



Every community can learn from the messages in the 2020 NRVC-CARA study. Leaders of religious life organizations noted that the study emphasizes the need to empower younger members, nurture communal life, invest in formation, and more. Pictured here are Sister Michelle Leshner, S.S.J. (left) conversing with Sister Roberta Archibald, S.S.J.

Leaders reflect on the study

HORIZON reached out to men and women affiliated with the major religious conferences in the U.S. and some national organizations for religious institutes to respond briefly to whatever aspect of the 2020 Study on Recent Vocations to Religious Life they found most intriguing given their perspective. Here are their thoughts.



Let's listen to and support new members

By Sister Annmarie Sanders, I.H.M. Sanders is the communications director for the Leadership Conference of Women Religious.

THE HOPE AND ZEAL contained within the responses of new members in religious life to the NRVC study give us clear indicators of the work needed now and into the future to support this way of life for generations to come.

The 2020 study offers an interesting observation about the hope of newer members for the future of religious life. Noting that newer members are more optimistic than the leaders of their institutes, the researchers add, “perhaps because they recognize their own agency in creating a future for their institute.”

Without a doubt, newer members have the utmost love, respect, and reverence for their elders in religious life. However, they also see that the time has come for elders to loosen their grip on what has been in order to let the new emerge. Newer members are highly aware of the profound and rapid changes occurring in society that require us to be adaptable. They also acknowledge that they need strong spiritual grounding and solid education to discern carefully how such adaptation needs to occur within their communities and within themselves. They seem, indeed, to be acknowledging their own agency by naming both what they desire and what they need.

I wonder what might occur if we, of the older generations, focused more on the vision and potential younger members see and are articulating. Hints of the

vision are found throughout their survey responses. The religious life they want highly values personal and communal prayer and is lived in community (recognizing that “community” may not be defined as it has been in decades past). Their vision sees religious giving of themselves fully in meaningful ministry in

the service of the pressing needs of the world—but not at the risk of overwork and burnout. In this new vision, religious are committed to wholesome, balanced living.

I use the word “hints” deliberately because the survey responses also indicate that newer members often feel that their perspectives and viewpoints are drowned out by the larger age cohorts in their institutes.

The findings show that newer members often feel they cannot fully express their own vision for the future and, at best, offer only suggestions or intimations of their true hopes. While the reasons for their muted voices may be myriad, this reality calls for attention.

What would it mean if newer members were encouraged to name the future they envision and were then supported to use their agency to create that future—fully and without fear? What if our institutes expected their newer members to live according to their dreams and provided what they needed to do so? What if newer members experimented, tried, and perhaps even “failed” with what they endeavored to do? Could we create a culture that prized such attempts and saw even failures as ways for us all to learn and grow into what is emerging in religious life?

The NRVC study points to the work older generations need to do to assure that newer members have a future that does not burden them with former structures and expectations that no longer fit today’s reality. Responses that indicate newer members are worried about caring for large numbers of elders or feel that they will be pressed into leadership long before they feel ready tell us that we have a responsibility to make changes now so that new members can live religious life free from undue anxiety about internal matters and with the wholeheartedness for mission that they desire.

The Leadership Conference of Women Religious is

initiating a national discernment on how all institutes of women religious can find new ways of supporting one another through these next decades of change. Such support might result in new networks, new ways to share resources, new ways to administer our institutes, new ways of being a sisterhood across the boundaries of our institutes. We hope such efforts will help put in place what newer members need to live religious life into the future.

A large question looms before us: Do we have the will to make the needed changes for the sake of those coming after us?



Formation, collaboration, and investment

*By Brother Bill Boslet, O.S.F.
Boslet is a Franciscan Brother of Brooklyn and the executive secretary of the Religious Brothers Conference.*

My thoughts about NRVC’s 2020 *Study on Recent Vocations to Religious Life* fall under three categories: new membership, formation, and the future. Starting with new membership, “vocations” is a frequent topic at meetings of my own religious congregation, the Franciscan Brothers of Brooklyn. The comments from both the major superiors and the newer members, the two groups that were surveyed in the study, could certainly have been heard at any gathering of Franciscan Brothers.

The report shows that major superiors see the gap in age between older members and newer members as an ongoing concern, one with serious implications for the future of institutes.

The newer members express a concern about aging members and the few incoming members to replace the elderly. But there *are* newer members, and their religious formation is more crucial than ever.

Meanwhile the major superiors acknowledge that with few new members, it has been challenging to provide peer support for new entrants. Leaders realize that one solution is to provide opportunities for inter-congregational support.

Superiors also worry that young people in modern, secular society do not have the faith background that was common in previous generations. And they are concerned about new members’ experiences before entering that necessitate mentoring or counseling, such as those related to a dysfunctional family.

What would it mean if newer members were encouraged to name the future they envision and were then supported to use their agency to create that future?

The major superiors hope that formation programs will enable new members to have a solid foundation in religious life and will help them to incorporate that foundation into their daily religious life. Both newer members and superiors mention deliberate engagement with the wider religious community as important in the accompaniment and formation process.

As a former formation director I have long believed in the importance of ongoing formation. Prayer and spiritual direction are a vital part of religious life. These tools are also essential to the support of newer members in their formation.

What about some challenges and hopes for the future? The major superiors realize that the small size of communities is a challenge to the institutes, one that affects both maintenance of their ministries and the selection and preparation of new members for leadership roles.

However, the newer members saw that one of the outcomes of diminished size is often a recognition of the need for collaboration with other religious institutes and with lay partners in order to fulfill the mission. Those efforts at networking and collaboration can help new members and their institutes to extend their ministry despite fewer vowed members. Thus we can ask about smaller size: is the glass half empty or half full?

Lastly I would like to share the thoughts of a major superior quoted in the report whose words struck me as particularly good advice: "Try to form and give priority to creating a formation community to receive them, support them, and nurture their vocation. We put our best people in vocation and formation ministry. We also put our financial resources there, too!"



Vitality of community life matters

By Sister Mary Christine Cremin, R.S.M.

Cremin is a Religious Sisters of Mercy and executive director of the Council of Major Superiors of Women Religious.

The data presented in the new NRVC-CARA study should give hope to anyone concerned about the future of religious life in the United States. At the same time, it raises questions about what the lived experience of the life, at least for some, may look like in the not too distant future. Of particular interest to vocation directors and religious superiors may be

information on what a significant number of newer vocations (those of the last 15 years) are looking for in religious communities.

Analyzing the characteristics of men and women who have entered religious communities in the last 15 years, the study used a combination of survey data and focus group sessions to look at four areas: 1) what attracted respondents to religious life and to their particular institute, 2) what they found helpful in their process of discernment; 3) what styles of prayer, community life, and ministry they preferred, and 4) what sustains and what challenges them in living out their religious life.

The study clearly shows that men and women are still being called to religious life and responding to the call. They are drawn by a sense of being called, and they have a desire for spiritual growth, for prayer, to be part of a community, and to be of service. Significantly, almost half of those now in initial formation are under age 30, an increase from 10 years earlier when the study indicated 43 percent were under 30.

What will come as no surprise is the importance to a discernor of personal contact with a religious and his or her community. Apparently recognizing this fact, the majority of communities participating in the study have one or more vocation directors. Surprisingly enough, however, only 23 percent of women's communities regularly invite their vocation directors to give reports about vocation activities at the institute's leadership meetings. Given that newer members indicate that their choice of a community was heavily influenced by the experience of relating to the community and sharing prayer and community meals, it would seem helpful to have regular updates from vocation directors as part of community meetings.

Emphasizing the significance of an institute's prayer and community life to its ability to attract new vocations, the research shows that younger members were attracted to their particular institute primarily by its charism, style of prayer, and community life. While many respondents indicated that they first learned about their institute online, direct contact with religious through "Come and See" programs or discernment retreats was particularly important to Millennial discerners.

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Consistent with the high value the majority of respondents placed on community life, Millennial respondents were very much attracted by the example of the institute's members and the nature of their community life. Interestingly, women were more likely than men to be "very much" attracted by the community life of the institute. They placed a high value on living together, sharing meals and leisure time together, and celebrating holidays and feast days together.

Perhaps this last point is one of the most important for institutes as they look to the future. A vibrant community that deeply shares its life, its prayer, its work, its meals, its recreation, and its joys and sorrows is a powerfully attractive sign. It's one that any institute wanting to encourage new members will take seriously.

A new narrative of perseverance



By Sister Ellen Dauwer, S.C.
Dauwer is the executive director of the Religious Formation Conference.

Several years ago in her Leadership Conference of Women Religious presidential address, Sister Mary Pellegrino, C.S.J. spoke of the narrative of diminishment in religious life. The narrative seems to have grown larger and louder through frequent repetition and has subtly wound its way into much of the U.S. Catholic consciousness.

When asked if anyone is entering religious life today, I sometimes engage people in a simple experiment I devised a few years ago. I ask them how many people they think entered religious life this past year in the United States or how many people they think are in initial formation in religious communities at this time. Only one person out of dozens questioned has given an accurate answer to these questions; all others have underestimated the statistics, and most have vastly underestimated them! Unfortunately, the narrative is alive and well.

The *2020 Study on Recent Vocations to Religious Life* provides important tools to those who serve in vocation and formation ministries, as well as to leaders and all members of religious congregations. I dare say to all in our church and society, too. First, it promotes deliberations and decisions, conversations and consultations based in fact rather than anecdote. Many of us are steeped in the local worlds of our community, neighborhood, family, and friends; we then generalize

and normalize our experiences. For example, if three women in their 40s are discerning in my community and in the communities of my friends, I might conclude that most discerners these days are in their 40s. This latest NRVC/CARA study, when paired with the annual reports of CARA on recent entrants and those recently professed, broadens these anecdotal observations to create a more accurate picture of religious life in the United States.

Another tool the study provides is that of comparison. When the NRVC's *2009 Study on Recent Vocations* was published, it raised more questions than answers. I recall a presentation of initial findings of the study at a Commission on Religious Life and Ministry annual meeting that gathered leaders of LCWR, CMSM, CMSWR, and the USCCB that resulted in lively conversation. Later at the LCWR Assembly, when the final results were reported, there were questions regarding methodology intermingled with questions about findings. The current report about newer members stands on the shoulders of the one that preceded it, gaining wisdom from experience, while providing rich data from a 15-year look back period.

Finally, this study of recent members will assist the Religious Formation Conference in its current ministry with both formators and leaders of men's and women's congregations. Since the beginning of religious life, formators have taken their place between the proverbial rock and a hard place as they stand on the edge of the new, in the middle of the present day, and on the waning edge of the past. They engage in mutual discernment, accompanying newer members with their questions of call and fit. They also ponder call and fit on behalf of the congregation. Formators report to congregational or provincial leadership while journeying with newer members who sometimes challenge and question the formation program and process. This study probes the concerns of leaders and newer members while also giving voice to their hopes and dreams. The Religious Formation Conference's Orientation to Formation Program to be held in October will offer a two-day extension for congregational and provincial leaders. The insights and observations of leaders and newer members from this study will be an invaluable tool.

Pervasive narratives of diminishment need to be presented with accurate information to release their hold on people's perception of the truth. It is my hope that this important study be disseminated broadly and discussed deeply by formators and other religious so that all may hear and believe the good news it contains.

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Attend to common life

*By Father Frank Donio, S.A.C.
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Common prayer, common life, and common ministry are the most important aspects of a religious institute for respondents to the *2020 Study on Recent Vocations to Religious Life*. For many, these findings will not come as a surprise. In some ways they are not much different from a similar study done in 2009 when these aspects of community life were also highly rated. The difference is that young religious now, especially in communities of men, are primarily from the Millennial generation. Those “respondents, in particular, are more likely than older generation respondents to report that living, ministering, sharing meals, and

socializing with other members are ‘very important’ to them” (108).

What may come as a surprise to older generations of men in religious life whether in the Silent, Boomer, or even X Generations, is that “ministries of the institute are also important to most new members, [but] they are less important than spirituality, prayer, community, and lifestyle” (7). Another aspect that might surprise or even cause discomfort for some is that “most new members prefer to live in a large (eight or more) or medium-sized (four to seven) community, living with members of different ages at or near their ministry site” (9). The newer members are also much more ethnically diverse than their elders (6). Finally, another finding that might surprise is that new members are in their late 20s, on average, when starting religious life, rather than in their early 30s as they were in 2009 (6).

While the charism and spirituality of the institute attract newer members, they often come to know their institute through one of its works or online. The witness

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of the members of the institute and their encouragement are important factors in someone taking the step to enter. The role of the vocation director continues to be important, but together with the other members of the institute (92). Personal contact through "Come and See" programs (74 percent) and discernment retreats (59 percent) are very common among those who eventually join (87).

Once they do enter, they "identify personal private prayer as one of the aspects of religious life that is most important to them and that most sustains them now" (8). For communal prayer they tend toward "daily Eucharist, Liturgy of the Hours, Eucharistic Adoration, and other devotional prayers" (8). Again, for some older members these practices, particularly the last two, might not be a regular part of their communal prayer.

New member concerns include: their ability to persevere, too much work, lack of preparation for leadership, loneliness, as well as "adapting to rapid change in society" (10). Some of these, such as perseverance, are similar to the concerns of major superiors for new members. One critical difference is that while newer members are concerned about the age gap in their institute, they "realized that more deliberate efforts at networking and collaboration can help them and their institute" (10). In fact, "they look forward to increased collaboration across generations" (11).

For leaders, formators, and vocation directors in male religious institutes, these findings offer an opportunity to evaluate the strength of communal prayer, life, and ministry. Today Catholic young adults can do ministry full-time as a first career. They do not need to join a religious institute to do that. What the institute can do is offer to accompany a young person into deeper life in Christ, in and through the life of the institute. They come looking for a life that is larger than themselves, one in which members support and accompany one another, pray together and for one another, and assist one another in their apostolic work.

When these are not present in our institutes, then why do we wonder when young men do not come to us? They are not looking for an institute to be perfect. They are simply looking for it to be striving to be authentic to the life that it proclaims. When they see and experience this, then the study shows that they will take the risk to join us, grow with us in holiness, and offer us an optimism that can be challenging, but growth-filled. ■