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2025 Catholic
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THE MOST COMPREHENSIVE CATHOLIC RELIGIOUS VOCATION DISCERNMENT GUIDE

A publication of the National Religious Vocation Conference

VISION VOCATION GUIDE™

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PUBLISHER/EXECUTIVE EDITOR Patrice J. Tuohy

DIRECTOR OF PRODUCTION Anne Marie O'Kelley (annemokelley@truequestweb.com)

MANAGING EDITOR Carol Schuck Scheiber (visioncarol@gmail.com)

SPANISH EDITOR Mónica Krebs

EVENTS EDITOR Jennifer Tomshack (jenniferrebecca@truequestweb.com)

COVER DESIGN Patrice J. Tuohy

MARKETING & ADVERTISING

SALES Patrice J. Tuohy (pjtuohy@truequestweb.com)

CUSTOMER SERVICE

312-356-9900 mail@vocationnetwork.org

ONLINE SERVICES/WEB PROGRAMMING

ideaPort, L.L.C.

PRESIDENT: Curtis Long (clong@ideaport.com)

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PUBLISHER'S NOTE

Bon voyage!



THE FIRST TIME I registered to attend a World Youth Day, I saw that participants were referred to as “pilgrims.” The term struck me as odd at first. Why were we being called *pilgrims*? Of, course, I knew that people going on a pilgrimage to a holy site were

called pilgrims. But I didn't really associate traveling to lush, vibrant Rio de Janeiro in that light—until I was standing on Copacabana Beach with 3 million other pilgrims from around the world, laughing, singing, and praying. It was overwhelmingly and deeply spiritual. The gathering itself was made sacred by the faith-filled people present there. Indeed, we were *pilgrims* on a life-changing holy pilgrimage.

But our journey didn't end there. It was simply a stop along the way of a longer voyage on which all Christians embark. As followers of Christ, we are called to make our way toward “a better homeland, a heavenly one” (Heb. 11:16). It is a journey filled with hope—hope in the Good News that our sins are forgiven and that all are welcome to the banquet

of God's love. It is a hope that we see lived out in the men and women in consecrated life featured in these pages who have dedicated their lives to helping others through prayer and service and the special charisms of their communities. Whether herding sheep, teaching physics, writing theological reflections, or traveling through the jungle with machete in hand, these fearless men and women personify belief in God's saving grace, which heals all wounds and makes us whole.

VISION is designed to be a valuable guide on your vocation journey as you strive to be a pilgrim of hope in your own unique and vital way. The world needs your courage, compassion, and adventurous spirit, particularly in a Jubilee Year in which the church is asking each of us to reconcile, unify, and “fan the flame of hope that has been given to us.” (See page 10 for more on the Jubilee Year.) We thank you for the privilege of helping you chart a course that will provide you with a joyful and generous life filled with faith, hope, and, above all, love—the divine source of our being.

—Patrice J. Tuohy,
VISION Publisher



NRVC UPDATE



Sister Nicole
Trahan, F.M.I.,
NRVC Board
Chair

HAPPY JUBILEE YEAR! The NRVC launched jubileeyear2025.org to help our members and all those they serve find resources to help them celebrate the Jubilee (see page 10). NRVC warmly embraces the Jubilee Year as true Pilgrims of Hope committed to shining a light on our member communities, who live the Jubilee spirit each day as they perform untold works of mercy to bring about healing and reconciliation to our suffering world. You may also find many opportunities to participate in events and ministries sponsored by our NRVC member institutes by going to tinyurl.com/MeetToday'sReligious, our comprehensive storymap, “Bold and Faithful: Meet Today's Religious.”

Please join us on our Jubilee journey in prayer and in the firm belief that God continues to call people to religious life. We hope that our many resources, particularly VISION Vocation Guide and vocationnetwork.org, will help you in your own journey of discovery as a Pilgrim of Hope. †





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you know, to be a Franciscan?



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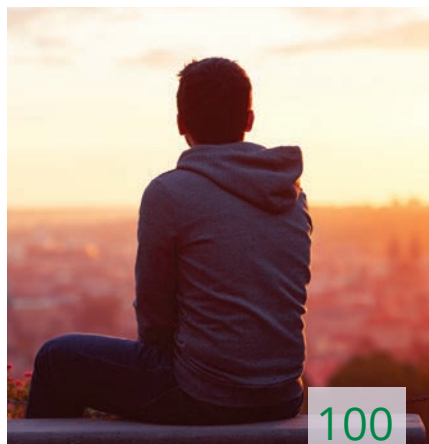
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TRAIL ANGEL OFFERS REFRESHMENTS FOR BODY AND SOUL

BROTHER TOM SHEEHY, G.H.M. spends his days in an outreach ministry that may seem rather vague to those used to hard-and-fast results. “I’m planting seeds,” he says. “My ministry is to be present to seekers and searchers on the trail.”

He’s talking about the Appalachian Trail, where he puts in seven to eight hours a day, five days a week, 10 months a year at Indian Grave Gap, on the mountainous border of Tennessee and North Carolina. He offers snacks, beverages, conversation, and a listening ear to hikers. He spends additional time baking quick breads and brownies and preparing fruit, tea, coffee, and cold drinks to give away.

At a surface level, he is what hikers call a “trail angel.” These are people who give refreshments, rides, and other aid to hikers. Some are church-affiliated and others are not. As a brother with the Glenmary Home

Missioners, he represents the Catholic Church, yet he keeps his approach broad. He wants to be “present to them as they explore their spirituality.... Many are trying to figure out where they fit into the universe and where God is.”

The food and drink he offers is both freely given hospitality and an entrée into conversation. After an initial exchange, Sheehy says he will often ask, “Do you have a faith background?” A few hikers are indignant at the question; others don’t have much to say; still others open up about a deep desire to connect with the divine.

Those hiking the full trail (stretching from Georgia to Maine) have to forego income for four or five months and can spend thousands on proper equipment. Their deliberate, physically challenging effort is often part of a personal search for meaning, says Sheehy, and sometimes it is connected to a need to heal from a trauma. A typical day for Sheehy involves welcoming seven to 15 hikers, but the number ebbs and flows.

Prior to beginning his current ministry in 2015, he was the executive director of Habitat for Humanity in Dodge County, Georgia. He points out that his experience working with young people and his degrees in psychology and social work helped prepare him for this role.

What’s rewarding for him in this ministry? “I find each individual encounter can be very meaningful. I’m impressed by the depth of faith people have, especially among those who have been wounded and yet are still searching for greater meaning in their lives.”

BROTHER TOM Sheehy, G.H.M. (in red jacket) engages with those hiking the Appalachian Trail, offering them snacks, a listening ear, and an opportunity to talk about their spiritual lives.



JOHN FEISTER, COURTESY OF GLENMARY HOME MISSIONERS

IT'S WHAT NUNS DO

AMONG MANY WOMEN in religious life, the film *Cabrini*, released in March 2024, has been a welcome portrayal of what nuns do. Sisters today, just like Saint Frances Cabrini portrayed in the movie, see unmet human need, and, through faith-fueled conviction, work tirelessly to assuage suffering and right wrongs. “I could give a gazillion examples of women religious doing similar types of things today,” says Sister Bernadette Anello, M.S.C., who belongs to the religious institute that Saint Frances Cabrini founded, the Missionary Sisters of the Sacred Heart of Jesus.



SHARE YOUR SIGHTINGS If you spot a member of a religious community in the news, please email the details to us at mail@vocationnetwork.org.

Religious communities put out the welcome mat

MOST RELIGIOUS communities want to connect with people interested in their way of life, including having them visit their homes. Nothing compares to face-to-face time in a community's own environment. How can you arrange a visit? Here are some tips.

FIND NEARBY COMMUNITIES

A good first step is to reach out to communities in your geographic region. VISION and other groups committed to religious life sponsor the website "Bold and Faithful: Meet Today's Religious" (tinyurl.com/MeetTodaysReligious). Visit the page and scroll down to the interactive map to find the communities in your region, along with their web addresses and vocation contacts. Once you're in conversation with a community, it is appropriate to ask about making a visit.

EXPLORE EVENTS

Some communities host events that include a visit to a convent, monastery, or other religious residence. Short visits to several women's communities are sometimes dubbed "nun runs." An opportunity to meet a single community is often called "Come and See." Events such as these are posted on the VISION events page (vocationnetwork.org/events) and sometimes on diocesan vocation websites.

CONNECT THROUGH VOCATIONMATCH.COM

VISION's match site allows you to find compatible religious communities by indicating your interests and preferences.

MANY YOUNG ADULTS visit and sometimes stay for periods of time at the convent of the Sisters of St. Joseph in Rochester, New York. In this photo, the young adults are temporary residents and the remaining women are members of the Sisters of St. Joseph.



COURTESY OF THE SISTERS OF ST. JOSEPH, ROCHESTER, NEW YORK

LATTE WITH A SHOT OF ... FAITH?

MANY PEOPLE have left the Catholic Church in Ireland over the past few decades, but a coffee shop in Cork called Brew132 is providing a space for young Catholics, and even disillusioned Catholics, to gather and find informal community. Learn more at Brew132.ie.



COURTESY OF BREW132

SUPER LAWYER SISTER FIGHTS FRAUD

FRAUD IS AN OUTRAGE to most people—whether it affects them directly or indirectly. Sister Susan Coler, B.V.M. is outraged, too, and as a lawyer in Minnesota's Twin Cities, she

dedicates her days to holding perpetrators of fraud accountable and defending whistleblowers who turn them in.

Coler—who has earned professional accolades including a ranking as a “super lawyer”—focuses on fraud against the government, including cases of fraud

against Medicare/Medicaid. “Healthcare fraud is particularly satisfying” to litigate, she says. “It might be double-billing or billing for services not performed.... It can get so bad—and I’ve not done this particular case—that there are doctors who have told patients they have

cancer when they did not have cancer, and treated them for it, and then billed the government. That’s a pretty serious kind of fraud.”

Among her legal victories, Coler represented an individual who filed a False Claims Act lawsuit against Abbott Laboratories, resulting in the fifth largest civil healthcare recovery ever achieved under the act.

She also defends employees who suffer retaliation for turning in colleagues guilty of fraud. “One thing that’s really satisfying, especially with retaliation, is the ability to listen to people and give them a voice. It is not uncommon that, through the law, a person who has been victimized can give voice to what has happened to them. That in itself is really important, regardless of the results.”

While other sisters, brothers, and priests do practice law, Coler’s particular focus is uncommon in consecrated life. Her efforts, however, are aligned with the mission of the Sisters of Charity of the Blessed Virgin Mary, she says. “Our charism is enjoying God’s freedom and helping others experience God’s freedom ... We do works of freedom, education, charity, and justice, and [my work] fits very well.”



LAWYER SISTER SUSAN COLER, B.V.M. defends whistleblowers and specializes in cases involving fraud against the government. (Photo courtesy of Halunen Law.)

Jubilee Year 2025 emphasizes forgiveness and hope

THE YEAR 2025 has been proclaimed a Jubilee Year, which means that Catholics throughout the world are encouraged to focus on forgiveness and reconciliation throughout the year. Pope Francis has designated a special emphasis on the theme “Pilgrims of Hope” to give witness to Christian hope in light of wars, the climate crisis, and the ongoing impact of COVID-19.

A clearinghouse of information about the Jubilee Year in the United States is provided by the National Religious Vocation Conference at jubileeyear2025.org.

Catholics have a long tradition of celebrating Jubilee Years. There have been 28 of them, stretching back to the first one in the year 1300. The most recent was the Jubilee Year of Mercy held in 2015. In past Jubilees, Catholics have made pilgrimages, forgiven debts, intensified their prayer lives, and promoted the theme of God’s mercy and forgiveness through special gatherings and study sessions. Jubilee Years also often involve pilgrimages to sacred sites and the ceremonial opening of “holy doors” on cathedrals, basilicas, and other significant churches.

Pope Francis has called on Catholics to invigorate their prayer lives during 2024 in preparation for the 2025 Jubilee Year. A free, downloadable prayer resource may be found at jubileeyear2025.org.

As part of the larger Jubilee Year, on October 8-9, 2025, religious communities worldwide are celebrating a special Jubilee of Consecrated Life with the theme of “Pilgrims of hope, on the way of peace.”





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PRIEST, TEACHER, CARPENTER

BY DAY, Father Daniel Groody, C.S.C. teaches theology and serves as vice president and associate provost for undergraduate education at the University of Notre Dame. By night (or when he gets a pocket of time), he is an avid woodworker, creating tables, cabinets, and more.

For him, hobby and ministry are not unrelated. His job is to creatively help shape students, and that's not so different from creatively re-shaping and repurposing wood.

The wood Groody uses is salvaged from trees cut down by campus groundskeepers. It is a slow process to dry the wood over time and examine how it might be used to make something of beauty.

He has a parallel approach with students, he told the University of Notre Dame's *Stories* (nd.edu/stories): "How can we make something beautiful for our students? How can we actually help them have an even better education here? How can we help them discover their potential, their gifts



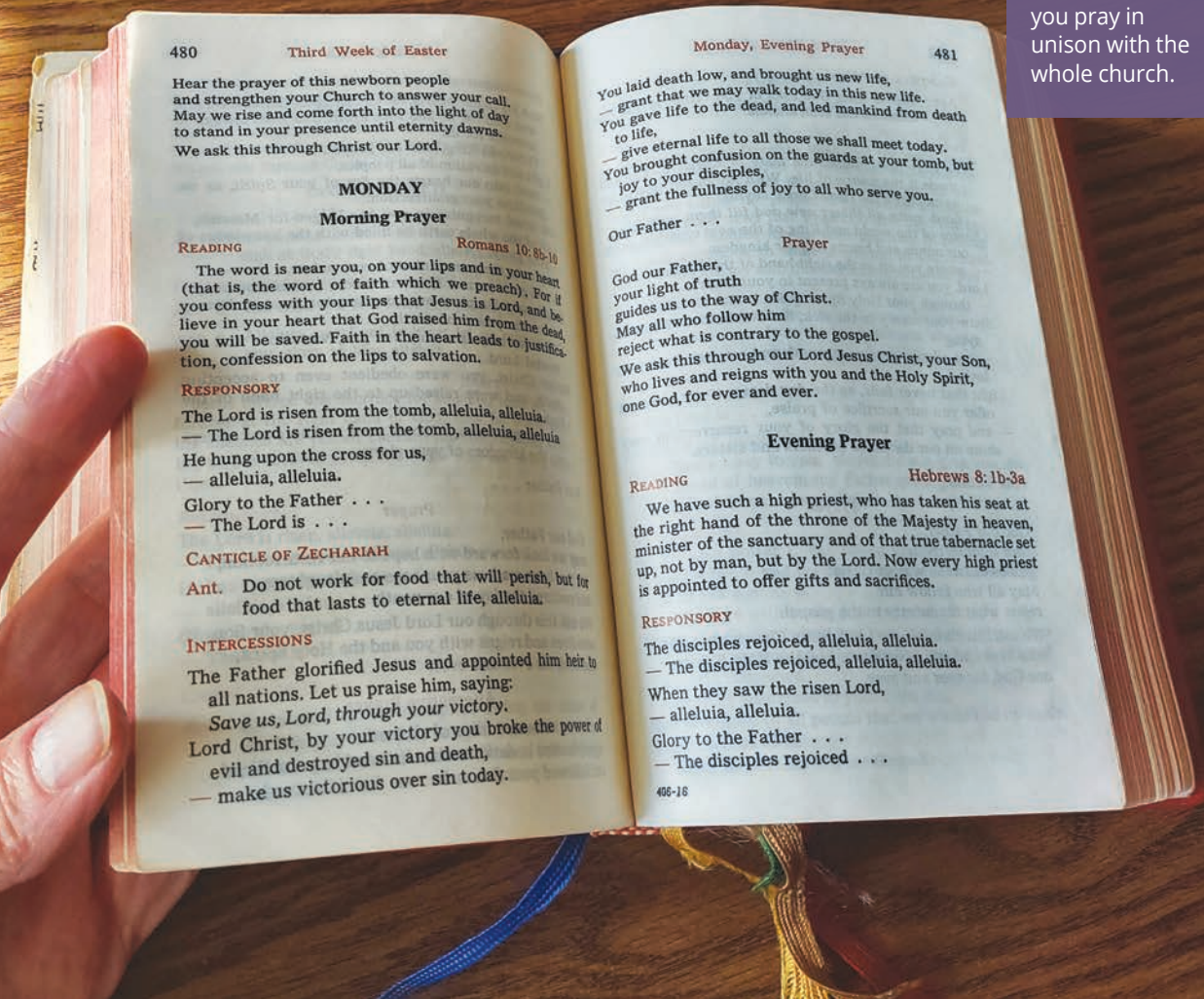
and development? So, part of the process of woodworking, to me, goes hand in hand with my work in undergraduate education."

He also enjoys carpentry's connection to nature and transformation. He remembered a table made from a maple on campus: "The tree was there for 120 years, and we're making a conference table that we'll be meeting around for years to come."

FATHER DANIEL Groody, C.S.C., in his workshop, is at once a Catholic priest, educator, and woodworker.

BARBARA JOHNSTON/UNIVERSITY OF NOTRE DAME

WHEN YOU pray the Liturgy of the Hours, you pray in unison with the whole church.



By Matthew Petesch, who works in law in Helena, Montana.

Five reasons to pray the Liturgy of the Hours

This ancient prayer form is very much alive today. Adapted for all vocations, it connects every practitioner to the global community of pray-ers—and most of all to God.

ENGAGING your spiritual life can be hard. Routines are difficult to start and usually more difficult to maintain. If you find yourself struggling in your prayer life or looking for something more, the Liturgy of the Hours might be your answer.

The built-in schedule within the pages of the Liturgy of the Hours puts you in a position to pray at the same appointed times every day. Routines can be an essential part of growth in many areas of life, and the spiritual life is no exception. The

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“ —

“ASK, AND IT WILL BE GIVEN YOU;
SEARCH, AND YOU WILL FIND;
KNOCK, AND THE DOOR
WILL BE OPENED FOR YOU.”

MATTHEW 7:7

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Meditative dialogue

The Liturgy of the Hours, also known as the Divine Office or the Work of God (Opus Dei), is the daily prayer of the church, marking the hours of each day and sanctifying the day with prayer. The Hours are a meditative dialogue on the mystery of Christ, using scripture and prayer.

—*The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops*

Something great and beautiful

The first time I prayed the Liturgy of Hours I was in a small chapel with about 10 people in college. I woke up early one morning after seeing a sign in my dorm's hallway stating the time and place to meet to pray.

Someone handed me a thick prayer book with ribbons. For the next 15 minutes the most beautiful thing happened. Though I was completely lost and not on the right page the entire time, I felt part of a community; I felt the unitive power of prayer. I felt part of something great and beautiful.

—*Claire Couche, blessedisshe.net*

Liturgy of the Hours (also called the Divine Office) provides routine and much more.

The Liturgy of the Hours is one of the oldest forms of prayer in the church. It was cultivated by the Desert Fathers and Mothers, early Christians who withdrew to the desert to pray. Later, Saint Benedict helped develop the Liturgy of the Hours in the sixth century. From the earliest institution of this practice, the Liturgy of the Hours has served as means of encountering Christ throughout the day. Following the words of Saint Paul to “pray without ceasing” (1 Thess. 5:17), the church has divided the Liturgy of the Hours into five segments, or “hours,” of prayer. These hours include the Office of Readings, Morning Prayer, Daytime Prayer, Evening Prayer, and Night Prayer. For laypeople whose lives are not organized according to this schedule, it is sufficient and honorable to pray Morning or Evening Prayer or both.

Here are five reasons to pray this prayer at the beginning and end of the day.

1) The church encourages it!

In the Second Vatican Council document *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (Sacred Council), the church declared, “And the laity, too, are encouraged to recite the Divine Office, either with the priests, or among themselves, or even individually.” This humble recommendation should be contemplated by everyone. The Catechism of the Catholic Church states that

the Liturgy of the Hours “is the very prayer which Christ Himself together with His Body addresses the Father.”

In other words, the Liturgy of the Hours is the prayer of the church “so devised that the whole course of the day and night is made holy by the praise of God.” Members of the clergy and religious communities are encouraged or required to pray it. That means that when you pray the Divine Office, you are praying in communion with devoted laity, as well as the pope, bishops, priests, deacons, brothers, sisters, nuns, etc.

2) It provides a foundation for your prayer life.

A common stumbling block to prayer is the absence of a routine. The Liturgy of the Hours is perfect, because it provides you with a prayer schedule for the day. Morning and Evening Prayer offer a consistent means of sanctifying your day, by praising God in the morning and thanking God in the evening. This built-in routine can be a building block for the rest of your spiritual life.

3) It immerses your prayer in scripture.

Saint Jerome once said, “Ignorance of the scriptures is ignorance of Christ.” In scripture you encounter Jesus Christ who is the Word made flesh. The whole of the Christian life is oriented toward an encounter with Jesus and union with him. The Liturgy of the Hours is saturated in scripture.

Morning and Evening Prayer offer a consistent means of sanctifying your day, by praising God in the morning and thanking God in the evening.

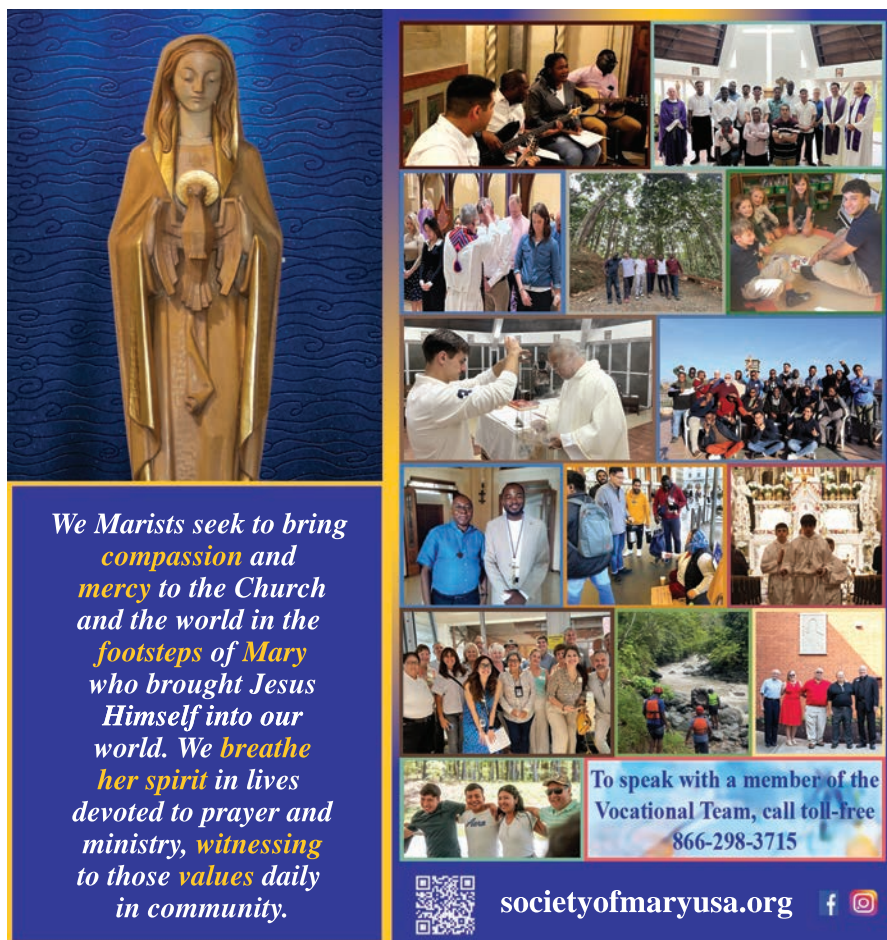
By praying the Liturgy of the Hours, you immerse your prayer life in the Psalms and readings from the Old and New Testaments, improving your knowledge of scripture and Christ.

4) It follows the liturgical year.

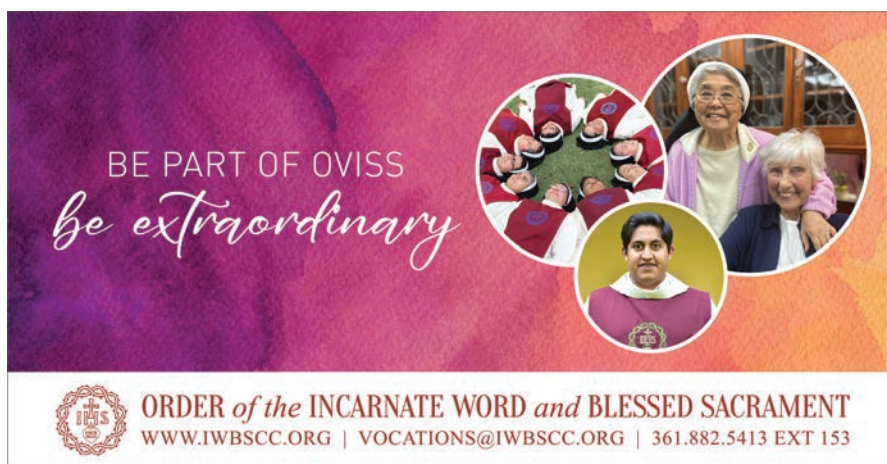
Christians have many celebrations throughout the liturgical year, and the Liturgy of the Hours is designed to be part of all of them. Each season of the church focuses intentionally on specific moments in the life of Christ and salvation history. The Liturgy of the Hours provides you with a means of prayerfully contemplating these events.

5) It's great for travel.

When you travel, your normal prayer schedule is thrown out the window and replaced by spontaneity and chaos. Prayer often becomes an afterthought. The Liturgy of the Hours is what can hold your prayer life together during these joyfully uprooted times. When silent prayer is hard to come by, the Liturgy of the Hours provides solace amid a noisy environment. The



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format of the Liturgy of the Hours enables you to remain prayerful even in a busy setting. There are even phone apps for carrying this prayer on the go.

Prayerfully contemplate adding this practice to your prayer life. It is a wonderful way to build and maintain a prayer routine that will draw

you closer to Christ. The saints are witness to this! †

A version of this article first appeared on ChurchPOP.com. Reprinted with permission.

RELATED: VocationNetwork.org, “8 questions and answers to your prayers.”



BROTHER RAFAEL Vargas, S.D.B. first met his community in high school, where he absorbed the community's ideals about service and faith.

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Brother Rafael Vargas, S.D.B. is a Salesian of Don Bosco and ministers in Orange, New Jersey as a parish youth minister and formator for his community.

INSPIRED BY EXAMPLE, DRAWN TO COMMUNITY

By Brother Rafael Vargas, S.D.B.

MISSION, charism, and community—these were the three things that attracted me to religious life. Even though I was unable to name it that clearly at the time, those were the things that led me to join the Salesians back in 2010 immediately after graduating from high school.

You may wonder what about my high school experience led me to not only begin to discern my

vocation, but to choose to follow it at such a young age. After all, most people join religious communities in their 20s and 30s. I was fortunate to attend Don Bosco Preparatory High School in Ramsey, New Jersey, which is run by the Salesians. My dad's boss gave me the opportunity to attend by paying the tuition for my brother and me. He had also allowed my family to live rent-free on top of one of the car dealerships he owned. Since I was beyond grateful for everything he had done for my family, I took the opportunity to make the most of it. During high school, I dedicated all my effort to academics and to running.

The next blessing came through a summer reading assignment prior to entering high school. We were required to read the biography of Saint John Bosco. I was immediately

For the rest of my time in high school I began to take time each day to pray, asking God to help me to know his plan for me and to have the courage to say yes to whatever it was.

inspired by this poor priest from Italy who gave his entire life to serve and care for young people most at risk. He was a man of many talents who won the hearts of young people through his joyful and loving presence.

One of the main people who embodied Don Bosco's spirit for me was my cross-country and track coach, a layman. He helped create a sense of family on our team, challenged us to push beyond our limits, taught us life lessons, and was a genuine witness of faith and character. Through his example and others, I began to see that Don Bosco's spirit and mission are meant to be shared and lived by many people. The Salesian family is very wide and includes all vocations.

It wasn't until the beginning of my junior year during our first school Mass that we were challenged during the homily to truly consider what vocation God was calling us to. When the topic of religious vocations came up, I immediately thought of two friends who were discerning the priesthood. However, at that moment, I felt God speaking to me also. For the rest of my time in high school I began to take time

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each day to pray, asking God to help me to know his plan for me and to have the courage to say yes to whatever it was.

Like others, I truly identified with Don Bosco's mission and charism and was personally drawn to live it out more fully in community. Later, during my first couple of years in initial formation (preparation to be a Salesian), I began to consider whether God was calling me to live out my religious life as a priest or a brother. Even though I had initially aspired to the priesthood, I began to feel God was calling me to the brotherhood. Living in a religious community helped me to see that at the core of my calling was the desire to be Christ for others, especially for young people who are most at risk. And I wanted to live out that call in community for my whole life.

Since the time that I joined, I have experienced countless blessings and joys, two of which I want to call attention to. The first is community life. It has been a major source of support, and at the same time, it has challenged me to grow deeper in love, humility, and vulnerability. The second joy has been young people. For me, it has been a major blessing to walk alongside so many young people as a friend and guide. It has been both a graced opportunity and a challenge to accompany these same young people through their early adulthood as they begin to experience new situations and make important life decisions.

As for me, with God's grace I hope to continue to be faithful to my Salesian calling to "live Jesus, be family, all for youth."



Sister Limètèze Pierre-Gilles, S.S.N.D. belongs to the School Sisters of Notre Dame and ministers from Towson, Maryland with Beyond Borders, a nonprofit in Haiti.

CURIOSITY AND AN ATTRACTION TO SERVICE

By Sister Limètèze Pierre-Gilles, S.S.N.D.

MY JOURNEY to become a religious began when I was a child, several years before I left my birthplace in Haiti to join my family in Florida. What is clear to me now is that God has always been present, leading every step, even when I did not notice.

I was a very quiet child who loved to read. I read the whole Bible more than once. What was mostly



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SISTER LIMÉTÈZE Pierre-Gilles,
S.S.N.D. with Sister Sharon Kanis,
S.S.N.D. Behind them is an image
of their community's foundress,
whose portrait triggered a
conversation that eventually led
Pierre-Gilles into religious life.

available to me were books about the
lives of the saints. As I read and pon-
dered their stories, I became more
and more intrigued by God.

At some point, I met some
of the saints not written about in
books. Some of them even looked
like me. They were Catholic sisters
who devoted their lives to serving
children and those in need. Some
had left their countries to work in
remote places in Haiti. I told myself
that if they could leave their coun-
tries and all the comfort of home to
work in Haiti, perhaps I too could
do the same. I found both the mis-
sionaries and the Haitian sisters
inspiring, and I wanted to give my-
self in God's service just like them.
However, I wanted an education,
and becoming a sister was not going
to happen until after I got it.

I kept going to school, while
at the same time I volunteered
and worked in my parish in Haiti.
Eventually one of the priests in

the parish introduced me to some
religious congregations. I even went
to a "Come and See" weekend with
one community. After much prayer
and reflection, I decided not to enter.
I stayed focused on my education,
thinking that was the end of my
quest for religious life.

Then I moved from Haiti to Flor-
ida to join my family, and education
remained my focus. I wrote down
my plan, which included learning
English, attending the community
college, working with attorneys,
and eventually going to law school.
Entering religious life was not part
of the plan, while in the meantime
perhaps God was conspiring to get
me back on track.

One obstacle to my plan was that
I needed a monthly bus ticket to go
to school five days a week. This was
less than affordable for me. After
much resistance, I agreed to go with
the parish priest to St. Ann Place in
West Palm Beach, Florida to ask the

prayer hospitality work community



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sisters there for a monthly bus ticket. Upon my arrival at this ministry to the homeless, Sister Carleen Cekal, S.S.N.D. introduced me to the two other sisters, the staff, and an associate of the School Sisters of Notre Dame who ministered there.

My tour of the center included a stop in Sister Carleen's office. A picture on the wall grabbed my attention, and I asked, "Who is this woman in the picture?"

My question prompted another question from Sister Carleen: "Are you interested in religious life?" Neither yes nor no was the correct answer at the time. I needed time to think and pray about whether I was interested—again. "I don't know" was the safest reply I could give at the time. It turned out it was more than what God needed to work with.

I met with the School Sisters of Notre Dame in West Palm Beach.

I also searched for and met sisters from other congregations. I went to another "Come and See" weekend. Eventually I met with the S.S.N.D. vocation director and kept in close contact with the community.

The S.S.N.D. ministry in West Palm Beach is what first attracted me. They were ministering to homeless people with dignity, love, and joy. I learned later that this value, joy, is part of their constitution.

When they occasionally invited me to their home for evening prayer and dinner, I was able to experience their prayer life in addition to their community life.

We continued to meet, discuss, and share. We prayed together, and I learned about the life of Blessed Theresa of Jesus Gerhardinger, the woman in the picture in Sister Carleen's office who founded the School Sisters of Notre Dame. How curious I

**I met some of the saints
not written about in
books. Some of them
even looked like me. They
were Catholic sisters
who devoted their lives
to serving children and
those in need.**

was to learn her fascinating story!

Perhaps it was the same curiosity I had about the saints when I was a child that prompted me to ask my question about a woman in a picture frame—a woman, a saint, who risked everything and gave her life completely to God in the service of others.

And so I said yes to religious life and the School Sisters of Notre Dame.

SISTER CECILIA Ashton, O.C.D. with her community on the day she professed her final vows.



Sister Cecilia Ashton, O.C.D. belongs to the Carmelite Monastery of Baltimore.

CONTINUAL SURPRISES

By Sister Cecilia Ashton, O.C.D.

BORN AND RAISED Catholic, I attended Catholic school from kindergarten through college. Three of my aunts are Catholic sisters, so religious life was a normal part of my family dynamic. From a young age, I felt drawn to their way of life—to make God the primary focus of my life and to serve the people of God in community. When I was in eighth grade, I wrote to dozens of religious communities to request information.

During high school, however, I began to question and wrestle with my faith. Unable to resolve the questions I was holding at the time, my fervor for religious life began to wane. I turned my focus toward dating and choosing a career path. Looking back, I think my questioning, dating, and professional endeavors were all important points of my journey.

After obtaining a Bachelor of Science, I went on to earn a Doctor of Dental Surgery degree. I practiced dentistry for 10 years, until I was no longer able to resist what I felt was God's dream for me—religious life.

As you might suspect, my journey has been one of continual surprises. While I am not at all surprised that I eventually pursued the way of life that captivated my heart in my youth, my desire for contemplative life certainly took me by

surprise, especially considering my dental degree.

The very first time I visited my community's monastery happened to be Vocation Sunday. I remember thinking: "OK, God, you've got my attention now—I'm really listening." That visit was also my first time back to church in a very long time, as I had found it difficult to reconcile my personal beliefs with church teaching in a way that allowed me to worship authentically. Yet, when I came to the monastery's chapel and saw how much the sisters were included in the liturgy, how welcome they made me feel, and how they incorporated issues of social justice into their prayer, it was like coming home. My heart had finally found what it had been seeking.

After that first experience in the chapel, I knew I needed to continue to come back. The sisters invited me

to participate in a young adult prayer group where they were teaching contemplative prayer. The prayer group opened my eyes to the richness of Carmelite spirituality. The more I learned about Carmelite spirituality, the more deeply I felt the sisters' life resonate with my heart's desires.

My vocation story is similar to the majority of newer entrants to religious life who are attracted to the spirituality of their respective communities. NRVC's 2020 *Study on Recent Vocations to Religious Life* showed that more than 90 percent of us were drawn to religious life by the spirituality, charisma, and mission of our communities.

As I look back, a number of things drew me to my community: Carmelite spirituality, the community's focus on prayer and solitude, and their forms of expression, which were both intercultural and intergenerational. I also was attracted to their commitment to share the fruits of their interior life through contemplative ministry and their intellectual life, expressed in their annual Festival of Learning, their ongoing education, and their writings. As I got to know the community, I came to believe deeply in the importance of contemplative life for the transformation of the world—so much so that I desired to give my life to it.

So far, I've been delighted by all the wonderful people I've met along the way. I continue to be inspired by the faith and dedication of women and men religious across many communities and charisms, and all people of goodwill who earnestly desire God.

Religious life fills me with great hope because while communities are certainly undergoing challenges, something new is emerging. And it brings me much joy to be part of this journey, helping to give birth to the next stage of religious life.

My passion for God and my desire to help others explore the



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depths of Holy Mystery is what attracted me to religious life. This is what continues to sustain my vocation. All along I've trusted that God would provide whatever I needed to flourish, and, so far, I have not been disappointed.

So, what are you waiting for? †

This article is based on presentations in a

webinar series by VISION's parent organization, the National Religious Vocation Conference. Find "Religious Life Today Webinar 6: Newer Entrants Stories" at tinyurl.com/Religious-Life-Today-Webinars.



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ONE SIGN that you may be called to religious life is that others affirm that such a life seems right for you.



By Sister Colleen Therese Smith, A.S.C.J., a member of the Apostles of the Sacred Heart of Jesus.

Five signs religious life might be right for you

Look for these signposts as you explore and pray about your vocation.

Leer en español en la página 92.

A YOUNG WOMAN once posed this question to me: “Does God send signs?” She had been praying to God for a very specific sign that would alleviate any doubt in her mind once and for all that God indeed was calling her to religious life. Don’t we all long for that kind of clarity?

But can you really expect that God’s will for you will be revealed through tangible signs? Whether or not that may be, often young men and women are hoping that God will show them an obvious sign that will confirm where God is leading them. The simple truth is that you cannot really calculate the exact “sign” God should send nor expect God to answer on cue.

Nonetheless, our faith assures us that God is always communicating God’s will to us. God’s message is consistent, sure, and irrefutable. The first chapter of the

The pivotal moment comes when discerners recognize that God is not calling them to be anyone other than their best selves.

Letter to the Ephesians summarizes God's intentions for us: God has given us the wisdom to understand fully the mystery, the plan to be decreed in Christ in the fullness of time, to bring all things into one in him, in the heavens and on the Earth.

That's the plan! And every sign that comes from God simply reminds us that ultimately our vocation will be a means to a lasting union with God. So that we are not alone on this journey, Jesus gives us the Holy Spirit to guide us on the way. In fact, the Holy Spirit teaches us how to read signs that point us in the right direction. Here are five signposts I have noticed on the discernment journey.

1. A peace like no other


Saint Ignatius of Loyola teaches in his *Spiritual Exercises* that when your own will is aligned with God's will, you shall know great consolation. God's will is completely directed toward allowing you to know God and love God in return. Thus, Ignatius writes, "Our only desire and our one choice should be this: I want and I choose what better leads to God's deepening life in me" (no. 23).

God would not call you to consecrated religious life and then not somehow reveal that vocation. Rather than some sort of external sign, the Ignatian tradition says that a deep inner peace is the truest sign. Over and over I have seen young women feeling a great sense of unrest in their discernment process, but when they finally surrender and say yes to what their heart tells


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them is God's plan, they experience a profound peace. The pivotal moment comes when discerners recognize that God is not calling them to be anyone other than their best selves. One woman described this sense to me when she said, "I feel like I just came home to myself." A peace like no other or, as Jesus says, a

peace "not as the world gives" (John 14:27), is the first sign that you have found God's will.

2. Your deepest desire

The second sign is also integral to the Ignatian spiritual tradition: Your own deepest desires do in fact

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reflect God's deepest desires for you. A young woman tearfully once said to me, "I so hope God is calling me to religious life! I want nothing more than to give my life completely to Him!" "So why are you still so conflicted?" I asked. "Because," she sighed, "what if that's not where God is calling me?" Ignatius assures us that God has placed God's deepest desires for us within our own hearts. Ask yourself, "Would I be disappointed if God were not calling me to religious life?"

In order to know what you really desire, moreover, you have to get beyond all the cultural messages that tell you what should make you happy. You might need to get beyond your family's expectations of who you could be. Through silence and prayer, you will gradually come to hear that quiet voice within and,

with God's grace, have the courage to trust that these deep inner longings are really from God.

Often in the beginning men and women called to religious life resist God's promptings. Even Saint Peter cried, "Depart from me Lord, for I am a sinful man" (Luke 5:8). Yet, if we're really honest with ourselves, there is a subtle attraction to this life. We are drawn to consecrating ourselves to Christ, to praying in common, living in a loving community, and witnessing to the gospel in a radical way. Through good spiritual direction, prayer, and silence, you can come to name your deepest desire that just might be to leave all behind and answer Jesus' invitation to "follow me" (Luke 5:27).

3. With God all things are possible

Another sign that God might be calling someone to religious life is that gradually the impossible becomes possible. If God is calling you, then would God not give you whatever graces and gifts are needed for that to happen? Nonetheless that does not mean the road is always perfectly smooth. Sometimes there are obstacles—some of our own making and some from outside of us.

When Mary gave her yes to God at the Annunciation, there were clearly some obstacles to overcome: what to tell Joseph; how the community would respond; the need to register for the census. Yet to show Mary that "nothing will be impossible for God" (Luke 1:37), the angel told her that even her cousin Elizabeth had conceived a child in her old age.

Repeatedly I have marveled as God has seemingly moved mountains in the lives of those who are called. One young woman did not have the means to pay for her own health insurance during the postulancy period

of entering my community, but on her last day of work she was amazed when her former employer announced that her parting gift would be a year of health insurance coverage!

Another young woman struggled interiorly with accepting that she would never bear her own children. Acknowledging this painful inner conflict before God while at Eucharistic Adoration, she suddenly realized that though she would not bear children of her own she would be called to "mother" many of God's children. The amazing gift was that this insight brought great joy and suddenly she was ready to embrace her vocation. Once again the impossible became possible.

4. Others can see it

Another signpost along the way is when other people see God's grace in your life and affirm that indeed you would make a wonderful religious sister, brother, or priest. Often candidates distrust their own worthiness. Though we know in our hearts that God calls us in our human weakness, sometimes we rationalize the many reasons why we should not be called. We need to leave this choice to Christ and recall that Jesus said that "it was not you who chose me, but I who chose you" (John 15:16).

One young woman who had just begun the application process to enter my community, the Apostles of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, ran into a friend from high school. When her friend asked her what she would be doing once she graduated from college, she replied, "I am applying to enter as an Apostle [of the Sacred Heart of Jesus]!" Her friend immediately responded, "Of course! You have the Apostle charism!"—my community's spirit. While not seeking a direct sign, this young candidate reflected that she truly felt God

God wants nothing less than fullness of joy for you; therefore, the clearest sign of all is a deep sense of joy that cannot be contained.

was speaking to her in this moment. Oftentimes when God is calling someone to religious life, God confirms this call through other people.

5. Joy: The irrefutable sign

The Jesuit priest and scientist Pierre Teilhard de Chardin reminds us, “Joy is the most infallible sign of the presence of God.” The surest signpost of all is a tangible joy that bubbles up and overflows in all aspects of life. As you open yourself to God’s will and say your own *fiat*—like Mary’s “let it be done” to the angel Gabriel—a palpable joy will soon emanate.

Jesus’ own prayer for his disciples was that his “joy might be in them and that joy might be full!” (John 15:11). God wants nothing less than fullness of joy for you; therefore, the clearest sign of all is a deep sense of joy that cannot be contained. One young woman wrote to me, “Even my coworkers notice that I smile every time I talk about the Apostles!” Joy is clearly the most vivid of God’s signs!

What does it all mean?

As I was working on this article on a plane heading to a discernment retreat I was leading, I gazed out the window and asked myself again, “Does God really send signs?” I nearly laughed aloud as I beheld a rainbow stretched across the clouds. “Just as in the days of Noah,” I pondered, “God continues to send us signs.” I now realize that all of God’s signs continue

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to point to the same reality: “I am with you! I will never leave you!”

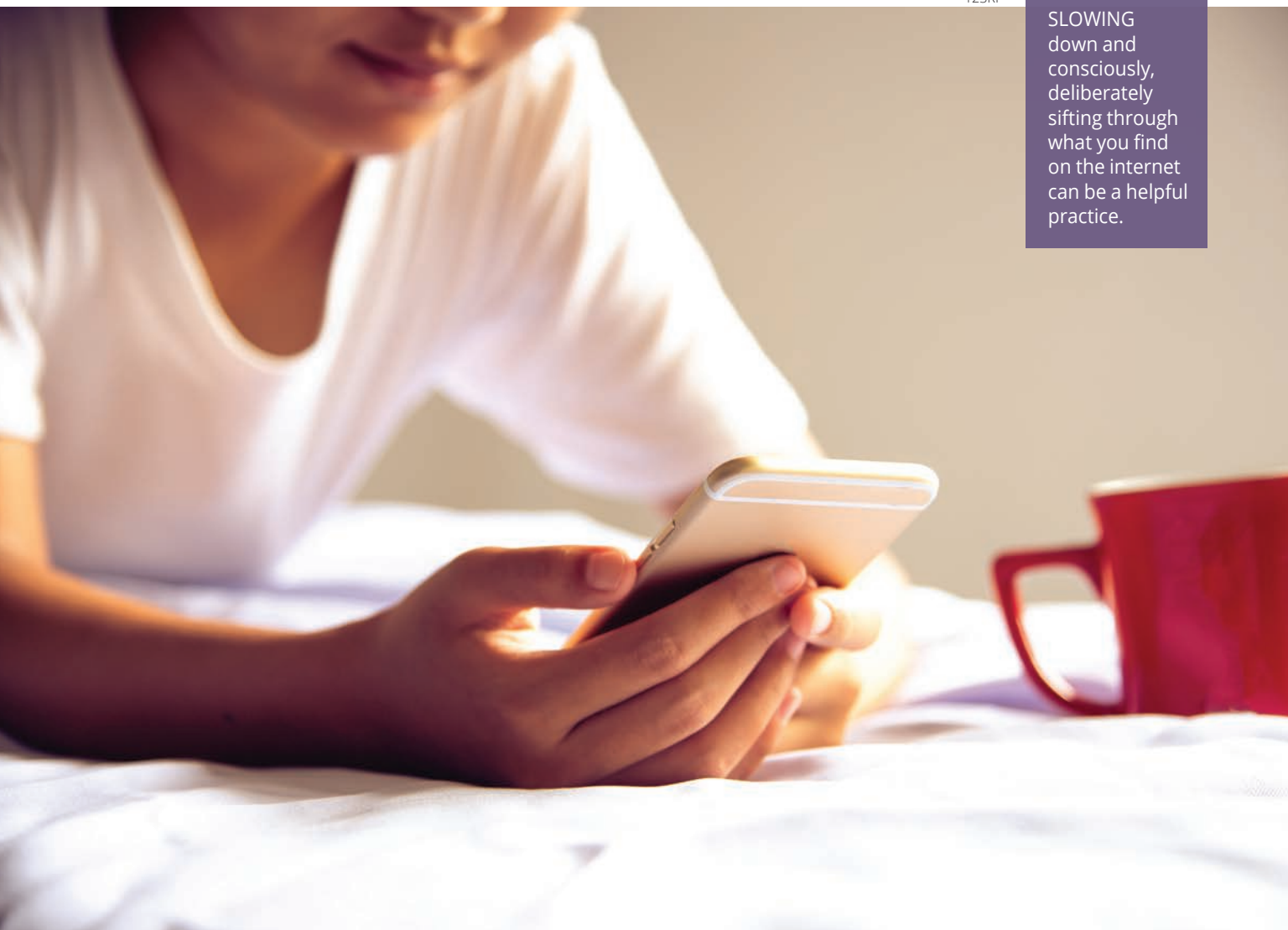
God is constantly communicating God’s will to us every day of our lives: “to bring all things into one in Christ” (Eph. 1:10). You can be sure that God’s plan is unfolding as you experience an unshakeable peace, you discover and trust your deepest desires, the impossible suddenly be-

comes possible, others affirm God’s grace in you, and finally an unmistakable joy gives that telltale sign: God is with you. †

A version of this article appeared in VISION 2014.

RELATED ARTICLE: *VocationNetwork.org, “Unravel the mystery of your call.”*

SLOWING down and consciously, deliberately sifting through what you find on the internet can be a helpful practice.



Dominic Sanfilippo, currently an associate director at the University of Notre Dame's Gender Relations Center, has a master's in theological studies from the University of Dayton.

Beware of bots and bad actors as you engage online

Here's how to get the most out of your faith-related web browsing—and avoid online distortions and divisions. VISION editors interview Dominic Sanfilippo.

USING THE INTERNET and social media to explore a vocation or learn about the Catholic faith can be an effective tool—but there are a few hazards. It pays to understand where things can go wrong and to become more mindful about our online lives, says Dominic Sanfilippo, who recently completed post-graduate research on the effects of conspiracism and polarization within Catholic social media spaces. VISION caught up with Sanfilippo to learn how Catholics can use the abundant resources of the internet in a positive way, while steering clear of the ways it can misinform and divide us.

The internet frees up many individuals to find real people and connect with them across distances and barriers—and that's wonderful.

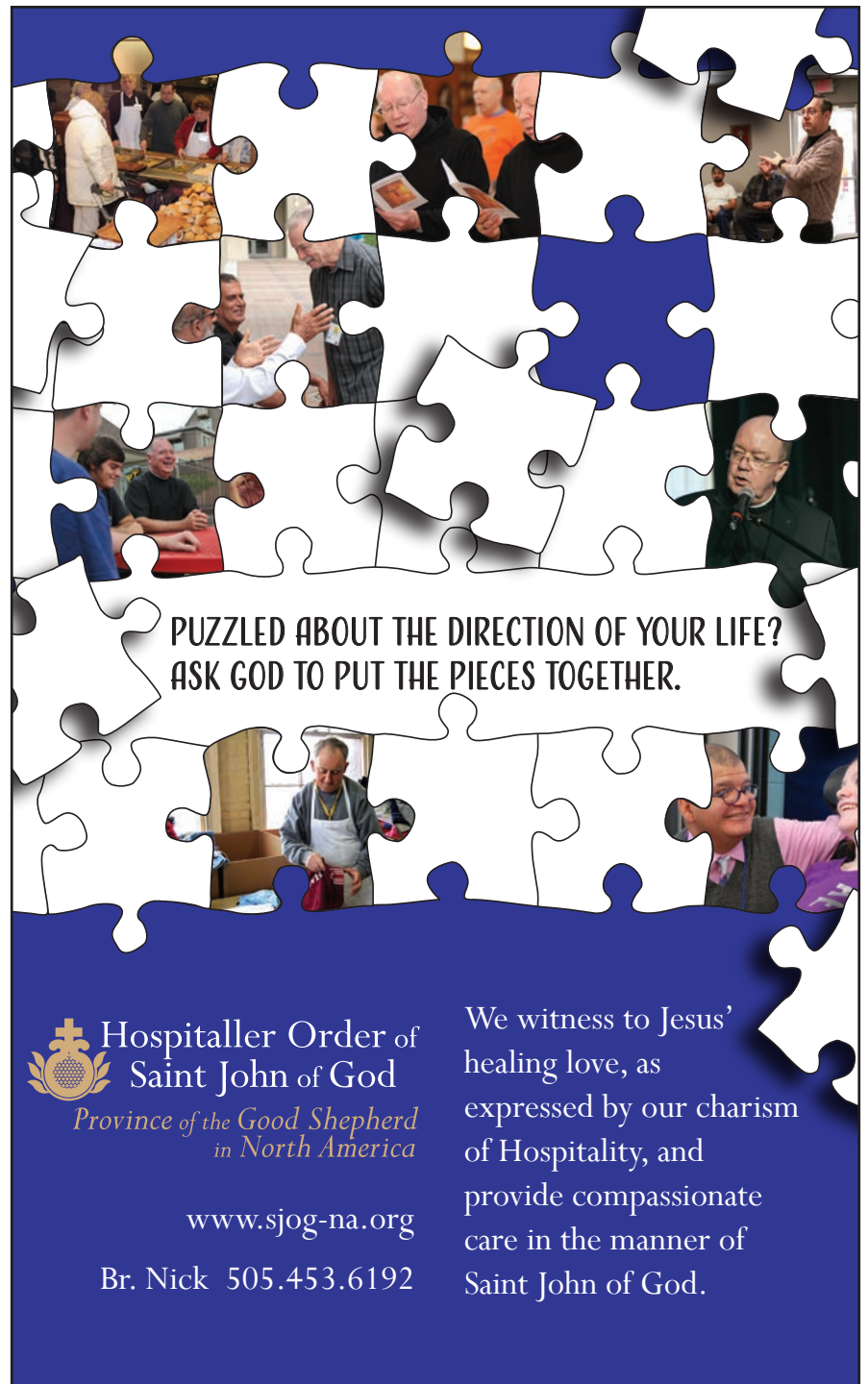
Before we get into the hazards of online faith-related content, tell us what you see as positives.

The internet can be a salve for many people. Those living in isolated, remote places—or who feel disconnected for whatever reasons—might never know about the many religious communities that exist. By doing an online search, they might find the VISION website, or resources from the Augustinians, Marianists, or Franciscans, for example. These may be people who weren't supported at home in their interest in religious life; online, they can find a website or an email and can reach out. The internet frees up many individuals to find real people and connect with them across distances and barriers—and that's wonderful.


There is an enabling power in having plentiful information with just a few keystrokes. I won't say all that information is enabling, however, because search engine algorithms and business pressures prioritize keeping you engaged at any cost. The priority is not to bring you a nuanced view of a given subject.

What goes wrong with relying on internet searches and social media for learning about faith and vocation discernment?

Let's start with search bars, whether through search engines or on social media feeds. On an individual level,



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a person considering religious life and looking around online may not always remember their data and interests are being gathered and sold on a minute-by-minute basis. Let's say you're using Google to search "Catholic religious orders near me" or, "How do I join a monastery?" Whenever questions are put into Google, your search terms, loca-

tion, preferences, and digital habits are swept up. That individualized snapshot is sold to data brokers and advertisers.

That is creepy, but it seems unavoidable in the modern world. Are there more immediate concerns about



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Best practices

SLOW DOWN the pace at which you take in social media and web browsing. This will help you be more conscious, help you scrutinize who is publishing information, and can help you reflect on why the site wants to attract your clicks.

PAY ATTENTION. Take note of the sources you find online. Who is sponsoring a social media site or a website? Is the person or group transparent about who they are? Are they using absolute, inflammatory language?

STAY CONNECTED. Catholicism and religious life purposely put heavy emphasis on community. Stay in touch with other Catholics (and non-Catholics). Bounce off the ideas you gather online with them.



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mixing up our faith life and our online life?

A more immediate hazard is that some of the top-line results of Catholic material on the internet have a decidedly polarizing, peculiar character. The research on this continues, but a good deal of data shows if you're hopping between Facebook

or X (formerly Twitter) or Instagram, the picture of the American Catholic experience that the top results reveal is often not representative of the lovely variety that actually exists.

There are rich resources out there. I can go to the website of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops and read all the social encyclicals of the past 100 years. I can go to Jesuit or

Benedictine official websites and learn what programs and services these communities offer in my local area. A wide variety of professional Catholic media outlets are online. These varied resources speak to the vibrancy and difference within the mainstream American Catholic mosaic.

There is also robust Catholic engagement within spaces like X. However, nuance and thoughtfulness are often *not* what emerge when you type "Catholic" in your X search bar. Instead, you might see content from accounts that brand "Catholic" into their incorporated name and purport to be an objective Catholic resource on, say, doctrinal issues or pastoral advice. However, these accounts often polarize, stoke fear, and misinform. This sort of social media and digital

Nuance and thoughtfulness are often *not* what emerge when you type “Catholic” in your X search bar.

content does not represent the broad mosaic of American Catholic life.

But shouldn't we expect that there will be different ways people express their Catholic faith online?

Of course! And that's a good thing. There will always be different nuances within our expressions of the faith. I don't intend to warn about the healthy tensions and differences that have always existed in Catholicism. That's part of being in communion with one another.

What I'm saying is that, as of late, the algorithmic tendrils of the web have trended conspiratorial and often push militant and misogynistic content. There are layers of anti-Semitism, racism, and virulent homophobia packaged into many aesthetically Catholic posts. For instance, you may find a popular account on #Catholic X commenting on a recent news event. About three clicks in, you might find accounts that espouse horrific ideas well outside the religious and civic mainstream.

Meanwhile, you have people just scrolling, scrolling, and scrolling. Research shows folks from multiple generations are consciously or subconsciously consuming the kind of content I just described. That helps push richness and relationality away from the center of the Catholic experience, replacing



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it with conspiracy chatter. These fringe individuals and groups have an outsized presence on social media because their content gets clicks—and attention sells.

How have these distortions been created?

Bots, or automated computer programs, can be created by real people to set up targeted, software-run accounts. Research about bot activity on Catholic life is ongoing, but it seems safe to say that certain actors seek to manipulate Catholic public opinion to harm unity, polarize relationships, and spread misinformation and distrust.

These types of opaque accounts might have names like “ChristSave-Us21589” or “Christian Knight92497,” to name a fictional few. (Picture a religiously coded

phrase, followed by five or six numbers.) They may contain Catholic imagery: Saint Michael, Mary weeping, the Sacred Heart of Jesus. They will quickly comment on breaking news items or intense discussion spaces, inflaming discourse and speaking in apocalyptic terms. People can set up “bot farms” to spread this kind of inflammatory content en masse. Despite claims from corporate leadership about cracking down on bots on platforms like X, several recent scholarly analyses from the fall of 2023 suggest bot activity remains high.

The Vatican document *Towards Full Presence: A Pastoral Reflection on Engagement with Social Media* mentions the dangers of echo chambers, bot activity, and filter bubbles (getting only content that reinforces your existing beliefs). If we spend enough time in certain digital pockets, content that reinforces and inflames can



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get algorithmically wired around us like a cage.

Are influencers also responsible for distorting the content we find on social media?

Yes. In general terms, influencers are people with big followings on places like Instagram, TikTok, or YouTube who seek to monetize consumers' attention by promoting products and brands. Under X's new rules, accounts with enough engagement can make tens of thousands of dollars through shared advertising revenue. I am not saying these processes are wholly negative. However, it places a consumption-oriented spirit of attracting eyeballs at all costs at the center of how the platform functions.

Many Catholic influencers purport to share an idealized Catholic

life, laden with artificial intelligence-generated images of idyllic family life or Christian conquest. Well-known accounts on X and Instagram promote messages such as, "This is what it means to be a *true* Catholic dad, mom, or seminarian," or, "Here is the *correct* way to worship."

It can seem harmless. But once you begin to click, the social media algorithm will feed you more and more of this content, to the point that you might start to think, "Oh, maybe that is the real way to be Catholic. I'm doing it all wrong." These influencer accounts are inculcating massive amounts of shame, anxiety, and judgment. People tie their identities as Catholics to fake worlds of perfection and exclusion that seem so real. This de-centers journeying through the rich tapestry of the Catholic community—the messy multiplicity of it.

Do we create the problem ourselves from just clicking on provocative content?

I'm no data scientist, to be clear. However, I've sifted through reams of scholarly data that argues that programmers and advertisers know which algorithmic structural edits alter dopamine-release levels, further hooking users. They want to keep you on the app as long as possible, even if it means upsetting you and casting you against your neighbor. Remember, you're the product apps want to sell to data brokers and advertisers.

At the same time, let me note that there are many thoughtful, earnest professionals working in tech spaces who are also worried about polarizing, addictive digital forces. I don't want to paint a simplistic picture of these hundreds of thousands of individuals. But there is a lot to be concerned about.

How can we keep using online resources for our own faith development and vocation discernment but avoid the distortions?

We can cultivate an approach to internet and social media use as a conscious, deliberate practice—in contrast to a passive muscle reflex. In using search and social media reflectively and moderately, we can get the best out of it. Before going to X or TikTok, ask yourself: What's missing? Who or what am I looking for? How can I use my time on the internet thoughtfully? How can I sift through the noise? Who in my life might help me make sense of what I'm finding online?

Try to stay rooted in a community. When something flares up in the news, I recommend processing it with some sort of community. You want to avoid just sitting in isolation with your own thoughts.

What can help us become more conscious and deliberate?

One way is practical: Try to stay rooted in a community. When something flares up in the news, I recommend processing it with some sort of community. Maybe it's a parish group or an online book club—that community could take many forms. Give yourself a chance to converse—to have some back and forth of ideas with people who are different from you. You want to avoid just sitting in isolation with your own thoughts, scrolling and scrolling. If you don't yet have a community to talk things over—or if you're nervous to engage, to be vulnerable—that's OK! That's normal, and we're all in this boat together.

It's also important to take time to pay attention. This is tough for me sometimes. Someone whose work helps me is the late poet Mary Oliver. She wrote so beautifully about paying and cultivating attention. Check out her poetry describing hawks, rivers, or changing seasons. How often do we miss such moments amid frenetic, constant digital busyness? Another helpful voice is that of the late Catholic

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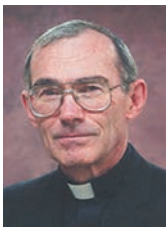
writer Brian Doyle, who beautifully centered life's little things in his writing—noticing the people, creatures, and ideas in our midst.

We need to make sure we're cultivating a practice of attention, because the internet moves a heck of a lot faster than our active minds. It hides things from us and

can distort our perspective quicker than we can grasp. Slowing down and paying attention is sacramental; it can help us glimpse God amid the busyness and cacophony of modern life. †

RELATED ARTICLE: *VocationNetwork.org*, "Listen closely."

RELIGIOUS SISTERS, brothers, and priests enrich our world with wisdom, commitment, joy, hope, and struggle.



By Bishop Robert Morneau, auxiliary bishop emeritus of Green Bay, Wisconsin, author of several books and numerous essays on prayer and spirituality.

Discover five treasures of religious life

Knowing and working with men and women in religious communities, I have found that they enrich our world with five qualities that clearly demonstrate why we need them.

I DON'T BELONG to a religious community, but I'm deeply grateful religious communities exist. As a diocesan priest and a bishop for many years, I've had the privilege of knowing and working with a number of men and women in religious life. This work has involved the ministries of teaching together, working on retreats, and reaching out to those in need. By expressing my gratitude for five of the qualities that I so often find in religious communities, I want to demonstrate why, at least for me, we need religious women and men.

SERVE

CALLLED TO

1. Wisdom

So many doctors of the church—that is, the great spiritual thinkers and writers—are members of religious communities. The most recent doctor, Saint Thérèse of Lisieux (1873-97), has enriched the world by telling the story of her soul. For Thérèse, God is a God of love and mercy. Her little way, doing every task with love, makes spirituality available to everyone. And her suffering at the end of her short life, a suffering that involved intense doubt, witnessed to our world that faith lies far beyond intellectual nimbleness. Her famous statement—“After my death I will let fall a shower of roses. I will spend my heaven in doing good on Earth”—has been verified by the many miracles attributed to her intercession.

Another wise person in religious life is Father Don, a contemporary professor and writer. He is a wise man; he knows “what is pleasing to God”—the heart of wisdom. His life is one of study and prayer. His knowledge and love of the Christian tradition is truly amazing. Even more impressive is his knowledge and love of his students. They learn as much from his presence and concern as from his words.

2. Commitment

The human heart holds many hungers, and the lives of men and women in religious life address many of them. The hunger for meaning and depth and the hunger for intimacy and wholeness are four key longings. And then there is the hunger for commitment, to give one's life in a total, sacrificial way. Here we can turn to Mother Teresa of Calcutta (1910-97) and the Mis-

sionaries of Charity as an example of total commitment.

Nothing is held back. Mother Teresa reminds us: “God has identified himself with the hungry, the sick, the naked, the homeless; hunger, not only for bread, but for love, for care, to be somebody to someone; nakedness, not of clothing only, but nakedness of that compas-

sion that very few people give to the unknown; homelessness, not only just for shelter made of stones, but that homelessness that comes from no one to call your own.” Many religious communities demonstrate radical, total commitment to the work of the Kingdom.

Sister Maria also exemplifies this commitment. She works in the



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slums of Lima, Peru. This Franciscan sister has left family and homeland, security and comforts, to dedicate her life to the poor and to further God's kingdom. Supported by her community, she gives totally of herself. Sister Maria was a student of mine many years ago, and even then I already saw in her eyes that look of generosity and dedication.

3. Joy

Scanning our culture and the world scene, with its hurricanes and wars, its violence and diseases, sometimes we are hard-pressed to experience joy. Depression and despair often reign in the hearts of many. Religious life is not immune to these dangers, but, from my experience, I have found that a predominant mood of joy permeates most of the religious I have met.

Sister Pamela, for instance, works in a large city parish. It's her smile that makes her an extremely attractive minister of the Lord. She delights in teaching, organizing, and reaching out to the poor. Her smile is contagious; her joy is exuberant. I have seldom seen a happier person. She knows herself to be loved by God and God's people. That experience of love is her joy, and she freely gives it away.

4. Hope

Hope is the virtue of the "not yet." It looks to the future with expectation that what God has promised will be fulfilled. Religious life is grounded in a promise—the promise that God will be with us forever. It is grounded in the promise of a new heart (Ezekiel 36:25-27), a heart of flesh and not of stone.

We need religious because they are willing to struggle with the human condition with honesty and courage.

Brother Steve lives with a sense that change and conversion are possible. Indeed, he lives with a sense of endless possibilities. He has, as one person put it, a "passion for the possible." His field of ministry is social justice. Not only does he touch individual lives in meeting their needs, he is deeply involved in changing social systems that hurt the poor. His community organizing is about the work of the Kingdom. And he never quits. Hope, for him, is a way of life.

5. Struggle

We need religious because they are willing to struggle with the human condition with honesty and courage. As a church of saints and sinners, those in religious communities know the burdens of our human existence and have often articulated what it means to be human.

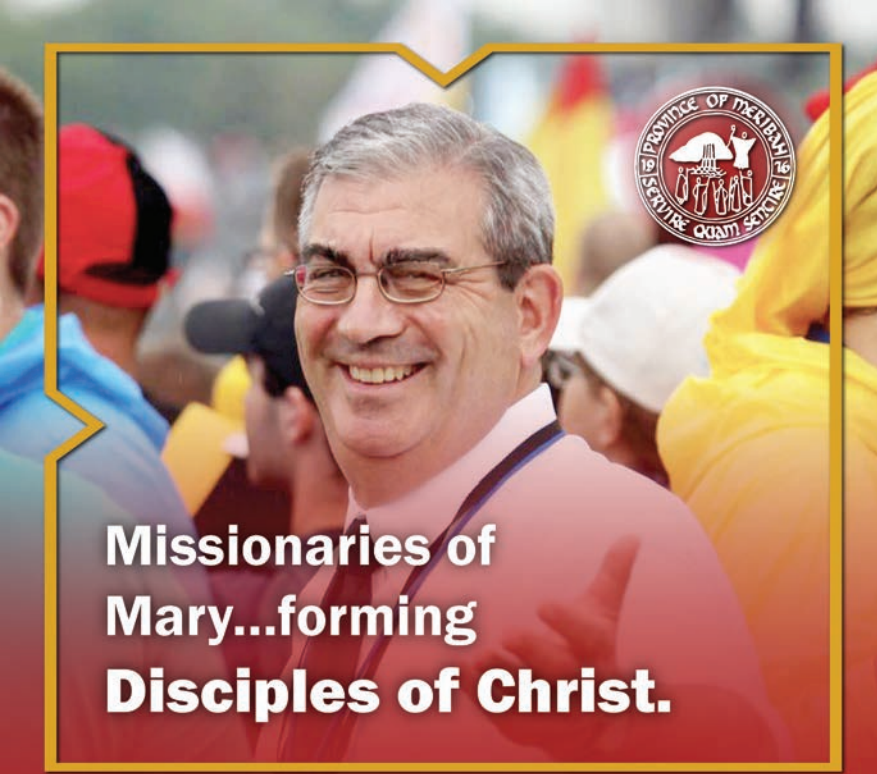
For many of us, Trappist monk Thomas Merton (1915-68) is an example of what it means to be a struggling pilgrim. His writings, which many years after his death continue to sell in great quantity, trace the complexity of our relationship with God and the world. Merton wrote about being grateful to God for three gifts: "First, my Catholic faith; second, my monastic vocation; third, my calling to be a writer and share my beliefs with others." Elsewhere, Merton describes himself as a pilgrim and an exile on this journey, never feeling at home on the planet.

Yet he exercised his gifts amid great personal struggle.

Obviously religious sisters, brothers, and priests are not the only Christians with these five qualities. I name them here because in my dealings with religious, I so often find they enrich our world with these qualities. I had the privilege of knowing the Carmelite poet Jessica Powers, O.C.D. (Sister Miriam of the Holy Spirit). Her poem, "The House at Rest" (inset), inspired by Saint John of the Cross, speaks powerfully of religious life, a life of discipleship, stewardship, and evangelization. It is always good to give a poet the last word. †

A version of this article appeared in VISION 2007.

RELATED ARTICLE: VocationNetwork.org,
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THE HOUSE AT REST

*On a dark night
Kindled in love with yearnings—
Oh, happy chance!—
I went forth unobserved,
My house being now at rest.*
—Saint John of the Cross

How does one hush one's house,
each proud possessive wall, each sighing rafter,
the rooms made restless with remembered laughter
or wounding echoes, the permissive doors,
the stairs that vacillate from up to down,
windows that bring in color and event
from countryside or town,
oppressive ceilings and complaining floors?

The house must first of all accept the night.
Let it erase the walls and their display,
impoverish the rooms till they are filled

with humble silences; let clocks be stilled
and all the selfish urgencies of day.

Midnight is not the time to greet a guest.
Caution the doors against both foes and friends,
and try to make the windows understand
their unimportance when the daylight ends.
Persuade the stairs to patience, and deny
the passages their aimless to and fro.
Virtue it is that puts a house at rest.
How well repaid that tenant is, how blest
who, when the call is heard,
is free to take his kindled heart and go.

From The Selected Poetry of Jessica Powers or The House at Rest, published by ICS Publications, Washington, D.C.; The House at Rest published by Carmelite Monastery, ed. by Regina Siegfried, A.S.C. and Robert F. Morneau. All copyrights, Carmelite Monastery, Pewaukee, WI. Used with permission.

ONE OF THE MAIN ways religious community members honor the vow of poverty is by directing their resources, especially time and talent, to serving others. During the pandemic, members of the Augustinian community in Chicago distributed food to those in need.



By Sister Renée Daigle, M.S.C., who serves on the leadership team of her community, the Marianites of Holy Cross.

What our vows mean

Popular culture sees the vows of poverty, celibacy, and obedience as negatives. However, the vows can be incredibly freeing—a radical way to live the faith in community.

IF YOU ARE READING this article, you probably have at least some interest in learning more about vowed life. While the vows of poverty, celibacy, and obedience are common to those who choose religious life, they are lived and experienced in a variety of ways. Like life in general, the experience of the vowed life is unique to each person who professes vows. I share here some of my own experiences as a Marianite of Holy Cross sister, and I hope along the way to capture the meaning the vows have for many of us in this life.

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Building up, not giving up

The reason to choose a vowed life is to participate in the mission of Jesus in a radical way. While much is gained through this lifestyle, the initial embrace of it comes from a deeply felt call to abandon everything and “follow me.” When I was 22 and graduating from college, I felt this call, and so I entered the Marianne congregation before I could rationalize or talk my way out of it!

Most people, when they think of the vows of poverty, celibacy, and obedience, tend to see them in terms of what we can't do. Simply put, we have no money of our own, we can't

get married or date, and someone else tells us what we can and cannot do. While that's technically true, if that were all the vows were about, who in their right mind would say yes to such a life? The vows are meant to free us rather than constrict us so that we can spend more of our time and energy building up the kingdom of God.

The vow of poverty: Enough is enough

Poverty means developing a healthy practice of using the word “enough.” Our society tells us that we con-

IT'S IMPORTANT TO develop friendships to live the vow of celibacy in a healthy way. Here members of the Dominican Nuns of Summit, New Jersey play a board game during a community social time.



stantly need more, bigger, the latest, and the best to be happy. The vow of poverty calls us to live simply, to be satisfied with what we have, and to share with others. The vow of poverty is not so much about being materially poor but rather avoiding the accrual of things and status, using in moderation the natural resources of the world, and following the example of Jesus and his first disciples.

While I have everything I need and lots of things I want, I hope I have a healthy detachment toward those things and that neither my happiness nor my self-worth de-

Poverty means developing a healthy practice of using the word "enough."

pends on what I do or do not have. That in itself is a huge freedom!

Vowing poverty, however, is not without its struggles. For me, the hardest part is not having the means to give gifts to people the way I'd like to. I know that's my problem and that people do not expect huge gifts from me, but I suppose that's an area where I still need to develop acceptance.

Desires to have things and to go places don't vanish with religious profession, and while that could be considered a struggle of poverty, I think people in all walks of life have trouble managing these desires from time to time.

Celibacy: Open your heart

Celibacy is probably the vow that causes the most consternation and hesitancy to those considering vowed life. How can an adult possibly live without marriage, sex, and children and be happy and fulfilled? Again, if our understanding of the vow is one-dimensional, we would never be able to live it. In choosing celibacy, we *choose not to marry*, which is very different from saying we can't get married, the way most people describe the vow.

The best way I can explain my understanding of it is by sharing phrases from my Marianite community's constitution on the vow of

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THE VOW of obedience has to do with making important personal decisions—such as what ministry to do—in consultation with elected leaders. Religious communities make most major decisions as a group. Above are members of the Sisters of Divine Providence at a community assembly.

celibate chastity: “We acknowledge our need to love and to be loved personally . . . we choose that the deepest of all our relationships will be our relationship to Christ . . . we free our hearts from all that might hinder this relationship in order that we might be more available to Christ and to others . . . by the joy which this commitment radiates and the quality of our presence . . . we become a dynamic source of Christ’s love . . . we announce what will be our resurrected state.”

When I reflect on these words, the vow of celibacy is much more a positive choice than a set of “can’t” and “don’t have.” That is the frame of mind in which I choose to live, and my life is very full of people I love, some more deeply and intimately than others.

Vowing celibacy, though, has its

difficulties. There are times when I ache for that life partner who is solely for me and I for him; when I wonder what my children would have been like; and the sex drive doesn’t go away with vows either. I need to find healthy ways to negotiate times when celibacy feels anything but freeing—honest conversations with good friends, healthy community life, and good old-fashioned prayer and asceticism work wonders! I do admit that celibacy is the biggest “price” I have had to pay in receiving the incredible gift of religious life—but it is oh so worth it!

Obedience: Pay attention

Obedience is the vow by which we seek to follow God’s will for us as revealed through scripture, the events of our lives, the inspiration of

the Spirit, the demands of our community and ministry, our community constitution, and the decisions of our community leadership. Communally we also discern God’s will for us as a congregation.

Obedience calls us to an authentic prayer life. How can we hear God speaking to us if we don’t make time for the relationship that we profess is the deepest of all? Obedience calls us to pay attention to all aspects of our world and remember that by consecrating ourselves to God’s service, our lives are not our own. Every major decision in our lives is made with the consideration of how it fits with the mission God entrusted to our religious institute. We’re called to live our daily lives attentive to this mission and to our part in it.

Vowing obedience, however, is not always easy (see a pattern?).

The vowed life allows me and my brothers and sisters in consecrated life the freedom to be available for whatever the future brings.

There have been times when I felt certain about a decision, but the sisters in leadership decided otherwise. The humility of living a decision that is not my own can be hard, but experience has taught me that God can work wonders in any circumstance. The gift of obedience for me is in the graces that have been mine in each ministry and living situation. By accepting changes and challenges I did not initially embrace, I have grown in ways I never could have imagined.

Endless possibilities

Missions in Mexico, Alaska, Nicaragua; teaching in schools, including in the housing projects of New Orleans; vocation ministry; campus ministry; retreat ministry; congregational leadership; wonderful educational opportunities; travels far and wide for formation, community, and ministry purposes (yes, and some vacations, too)—my experiences as a sister have been rich and diverse. While the circumstances and the pace can at times seem frenzied, I continue to look forward to what God has in store. The vowed life allows me and my brothers and sisters in consecrated life the freedom to be available for whatever the future brings.

Living the vowed life is an adventure spent serving an extravagantly loving God who remains



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faithful and present to those who respond to God's call. I am encouraged and blessed by the fact that I made (and renew daily) the vows of poverty, celibacy, and obedience within a loving community, and that I don't live them alone. I pray for those of you who are discerning a call to the vowed life—that you will have the

faith and trust necessary to abandon yourself wholeheartedly to the will of our all-loving God for your life! †

A version of this article appeared in VISION 2019.

RELATED ARTICLE: *VocationNetwork.org*, "What are religious vows?"



SISTER LINDENA Brace, S.C., who belongs to the Sisters of Charity of Seton Hill, is fulfilling a charism that includes an emphasis on education.



By Catherine O'Connell-Cahill, a writer and editor who lives in Chicago.

Charism: The gift that shapes lives

Charism is the gift at the heart of all religious communities. It's why they were founded and what keeps them going.

A CHARISM IS A GIFT that comes from the Holy Spirit. Its purpose? To serve others, and especially to build up and renew the Body of Christ, the church.

When religious communities use the word *charism*, they mean the particular gift of the Spirit that inspired their founder—a man or woman of bold vision, who gathered other people to help turn that vision into action.

The story of a community's founder will reveal a charism in action. Often

Charisms enable you to tell religious communities apart from one another. The Holy Spirit calls these groups of men and women to different things and gives them different gifts.

these people did not even envision founding a religious community; they simply felt a passion to do something to meet a specific need of their time. This burning desire came from the Spirit. Others wanted to join them, and out of this grew the community.

Charisms enable you to tell religious communities apart from one another. The Holy Spirit calls these groups of men and women to different things and gives them different gifts, such as preaching, teaching, praying, caring for the sick, and more. We need all these many gifts to build up the Body of Christ. The charism guides the community as it makes decisions about its mission and its future—whether the founder lived 50 or 500 years ago.

You have a charism, too. Sister Mary Pellegrino, C.S.J. writes in *America*, “[O]ur charisms are not confined to vowed, religious life. They are found and flourish among single and married persons, and clergy, as well.” Saint Paul says that each of us, by virtue of our Baptism, receives gifts of the Spirit for the good of us all.

Charisms begin as a reaction to needs

You can trace the development of

a religious community’s charism back to a specific historical moment. That’s because the founder read the signs of the times, and, with a push from the Holy Spirit, moved into action to do what needed to be done. The Alexian Brothers, for example, trace their origins to 12th-century Europe when small groups banded

together to tend the sick and bury the dead—revolutionary actions at the time. During the Black Death in the 14th century, which killed almost a third of Europe’s population, they stayed with the sick and dying when others fled. These lay brothers were not even recognized as a religious community by the pope until 1472.

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THE TRAPPIST CHARISM focuses on prayer, expressed in various ways, including contemplative pursuits such as gardening. Brother Joseph Kronebusch, O.C.S.O. tends petunias at New Melleray Abbey in Iowa.

Or consider the Sisters of Mercy. In 1827, Dublin's Catherine McAuley used a sizable inheritance to open a house that would serve as a school for poor girls and a shelter for homeless girls and women. As other women volunteered to help, McAuley envisioned a lay corps of Catholic social workers, not a religious order—especially since sisters at the time were confined to their convents. Eventually the women realized that for the sake of stability they'd be better off as a religious community, though not stuck in a convent. They called themselves the Sisters of Mercy, as they sought to make tangible the merciful love of God to all, especially the poor. Dub-

liners, however, often called them the “walking nuns” because they spent so much time out in the community among the poor.

Evolving response

Religious communities continually reflect on their founding charism to figure out how best to put their heritage into action in today's world. The Alexian Brothers in Chicago, for example, in the 1980s began taking people dying of AIDS into their personal residences, opening a permanent facility for them in 1989. Because family and friends often abandoned those suffering

from AIDS, which bore a great moral stigma as well, the brothers stepped in to care for them, just as they had for the afflicted during Europe's Black Death six centuries before.

The Mercedarians were founded in 1218 during the Crusades to ransom captive Christians. Today the community's website declares: “Friars of the Order of Mercy continue to rescue others from modern types of captivity, such as social, political, and psychological forms. They work in jails, marginal neighborhoods, among addicts, and in hospitals.”

Saint Julie Billiart, the founder of the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur, advised her sisters to “educate for

Religious communities continually reflect on their founding charism to figure out how best to put their heritage into action in today's world.

life.” Her sisters still serve in Catholic schools, but for decades now have also been interpreting their charism more broadly. For example, Sister Thérèse DelGenio, SNDdeN, who works with homeless people, says she “educates for life” as a social worker helping people recover from substance abuse, trauma, domestic abuse, and chronic poverty, among other challenges.

What's my charism?

If you're considering joining a religious community, you're likely asking yourself if you're drawn to a particular charism and what gifts you have to live it. It can take time and a process of trial and error to figure it out.

Father Brian Walker, O.P. worked in missions before realizing what he really wanted to do was preach, so he joined the Dominicans, also called the Order of Preachers. “I wanted to preach in season and out, and now that's what my whole life is about,” he says. “I preach from personal experience and from the scripture and how it's spoken to me.” One of Walker's favorite preaching themes is “To praise, to bless, to preach.”

“All of us are called to praise and recognize God in all creation, to

bless one another and what has been given us, and also to preach about the goodness of all of that,” he says. “Not everybody can preach from the pulpit, but we all preach by what we say and do, how we treat one another, and how we interact with one another. What does our interaction leave in our wake? What does it say about us when we're gone?”

Sister Sheryl Chen, O.C.S.O., a Cistercian nun, writes that the opportunity to sing the Liturgy of the Hours seven times a day was the main reason she joined the Cistercians. Her daily experience in the community, though, has changed over time: “When I was a novice, the silence was very strict. We had to learn a sign language to avoid speaking in the seven most important rooms in the monastery. Now we use common sense and charity to discern

when it is simplest to have a quiet conversation. Our constitutions claim that only with a personal love for Jesus can one persevere in a life that is ‘ordinary, obscure, and laborious.’ If the mystery and intensity of that appeals to you, come and see!”

The charisms of religious institutes serve the church and society in hundreds of different forms. Consider your own gifts and attractions, then test the waters. It's women and men of bold vision and commitment who live out the charisms of Catholic religious communities today. Perhaps you're one of them. †

A version of this article originally appeared in VISION 2018.

RELATED ARTICLE: *VocationNetwork.org*, “A charism encourages a caring ministry.”



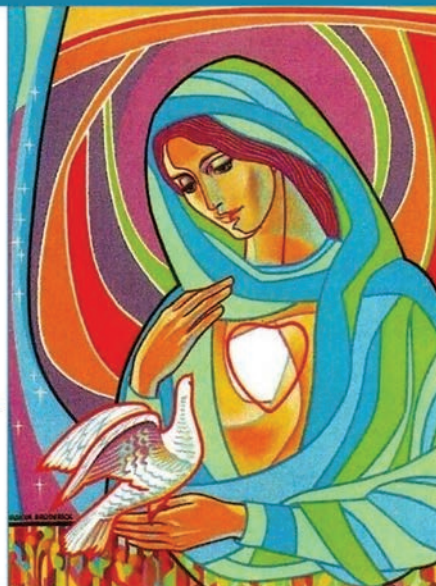
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WHEN THEIR SON first began the process of joining the Paulist Fathers, Kevin and Kit Cummings, the parents of Father Evan Cummings, C.S.P., were supportive but filled with questions.



Meet the parents

By Kevin Cummings, founder of seminarianparents.com and father of two sons, including Father Evan Cummings, C.S.P.

When a son or daughter considers joining a religious community, even the most devout parents have questions and concerns. Two parents share their experiences.

How are my parents going to take it? This can be a nagging question for those looking at the possibility of joining a religious community. While each family is unique, VISION brings you the stories of two parents who wondered about everything from contact with their child to who would pay seminary costs.

By Lori Williams, a retired educator, parish RCIA director, and mother of six, including Sister Kelly Williams, R.S.M.

By KEVIN CUMMINGS, FATHER OF FATHER EVAN CUMMINGS, C.S.P.

FOR AS LONG as we could remember, Evan wanted to be an engineer. When he came home one Thanksgiving and declared that he felt called to be a priest instead, we were surprised but not stunned. We had always been open to a religious vocation for our two sons; we didn't push it, but it always made the list of possibilities.

Priests and religious are often seen as remote and unapproachable, so it's natural parents think that they will lose contact with their child. Our experience with Evan has been quite the opposite.

We were proud that he was considering a religious vocation, and at the same time we had a lot of questions. We had no idea what the process of becoming a priest looked like or what Evan would have to do. Would he finish his bachelor's degree or go right off to seminary? Who would cover the cost of seminary? What would his life be like in seminary and after?


We started researching and found there wasn't much information available for parents. Most of what we did find was along the lines of, "Congratulations! Pray for your child!"

This wasn't entirely satisfying. Two things helped us. First of all, Evan's vocation director from the Paulist religious community came to Utah to visit us. We had him over for dinner and then sat on the patio and talked for a couple of hours. The relaxed atmosphere made it safe for us to ask our questions. The second thing that helped was learning that formation (preparation to be a priest) was about ongoing discernment. It wasn't a single moment in time, but a process that would continue through the next several years.

Based on that first conversation, we realized that we had a lot to learn. We decided to start a blog to record our experiences of Evan's journey and to post answers to questions as we found them. The blog


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 Fr. Chuong Cao, C.Ss.R. | chuongcssr@yahoo.com | 206-470-9749
 Br. Gerard St. Hilaire, C.Ss.R. | brothersaintg@hotmail.com | 767-315-5409



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still exists at seminarianparents.com.

We dove right in and explored the nature of vocations, the role of a vocation director, the difference between a religious priest and diocesan priest, how long formation took, what the stages were, whether religious are happy in their lives, and whether or not we'd be able to talk to Evan. The big question (and the one that drives the most traffic to our site) is: Who pays for seminary?

Through the blog, we heard from other parents and young people with questions similar to ours. Religious life is a mystery to most Americans. Most of us only know the priest as that guy on the altar every Sunday, and we only know religious sisters if some happen to minister in our community. Otherwise, everything we know about religious life comes from TV and movies.

There can be a clericalism that

separates the priests from the people. Priests and religious are often seen as remote and unapproachable, so it's natural parents think that they will lose contact with their child. Our experience with Evan has been quite the opposite. We're able to talk to him frequently. More important, we were able to visit him in the seminary as welcome guests of his community. Through those interactions, we got to meet and spend time with several priests. Getting to know them gave us insights into what Evan's life would be like.

After Evan began his discernment—entering the Paulist Fathers in 2013—we made it a point to host visiting priests for meals as often as possible. Even though they weren't in Evan's order, they were able to tell us about their experiences, good and bad, of the priesthood. The more we were able to see the priesthood

through their eyes, the more comfortable we felt with Evan's path.

Our ease with Evan's vocation started with that positive first interaction with Evan's vocation director. He clearly understood that, in a very real way, Evan was contemplating leaving our family and joining the family of his order. He didn't tell us, "Thanks! We'll take it from here." Over time we could see that Evan would be safe and well cared for. And so today Evan is part of two families, ours and the Paulists.

BY LORI WILLIAMS, MOTHER
OF SISTER KELLY WILLIAMS, R.S.M.

MY INITIAL RESPONSE to our daughter entering religious life happened while she and I attended a youth conference when she was in high school. She and several other teens had gathered for Eucharistic Adoration. I happened to look their way briefly. In that moment, God spoke to my heart, "Will you be OK with my plan for her?"

Kelly had never been one to openly cry in front of others even when she was hurt. In that moment I saw her glowing smile and tears of peaceful joy. I quietly whispered to myself and to God, "Yes."

Over the next few days, I began to process this extraordinary experience. I realized I had been given a gift, a window into the possibility of her future as a religious. I knew Kelly would be the one who needed to make that choice, and I would be the one to provide the space to do so.

Then I thought about the impact her potential decision would have on me. We have five sons and only one daughter. I would never celebrate her engagement or be the mother of

the bride. She would not need me to be with her when she welcomed children into the world. She would have so many women to support her, to guide her, and to celebrate important moments in her life. I would no longer be her primary confidante. What place would I hold in her life?

I concluded that it would be selfish on my part to even try to hold her back. I had realized long before that night that our children really do belong to God. All that we are called to do is for a greater purpose and that purpose is to glorify the Creator. Kelly has so much to offer our troubled world, so much positivity, so much joy, and so much love for God and God's people. It would be many years later, and with prayerful discernment, that she joined the Sisters of Mercy.

Her brothers had some initial concerns. Here is a sample:

1. How often would they get to see her?

2. Would she still get to have fun?

3. Would she get to choose her profession? (Now they know that in religious life it is called ministry.)

4. Does she have a voice on where she will live?

5. Will she have a car and what about car insurance?

6. Can they visit her?

7. Who will be responsible for her health insurance?

8. Will she have a personal cell phone?

When my sons brought their questions to me, I simply suggested they ask her instead. Soon they realized the Sisters of Mercy community is very welcoming. They see her on holidays, summer breaks, and family occasions. They all know they will be invited to attend her important formation events as well. They recognize that her voice is heard regarding

COURTESY OF LORI WILLIAMS



LORI WILLIAMS
with her daughter,
Sister Kelly
Williams, R.S.M.

I did a great deal of praying and tried to remember to invite God into this life decision process, just like I did with all our children.

how she feels called to serve, and they have visited her at many of her community homes. She is always on board with whatever fun activity is to be had when she is with them.

My mother also expressed misgivings regarding Kelly's choice to enter religious life. Her most frequent question was, "When does she get her habit?" My mum's youngest sister, clothed in a black habit, entered the convent nearly 60 years ago through a formidable black gate. Religious life was very mysterious at that time. For the Sisters of Mercy, much has changed since then. Mum realizes now that Kelly is very happy as a sister, she won't need to cut her very long hair unless she wants to, and she is not required to wear a religious habit. (My aunt no longer wears one either.)

The 2020 *Study on Recent Vocations to Religious Life* revealed that parent hesitation is not uncommon. Only 60 percent of the parents were "somewhat or very much" in support, and around one half of those favorable parents fell into the lukewarm "somewhat supportive" category. I had a hint of this reality through discussions with Kelly and some of the other newer members. As parents, we always want what is best for our kids. We especially want what will make them happy. It is so important to remember that God also wants what's best for them and what will bring them joy.



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I intentionally looked for ways to support and encourage Kelly as much as I could. I did a great deal of praying and tried to remember to invite God into this life decision process, just like I did with all our children. I had to come to terms with the fact that the average age of the Sisters of Mercy today is between 70 and 80 years old. Instead of focusing on this huge difference, however, I focus on the positive. I realized Kelly would be mentored with the wisdom of so many women, who, in their advanced stages of life, are still active in their ministries.

As a Catholic lay minister myself, I was blessed to have had a working relationship with the sister who would later be Kelly's vocation minister. I felt very comfortable expressing my thoughts during our many conversations. It took away the mystery. Throughout the formation

process, the wonder of technology allowed our family to stay in touch with Kelly and to follow her journey. The Sisters of Mercy community helped me to truly be at peace with her decision. It has now been over nine years, and Kelly has embraced her life as a Catholic sister. I see clearly that our daughter is not leaving her family. Through the grace of God, she has joyfully expanded it. †

This article is based on presentations in a webinar series by VISION's parent organization, the National Religious Vocation Conference. Find "Religious Life Today Webinar 5: Addressing Parental Concerns: Wisdom and Advice" at tinyurl.com/Religious-Life-Today-Webinars.



RELATED ARTICLE: *VocationNetwork.org*, "How to talk to family about your vocation."

Questions | Other vocations | Prayers

COMMON QUESTIONS

How can I enter religious life and how long does it take?

Joining a religious community takes time—typically three to nine years—and involves several stages. While these vary, the basic stages include: candidacy, novitiate, and vows. In addition, becoming a religious priest generally takes four years of college, followed by several years of seminary, a college for preparing men for priesthood.

Can I spend time with family and friends after I enter religious life?

Each religious community has its own policies, and some, such as cloistered, are fairly restrictive. However, all recognize that the support of loved ones is crucial and encourage contact with family and friends.

How important is prayer?

Prayer is central to religious life both in solitude and in community. Many in religious life spend about two hours a day praying at Mass, saying the Liturgy of the Hours and the Rosary, holy reading, Adoration, or reflecting on scripture. Whatever shape it takes, prayer is a way to stay in communication with God and offer praise and thanksgiving, seek forgiveness, and petition for the needs of the world.



Do men and women religious work?

Just like most adults, religious sisters, brothers, priests, and nuns spend a portion of each day working—some in paid jobs related to their community's charism, or spirit; others in the ministries of their religious institute. Religious strive to share their lives with others and reveal Christ in all they do.

After people enter religious life, what happens if they fall in love?

Sisters, brothers, priests, and nuns work at remaining faithful to their vows of chastity through prayer, closeness to Jesus, good friendships, and physical exercise. It isn't always easy to remain faithful to one's vows, no matter one's life's calling. Dealing with challenges honestly can make a vocation stronger.

OTHER VOCATIONS

GOD CALLS all of us to be true to ourselves and live in ways that bring us the greatest joy, whether that be within marriage, single life, Holy Orders, consecrated life, or other vocations, such as:

Associates Single and married laypeople who have a close bond with religious communities that offer this form of membership. Associates commit to integrating the community's charism, or spirit, into their way of life and usually take part in some activities of the community.

Secular third orders Laypeople who follow the inspiration and guidance of a religious institute in their daily lives. Third order members are usually received into the religious community in a particular ceremony and pledge themselves to certain prayers and religious practices.

Permanent deacons Men ordained to minister in preaching, liturgy, counseling, and other forms of service in a diocese after a formal period of formation. Deacons may be married at the time they receive Holy Orders.

Diocesan hermits A relatively rare but ancient form of life that involves living a life of prayer and contemplation in solitude with the approval of the bishop.

Secular institutes A form of consecrated life in which members commit to a life of celibate chastity, poverty, and obedience while providing Christian witness wherever they live and work.

Consecrated virgins Women who commit to living in perpetual virginity supervised by the local bishop. Candidates for consecration must be women who have never been married or had children, and have lived chaste lives.

Lay ecclesial movements Church organizations focused on a particular ministry or spirituality, or both. Examples include Cursillo and Focolare.

VOCATION PRAYER

Prayer for discernment

LORD, help me to:

***BOLDLY** take charge of my life, aim for the most beautiful and profound things, and keep my heart pure.*

***RESPOND** to your call, with the aid of wise and generous guides, and realize a proper plan for my life to achieve true happiness.*

***DREAM** great dreams and always have a concern for the good of others.*

***STAND** with you at the foot of the cross and receive the gift of your mother.*

***WITNESS** to your Resurrection and the hope it brings.*

***BE AWARE** that you are at my side as I joyously proclaim you as Lord. AMEN.*

—POPE FRANCIS

ESSENTIALS FOR THE VOCATION JOURNEY

Basic terms | Types | Way of life | Process

Vo-ca-tion \vō-ˈkā-shən\ **NOUN:** a summons or strong inclination to a particular state or course of action, especially to the religious life; a response to one's baptismal **call** to follow Jesus as a disciple in a life of holiness and service. From Latin *vocatio* (summons) and earlier *vocare* (to call) from *vox* (voice).

WOMEN AND MEN IN RELIGIOUS LIFE

SISTER A woman religious who professes public vows to an apostolic, or active, religious institute, distinct from a nun, who lives an enclosed, contemplative life. Sisters have a legacy of dedicating their prayer and ministry to serving wherever the need is greatest, particularly with the abandoned, neglected, and underserved.

NUN Although the terms *nun* and *sister* are often used interchangeably, a nun belongs to a contemplative order, lives in a cloister, and devotes the majority of her time to prayer for the good of the world.

BROTHER A brother publicly professes vows to God and models his commitment by serving others as a minister of mercy and compassion in ways that express the charism of his religious institute. Striving to imitate Christ, a brother relates to others as Jesus did, as a brother to all.

PRIEST A *religious priest* professes vows in a religious institute and is ordained through the sacrament of Holy Orders. A religious, or order, priest is accountable to his major superior and the other members of his community, as well as to the local bishop and the people he serves. Religious priests take vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience, and any additional vows of their community. A *diocesan priest* is ordained to serve the local church in a specific diocese/archdiocese. He is accountable to his bishop and the people he serves. A diocesan priest makes promises of obedience and celibacy to his bishop but not vows of poverty or community living.

TYPES OF RELIGIOUS VOCATIONS

APOSTOLIC Apostolic religious communities are engaged primarily in active ministries, such as education, parish and youth ministry, healthcare, social work, and care for poor and elderly people. Prayer and community are important elements of their life.

CLOISTERED Cloistered (enclosed) or semi-cloistered communities rarely leave their monasteries or convents, where they work, pray, and share meals. Like contemplative communities, their main charism is typically prayer.

CONTEMPLATIVE Contemplative religious communities focus on daily communal prayer, especially the Mass and Liturgy of the Hours, and individual prayer, such as *lectio divina*, which is the prayerful reading

of scripture. They live in relative solitude so that they can direct their prayer and work toward contemplation, though some contemplative communities are engaged in active apostolic ministries.

MONASTIC Monastic communities place a high value on prayer and communal living, but many in monastic life are also engaged in active ministries, such as preaching, teaching, and spiritual direction. Monasticism centers on common life, work, and prayer, and, often, adherence to a specific Rule.

MISSIONARY Missionary communities focus on promoting the gospel in areas where the church is not yet present in a robust form. Missionaries serve in many different places as preachers, teachers, advocates, social service ministers, among many other forms of witness.

WAY OF LIFE

CHARISM A religious community's spirit, way of life, and focus, which grows out of its history, traditions, and founder. From the Greek *charisma* meaning "gift," charism guides decisions about mission and ministry.

VOWS Men and women in consecrated life take vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience. Many communities add a fourth or fifth vow related to their charism, such as stability, hospitality, or service to the poor. In most religious institutes new members take temporary vows for a specified time, which they may renew. The final step is to profess perpetual vows.

PROCESS TO ENTER

DISCERNMENT The process of reflecting and praying about how to respond to God's call to follow Jesus in a particular way of life.

FORMATION Education and spiritual development that takes place after joining a religious community.

POSTULANCY Usually lasting six months to two years, the time the candidate lives within the community while continuing his or her education or work experience.

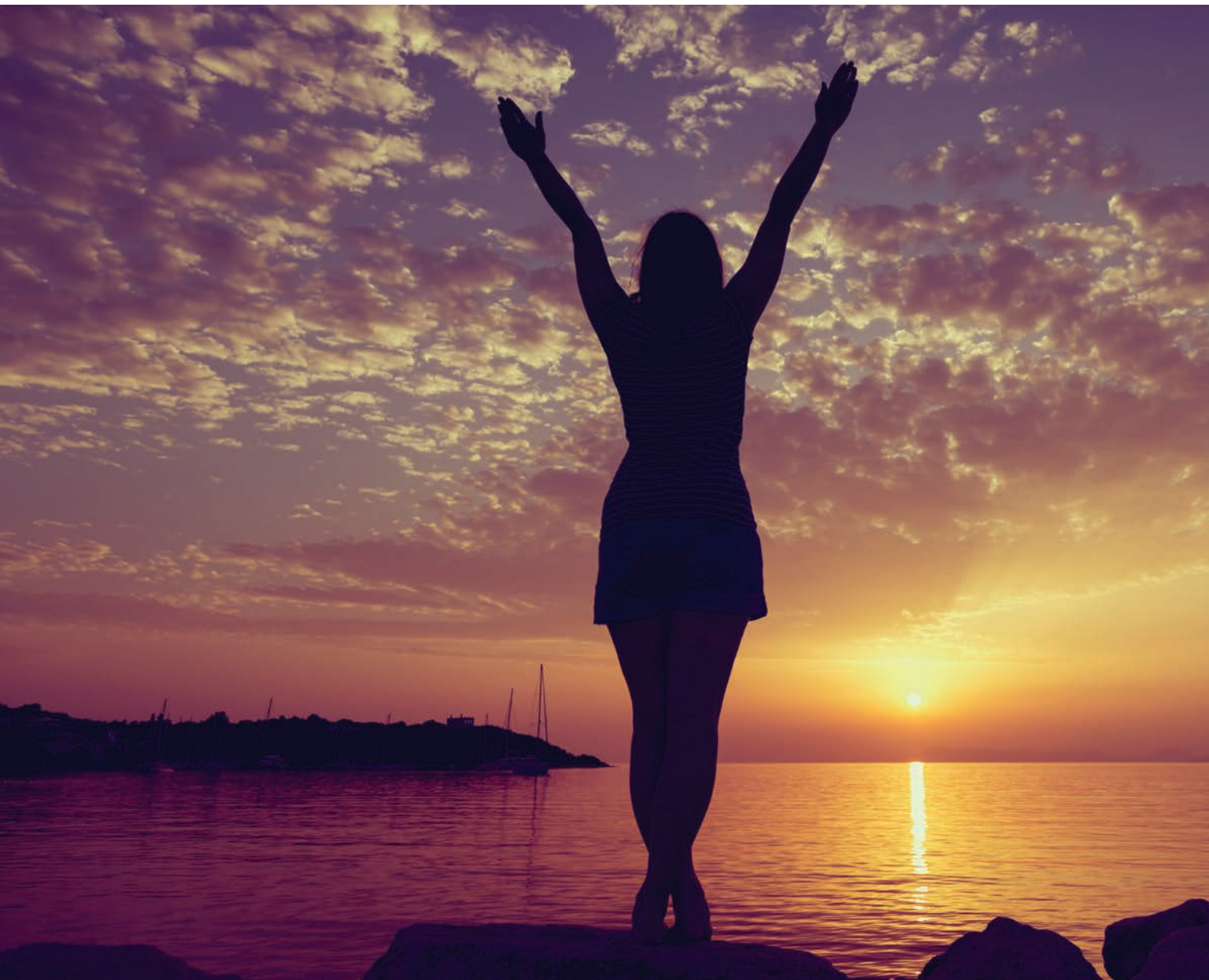
NOVITIATE Usually lasting from 12 to 24 months, a time after entrance that typically involves studying the community's charism, history, constitution, and way of life and learning more about the Catholic faith.

PROFESSION The religious rite in which a person formally enters a religious community by making public vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience, among others. Typically, religious make first profession and then three to nine years later perpetual profession, or final vows.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES



Find more information on religious vocations, religious life today, and discerning a vocation as a Catholic sister, nun, brother, or priest at VocationNetwork.org/en/articles/archive.



You are already called

Message to youth from Pope Francis

God isn't waiting for you to be a more worthy person. God loves you as you are and has already called you by name.

Leer en español en la página 100.

While many people begin to consider life as a sister, brother, or priest with the question, "Am I called?" a better question might be, "How am I called?" Pope Francis has encouraged the faithful to recognize that every Christian has a calling, a very personal invitation from God who loves us just as we are. Here are some of his words on the subject, drawn from his address at the welcome ceremony of the 2023 World Youth Day in Lisbon.

POPE FRANCIS has emphasized that God loves each one of us as we are and has called each of us by name, warts and all.

associate it with likes and preferences, all of which is useful for market research, yet it does not begin to approach you in your uniqueness.

How many wolves hide behind smiles of false goodness, saying that they know you, though they do not love you. They insist that they believe in you and promise that you will become someone, but then abandon you when you no longer matter. These are the illusions of the virtual world and we must be careful not to let ourselves be deceived, for many realities that attract us and promise happiness are later shown to be what they really are: soap bubbles, superfluous things that we don't need and that leave us empty inside. Let me tell you: Jesus is not like that. He trusts you, each of you, each of us, because each of us matters to him, each one of you matters to him. That is how Jesus is.

That is why we, his Church, are *the community of those who are called*: not of people who are better than others—no, absolutely not—but of sinners, called as such. Let us think seriously for a moment about that: we are called as we are, with our problems and limitations, our overflowing joy, our desire to be better and to get ahead in this world. We are called as we are. Think of this: Jesus calls me as I am, not as I would like to be. We are the community of brothers and sisters of Jesus, sons and daughters of the same Father.

Friends, I want to be clear with you, for you are allergic to falsity and empty words: in the Church, there is room for everyone. Everyone. In the Church, no one is left out or left over. There is room for everyone. Just the way we are. Everyone. Jesus says this clearly. When he sends

**In the Church,
there is room for
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Just the way we are.**

the apostles to invite people to the banquet which a man had prepared, he tells them: “Go out and bring in everyone,” young and old, healthy and infirm, righteous and sinners. Everyone, everyone, everyone!

In the Church there is room for everyone. “Father, but I am a wretch, is there room for me?” There is room for everyone! ... The Lord does not point a finger, but opens his arms. He embraces us all. He shows us Jesus on the cross, who opened his arms wide in order to be crucified and die for us.

Jesus never closes the door, never, but invites you to enter: come and see. Jesus receives, Jesus welcomes. ... Each of us transmits the love of Jesus. God loves you. God calls you. How lovely this is! God loves me. God calls me. He wants me to be close to him....

I encourage you to reflect on the beautiful fact that God loves us. God loves us as we are, not how we want to be or how society wants us to be. As we are! He calls us with our faults and failings, our limitations and our hopes in life. That is how God calls us. †

RELATED ARTICLE: VocationNetwork.org, “Pope Francis wants YOU to be a missionary.”

YOUNG MEN and women, we are loved the way we are.... Do you understand that? And each of us is called by name.

That is no mere figure of speech; indeed, it is the word of God (see Isaiah 43:1-2 and 2 Timothy 1:9). Dear friends, if God calls you by name, it means that for God none of us is a number, but a face and a heart. I would like each of you to remember that many people know your name, yet they do not call you by name. Certainly your name is known, it appears on social networks and is processed by algorithms that

The sacred art form of iconography brings spiritual depth to those who use icons in prayer and those who create them using ancient and established techniques.

Icons: An age-old entrée into the divine

FOR CENTURIES, the art of iconography has had a rich tradition in the Catholic Church, serving as a powerful way for the faithful to connect with the divine. The late priest and author Henri Nouwen wrote, “An icon is like a window looking out upon eternity.” The unusual proportions of the figures and strange pictorial perspectives, alone, appear otherworldly and are ripe with religious symbolism. These striking artworks are also visual reminders of the life of Jesus and his teachings that can help us connect more intimately with God through prayer and contemplation.

Sacred imagery holds a central place in our faith, offering a doorway to the stories of the Bible and beyond. While we might admire the beauty of an aesthetically pleasing sculpture, the tradition of iconography calls for more active participation from the people who create icons and those who pray with them, drawing individuals into a profound encounter that transcends aesthetics. The icon’s role as a sacred art form invites us to explore the images through the lens of holy and theological understanding.

Layers of meaning

Everything from color and composition to value and linework becomes a beacon to unraveling the mysteries of the icon and, in turn, our faith. Each stage of the painting and the materials used are all imbued with divine symbolism. In some forms of iconography, for example, iconographers use their breath to moisten the red clay on their board to apply thin sheets of gold leaf. The process calls to mind how God created Adam from the dust of the Earth and breathed life into him. Using gold symbolizes the brilliance of God’s divine glory and heavenly Kingdom.

Other symbolism, such as crosses, scrolls, and stars, are keys to deciphering the identity of each figure and scene. Martyrs, for instance, are often depicted

By Alison Nastasi, an arts and culture journalist, author, and artist living in Los Angeles.



THE ICON MUSEUM AND STUDY CENTER

A RUSSIAN ICON of Saint John the Baptist from the late 1400s.





REFUGEES: THE Holy Family, a modern icon by Kelly Latimore.

we are reminded by the Catechism of the Catholic Church: “Genuine sacred art draws man to adoration, to prayer, and to the love of God, Creator and Savior, the Holy One and Sanctifier.”

Some find it helpful to recite traditional prayers, while others sit silently with icons. In his book *Praying with Icons*, author and theologian Jim Forest writes:

The icon is silent. No mouths are open nor are there any other physical details which imply sound. But an icon's silence is not empty. The stillness and silence of the icon, in the home no less than church, create an area that constantly invites prayer. The deep and living silence which marks a good icon is nothing less than the silence of Christ. It is the very opposite of the icy stillness of the tomb. It is the silence of Mary's contemplative heart, the silence of the transfiguration, the silence of the resurrection, the silence of the Incarnate Word.



OUR LADY of Perpetual Help icon from the 1400s was popularized by the Redemptorist priests and is housed in Rome in the Church of St. Alphonsus of Liguori, named for the founder of the Redemptorists.

calling it idolatry), but it eventually became firmly entrenched in the Eastern Church and is now experiencing renewed popularity among Roman Catholics.

Christians have long used icons in their daily lives rather than treating them as untouchable objects. In ancient times, icons were paraded through the streets in times of war, carried in processions, fervently adored, held close for spiritual protection, and brought on long journeys by land and sea. Icons come in various styles, sizes, and forms, including panel paintings, mosaics, frescoes, and more.

Icons as a prayer portal

Eastern Orthodox Christians often have an “icon corner” in their homes that features traditional icons, including Christ and Mary. The images serve as an invitation to prayer, as

wearing red robes and holding crosses. Icons of the Mother of God with the Christ child often feature Jesus with an enlarged head to signify he has the wisdom of God. Saints can be identified by the items they carry. For instance, the Byzantine icon of Saint Mary Magdalene usually depicts her holding an alabaster jar, referencing the story of the woman who anointed Jesus' feet with perfumed ointment.

“Icon” comes from the Greek word *eikon*, meaning “image.” This sacred art form was a source of controversy during the first millennium of the church (with opponents



THE ICON MUSEUM AND STUDY CENTER

A 20TH-CENTURY icon from Ethiopia depicting the Mother of God and the Ethiopian Orthodox Church's Feast of the Covenant of Mercy.

Many who join religious communities consider praying with and creating icons essential for spiritual growth. Here are stories about several of these sisters, brothers, and priests.

RELATED ARTICLE: [VocationNetwork.org](https://www.vocationnetwork.org), "Inspired images."



BROTHER CLAUDE LANE, O.S.B. (above) of Mount Angel Abbey in Oregon has taught iconography for more than 20 years. Lane created the icon of Christ the Teacher (see page 62) that hangs over the tabernacle at Mount Angel Abbey. Brother Isaiah Vargas, O.S.B. (below) works on an icon at Mount Angel Abbey.



COURTESY OF MOUNT ANGEL ABBEY



COURTESY OF THE FRANCISCAN SISTERS OF CHICAGO



THE FRANCISCAN Sisters of Chicago commissioned lay iconographer Joe Malham (left) to create an icon of their foundress, Venerable Mary Theresa Dudzik.

ICON CAPTURES SOCIAL MINISTRY HERO

THE FRANCISCAN SISTERS of Chicago were delighted in 2021 when they learned that artist and lay iconographer Joe Malham had created a portrait series of heroic Catholics of Chicago that included their foundress, Venerable Mary Theresa Dudzik. Dudzik dedicated her life to social and educational ministries for impoverished Chicagoans in the early 20th century, founding a religious community along the way.

The Franciscan community purchased a copy of the Dudzik portrait and then commissioned Malham to create an icon of her. It is now on display in Our Lady of Victory Convent in Lemont, Illinois.

On the community website, Malham explains details of the icon, including these: "There is an ethereal quality to Mother Mary Theresa as she is slightly out of proportion. The object is not to show the way she was human, but to illustrate her slightly elongated, which shows she's been transformed into her divine state. She is then situated against a gold background, symbolizing God's own created light."



ONE OF Father Guerric Llanes, O.C.S.O.'s first icons, depicting Saint Michael the Archangel. Below, he begins work on an icon at the Abbey of Our Lady of New Clairvaux.



INSTRUMENTS OF PRAYER

FATHER GUERRIC LLANES, O.C.S.O., vocation director at California's Abbey of Our Lady of New Clairvaux, explains that creating icons can cultivate humility. "The focus of the icon is not on the painter. And although an icon may be painted by my hand, the icon belongs to the church," he says. Llanes always had an appreciation for art before monastic life and felt drawn to the beauty of Cistercian monastic architecture, noting the early Cistercian fathers' emphasis on principles of harmony, austerity, simplicity, proportion, and light. Now

he helps teach iconography to novices at the abbey. "Our novices learn how to prepare their own wooden boards and gesso and sand the surface to a smooth finish before they begin to work on the image they will paint on the board. Currently, our novices are working on the icon of the holy archangel Michael," he explains.

"Icons are instruments of prayer," Llanes continues. "And prayer is what facilitates conversation with God, listening to God intimately. So every time I work on an icon, my mind, heart, and hand are engaged in prayer." He believes icons can be a helpful tool for someone discerning religious life. "When I sit to pray with scripture, I place an icon of our Blessed Mother or Christ before me. When it comes time to pause and ponder over the words of scripture, gazing into the icon mediates whatever God wants me to hear. I just have to be open and willing to receive that divine message."

CLOSER TO JESUS

BROTHER JOSEPH PIO YOUNG, C.F.R., at Our Lady of the Angels Friary in New York City, calls iconography a "tried-and-true way of growing in your relationship with Jesus. The closer you are to him, the better you're going to know his will." He was taught that the full-face view of the icons is "anticipatory of the face-to-face communion that we'll have with God in heaven."

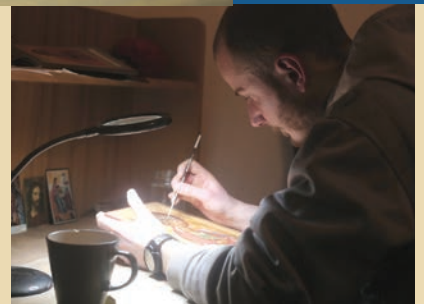
Young was always drawn to art and spent a summer in Russia during college, where he became more familiar with iconography. He felt called to create an icon with acrylic paint after prayer and reflection during his postulancy, his early affiliation with his community. In novitiate—his formal preparation to become a friar—a fellow brother started teaching him the Prosopon School of Iconology style, which used the traditional methods of Byzantine iconography including egg tempera paint pigments. Learning the ancient art has been "spiritually enriching," he says, and he has learned to trust the process—at the icon board and beyond. For Young, the icon's dark, earthy base paint layer, called *roskrysh*, represents the chaos of creation and can look strange and mottled before the other paint layers complete the beautiful final picture. For Young, this mirrors the interior chaos people sometimes feel.

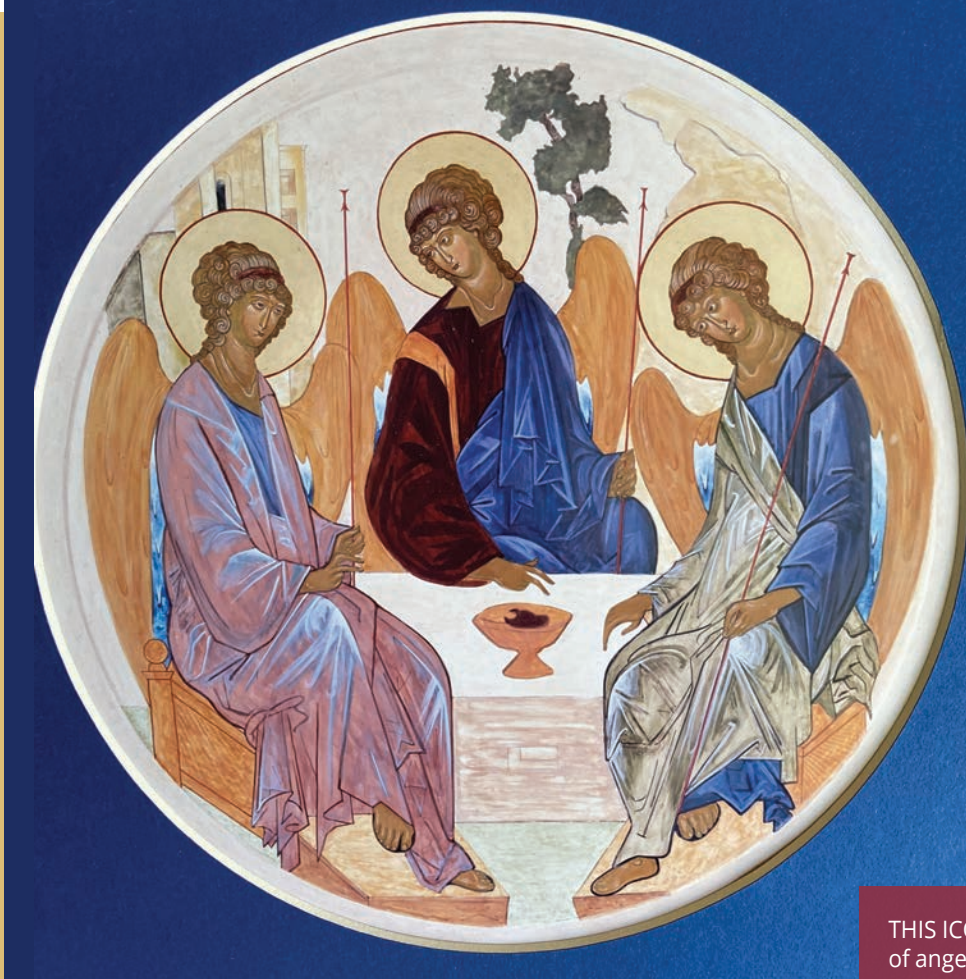
Of his relationship with the icons, he says, "It's changed everything that I do in daily life. It's brought me closer to prayer throughout the day."



BROTHER MICHAEL FRANCIS KEARNEY, C.F.R.

THE ICON of Archangel Michael (left) was created by Brother Joseph Pio Young, C.F.R. (below), shown here working.





VOCATION CLARITY BEFORE AN ICON

“YOU FEEL THEIR PRESENCE when you’re working. They’re there with you,” says Sister Nancy Lee Smith, I.H.M. about the divine subjects of her icons. She has been a full-time iconographer for 30 years and studied with luminaries, including Ksenia

Pokrovsky—a Russian Orthodox painter who helped revive classical iconography while it was still restricted in the Soviet Union. In 1957, Smith was a sculpture major at Webster College when she heard a call

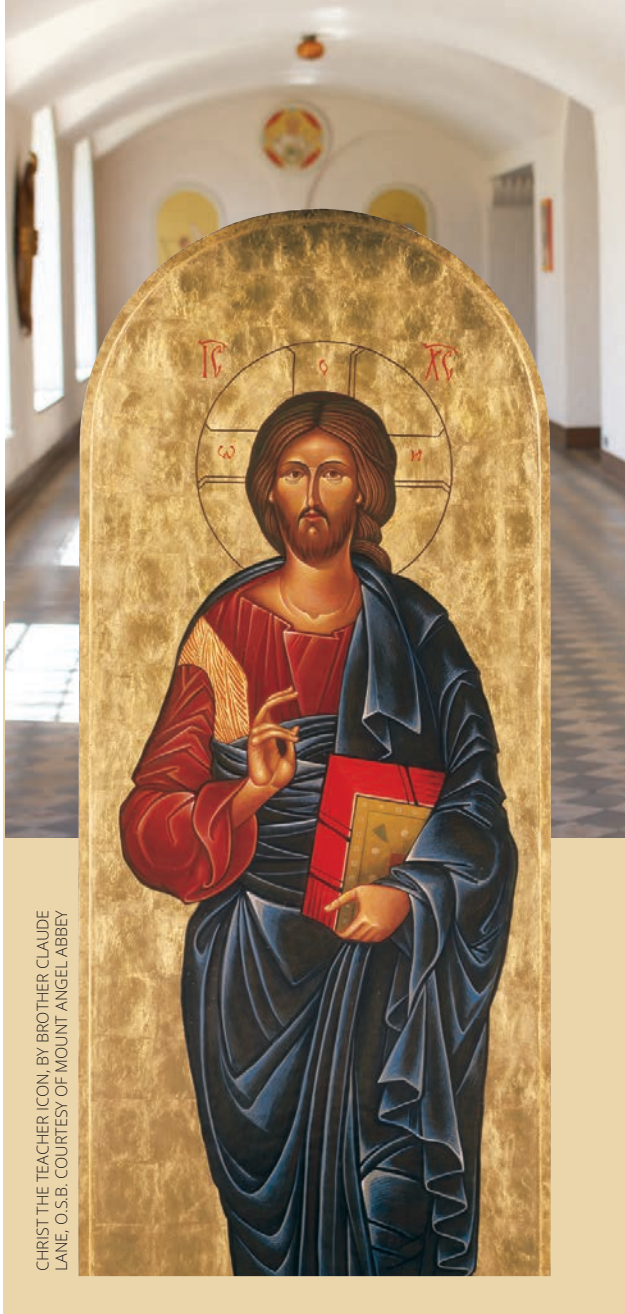
to religious life as she prayed before an icon of Our Mother of Perpetual Help for clarity on her vocation. That moment led her to join the Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary in Monroe, Michigan and to experience a lifetime of interconnected moments with the divine through her iconography practice.

“The whole thing has been a story between Joseph and the Mother of Perpetual Help,” she says. Saint Joseph is the namesake of her icon studio, as well as her late cat.

With additional degrees in English, theology, and a Master of Divinity degree—as well as icon installations in five countries and across the United States—Smith has spearheaded a prolific ministry as an iconographer. Though edging toward retirement, Smith still delights in explaining the stories and symbolism in her works. “The halo does not mean holiness,” she says of what may be the icon’s most recognizable symbol. “It’s contrary to what we think. The halo only means love. . . . The halo must break into the border, which means north, south, east, west. Because love will never be fenced in.”

THIS ICON of angels by Sister Nancy Lee Smith, I.H.M. is five feet tall and hangs over an altar in St. Benedict’s Church in Chicago. Smith (at left) has been an iconographer for three decades.





CHRIST THE TEACHER ICON, BY BROTHER CLAUDE LANE, O.S.B. COURTESY OF MOUNT ANGEL ABBEY

ICONS PROVIDE GUIDANCE AND INSPIRATION

"IT'S THE GOSPEL written on wood," says Father Michael Shrum, O.S.B. of Mount Angel Abbey in Oregon. "And that's the verb that we use frequently. You can say we paint icons. And, sure, that's true. But another way that we say it is that we write the icon because it's writing the story of the gospel and the life of Christ and the lives of the saints in paint." Shrum, a former archdiocesan priest who felt the call to join the abbey as a monk, started his journey with iconography after seeing art's greatest masterpieces while studying in Italy. "Walking into churches and seeing the art as a catechism really helped me to grow in my faith," he explains. During seminary at Mount Angel Abbey, he began studying iconography under the tutelage of Brother Claude Lane, O.S.B., who has been teaching the art form for more than 20 years.



FATHER MICHAEL Shrum, O.S.B. with the icon he created of Saint Benedict.

COURTESY OF MOUNT ANGEL ABBEY

Lane's oldest icon, Christ the Teacher, hangs over the tabernacle at the abbey. In a poetic turn, the icon was written on an old tabletop previously used to prepare bread in the monastery kitchen. "That's where I prepare for Mass," Shrum says. "And to see the face of the Lord gazing upon us as we ponder his word, the word made flesh right there . . . that's really at the heart of praying with an icon. . . . You can go deeper into the mystery."

Mount Angel Abbey fosters a deep appreciation for iconography and art in several ways, including an exhibit of 22 icons written by Lane called The Salve Suite. "They have been purposely installed around the Abbey Hilltop in meaningful locations," writes curator Father Nathan Zodrow, O.S.B. on the abbey website. "Together, they create a network of beauty and grace beckoning those of us living here and our guests to encounter the mysteries: to 'seek things above.' With each icon there is a story, a narrative, telling why it has emerged from our particular monastic culture and how it relates to the whole composition."

Shrum says that even if people don't fully understand the icons or feel moved by them initially, it is good to approach iconography with an open heart. He compares this to how a parent introduces a child to the faith and stresses the importance of having someone explain things. Shrum believes the icons can provide guidance and inspiration: "It's a wonderful help to our prayer and in discerning what is God's will for us. As we look to Christ and the saints, they're always there beckoning us on to realize God's plan for us."



OUR LADY of the Sign icon, created by Sister Suzanne Mattiuzzo, O.C.S.O., who says she thinks in images and finds making icons to be a spiritually engaging devotion.



MIRROR TO THE SOUL

SISTER SUZANNE MATTIUZZO, O.C.S.O., vocation director at Our Lady of the Redwoods Abbey in California, was formally trained by the Iconographic Arts Institute and Prosopon School of Iconology. She first explored iconography with a fellow Cistercian sister in Iowa who practiced the art and had an extensive library of books on the subject. “God speaks to people in many different ways. . . . I think in images,” she says. Mattiuzzo describes painting icons as “a devotion. It’s many things all rolled into one; it’s a conversation.” She says monastic life and its emphasis on *lectio divina* (a form of praying with scripture) is a natural match for the reflective, spiritually engaging act of icon painting.

She explains why someone discerning religious vows should consider icon painting or praying with icons: “An icon can bring you to contemplation just because of the way that it’s structured. A lot of it is based on sacred geometry. It reflects back to you in a way that touches your heart.... It’s a mirror to the soul.” She recalls an impactful teaching at the Prosopon School that echoes this: “As you’re painting your icon, the icon is getting painted in your soul.”

This is the power and beauty of icons.

WHEN A MAN is ordained, he lies prostrate on the floor as a symbol of giving over his entire life to service, as shown here in the Diocese of Rochester, New York.



No regrets: A grateful priest takes stock

By Father Ron Rolheiser, O.M.I., who belongs to the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate. He is a writer, speaker, and faculty member at Oblate School of Theology in San Antonio.

I wouldn't have chosen this life except for a strong call that I initially tried to resist. It is by far the most life-giving choice that I possibly could have made.

FIFTY YEARS AGO, on an overcast, cold, fall day in the gymnasium of the local public high school, I was ordained to the priesthood.

Beyond the gray sky, another thing marked the event. This was a tender season for my siblings and me. Both our parents had died (and died young) within a year and a half just prior to this, and we were still somewhat fragile of heart. In that setting, I was ordained a priest.

Looking back, what do I most want to say as I mark the 50th anniversary of



Fr. Michael Joyce, O. Carm.
Director of Vocations
email: vocations@carmelites.net
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that day? I borrow from the novelist Morris West, who begins his autobiography this way: “When you reach the age of 75, there should only be three phrases left in your vocabulary: thank you, thank you, and thank you!”

I just turned 75 and reflecting on 50 years of priesthood, many thoughts and feelings come to mind; life, after all, has its seasons. However, the feeling that overrides all others is that of gratitude: thank you, thank you, and thank you! Thank you to God, to grace, to the church, to my family, to the Oblates, to the many friends who have loved and supported me, to the wonderful schools I have taught in, and to the thousands of people I have encountered in those 50 years of ministry.

My initial call to the priesthood and the Oblate congregation was not the stuff of romance. I didn’t enter religious life and the seminary

because I was attracted to it. The opposite. This was not what I wanted. But, I felt called, strongly and clearly, and at the tender age of 17, I made the decision to enter religious life.

Today, people may well raise questions about the wisdom and freedom of such a decision at age 17, but looking back all these years later, I can honestly say that this is the clearest, purest, and most unselfish decision that I have yet made in my life. I have no regrets. I wouldn’t have chosen this life except for a strong call that I initially tried to resist; and, knowing myself as I do, it is by far the most life-giving choice that I possibly could have made.

I say this because, knowing myself and knowing my wounds, I know too that I would not have been nearly as generative (nor as happy) in any other state in life. I nurse some deep wounds, not moral ones, but wounds of the heart, and those

very wounds have been, thanks to the grace of God, a source of fruitfulness in my ministry.

Moreover, I have been blessed in the ministries that have been assigned to me. As a seminarian, I dreamed of being a parish priest, but that was never to be. Immediately after ordination, I was sent to do graduate studies in theology and then taught theology at various seminaries and theology schools for most of these 50 years, save for 12 years that I served as a provincial superior of my local Oblate community and on the Oblate General Council in Rome.

I loved teaching! I was meant to be a religious teacher and religious writer and so my ministry, all of it, has been very satisfying. My hope is that it has been life-giving for others.

In addition, I have been blessed by the Oblate communities within which I lived. My ministry usually had me living in larger Oblate communities and through these 50 years, I estimate that I have lived in community with well over 300 different men. That’s a rich experience. Moreover, I have always lived in healthy, robust, caring, supportive, and intellectually challenging communities that gave me the spiritual and human family I needed.

There were tensions at times, but those tensions were never not life-giving. Religious community is unique, in a class of its own. It isn’t family in the emotional or psychosexual sense, but family that is rooted in something deeper than biology or attraction—faith.

There have been struggles of course, not least with the emotional issues around celibacy and living inside a loneliness which God, himself, condemned (as Father Thomas Merton, O.C.S.O. once said). It is not good for someone to be alone! It is here too where my Oblate religious community has been an anchor.

Reflecting on 50 years of priesthood, many thoughts and feelings come to mind. The feeling that overrides all others is that of gratitude: thank you, thank you, and thank you!

Vowed celibacy can be lived and can be fruitful, though not without community support.

Let me end with a comment that I once heard from a priest who was celebrating his 85th birthday and his 60th anniversary of ordination. Asked how he felt about it all, he said, “It wasn’t always easy! There were some bitter, lonely times. Everyone in my ordination class left, and I was tempted too. But I stayed and, now, looking back after 60 years, I’m pretty happy with the way my life turned out!”

That sums up my feelings too after 50 years—I’m pretty happy with the way it has turned out—and deeply, deeply grateful. †

Reprinted with permission from ronrolheiser.com. Though he now counts more than 50 years in the priesthood, the author’s sentiments remain the same.

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Moved by the power of the Eucharist

FATHER DUY HENRY BUI NGUYEN, S.C.J.

In his early teens Henry Nguyen thought of becoming a missionary. “I really didn’t know what that meant. I just felt called to it.” Fearful of where such a notion might lead, he squashed the idea, but it wouldn’t leave him. Fast forward a decade—during which he was immersed in the Vietnamese Eucharistic Youth Movement (VEYM)—and the idea returned full force. Through his VEYM involvement, he had met a Dehonian priest and liked the community’s emphasis on praying together before the Eucharist. Today he is a Dehonian priest himself, serving in Franklin, Wisconsin as an associate pastor and vocation minister.

What do you enjoy most in your ministry?

In my parish, I like celebrating the sacraments with the faithful, especially Reconciliation. In vocation ministry, I like accompanying serious discerners, helping them toward an authentic response to God. I’m also a chaplain with the Vietnamese Eucharistic Youth Movement, one of my best ministry experiences to date.

What first drew you to religious life?

The calling to serve. I have always centered my life around service; if it wasn’t with the church, it was with the local community.

Your favorite way to pray?

Spending time in front of the Eucharist, quiet one-on-one time with Jesus, being with him in both my wholeness and brokenness, just as I am.

What do you do for fun?

I’m in a movie club. I also enjoy exploring the outdoors and hiking.

What do you appreciate about community living?

Whenever I stay elsewhere, I notice something is missing, and that is my time with my confrères. This experience has solidified that religious life is for me.

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SISTER VILMA Franco, S.P. with one of the many children in her ministry in El Salvador, her home country. The violence of the Salvadoran civil war continues to affect both young and old.



STEVE PEHANICH



By Loretta Pehanich, a spiritual director and Catholic freelance writer who has published three books.

Sister Vilma's fearless faith

The courageous ministry of Sister Vilma Franco, S.P. promotes healing and faith in the very place she saw her father slaughtered.

IT'S 3 A.M. IN ARCATAO, El Salvador and Sister Vilma Franco, S.P. heads to her pickup truck emblazoned with Hermanas de Providencia (Sisters of Providence) to deter government officials from stopping her during her rounds. Under the country's "state of exception" anyone even suspected of helping gangs risks arrest and denial of legal representation, so this Catholic sister needs to be extra careful. She's about to drive sick villagers three hours to the hospital for life-saving treatments. The machete under the front seat helps when a tree blocks a rainy road, and she hopes she won't need it today for self-protection.

Franco knows the dangers of simply living in mountainous territory. At 6, she saw her father murdered during El Salvador's 12-year civil war; she escaped

with her mother and two siblings and hid in tiny mountain caves for a time. Her mom crept out nightly to forage for food and water. They once hid in Arcatao's church as gunmen killed everyone outside on suspicion of supporting guerillas. Franco leads services in the same church today.

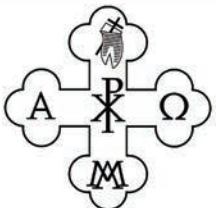
Often the sole minister within three hours, Franco leads Communion services in overcrowded village churches throughout the area. One of those churches is San Bartolomé, where murals among the Stations of the Cross on the church walls depict massacres. Her face as a child is painted into one of them.

Government officials once stopped her and demanded proof that she was a nun. Fortunately, she had a letter from her religious community, which pioneered ministry in the coastal town where young Franco first met members of the Seattle-based community.

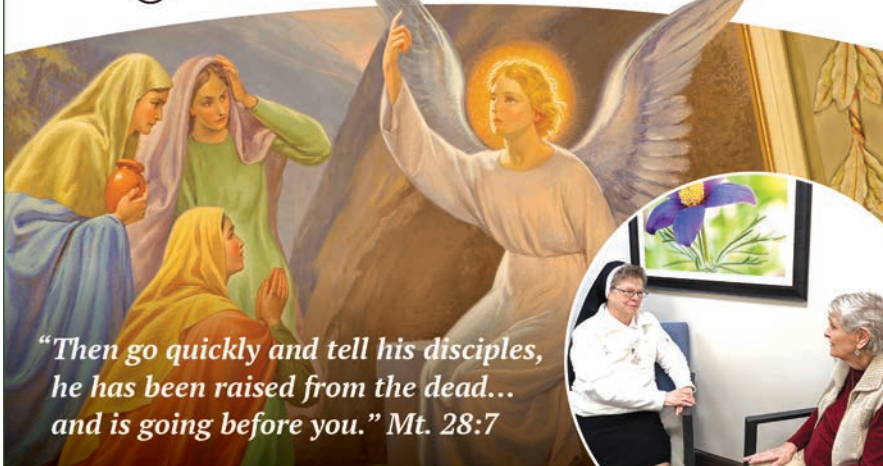
Sisters open up possibilities

Franco's vocation road was rough. It began when Sister Fran Stacey, S.P. learned that Franco worked under abusive conditions as a housekeeper and nanny. From ages 15 to 17, Franco slept on a kitchen floor and rose before dawn to walk miles to school. In 1998 Stacey hired her for odd jobs at the convent, like ironing and watering plants. This gave Franco time to study and allowed her to live at home and participate in parish activities.

"I fell in love with Sister Fran and her ministry," Franco explains. But Franco's journey took a perilous turn. When she saw a dead



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body, which is not uncommon in El Salvador, she flashed back to seeing her father killed. Post-traumatic stress disorder incapacitated her. Her godmother, Azucena Quinteros, coaxed her back to health. Stacey helped her finish high school. They facilitated Franco's ability to answer God's whisper to help others.

Pursuing a vocation as a sister

meant leaving her home region, her mentor, and her ill mother to attend Central American University. Stacey would visit Franco's mother during the years her daughter was away, including time in Chile for pastoral work and formation.

Soon Franco was at a turning point. If she fully committed to the community, she would have to go to



FRANCO BLESSES a girl during a Communion service. Franco herself was only a girl when the war shattered her life. Today she hopes to pass on the love that helped her to heal.

“God spoke to me, ‘Go to the United States. Learn, and come to reconciliation.’”

the United States for her final formation (preparation to be a sister). She hated the idea. Deep anger made her consider quitting. Countless family members and acquaintances had been killed with U.S. weapons by gunmen trained at the United States’ School of the Americas (as it was named at the time).

“God spoke to me, ‘Go to the United States. Learn, and come to reconciliation,’” she remembers. “My heart was saying, ‘Go!’ But I didn’t want to be there.”

The United Nations reports that 75,000 people died during El Salvador’s civil war in the 1990s, a nation of 4.5 million in 1980. Some 8,000 people simply disappeared. Franco makes a point to show some of her

visitors the Sumpul River, site of a renowned massacre. Death squads opened fire on hundreds of families trying to flee to the other side. Unburied bodies turned the river red for days.

Franco’s first vows took place in 2006. She attended Spokane Community College, spent three months in Guatemala, visited the Sisters of Providence’s founding community in Montreal, and studied early childhood education.

But back in El Salvador, her mother’s health worsened. “Do you want me to come home?” Franco asked her mom, who surprised her by saying no, adding, “If I die, you’d be in good hands with the sisters.” Her mother had grown to accept her



JUAN CARLOS Pineda enjoys a visit with Franco. Pineda is able to receive critical medical care, thanks to Franco's help with transportation and arrangements.

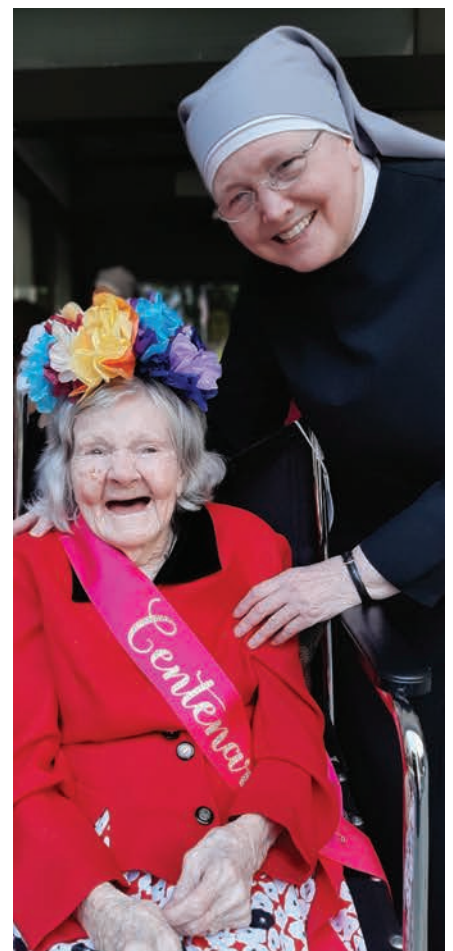
vocation. "I felt free," Franco said. "I finally had her blessing."

At 22 she entered the community and spent 12 years in Washington state. Over time her anger dissipated. "The sisters truly became my family," she says. And out of love for them she became a U.S. citizen "for the good of the community."

Return to home and heartache

Franco made her final vows in 2012,

expecting to remain in the United States. But her road would switch back to Arcatao. "God was telling me to return," she says. She felt a strong desire to return to El Salvador to pioneer ministry in the mountains where she was born. Father Miguel Angel Vasquez, S.J., who has known her since childhood, invited her to join the staff of his parish, which stretches to the Honduran border. "God said, 'Go be a missionary,'" says Franco. It was a powerful feeling.



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Franco believes that the pain she experienced taught her the compassion “to help people who had suffered like me.”

But in El Salvador? In proximity to so many heartbreaking sites? She shrugs. “Why not go back to my own country?”

She returned “to have an encounter with myself and my own history,” she explains. “We work out our wounds from the inside out.”

Franco believes that the pain she experienced taught her the compassion “to help people who had suffered like me.”

In 2016 Franco approached the Providence leadership team with the idea to serve people in El Salvador whose struggles, pain, and determination to thrive she understood. Her nearest Providence sisters would be four hours away, running a scholarship program in Usulután for students in poverty.

Trusting Franco’s discernment, the community leaders blessed her decision.

Franco arrived in Arcatao with a car, a suitcase, and no cell service. No one knew she was coming. Vasquez was absent; she had nowhere to stay. A family took her in temporarily. She gave herself one week to find a place to live or return to Seattle. Since people knew her family and story, the week was enough. She found a house to rent.



A CHURCH MURAL recalling those affected by atrocities during the Salvadoran civil war depicts Franco as a child.



FRANCO leads a church service.

Vasquez suggested that the parish pay her \$100 a month. Villagers could feed her, he said. The Sisters of Providence said no; they paid her a living wage.

Not for the faint of heart

Franco is now a linchpin for the Catholic community in the region, noted for having the highest number of massacre sites during the nation's civil war. Franco facilitates catechetical training for volunteer teachers, delivers pastoral care to destitute homebound parishioners, and encourages young people to dance in a troupe that performs in the parish. She builds awareness of El Salvador's struggles by taking visitors to a small museum on church property. It includes fragmented warheads from the civil war, drawings children made of what they saw during massacres, and her own First Communion picture.

Franco travels treacherous mountainous roads while serving parishioners. One night around 9 p.m., the road was so bad driving home that her machete wasn't enough for a felled tree. She slogged through mud—machete in hand—arriving home at midnight to find her rented space flooded.

She advocates for public funding in Chalatenango's remote areas for healthcare and medical transport. Once she drove back to the village with a corpse in the truck flatbed because hospital treatment failed. Who would think religious life would encompass such duties? She ignores the question. She loves her work, the people, and the healing she sees happening all around her.

"I never want to leave," Franco

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says, "and yet I will go wherever God calls me."

She used to imagine having many children. God appears to have granted this deep desire, evidenced in crowds of youth mobbing her after liturgies. Not long ago, five Salvadoran women attended a "Come and See" retreat online with the Sisters of Providence.

With children to hug, young women to mentor, and plenty of other parish duties, Franco offers each day in her Salvadoran homeland to God, the one who brought her full circle. †

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By Sister Karla Gonçalves, O.C.S.O., a Cistercian sister of Mount Saint Mary's Abbey in Wrentham, Massachusetts.

Intro by Sister Katie McNamara, O.C.S.O.

What a flock of sheep taught its shepherdess

Caring for sheep helps these Trappist nuns stay grounded in the created world and connect to God beyond the walls of their chapel.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF MOUNT SAINT MARY'S ABBEY



SISTER KARLA Gonçalves, O.C.S.O. was initially put off by working with sheep, but over time shepherding has both illuminated and affirmed her vocation to contemplative life. Here she gives DW some extra attention with a handful of grain.

ingrained in us since we were founded. Precisely because it is not an industry, the farm and animal work allow for a more relaxed attitude toward labor and eventually the self, which most newcomers come to appreciate and incorporate into their call to the contemplative life.

Our shepherdess, Sister Karla Gonçalves, O.C.S.O., spends much of her day tending to our sheep, and I have asked her to share a little about what her work means to her in the light of our contemplative vocation.

—Sister Katie McNamara, O.C.S.O.

I GREW UP in the city. The closest interaction I had with farm animals was in the refrigerator aisle of the supermarket, grabbing a gallon of milk and a dozen eggs. Clearly I did not join Mount Saint Mary's Abbey because I was attracted to the farming component of their way of life. Much to the contrary, when I first came, I dreaded the days I was assigned to work at the barn with our flock of sheep: the smell, the dirt, the uselessness of it all! Being with the sheep meant putting on my garment of grumpiness and praying for the time to zoom by.

In a small town in a quiet corner of Massachusetts is a lovely piece of heaven on Earth, a farm on some 500 acres of land that make up Mount Saint Mary's Abbey. The abbey is home to 40 nuns as well as a small flock of sheep and several chickens.

We Trappistine nuns, also known as the Cistercians of the Strict Observance, have lived, worked, and most important, prayed here for 75 years. Every Trappist monastery strives to have an industry to financially support

the life of the community. When our monastery was founded in 1949, our industry was a dairy farm with more than 50 cows, milked by hand for many years. As industrialization increased, our dairy farm no longer was profitable, and we now have a candy business, Trappistine Quality Candy.

When the cows left in the early '90s, a flock of sheep moved in, a gift from a neighboring men's monastery. The flock helps us to maintain our values of simplicity and care for creation,

Transforming moment amid sheep

During my first winter at the monastery, we had a day that was brutally cold, and somehow inside the barn was colder than outside. With that winter came all my doubts: "Is this really what I want to do for the rest of my life? Is it worth it? Did I discern this right? Is this really me?" As I scooped manure into a wheelbarrow, I ruminated on my doubts and



MOTHER SOFIA Millican, O.C.S.O. holds Lambert a few hours after he was born. For the nuns, the vulnerability of sheep can be a lesson in accepting their own weaknesses.



THE LAMBS and sisters visit each other in the monastery garden. Interacting with their flock of sheep keeps the community connected to care for creation, an important value for them.

questions, but the noise of the sheep, who were particularly vocal that afternoon, was overpowering my interior noise. Seeing my frustration, the sister-shepherdess asked me to go across the street to dump the cart of manure. “But I am not finished,” I replied. “That’s OK. You don’t have to do a good job.” Though confused by her remark, I welcomed the task: fresh air and a break from the ceaseless baaing.

I was only a few yards away when the baaing came to a complete halt. Singing followed: the “Salve Regina.” I rushed back to the barn and peeked through the half-open door. The voice filling every nook of the barn was that of the sister-shepherdess, standing in the middle of

it. And the flock? Every single sheep gathered around her was transfixed, mesmerized. The sung prayer finished, the flock settled, and there was complete silence.

I was filled with awe and a sense of the divine that I could not understand. Exterioirly, everything was the same: the smell, the dirt, the seeming futility of it all; inside, however, something moved within me. I looked down at my feet: filthy jeans, worn-out boots, cold, smelly. Was simplicity the key to my vocation? I did not have to strive for scholarships, to compete for jobs, or be up-to-date with the latest technology to keep my job. I was doing “not a good job,” and I was feeling complete, fully me—not despite my

doubts and questions but with them still lurking. I was complete in my incompleteness, and finding it in the smell, dirt, and uselessness of our flock of sheep.

I returned to the cart of manure and told myself, “There is something greater here. I don’t know why it allures me, but I need to open myself to the experience.” As far as I can remember, this was my second yes to my vocation—the first being when I entered the monastery.

Operating from a different rule book

Another time, after I became the sister-shepherdess, a farmer came to visit. He spotted our ewe, Skippy.

I was feeling complete,
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our flock of sheep.

“What’s wrong with that one?” he asked.

“She has a hernia; she has had that lump since she was a lamb.”

“Why don’t you get rid of her? Send her to the meat market. You can’t breed her; you won’t be able to sell her to another farmer. She will be one mouth less to feed.”

Thoughts rushed through my mind. Skippy smiles. She is the guardian of the flock, keeping watch at the gate while everyone grazes. She is kind to the lambs when they first join the flock. She smiles at me when I wish her good night. Skippy smiles.

I broke the silence: “We don’t do that here.”

The farmer went home confused. But I wasn’t. I was changing. I was less preoccupied with gain, productivity, and efficiency, more accepting of what is enough, and able to see strength in weakness.

Simplicity is my way to God and my true self, and I am finding it through shepherding. It fulfills hu-



manity’s first vocation: to be stewards of God’s creation.

Together through the storm

Here is one more story that reveals how caring for sheep fits our life of prayer and has been a source of spiritual growth for me. After mid-day prayer, I rushed to the pasture.

A thunderstorm was predicted, and I needed to fix the roof of the pasture shelter.

Up on the ladder, I saw birds dancing in a sky bluer than any other blue. I questioned the weather forecaster. I lost sight of the sheep that were grazing out on the field only to find them surrounding my ladder. I kept on with my makeshift repairs.



THE NUNS KNOW their sheep by name and personality. Sister Lily Key, O.C.S.O. poses with Ella, who is considered the diva of the flock.

They started to baa. I continued to ignore them. Then, KRACK-BOOM! The loudest explosion I've ever heard. I looked behind me and saw massive dense black clouds swallowing the blue sky, the birds nowhere to be seen. I alone remained in the sky.

I climbed down from the ladder and into the shelter with the flock. All 17 of us snuggled in, and through

the still half-open roof we witnessed torrential rain and endless thunder peals that seemed to shake the earth beneath hooves and feet alike. Lightning was striking all over the pasture. We were motionless. One of the sisters called, and amid the noise I guessed she was asking if I wanted her to drive to the pasture to pick me up. I knew that if I walked away

the flock would try to follow and be even more vulnerable than we already were in the shelter. "No. We'll be all right. It will be over soon."

I bent down and whispered to them, "We'll be all right. It will be over soon." Smell, dirt, fear, powerlessness: the flock and I were one, and the sense of being complete in incompleteness was palpable again. Then I

SISTER ROBERT
Blough, O.C.S.O.
grooms a lamb.
Caring for
sheep demands
constancy from
the community.



thought: maybe this is what my life of prayer is all about. I can't always be prepared for the storm; I can't always fight or stop a storm; but I don't have to escape it either. Because of my faith and my life now consecrated to God and for the church, I am called to stay, to be with the fearful, the vulnerable, the powerless. There, as one with them, my call is to whisper words of hope in their ears and words of trust in God's ears.

The storm was over. The flock dispersed to graze on the lush, wet grass; birds danced in the blue sky again. It was almost time for Vespers, and I needed to go to church and join another flock: my sisters. But this time, we will be the ones storming heaven. †

RELATED ARTICLE: VocationNetwork.org,
"Living simply, centered on prayer."

A life centered on prayer

Like all Trappist monasteries, the primary "work" of the members is prayer, following the centuries-old pattern of the Divine Office, which involves prayer periods with Latin names throughout the day. Here is the daily schedule of the sisters at Mount Saint Mary's Abbey.

3:20 a.m.	Vigils
4:15 - 6:15 a.m.	Private prayer and breakfast
6:30 a.m.	Lauds
7:20 a.m.	Mass, followed by Terce
8:45 - 11:30 a.m.	Morning work
12 p.m.	Sext
12:20 - 1:45 p.m.	Dinner followed by optional siesta
2 - 4 p.m.	Afternoon work
3 p.m.	None (prayer at work)
5 p.m.	Supper
5:30 p.m.	Vespers
7:10 p.m.	Compline

What ministries have you served in since joining your community?

After more than a decade of teaching art in Catholic schools, I now serve as the director of mission and ministry at Academy of the Holy Names in Tampa. I supervise our campus ministry staff and programming, and I help promote the charisma [or spirit] of the Sisters of the Holy Names of Jesus and Mary, who founded the school.

What do you enjoy most in your ministry?

I have two favorite parts. I have always enjoyed collaborating with other women religious and their associates, but more so, I love witnessing the spiritual growth in our students. Even when I taught art, I always made it a point to integrate faith and foster personal voice and meaning-making.

Do you have a favorite food?

Peanut butter—you can't live the vow of poverty without it!

What is your preferred form of prayer?

Contemplative prayer, be it dwelling on a brief scripture passage, gazing at nature, or silently sitting before the Blessed Sacrament.

The best part of living in community?

Taking turns cooking! For one, I would much rather cook for a group than only for myself, and I think a meal made with love by someone else is always tastier.



An art teacher is drawn to something greater

SISTER LISA PERKOWSKI, I.H.M.

Sister Lisa Perkowski, I.H.M. has seen her life goals shift a bit. As a kid with an artistic bent, she aspired to be a Disney animator. She discovered as a teenager that she liked working with children, so she embraced a new goal that combined her interests: art teacher. While in college, she met the Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary of Scranton, Pennsylvania. She loved what they were about, and her dream stretched further. She eventually became an art teacher, joined the I.H.M. sisters, and has embraced the expansive focus of her community: “serving others and bringing about a beautiful, just, and peaceful Reign of God here on Earth.”

BROTHER
Antonio Moualeu,
O.F.M.Conv. gives
a science lab
demonstration to
a family attending
a St. Francis High
School open
house.



By Heather Grennan Gary, an Indiana-based writer and editor who frequently works with religious organizations and universities.

From physics lab to friary—and back again

“If you had told the 15-year-old me what I’d be doing today—well, there’s no way I could have even fathomed it,” says Brother Antonio Moualeu, O.F.M.Conv. His journey has taken him across continents, put him deep into science, and carried him into the world of Franciscans.

AS A PHYSICS TEACHER with a Ph.D. in mechanical engineering, Brother Antonio Moualeu, O.F.M.Conv. can clearly explain Newton’s Second Law of Motion, which pertains to the forces involved in the acceleration of an object.

Moualeu can also explain, on a personal level, how nonphysical forces can sometimes cause amazing changes in one’s own trajectory. In his life, for instance, there was the time in 2004 when his father won the “green card lottery,” and his family moved from the Central African country of Cameroon to Dallas. And then there were the times when questions about his faith propelled him to get



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involved at the Newman Center at Texas A&M, where he completed his undergraduate degree, and at Georgia Tech, where he completed his doctorate. And there was the time in 2015 when Moualeu stopped to talk to a couple of Franciscan friars at the Eucharistic Congress in Atlanta—the force of that encounter was so strong that it catapulted him into a new life.

Today, the kid from Cameroon who became the engineer in Texas is now the friar in New York. “If you had told the 15-year-old me what I’d be doing today—well, there’s no way I could have even fathomed it,” he says. On August 14, 2023, Moualeu made his solemn vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience at St. Francis High School Chapel in Athol Springs, New York, about 10 miles south of Buffalo. More than two dozen family members and about 70 friars

gathered to celebrate the milestone in Moualeu’s journey of becoming a Franciscan brother, a member of the Franciscan Friars Conventual.

Drawn to a life of ministry

His journey officially began when he entered what is called a “postulancy year” in 2017, but of course in reality it began much earlier. As the third of four children in his family, Moualeu grew up in Douala, Cameroon’s largest city. He enjoyed music and academics. “We weren’t ardent, uber Catholics, but we were raised in virtue, and we went to Mass pretty regularly,” he says. Moualeu graduated from a Jesuit high school in Douala shortly before his family moved to Dallas. He enrolled in community college and then transferred to Texas A&M.

While in graduate school at

Georgia Tech, Moualeu began considering religious life; he credits the campus Catholic center with kindling his interest. “It was a very active community, and a lot of guys were discerning [priesthood] for the archdiocese,” he notes. He did too, but soon realized that was not his call. “I was living in Georgia, but my family was in Texas, and I was from Cameroon—it just didn’t make sense.”

He kept discerning. A friend who was also considering religious life shared information about the Franciscans with him. While his friend ultimately took a different path, it was that information that made Moualeu stop and talk with the Franciscans at the Eucharistic Congress. Soon after, he met with the vocation director for the order’s Our Lady of the Angels province, which covers the eastern and southern part

MOUALEU KNEW nothing about the Franciscans when he first met members of his community at a Catholic event. The more he got to know them, the more their life seemed right for him.



of the United States. He visited a friary (Franciscan living quarters) in Jonesborough, Georgia and was invited to the order's "Come and See" weekend in Ellicott City, Maryland. That event provided a startling flash of assurance.

"It felt like a big sign"

"'Come and See' answered my questions in a way that was pretty clear this was desired for me," Moualeu says. He hit it off with the friars and his fellow discerners. But what swayed him most was a talk on the Franciscan life presented by one of the friars. "His talk had seven points, and those points corresponded to

seven spiritual experiences I'd had," Moualeu says. "It felt like a big sign." By the end of the weekend, he sensed he would be joining the community.

Even with such strong assurance, though, Moualeu felt that it was still a wild choice to make. "I didn't know any Franciscans before this," he says. "I didn't really know what a Franciscan was." When he met again with the vocation director, they agreed that Moualeu would enter not the following year but the year after so that he could focus on his studies and learn more about the order.

In 2017 Moualeu embarked on his first step to joining the commu-

nity, a postulancy year in Chicago, where postulants from all the Conventual Franciscan U.S. provinces go to be introduced to the Franciscan tradition and communal life. In 2018 he spent his novitiate year (a more formal preparation period) in Arroyo Grande, California. There he received the habit and continued living the life—participating in corporate prayer, preparing meals, engaging in ministry, and meeting with his formators to get a better sense of his vocation. (Formators are those charged with teaching and guiding those joining the community.)

"All formation during these two years is in-house, and it is great formation," Moualeu says. At the end of



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his novitiate year, he was given the opportunity to finish the doctoral program he had started, so in 2019 he moved into a house of formation in San Antonio and re-enrolled at Georgia Tech, planning to work remotely. He ended up with plenty of company when COVID-19 required other students living in the house to work remotely as well. He received his Ph.D. in May of 2022.

Back to physics, his early love

While Moualeu was in San Antonio, he also worked at a parish and shadowed a science teacher at Holy Cross High School. This was in preparation for his apostolic year, when new Franciscans integrate spiritual life, community life, and ministry before they take solemn vows. In the summer of 2022, he started his apostolic year in Hamburg, New York, where

he was assigned to work as a religion teacher at St. Francis High School, an all-boys school on Lake Erie. Halfway through the year, the school had an opening in the science department, and Moualeu was thrilled to be able to fill in. Now he teaches four sections of physics and serves as moderator for the school's fledgling robotics club. "Teaching was always at the top of my list of potential ministries, and now I'm teaching what I love," he says.

He lives with seven other friars at St. Francis of Assisi Friary; six of them work at the school. Their day starts with prayer at 6:45 a.m. at the friary, then Mass at the school chapel at 7:20. School starts at 8:10, and it's a whirl of prepping, teaching, setting up labs, and grading. After school, Moualeu is with the robotics club and is available for physics help if students need it. He's back at the fri-

"Teaching was always at the top of my list of potential ministries, and now I'm teaching what I love."

ary at 5 p.m. for evening prayer and dinner. (One of the friars attended the Culinary Institute of America. "He's a great cook," Moualeu says. "If a friar has talents like that, they're definitely encouraged to flourish.")

Brotherhood is the right fit

While some Franciscan friars are priests, Moualeu hasn't felt called to that vocation. He has considered it but found that when he's at Mass, he doesn't have the desire to be on the other side of the altar. "I'd rather be where the choir is, or on the piano,

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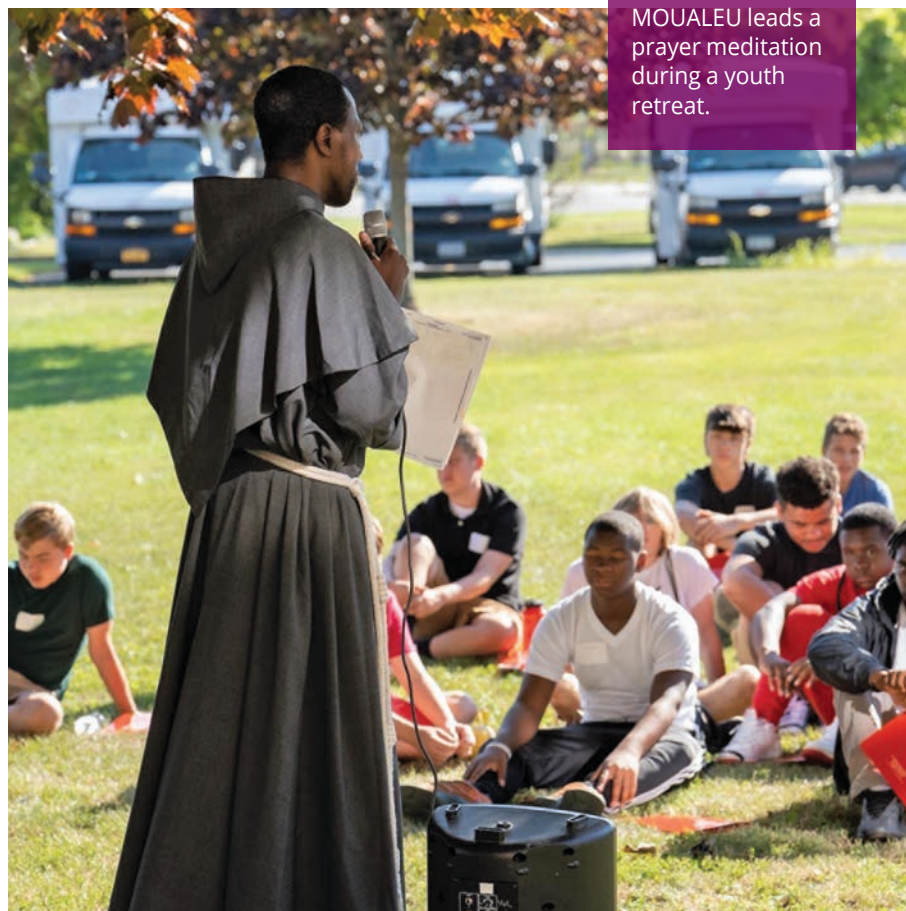
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COURTESY OF FRANCISCAN FRIARS CONVENTUAL



MOUALEU leads a
 prayer meditation
 during a youth
 retreat.

or participating in the pews,” he says. “I realized during my formation that I am called to the life—not to the priesthood. At least not now.”

In addition to work and prayer, life in Hamburg includes plenty of fun. “The thing about community is that even if you’re an introvert, you will still do a lot of things,” he says. With his brothers, he has gotten to explore the local area. “The views here are amazing. The sunsets are amazing. You do get the winter weather, but it’s just gorgeous here.” He has visited Niagara Falls, taken in his first hockey game, and enjoyed music recitals and other cultural events. At Canisius University in nearby Buffalo, he recently attended a lecture by Brother Guy Consolmagno, S.J., director of the Vatican Observatory. Moualeu was eager to hear from a fellow religious

brother-scientist. “One of the things he said that struck me was that the study of science is his prayer. And it’s true—studying the wonders of God’s creation, that’s what we’re doing in science.”

When Moualeu looks back on his journey to this point, he is amazed at how, as a friar, he is able to be more of himself. Before joining the Franciscans, he says, “I thought that I might have to give up everything that was important to me. I didn’t realize that down the line, parts of my previous life would be integrated into my vocation. It’s impossible to know where God is going to lead you, but that’s been very beautiful to see.” †

RELATED ARTICLE: *VocationNetwork.org*, “Science + Spirit = Brother Kyle: Profile of Brother Kyle Mena, F.S.C.”



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Who were some early influences on your faith life?

My grandmothers taught me prayers and bribed me with great food to do pious activities and excel in catechism. My family also belonged to a very vibrant parish in Kerala, India prior to immigrating to the United States when I was 18.

What first drew you to religious life?

The opportunity to lead a prayer life and be of service to others. I first became aware of the vocation of brothers when a Capuchin Franciscan brother took my 12th-grade religion class on a field trip to his monastery. I felt a tug in my heart when I saw a group of brothers playing volleyball and having so much fun together.

What do you like most about your teaching ministry?

Every year at graduation I see the proud faces of my students bubbling with joy and enthusiasm. Knowing that I was part of their journey and they will make a difference in the world is one of my best ministry experiences.

Any fun facts you'd like to share?

I am passionate about new technology and continue to develop it in my spare time. I introduced my students to ChatGPT the week it came out and asked them to use it ethically. I also hold two patents in computer peripherals.

Favorite way to pray?

Lectio divina. I like to prayerfully read the scripture passages and spend time in meditation and contemplation.



He blends new tech and old prayer

BROTHER JOSEPH ANOOP, F.S.P.

By his early 20s, Brother Joseph Anoop, F.S.P. had already achieved what many would call success: a lucrative job as a computer engineer. But the little nudges toward religious life that he had experienced as a boy had never left. As a young professional he met a Brother of St. Patrick by chance on vacation and eventually joined the community at age 25. As a brother, he still uses his tech expertise every day, teaching math and computer science and coaching a robotics team at Mater Dei High School in Santa Ana, California.

COURTESY OF THE BROTHERS OF ST. PATRICK

UNA SEÑAL DE que puedes estar llamado a la vida religiosa es que otros afirmen que esa vida parece ser la indicada para ti.



Por la Hermana Colleen Therese Smith, A.S.C.J., miembro de las Apóstoles del Sagrado Corazón de Jesús.

Traducción de Mónica Krebs.

Cinco señales de que la vida religiosa podría ser adecuada para ti

Busca estas señales en el camino a medida que estudias la posibilidad de la vida religiosa.

Read this article in English on page 24.

UNA JOVEN me preguntó una vez: “¿Dios envía señales?” Ella había estado rezando a Dios pidiendo una señal muy específica que pudiera aliviar definitivamente las dudas de su mente, de que Dios realmente la estaba llamando a la vida religiosa consagrada. ¿No anhelamos todos esa clase de claridad?

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Pero ¿puedes realmente esperar que Dios revele la voluntad de Dios para ti enviándote señales tangibles? Sea o no sea posible, a menudo los jóvenes hombres y mujeres esperan que Dios les muestre una señal obvia que confirme a dónde los está guiando. La sencilla verdad es que realmente no puedes calcular qué “señal” debería mandarte Dios exactamente, ni puedes esperar que Dios responda “en el momento preciso.”

No obstante, nuestra fe nos asegura que Dios siempre está comunicándonos la voluntad de Dios. El mensaje de Dios es coherente, seguro, e indiscutible. La carta a los Efesios resume las intenciones de Dios para nosotros: “Dios nos ha dado la sabiduría para comprender completamente el misterio, el plan a ser decretado en Cristo en la plenitud del tiempo: a reunir todas las

cosas en una en Él, en los cielos y en la tierra” (1:9-10).

¡Ese es el plan! Y cada señal que viene de Dios simplemente nos recuerda que finalmente nuestra vocación va a ser un medio para una unión duradera con Dios. Para que no estemos solos en este viaje, Jesús nos da al Espíritu Santo para guiarnos en el camino. De hecho, el Espíritu Santo nos enseña cómo leer las señales que nos indican la dirección correcta. Éstas son cinco de las señales de tráfico que he descubierto en el viaje de discernimiento.

1. Una paz incomparable

San Ignacio de Loyola enseña que su deseo y nuestra única opción deben ser esto: “Yo deseo y yo elijo lo que mejor me conduzca a la vida de Dios que se profundiza en mí.”

Dios no te llamaría a la vida religiosa consagrada y luego dejaría de revelarte de algún modo esa vocación. En vez de algún tipo de señal externa, la tradición ignaciana dice que una profunda paz interior es la señal más verdadera.

Una y otra vez he visto a jóvenes mujeres que sienten una gran inquietud en su proceso de discernimiento, pero cuando finalmente se rinden y dicen “sí” a lo que su corazón les dicta que es el plan de Dios, sienten una profunda paz. El momento crucial llega cuando quienes disciernen reconocen que Dios no los está llamando a ser ninguna otra cosa que lo mejor de sí mismos. Una mujer me describió esta sensación cuando me dijo, “me siento como quien recién ha llegado a su propio hogar.” Una paz incomparable o, como dice Jesús, “una paz



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**El momento crucial
llega cuando quienes
disciernen reconocen
que Dios no los está
llamando a ser ninguna
otra cosa que lo
mejor de sí mismos.**

que el mundo no puede dar" (Juan 14:27), es la primera "señal" de que has encontrado la voluntad de Dios.

2. Tu deseo más profundo

La segunda señal está también integrada con la tradición espiritual ignaciana: tus propios deseos más profundos de hecho reflejan realmente los deseos más profundos de Dios para ti. Una joven, llorando, me dijo una vez: "¡Deseo tanto que Dios me esté llamando a la vida religiosa! No deseo ninguna otra cosa que entregar mi vida completamente a Él." "Entonces, ¿por qué estás tan conflictuada todavía?" le pregunté. "Porque," me dijo suspirando, "¿qué pasa si no es allí a donde Dios me está llamando?" Ignacio nos asegura que Dios ha puesto los deseos más profundos de Dios para nosotros

dentro de nuestros propios corazones. Pregúntate: "¿Me sentiría desilusionado si Dios no me estuviese llamando a la vida religiosa?"

Para saber lo que realmente deseas, por otra parte, tienes que ir más allá de todos los mensajes culturales que te dicen qué "debería" hacerte feliz. Tal vez necesites ir más allá de las expectativas de tu familia en cuanto a quien "podrías" ser. A través del silencio y la oración, gradualmente vas a llegar a escuchar esa tranquila voz interior y, con la gracia de Dios, tendrás el valor de confiar en que estos profundos anhelos internos son realmente de Dios.

Es frecuente que al principio los hombres y mujeres llamados a la vida religiosa se resistan a las motivaciones de Dios. Aún San Pedro exclamó, "¡Déjame, Señor!" "¡Soy un pecador!" (Lucas 5:8). Sin embargo, si somos realmente honestos con nosotros mismos, hay una sutil atracción hacia esta vida. Nos sentimos inclinados a consagrarnos a Cristo, a la oración en común, a vivir en una comunidad de amor, y a dar testimonio del evangelio de manera radical. Mediante una buena dirección espiritual, oración y silencio, puedes llegar a dar nombre a tu más profundo deseo, que podría sencillamente ser dejar todo y responder a la invitación de Jesús, "sígueme" (Lucas 5:27).

3. Con Dios todo es posible

Otra "señal" de que Dios podría estar llamando a una persona a la vida religiosa es que paulatinamente

lo imposible se vuelve posible. Si Dios te está llamando, ¿entonces no crees que te daría las gracias y dones necesarios para concretarlo? Sin embargo eso no significa que el camino está siempre perfectamente libre de asperezas. A veces existen obstáculos—algunos creados por nosotros mismos y algunos externos.

Cuando María le dio el sí a Dios en la Anunciación, claramente existían obstáculos para superar: qué decirle a José; cómo respondería la comunidad; la necesidad de registrarse para el censo. No obstante, para mostrarle a María que “nada es imposible para Dios” (Lucas 1:37), el ángel le dijo que aún su prima Isabel había concebido un niño en su vejez.

Me he maravillado repetidamente cuando Dios aparentemente ha movido montañas en la vida de las personas a quienes Dios llama. Una joven no tenía los medios económicos para pagar su seguro de salud durante el periodo de postulación para ingresar en mi comunidad, pero en su último día de trabajo quedó maravillada cuando su empleador le anunció que ¡su regalo de despedida iba a ser un año de cobertura de seguro de salud!

Otra joven se debatía internamente en cuanto a aceptar que nunca concebiría sus propios hijos. Al reconocer este doloroso conflicto interior ante Dios durante la adoración eucarística, súbitamente se dio cuenta de que aunque no tendría hijos propios, estaría llamada a ser “madre” de muchos hijos de Dios. El asombroso regalo fue que esta



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revelación le trajo una gran alegría y sin más ni más estuvo lista para aceptar su vocación. Una vez más lo imposible se hizo posible.

4. Los demás lo pueden ver

Otra señal del camino es cuando otras personas ven la gracia de Dios

en tu vida y afirman que realmente serías una maravillosa hermana o hermano religioso, o sacerdote. A menudo los candidatos desconfían de sus propios méritos. Si bien sabemos en nuestros corazones que Dios nos llama, en nuestra debilidad humana a veces racionalizamos las numerosas razones por las que no



TU VOCACIÓN ESPERA

JESÚS NOS llama por nuestro nombre a seguirlo. La pregunta para cualquier cristiano, entonces, es ¿cómo? ¿Qué sendero me llevará más cerca de Dios? ¿De qué manera puedo servir mejor? Determinar nuestro llamado, o “vocación” (del Latín *vocare*, “llamar”), no siempre es fácil. Pero cada uno de nosotros puede dar ciertos pasos útiles: 1) rezar y reflexionar sobre qué te atrae y dónde están tus talentos; 2) hablar con un ministro pastoral o director espiritual; 3) confiar en amigos probados o miembros de la familia que pueden ayudarte a considerar objetivamente tus opciones; 4) comprometerte con varias prácticas (Eucaristía, servicio, establecer y mantener relaciones saludables) que van a fortalecer tu espíritu y no van a permitir que te vuelvas egocéntrico. “Yo he venido para que tengan vida, y que la tengan en abundancia” (Juan 10:10).

—TAKE FIVE FOR FAITH

Dios no desea nada menos que la plenitud de la alegría para ti; por lo tanto la más clara de las señales es una profunda sensación de alegría que no puede ser contenida.

deberíamos ser llamados. Necesitamos dejar esta elección a Cristo y recordar que Jesús dijo que “no fuiste tú quien me eligió, sino yo que te escogí a ti” (Juan 15:16).

Una joven que recién había iniciado el proceso de solicitud para ingresar a mi comunidad, los Apóstoles del Sagrado Corazón de Jesús, se encontró casualmente con una amiga de la escuela secundaria. Cuando su amiga le preguntó qué pensaba hacer después de graduarse en la universidad, le respondió, “¡voy a solicitar mi ingreso como Apóstol [del Sagrado Corazón de Jesús]!” Su amiga le respondió inmediatamente, “¡Por supuesto! ¡Tienes el carisma de los Apóstoles!—el es-

píritu de mi comunidad. Si bien no estaba buscando una señal directa, esta joven candidata reflexionó que realmente había sentido que Dios le estaba hablando en este momento. Muy frecuentemente cuando Dios está llamando a alguien a la vida religiosa, Dios confirma este llamado a través de otras personas.

5. La alegría: la señal irrefutable

El sacerdote jesuita y científico Pierre Teilhard de Chardin nos recuerda: “La alegría es la señal más infalible de la presencia de Dios.” La señal de tráfico más segura de todas es una alegría tangible que burbujea y se derrama en todos los aspectos

de la vida. Cuando los jóvenes hombres y mujeres se abran a la voluntad de Dios y digan su propio *fiat*—el “hágase tu voluntad” de María al ángel Gabriel—pronto surgirá una alegría.

La propia plegaria de Jesús por sus discípulos fue que su “alegría estuviese en ellos y esa alegría fuese plena” (Juan 15:11). Dios no desea nada menos que la plenitud de la alegría para ti; por lo tanto la más clara de las señales es una profunda sensación de alegría que no puede ser contenida. Una joven me escribió hace poco: “¡Hasta mis compañeros de trabajo se dan cuenta de que sonrío cada vez que hablo de los Apóstoles!” ¡La alegría es claramente la más vívida de las señales de Dios!

¿Qué significa todo esto?

Cuando estaba trabajando en este artículo mientras iba en un avión, camino a un retiro de discernimiento que estaba guiando, miré por la ventana y me pregunté nuevamente, “¿Realmente, Dios envía señales?” Casi me reí en voz alta cuando vi un arcoíris extendido a través de las nubes. “Igual que en los días de Noé,” pensé, “Dios sigue enviándonos señales.” Ahora me doy cuenta de que todas las señales de Dios siguen apuntando a la misma realidad: “¡Estoy contigo! ¡Nunca te dejaré!”

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las cosas en una en Cristo” (Efesios 1:10). Puedes estar seguro de que el plan de Dios se está desplegando a medida que experimentas una paz inquebrantable; descubres y confías en tus más profundos deseos; lo imposible súbitamente se vuelve posible; otros afirman la gracia de Dios en ti; y finalmente una alegría

inconfundible te da esa señal reveladora: Dios está contigo. †

Una versión de este artículo apareció en VISIÓN 2014.

ARTÍCULO RELACIONADO:
VocationNetwork.org, “Devela el misterio de tu vocación.”



EL HERMANO Luis Ramos, F.M.S. descubre que la mayor preocupación de sus padres es que él sea feliz, se sienta realizado y conectado con Dios.



Por el hermano Luis Ramos, F.M.S., miembro de los Hermanos Maristas y enseña en la Escuela Secundaria Archbishop Molloy en Queens, New York.

Traducción de Mónica Krebs.

Cómo respondieron mis padres cuando me convertí en hermano

Mis padres tenían dudas sobre mi ingreso a los Hermanos Maristas, pero finalmente me han apoyado.

Read this article in English at VocationNetwork.org.

CUANDO PIENSO en el servicio, pienso inmediatamente en mis padres. Me inculcaron cualidades que me abrieron a una vida de servicio. Verlos trabajar en las Escuelas Públicas de Nueva York en docencia y orientación fue un gran ejemplo de servicio y responsabilidad. Su trabajo no siempre era fácil, pero estaban dedicados a los jóvenes. También me enseñaron a ser agradecido y a compartir. Son dos personas muy generosas, tanto en tiempo y energía como en

Su máxima preocupación es que yo sea feliz, me sienta realizado y esté conectado con Dios.

recursos. Siempre los veo dando.

Si bien es cierto que el servicio y la entrega eran valores importantes para mi familia, mis padres tuvieron una reacción ambigua ante mi interés y exploración de la vida religiosa. Me enviaron a Escuelas Católicas desde la escuela primaria hasta la universidad, y sabían que yo estaba especialmente involucrado con la comunidad de Jóvenes Adultos Maristas. Era un grupo realmente importante para mí, con quienes compartía regularmente mi fe.

Cuando empecé a hablar de unirme a los Maristas, mi padre dijo: “De alguna manera me imaginaba que era una posibilidad.” Fui recibido en la Iglesia Católica cuando estaba en la universidad, lo que supuso un cambio para nuestra familia. Habíamos asistido a iglesias Pentecostales y no confesionales toda mi vida. Me atrajo mucho el culto Católico y la tradición sacramental cuando estaba en la escuela primaria. La universidad me pareció el momento adecuado para hacer esa transición.

Mi madre y mi padre tenían dudas y preocupaciones sobre la vida religiosa. Sin embargo, nunca se resistieron ni trataron de frenar el proceso. Siempre me dieron espacio, me hicieron preguntas con delicadeza y pusieron énfasis en escuchar al Espíritu Santo. Ambos



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dijeron que nunca se interpondrían entre Dios y la obra de Dios en mi vida. Estoy siempre agradecido por esta respuesta.

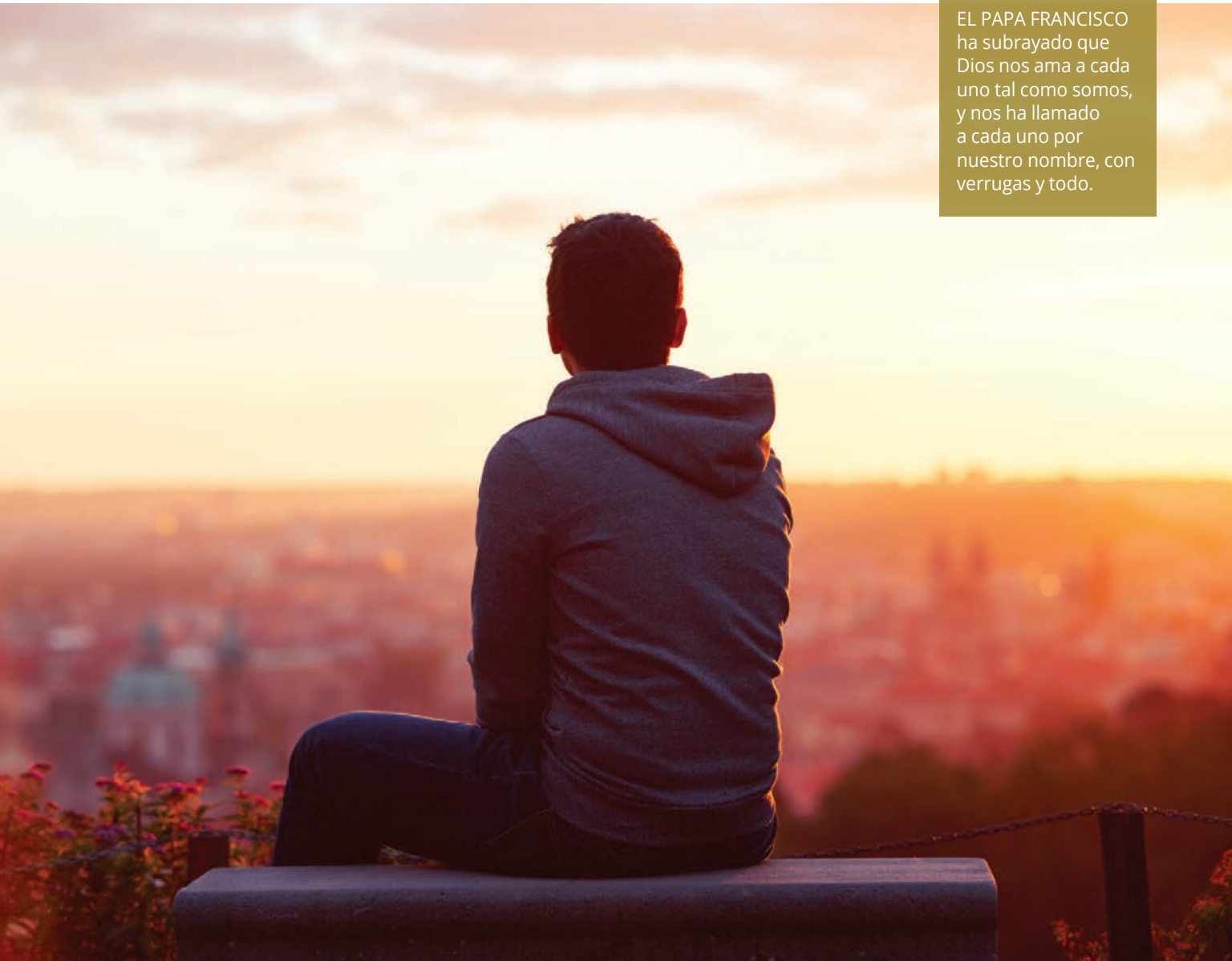
Mis padres habían conocido a muchos hermanos Católicos y tenían una idea básica de cómo podía ser la vida de un religioso. Una de sus preocupaciones era si yo sería independiente. En la comunidad religiosa, dejamos de lado parte de nuestra independencia personal para ser más interdependientes. Pero no nos convertimos en robots religiosos. Siempre he admirado a los hermanos que he conocido por ser ellos mismos sin dejar de pertenecer a algo más grande. Por suerte, mis padres también lo experimentaron, dado que los conocieron.

Otra preocupación era sin duda la cuestión de los nietos. Mis padres nunca nos impusieron una carrera o un estilo de vida a mí o a mi

hermana. Dieron ejemplo de lo que era ser educadores, miembros de la comunidad y un matrimonio comprometido. Con el paso del tiempo, hemos hablado de la realidad de que no quiero formar una familia. Lo habrían aceptado si fuera una realidad en mi vida, pero saben que no lo es. No hacen un escándalo y tampoco lanzan indirectas. ¡Eso sería muy molesto!

Su máxima preocupación es que yo sea feliz, me sienta realizado y esté conectado con Dios. Mientras mi discernimiento continúa en los votos temporales, confío en que seguiremos apoyándonos mutuamente. Como familia, seguimos aprendiendo juntos. Veo crecer a mis padres mientras mi hermana y yo entramos en la edad adulta. Cada uno vive una vida diferente, con sus propias circunstancias y desafíos. ¡Para nosotros es un viaje vocacional estupendo! †

EL PAPA FRANCISCO ha subrayado que Dios nos ama a cada uno tal como somos, y nos ha llamado a cada uno por nuestro nombre, con verrugas y todo.



Ya has sido llamado

Mensaje del Papa Francisco a los jóvenes

Dios no está esperando que seas una persona más digna.
Dios te ama tal como eres y ya te ha llamado por tu nombre.

Read this article in English on page 54.

Mientras muchas personas comienzan a considerar la vida como hermana, hermano o sacerdote con la pregunta: “¿Estoy llamado?” una pregunta mejor podría ser: “¿Cómo estoy llamado?” El Papa Francisco ha animado a los fieles a reconocer que cada Cristiano tiene un llamado, una invitación muy personal de Dios que nos ama tal como somos. Estas son algunas de sus palabras sobre el tema, extraídas de su discurso en la ceremonia de bienvenida de la Jornada Mundial de la Juventud 2023 en Lisboa.

CHICOS Y CHICAS, somos amados como somos... ¿Entienden esto? Y somos llamados por el nombre de cada uno de nosotros.

No es un modo de decir, es Palabra de Dios (ver Isaías 43:1 y 2 Timoteo 1:9). Amigo, amiga, si Dios te llama por tu nombre significa que para Dios ninguno de nosotros es un número. Es un rostro, es una cara, es un corazón. Quisiera que cada uno vea una cosa: muchos hoy saben tu nombre, pero no te llaman por tu nombre. De hecho, tu nombre es conocido, aparece en las redes sociales, se elabora por algoritmos que le asocian gustos y preferencias. Pero todo esto no interpela tu unicidad, sino tu utilidad para los estudios de mercado.

Cuántos lobos se esconden detrás de sonrisas de falsa bondad, diciendo que saben quién sos, pero que no te quieren; insinúan que creen en ti y prometen que llegarás a ser alguien, para después dejarte solo cuando ya no les interesas más. Y estas son las ilusiones de lo virtual y debemos estar atentos para no dejarnos engañar, porque muchas realidades que hoy nos atraen y prometen felicidad después se muestran por aquello de lo que son: cosas vanas, pompas de jabón, cosas superfluas, cosas que no sirven y que nos dejan vacíos por dentro. Les digo una cosa: Jesús no es así, no es así; Él confía en ti, confía en cada uno de ustedes, en cada uno de nosotros, porque para Jesús cada uno de nosotros le importamos, cada uno de ustedes le importa. Y ese es Jesús.

Y es por eso [que] nosotros, su Iglesia, somos *la comunidad de los que son llamados*; no somos la comunidad de los mejores, no, somos todos



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pecadores, pero somos llamados así como somos. Pensemos un poquito esto en el corazón: somos llamados como somos, con los problemas que tenemos, con las limitaciones que tenemos, con nuestra alegría desbordante, con nuestras ganas de ser mejores, con nuestras ganas de triunfar. Somos llamados como somos. Piensen esto: Jesús me llama como soy, no como quisiera ser. Somos comunidad de hermanos y hermanas de Jesús, hijos e hijas del mismo Padre.

Amigos, quisiera ser claro con ustedes, que son alérgicos a la falsedad y a las palabras vacías: en la Iglesia, hay espacio para todos. Para todos. En la Iglesia, ninguno sobra. Ninguno está de más. Hay espacio para todos. Así como somos. Todos. Y eso Jesús lo dice claramente. Cuando manda a los apóstoles a llamar para el banquete de ese señor que lo había preparado, dice: “Vayan y traigan a todos”, jóvenes y viejos, sanos, enfermos, justos y pecadores. ¡Todos, todos, todos!

En la Iglesia hay lugar para todos. “Padre, pero yo soy un desgraciado, soy una desgraciada, ¿hay lugar para mí?”. ¡Hay lugar para todos! El Señor no señala con el dedo, sino que abre sus brazos. Es curioso: el Señor no sabe hacer esto [indica con el dedo], sino que hace esto [hace el

En la Iglesia, hay espacio para todos. Para todos. En la Iglesia, ninguno sobra. Ninguno está de más. Hay espacio para todos. Así como somos.

gesto de abrazar]. Nos abraza a todos. Nos muestra a Jesús en la cruz, que tanto abrió sus brazos para ser crucificado y morir por nosotros. Jesús nunca cierra la puerta, nunca, sino que te invita a entrar; entrá y ve. Jesús recibe, Jesús acoge. En estos días cada uno de nosotros transmite el lenguaje de amor de Jesús. Dios te ama, Dios te llama. ¡Qué lindo es esto! Dios me ama, Dios me llama. Quiere que esté cerca de Él...

Queridos chicos y chicas, los invito a pensar esto tan hermoso: que Dios nos ama, Dios nos ama como somos, no como quisiéramos ser o como la sociedad quisiera que seamos. ¡Como somos! Nos llama con los defectos que tenemos, con las limitaciones que tenemos y con las ganas que tenemos de seguir adelante en la vida. Dios nos llama así. †

ARTÍCULO RELACIONADO:
VocationNetwork.org, “El Papa Francisco quiere que TÚ seas un misionero.”



ES ESENCIAL QUE los sacerdotes se dediquen al servicio. Aquí, el Padre Miguel Briseño, O.F.M.Conv. sirve a su rebaño presidiendo una confirmación.



Por el Padre Jim Kent, O.F.M.Conv., un Fraile Franciscano Conventual.

Traducción de Mónica Krebs.

Qué hace falta para ser sacerdote

Ser sacerdote es un honor y una responsabilidad impresionante. Estar al servicio de los demás es ser un canal de la gracia de Dios, y ese es el corazón de esta vocación especial.

Read this article in English at VocationNetwork.org.

HACE AÑOS ESTUVE en una reunión de familiares a los que no veo a menudo. Mientras hablaba con mi prima y su marido, su hija de siete años se acercó y se sentó en su regazo. En una pausa de nuestra conversación, la pequeña Megan se inclinó hacia mí y me dijo: “Tú eres el cura, ¿verdad?” “Ese soy yo.” “Bien”, dijo, y sus ojos se encendieron de expectación. “Dime todo lo que sabes sobre Dios.”

La oración es el ancla para todo sacerdote. Su oración personal es un tiempo de solaz y silencio en la presencia de Dios.

Me sentí abrumado por el asombro y el deseo de esta niña de siete años. Por supuesto, no había tiempo suficiente—ni ahora ni entonces—para contarle todo lo que sabía sobre Dios. Y su pregunta me recordó que lo que sé de Dios siempre será bastante limitado. Pero, como sacerdote, estoy comprometido a aprender todo lo que pueda sobre nuestro Dios y a compartirlo con los demás, especialmente a través de los sacramentos.

Ser un buen sacerdote comienza, ante todo, con esa relación con Dios—aprender y experimentar todo lo posible, amar y ser amado por un Dios que es a la vez inmanente—con nosotros— y trascendente—más allá de nosotros. Es un proceso continuo y vivo con muchas facetas, y siempre empieza con la oración.

Orar y predicar

La oración es el ancla para todo sacerdote. Su oración personal es un tiempo de solaz y silencio en la presencia de Dios. También es un tiempo de palabras—palabras dichas de la manera que mejor nutre la relación de ese sacerdote. El elemento crucial es que el sacerdote dedique realmente tiempo a la oración personal. Puede parecer extraño hacer este comentario, pero las constantes exigencias del ministerio y las muchas ocasiones para la oración pública pueden fácilmente interrumpir el tiempo de oración personal con Dios.



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Cuando el difunto cardenal Joseph Bernardin era arzobispo de Cincinnati, se dio cuenta—con la ayuda de tres jóvenes sacerdotes—de que necesitaba más tiempo de calidad con Dios. Decidió dedicar la primera hora de cada día a la oración y la meditación. Con todas las exigencias de ser pastor de un

gran rebaño, fue esa hora, escribió más tarde, la que lo sostuvo durante todo el día y lo convirtió en un buen sacerdote y obispo.

La oración personal siempre informa y enriquece la oración pública, y viceversa. Para un sacerdote diocesano, el antiguo régimen de salmos y oraciones de la Liturgia de las Horas

La ordenación no es un final, sino un comienzo para crecer de nuevas maneras.

es ante todo una oración privada. Para los sacerdotes que pertenecen a una orden religiosa, es una oración rezada con los miembros de su comunidad. La Liturgia de las Horas es la oración de la Iglesia, el eje de otras oraciones y liturgias públicas, y es esencial para que los sacerdotes desarrollen una relación más profunda con Dios.

La oración más común e importante en la vida de un sacerdote es la Eucaristía. Es aquí donde el sacerdote se sitúa más notablemente *in persona Christi*, “en la persona de Cristo.” Nadie puede ser un buen sacerdote sin ser consciente de la centralidad de la Misa para nuestra fe y sin celebrar sus sagrados misterios con cuidado y consideración. Para mí, presidir la Eucaristía es humilde y sobrecogedor.

Cuando celebra la Eucaristía, un sacerdote debe estar preparado para pronunciar homilías arraigadas en la sabiduría y la inspiración de la manera que más lo identifique. El buen sacerdote se da cuenta de que estos pocos minutos pueden ser muy importantes en la vida de una

congregación. No pueden darse por sentados. Para ser un buen sacerdote es necesario esforzarse por ser un buen predicador. Esto surge del fruto de la oración—tanto privada como pública—y del compromiso de trabajar en ello.

Los atributos necesarios

Ciertos atributos y actitudes ayudan a una persona a aprovechar al máximo el sacerdocio. El primero es la apertura al crecimiento. Somos una Iglesia y un pueblo peregrinos, y un sacerdote debe estar abierto a caminar hacia donde Dios lo llame. Un sacerdote será llamado a asumir nuevos ministerios en nuevos lugares. A veces encontrará un gran éxito y otras veces un fracaso absoluto—y necesita aprender de ambos. La ordenación no es un final, sino un comienzo para crecer de nue-

vas maneras. El crecimiento puede ser emocionante y doloroso, y un sacerdote tiene que hacer frente a esa oportunidad con apertura de mente y de corazón.

Un segundo atributo de un sacerdote efectivo es abrazar la condición humana con los ojos de la fe. El sacerdocio implica celebrar con alegría la nueva vida en Bautismos y bodas, y compartir el dolor de quienes lloran la pérdida de seres queridos. El sacerdocio te llama a estar con los enfermos y los presos, los pobres y los ricos, con aquellos cuya fe es fuerte y quienes viven en la duda. Un sacerdote se ve envuelto en condiciones eclesísticas y sociales que no puede controlar. Puede ejercer su ministerio en un entorno de crecimiento y expansión, o en uno de disminución, fusiones y cierres. Puede ser destinado a una parroquia rural, a una del área carenciada de la

LA GENEROSIDAD es una cualidad clave para los sacerdotes, y dar una bendición extiende la generosa gracia de Dios a los demás. En la foto, el Padre Juan Zúñiga, O.F.M.Conv. bendiciendo a los fieles con agua bendita.



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ciudad, o a una de un suburbio floreciente. Quizá tenga que aprender un nuevo idioma y una nueva cultura, o trabajar en medio de escándalos y contratiempos ajenos a su voluntad. A pesar de todos los altibajos, debe ver la gracia de Dios actuando en el mundo con la mirada puesta en el Reino y su plenitud.

La generosidad es otro atributo clave. “Los mejores sacerdotes que conozco comparten la virtud de la generosidad,” dice el obispo John Stowe, de la Diócesis de Lexington, Kentucky. “Su mundo es más grande que ellos mismos, y están verdaderamente dedicados al ministerio.” Estos sacerdotes se dan cuenta de que el ministerio no consiste en acariciar su propio ego, sino en cuidar de las almas. “Una sana autocomprensión y un espíritu generoso,” dice Stowe, “son las verdaderas marcas de la grandeza y la excelencia.”

Aunque el efecto que un sacerdote tiene en la vida de tantas personas puede parecer abrumador, el sentido del humor es esencial para mantener todo en perspectiva. Es sano reírse, y un sacerdote debe ser capaz de reírse de sí mismo y de las alegrías y absurdos del mundo. Puede ser un comentario de un niño desinhibido o de un anciano bromista. Reír es reconocer un don de Dios y admitir nuestras propias falencias y limitaciones humanas.

Un buen sacerdote debe sentirse a gusto en su propia piel. Esto le permite estar contento con su tiempo a solas, atesorando la tranquilidad que tiene para sí mismo, lo quiera o no. Debe conocer—y aceptar—sus fortalezas y debilidades.

“Para ser un sacerdote lleno de fe, uno debe ser consciente no sólo de sus dones, sino también de sus áreas de crecimiento—y no tener

miedo de admitirlas ante sí mismo y ante los demás”, dice el padre Miguel Briseño, O.F.M.Conv., párroco de Nuestra Señora de Monte Carmelo en El Paso. “Debe estar dispuesto a escuchar a los demás y estar presente para ellos.”

No lo hagas solo

Los buenos sacerdotes tienen capacidad para la amistad. Familia y amigos ayudan a poner todo en la perspectiva adecuada. He encontrado gran apoyo en las visitas y vacaciones con amigos de la universidad y otras personas que me conocen aparte de mi ministerio. Lo mismo puede decirse de mi familia. Mis padres y hermanos, sus cónyuges y sus hijos me han mantenido arraigado en lo que soy, a veces de forma bastante incisiva. Una vez, mi madre anunció a la familia que, como había sido elegido vicario

LOS SACERDOTES TIENEN muchas oportunidades de celebrar acontecimientos tanto felices como dolorosos. El Padre Miguel Briseño, O.F.M.Conv. celebra la Misa del Domingo de Ramos con sus feligreses.



provincial (líder de una sección de mi comunidad religiosa), tenía un nuevo título: Muy Reverendo. Uno de mis hermanos respondió: “Lo llamaremos simplemente Muy Jim.”

Estas relaciones con familia y amigos, compañeros y mentores son indispensables para llevar una vida célibe feliz. Un buen sacerdote aprovecha y cultiva esta intimidad. Es muy importante para su vida de celibato. Crecer en confianza con los demás refleja la confianza y la intimidad que tiene con Dios.

Un último atributo de un buen sacerdote es su dedicación al servicio de los demás. “Un profundo sentido de servicio a la Iglesia y a todas las personas, junto con una fe profunda, es lo que está en la base del sentido de esta vocación tan especial”, dice uno de mis compañeros sacerdotes

Franciscanos, el Padre Tom Merrill, O.F.M.Conv. “Nada me da más alegría que haber servido a otros, especialmente en un momento importante o difícil de sus vidas, cuando se encontraban en una encrucijada.”

Un canal de la gracia de Dios

Todos los sacerdotes tienen ocasión de servir a los demás y, al hacerlo, se les recuerda cómo Dios actúa a través de ellos. Esta verdad me golpeó profundamente en el segundo año de mi propio sacerdocio. Recibí una llamada a altas horas de la noche para acudir a un hospital de una ciudad lejana y ayudar a una familia a sobrellevar una muerte.

Cuando llegué, me recibieron dos médicos que me pusieron al tanto de la situación. Esa tarde,

una niña de 13 años había muerto repentinamente de un tumor. La familia estaba tan angustiada que se negó a que el personal del hospital o el director de la funeraria hicieran nada hasta que llegara un sacerdote. Como el párroco local no estaba en la ciudad, tardaron cuatro horas en encontrar un sacerdote, así que se alegraron cuando llegué.

Los médicos me presentaron a la familia. Hablamos un rato y luego entramos en la habitación donde yacía su hija. Rezamos juntos y en silencio. Bendije y ungí el cuerpo de esta niña de 13 años y rezamos un poco más. Finalmente, volvimos a la zona familiar. Hablaron de la vida de su hija y de todo lo que había significado para ellos. Después de un par de horas, se sintieron suficientemente cómodos para permitir que

Estar al servicio de los demás es ser un canal de la gracia de Dios, y ése es el centro de esta especial vocación.

el hospital siguiera adelante. Les di las buenas noches y me dispuse a marcharme.

Los dos médicos seguían allí y me acompañaron hasta el coche. Una vez en el estacionamiento, me dirigí a ellos y les dije: “Debo decirles algo. En nombre de la familia y de la iglesia, quiero darles las gracias por estar con esta familia en sus momentos de dolor. Sé que podrían haber estado en casa con sus propias familias hace horas, y les agradezco que hayan ido más allá de su deber. Fue un gran consuelo para ellos.”

Los médicos asintieron, y uno de ellos me tomó del brazo y me dijo: “Sus palabras son muy amables, pero permítame decirle algo. Como médicos podemos hacer cosas increíbles. Ayudamos a la gente a superar enfermedades y dolencias y a recuperar la salud. A veces incluso resucitamos personas y las traemos de vuelta de la muerte. Pero hagamos lo que hagamos, todos nuestros cuerpos acaban desgastándose. Lo que hacemos—por bueno que sea—es sólo temporal. Pero lo que usted hace como sacerdote es atender el alma. Y eso es eterno. Así que le damos las gracias por lo que hace.”

Sus palabras me produjeron escalofríos. Y comprendí muy clara y definidamente lo que este médico había dicho—y lo que no había dicho. No dijo que yo, el Padre Jim, tuviera



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todo lo adecuado para decir a esta familia e hiciera todo lo correcto. En absoluto. Lo que estaba diciendo era que lo que yo represento en la persona de Jesucristo es mucho más potente que cualquier cosa que yo pueda decir o hacer. Me recordó el inmenso honor y responsabilidad que significa ser sacerdote. Estar al servicio de los demás es ser un canal de la gracia de Dios, y ése es el centro de esta especial vocación.

Responde al llamado

El escritor y conferenciante Gil Bailie cuenta la historia de un amigo sacerdote que, recién ordenado, vivía con un cura anciano.

“Una mañana, durante el desayuno, mi amigo le preguntó: “Padre, ¿cuándo decidió hacerse sacerdote?” El anciano sacerdote respondió: “Cuando me levanté esta mañana.”

El sacerdocio comienza respondiendo al llamado. No sólo el llamado a ingresar al seminario o a la formación, sino a seguir respondiendo a ese llamado todos los días de la vida. Mientras el sacerdocio nos llama a revelar la presencia de Dios a los demás, los sacerdotes también saben que Dios siempre está delante, detrás y a su lado. Un sacerdote nunca actúa solo, nunca depende por completo de sus propios atributos, porque el milagro continuo de Dios es llenar el mundo de gracia obrando a través de manos humanas. †

Una versión de este artículo apareció en VISION 2019 en Inglés.

ARTÍCULO RELACIONADO:
VocationNetwork.org, “Corriendo hacia mi vocación religiosa.”

CATHOLIC TEACHING urges the faithful to take steps to end climate change, to care “for our suffering planet,” as Pope Francis puts it.



By Carol Schuck Scheiber, managing editor of VISION Vocation Guide.

Climate change: Five facts for Catholics

The Catholic Church has spoken clearly and forcefully about the reality of climate change, its human cost, and the need to address it.

THE PUBLIC CONVERSATION about climate change has ramped up year by year, and that is true within church circles as well. For Catholics, the conversation about what faith has to say about climate change began in earnest when *Laudato Si': On care for our common home* was published in 2015. This groundbreaking environmental encyclical garnered keen attention from around the world.

Our spiritual life is part and parcel of the rest of our life, and it has bearing on how we conduct ourselves in the marketplace, in our relationships, in our politics, and more.

Since then, Pope Francis has continued to speak and write about environmental concerns in general and the climate crisis in particular. In fall 2023 the pope released a follow-up to *Laudato Si'*, the apostolic exhortation *Laudate Deum* ("Praise God"), which is an impassioned plea for the world to address the climate crisis.

Both documents build upon previous statements and teachings of the church and both are addressed to the entire world, since environmental issues are felt throughout the planet. Following are key messages from Catholic teaching on the climate crisis.

1. Faith and "real life" are connected.

The very act of writing an encyclical on our care for creation—and a follow-up document on the climate crisis—means that Pope Francis, like popes before him, wants Catholics to apply principles from faith to all aspects of life. Our spiritual life is part and parcel of the rest of our life, and it has bearing on how we conduct ourselves in the marketplace, in our relationships, in our politics, and more.

So closely intertwined are faith and material reality that Pope Francis spends a good bit of ink in *Laudato Si'* explaining that the created world



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is an embodiment of God in the same way that human life is made in the image and likeness of God.

Our insistence that each human being is an image of God should not make us overlook the fact that each creature has its own purpose. None is superfluous. The entire material universe speaks of God's love, his boundless affection for

us. Soil, water, mountains: everything is, as it were, a caress of God (*Laudato Si'*, #84).

2. The climate crisis is urgent and caused by humans.

Pope Francis recognizes that global warming and other types of environmental degradation are harming the



Major church documents on the environment

Laudato Si' is available as a print book and online at tinyurl.com/Vatican-Laudato-Si (or scan QR code here).



Laudate Deum is online at tinyurl.com/Vatican-climate-crisis (or scan QR code here).



Earth and the plants and animals that live on it, including humans. “Rising sea levels, droughts and other phenomena affecting the planet have left many people adrift,” he notes in *Laudate Deum* (#10). The crisis is not overstated, he emphasizes, and people must face it head on:

As often occurs in periods of deep crisis which require bold decisions, we are tempted to think that what is happening is not entirely clear. Superficially, apart from a few obvious signs of pollution and deterioration, things

do not look that serious, and the planet could continue as it is for some time. Such evasiveness serves as a license to carrying on with our present lifestyles and models of production and consumption. This is the way human beings contrive to feed their self-destructive vices: trying not to see them, trying not to acknowledge them, delaying the important decisions and pretending that nothing will happen (LS, #59).

The pope goes even further in *Laudate Deum*: “The world in which we



CLIMATE CHANGE has a huge human cost. People around the globe are suffering and dying from the increase in floods and severe weather caused by warmer temperatures. With fewer resources, poor people have the hardest time coping.

live is collapsing and may be nearing the breaking point,” he states at the beginning of the document (#2). Furthermore, he provides data about temperature change and clearly links it to human activity. “It is no longer possible to doubt the human—‘anthropic’—origin of climate change,” he writes (LD, #11).

Later he says, “The overwhelming majority of scientists specializing in the climate support this correlation, and only a very small percentage of them seek to deny the evidence” (LD, #13).

3. The climate crisis has cultural and economic roots.

In particular, Pope Francis says our cravings for consumer goods, for our own convenience, and our own comfort, have negative environmental impacts. Technology should not be blindly embraced but rather seen as valuable when it enhances human life and the common good. Economic growth that furthers the climate crisis is a net loss for humanity, he argues. He urges a turn away from what he calls the “technocratic paradigm,” a blind embrace of technology and economic growth.

We have made impressive and awesome technological advances, and we have not realized that at the same time we have turned into highly dangerous beings, capable of threatening the lives of many beings and our own survival (LD, #28).

But a sober look at our world shows that the degree of human intervention, often in the service of business interests and consumerism, is actually making our earth less rich and beautiful, ever more limited and gray, even as technological advances and consumer goods continue to abound limitlessly (LS, #34).

Obsession with a consumerist lifestyle, above all when few people are capable of maintaining it, can only lead to violence and mutual destruction (LS, #204).

Yet, all is not lost, Francis assures us. We can choose what is good and start again.

A change in lifestyle could bring healthy pressure to bear on those

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CATHOLICS HAVE JOINED hands with other activists to push for Earth-friendly policies. Pictured here are participants in a climate march in New York City.

CHRIS HERLINGER; COURTESY OF GLOBAL SISTERS REPORT



who wield political, economic and social power (LS, #206).

A ruined natural environment, Francis says, is closely connected to aspects of our culture that are also in ruins: weak families, dysfunctional governments, and immoral businesses.

Our difficulty in taking up this challenge seriously has much to do with an ethical and cultural decline, which has accompanied the deterioration of the environment. Men and women of our postmodern world run the risk of rampant individualism, and many problems of society are connected with today's self-centered culture of instant gratification. We see this in the crisis of family and social ties and the difficulties of recognizing the other (LS, #162).

4. Hope prevails: Individual and collective action can help.

Ending climate change begins in our hearts and homes and extends into our jobs, policymaking, and more, says Francis. In *Laudate Deum*, he pointedly urges those involved in climate conferences to take more decisive and enforceable action. He encourages activists to keep pushing international leaders. Francis holds out hope for healing the planet:

Although the post-industrial period may well be remembered as one of the most irresponsible in history, nonetheless there is reason to hope that humanity at the dawn of the twenty-first century will be remembered for having generously shouldered its grave responsibilities (LS, #165).

A path of productive development, which is more creative and better directed, could correct the present disparity between excessive technological investment in consumption and insufficient investment in resolving urgent problems facing the human family (LS, #192).

Furthermore, by focusing on our vocations (how we use our God-given talents), Francis says we can be part of the process of healing the planet. He notes in *Laudate Deum*:

Efforts by households to reduce pollution and waste, and to consume with prudence, are creating a new culture. The mere fact that personal, family and community habits are changing is contributing to greater concern about the unfulfilled responsibilities of the political sectors and indignation

Catholic environmental groups

Laudatosimovement.org

catholicclimatecovenant.org


at the lack of interest shown by the powerful. Let us realize, then, that even though this does not immediately produce a notable effect from the quantitative standpoint, we are helping to bring about large processes of transformation rising from deep within society (LD, #71).

5. Celebration and rest are essential.

Yes, you read that right. Pope Francis ends the lengthy, intricate *Laudato Si'* reminding us that a connection exists between a sense of celebration and festivity and our honor for God, nature, and the Eucharist. Furthermore he reminds us that we need to guard the Sabbath, using it to rest and worship. Doing so will renew us in our commitment to nurture both creation and human dignity.



Christian spirituality incorporates the value of relaxation and festivity. We tend to demean contemplative rest as something unproductive and unnecessary, but this is to do away with the very thing which is most important about work: its meaning. ... Rest opens our eyes to the larger picture and gives us renewed sensitivity to the rights of others. And so the day of rest, centered on the Eucharist, sheds its light on the whole week, and

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motivates us to greater concern for nature and the poor (LS, #237).

The mission to care for creation is part of each human being's essential vocation. As Pope Francis puts it in the final paragraph of *Laudato Si'*: "God, who calls us to generous commitment and to give him our all, offers us the light and the strength needed

to continue on our way. . . . His love constantly impels us to find new ways forward. *Praise be to him!*" †

A version of this article originally appeared in VISION 2018.

RELATED ARTICLE: VocationNetwork.org, "Rural religious take to the highways and byways."

FEEDING THE hungry is a corporal work of mercy, but putting it into practice encompasses efforts at economic reform, too.



By Alice Camille, writer, religious educator, and retreat leader. She writes VISION's "Questions Catholics Ask" online and "Discernment Matters" in the *E-Vocation* newsletter.

Questions Catholics Ask

The Catholic tradition is centuries old and always evolving, so there is always something to learn. Explore questions about the works of mercy, salvation, the sacraments, and the Hail Mary.

IF YOU TAKE your faith seriously, you probably have plenty of questions about it. In fact, a lifelong exploration of your questions will help you grow spiritually and intellectually. VISION brings you answers to a few important questions here. We encourage you to explore these questions and others in more depth in the VISION column, "Questions Catholics Ask" at VocationNetwork.org.

What are the corporal and spiritual works of mercy?

Listing the 14 works of mercy is easy; appreciating their breadth takes time. Let's begin with the *corporal works of mercy*: feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, clothe the naked, visit the imprisoned, shelter the homeless, visit the sick, and bury the dead. Where do these come from? Six derive from the Last Judgment teaching in the Gospel of Matthew (25:34-40): "What you do for the least of these, you do for me." The seventh work is grounded in traditional Hebrew respect for the body.

Feeding the hungry goes beyond soup kitchens to the level of economic reform. Satisfying thirst includes the politics of water rights and the ecology of preserving seas and rivers. Clothing the naked involves respecting the dignity of the poor as well as surrendering your cast-off attire. Visiting the imprisoned recognizes many kinds of captivity: domestic violence, sexism, racism, educational impoverishment. Sheltering the homeless includes welcoming the marginalized and lobbying for affordable housing. Visiting the sick expands to creating access for the disabled and inviting the infirm and elderly into the greater community. Burying the dead can include pardoning those who injured us long ago.

The *spiritual works of mercy* are next: admonish the sinner, instruct the ignorant, counsel the doubtful, comfort the sorrowful, bear wrongs patiently, forgive all injuries, and pray for the living and the dead. These teachings are gathered from the New Testament and 2 Maccabees

12:38-46 in Hebrew scripture. This eclectic list was compiled later than the first to balance the temporal (worldly) and spiritual obligations we owe each other. Saint Augustine of Hippo recorded both lists in 421; perhaps he was promoting what was already within Christian tradition.

While Jesus obliges all Christians to practice corporal works of

mercy, some of the spiritual works require spiritual maturity to undertake them. We can all comfort the sad and must forgive trespasses and pray "unceasingly" for other's needs, both living and deceased. Bearing wrongs patiently takes practice, but we can begin at once to form the habit. However, correcting sinners, teaching the ignorant,



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THE SEVEN sacraments of the church are meant to reveal and conceal God. Once we begin to see the world this way, God can come alive in countless ways.

and counseling the hesitant are best left to those more advanced in Christian virtue and knowledge. Mercy has been called the meeting ground of love and justice. In works of mercy, compassion ascends to the level of service.

Why does the Catholic Church place so much importance on the sacraments?

There are plenty of ways to talk about the significance of sacraments. Among the most compelling is that they are actions that reveal and conceal God. This doesn't imply that seven, and *only* seven, actions have this sacred power. Quite the opposite: the sacraments listed by

the church (Baptism, Confirmation, Eucharist, Reconciliation, Anointing of the Sick, Matrimony, and Holy Orders) remind us how many ways God seeks to be known to us.

We find God at work in welcome and in mission and at meals. We experience God in hours of forgiveness and healing. We anticipate God in loving relationships and the call to service. As theologian Mark Francis says, what sacraments best reveal is the conviction that God's loving intention is to save humanity—not to judge or condemn it. This intention isn't just the basis for sacraments, but for the church's very existence.

How did so many of us manage to miss this beautiful idea? Chances

are we learned our lessons about sacraments without ever appreciating their meaning. The traditional definition of a sacrament that many of us were taught is that it's an outward sign instituted by Christ to give grace. This formula, popularized at the Council of Trent (1545-63), was an outgrowth of an era that loved classifying things—especially since the Protestant Reformation was in the process of challenging every practice of the institutional church. Numbering the sacraments and explaining how they impart grace (by imprinting an indelible character or seal on the soul, for one) became the lesson plan. Reciting lists and formulas was emphasized over understanding what these symbolic actions communicate.

A sacrament is an event emerging from mystery. It bears a hidden component of divine love and power manifesting in space and time. Saint Augustine preferred to describe a sacrament rather than to define it. He called it a “visible word.” This fits more with contemporary theology, which names the Incarnation of Jesus (Jesus becoming human) as the first sacrament, and the church as the second one. If Jesus is the sacrament of God—revealing and concealing the “visible word”—and the church is

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THE HAIL MARY evolved from the early Christian tradition of seeing Mary as the bearer of Christ, as shown in this painting by Raphael of the pregnant Mary meeting with her cousin, Elizabeth. According to scripture, Elizabeth greeted her with the words “Blessed is the fruit of thy womb.”

the sacrament of Jesus, you and I might be rightly called sacraments of the church. We begin to understand why thoughtful participation in seven sacramental moments of church life is so significant. They train our vision to see where God is

What sacraments best reveal is the conviction that God’s loving intention is to save humanity—not to judge or condemn it.


concealed, and seeks to be revealed, everywhere life takes us.

Where did the Hail Mary prayer come from?

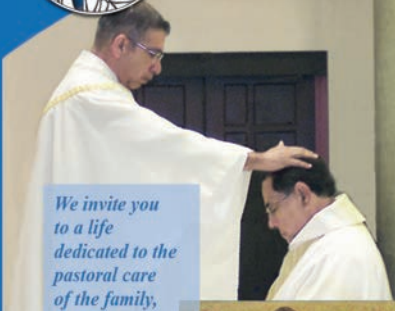
No one knows who put together the series of Bible verses and intercession we know as the Hail Mary. There were several stages to the evolution of this prayer. The title “Mother of God” (*Theotokos*, or “God-bearer” in Greek) was used for Mary after church councils of the fourth and fifth centuries sanctioned it as theologically correct to describe her as more than “Christ-bearer” (*Christotokos*). Forms of this prayer existed in the sixth-century Eastern church. In the West, it was included in the Little Office of the Blessed Virgin Mary by the 11th century. The Hail Mary came into wider use in the 12th century, as the Crusaders invoked Mary to assist their quest to recapture the Holy Land.

The prayer is grounded in scripture with the angel’s greeting to Mary: “Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee” (Luke 1:28). It continues with Elizabeth’s blessing for her young cousin during their visitation: “Blessed are thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb” (Luke 1:42). Elizabeth offers a standard Jewish birth-blessing praising the mother for the child she carries.


While we think of it as a Marian prayer, the Hail Mary is literally



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Heaven and hell,
properly understood,
are images that invite us
to participate now in the
happiness or misery we
ultimately want.

Christ-centered, as all Christian prayer should be. Many ancient writings held the key to their interpretation in the center. The hinge word of the Hail Mary is the name “Jesus.”

What follows is an invocation for Mary’s help (“pray for us”) as she is close to God, being both holy and divine mother. As the prayer begins with the angel’s identification of Mary as Spirit-filled (“full of grace”), then hinges on her relationship to Jesus, and finally ends with her relationship to God, in its entirety the Hail Mary reveals Mary as a willing participant in the work of the Trinity. The final line, “now and at the hour of our death,” was the last addition to the prayer, making it a particularly poignant entreaty for crusaders facing battle, the threat of plague, and other dangerous circumstances.

The Hail Mary also acknowledges Mary of Nazareth as a young girl whose faith in God is strong and true. This elevates Mary to the status of Abraham, whose faith made him father of nations. The Jewish community identifies itself as Abraham’s children. It’s fitting that Christians perceive themselves as children of Mary, our mother in faith.

What does it mean to be “saved”?

Salvation is one of those churchy words we use all the time with relatively little reflection. To Catholics of a certain generation, as well as some Christians, it simply implies you’re not

going to wind up in hell for your sins. But that’s a very reductive idea. Being saved is so much more than that.

In theologian Jon Nilson’s wonderfully rich definition, salvation is the condition of the *ultimate restoration and fulfillment of humanity and all creation* effected by God’s action in Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit. I mean, wow! This is so much bigger than the singular rescue of your soul or mine from eternal flames, so to speak. God’s desire to save includes everything. This reminds us of the words of Jesus after the multiplication of loaves: “Gather the fragments left over, so that noth-

ing will be wasted.” It’s God’s plan that no crumb of creation is wasted.

The important question this raises is: Is this your plan and mine as well? Climate change reveals how human beings have been careless about the stewardship of life placed in our hands. Pope John Paul II’s admonitions concerning our “culture of death” point toward the many ways we “waste” life: in warfare, poverty, capital punishment, and abortion, among others. Pope Francis likewise warns about our “throwaway culture,” which pollutes the air, soil, and water in production, then tops off landfills as we discard these purchases for



SALVATION is much bigger than an individual “making it to heaven.” It involves God’s continual invitation to restore all of humanity and creation to a state of grace.



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more. And we squander life in other ways: in the wasteful use of our time. In exploitative careers founded on personal greed rather than on meeting social needs. In addictive habits, injustice, racism, hate speech, attitudes of resentment, and so much more.

What seems clear is that, if we’re not saved—if we are, in fact, wasted or lost—it’s not because God wills it to be so. God’s design and desire are to rescue *all*. The story of salvation traced in scripture describes the perpetual efforts of a “saving God” who seeks to rescue and reconcile a people repeatedly and stubbornly choosing to wander into harm’s way.

Heaven and hell, properly understood, are images that invite us to participate now in the happiness or misery we ultimately want. In Nilson’s words, “Taken seriously but not literally, [heaven and hell] are reminders of the ultimacy involved in one’s everyday decisions.” There should be no mystery in how we’ll

spend eternity. Just contemplate how you spend today. †

Excerpted from Questions Catholics Ask, vocationnetwork.org/blog/questions_catholics_ask.

RELATED ARTICLE: *VocationNetwork.org, “Ten great things about being Catholic.”*

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—St. Clare

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A



Adorers of the Blood of Christ (A.S.C.)

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community/001

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Apostles of the Sacred Heart of Jesus (A.S.C.J.)

vocationnetwork.org/
community/267



B

Benedictine Nuns (O.S.B.),
PETERSHAM, MA,
ST. SCHOLASTICA PRIORY
vocationnetwork.org/
community/482



Benedictine Sisters of Perpetual Adoration (O.S.B.)

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community/008

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Benedictine Sisters (O.S.B.)/NABVFC

vocationnetwork.org/
community/004

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Benedictine Sisters (O.S.B.), ATCHISON, KS, MOUNT ST. SCHOLASTICA

vocationnetwork.org/
community/080

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Benedictine Sisters (O.S.B.), BEECH GROVE, IN, OUR LADY OF GRACE MONASTERY

vocationnetwork.org/
community/362

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Benedictine Sisters (O.S.B.), BISMARCK, ND, ANNUNCIATION MONASTERY

vocationnetwork.org/
community/358

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Benedictine Sisters (O.S.B.), COVINGTON, KY, ST. WALBURG MONASTERY

vocationnetwork.org/
community/579

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Benedictine Sisters (O.S.B.), CULLMAN, AL

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community/280

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Benedictine Sisters (O.S.B.), DULUTH, MN, ST. SCHOLASTICA MONASTERY

vocationnetwork.org/
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Benedictine Sisters (O.S.B.), ELIZABETH, NJ, ST. WALBURGA MONASTERY

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Benedictine Sisters (O.S.B.), ERIE, PA, MOUNT SAINT BENEDICT

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Benedictine Sisters (O.S.B.), FERDINAND, IN, MONASTERY IMMACULATE CONCEPTION

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Benedictine Sisters (O.S.B.), FORT SMITH, AR, ST. SCHOLASTICA MONASTERY

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Benedictine Sisters (O.S.B.), LACEY, WA, ST. PLACID PRIORY

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Benedictine Sisters (O.S.B.), LUTHERVILLE, MD, EMMANUEL MONASTERY

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Benedictine Sisters (O.S.B.), ST. JOSEPH, MN, SAINT BENEDICT'S MONASTERY

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Benedictine Sisters (O.S.B.), YANKTON, SD, SACRED HEART MONASTERY

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C

Cabrini Sisters (M.S.C.)

See Missionary Sisters of the Sacred Heart of Jesus.



Carmel of Cristo Rey (O.C.D.)

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community/333



Carmelite Sisters of Baltimore (O.C.D.)

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Cenacle Sisters (r.c.)

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Congregation de Notre Dame (CND)

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Congregation of Divine Providence, (C.D.P.), MELBOURNE, KY

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Congregation of Sisters of Bon Secours (C.B.S.)

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Congregation of Sisters of St. Agnes (C.S.A.)

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**Congregation
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**Congregation
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of Mary (C.H.M.)**
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D



**Daughters of Divine Zeal
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**Daughters of Mary Help
of Christians (F.M.A.)**
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**Daughters of St. Mary
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Daughters of St. Paul (F.S.P.)
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Dominican Sisters (O.P.)
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**Dominican Sisters (O.P.),
ADRIAN, MI**
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**Dominican Sisters (O.P.),
BLAUVELT, NY**
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**Dominican Sisters (O.P.),
GRAND RAPIDS, MI**
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**Dominican Sisters (O.P.),
HOUSTON, TX**
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**Dominican Sisters (O.P.),
MISSION SAN JOSE, CONGREGATION
OF THE QUEEN OF THE HOLY
ROSARY, FREMONT, CA**
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**Dominican Sisters (O.P.),
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**Dominican Sisters (O.P.),
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**Dominican Sisters (O.P.),
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**Dominican Sisters (O.P.),
SPRINGFIELD, IL**
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**Dominican Sisters
of Hope (O.P.)**
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**Dominican Sisters
of Peace (O.P.)**
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F



**Felician Sisters (C.S.S.F.),
OUR LADY OF HOPE PROVINCE,
NORTH AMERICA**
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**Franciscan Missionaries
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**Franciscan Missionaries
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**Franciscan Missionary
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**Franciscan Sisters of John
the Baptist (F.S.J.B.)**
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**Franciscan Sisters
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community/030



**Franciscan Sisters of the
Atonement (S.A.)**
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**Franciscan Sisters
of the Sacred Heart (O.S.F.),
FRANKFORT, IL**
vocationnetwork.org/
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L



**Little Sisters of the
Poor (L.S.P.)**
vocationnetwork.org/
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M



Maryknoll Sisters of St. Dominic (M.M.)
vocationnetwork.org/
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Missionaries of Our Lady of La Salette (M.S.)
vocationnetwork.org/
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Missionary Servants of the Most Blessed Trinity (M.S.B.T.)
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Missionary Sisters of the Sacred Heart of Jesus (M.S.C.), CABRINI SISTERS
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O



Olivetian Benedictine Sisters (O.S.B.)
vocationnetwork.org/
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Order of the Incarnate Word and Blessed Sacrament (OVISS), CORPUS CHRISTI, TX
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P

Parish Visitors of Mary Immaculate (P.V.M.I.)
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Passionist Nuns (C.P.), Ellisville, MO
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Poor Clares (O.S.C.), ORDER OF SAINT CLARE, BOSTON, MA
vocationnetwork.org/
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Poor Clares (O.S.C.), ORDER OF SAINT CLARE, CINCINNATI, OH
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Poor Clares (O.S.C.), ORDER OF SAINT CLARE, LANGHORNE, PA
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Poor Clares (O.S.C.), ORDER OF SAINT CLARE, TRAVELERS REST, SC
vocationnetwork.org/
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Poor Handmaids of Jesus Christ (P.H.J.C.)
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community/049



Presentation Sisters (P.B.V.M.) Collaborative
vocationnetwork.org/
community/606



R

Religious of the Assumption, USA Province (R.A.)
vocationnetwork.org/
community/466



S



Salesian Sisters of St. John Bosco (F.M.A.), DAUGHTERS OF MARY HELP OF CHRISTIANS
vocationnetwork.org/
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Salvatorian Sisters (S.D.S.)
See Sisters of the Divine Savior.



School Sisters of Notre Dame (S.S.N.D.)
vocationnetwork.org/
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Servants of the Blessed Sacrament (S.S.S.)
vocationnetwork.org/
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Servants of the Holy Heart of Mary (S.S.C.M.)
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Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary (I.H.M.), IMMACULATA, PA
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Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary (I.H.M.), MONROE, MI
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Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary (I.H.M.), SCRANTON, PA
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Sisters of Bon Secours (C.B.S.)
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Sisters of Charity of Leavenworth (S.C.L.)
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Sisters of Charity of Nazareth, KY (S.C.N.)
vocationnetwork.org/
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Sisters of Charity of Saint Elizabeth (S.C.)
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Sisters of Charity of St. Joan Antida (SCSJA)
vocationnetwork.org/
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Sisters of Charity of the Blessed Virgin Mary (B.V.M.)
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Sisters of Charity of the Incarnate Word (CCVI), HOUSTON, TX
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Sisters of Christian Charity (S.C.C.)
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Sisters of Mary of the Presentation (S.M.P.)
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Sisters of Mercy of the Americas (R.S.M.)
vocationnetwork.org/
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Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur (SNDdeN)
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 **Sisters of Notre Dame of the United States (S.N.D.)**
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Sisters of Our Lady of Sion (N.D.S.)
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 **Sisters of Our Mother of Divine Grace (S.M.D.G.)**
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Sisters of Providence (S.P.), MOTHER JOSEPH PROVINCE
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 **Sisters of Providence (S.P.), SAINT MARY-OF-THE-WOODS, IN**
vocationnetwork.org/
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Sisters of Reparation of the Sacred Wounds of Jesus (S.R.)
vocationnetwork.org/
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 **Sisters of Saints Cyril and Methodius (SS.C.M.)**
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Sisters of St. Agnes (C.S.A.)
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Sisters of St. Francis (O.S.F.), CLINTON, IA
vocationnetwork.org/
community/475



Sisters of St. Francis of Philadelphia (O.S.F.)
vocationnetwork.org/
community/139



Sisters of St. Francis of the Neumann Communities (O.S.F.)
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Sisters of St. Joseph (C.S.J.) & S.S.J.), U.S. FEDERATION
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Sisters of St. Joseph (C.S.J.), BADEN, PA
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Sisters of St. Joseph (C.S.J.), BOSTON, MA
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Sisters of St. Joseph (C.S.J.), BRENTWOOD, NY
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Sisters of St. Joseph (C.S.J.), CONCORDIA, KS
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Sisters of St. Joseph (C.S.J.), ORANGE, CA
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Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet (C.S.J.), ALBANY, NY
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Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet (C.S.J.), LOS ANGELES, CA
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Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet (C.S.J.), ST. LOUIS, MO
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Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet (C.S.J.), ST. PAUL, MN
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Sisters of St. Joseph of Lyon (C.S.J.), WINSLOW, ME
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 **Sisters of St. Joseph of Peace (C.S.J.P.)**
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Sisters of St. Joseph (S.S.J.), NORTHWESTERN, PA
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**Sisters of St. Joseph (S.S.J.),
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**Sisters of St. Joseph (S.S.J.),
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**Sisters of St. Joseph (S.S.J.),
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**Sisters of St. Mary
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Sisters of St. Rita (O.S.A.)
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**Sisters of the Cross
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**Sisters of the Divine Savior
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**Sisters of the Holy
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**Sisters of the Humility
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**Sisters of the Presentation
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(P.B.V.M.), DUBUQUE, IA**
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**Sisters of the Presentation
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(P.B.V.M.), NEW WINDSOR, NY**
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**Sisters of the
Redeemer (C.S.R.)**
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**Sisters of the
Resurrection (C.R.),
IMMACULATE CONCEPTION-
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**Sisters of the
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**Sisters of the Third Order
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**Sisters of Transfiguration
Hermitage**
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**Society of the Holy Child
Jesus (S.H.C.J.), AMERICAN
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T

**Trappistine Cistercian
Nuns (O.C.S.O.)**
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Nuns (O.C.S.O.), DUBUQUE, IA,
OUR LADY OF THE MISSISSIPPI ABBEY**
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(O.C.S.O.), SONOITA, AZ,
SANTA RITA ABBEY**
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Nuns (O.C.S.O.), WHITEHORN,
CA, REDWOODS MONASTERY**
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**Trappistine Cistercian
Nuns (O.C.S.O.), WRENTHAM,
MA, MOUNT SAINT MARY'S ABBEY**
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U

**Union of the Sisters of the
Presentation of the Blessed
Virgin Mary (P.B.V.M.),
NEWFOUNDLAND AND LABRADOR**
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**Union of the Sisters of the
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Virgin Mary (P.B.V.M.), U.S.**
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**Ursuline Sisters of Mount
Saint Joseph (O.S.U.)**
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V

**Visitation Sisters
of Minneapolis (V.H.M.)**
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A



Alexian Brothers (C.F.A.)

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Augustinian Friars (O.S.A.)

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Augustinian Friars (O.S.A.),

MIDWEST PROVINCE OF OUR
MOTHER OF GOOD COUNSEL

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Augustinian Friars (O.S.A.),

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Augustinian Friars (O.S.A.),

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B



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Benedictine Monks (O.S.B.),

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Benedictine Monks

(O.S.B.), PINE CITY, NY, MOUNT
SAVIOR MONASTERY

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Benedictine Monks (O.S.B.),

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ANGEL ABBEY

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Benedictine Monks

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Benedictine Monks

(O.S.B.), SUBIACO, AR,

SUBIACO ABBEY

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community/256](http://vocationnetwork.org/community/256)



Benedictine Monks

(O.S.B.), WASHINGTON, DC,

ST. ANSELM'S ABBEY

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Brothers of St. Patrick

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Brothers of the Christian Schools (F.S.C.)

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Brothers of the Sacred Heart (S.C.)

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C



Carmelite Friars (O.Carm.),

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PROVINCE

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Carmelite Friars (O.Carm.),

ST. ELIAS PROVINCE

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Clerics of St. Viator (C.S.V.)

See Viatorians.



Congregation of Christian Brothers (C.F.C.)

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Congregation of Holy Cross (C.S.C.)

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Congregation of the Mission (C.M.)

See Vincentians.

Congregation of the Passion (C.P.)

See Passionist Fathers and
Brothers.



Crosier Fathers and Brothers (O.S.C.)

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D

De La Salle Christian Brothers (F.S.C.)

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Schools.

Dehonians (S.C.J.)

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Heart.

Discalced Carmelite Friars

(O.C.D.), CALIFORNIA-ARIZONA

PROVINCE OF ST. JOSEPH

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Divine Word Missionaries

(S.V.D.), SOCIETY OF THE DIVINE

WORD

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F



Franciscan Brothers of Peace (f.b.p.)

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Franciscan Friars (O.F.M.), IMMACULATE CONCEPTION PROVINCE
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G



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H



Hospitaller Order of St. John of God (O.H.)
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J

Josephites (S.S.J.), SOCIETY OF ST. JOSEPH
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L



Legionaries of Christ (L.C.)
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M



Marianists (S.M.), PROVINCE OF MERIBAH
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N

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O



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P



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R



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S

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T

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Trappist Cistercian Monks (O.C.S.O.), PIFFARD, NY,
ABBEY OF THE GENESEE
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Trappist Cistercian Monks (O.C.S.O.), TRAPPIST, KY,
ABBEY OF GETHSEMANI
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Trinitarians (O.S.S.T.)
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V

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Vincentians (C.M.),
CONGREGATION OF THE MISSION
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X



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OTHER COMMUNITIES

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Associate Community of the Poor Handmaids of Jesus Christ
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community/602



LAY COMMUNITIES

Lay Salvatorians (S.D.S.)
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SECULAR INSTITUTES

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Secular Institute of Missionaries of the Kingship of Christ (S.I.M.)
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LifeChoices®
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National Fund for Catholic Religious Vocations (NFCRV)
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National Office for Vocation (U.K.)
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RESOURCES

National Religious Vocation Conference
tinyurl.com/MeetToday'sReligious



TrueQuest Communications
vocationnetwork.org/
community/999
SEE AD ON PAGE 40.



Member of the National Religious Vocation Conference
See online ad at VocationNetwork.org
See ad in the monthly E-VOCATION Newsletter

Jubilee Year Events

Please be sure to check the **VISION Events Calendar** for Jubilee Year 2025 events sponsored by religious communities, parishes, and campus ministry offices in your area. AND ... be sure to remind others to post to the calendar and seek events throughout the year.




SOME KEY VATICAN JUBILEE EVENTS

2024 Year of Prayer In preparation for Jubilee Year 2025	28 MARCH 2025 24 Hours for the Lord	28 JULY - 3 AUGUST 2025 Jubilee of Young Adults
24 DECEMBER 2024 Opening of the Holy Door of Saint Peter's Basilica	25-27 APRIL 2025 Jubilee of Teenagers	8-9 OCTOBER 2025 Jubilee of Consecrated Life
	23-24 JUNE 2025 Jubilee of Seminarians	DECEMBER 2025 Closing of the Holy Door of Saint Peter's Basilica


OFFICIAL JUBILEE WEBSITE: iubilaeum2025.va

NATIONAL RELIGIOUS VOCATION CONFERENCE JUBILEE SITE: jubileeyear2025.org





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ONGOING EVENT: PRAYER!

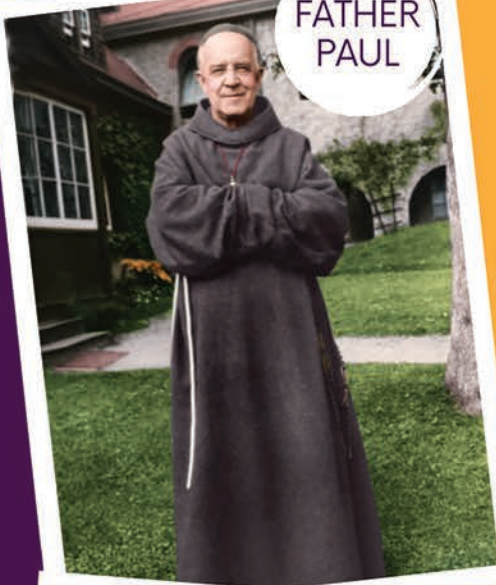
For a Christian, prayer should be the spiritual breath of life that never ceases, "not even while we sleep," says Pope Francis in *Teach Us to Pray: Living the Year of Prayer in Preparation for Jubilee 2025*.

Through prayer, says Francis, "the Word of God comes to abide in us and we abide in it. The Word inspires good intentions; it gives us strength and serenity, and even when it challenges us, it gives us peace."

In prayer, the pope says, we discover just how much we are loved by God, and this discovery gives us the hope and courage to live each day. "Prayer is the key that opens our heart to the Lord."

Find Vatican resources for the Year of Prayer at: tinyurl.com/Year-of-Prayer-2024

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Notice everything

Text by Patrice J. Tuohy, publisher of VISION on behalf of the National Religious Vocation Conference, and CEO of TrueQuest Communications.

Photo by Jennifer Tomshack, events editor of VISION.

“LESS IS MORE,” the credo of the minimalist movement in architecture, emphasizes the importance of clearing away the clutter to expose the beauty of the details and function of a space. A similar ethic was espoused centuries earlier by Jesus when he says to his fretting followers, “Notice how the flowers grow. They do not toil or spin. But I tell you, not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of them (Luke 12:27). This simple spiritual lesson, followed by saints and mystics ever after, is to examine our lives with an eye to the loveliness that is there in view, present all around us, rather than all that could be, that might have been, that others have.

As you discern your vocation don’t get distracted by the worry of the “what ifs.” Instead, consider the here and now. How do you feel when you pray, attend liturgy, serve in parish ministries, or spend time with men and women in religious life? Do you experience a sense of welcome, of clarity, of peace? Notice everything, particularly when you feel the most joy. †

Here and Now, by VISION Events Editor Jennifer Tomshack, was taken at Plainsong Farm in Rockford, Michigan. The photo’s title, says Tomshack, was inspired by the writings of Etty Hillesum, a Dutch Jew murdered in 1943 at Auschwitz:

Sometimes I long for a convent cell, with the sublime wisdom of centuries set out on bookshelves all along the wall and a view across the cornfields—there must be cornfields and they must wave in the breeze—and there I would immerse myself . . . Then I might perhaps find peace and clarity. But that would be no great feat. It is right here, in this very place, in the here and the now, that I must find them (*An Interrupted Life: The Diaries of Etty Hillesum 1941-43*).



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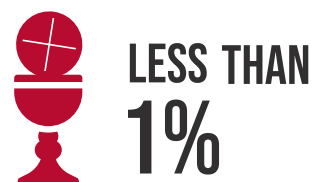
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