

J.S. Paluch Vocation Seminar Address**Implications of the NRVC/CARA Study
on the Future of Religious Vocations**

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August 18, 2009

BEFORE I BEGIN, I would like to extend my profound gratitude to Sister Mary Bendyna, RSM, and her staff, for their expertise, hard work, and personal commitment and dedication to this research project. It has been an extraordinary journey, one in which I truly believe has been guided by the Holy Spirit from the beginning.

I have been given the opportunity this afternoon to reflect briefly with you on the implications of this study for the future of religious vocations in this country, especially as it would relate to the gathered participants of this seminar and their related areas of expertise. Before I do that, however, I do want to make a couple of clarifying comments about the study and the results.

Independent study serves as snapshot and benchmark

First, it is important to note that this study was done independently of the Vatican's apostolic visitation of women religious and the doctrinal assessment of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR). Some have tried to relate the two, but our work was well into the second phase of the study before the first investigation was even announced, so I just want to put to rest any lingering questions about the relationship between this study and the two ongoing investigations. There is none.

Second, the final results of this research are simply a snapshot of today's reality of those who are coming to religious life and the communities that are receiving them. Although we have studied the hopes and dreams of newer religious who entered in the past 15 years, clearly, as the results have shown, there are definite generational differences of those who entered before and after 2000. Generations change, and as I have often said, this is what generations are supposed to do. We should not lament that reality nor should we fear it. Instead, we simply need to deal with it.

Third, this research is not necessarily a predictor of the future generations who will be coming to religious life. Our young people are influenced by the cultural and societal shifts in the world in which they are growing up. For instance, the jury is still out on how 9/11 is presently influencing our younger generation, their view of the world, their image of God, and the hopes and dreams for the future. Although we can speculate and project about lies ahead, the truth is that we cannot predict the unpredictable.

Last, I think it is essential that we look at these results within the broad spectrum of religious life. Men and women religious have always made up a small number of our Catholic population. During the middle of the last century, we saw a tremendous surge in religious vocations that began after World War II and peaked in the 1960s. At that time children of an enormous immigrant population were growing up in Catholic ghettos where religion oftentimes served as the primary connection to the customs and traditions of the home countries they left behind. Larger families were in vogue and having a child in priesthood or religious life was considered to be an honor and special blessing from God. In addition, our Catholic values were also very much in sync with the values and cultural norms of our country. Finally, after a history of suspicion and being viewed as a threat to our American democracy, the Catholic Church had finally begun to win a reasonably respectful place in our American society. This was evident not only in the growing infrastructure of our parochial school system and Catholic health care institutions, which was managed primarily by religious communities, but also in the warming of political relations between the United States and the Holy See. It was President Franklin Roosevelt who chose to establish a relationship with the Vatican by assigning his own personal representative to the Holy See.

I mention all of these historical happenings because they are only a few of the major contributing sociological, cultural, and ecclesial factors that influenced an unprecedented number of men and women entering convents, houses of formation, and seminaries in this country. Since many of us grew up in this era, this is what we remember as being then norm for religious life and priesthood, when in reality, it was actually an anomaly. As a result, we unfortunately compare today's situation with the experience of the middle of the last century, which really is not a fair comparison. Instead, given the large but highly unusual numbers of the 50s and 60s, it may be more appropriate to compare today's numbers of priests and religious with the numbers we had at the beginning of the last century.

Because no study of this magnitude on religious vocations has ever been done before in the United States, it is my hope that this new research will serve as a benchmark of vocation ministry for this new century. I would be curious to see the results of a follow-up study to this research in another 15 years and to see what maybe had changed from 2008, but I will leave that to the next NRVC executive director to figure out.

Study challenges all Catholics to promote a culture of vocations

So, in addition to the outlined best practices for vocation promotion and religious formation, what does this research tell us as ministers in today's Church, whether we are single or married Catholics, ordained priests or consecrated persons? If I were to put it into a simple soundbite, I think this study challenges all

of us to promote a culture of vocation in our own particular disciplines with our Catholic young and young adults. From our research, I would suggest three areas for us to begin this: Catholic identity, prayer, and community.

Clearly, if you have done any reading on the millennial generation, you will know that tangible and concrete symbols of our Catholic faith and spirituality speak to this younger cohort in a powerful way. Growing up in a world of relativism, political correctness, and ambivalence, it is not surprising that young women and men are looking for a defined identity as Catholic Christians. They want to know what makes Roman Catholicism different from other Christian religions. They easily grasp on to Eucharistic adoration, rosaries, scapulars, religious habits, or similar other Catholic devotions or symbols, because they appeal to their need for distinction in their faith. They are proud of being Catholic and they want people to know that they stand for something. For those who grew up prior or during Vatican II, some would interpret this renewed interest in traditional piety as stepping backward. After speaking to several younger religious, I do not believe that they see it as such. For them it is simply a way to move forward to attain greater clarity and appreciation of a Catholic identity that they perceive has been watered down or biased by the personal preferences of their elders. Unfortunately, this trend may be a commentary on the quality of Catholic identity we may have passed on to our younger generation in CCD, religious education, or theology classes. All of us with any lived experience of the faith know, however, that identity goes beyond externals. Identity, whether it is personal or spiritual, must be rooted in something much deeper, much more real, and much more constant.

I once heard Father Ron Rohlheiser say that often it is romance, be it in a relationship or in our religious faith, which invites us to something deeper. Applying this to people new to the Catholic faith, or even those new to religious life or seminary, there is an attraction first to the romance of rituals, symbols, and traditions. Although it may be the romance that draws them, after a more tempered experience and greater maturity in the faith or in the formation program, they are eventually led to something much more profound—a committed relationship with Jesus Christ mediated through a sinful, but divinely inspired faith community.

Much like romance plays an essential role in the beginnings of courting in a relationship, so too does romance play a significant role in the courting of a religious vocation. After all, isn't it the romance that initially enables us to fall in love? How do we, effectively incorporate romance in the vocation process?

Think of two people who have fallen in love. They are starry-eyed from the beginning. They engage in the romantic trappings of candlelight dinners, moonlit walks, and sweet whisperings and all of the other dreamy things we see in the movies. All of this romance serves as a prelude to something deeper—a committed love relationship. The same would apply to nurturing a vocation. How do we provide our young people with the romance of our Catholic faith and tradition in a way that it will invite them to something deeper, and it will enable them, if I may say, to hear more clearly the sweet whisperings of a loving God inviting them to a life of faith and service in our Church? The beauty of romance is that it speaks to the heart. Jesus knew this. He spoke to the hearts of the people and they followed.

Young looking for role models of holiness

But for someone to hear and respond to God's invitation presupposes that there is a living relationship with the One who calls. Our research has shown that one of the reasons people are coming to religious life is to enrich their relationship with God through prayer and their participation in the sacraments. This should not be interpreted as a minimization of their commitment to mission and ministry. Since, as our study has also shown, the majority of our newer entrants were already engaged in some form of ministry prior to entrance, one can assume that they are already committed to a life of service.

A committed prayer life though is not just relegated to the lives of priests, brothers, and sisters. It applies to all Catholics. In many ways all of us in the Church need to become men and women of prayer. The Church, and especially our young people, desperately needs models of holiness, a call that we all share through our baptism, no matter what vocation we have chosen.

Our first priority in our ministries must be to help all, especially the young, deepen their relationship with God. The Catholic Church upholds a rich tradition of devotional practices, scriptural meditation, and sacramental celebration. We need to teach this tradition in a way that speaks to their experience. Our young people need authentic witnesses of prayer in their parishes, families, and faith communities. They need to be shown that being prayerful does not mean that they are weak or inferior. They need people to share their own experience of prayer and to teach them how to pray.

Do young people see us praying? What form does that prayer take? Do we pray with them at home, in our schools, in our parishes, in our community houses? Do we pray before meals? Do we pray as a family? How can we better teach young men and women to reflect more prayerfully on the events in their lives?

Since religious and priests are the assumed professionals in prayer, how can we speak directly to young people about our prayer lives, be it in the Sunday homily, the classroom or in private conversations?

All vocations require community support

Our study is an invitation to renew our efforts of community building in our parishes, religious houses, and in the programs sponsored by our organizations. A response to a vocation is not only a personal one; it is a communal one. For a vocation to be truly lived for others, it must be lived with others.

Providing supportive community experiences is important, because after prayer, our study found that men and women come to religious life for community. Some come from disjointed families and feel disconnected from the world, and may lack a strong sense of self. Is it any surprise to us, therefore, that they yearn for community? For those of us in consecrated religious life, our charism of community living, if lived well with authenticity and joy, in many ways has become part of our mission as contemporary religious. It is not just the service we provide in our ministry that builds upon the Body of Christ; much more today, it is the witness of our life together as brothers or sisters united by our vowed commitment in community.

How do we provide experiences of community for our young? Do young people feel welcomed in our churches? And if they don't, how do we emphasize that belonging to some worshipping community is intrinsic to our Catholic identity? For those in a religious community, how do we share and witness to our communal charism and is it effective for the needs of today's world? This study challenges all of us to provide creative, positive experiences of community and welcome for our youth and young adults without prejudice or exclusion.

Catholic identity, prayer, and community are three factors surfaced in our research that help to promote religious vocations. These factors, however, are essential for all of the baptized. I do believe that we are at the point, given our diminishing numbers in religious life and priesthood, we, bishops, clergy, consecrated and lay persons, have got to take the next step and actively connect the dots for our younger Catholics. In other words, we can no longer assume that they will take the initiative on their own of considering a religious vocation. As the 2002 North American Congress on Vocations advocated, we have got to make the invitation and to provide them with opportunities to discern their own call prayerfully and reflectively.

Invitation is essential

Study after study has shown that the number one reason why people enter religious life and seminaries is that they were invited. Advertising is important, as are web pages and media coverage, but over and over again, they cannot replace the personal invitation of a priest, religious, parent, grandparents, teacher, or other trusted adult. Have you ever considered a religious vocation? You show many positive qualities that would speak of being a good sister, brother or priest.

Because of the many poor examples they have encountered, young people are afraid of commitment. They think it will cut back on their freedom. But we need to teach them that the only way we are truly free, is when we exercise our God given free will and choose. Eventually, we have got to commit to something in life. If we don't choose it ourselves, then circumstances or other people decide for us. That's not freedom.

But, if we are going to invite, we have got to be convinced ourselves that this life is worth living. Our Church needs the energy, the enthusiasm and the dreams of the young, as it needs the wisdom, fidelity and the tradition of the old. As a Church, we need to ensure the Catholic faith, and the witness of consecrated life, for future generations; therefore, we must work together, collaboratively, to rebuild a culture of vocation in our Church in which all of the baptized will be free to discern and to respond to God's loving invitation.

Throughout his ministry, Jesus never stopped inviting. As ministers of the gospels, can we do any less? So, fortified by this gospel challenge, let us invite together a new generation of priests, sisters, and brothers, not just for the sake of the Church, but for the sake of the communion of vocation we all share as men and women, consecrated, lay, and ordained, united in faith by our baptism and by our love for Jesus Christ and the Church.