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Vocation directors report fourth year of increased interest

by Nancy Frazier O'Brien by Catholic News Service

WASHINGTON -- New revelations of clergy sex abuse and the Vatican apostolic visitation of U.S. communities of women religious have not discouraged Catholics from considering a religious vocation, with the majority of vocation directors seeing an increase in inquiries for the fourth straight year, according to a recent survey.

The survey, commissioned by the Chicago-based Vision Vocation Guide, also found that vocations directors reported some positive impact on their work from Pope Benedict XVI's call for atonement for the church's failings, the Year for Priests and the canonization or beatification of a particular saint.

Conducted Aug. 30-Sept. 23, the survey received responses from 431 "vocation inquirers" and 175 vocation directors. The majority of the vocation inquirers said they were very serious about choosing religious life, with 18 percent saying they planned to enter a religious community in the next year.

"The fact that church events have little impact on a person's exploration of a religious life says a lot about the depth and seriousness of the call," said Patrice Tuohy, executive editor of Vision Vocation Guide and VocationMarch.com, in a Sept. 30 news release about the survey.

Nearly 84 percent of the respondents considering a vocation said prayer was the most essential element in their decision-making process. The majority also listed spiritual direction, opportunities to experience community life and greater knowledge of what would be a good fit as essential in making a decision about religious life.

About one-third said they felt most drawn to an "apostolic/evangelical" community and another third said they were drawn to a "contemplative/contemplative-active" community. The rest were divided among

monastic, cloistered/semi-cloistered or missionary communities.

Asked what attracts them most to a particular religious community, nearly three-quarters chose "living a life of faithfulness to the church and its teachings" as an essential element, while more than half said "praying with members of the community" was essential.

The most frequently cited challenging aspects of being a religious priest, brother or sister were the discipline of prayer, the vow of celibacy, a life of service and sharing resources and living simply. Less than 20 percent of the respondents said they found living in community or restrictions on personal freedom to be the most challenging aspects.

Twenty-five percent of men and 25 percent of male and female respondents over age 40 said they found wearing a religious habit essential; among women and respondents under 40, the percentage increased to nearly 37 percent.

Asked what resources they found most helpful in gathering vocation information, more than half cited personal contact with a religious priest, sister or brother as essential, while 40 percent named the "come and see" weekends or discernment retreats sponsored by religious communities.

Judged least helpful in gathering vocation information were a community's or discerners' blogs, parents and family, and campus, youth or young adult ministers.

The survey asked vocations directors to what they attributed the increase in inquiries about religious life, and 60 percent said the main reason was a desire for deeper spirituality. More than 40 percent attributed it to a desire for community and identity, while more than 30 percent credited the easy availability of information via the Internet.

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Although more than three-quarters of the vocation inquirers said they used e-mail all the time and more than a quarter said they used smart phones all the time, only 56 percent of the vocations directors said they used e-mail all the time and 13 percent said they used smart phones all the time.

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