can speak to God and how God speaks to us. In this way we undergo those purifications by which we become open to God and are prepared for the service of our fellow human beings. We become capable of the great hope, and thus we become ministers of hope for others." (*Spe Salvi*, #34) Furthermore, St. Paul assures us that hope can bring us joy even under trial: "Rejoice in your hope, be patient in tribulation" (Romans 12:12).

Traits within reach for all

Arguably our challenges today call for greater faith, hope and love than those of our forbears. We live by faith, and we act in hope. With all of that, we can't expect not to be troubled or anxious. The Gospel of John portrays Jesus himself as troubled at the death of a friend (John 11:33), at the anticipation of his own death (12:27), and at the betrayal of Judas (13:21). His words from the cross,

"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matthew 27:46) still have the power to shock us. Similarly, Jesus' mother was not spared uncertainty and anxiety (Luke 1:29; 2:48). These stories and others (e.g., Luke 1:12; 10:41) keep us from an

easy confidence or casual optimism that all will be well, that we are somehow entitled to expect affirmation and success in all of our efforts. That said, what is asked of us?

The response is both simple and profound, available to every person and every congregation willing to seek and embrace the gifts of a deepened faith, an ardent love and an unquenchable hope. These gifts do not excuse us from the practical actions that help guarantee fruitful ministries and a future for our congregations. They are not an excuse for complacency or inaction. Rather, these gifts are a recognition that the challenges before us are just as genuine as those our forbears faced, and we are no less gifted with the means to meet them—as long as we hold fast to the hope that is set before us. And our response to our modern and post-modern anxiety is not the sole responsibility of vocation directors, no matter how dedicated. It has to be rooted in the hearts and lived out in the behaviors of all members, from the newest to the oldest. This united effort guarantees us a future full of hope. ■

St. Paul assures us that hope can bring us joy even under trial: "Rejoice in your hope, be patient in tribulation."

Building on the time-honored Christian tradition of pilgrimage, vocation ministers in West Central Ohio have designed an annual trek that promotes vocation awareness.

Pilgrimage as a way to build vocation culture

BY FATHER KEN SCHNIPKE, CPPS AND SISTER CAROLYN HOYING, CPPS

IN WEST CENTRAL OHIO, in a region rich in farmland and faith, Sister Carolyn Hoying, CPPS had an idea in 2003. She envisioned combining walking and faith in order to raise vocation awareness. Since at that time I was director of vocation ministry for the Missionaries of the Precious Blood, Cincinnati Province, Sister Carolyn contacted me, and soon we formed a committee to organize a pilgrimage for vocations. Our committee was composed of local youth ministers, religious education directors and teachers, parish council representatives, clergy and religious, and members of the vocation committee for the local deanery.

Father Ken Schnipke, CPPS served as director of vocations for the Missionaries of the Precious Blood, Cincinnati Province for the eight years and is now pastor of Immaculate Conception Catholic Church in Celine, OH and St. Theresa Church in Rockford, OH. Sister Carolyn Hoying, CPPS is coordinator of vocation ministry for the Sisters of the Precious Blood, Dayton, OH.



Our original intent for the vocation pilgrimage was to gather together young people, families and religious for a day of prayer, walking and talks on religious vocations. Our group wanted to host a variety of prayer and worship expressions, and the committee members hoped that walking would be a visible sign of vocation awareness, encourage conversations along the way, and tap into youthfulness and energy. We hoped that witness talks by dynamic religious would engage the imaginations and dreams of young people. We also saw the pilgrimage as a way to step up vocation awareness within the local population, thus building a culture of discernment. Since our first Vocation Pilgrimage in 2004, we have undertaken the pilgrimage many times, and I believe it has met many of our original goals—above all, the goal of improving awareness within the Catholic community of all types of vocations.

Practical first steps

Traditionally, a pilgrimage is a journey to a shrine or holy place for a specific reason. It presumes a profound belief in the power of prayer, a conviction that God is present and a desire that the journey be sacred. Often pilgrimages are challenging and employ sacrifice as a way of deepening faith. The path of the vocation pilgrimage needed to be arduous enough

to challenge young people, yet also a realistic distance for a one-day journey. We wanted to use the beautiful churches in West Central Ohio that have nurtured our faith for generations, and we wanted to include the motherhouses of the Missionaries of the Precious Blood and the Sisters of the Precious Blood.

From the beginning young people were the target group to take part in the pilgrimage, particularly ages 15-30. Yet we have remained open to casting the net widely to welcome whomever God might send. We identified local youth and young adult groups, as well as religious education programs. We created a database of parishes, youth ministers, directors of religious education, parish council representatives, the Deanery Vocation Committee, Knights of Columbus Councils and other civic organizations involved with young people.

Choosing the itinerary

The proximity and historical significance of the local churches and other Catholic sites helped us to identify the path of the first pilgrimage. The subsequent pilgrimages have been similar, with stops changed according to parish schedules and other needs.

STOP ONE St. Augustine Church in Minster, OH was the logical place to begin. It was founded in 1835 and is the

mother church of the region. People with single and married vocations were the first witness talks of the day since we would be visiting religious houses of the priests, brothers and sisters later in the day. The local director of religious education agreed to prepare a prayer service, and the pastor agreed to welcome pilgrims and lead prayer.

After prayer the pilgrims set out on a 3.6 mile hike through the streets of Minster and then through the surrounding country roads to St. Joseph Church, in Egypt, OH.

STOP TWO At St. Joseph's young men and women discerning the priesthood and religious life shared their vocation discernment with the pilgrims, after which participants said a prayer for vocations. We hoped the youthfulness and vitality of the speakers would inspire those attending and provide assurance that God calls all people, even the unlikely. The first two years we hosted the pilgrimage, these talks were delivered by men and women discerning a possible call to a Precious Blood community. That was broadened by accident the third year. A young man in medical school had attended a Precious Blood Lenten Discernment Retreat. He was grateful for the weekend and described it as the best discernment retreat of

There are no silver bullets for increasing membership to religious communities, but we have found the pilgrimage to be uniquely suited to our local area.

his life. He then proceeded to say that he developed two clear insights from the weekend, first that he was not called to be in medical school, and second that he was called to be a diocesan priest.

STOP THREE The next stage of our first ever pilgrimage was a 4.4 mile hike to the Maria Stein Center, the former motherhouse of the Sisters of the Precious Blood and the Shrine of the Holy Relics. It is a place of peace, prayer and hospitality, and it includes the nation's second-largest collection of holy relics. We provided lunch during this stop, and pilgrims had the opportunity to tour the relics and historical displays. In light of the many years that the Sisters of the Precious Blood had perpetual adoration at Maria Stein, we conducted Eucharistic adoration and benediction while we were there. A sister shared her vocation story and led prayer. A deacon witnessed his vocation and presided over benediction.

STOP FOUR The final destination of the pilgrimage was St. Charles Center, the motherhouse of the Missionaries of the Precious Blood. Since it is 7.4 miles from Maria Stein, we completed the last leg of the journey by cars and vans. A brother and a priest gave witness talks, and then the group celebrated the Eucharist. This last stop completed our first journey, and we have used this basic route with similar activities in subsequent years.

Details, details, details

Subcommittees handle the many organizational and logistical details that ensure a smooth pilgrimage. Here are the concerns that various people and groups focus on:

- designing and using a logo,
- promoting the pilgrimage through organizations,
- distributing a news release to media outlets,
- ordering T-shirts emblazoned with the logo,
- recruiting help to serve a lunch to pilgrims,
- finding volunteers to drive,
- recruiting and preparing musicians,
- recruiting volunteer police to ensure road safety,
- soliciting donations to cover costs,
- organizing prayers and speakers at stops, and
- recruiting a volunteer nurse for any medical issues.

Weather, growth and challenges

While we can plan for most aspects of the pilgrimage, the weather is always unpredictable. Our first year we were met with a cold, driving rain that deterred many. One year we even experienced snow in May. We learned to include vehicles and a driving pilgrimage to additional churches for those unable to walk or manage the inclement weather and to advertise the event as “rain or shine.” The driving stops along the pilgrimage have varied from year to year. Over the last seven years we have visited 20 parishes in two deaneries. Sites for the driving tour are flexible to account for weddings, funerals and other sacramental needs that may arise.

A positive change since beginning this annual pilgrimage has been the growth in participants. Each year we have had more pilgrims than the year before. Collaboration has also increased: the pilgrimage began as a joint adventure of the Sisters and Missionaries of the Precious Blood, and now it includes the sponsorship of the Archdiocese of Cincinnati.

The pilgrimage has received critiques and affirmations over the years that have helped shape and enhance it. Cars in the driving pilgrimage are now identified with red and white tassels on antennas, and the walkers carry a 2 by 8 foot red and white banner that announces “Stepping Up the Call: A Pilgrimage for Vocations.” Vocation prayer and song resources have been developed for the walkers, and someone using a loudspeaker accompanies them, inviting participation from onlookers along the way. We sport key rings with tiny tennis shoes, and we distribute refrigerator magnets to keep the annual date in sight. Nearly 500 “Stepping Up the Call” T-shirts have been distributed over the years. Red and white “Stepping Up the Call” T-shirts regularly appear at youth gatherings, community picnics, outreach events and even in the local grocery stores.

Our target group throughout the years has been young people, primarily those in high school or college. Admittedly we have had limited success with this group. About one third of the pilgrims are young people. A litany of other options always competes with our annual pilgrimage: school and family activities, work, prom, sports, etc. Our best recruiters are youth ministers and directors of religious education programs who encourage young people to attend and identify the pilgrimage as an opportunity for service hours.

The pilgrimage has also been fostered by families seeking a positive activity they can do together. Several years ago a daughter pushed a mother in a wheelchair all eight miles. Recently a father and teenage daughter walked to remember the

anniversary of the death of their wife and mother. In 2010 an uncle walked with his two teenage nephews, one of whom is discerning a call to the religious life. We continually seek and discuss ways to increase the number of youth participating in the pilgrimage while at the same time remaining grateful for all who do take part.

Evaluating and adjusting

Is it worth all the effort? What difference are we making? While we are not getting as many young people as we originally had hoped, those attending have been inspired by the witness talks. The pilgrimage has helped forge relationships with local youth ministers and parishes, as well as with the archdiocese of Cincinnati. These relationships have opened doors for other vocation events. Nearly 1000 brochures are distributed annually throughout the region, making our Precious Blood communities more visible, and the annual effort has fostered a growing culture of discernment in an area known for its numerous religious vocations. There are no silver bullets for increasing membership to religious communities, but we have found the pilgrimage to be uniquely suited to our local area.

We have learned many valuable lessons over the years, and most boil down to a few key elements. We have learned to plan well and to be flexible at the same time. We have learned to be persistent in our efforts to grow in number each year. We have learned to brand a logo that is gaining recognition. Most of all we have learned to rely on the power of prayer and to be more attuned to the presence of God in our midst.

When the early missionary priests, brothers and sisters came to West Central Ohio over 160 years ago, the going was rough. They traveled by foot and wagon, often upon wet, muddy roads. They came to minister to the German immigrants, to spread the Catholic faith and to build a future.

Over the last seven years new groups of pilgrims have traversed the highways and byways of West Central Ohio. They have traveled by foot and by vehicle in the sun, the wet and the snow. They have come to minister to the needs of the local church by praying for vocations and spreading the word that God calls each one of us. While far from complete, the pilgrimage has become a positive means of stepping up vocation awareness in our region. ■

Top, middle and bottom photos: Rain or shine, pilgrims take part in Stepping up the Call: A Pilgrimage for Vocations each May in West Central Ohio.





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BOOK & FILM NOTES

Book provides insight on context of discernment

BY KATHLEEN HOPE BROWN

FROM THE TIME WE ARE VERY SMALL and begin to have opinions—and most parents will say that occurs well before our first birthday—we make choices. We like some foods, but not others. We opt to spend our free time doing certain kinds of activities, and not others. We are comfortable with some kinds of people but not others. We make so many choices each day that we don't often reflect on the range of choices we have or on how our choices both reflect and shape who we are.

Sheena Iyengar's book, *The Art of Choosing*, (Twelve, 2010) is a study of how and why we choose all of the things we choose. She illustrates in this extensive narrative that we are surrounded with opportunities to choose; in fact, we live in a culture that bombards us with opportunities to choose. She cites studies suggesting that people who feel in control of their lives, able to

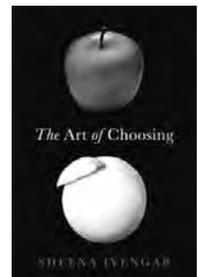
Kathleen Hope Brown holds a doctorate in ministry and is Dean of Students and Director of Formation for Ministry at the Washington Theological Union. She is co-author with David M. Orr of the book, Companions on the Journey: The Gift of Spiritual Friendship, published in 2006 by the DeSales Resource Center.



choose rather than subject to uncontrollable forces, tend to be mentally and even physically healthier. There is a certain “learned optimism” among those who can exercise control by making choices, and most readers can corroborate this evidence with experiences in their own lives.

As products of an affluent culture, we tend to assume that more choice is better. But in places in her narrative, Iyengar gently challenges that assumption. For example, as the offspring of an arranged marriage, Iyengar suggests that arranged marriages can work well and even be more stable than marriages chosen based on emotions. Certainly this has as much to do with the expectations of those entering into a marriage as with the act of choosing, but the idea is provocative in a culture where the choice of one's life partner is so defining and personal. Iyengar pays particular attention to American culture and spends a considerable portion of the book comparing American attitudes and expectations about choice to those in other parts of the world. One is left wondering whether more choices really mean more freedom; one can in fact be left paralyzed by an avalanche of choices. Iyengar says that we frequently pay a mental and emotional tax for freedom of choice.

A particularly interesting part of the book is a chap-



ter entitled “Song of Myself.” Here the author describes the dialectic process through which the choices we make both reflect who we are and determine who we are becoming. The young adult years from 18 to 25, once a time of life when people made lifelong choices and entered into permanent commitments, are now years that are characterized by the search for personal identity. People of older generations might see young adults in this period of life as stagnant, but the fact is that there are many more opportunities to be considered.

There is no clear social consensus on whom young adults ought to be. The result can be a confusing plethora of choices with little guidance.

So, it can hardly be surprising that young adults would want to take advantage of the time and freedom to be themselves and define themselves. However, the question remains: what is it they are actually looking for? They can select from among a myriad of options that were not available until

very recently. Variations on careers and family structures are increasingly acceptable, and geographic mobility opens a wide range of possibilities for where one might live. But, while time and opportunities might be more abundant than they were for previous generations, and while people can potentially adopt and experience a wider range of identities, there is no clear social consensus on whom young adults ought to be. The result can be a confusing plethora of choices with little guidance.

The author points to the importance of sharing stories, and this can be an important insight for those who walk with young people along the journey of discernment. The narratives of our lives help us to make sense of our lives and give meaning to our experience. “When the narrative is about choice, when it is the idea that we have control, we can tell it to ourselves quite literally—‘In order to live’” (p. 20). Moreover, when we share our stories and listen to the stories of others, we can come to realize that we are not so different and unique as we think (and perhaps hope) we are, but rather that there is a commonality to our human experience. That understanding can be an anchor in what can otherwise be a sea of overwhelming possibilities.

While this book is rich with narratives and research about the range of choices we face and why we choose what we do, it contains little in the way of advice on what to do about it all. There are nods in the direction of consulting ex-

perts, and limiting our range of options in ways that simplify the choosing process, but not much else in the way of practical advice. To be fair, advice does not seem to have been the author’s intention. This book is more of an extended expose on what could be called our “culture of choice.”

For those who walk with people who are discerning a vocation, this book does not help with a process of discernment so much as shed light on the context within which the people who come to us are discerning. It is an illuminating and insightful discussion of the forces at work in a culture that makes choosing—and committing to our choices—challenging and complex.

AT THE MOVIES

OF GODS AND MEN

DESPITE A LIMITED run this spring in U.S. theaters, the French film *Of Gods and Men* managed to attract a good deal of positive buzz within both secular and Catholic circles. Clearly the film provides a glimpse of the heroism and self sacrifice that is possible when religious life is authentically lived. It is based on the true story of a community of French Trappists caught up in a bloody civil war in Algeria during the 1990s. The film has been praised for its evenhandedness and intelligence, as well as for its vocation impact.



A scene from *Of Gods and Men*.

John Mulderig of Catholic News Service called the film: “a profound meditation on what Lutheran theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer famously termed the cost of discipleship” and also “a timely and artistically adept testimony to the power of non-violence in the face of anti-Christian fanaticism.”

In addition Mulderig notes:

Viewers of faith will also welcome the lyrical, though not unrealistic, image of religious life presented here, conveyed most powerfully in the climactic scene of a shared meal that movingly evokes the Last Supper. Indeed, in addition to its success on so many other levels, *Of Gods and Men* could serve as a highly effective tool for the vocation directors of various religious orders. ■



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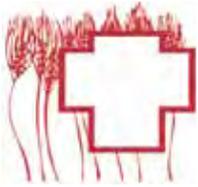
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