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Religious orders say social media use spurs more interest in vocations

Chelsea Weikart Catholic News Service | Oct. 4, 2012

Several religious congregations and organizations are taking advantage of social media to "introduce" individuals discerning a call to a vocation and the seminary, convent or monastery that fits them.

With more than 1,400 likes on Facebook, the National Religious Vocation Conference takes full advantage of social networking, through its Vision Vocation Guide and other outlets.

At VocationMatch.com, also operated by the Chicago-based conference, a brief questionnaire tells "discerners" -- those considering a commitment to religious life -- what their seminary, convent or monastery matches are.

People post questions daily about their life circumstances, inquiring about what resources could help them find the right vocation fit, and Vision connects them with the congregation that matches their interests.

Patrice Tuohy, executive editor of the Vision Vocation Guide, said social media has brought the organization to a place greater than it could have been 15 years ago.

"As the community's use of social networking has increased, so have inquiries. They have quadrupled since we started having a presence online," she told Catholic News Service.

Vision is primarily a social networking site that attracts more than 200,000 visitors each year. Seventy-five percent of those are new visitors and 5,000 fill out profiles to find their vocational match, according to Vision's tracking records.

Prior to its launch as an online social network, 150,000 copies of the Vision guide were printed, which resulted in 600 inquiries mailed in by readers.

Trinitarian Br. Josh Warshak of Baltimore credited Vision with giving him the information he needed in deciding what type of religious life was for him, and he would recommend it to any "discerner."

"I tell people Vision is kind of like eHarmony for those who have a religious vocation, it matches up your personality with the order that fits you best," he said.

Before finding Vision, Warshak was focused on becoming a priest but didn't have access to much advice about the topic. "Vision showed me that there are so many other things," he said, which led him to his community, the Order of the Most Holy Trinity.

Warshak, 25, said his Trinitarian vocations director, 30, was younger than most in that position and was extremely plugged in to social media. Warshak kept up on the order's blog and communicated regularly with the director during his discernment process via Facebook and email.

Warshak said this is something that religious communities need to embrace.

"My generation and younger, we grew up with technology being so integrated in our daily lives. It's how we connect," he said.

The Congregation of Holy Cross -- which founded the University of Notre Dame in Indiana and operates the seminary programs for its U.S. province there -- is using Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Flickr and blogs to promote its retreat weekends and increase general awareness of the congregation on the Internet.

The congregation has 55 men in formation, its largest number since 1999. A news release said the province's vocations program is "among the healthiest" for U.S. Catholic religious orders. Next spring three Holy Cross seminarians will be ordained priests; two are in the process for being ordained in 2014; and up to six could be ordained in 2015.

"The personal interaction still comes first," Fr. James T. Gallagher, Holy Cross vocations director, said in a statement. "Our social media outlets are just tools we use to help make Holy Cross known, share discernment tips, and help deepen a man's prayer life."

Gallagher said in an interview with CNS that having a place in social media is a presence he wants.

"That's where young people are finding their news and information and connecting with friends. We want to have a presence they can find there," he said.

One of the largest, youngest and fastest growing orders in the U.S. is the Dominican Sisters of St. Cecilia in Nashville, Tenn. With 284 sisters in the congregation and 95 women in formation, the sisters are considering getting a Facebook page.

Dominican Sr. Peter Marie said Facebook could be used as a tool to help spread information about the congregation and the Gospel.

"The possibility of creating a Facebook page for our congregation comes from a desire to respond to the Holy Father's call for the new evangelization. We would hope to make resources available to catechists, teachers, families, home-school parents, and young people discerning a religious vocation," she said.

Although they're not yet on Facebook, the sisters' media presence is not absent. St. Cecilia's is currently using a website, e-newsletters, and Veritas magazine to communicate with supporters and those discerning a vocation.

"There is no question that Internet social networking has been a tremendous boon to Catholic religious vocation promotion," Tuohy told CNS.

Whether to enter religious life is a private, personal decision for many, but Sister Peter Marie, Gallagher and Tuohy agree social media does not substitute for face-to-face interaction with a priest or woman religious.

"Ultimately, you do need to have one-on-one contact for the vocation to really blossom," Tuohy said.

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