

Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR)

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Paul Bednarczyk, CSC

In 1992 David Nygren, CM, and Miriam Ukeritis, CSJ, released the results of the *Future of Religious Life in the United States (FORUS)* study. After further examination of their research, they later emphasized that religious institutes have a “ten-year window of opportunity” to make necessary changes, after which they will enter into “irreversible decline.” Although this study and its inferences were hotly debated at the time, according to their projection, the window of opportunity for religious institutes in the United States has now been closed for seven years.

I am well aware of the multitude of intricate complexities involved in contemporary vocation ministry and religious life. At the risk of sounding like an alarmist, I think you would agree with me, in that in light of our present reality, the question of new membership and its implications for the future of our congregations take on a heightened sense of urgency. I do not make this statement cavalierly. I say it realistically with a sense of regret, while at the same time being fully aware that the diminishment of religious congregations and the emergence of new communities have always been part of the continuum of religious life since its beginning.

I believe our NRVC study confirms that the intrinsic beauty of religious life in this country lies in its diversity of charisms, lifestyles, and ministries that contribute to the remarkable heritage and tradition we share as religious. At the same time, I think it is helpful to recognize that the statistics from this study present us with a snapshot of today’s reality. It is clear. Generations, like our world, changed and continue to change. That is what generations are supposed to do. We cannot be dismissive of it nor can we fight it. We can only deal with it.

At the onset of this talk, I want you to know that I come to you this morning as a religious brother, I come as your brother, who lives a life similar to yours. Although much of what I will say would, for the most part, also apply to men’s communities, my comments this morning will be addressed to you specifically as women religious in leadership.

I would propose that the most urgent question for us today is the future of consecrated religious life in the Church of the United States. In light of the demographics we just heard, when the question is put within this context, I believe the challenge of a future becomes more global, more inclusive, and more confrontable for our religious institutes than we may have previously thought. Many of our communities have courageously faced this life question of building a future already in the long and sometimes painful process of consolidating, reconfiguring and merging provinces, monasteries, and/or institutes into new entities that will continue to meet the needs of the Church and the People of God. Many who have undergone this process will attest that it ultimately did generate within their membership a new found hope for their future. How do we provide that same hope for a new generation of women who aspire to be called sister?

The vocation question, and specifically, why there are not more, is both multi-faceted and complex. There are many sociological and ecclesiological reasons far too numerous to expound upon in this limited time. That being said, I would like to present one perspective for

your consideration. If I may indulge the jargon of our consumer economy, when we attempt “to sell” the idea of a religious vocation today, we find ourselves in a very competitive market. Fifty years ago, if a woman wanted to serve the Church, religious life was the only show in town. Since opening wide the windows of Vatican II, not only have the ministry options for lay women widened, but what we sometimes fail to realize is that new and different forms of consecrated life have also emerged and continue to grow. As a result, religious life has become one of many options for consecrated life in the Church today.

Although still relatively small in number, secular institutes and consecrated virginity are gaining more notice with Catholic women in the United States. Similarly, the rapidly growing ecclesial movements, such as Focolare, Communion and Liberation, and Regnum Christi, allow for consecration in different membership forms as well. And then there are the non-canonical groups, some ecumenical, some mixed gendered, and some mixed with married and celibate members, who also allow for some form of consecration. My point is that all of these groups already draw from the same shrinking pool of women and men, who may practice their Catholic religion to various degrees of intensity, but who are becoming less and less steeped in their faith and tradition, as was recently suggested by a study on religious affiliation conducted by the Pew Forum on Religious and Public Life.

Please do not misunderstand me. I am not in any way diminishing the validity and rightful place of these various groups and forms of consecration in our Church. Rather, I am simply making the point that religious life is no longer the only show in town.

I think that because of this changed reality, some of our members may have been mistakenly duped into thinking that consecrated religious life is less valid, less relevant, less important and less viable. Our study has clearly shown that it is not. The good news is that there are women and men who still choose to respond to God’s mysterious invitation to live the evangelical counsels of chastity, poverty, and obedience as we know it. They not only love the life, but they live it with vitality and joy eagerly look to the future with tremendous hope.

Although we have all benefited from visioning the future of religious life, we must realize that in many ways the future is already happening, as is evident in the emerging, new forms of consecrated life. Admittedly, it may be more comfortable to engage in theoretical and intellectual imaginings about what religious life will become, but at this point, we need to deal with the uncomfortable, which is the essential and urgent issues of the present day. The results of this study invite us to do just that.

I would infer from this research, that if any religious community is to attract new members, three things need to be in place.

First and foremost, there is a need to define a clear identity of women religious today. As we all know, the creation and reinforcement of a religious order’s identity goes well beyond wearing a religious habit, blessed ring or community pin. While the diversity of lifestyle and ministry you share in your various institutes is important, on the other hand, what are the non-negotiables in your life? What makes the life of a religious sister different from that of a consecrated secular or a consecrated virgin, and how would a younger woman, interested in

religious life, recognize that?

Our research suggests that if congregations of women are to attract new members, there is a need to educate young women, who live in a diminishing Catholic culture, about what a religious sister is. To do this effectively assumes the need for clarity. But it is not just about the articulation of that clarity; more importantly, it is the challenge of demonstrating a consistency of an established identity of a religious institute with the lived reality of the members. If, as our study shows, a younger woman wants to deepen her Catholic faith and spirituality by exploring religious life, if her experience of a community does not meet her need, then she will simply go to another religious community where her Catholic identity will be nurtured and supported. I am well aware that these are difficult questions for all of us.

Secondly, if a congregation makes vocation ministry a priority, education of the general membership about the profile of the contemporary candidate is essential. Although it is extremely difficult to put this younger generation into neat, little boxes of liberal or conservative, traditional or progressive, this research does provide us with some consistent data. Generally speaking, newer members are coming to religious life to deepen their own prayer life, sacramental life, and Catholic faith, and they want to live, to work, and to pray together on a daily basis with other members in their community. These are not radically new ideas. In fact, I would conjecture that they are probably the same reasons that you and I came to religious life.

This data, however, for many religious institutes highlights to varying degrees the disconnect that exists in what a contemporary candidate might be looking for in her religious life, and what our present vowed membership may be seeking in their own religious life and in the life of the congregation. The reality is that the largest cohort in our congregations were formed and transformed by the radical renewal of religious life initiated by the Second Vatican Council. Faithful to the spirit of the Council's documents, women religious, in particular, admirably embraced the challenges of renewal with risk, courage, and a profound trust in the movement of the Spirit which ultimately shaped them into who they are today. This generation of Catholic women has been shaped by a different experience of Church. Although they come to religious life today with the same idealism of past generations, their hopes and dreams for Church renewal may not be felt with the same degree of passion or intensity as their older sisters in community. As religious leaders, how do you bridge a younger person's contemporary experience of Church with the very different lived experience and history of Church that probably your largest percentage of your present membership shares? How do you learn from each other's equally valid experience, and how do you journey together into the future faithfully serving the Church in your common pursuit of the most romantic of all quests: Oneness with the invisible, ever-present God?

This disconnect, which our research shows falls along generational lines and contributes to the complexity of the vocation question, is one of the biggest challenges that face communities regarding the attraction, and more importantly, the retention of new members. Simply put, is your religious institute able to provide, or maybe even more directly, is it willing to provide for what the contemporary candidate is looking for in prayer, community, and identity? If you are, then what is it that may need to be sacrificed, on the part of both individuals and the congregation, in order to provide for a future with new membership?

Our research shows that younger entrants, in evaluating their religious institutes, gave vocation efforts a lower rating. What resources do you put into vocation ministry? Speaking as a former secondary school administrator, I would like to use the analogy of a school with dwindling enrollment. If I were the chief administrator, I would not effectively treat this problem by cutting my admissions program or by reducing to a part-time basis my admissions officer's position. Instead, I would make recruitment of new students a priority by investing time, personnel and money. In a similar fashion, if we want a future for our religious congregations, we must invest in vocation ministry and create a culture of vocation within our own congregations. At this point in history, the cost of not doing so is just too much to bear.

Thirdly, this study invites us to answer deeper questions. I know that this has been a difficult year for you and your institutes. To add further to the complexity of the vocation issue, not only are your congregations undergoing an unprecedented apostolic visitation, but your leadership conference is also in the midst of a Vatican doctrinal assessment. If we were to be honest, I am sure many of you were hoping to hear some different results from this study or possibly even some final answer. Instead, what this study suggests is that all women religious, liberal and conservative, old and young, habited and non-habited, have to face one challenge together: ensuring the future of consecrated religious life for women in the Church of the United States.

If that remains our priority and focus, we should not fear then the facts nor the questions they may elicit. In the LCWR reflection book, *Midwiving a Vibrant Future*, Michele Morek, OSU, from Maple Mount, KY, writes "Insecure people and comfortable institutions often resist questions, because questions often lead to changes. But asking questions is not a sign that one lacks faith."

Our research shows that young people pursuing religious life value Mass as well as the Divine Office. *How then is a local community's personal and communal prayer reflective of our Catholic faith and sacramental tradition?*

Clearly, public identification with the Church and Jesus Christ is the greatest draw for idealistic Catholic youth. By virtue of our profession of the evangelical counsels, we deepen our Catholic ecclesial commitment, but for women in the Church, this commitment is not always comfortable or easy. *How then does a congregation see themselves in relationship to the Church at large and its teachings? How do we give public witness to our vowed life, and is it effective for today's world?*

Our younger members want to live community under one roof with a high percentage preferring a setting with more than 8 members. The reality, however, is that many congregations no longer have the large houses to accommodate them. I must qualify that giving up your real estate was not always by your choosing, and more often than not, was externally imposed by other authorities. *How then do we define and live out community today? How does personal choice and self-selected ministry affect our response to the communal needs of the congregation and its members? Would a younger member find our community life nurturing and life-giving?*

As dramatic and disconcerting as both of the current investigations are, as people of faith, we cannot negate that God's mysterious grace must be at work. Whether we like it or not,

because of these investigations, questions such as the ones I just raised, and which may have formerly been relegated to private conversations, have now been raised in the public forum.

Both the world and the church have changed dramatically from when many of us first entered religious life. From this changed world and church is from where our candidates come. No matter what we may think of this younger generation, their spirituality, their hopes, and their values, we cannot ignore them if we want a future. *Perfectae Caritatis* challenged the religious of the world to read the signs of the times. Today's young Catholics are themselves the signs of our time. What will be our response to them?

The annual trends survey from *Vision VocationMatch* for the third year in a row has documented that younger women are re-looking at religious life again with new eyes. This year nearly 50% of the female respondents to VocationMatch were under 30 years of age. Our study shows that 43% of men and women in formation are under 30 years of age. Sister Mary Bendyna has also acknowledged that vocation directors have reported that they are receiving more inquires from younger women. If we are to be true to our religious commitment, we must be there for these young people, even if it means we change, make personal sacrifices, and be willing to be changed in the process.

In the midst of tension, investigation, change, and transition, I do believe that God is presenting us with a graced moment. But for women religious, this is not the first time you have found yourself in such a position. Since the arrival in 1727 of 12 Ursuline Sisters in the early American colonies, social or ecclesial adversity was never foreign to your experience or ever beyond your grasp of God's good grace. Women religious consistently rose to the challenge and inspired generations by your unflappable resiliency and unflinching faith. I am confident that in this graced moment, you will continue your remarkable legacy and embrace the challenges of future new membership with bold courage, transforming creativity, unmoving fidelity, and profound openness to the Spirit that dwells in and among us.

Nygren, David J. and Ukeritis, Miriam, D. (1993) *The Future of Religious Order in the United States: Transformation and Commitment*. Westport, CT: Praeger Press.

For further information on this study, please consult <http://pewforum.org/docs/?DocID=411>

Midwiving a Vibrant Future (2009), July 3 reflection.

More information on this survey can be found at <http://www.vocation-network.org/articles/show/186>