

The future of religious life and the plight of young adult Catholic women

Jamie Manson | Oct. 27, 2011 | Grace on the Margins

Lately there has been a lot of talk about the future of religious life in the pages of *NCR*.

In August, Monica Clark reported from the annual meeting of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR). Facing the challenges of aging sisters and smaller numbers of vocations, the entire conference was dedicated to contemplating what God was calling forth from these communities.

"We sense that something new is emerging," said St. Joseph Sr. Carol Zinn, a member of LCWR's executive committee, "but we certainly don't yet know what it will look like."

Later that month, Tom Roberts entered the conversation to offer a correction to the idea, widely held by many conservative Catholics, that traditional religious communities are experiencing a robust increase in vocations.

The conservative orders, Roberts demonstrated, account for only 5 percent of women religious in the United States. Last year, the highest number of professions among any community was nine. Neither the conservative orders nor the communities affiliated with LCWR have a retention rate higher than 50 percent prior to the profession of final vows.

"In the end," Roberts concluded, "all of this may be panning for gold on opposite sides of a creek going dry."

NCR blogger Mary Ann McGivern, a Sister of Loretto, responded to Roberts by offering her own experience of living in a Catholic Worker House for three decades.

It's a "vibrant young community," she writes, that devotes itself to "praying together, holding discussions to clarify thought, publishing journals, and doing the corporal works of mercy."

"It's not a matter of which religious style will win out," McGivern states, "but whether we trust in the Spirit of God acting in each of us."

And perhaps no one has contributed more to this topic in the *NCR* than Sandra Schneiders. In the last two years, she has published numerous essays on religious life as a "prophetic life form." The "distinguishing mark" of the "prophetic witness," she writes in one essay, "involves discerning and responding to ... 'the signs of the times.'"

As Heidi Schlumpf wrote in her coverage of Schneiders' recent address at St. Mary's College, the sister and scholar projected that "women's ministerial life has a future in this time and beyond."

Unlike many women religious in this country, Schneiders isn't as distressed about the dwindling numbers of vocations.

"No Congregation 'needs' more members than are actually called to it by God," she asserted in a 2010 *NCR*

essay. "The purpose of the life is not to perpetuate particular Congregations nor to staff Church institutions; it is to live intensely the witness to the Gospel to which the Congregation is called and for as long as it is called."

As fruitful as this ongoing *NCR* conversation has been, what I find lacking from the discussion is the same element that goes missing every time the topic of declining priestly vocations arises, too. What about all of the young adults, many of whom hold degrees in theology and ministry, who are currently doing the traditional work of the church?

Every year, hundreds of young Catholic women graduate from universities, graduate programs in religion, divinity schools and seminaries. Many of them go on to be theologians, chaplains, nonprofit leaders, advocates, activists and social workers doing outreach with the homeless, the incarcerated and victims of domestic violence.

Their work is not only high-risk, it is often emotionally demanding and spiritually draining. If they are very lucky, they work in a supportive environment under a supervisor who is stable, competent and compassionate.

Unlike males who seek the priesthood, the institutional church does not support their education or their profession -- even though they, too, spend their lives studying and serving the church.

Unlike women religious, they do not experience some of the securities that come with religious life. They have to find employment on their own, pay their rent, maintain a household on their own and, in some cases, provide their own medical insurance. If they lose their jobs, there is no safety net to carry them through until they find work again.

Perhaps most challenging of all, these young women do not enjoy the sustenance that comes with a life of prayer, contemplation and community. Young women are as in need of this support as any of the sisters engaged in similar work.

The number of young adult Catholic women who find themselves in this predicament is not small. And, I believe, they are most certainly called by God in a way very similar to women religious.

The difference is that these young women grew up in a culture that, in some significant ways, is radically different from society in which the majority of sisters in the United States were raised.

The bulk of the sisters ministering in the United States today entered their communities during or before the 1960s. They were raised in a social climate that did not discuss sexuality openly and in a church that demanded they bury their sexual feelings. Thankfully, most women religious in the past few decades have moved beyond these repressed beginnings. Nowadays, sisters are among our culture's strongest advocates for sexual and gender justice.

Today's young adult women came of age in a culture that speaks much more freely about sexuality and in a society where gender roles have loosened up significantly. The notion that being in a loving, committed relationship might somehow compromise their capacity to serve God fully is foreign to most of them.

More importantly, they were raised in a post-communal culture. Most did not grow up surrounded by extended family or in a traditional parish or neighborhood. For them, a partner or a spouse provides an important part of their identity and their support network. The need for a partner, therefore, is stronger and more crucial to their emotional stability and spiritual health than it was for previous generations.

Yet, sadly, their desire for marriage cuts off any possibility for consecrated religious life -- even though, like women religious, these young Catholic women long to live out the witness of the Gospel. They share the same hunger for community, charism and contemplation.

Many will argue that young women can easily join the thriving lay associates and companions programs offered by many religious communities. But associates, it seems to me, have a slightly different purpose in religious life. They immerse themselves in the charism of a community and then they bring that spirit into their professional and personal lives.

I suspect that there are many women, and I count myself among them, who desire more. Rather than taking the community's spirit into the world, they wish to dwell fully in the community. They want to live among the suffering or in the retreat house. They want to make a home within their ministries. They want to make a life commitment not simply to a profession, but to a mission.

Last summer, I had the extraordinary opportunity to study several communities of women religious who ran shelters for homeless mothers. The sisters who ran these homes were aging and were small in number. Many of them lived in the shelter with their guests. Most of them had several nonreligious staff members who served as case managers and social workers.

But as dedicated and skilled as the support staff was, I got the distinct sense that most did not quite grasp the deeper mission of the place. Their devotion to their work was not grounded in Catholic social justice tradition or sacramental theology. Watching the differences between sisters and the clinical staff, I felt like I was looking at a charism of the brink of extinction.

But does it have to end this way?

There are hundreds of young adult women who want to answer God's call and who can, both theologically and pastorally, sustain the spirit and mission of these religious communities. And I believe they can do this *and* be partnered or married. In some cases, my own included, I believe that being in a committed relationship would actually enhance the fruitfulness of some women's vocations to religious life.

For decades, Catholic Worker Houses have found creative ways to accommodate couples. More recently, the multitude of groups that are emerging out of the "new monasticism" movement are also incorporating couples, some of them even same-sex partners, into their communities.

Many of these "new monastics" are actually Protestants who are finding profound meaning and purpose in this ancient Catholic concept. Catholic women have the extraordinary benefit of already being deeply rooted in the tradition. All they need is for a religious community to open its doors to them.

Most of us would agree that something new is emerging, but we are not quite sure what it is. I would invite women religious to expand their contemplation to include the voices of young adult women who share a deep understanding of their calling and charism. Even though they may not be ready or willing to profess vows, these young women may hold significant insight into how this prophetic life form might continue to give life to future generations.

Although we won't find all of the answers to the mysterious future of religious life, by giving young women a voice, the sisters will be actually provide a much-needed ministry to a different kind of marginalized community. The most overlooked group in the Catholic Church may well be young adult Catholic women who, regardless of the depth of their commitment to the Gospel and to the work of justice, are excluded from nearly every form of life-commitment to ministry.

Together we may be able to attune one another's prophetic vision and guide one another in reading the signs of the times.

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