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

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report presents findings from a study of recent vocations to religious life in the United States that was conducted by the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA) for the National Religious Vocation Conference (NRVC). The study is based on surveys of religious institutes, surveys and focus groups with recent vocations to religious life, and an examination of selected religious institutes that have been successful in attracting and retaining new members. The study was designed to identify and understand the characteristics, attitudes, and experiences of the men and women who are coming to religious life today as well as the characteristics and practices of the religious institutes that are successfully attracting new candidates and retaining new members.

The study is based on four major research components:

- A single informant survey of religious institutes and societies of apostolic life
- A survey of those in initial formation or in final vows/commitment since 1993
- Focus groups with those in initial formation or in final vows/commitment since 1993
- Examination of the characteristics and practices of selected religious institutes

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

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

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

CARA mailed surveys to a total of 976 entities in spring 2008 and then conducted extensive follow-up by mail, e-mail, telephone, and FAX throughout summer and fall 2008 to achieve a high response rate. CARA received completed responses from 591 religious institutes for a response rate of 60 percent. However, closer examination of the lists and the nonrespondents revealed that some of the congregations and provinces on the original lists had merged with others during the course of the research. Other entities on the lists are neither provinces nor congregations, but regions or houses that do not have formation/incorporation in the United States and should not have been included in the survey. Still others, particularly among the contemplative monasteries and the emerging communities, had apparently ceased to exist.¹

CARA estimates that the total number of units (congregations, provinces, monasteries) in the United States is fewer than 900, which would result in a response rate of approximately 66 percent. However, the responding entities account for 62,250 men and women religious, or well over 80 percent of all women and men religious in the United States. Many of the institutes or other entities that did not respond appear to be either small, mostly contemplative, communities that may not have had anyone in initial formation for some time, or those who are still in the process of becoming institutes of consecrated life.

This initial survey was designed to gather statistics about the membership in the institute, including the numbers in initial formation or incorporation; basic information about vocation promotion and formation in the institute; and basic data about the institute's ministry, community life, community prayer, and practice regarding the wearing of a religious habit. In addition, respondents were asked to provide the names and contact information for those in initial formation as well as those who had professed final or perpetual vows or commitment since 1993. This list served as the mailing list for the survey of new members described below.

The second phase of the research consisted of a survey of "new members," that is, current candidates/postulants, novices, and those in temporary vows or commitment as well as those who had professed final vows or commitment since 1993. The questionnaires were mailed in fall

¹ "Reconfiguration" among religious institutes proved to be one of the most challenging issues for calculating a response rate as well as for obtaining historical information about new membership. Responses to questions about reconfiguration in the survey revealed that 19 percent of the respondents were in the process of reconfiguring at the time the survey was conducted in 2008 and another 16 percent had reconfigured since 1990. The number of "units" changed while the survey was being conducted.

2008 and winter 2009 to 3,965 new members, again with a cover letter from Brother Paul Bednarczyk, CSC, and a return envelope addressed to CARA. Some 40 surveys were returned as undeliverable. In addition, closer examination of both responses and non-responses revealed that at least 45 returned surveys are from transfers rather than new members as defined by the study and at least 26 other respondents were formed and are based outside the United States and thus beyond the parameters of the study. When these are removed from the sample, CARA received a total of 1,568 usable responses from new members for a response rate of at least 40 percent.

The survey of new members was designed to identify what attracted these candidates and new members to religious life and to their particular religious institute or society; what they found helpful in their discernment process; what their attitudes and preferences are regarding community life, prayer, ministry, and the wearing of a religious habit; and what sustains and challenges them in religious life. The survey also asked about their background characteristics as well as their experience before entering religious life. In addition, the survey included a question asking the respondent if he or she would be willing to participate in a focus group.

The third and fourth phases of the research, which included focus groups with new members and closer examination of selected institutes, were conducted during spring and summer 2009. CARA conducted three focus groups with new members in Chicago, San Antonio, and Washington, DC. These sites were selected because of the relatively large concentration of new members in each of these areas. Participants were selected from among the survey respondents who indicated that they would be willing to participate in a focus group.

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

During the final phase of the research, CARA examined selected institutes that have experienced some success in attracting and retaining new members in recent years. At a minimum, this examination included an interview with the vocation director and a review of vocation promotion materials and practices. In most cases, the examination also included interviews with the novice director and/or other formation directors. In a few cases, it included interviews with leadership and interviews or focus groups with new members.

It is important to note that although each of these institutes has enjoyed some success in attracting and retaining vocations, these institutes do not necessarily have the highest numbers of new members. They were selected to represent different types of institutes and to help identify best practices in vocation promotion and retention. A list of the religious institutes that were included in this part of the study can be found in the introduction to this report.

MAJOR FINDINGS

Religious Life Today

- There is a great deal of variety and diversity in religious life today not only in terms of the spirituality, charism, and mission of religious institutes but also in terms of their size, composition, and presence of new members. Although most religious institutes in the United States are experiencing aging membership, diminishing numbers, and few, if any, new vocations, some continue to attract new members and a few are experiencing significant growth.
 - The study identified at least 2,630 men and women in initial formation and nearly 4,000 who are either in initial formation or who had professed final vows within the previous 15 years. The actual number of new members is likely even higher given that some religious institutes did not respond to the survey and/or did not provide information about members who had professed final vows since 1993. The findings from the surveys, and especially those from the focus groups and interviews with new members, confirm that there are still significant numbers of men and women who are responding to a call to religious life and are hopeful about its future.
 - Three-fourths of institutes of men (78 percent) and two-thirds of institutes of women (66 percent) have at least one person currently in initial formation (candidate or postulant, novice, or temporary professed). However, almost half of the institutes that have someone in initial formation have no more than one or two. About 20 percent of the responding institutes currently have more than five people in initial formation. Some of these are institutes that recently merged, bringing together several congregations or provinces that separately had no one or only a few in formation.
 - Overall, religious are an aging population. Three in four finally professed men (75 percent) and more than nine in ten finally professed women (91 percent) are age 60 and over in 2009. Among both men and women, a majority of those under the age of 60 are in their 50s. While this presents some challenges for new members, especially those who are younger, it has not deterred those who entered from doing so.
- Characteristics of New Members
- Compared to men and women religious in the last century, those coming to religious life

today are much more diverse in terms of their age, racial and ethnic background, and life experience. Many come with considerable education as well as ministry and work experience. The diversity among new members presents a number of challenges for formation as well as for life and ministry in many religious institutes.

- According to the survey of new members, the average age of entrance is 30 for men (median 27) and 32 for women (median 29). However, there is a ten-year gap in average and median entrance age between women in LCWR institutes and women in CMSWR institutes. According to the survey of religious institutes, more than half of the women in initial formation in LCWR institutes (56 percent) are age 40 and older, compared to 15 percent in CMSWR institutes.
- Compared to finally professed members, those in initial formation are more likely to come from non-Caucasian/white/Anglo backgrounds: 21 percent are Hispanic/Latino(a), 14 percent are Asian/Pacific Islander, and 6 percent are African/African American. About 58 percent are Caucasian/white, compared to about 94 percent of finally professed members.
- The survey of new members found that about nine in ten were raised Catholic and most (73 percent) attended a Catholic school for at least part of their education. About half attended parish-based religious education. One in seven (14 percent) new members from the Millennial Generation (born since 1982) was home-schooled for at least some of their education.
- Seventy percent of new members had at least a bachelor's degree before they entered. More than nine in ten were employed, usually in a full-time position, and about seven in ten were engaged in ministry, one-third on a full-time basis and about six in ten on a volunteer basis. Many were also involved in various parish ministries and/or other volunteer work.
- More than two-thirds (68 percent) of the new members first considered religious life by the time they were 21, with a little more than half (53 percent) doing so by the time they were 18. Female respondents are a little more likely than male respondents to have thought about a religious vocation at a young age, that is, before the age of 14 (27 percent compared to 19 percent). Men were a little more likely to first consider religious life when they were college-age, that is, between the ages of 18 and 21 (28 percent of men compared to 20 percent of women).

Attraction to Religious Life and to a Particular Religious Institute

- New members are drawn to religious life primarily by a sense of call and a desire for prayer and spiritual growth. More than three-fourths (78 percent) say they were attracted "very much" by the former and almost as many (73 percent) say they were attracted "very much" by the latter. More than anything else, they were attracted to their particular religious institute by the example of its members, and especially by their sense of joy, their down to earth nature, and their commitment and zeal. Some 85 percent say the example of members attracted them "very much."
- To only a slightly lesser degree, most new members also say they were attracted to religious life by a desire to be of service and a desire to be part of a community. They were attracted to their particular religious institute by its spirituality, community life, and prayer life. Although the ministries of the institute are also important to most new members, they are less important than spirituality, prayer, community, and lifestyle. Questions about ministry, especially the possibility of a variety of ministries, tend to be more important to men than to women among new members.
- Younger respondents are more likely than older respondents to say they were attracted to religious life by a desire to be more committed to the Church and to their particular

institute by its fidelity to the Church. Many also report that their decision to enter their institute was influenced by its practice regarding a religious habit. Significant generational gaps, especially between the Millennial Generation (born in 1982 or later) and the Vatican II Generation (born between 1943 and 1960), are evident throughout the study on questions involving the Church and the habit. Differences between the two generations also extend to questions about community life as well as styles and types of prayer.

- Newer members in religious life first became acquainted with their religious institutes in many different ways. The most common experience was in an institution, such as a school, where the members served. Other relatively common ways of becoming acquainted with the institute include through the recommendation of a friend or advisor, through working with a member of the institute, through a friend in the institute, and through print or online promotional materials.
- Men are more likely than women to report that they first encountered their religious institute in a school or other institution where the members served. Women are more likely than men to indicate that they learned about their institute through the recommendation of a friend or advisor.
- Older respondents are somewhat more likely than younger respondents to have met the institute more directly, that is, through working with a member or through a friend in the institute. Younger respondents, especially those in the Millennial Generation, are more likely to have first heard about the institute through the recommendation of a friend or advisor or through print or online promotional materials.
- Some younger members did not know a man or woman religious before they sensed a call to religious life. Many of these young religious first learned about their particular institute through the recommendation of a friend or advisor, often a priest, and many found out or learned more about their institute online. Direct experience with the institute and its members through “Come and See” experiences, discernment retreats, and other opportunities to spend time with members are especially important for this age group.

Vocation Promotion and Discernment Programs

- Many religious institutes offer a variety of vocation promotion and discernment programs. Most responding institutes report that they use print materials, websites, and or/advertising for vocation promotion, and many report that they target specific age groups, most typically high school, college, and young adults, in their vocation promotion and discernment programs.
- The most common discernment programs are “Come and See” experiences (offered by three-fourths of the responding institutes), live-in experiences and discernment retreats (each offered by a little more than half), and mission or ministry experiences (offered by about a third). New members who participated in these and other programs for vocation discernment generally found them to be very helpful in their discernment process.
- Findings from the survey of religious institutes suggest that using various media (especially websites) for vocation promotion, offering programs (especially discernment retreats, “Come and See” experiences, discernment groups, and ministry/mission experiences) for vocation discernment, and targeting certain age groups (especially college-age and young adults) in vocation promotion and discernment efforts are positively correlated with attracting and retaining new members.
- The data also suggest that having a vocation director, especially one who is engaged in vocation ministry on a full-time basis, and a vocation team are positively correlated with attracting and retaining new members. Although most religious institutes (88 percent)

report that they have a vocation director, he or she is full-time in less than half of these institutes (46 percent). Findings from the survey of new members and especially the reflections of participants in the interviews and focus groups suggest that the vocation director and other team members can play a critical role in the discernment process.

- The survey of new members found that the age of the respondent is negatively correlated with how helpful they found most of vocation promotion and discernment resources and programs. Thus, the younger the person, the more likely he or she is to say that these resources or programs were helpful in the discernment process. This is especially the case with various types of websites; CDs, DVDs, and videos; and print and online promotional materials. Compared to older respondents, younger respondents are much more likely to report that websites, especially the websites of religious institutes, were helpful to them. They are also considerably more likely to report that discernment retreats and “Come and See” experiences were helpful.

- Although various vocation promotion and discernment programs can play an important role in informing potential candidates about religious life, especially in a particular religious institute, the findings suggest that members themselves play the most important role. New members report that it was the example of members that most attracted them to their institute and that meetings with members and communities were the most helpful when they were discerning. Comments from interview and focus group participants provide further support that it was their experience of members and the way they are living religious life that was most influential in the decision to enter their institute.

Encouragement and Support in Discernment and in Religious Life

- Many new members did not experience a great deal of encouragement from parents, siblings, and other family members when they were first considering a vocation to religious life. Many also did not receive much encouragement from diocesan priests, people in their parish, or people in their school or workplace. Many report that their parents are now much more supportive.

- Most new members report that they received a great deal of encouragement from members of their institute during their discernment process and that members of their institute continue to be their greatest source of encouragement and support in religious life. Most also report high levels of encouragement from those to whom and with whom they minister.

- Compared to older new members, younger new members are more likely to report that they were encouraged by diocesan priests when they were first considering religious life. They are also more likely to report receiving encouragement from diocesan priests in their life and ministry now. Among other respondents, diocesan priests are least likely to be cited as a source of “very much” encouragement.

Prayer and Spirituality

- Many new members identify common prayer as one of the aspects of religious life that most attracted them and that most sustains them now. When asked about the importance of various types of communal prayer, respondents are most likely to name daily Eucharist and Liturgy of the Hours as the prayer types that are most important to them.

- Millennial Generation respondents are much more likely than other respondents – especially those from the Vatican II Generation – to say that daily Eucharist, Liturgy of the Hours, Eucharistic Adoration, and other devotional prayers are “very” important to them. Compared to younger respondents, older respondents place greater importance on faith-sharing and, to a lesser degree, on non-liturgical common prayer.

- These patterns were reiterated in the open-ended responses as well as in interviews and focus groups in which many younger members mention Eucharist, Eucharistic Adoration, the Divine Office, and Marian devotion as especially important to them.

Community Life and Ministry Setting Preferences

- When asked about their decision to enter their particular religious institute, new members cite the community life in the institute as the most influential factor in their decision

(followed closely by the prayer life or prayer styles in the community). Most new members indicate that they want to live, work, and pray with other members of their religious institute, with the last being especially important to them. Responses to an open-ended question about what most attracted them to their religious institute reinforce the importance new members place on this aspect of religious life.

- When asked about various living arrangements, most new members prefer to live in a large (eight or more) or medium-sized (four to seven) community and to live only with other members of their institute. Younger respondents express even stronger preferences for living with members of their institute in large community settings. Findings from the survey of religious institutes suggest that that new membership is negatively correlated with the number of members living alone. That is, the higher the number of members who live alone, the less likely an institute is to have new members.
- When asked about various ministry settings, most new members indicate a relatively strong preference for ministry with other members of their institute and ministry sponsored by their institute. Again, these preferences are much stronger among younger new members. Very few new members, especially in the youngest age cohorts, prefer ministry with a non-Catholic or non-religious organization or even one that is Catholic but not sponsored by their institute.

Evaluation of Religious Institutes

- Most new members give their religious institutes very high ratings (“excellent”) for their commitment to ministry. Most also give high marks to their institutes for their faithfulness to prayer and spiritual growth, the opportunities for spiritual and personal growth, and focus on mission. They give their institutes somewhat lower ratings for community life and relationships, opportunities for ongoing formation, and efforts to promote vocations.
 - Compared to new members from other generations, those from the Vatican II Generation tend to give their institutes lower ratings on most of the aspects of religious life about which they were asked. Those from the Millennial Generation tend to be the most positive in their assessment of their religious institutes.
- ### Practices Regarding the Religious Habit
- The responses to the open-ended question about what attracted them to their religious institute reveal that having a religious habit was an important factor for a significant number of new members. Interviews with vocation directors also suggest that many who are inquiring into religious life are looking for the possibility of wearing a habit even in those institutes in which few, if any, members regularly do so.
 - About two-thirds of the responding new members are in institutes that wear a religious habit. For a little more than half of those new members (55 percent), the habit is required in all or most circumstances and for another 16 percent it is required only at certain times, such as for ministry or prayer. In the focus group discussions, a few of the participants were either strongly in favor or strongly opposed to requiring habits, while some saw the value of wearing a habit or clerical dress in at least some circumstances.
 - Among those who report that the habit is optional, 90 percent of men and 27 percent of women say they wear it at least once in a while, with 14 percent of men and 15 percent of women saying they wear it in all or most circumstances. Among those who report that their institute does not have a habit, almost half of the men (48 percent) and almost a quarter of the women (23 percent) say they would wear a habit if they had that option.

Most Rewarding and Satisfying Aspects of Religious Life

- When asked what they find most rewarding or satisfying about religious life, new members offered a range of comments about various aspects of religious life. The most frequent responses were about the communal dimension of religious life. Some mention living, praying, and working together while others focus more on the sense of common purpose and being part of something larger than themselves. The frequency of mentions of community life suggests that this is a particularly important aspect of religious life to most new members.
- Many new members also identify some aspect of the spiritual dimension of religious life, such as the sense of following God's call, deepening their relationship with God and with Christ, and/or personal and communal prayer, as providing the greatest sense of reward or satisfaction. In their responses, many new members specifically mention daily Eucharist, Eucharistic Adoration, the Divine Office, Marian devotion, and other devotional practices as especially meaningful to them.
- Some new members cite the service or outreach dimension of religious life as most rewarding or satisfying for them. Many of these respondents mention ministry, service, or the apostolate while others comment on being a witness to God for others. The fact that comments about ministry, service, or the apostolate are less frequent than those about community and spirituality suggest that these may be less salient to new members.
Challenges in and for Religious Life Today
- In response to questions about what they find most challenging about religious life, new members identified a range of issues and concerns. Some of these are perennial issues in religious life: the challenges of living in community, overcoming personal weaknesses, faithfully living the vows, and balancing personal, communal, and ministerial responsibilities.
- Some of the challenges identified by new members are more unique to this particular time in the history of religious life in the United States: aging and diminishment in their religious institutes, age and experience differences among new members as well as between new and older members in community, the lack of peers in religious life and in their religious institutes, and differences in theology and ecclesiology, often across generational lines. Some see the polarization within the Church and within religious life as the greatest challenge.

Hope for the Future

- Although many of the participants in the focus groups and interviews expressed concerns about the future of religious life and the future of their religious institutes, most remain hopeful. Most acknowledge that the numbers in religious life may continue to decline and that their religious institutes may be different in the future. Nonetheless, they believe religious life will persevere and that the Spirit can and will move in that diminishment. Some already see signs of hope, especially in a younger generation that they believe is bringing a new energy and optimism to religious life.
- Findings from the qualitative research also suggest that new members are especially attracted to religious institutes that themselves are clear and confident about their identity and hopeful about their future. Some new members are disheartened by the apathy, pessimism, and fatalism they see in some of the members of their institutes.

Best Practices in Vocation Ministry

- The findings from the study suggest a number of “best practices” for vocation promotion. These include instilling a “culture of vocations” and involving membership and leadership in concerted vocation promotion efforts; having a full-time vocation director who is supported by a team and resources; using new media, especially websites and other online presence; offering discernment programs and other opportunities for potential candidates to meet members and learn about the institute; and targeting college students and young adults as well as elementary and high school students to expose them to the possibility of religious life and inform them about the institute.
- Although these practices can have a positive impact on attracting and retaining new members, the research suggests that it is the example of members and the characteristics of the institute that have the most influence on the decision to enter a particular institute. The most successful institutes in terms of attracting and retaining new members at this time are those that follow a more traditional style of religious life in which members live together in community and participate in daily Eucharist, pray the Divine Office, and engage in devotional practices together. They also wear a religious habit, work together in common apostolates, and are explicit about their fidelity to the Church and the teachings of the Magisterium. All of these characteristics are especially attractive to the young people who are entering religious life today.