

Signs of Vitality



*An Exploratory Study of Four Congregations
of Women Religious in Southern California*

*“Give aid to... the sisters, who devote their love
and life’s work for the good of mankind, for
they appeal especially to me as deserving help
from the Foundation.... It is my wish... to have
the largest part of your benefactions dedicated
to the sisters in all parts of the world.”*

— Last will and testament of Conrad N. Hilton

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USC Center for Religion and Civic Culture

for

Conrad N. Hilton Foundation
Catholic Sisters Initiative

Introduction

AT FIRST GLANCE, the Carmelite Sisters of the Most Sacred Heart of Los Angeles may seem like a vision from another era. Their motherhouse is a half-block property in a quiet suburb, with multiple building surrounded by tall shrubs, a wall and a double gate entrance. Far from being closed off, though, their retreat house is busy with retreats for lay women nearly every weekend between September and June. During weekdays, laypeople and priests come in and out to meet with sisters, who are dressed in long dark robes and full wimples, with a white cloth covering their necks, heads, ears and chest and a veil over it.

The Verbum Dei Missionaries of Long Beach, in contrast, wear plain clothes adorned only with a simple cross and a ring to symbolize their marriage to Christ. Their convent is a former parish office next to St. Anthony's Church in Long Beach. At its entrance is a hand-painted scroll, with the print, "We will dedicate ourselves to prayer and service of the Word" (Acts 6:4). On the other end of the entry way, a Dalai Lama quote hangs from a wall in a Zen-like meditation space. Later that day, some of the sisters will meet with their parishioners, a large group composed of couples and families, for a Spanish Bible-study group, where they "learn how to pray."

Despite their differences, both congregations have had success in cultivating new vocations and in engaging with a robust Catholic ecosystem around them. Even as more young people—and young Catholics in particular—leave their religious traditions, some young women are making the radical decision to follow a call into religious life. Some attribute the continued growth of orders like the Carmelites to their conservative values, counter-cultural lifestyles and even their traditional aesthetic. Yet, the focus on the habit obscures what it takes for a religious congregation to thrive today.

In order to better understand vitality in religious life today, the USC Center for Religion and Civic Culture conducted interviews and ethnographic observation with the Carmelites and Verbum Dei Missionaries, as well as two other congregations in Southern California. This research is part of CRCC's activities as the Measurement, Evaluation and Learning (MEL) Partner for the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation's Catholic Sisters Initiative.

One of the goals of the Sisters Initiative is to support the vitality of congregations of women religious. In the global north, it aimed to do so, in part, by increasing the number of women becoming sisters. As the Sisters Initiative's MEL partner, CRCC has documented how larger trends in religion and society impede this goal. At the same time, CRCC recommended in its second MEL report that the Foundation pursue research into places where Catholicism is charismatic and/or vibrant and where congregations are attracting vocations to better understand how the Initiative can shape the future of religious life. This qualitatively-based research study is a starting point for such work. As an exploratory overview of a limited number of congregations in one geographical location, this report cannot be said to definitively describe the vitality of religious life. Nonetheless, its findings reflect common themes in other research on religion, including CRCC's research on religious creativity and innovation.





Contrary to the idea that the popularity of orders such as the Carmelites comes from their being a throwback to the 1950s, CRCC has found that the young women attracted to the four congregations are modern women, engaged with today's technology and culture. The sisters also delve energetically and innovatively into their ministerial work alongside laypeople in the midst of ordinary secular life. At the same time, collective prayer life and intimate communal bonds cultivated in the convent are foundational to spiritual development of the sisters. It is from these life-giving sources that the sisters then engage with the outside world.

Based on this exploration of a limited number of congregations, CRCC posits that the vitality—and moreover the sustainability—of congregations is informed by the adaptive manner in which a congregation engages with spirituality, community life, service and outreach across the whole lifetime of a sister. In other words, the four congregations CRCC has examined are responsive to the needs and desires of women throughout their lives, supporting both sisters and the wider Catholic community.

AMERICAN CATHOLICISM

History and Context

IN ORDER TO UNDERSTAND the vitality of congregations, it's important first to understand the context in which they operate.

The Catholic population started growing significantly in the United States through immigration in the 19th century. Even as Catholics became the largest Christian denomination in the United States, they remained isolated as a minority group. Catholics typically lived in ethnic enclaves in cities, each with its own parish, school and social institutions. Catholic sisters worked in many of these institutions and started social service and health care institutions to serve new immigrants and poor and working-class Catholics.

American Catholic life changed drastically in the second half of the 20th century. In the years following World War II, many Catholics of European

descent rode the country's economic growth into the middle class, moved away from urban ethnic enclaves into the suburbs and became accepted as "white" Americans. New Catholic immigrants, mostly from Latin America and increasingly from Asia, have taken their place in urban communities.

The Second Vatican Council (1962-65) changed Catholic life by bringing the church into conversation with modernity and elevating the role of the laity in the Church. Vatican II brought a process of renewal for women religious, who adapted their life, prayer and work according to the intent of their congregation's founders as well as the time and place in which they served. Many orders of sisters removed or simplified the habit, gave sisters more flexibility in their spiritual lives and apostolic work, and sent sisters out to live among the people they served rather than within the convent.¹

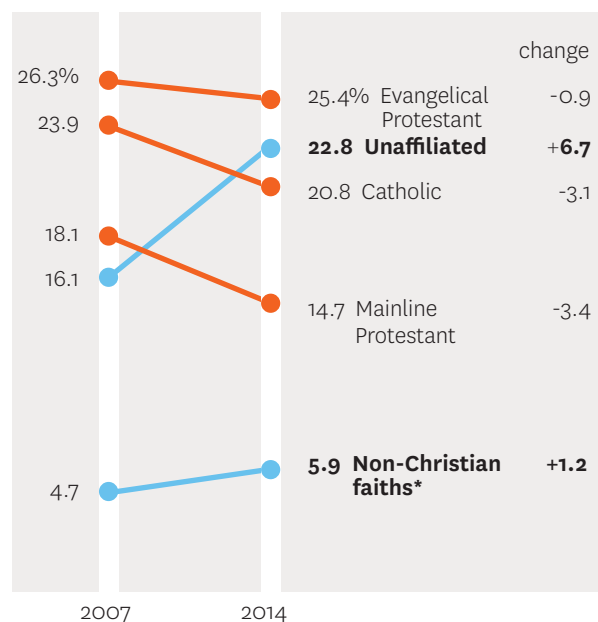


Across religious traditions, the past two decades have been defined by the decline in religious affiliation, with the trend particularly affecting the Catholic Church. The share of Americans who have disaffiliated from religion has increased from about seven percent in the 1970s, to 23 percent today. Among the so-called Millennial generation, the number of religiously unaffiliated is more than one-third.² From 2007 to 2014, the proportion of American adults who identified as Catholic fell from 24 to 20.8 percent.³ Only 16 percent of Millennials identify as Catholics, suggesting that the Catholic share of the U.S. population will continue to fall. A significant portion of self-identified Catholics also are non-practicing “cultural Catholics.”

fig. 1

Shifts in Religious Affiliation

From 2007–2014



SOURCE: Pew Forum for Religion & Public Life

Even as their numbers decline, American Catholics—like the U.S. population as a whole—are becoming more racially and ethnically diverse. Catholics are more likely than other Americans to be immigrants or children of immigrants. Indeed, the number of foreign-born Catholics in the U.S.—21.5 million in 2014—has increased steadily over time. Racial and ethnic minorities now make up 41 percent of Catholics, up from 35 percent in 2007.⁴ Catholic Millennials are more likely to be Hispanic (46%) than they are to be white (43%).

This shift in the ethnicity of Catholics can be seen geographically as well. While a quarter of Catholics live in the Northeast, this population is older and more white, while a majority of Catholics in the West (57 percent) are Hispanic, with a growing number of Asian Catholics (currently 8 percent).⁵

Southern California vividly capture this demographic shift. The Archdiocese of Los Angeles, the largest dioceses in the United States, is home to an estimated 5 million Catholics, and the Diocese of Orange is now among the fastest-growing dioceses in the United States and home to 1.3 million Catholics. Diversity—shaped by immigration from heavily Catholic countries, particularly Mexico, Vietnam and the Philippines—is a key reason for the vibrancy of these dioceses. Meanwhile, many dioceses in the Northeast and Midwest are experiencing priest shortages, parish closures and thinning ranks in the pews.⁶

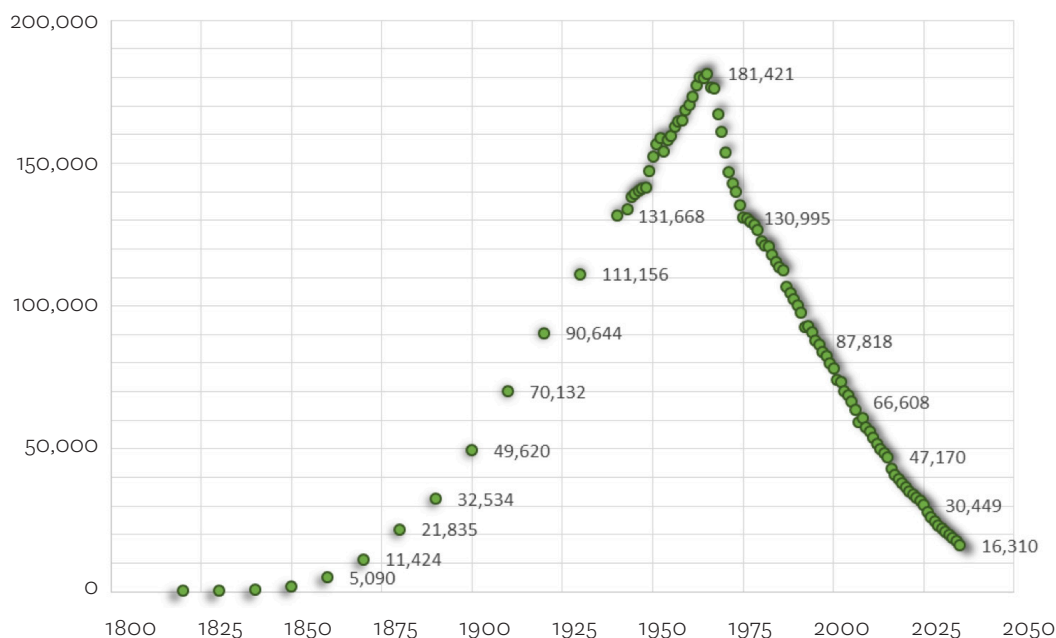
Catholic sisters have followed these demographic trends. After reaching a peak of more than 180,000 women religious in 1965, the number of Catholic sisters declined rapidly.⁷ As of 2016, there were 47,170 Catholic sisters in the United States. As a result of this decline, only 9 percent of religious sisters were younger than age 60 in 2010.⁸ By 2035, CRCC's projections show there will be 16,310 sisters in the United States, with fewer than 4,000 of these under the age of 70.

The reasons for this decline are complex. Many claim that the peak in the number of sisters in 1965 is an exception in the history of religious life. During the first half of the 20th century, there were greater family expectations in large and often working-class Catholic families that one or more children would be "given back" to the Church as a priest or sister. Outside of the Church, the civil rights and feminist movements brought new opportunities for women.

fig. 2

Total Number of Religious Sisters in the United States

1820–2015 and projection through 2035



The total number of religious sisters is expected to decline from 47,170 in 2015 to 30,449 in 2025 and then 16,310 in 2035. The current largest cohort of religious sisters are in their 70s (15,094 individuals). In 2025, then in their 80s, this group is expected to number 11,484. The model estimates 5,266 will survive into their 90s in 2035.



Outside of domestic and low-wage work, women largely had been limited to the roles of teacher or nurse, with Catholic sisters filling the latter two roles in the Catholic Church. Vatican II's call for the renewal of religious life, combined with wider cultural changes, offered the opportunity for many to leave religious life and pursue other paths as laywomen. In one dramatic instance, 350 of the 400 Immaculate Heart Sisters of Los Angeles left religious life at once, forming a lay community, when the local bishop did not accept the changes the institute had made to give sisters greater independence after Vatican II.⁹

Today, the decline in the number of sisters is due to sisters aging and young women not joining orders. Practical factors have prevented women from becoming sisters, including policies within some orders requiring college and work experience prior to entrance, failing to invite vocations from new immigrants and the reduced probability of young women coming into direct contact with sisters in ministries.¹⁰

Despite these downward trends, women are still drawn to religious life. Approximately 1,200 women were in formation as of 2014, with 150 in monasteries as cloistered nuns and the remaining 1,050 evenly divided between orders under the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR) and Council of Major Superiors of Women Religious (CMSWR), the two leadership councils in the United States (with the rate of retention at 50 percent across both institutes).¹¹

Like Catholics more broadly, Catholic sisters are becoming more diverse. The Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA) at Georgetown University found that “while nine in ten perpetually professed members of religious institutes of women are Caucasian/Anglo, four in ten of those who entered in the last ten years are of another race or ethnicity. More than half of these institutes of women religious say that at least one entrant in the past ten years was born outside the United States.”¹²

More than 4,000 international sisters (a sister who was born in another country) currently reside in the United States, with a large proportion (41 percent) having been here for less than 15 years.¹³ Globally, religious life is growing in Africa and Asia, and it is not declining as rapidly in Latin America as it is in the United States or Europe.¹⁴

The vital congregations in this report are active in their communities and attracting a group of young and diverse women to join their orders. They have taken active steps to counter some of the issues that prevent young women from discerning a call to religious life. CRCC's own research, along with the above data, suggests that in the midst of overall decline in Catholicism and religious vocations, there are signs of life and vitality in the Catholic Church.

What is a Vital Congregation?

THE WORD “VITALITY” means the state of being strong and active. Put into the context of religious life, however, vitality is difficult to define. Religious life is by its very nature vital and life-giving. Even in the context of declining vocations, sisters are filled by the Holy Spirit and called to serve God and humanity with the humility and fortitude that comes from a deep prayer life.

The vitality of sisters, however, is different from the vitality of the institutes that support them. In this report, CRCC’s definition of a “vital congregation” includes its sustainability. In other words, it must be able to cultivate new vocations and continue its ministries into the future.

Yet, the number of sisters in a congregation is just one measure of vitality. Indeed, sisters’ vocation stories—upon which much of this report is written—illuminate the qualities of congregations that make them attractive not only to young women but also the wider Church and society. CRCC suggests that it is the adaptive ability of religious congregations—their ability to meet challenges with a sense of possibility—that makes them “vital.” This report illustrates how these vital congregations have been adaptive in their spirituality, communal life, service and outreach.



This working definition of vitality builds off of the Catholic Sisters Initiative's first strategy, the research it has supported on vitality and CRCC's research on religious creativity and innovation across religions. In its first strategy, the Catholic Sisters Initiative's measure of success for its "membership" area in the global north is the number of new vocations. As such, vocations were a primary factor in choosing the four congregations studied in this report.

Part of the challenge of using the number of vocations to measure vitality, however, is the idea that vocations come from the Holy Spirit. Sisters describe their vocation as a path God chose for them, rather than one they chose for themselves. It is a woman's faith and trust in divine providence that guides her to a particular order. This calling takes the form of an intimate dialogue between a woman and God, in which she must first hear the call, then interpret, respond to and heed it with a decisive act to become a woman religious.

Sisters also are reluctant to define vitality in terms of vocations due to the context of decline. The Religious Life Vitality Project (RLVP), supported by the Catholic Sisters Initiative, attempted to describe vitality using the feedback of its research participants, who were women religious in the United Kingdom, Ireland and the United States.¹⁵ Across the congregations studied, women religious agreed that six themes are important to vitality: ministry; community and formative growth (which largely focused on "flat" governance within the congregation); collaboration; prayer and spirituality; new forms of membership; and "how we're aging."

This insider's view of vitality intersects with what CRCC saw within the four congregations. Even if the sisters in both studies might describe each area differently, ministry, communal life, collaboration and prayer are all central to vitality in religious life. At the same time, membership was barely mentioned by RLVP study participants, and when it was, it was often in the context of membership growth in other parts of the world. In the RLVP study, vitality also includes "living diminishment creatively."¹⁶

As the RLVP researchers observe, "The question nevertheless arises of the extent to which willingness to take personal and corporate responsibility for vocations promotion is an indicator of members' belief that religious life still has a future."¹⁷ The researchers note specific challenges around sisters' openness to younger aspirants from different cultural backgrounds and different theological and spiritual stances. Notably, CRCC did not see these challenges within the vital congregations in this study.

CRCC's research on religious creativity and innovation across religions provides another way to look at vitality. Even in the midst of the decline of religious affiliation, CRCC has found groups—"Reimagined Communities"—that are thriving across religious traditions. Like religious congregations of women religious, reimagined communities are not necessarily large, yet they help participants satisfy the goals of religion: the formation of meaning, community and identity. In fact, smaller groups often have the freedom to explore more innovative methods of ministry and practice because they lack the organizational apparatus and inertia of larger religious groups, such as megachurches.



Although there is great variability among these groups, they share in common several characteristics. According to our research, these innovative, “reimagined” communities remain bounded by their religious traditions, yet find ways to be creative within those boundaries, innovating with forms of embodied spirituality. They tend to be embedded in a particular place where they enact their vision for a better world. They are enfranchised to act, even within hierarchical organizations. They are networked enjoying strong connections to other groups, which strengthens their ability to pursue their mission. Finally, these communities are adaptive, responding to new challenges as opportunities.

These characteristics are also descriptive of the vital congregations that we have included in this study. In different ways, the congregations remain bounded and committed to the Catholic tradition and the charism of their congregations, practice embodied forms of spirituality, are embedded in particular communities, are enfranchised to act and have developed important networks that support their work.

Perhaps most importantly, they have demonstrated the ability to adapt—to respond to challenges with sense of possibility, rather than a sense of fear. This quality overarches all the areas of religious life in vital congregations—their spirituality, communal lives, service and outreach. In the findings below, therefore, CRCC tells stories across all four congregations to illustrate how vital congregations have adapted to modern challenges as they support sisters throughout their lifetimes.

The Four Congregations Studied

The
Carmelite
Sisters of the
Most Sacred
Heart

Lovers
of the
Holy Cross

Servants
of Mary,
Ministers to
the Sick

Verbum
Dei
Missionaries

CRCC SELECTED THESE FOUR ORDERS of women religious to participate in the study of vital congregations, building on existing relationships.

Three of these orders have existing relationships with the Hilton Foundation, through grants from other organizations. The Carmelites, for instance, have benefited from grants to the Council of Major Superiors of Women Religious (CMSWR) and the National Religious Vocations Conference (NRVC). Verbum Dei is involved in a grant to the USC Catholic Caruso Center through its campus ministry at UCLA and had a postulant resolve her student debt through the Labouré Society, a previous grantee of the Hilton Foundation. Servants of Mary, Ministers to the Sick have also become actively involved in campus vocation ministry activities sponsored through the USC Caruso Center grant.

While the number of new vocations in an order is not the only sign of vitality, it is perhaps the easiest outward marker to recognize. Therefore, CRCC chose congregations with several new vocations.

Three of the four are members of the Council of Major Superiors of Women Religious (CMSWR), while Verbum Dei is a member of the Leadership Council of Women Religious (LCWR). These are the two organizing bodies of religious congregations in the United States. The origins of LCWR date back to 1956

when the Vatican's Congregation for Religious asked sisters in the United States to form a national conference.¹⁸ In 1971, a group of sisters broke away from the newly named Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR), which represents most orders in the United States, and formed the Consortium Perfectae Caritatis, which eventually became CMSWR. CMSWR was formed out of concern that LCWR "was deviating away from authentic church teaching about the essentials of religious life."¹⁹ Pope John Paul II approved CMSWR as a leadership conference in 1995. LCWR congregations are seen as more progressive and focused on social justice issues, and many of the congregations do not have a formal habit outside of a pin, pendant or cross. CMSWR congregations tend to be viewed as more conservative in nature, are traditionally habited and often take a fourth vow of faithfulness to the magisterium, or authority, of the Catholic Church, in addition to poverty, chastity and obedience. CRCC found in its interviews with younger sisters and postulants that in comparison to their elders, they had little awareness of either leadership group or the distinction and divisions between the two.

Like all congregations of women religious, each of these orders have their own unique character and identity, shaped by the charism that their founders set out for them, their historical roots and theological grounding. There are, however, common attributes shared across all four orders.

1. All four orders have their roots outside of the United States.

The Carmelites were first founded in Mexico, and later moved to the United States and are now based in Los Angeles. The Lovers of the Holy Cross were originally founded in Vietnam and were later established in the United States by Vietnamese immigrants. Both the Servants of Mary and Verbum Dei have their origins in Spain, yet have birthed several congregations across the United States.

These international roots seemed to have had a marked impact on the diversity of these orders as well. All but four of the 26 sisters interviewed were immigrants or children of immigrants (from Mexico, Ecuador, Colombia, Philippines and Vietnam), and a majority of them identified a mother tongue other than English. Their diversity mirrors American Catholicism, with an increasing number of first- and second-generation immigrants in communities of women religious.

2. All four orders are contemplatives in action.

Another common feature of these four orders is that they each identify themselves as “contemplatives in action.” In other words, they view themselves as strongly and primarily rooted in spiritual practices of personal, silent, solitary prayer and meditation, Eucharistic adoration, Marian devotion and communal life. Their interaction with the community in their apostolic missions is an extension of their spiritually

rooted lives. Prayer is “the jewel in the crown of the mission.” Indeed, in these orders, sisters cultivate a routine of prayer, wherein all activities—even in the most secular of domains—are interpreted as service to God. This came into sharp relief in the process of the research, when a number of sisters took a moment to pray before proceeding with the research interview. For instance, Sr. Gloria Therese (Carmelite) quickly interrupted the interview after introducing herself, saying:

I need to pray first. I just realized I had to do that. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, Amen. Lord Jesus, I ask for your blessing upon this time and help me to share that which would be helpful for Nalika. Lord, bless these days that she has with her sisters and please bring light and peace and clarity. In Jesus’ name we pray, Amen.

“It’s prayer first and then help,” as a Servants of Mary sister put it. A key feature of a sister’s development as a religious is learning to cultivate a prayer life that is both private and communal. The pious virtues of contemplation, surrender and obedience are cultivated by living as a community rather than on their own, and by praying throughout the day—especially doing so together in the morning and after work in the evening.

The Carmelite Sisters of the Most Sacred Heart of Los Angeles



The Carmelite Sisters of the Most Sacred Heart of Los Angeles (henceforth called the Carmelites) are an active community combining the contemplative charism of Carmel and bringing this spirit out through services in elder care, education and retreat work for individual and groups. Founded by Mother Lusita, who first established schools, hospitals, and orphanages in the context of the Mexican Revolution and the resulting religious persecution, the Carmelite order established roots in the Archdiocese of Los Angeles when Mother Luisita and two companions entered the United States as religious refugees in 1927. Today, the Carmelite Sisters of the Most Sacred Heart of Los Angeles has grown to 137 professed sisters (with 12 novices, 13 having taken temporary vows, and 112 (82 percent) having taken perpetual vows). They are based in Alhambra, California but also carry out their work at 12 other sites in California, Arizona, Colorado and Florida.

The Lovers of the Holy Cross of Los Angeles



The Lovers of the Holy Cross of Los Angeles (henceforth called Lovers of the Holy Cross) were founded in North Vietnam in 1670 by a French missionary, Bishop Pierre Marie Lambert de la Motte, and identify themselves as the first female religious congregation to be distinguished by its East Asian characteristics. They also have congregations in Laos, Thailand and the United States. The Lovers of the Holy Cross of Los Angeles was established in 1992. They minister in the Archdiocese of Los Angeles, the Diocese of Orange and the Diocese of San Bernardino. Contemplation, sacrifice and service to the poor and the disadvantaged, especially women and children, in the areas of healthcare, education and social work form the core of the order's apostolic work. Religious vocations from Vietnamese American (both women and men) are among the highest of any ethnic group in the US, and the Lovers of the Holy Cross are the largest of the nearly 20 Vietnamese women religious societies in the United States.²⁰ At the time of the study, the congregation had 67 sisters, 4 novices and 16 aspirants.

The Servants of Mary, Ministers to the Sick



The Servants of Mary, Ministers to the Sick (henceforth called Servants of Mary) were founded in Madrid, Spain, in 1851 by Maria Soledad Torres y Acosta. They are dedicated to the care of the sick poor, both in clinics, hospices and through home health nursing. Since then, the religious order has established itself in Europe, Latin America, Cameroon, Philippines, Mexico and the United States. In the United States, they have six convents, three of which are in Southern California (Los Angeles, Oxnard and Newbury Park). The sisters' apostolic work mainly involves caring for the sick, often the terminally ill, in their homes.

Verbum Dei Missionaries, Long Beach



Verbum Dei Missionaries, Long Beach (henceforth called Verbum Dei) are the youngest of all the four orders. The order was founded in 1963 in Spain by Father Jaime Bonet. This missionary community is deeply rooted in prayer and grounded in theological training. The name Verbum Dei is Latin for “Word of God,” and through contemplative prayer with scripture, retreats, meditation, art, music and living testimony, Verbum Dei encourages participants to engage in a life-giving, transformative journey of faith. The community consists of consecrated women, consecrated men (brothers and priests) and consecrated married couples. They are active in 28 countries, including Southeast Asia, Europe, Australia, Africa and Latin and North America. The only LCWR congregation of the four orders, the sisters of Verbum Dei do not wear a habit, but they do maintain a modest and understated form of dress.

Most celibate members of the community, including women religious, go through several years of academic study in philosophy and theology. The daily life of a missionary involves several hours of silent contemplative prayer. In their ministerial work within the Catholic Church, the sisters of Verbum Dei has a substantial retreat ministry for a wide group of people, including retreats for women, men, married couples, young adults and teenagers. They also perform vocational discernment retreats and silent contemplative retreats, and organize scripture-based prayer groups, university campus ministries and workshops for laypeople.

Findings



Forming the Spirit



MANY SISTERS talked about the discernment of their religious vocation in terms of a “conversion story,” even though most were raised as practicing Catholics. Answering God’s call was a radical re-orientation of the self to God and the world, cultivated through a strong prayer life. Their decision was intensely fostered in the company of others, particularly with peers through high school, college and church life.

Compared to earlier generations, when discerning religious life was highly esteemed and promoted within Catholic culture, religious life today is a radical path that is counter-cultural to normative expectations for a contemporary woman. In order to cultivate the depth of spirituality required for such a unique path, women need to embed themselves within a broad network of relationships and ties associated with the Catholic faith.

Vital congregations are aware of this and are adapting to the new circumstances. Their efforts to support the spiritual development of women are not always aimed specifically at making new vocations. Rather, they encourage the spiritual life of the collective, fostering a sense of “communitas” in the broader Catholic ecology—within which a young woman’s “conversion” story may begin. This section examines some of the most fertile sites of Catholic spiritual life, as well as the ways that sisters have engaged with these trends.

One sister of the Carmelites order, soon to be taking her perpetual vows, joined at age 31. Her “conversion story” began with a group of friends she met in her mid-20s. She described her religious upbringing as a Filipino American as “culturally Catholic.” Whereas academics identify “cultural Catholics” as those who call themselves Catholic without necessarily believing or practicing the faith, her family

would “go to Mass every Sunday” and “pray the rosary every once in while.”

Still, this sister felt that her participation in church as a child was more about singing than practicing the faith. “I didn’t really live the faith as much as I would have probably liked [or] understand a lot of the truths of the faith,” she said. Through the introduction of a friend, she began to attend a number of what she described as “organic, young adult groups around the Los Angeles area, which are not necessarily parish based, [and] so they were young adults who were ‘normal.’” For instance, “they would have a beer and then talk about an encyclical around the Holy Eucharist.”

Her and other sisters’ stories reflect how a constellation of influences—family, other adults, and peers—contribute to young people’s religious socialization and spiritual development.

Parents, in particular, lay the groundwork for the journey toward religious life. The more than decade-long National Study of Youth and Religion (NSYR) demonstrated that: “Committed and practicing Catholic emerging adults are people who were well formed in Catholic faith and practice as children, whose faith became more personally meaningful and practiced as teenagers, and whose parents (reinforced by other supportive Catholic adults) were the primary agents cultivating that life formation.”²¹ Research among Jewish and Mormon families also support these conclusions about the primary role of parents.²² A study of Jewish families in Chicago suggests that “parents socialize their children by channeling them into other groups or experiences (such as schools and marriage) which will reinforce (have an additive influence on) what was learned at home and will channel them further into similar adult activities.”²³ In other words, parents are

influential not only in teaching faith in the home, but also in providing experiences and environments that foster and maintain what they teach at home.²⁴

Findings from the present study generally confirm this argument. Young women joining religious life tend to be cradle Catholics rather than converts and were raised by self-identified practicing Catholic parents, who took them to Sunday Mass and encouraged early faith formation by preparing them for the sacraments of Reconciliation, Holy Communion and Confirmation. Some attended Catholic schools, though that was not a universal experience. A small proportion of conservative Catholic families in the United States are opting to homeschool their children to inculcate them in Catholic formation and education. They draw on a network of home-schooling Catholic communities and utilize the curriculum of Seton Schools or St. Thomas Aquinas Academy.

Yet, a Catholic upbringing is not enough to lead a woman to religious life. The young women religious in this study all emphasized that during their teen or young adult years, their spiritual life underwent a shift toward a committed, intensive religious practice. Many explained their reasoning along the lines of “yearning for something more,” “finding the truth of what it is we should do,” or as one 32-year-old postulant put it, having “conflicting feeling about marriage, societal demands of success and material productivity.” Once this spiritual quest began, the turn to the faith of their upbringing was spurred by surrounding themselves with other like-minded Catholic peers and mentors. The impetus to discern religious life was prompted by a constellation of non-familial influences.



Across faith traditions, adults other than parents play a great role in young people's spiritual development. These adults may be teachers in high school or college, spiritual directors in their parish or college, or relatives like older cousins or aunts and uncles. A number of scholars have observed that adult mentors introduced through the church or other social environments are also crucial in the religious development of a young person, especially after they leave home and enter college.²⁵ "Nonparental affirmation, through the mentor relationship, can provide the social and cultural context for youth to experience their spiritual selves," one study found.²⁶ The influence and mentorship of adults can result in young people developing a personal relationship with God, having a sense of moral responsibility, acquiring hopeful and positive attitudes, and engaging in mission and service work.²⁷ Higher education settings can be a particularly productive time for such encounters. A national study found that despite the increase in disaffiliation from organized religion, college students maintain an interest in spirituality and

religion, "are exploring the meaning and purpose of life," and exhibit an interest in greater involvement in religious institutions.²⁸

The religiosity of friends and peers can be as or even more influential in young people's spiritual development than parents or other adults.²⁹ In fact, scholars have found they can predict an adolescents' religious behavior by looking at their peers' religious behaviors.³⁰ Perhaps this is because, as one scholar points out, "it is in friendship that one learns how to relate to others and to have a deep sensitivity and union with them, a transcendent experience in embryonic form that may provide the foundation for the spiritual development of children and adolescents."³¹



For Laryn, a 32-year-old woman who just completed three years of aspirancy with Verbum Dei, friendships in college allowed her to see the diversity of Catholicism beyond what she knew from her family and parish, helping her decide how she wanted to live out her own faith. Laryn had stopped going to church in high school and only went “when it was convenient” in college. “When I went into college, I thought [Catholicism] was just this narrow, boxed-in way of being, because that’s all I was exposed to and that for me was not something that was attractive,” she said. At her non-Catholic liberal arts college in Ohio, she had one friend who was a “traditional Catholic” who showed Laryn “the beauty of our tradition of the sacraments.” Another friend was “very open, very progressive and very social justice-oriented.”

“That was really important to see that there’s not just one way of being a Catholic, not one way to express how we can live out our faith,” Laryn said. Exposure to the diversity in Catholic faith inspired her to investigate how she could engage with the faith of her childhood. She had yet to see religious life on the horizon of possibilities, because she did

not see how “if you were in religious life, you could be empowered to use your gifts and talents. I just didn’t consider that. I thought it was something that was very limiting.”

Other young women in this study pointed to communal activities as key to their spiritual transformation and development. These included Bible study groups, prayer nights, campus ministry, summer camps, silent retreats, residential communities, and conferences, including FOCUS (Fellowship of Catholic University Students) and the GIVEN forum (Catholic Young Women’s Leadership Forum). For the most part, the programs they became involved in were formal organizational structures directly or indirectly supported by parishes, university associations and cultural organizations, where adults other than their parents—including sisters—came to play an influential role in their religious formation. It was in the midst of their peers and religious mentors that these young women experienced a “conversion” in which they felt their religious faith began to exceed the religious commitments of their parents.

Sisters interviewed for this study were keenly aware of the importance of non-familial influences and friendships on the spiritual development of young women. All four congregations engage in ministries and programs that allow sisters to serve as adult mentors to young women and to bring like-minded young women together in peer communities. Through these ministries and programs, sisters can encourage pathways to formation for young women who are curious about religious life.

The sisters from Lovers of the Holy Cross, for instance, engage with young women through the Vietnamese Eucharistic Youth Movement (more customarily referred to as *Thiếu Nhi Thánh Thể* or TNTT), a national body of Catholic youth group that fosters the spiritual life among young second- and third-generation Vietnamese Americans. The organization uses “the natural and spiritual approach,” according to its website. “The natural method uses [tools] such as singing, outdoor activities, training camps, community services, etc., all of which are imbued with Scriptural thoughts. The spiritual method ingrains youth members to set the basis for their spiritual life through living the Eucharistic Day, which consists of offering of the day, prayers, Holy Communion, Eucharistic adoration, partaking in the Spiritual Bouquet, spiritual retreat, sharing of God’s word.”



This is an instance in which Catholic peer groups are forged around a particular ethnic identity and diaspora experience of youth. The Lovers of the Holy Cross are actively involved in TNTT’s programming, including organizing the annual national gatherings where all youth members of TNTT across the country come together.

The Servants of Mary facilitate a discernment group and camp of teenage girls, ages 14 to 17, who are homeschooled. Even within homeschooling families, there is a keen sense that peer groups are essential for the religious formation of youth, especially because of the limited socialization that a homeschooling life can entail. From observations of and conversations with the group, it was evident that the camp served two purposes: one spiritual, the other social. Many of the girls (or their parents) signed up for the group in order to, as the vocation directress Sr. Yesenia put it, “get a glimpse into religious life.” “They want to feel what life with us is like, live with us for a week and see how that’s like,” she said. The retreat also offers a unique opportunity for girls to connect with peers with a similar upbringing that markedly contrasts the upbringing of most youth.

The Carmelites have two “faith formation groups” for girls and young women. *Décor Carmeli* is a program for girls between the ages of 13 and 17, and often attracts girls from homeschooling communities. The “Handmaidens” is a group for single women between the ages of 18 and 35. Sr. Meredith first encountered the Carmelite order through the Handmaidens formation group. She was already involved in an adult prayer group, when she and a friend from that group began attending the Handmaiden’s monthly meetings. During these meetings, women would “have time for a little talk, recreation time involving hikes or visits to the beach, fellowship



and dinner” with the sisters of the Carmelite order, including novices and professed sisters. Another Carmelite sister, Sr. Lillian, said that Handmaiden members “become more familiar with what the Lord’s calling them to do in their life. Not that it’s necessarily religious life, but that they’re fortified to do whatever their Lord is calling them to do because they’ve got people around them and they’re supporting them.”

All the orders studied innovatively use retreats to facilitate spiritual formation of the laity, in particular to foster the spiritual lives of youth. Verbum Dei’s apostolic work in the community includes leading prayer groups and retreats for laypeople, such as a retreat for teenage girls after their Confirmation. Observing a group of 35 Hispanic teenage girls from the St. Anthony’s Parish in Long Beach gather at the church, tearfully say goodbye to their parents—and surrender their smart phones to them—and board a bus for a week of silence and prayer with Verbum Dei sisters in Central California, it was clear that

the sisters had earned trust with the parents in the parish and had the support of the parish.

Ministries offered by congregations are not necessarily designed specifically to attract vocations, but are part of their mission to support people’s spiritual development. Many of the spiritual practices fostered by congregations fit the trend that CRCC observed in its research on religious creativity and innovation. Within the bounds of religious tradition, reimagined communities are innovating with forms of embodied spirituality. CRCC’s research found that across traditions, many people today were more interested in lived spiritual experiences and practices than a set of beliefs. While retreats have long been a Catholic practice, they are becoming more common in non-Catholic circles in the United States, along with practices such as mindfulness and meditation.³² Whether Catholic or not, retreats offer participants not only a space for individual introspection through prayer, scripture reading and even silent meditation, but also the social, interactive and communal dimensions necessary for this process of religious introspection. Group activities, such as retreats and prayer groups, are an important part of the self-transformation process and can help individuals understand their own spiritual journeys.

Spiritual formation and conversion does not end when a young woman becomes a sister, though; it continues through vital congregations’ communal lives.



Living and Praying in Community



WHILE MENTORING two young postulants, Sr. Rosalia Meza of Verbum Dei told them their assignment that Sunday was to spend community time together, suggesting that they organize and watch a movie. Instead, the two young women went into their separate rooms, put on their headphones and proceeded to watch two separate movies on their computers. When asked about why they did this, the postulants said, “Well, she didn’t want to watch this movie. I didn’t want to watch that movie. What’s wrong with that?” Sr. Rosalia had intended that they work together to find compromise, share the experience and then be able to discuss what they had watched.

Communal living has always been a part of religious life, and specifically part of the congregations in this study, so in a way, it is not exactly an “adaptation.” Vital congregations, however, have had to adapt to today’s individualistic, technology-driven culture in their efforts to maintain themselves as spiritual communities. In one sister’s words, they are a “high-touch community in a high-tech world.”

A religious life is never complete, and is always an unfolding journey of self-discovery and transformation. While spirituality has typically been seen as an individual journey, recent scholarship has highlighted how people come to understand their spiritual and religious selves through their relationships and friendships with others.³³ As the previous section illustrated, intimacy, community ties and friendships play a powerful role in instigating the “conversion experience” many sisters describe having before entering religious life. These interpersonal ties and relationships serve an even more significant purpose in cultivating spirituality in the context of the convent.



Sisters living communally in a convent are intimately aware of the importance of the collective environment in the practice of submitting oneself to God as a woman religious. In the collective environment of the convent, they share the same space and time and have the same object of attention: God. By temporally aligning their experiences with one another, they feel a sense of togetherness.³⁴

All four congregations put significant stress on creating a community around shared space and time. The Carmelites' property is unique relative to the other three congregations in that many of the Carmelites' apostolic ministries are carried out in the same compound as their convent, while sisters in the other three congregations have to travel daily beyond the convent walls to perform their ministries. Nonetheless, to the extent possible, sisters from the other congregations converge at the convent for religious services throughout the day.

The Lovers of the Holy Cross, for instance, have morning prayer at 5 a.m. and evening prayer at 5:30, including Eucharistic Adoration. There is also

Mass, an hour for meditation on the Gospels, and at noon, they pray the rosary in the chapel. At night, they perform an examine, in which they look back on their day, in the chapel. As long as sisters are not working, all of these activities are done together.

Darlene Nguyen, a 22-year-old postulant, said that this schedule appealed to her: "Our community is distinct in that all of our convents adore the Eucharist every day as a community, whereas other communities do their work schedule or their way of lifestyle. They don't have that daily Eucharist adoration. Sometimes a lot of the communities now don't even have morning and evening prayer together. That's what I really value about our community, the prayer schedule."

All of the organizations also identified retreats as a significant aspect of formation for women religious themselves throughout their lives. Retreats allow time for spiritual regeneration, continued education in prayer and apostolic work, and community building. The Verbum Dei sisters reserve one month of the year for a retreat for themselves, despite the

economic hardship of such retreats, as it reduces their time working within paid ministries and hosting fee-based retreats for others.

Because of the challenging nature of communal religious life, all of the orders to some degree have an extended period of candidacy or aspirancy before young women become postulants and confirm their religious vocations. Those entering religious life are surrendering their time and schedule to the congregation, and above all else to God. During this period, postulants and novices come to understand themselves not simply as isolated individuals on their own spiritual journey, but as inextricably connected to others.³⁵ The sisters at the four orders thus make a tremendous effort toward mentoring young women in their early religious formation. Learning to surrender to communal life, breaking resistance to obedience, reducing attachment to social media and working on their financial debt from college (so that it doesn't burden the community) are some of the key challenges of a young person discerning religious life.

The Servants of Mary Ministers to the Sick target their vocation efforts at a younger cohort of girls. There are both pedagogical and practical reasons behind their desire to help a girl discern her vocation before she leaves home for college. On the one hand, girls were viewed as more malleable and amenable to cultivating the disciplinary virtues that religious life demands. The sisters saw that those who had entered higher education or work settings struggled with discernment because of exposure to modern worldly "sin" and independence. The practical consideration in their preference for younger vocations was because early vocations freed young girls from the financial burdens that college debt often entails. Also, if a girl discerns during her aspirancy/candidacy that she does not have a religious calling,

she can still continue university and/or married life at a young age. For those young women who find their calling in married life, Sr. Yesenia noted how she sometimes helps young women find a partner who is equally grounded in his faith by drawing on her many networks as a vocation directress.

While vital congregations intentionally engage with young women along their spiritual journeys, it's also important to young women discerning religious life that they see the congregations continue to support sisters' formation throughout their lives. Young women considering religious life said that they appreciated seeing the continued role that retired and aging sisters played in the spiritual life of the community as mentors and spiritual advisors to younger sisters. A key attraction to each of these communities is that at any stage of formation a sister is actively contributing to the spiritual development of the collective.

During their candidacy, young aspirants in all of the orders live at the convent, follow the routines of the sisters and dress more conservatively, yet they also have a degree of independence, where they may continue to go to work or complete their education, drive their own cars, own a phone and communicate with family and friends on a regular basis. During this extended period, a young woman enters the culture of religious life, learns to anticipate the nature of religious life and cultivates her detachment from family and a future of marriage.

Leaving home to join a religious order is a key turning point in the life of any discerning woman religious. As a uniquely Asian American order, however, the Lovers of the Holy Cross are innovatively adapting and enculturating their religious formation with the needs of their broader immigrant community as well, by extending their sense of community to



include family. For the Vietnamese American sisters, their parents, siblings and familial lineage are seen having a continued importance in their lives even after joining an order. The order has instituted rules that make it possible for a sister to visit her parents more regularly than is typical for sisters in other orders. For instance, Sr. Darlene noted the ability to maintain connections with family as one factor (although not the primary factor) helping her decide to join the Lovers of the Holy Cross. She said:

Other communities, especially the Caucasian communities that are traditional, like the Dominicans, the Carmelites, they only get to go home once every five years, and it's only for two weeks. Our community, because we are Asian and our culture is very family-centered, as a professed sister we go home once a year for two weeks and there's a lot of exceptions that are given when our parents are about to die. So sometimes our sisters go home very often during that time to care

for our parents and for occasions like Vietnamese New Year.... It is based on your own prayer if you feel needed, you can ask for more. Some sisters do. Some sisters don't.... It's not [that] we do it because it's out of our own comfort, but it's more because of our culture and for the respect of our parents.... I guess it would create a lot of interior turmoil for our sisters and just a lot of heartache for the family if it wasn't like that.

As an ethnic community emerging out of a history of trauma and displacement as a result of the Vietnam War and resettling and seeking belonging in the United States as ethnic minorities, Vietnamese American Catholics living in the United States find themselves "betwixt-and-between" two cultures and two churches. They want to be fully Vietnamese, fully American and fully Catholic. This might be especially true for those who, like Sr. Darlene, grew up in the United States and are beginning to look at the Catholic Church and Christianity with new eyes. This is echoed by scholarship about Asian American

Catholicism: “Instead of embracing the European, Roman Catholic Church and needing to deny their Asian beings, many younger Vietnamese American Catholics are attempting to imagine a type of Catholicism that touches their cultural core.”³⁶

One more aspect of communal life that is adaptive during this time of decreasing vocations to religious life is the increasing sense of community among women religious across congregations. CRCC has seen great cooperation between orders of women with the help of grants to the National Religious Vocations Conference and the USC Caruso Catholic Center. Due to the nature of these grants, they are particularly focused on activities related to vocations and ministries to young women. For instance, eight congregations participated in Nuns in the Sun, an opportunity for young women to engage with sisters on a casual, fun basis.

Other activities are neither spiritual nor vocations-oriented. This past year, the Carmelites organized an event called “Taste of the Town,” wherein 185 sisters of both LCWR and CMSWR orders, representing 26 communities from the Archdiocese of Los Angeles, convened for a casual meet-up. As Sr. Olga described it: “We pray together, and then we have dinner together out on the patio. Then we have a movie, and we make popcorn. It’s not a meeting, it’s not a conference, it is just a time to be together and enjoy one another.”

Similarly, the Vietnamese women religious orders in the United States (among whom there are some of the highest vocations in the country), hold annual retreats together “to build up a spirit of community among all the Vietnamese sisters,” including inter-generational exchanges.³⁷

Such inter-congregational activities and programs can also be beneficial for young sisters in formation, considering that even in orders that have vocations, such as those studied here, novitiate and postulant cohorts are not as large as those of previous generations. A young novice of the Servants of Mary shared that she prays for more vocations not only because having more women would allow them to continue their apostolate, but also because fellow novices can contribute to her own spiritual formation. Sr. Samantha, 22, explained this desire in the following manner:

In your formation, you’re learning. My experience is I’m just learning more and more, so much. And so, we have a community. But obviously, if you would enlarge that community with more people, that requires much more virtue. You’re practicing much more virtue, having to give yourself a little more to others around you. So, I think that would somewhat help in a way, to have a bigger community. But in the same sense, we trust whatever God gives us. That’s the truth. But it’s always ideal to have someone with you in your formation, you know? Like another person, another novice with you.

Although the comfort of companionship is certainly important, having peers in religious life is about much more. The virtues of surrender can be cultivated, practiced and learned vis-a-vis one’s relationship to others. These relationships can take place within a congregation or between young sisters and novices in multiple congregations.



A Life of Service



A FEW YEARS after her friends helped her return to the Catholic Church in college, Laryn, the Verbum Dei full-time aspirant, did a year of service through Jesuit Volunteer Corps (JVC). It was “one of the most formative years of my life before entering religious life,” she said.

CRCC’s research on religious creativity and innovation showed that even as one in five adults have left organized religion altogether, a number of service-oriented groups that are embedded in a particular neighborhood are flourishing in Los Angeles, particularly among young adults who want to make a difference in their own backyard. In addition to offering participants the opportunity to work individually with people in need, these service-oriented experiences create intentional communities through which to explore and learn about shared values and interests.

For those who do adhere to a religion, service-work can be particularly formative in learning to embody knowledge of esteemed religious virtues. Laryn’s understanding of the transformational impact that volunteering had on her eventual decision to enter religious life is illustrative of the way volunteering enables individuals to imagine themselves as “invited [by God] to serve in this world.”

The four congregations in this study identify as “contemplatives in action.” While prayer may come first, the “in action” or service component of their lives is integral to who they are as sisters. Indeed, the lives of Catholic sisters have long been about service, often through education, health care, parish or religious ministries, or other social services. As the number of sisters has declined, more and more sisters work in the management of ministries and faith-based organizations. In orders with few young sisters, those young sisters are often required to take on leadership positions early in their careers.

The congregations in this study have adapted to these trends by seeking out young women with volunteer experience and by offering young sisters plenty of opportunities to engage in direct service. While volunteering does not necessarily have a causal effect on young women's discernment of a vocation to religious life, it does help young women develop the qualities and predisposition required for religious life. Vital congregations recognize volunteering as a sign that young women might be inclined to religious life, and they offer experiences for young women to serve alongside sisters.

During college, Laryn had gone on a series of winter and spring service trips organized through her college and had volunteer stints at Habitat for Humanity. After college, she worked at a refugee resettlement agency for one year through JVC. In addition to meeting people from entirely different cultural, religious, social and political backgrounds, she was also exposed "to simple living" and learning to "live in solidarity with others" by learning "what isn't really necessary for me to exist when there's such a big gap between the rich and the poor."

Crucially, she learned how to pray through JVC. "I realized that year I didn't really know how to pray," Laryn commented. By structuring prayer into their mission work, she began to bridge community, prayer and service work. She found prayer life and spirituality to be a life-giving force for her ongoing service and activist involvement. Indeed, research finds that "throughout history when people focus on a self-transcending purpose or a purpose greater than themselves, they become capable of more than they thought ever was possible."³⁸ She realized that, as she put it, "I am going to get burnt out if I just think that I'm working on my own strength, and then sourcing my energy for myself instead of something that's bigger than myself."

After the year with JVC, Laryn sought to "stay grounded in those values...of community, of simplicity, of social justice and spirituality"—the four pillars of JVC. When she moved to Chicago to pursue her Master's degree, she reached out to a network of peers and alumni of JVC, and they organized into a residential intentional community based on those four values. Her community hosted traveling Couch-surfers to live out an ethic of hospitality, and in time they extended their welcome more radically by, as she put it, "offering hospitality to people who actually are in need," including some homeless people and refugees. Her path to discernment took several other turns, all of which she understands as providentially guided, but her experience volunteering was essential in instilling in her the ethical commitments of religious life.

Other young women who are considering or who have already entered religious life in this study also spent significant time at some point in their young adult years engaging in service work, either volunteering with religious and nonreligious nonprofit groups. Such volunteering involved much more than a once a week drop in at a service group in the local neighborhood. Rather it entailed intense engagement in some type of intentional community through short- and long-term mission trips.

These activities included mission trips abroad, street ministry programs and full-time volunteer programs that are part of the Catholic Volunteers Network (such as JVC). Some also participate in non-religious programs such as Alternative Winter Break. To support these service activities, young women often raised money with their peers and fund-raised in their local community and neighborhoods, as well as applied for scholarships.



A large-scale study of religious volunteers within the United States suggests a significant increase in mission trips in recent years. Before the 1980s, perhaps two percent of church youth group members participated in short-term mission trips, but since 2000 this number has steadily climbed to about 12 percent.³⁹ Research on young adult Catholics specifically finds that young “practicing Catholics” are significantly more involved in giving, volunteering and other organized activities sponsored by religious and nonreligious organizations than “sporadic” or “disengaged” Catholics.⁴⁰ One reason may be that practicing Catholics’ “friends are more likely to be doing the same” activities, but active involvement in religious organizations also “make [them] aware of opportunities to give financially, volunteer and become involved with other organizations.”⁴¹

The goal of volunteering, particularly through religiously-oriented mission trips, is to transform others’ lives either through material and/or spiritual uplift and evangelism. Yet, a significant aspect of volunteering is the spiritual transformation that volunteers themselves undergo in the process. Indeed, in addition to the social and cross-cultural awareness and knowledge that individuals acquire

by volunteering to assist impoverished and marginalized communities, volunteers often describe their experiences as fundamentally life-changing.⁴² In a study on short-term missions taken by college-age evangelical Christians, participants reported that they went through hardship and experienced self-denial through the trip—similar to a “rite of passage”—and through it, they experienced the presence of “*communitas*” or spiritual friendship among their team members.⁴³

Sr. Samantha, a Servants of Mary novice, for example, described her mission trip experience as having been a religiously formative experience:

[In] my experience with mission trips like that, [where] I’m with a group of people and we’re praying every day, we’re not only helping others, but we’re also committing ourselves to prayer and to learning more about God. And so, that is similar to consecrated life. You’re wanting to give yourself. And all of the people that I’ve surrounded myself in community to go on mission trips, we’re all living chaste lives. We’re giving ourselves, our love to one another and to others around us.

Sr. Samantha’s “conversion story” had begun through her campus Catholic center’s Bible study group. Her spiritual life intensified through the experiences of learning to read scripture and pray regularly with the mentorship of campus priests and sisters. On campus, she also began to explore her religious calling and vocation. Her description of her mission trip after college suggests that it offered her a glimpse into what life would be like if she were to pursue a religious vocation.



There is a half-joke (and even an unofficial slogan) among alumni of Jesuit Volunteer Corps, that they're "ruined for life" after doing a year of service. In other words, they are no longer comfortable with a life that is only about making money and finding "success" as society defines it. Rather, alumni seek a life connected with serving the poor and working to transform society. The experience makes them more active in both social justice causes as well as spirituality, some even having an experience akin to "conversion."⁴⁴ Through such immersive experiences, participants often come to ask themselves, can I continue such a lifestyle of solidarity, intentionality and simple-living for my whole life?⁴⁵

Studies and the anecdotal examples, such as Laryn's JVC story and Sr. Samantha's story of her mission trip, illustrate two key ideas of how and why volunteering is significant to religious life. First, volunteering, particularly when it's informed by a faith-based spiritual idea, offers a site for those discerning religious life to view it as a continuation of a life-path in which they find meaning and fulfillment.

These can become places where the "conversion" story can unfold. Religious life becomes a path that allows them to continue a radical life grounded in a spiritual calling. A study by CARA commissioned by Catholic Volunteer Network (CVN) that surveyed the 5,051 participants (male and female) who went through their programs found that 37 percent of those surveyed reported considering a vocation to religious life or priesthood, with 48 percent of this subset considering religious life or priesthood during (their) volunteer service.⁴⁶

A second additional insight from this research is that the actual practice of volunteering can actively nurture in a young person some of the key personal qualities and virtues of piety necessary for sisterhood. These qualities include an ability to live communally, surrender one's schedule to a larger purpose, cultivate an ethic of self-sacrifice and poverty, and work in solidarity with peers and mentors toward the betterment of others and spiritual communion with God. Moreover, in the context of mission work, practical

virtues such as taking responsibility become sacralized. Anthropologists of religion have noted that embodied behaviors and practices—such as prayer, worship or ministry—are connected to religiosity across traditions.⁴⁷ Outward religious practices often are seen as an expression of one’s inner religiosity or beliefs. Some argue, however, that these practices can actually cultivate piety and form one’s religious self. Using these insights, service grounded in prayer and spiritual training can be viewed as a powerful means for acquiring pious capacities and learning Catholic religious virtues, which can then become the foundation for religious life as a sister.

Indeed, according to vocation directresses interviewed in this study, if a woman discerning religious life has a history of volunteer commitments, it is a good indicator that she has cultivated qualities, or talents, that enable her to take to religious life more readily. These thriving congregations also encourage young women to commit themselves to volunteering as a part of their religious discernment.⁴⁸

Some of the congregations even host volunteer experiences for young women. For instance, the Carmelites host an 8-day retreat called “Serving with Sisters,” supported by the Hilton Foundation through





the Catholic Volunteer Network. Six of the 18 women who have attended the retreat over the past three years have ultimately discerned a call to religious life with the Carmelites. Those 18 women had already been deeply involved with various Catholic groups in college or through parish life. The retreat facilitated a space for participating young women to answer the question of religious life, without the “stress of discernment,” said Sr. Faustina, the former director of the program.

Moreover, in those eight days young women learned through the sisters about weaving prayer life into their existing service-oriented lifestyles, and the centrality of community in individual spiritual growth and prayer. Over the course of the retreat the participants met with sisters who were busily involved in apostolic efforts, serving alongside them in their various ministries, working in the pre-school and aiding with the care of the sick and elderly in the lay retirement home. They also saw how older, retired sisters continued to serve their fellow sisters as mentors and spiritual advisors.

Lovers of the Holy Cross organize an annual program in which existing aspirants and novices accompany fully-professed sisters on a mission trip called “Mission of Love” to North Vietnam. During the course of the trip, the sisters provide scholarships, free medical and dental care, funding to rebuild houses and construct clean water systems, along with various other projects according to the needs of the people. For some of the young aspirants, this trip is their first to the home country that their parents left behind during the Vietnam War. The trip is thus both personally and spiritually significant for their formation. In a blog reflection, one aspirant concludes that seeing the needs of the Vietnamese people makes her want to continue a life of service:

Seeing a glimpse of this grim reality, will I still choose to see with my heart, and see all the sufferings, the poverty, the homelessness and the hungers for love that stand right next to me? Will I share the light and love that my heart has blessedly found and received to my brothers and sisters who are lacking love? Will I respond to love? Yes, God: I will serve and love You in the least of my brethren.⁴⁹

Shaped by these experiences, some of the younger sisters in this study specifically talked about appreciating the opportunity to work directly with individuals purely as charitable works of mercy, rather than through their apostolic ministries (through which their congregation gets paid stipends for their work). Sr. Soroco of the Servants of Mary describes her work taking care of the sick as “a spiritual experience” and a gift. “I just feel so happy when I can take care of somebody that really needs help, and helping the family, too, so that they can rest while you’re taking care of their loved ones,” she said. “That’s something that really, really helps you in your spiritual life. Because you’re doing something for mankind. Maybe nobody will see it—just God. you’re making a difference in the world, with a little thing in your life.”



It can be a challenge for a congregation to support uncompensated service work, however, particularly for congregations that sustain themselves through apostolic ministries and not through other benefactors. This can sometimes even translate into an inter-generational tension between younger sisters who want to focus their time on uncompensated acts of mercy and older sisters with organizational concerns about the long-term sustenance of their congregation and the care of its retired sisters. Sr. Christine of the Lovers of the Holy Cross describes this issue as it plays out in her congregation:

The younger sisters have a zeal about helping the poor, non-profit, charitable work... [They say], ‘Our founder’s all about the poor. So we want to do something that helps us to connect with the poor that can be, you know, life-giving.’ But then the older generation who has seen this community grow, you know, who have built this community from scratch. They want security... Right now so we’re in the process of building, trying to add funds for a retirement home for the sisters...And it’s so expensive to buy a place here in Southern California... So whenever we propose something like that, it’s very hard because the council, the sisters, just say, ‘Sister, you know that’s great that you have the heart to help others to do this, to do that, but practically speaking, we’re barely surviving as a community financially. We have to save money for retirement. We have to save money for this new house project that we need to build.’

In their ideal world, sisters would be able to serve without concern for their future, but even vital congregations struggle with decisions about how to use their resources, negotiating practical concerns with spiritual desires.

IV.

Creating a Culture of Encounter



DURING the “Serving with Sisters” program with the Carmelite order, more than one young woman remarked that the sisters seemed more “normal” than expected, noting that they were both educated and skilled. The 12 young women at the retreat had come from around the country, and had met the Carmelite sisters when a Carmelite had visited them in their home parish or college campus, at a prayer night, a Bible study group, or the FOCUS conference. Recalling the first time they met a Carmelite sister, many of the young women commented on how surprised they were to actually meet a Carmelite, let alone one who had travelled across the country to meet with them. Carmelites were, in their mind, cloistered nuns who maintained traditional lifestyles.

The sisters laughed in response to the young women’s perspective: “Well, we are here, aren’t we?”

Contrary to the stereotype of conservative Catholic orders of women religious living apart from the world, CRCC has found that the four congregations studies all embrace what Pope Francis calls a “culture of encounter.” Pope Francis regularly speaks of “a culture of encounter” as “the idea of reaching out, fostering dialogue and friendship even outside the usual circles, and making a special point of encountering people who are neglected and ignored by the wider world.”⁵⁰ While sisters interviewed for this study seem to appreciate Francis’ pastoral approach to leadership and his focus on mercy, their outreach efforts predate his pontificate. Indeed, the Second Vatican Council encouraged religious orders to look outward. The four vital congregations in this study have embraced their role as evangelizers and the face of the Church, connecting with both young women and the laity.



While in the past, individuals may have met sisters in the course of their everyday lives within parishes and schools, today, vital congregations have adapted by sending representatives out to meet with potential new sisters and partners, both online and in person. All four congregations in this study, for instance, have a designated full-time vocation directress.

A recent study by CARA found that the provision of a full-time vocation director, supported by a team and resources, has a direct impact on the quality and the quantity of seminarians for a diocese or religious for a community. Moreover, congregations with a “culture of vocations” use new media (websites and social media); offer “discernment programs and other opportunities for potential candidates to meet members and learn about the institute;” and target young people from elementary school through the college and young adult years to open them to the idea of religious life and the institute.⁵¹ In addition to having vocation directresses, the four religious orders have embraced many of the ideas outlined by CARA.

The present study also found that in order to foster this “culture of vocations,” orders had to meet potential candidates for religious life where they were in their present life circumstances and discernment process. For example, many vocation directresses leveraged peer network groups to bolster vocations by visiting parishes or Catholic centers on college campuses, and by attending conferences such as FOCUS and GIVEN. On visiting these groups, vocation directresses meet young women and girls in a casual manner, having lunch or grabbing a cup of coffee, when they have an opportunity to share their own path to religious life or describe what their prayer life and apostolic work is like. At the same time, a sister may use these opportunities to assess the young women they meet. Often they exchange contact details and continue to keep in touch with potential vocation discerners, encouraging opportunities to meet again, deepen their connection and discern religious life with a congregation.

Getting to know and interact with a sister, and even working side by side with sisters, can have a powerful effect on a young person. The most meaningful encounters happen when sisters meet a young woman at a time in her life when she is already searching for meaning and seeking to discover what God is asking of them. While parents, adult mentors, peer groups and volunteer experiences can all propel someone toward religious life, meeting a vocational directress or other sister can have an even more powerful effect on a woman discerning her own calling. Sisters often become exemplary role models through which a woman can reflect upon her own ability to cultivate such exemplary moral character. It can be akin to holding a mirror up to one's future self, which allows for the possibility to imagine one's own calling. These engagements can, as Sr. Darlene of the Lovers of the Holy Cross put it, "seal the deal" for following a religious path. In her case, it was volunteering alongside the Carmelites in Denver, Colorado that informed her choice to discern, although ultimately she chose to discern with the Vietnamese order because she felt culturally called to be a part of it.

There are practical considerations to facilitate such moments of encounter. It is helpful if the vocation directress is approachable. The vocation directresses of all four orders were in their mid to late 30s or early 40s and had already taken their final vows. Women religious in this cohort grew up in the 1980s and 1990s, and thus came of age as Catholics well after Vatican II. They likely grew up in an increasingly diverse America, or were themselves first generation naturalized Americans contributing to this diversity. Significantly, their age makes them Internet savvy. Vocation Directress Christen Nguyen of the Lovers of the Holy Cross actively leveraged ethnic community associations and events to engage with potential

second-generation discerners. Sr. Christen is a 1.5 generation Vietnamese American—she immigrated as a child, meaning she is technically a first generation, but being raised in the United States makes her more like the second generation. She actively participated and ran programming with the Vietnamese Eucharistic Youth Movement (TNTT) that holds summer camps across the nation for Vietnamese American youth. Darlene, a postulant of LHCLA, said she was introduced to the order when she met Sister Christen at TNTT summer camp, where the sister was teaching Kung Fu to the youth.

Moreover, creating moments of encounter requires women religious to have existing close ties with a host of other Catholic organizers, both lay and religious, who spearhead groups such as campus Bible studies, volunteer programs and Catholic cultural associations. Vocation directresses and other sisters involved in vocation ministries thus have good ties with lay religious leaders in the parish, as well as with priests, other sisters and lay spiritual directors on campuses who can extend invitations to congregations and sisters to become involved in their activities and programs. It also requires a congregation to have financial resources to cover the cost of air travel for a vocation directress to visit such organizations and attend events. A number of sisters from the Servants of Mary, for instance, pointed out that they spent significant financial resources on sending vocation directresses to various discernment venues.

Outreach is not the only part of a congregation's efforts to attract vocations. Rather, the four thriving congregations also have deep relationships with the laity that contribute to their health in other ways.



Many of the congregations emphasize a sense of equality or parity between themselves and the laity, likely as a consequence of the Second Vatican Council, which elevated the role of the laity in the Catholic Church. In particular, the Carmelites changed how they refer to their numerous lay volunteers and employees, who are now known as “co-workers.” The laity are seen as people who work alongside the sisters.

Lay Catholics also contribute financially to congregations. Sisters take a vow of poverty, yet financial resources—as well as in-kind donations—are essential to maintaining the vitality of a congregation.

Verbum Dei is a “mendicant” community, meaning the sisters beg for their support. For their housing, they are dependent on the generosity of a parish priest who allowed them to move into an unused convent/parish office after they lost their last convent. Only one of the sisters who live in Long Beach works in a position in which she earns a stipend (as sisters call salaries). Their income comes from retreat fees, donations and fundraisers. The sisters rely on lay expertise to help with these activities. For instance, they have worked with a dozen lay members who volunteered to help them put on a fundraising gala dance.

Other congregations have ministries that provide them with more financial resources, such as the Carmelites' preschool and retirement community or the Servants of Mary's health care ministries. Still, the Carmelites also are active in raising funds to support their congregation. At a recent silent auction for the sisters, Carmelite sisters offered to sing Christmas carols at the Christmas party at the home of the congregation's pharmacist. On the part of the benefactor, he hoped that the occasion would provide his friends and family attending the party with the rare occasion to meet with the sisters and consider supporting the congregation financially.

Meeting laypeople in their homes is a practice that did not seem typical, unless the order's ministerial work demands in-home care delivery, such as those services performed by the Servants of Mary. Sr. Olga, who was one of the Carmelites at the Christmas party, remarked on how distinct and new this experience was for her congregation: "Some [of the guests] were crying. Some were singing with us. Then we enjoyed a dinner with them. You see, I would never have seen that when I was in my temporary vows. We used to take a special dinner to a benefactor, like a special Mexican dinner. We'd take it to them and then leave, or maybe sit down for a little bit. [But here] we really engaged with them."

At the same time, other sisters pointed out the need to protect the boundaries of the congregation. "It's important as a religious community to be independent too, because there's a lot of privacy in a religious community," one said. "And when we are so open to benefactors and donors and having ties with laity, they can come in and out of the convent, visit us and feel like they are entitled to a lot of things that will probably be a distraction to our religious life."

Those orders who are open to the laity, however, find that lay expertise can benefit the "community renewal" of the congregation. For instance, the Carmelites have recently begun inviting professionals, such as psychologists and physical trainers, to give workshops that could improve the health and wellbeing of sisters, including addressing issues that come up at different stages of life, such as menopause.

Finally, vital congregations cultivate and maintain personal relationships with the laypeople. The Carmelites played such a formative role in one young woman's life that she brought her fiancé and future in-laws to meet them during the week before her wedding. Another volunteer was a 71-year-old Mexican-American woman wearing a tie-dye shirt and with tattoos covering her arms and legs. She described her younger self as once being a *chola*, a rebellious teen involved in Los Angeles gangs. Nevertheless, when she was 12 years old, she and her mother started visiting the Carmelites weekly. She credits their support with helping her navigate the ups and downs in her life; during her early 20s she even considered a religious vocation with the Carmelites, but found that ultimately this was not her calling. Nevertheless, she continued to volunteer with "my sisters," as she called them.

While such relationships are not self-serving, these are the people that will ultimately support the congregations and make them continue to be vital in the long-run, whether through volunteering with them, giving donations or even becoming the parents or other adults in a young woman's circle who point her to religious life.

Implications for the Catholic Sisters Initiative

THIS EXPLORATORY STUDY of four vital congregations in Southern California offers some intriguing insights and possible directions for the leaders of the Catholic Sisters Initiative as they continue to develop the next iteration of their strategy. The research builds on the data and findings from existing grants that the Sisters Initiative funded during its first strategy (2013-2018), such as the CARA studies and the Durham University/Heythrop College/Margaret Beaufort Institute of Theology collaborative's work on congregational vitality in the United Kingdom and Africa. Through its explorations in Southern California, CRCC has found that despite the decline in the number of sisters in the United States, some congregations are attracting vocations. These new vocations are a sign of vitality, but not the only one.

CRCC has come to define vitality as informed by the adaptive manner in which a congregation engages with spirituality, community life, service and outreach across the whole life-time of a sister. Vital congregations, aware of the unique path of religious life, actively support the spiritual development of women through the larger Catholic community. They continue to support sisters through community, adapting to today's individualistic culture. Vital congregations have adapted to larger societal trends by seeking out women with volunteer experience and offering sisters opportunities to engage with direct service. Finally, they embrace a "culture of encounter," working alongside and reaching out to laypeople in new ways.

This exploratory study is important for the Catholic Sisters Initiative because it elucidates a key element—adaptivity—that contributes to congregations' spirituality, communal life, service and outreach to the larger Catholic community.

In its first strategy, the Catholic Sisters Initiative aimed to "build the capacity of congregations of women religious in the areas of leadership, membership and resources, enabling Catholic sisters to advance human development more widely and effectively." The Sisters Initiative is currently developing a new iteration of its strategy. The Foundation's board of directors approved a directions paper in November 2017 that broadly outlines the future course of the Sisters Initiative over the next five-year period. The Sisters Initiative's complete second iteration of its strategy is scheduled for board review and approval in May 2018. The directions paper laid out four portfolios that will form the basis of their next strategy. These four areas are sisters' education, human development services, knowledge and innovation.

As the Sisters Initiative refines its strategy, the findings from this study and other research work in the Sisters Initiative portfolio suggest the need for the Sisters Initiative team to develop a holistic approach for how it can support congregational vitality and sustainability. The holistic approach could be built around the ideas of lifetime formation and congregational adaptivity with four major pillars undergirding it: research, implementation, documentation and dissemination. The four pillars also fit into the four future strategic portfolios (sisters' education, human development services, knowledge and innovation).



RESEARCH. Understanding the factors that shape congregational vitality and sustainability are critical to the Sisters Initiative’s grant-making strategy. This exploratory study demonstrates the need for continuing research on congregations and the Catholic eco-system in which they operate. For example, this study points to the role of adaptivity in congregational vitality. A further exploration of this idea with additional congregations in Southern California or in other regions of the country could assist congregations in identifying points where they need to be more responsive to the “call of the times” in areas such as interculturality, prayer and communal religious practice or technology and social media.

This exploratory study also underscores the need to continue and expand upon the valuable collection and analysis of data from congregations in the United States. For example, ongoing grants with CARA and NRRO provide the Sisters Initiative and other stakeholders with information on the number of women entering congregations and taking final vows as well as data on retirement liabilities. This information is invaluable for strategic grant-making as well as congregational planning.

This exploratory study also builds on prior research such as the Durham University/ Heythrop College/Margaret Beaufort Institute of Theology collaborative’s work on congregational vitality, and reinforces that research on congregational vitality is applicable at a global level. The Sisters Initiative could consider chairing a meeting of its current research partners as well as other interested stakeholders to identify key research questions around congregational vitality and sustainability. These questions could drive its grant-making under its knowledge portfolio in the new strategy.

Research on congregational vitality and sustainability also informs how educational training programs, such as a formation program for vocational directresses, could be developed to respond to the needs of new generations of young women entering religious life. This research could help the Sisters Initiative amplify the impact of sisters’ human development missions by connecting congregations to the Catholic laity and their resources and expertise (e.g., young Catholic volunteers).

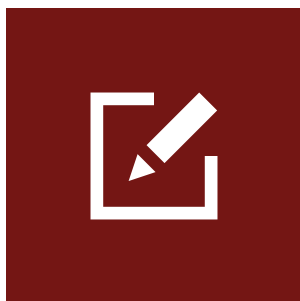


IMPLEMENTATION. At heart of the holistic approach lies the implementation of ideas and programs generated by information from research and from the experience of congregations and other stakeholders, such as parish and campus ministries. These ideas and programs could focus on key points in lifetime formation that directly contribute to the vitality of the congregation and the sustainability of its mission over the long-term.

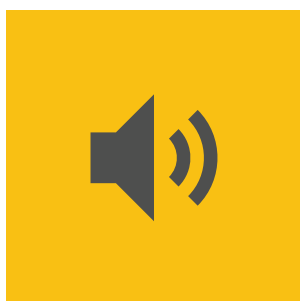
Two examples of the many areas in this report where translation of research into field-level implementation is possible are fostering a “culture of encounter” between congregations and young members of the Catholic community, and supporting programs for aging sisters to continue their spiritual mission and witness to the Catholic community and young women entering their congregations. The study pointed out that part of what made these congregations vital and attractive to young women is that all members, including the elderly, were seen as contributors to the mission and charism of their congregations.

The Sisters Initiative might target funding for some of the activities that the exploratory study showed are working for vital congregations, such as inter-congregational activities that draw sisters together and provide a place for support, networking and shared knowledge. The Sisters Initiative also can continue to support efforts on interculturality in congregations in the United States and abroad. This is particularly relevant in the US context as congregations “respond to the times” by reviewing their own practices and beliefs as the Catholic population becomes more diverse. One striking example drawn from the exploratory study is the flexibility of the Lovers of the Holy Cross congregation, an order rooted in Vietnamese culture, in allowing sisters more time with their families. Sisters Initiative-supported efforts to address issues like interculturality and lifetime formation might fall under the sisters education portfolio, and some may also be innovation grants—if they seek to create solutions to systemic issues affecting congregations.

The exploratory study also found that resource-strapped congregations struggle to support sisters’ efforts to take on uncompensated service work. The Catholic Sisters Initiative could remunerate sisters’ uncompensated service work under the umbrella of its human development services portfolio to support congregations and their various social service ministries, from health care to human trafficking. In turn, the witness that sisters provide while working in these ministries would contribute to a “culture of encounter” with young women and the wider Catholic community.



DOCUMENTATION. An essential element of the holistic approach would be the documentation of activities and lessons learned, including mapping networks of congregations, their lay associates and other key actors in the local and national Catholic ecosystem that have an influence on congregational vitality and mission sustainability. For example, if peer networks are influential in reigniting young women’s connections to their religious roots and catalyzing the discernment process, it would be useful for congregations to identify, document and perhaps act within those networks (e.g., sponsoring a youth Bible study group at a local parish or university, or connecting to on-campus ministries such as FOCUS).



DISSEMINATION. Sharing lessons learned from the ongoing research funded by the Sisters Initiative, from the implementation of that research, and from activities under the sisters education and human development services portfolios, is essential to nurturing vital congregations and fostering communities of practice around lifetime formation.

An example of this can be drawn from *Global Sisters Report* (GSR), a key information disseminator for the Sisters Initiative. GSR reported on the “small-numbers solutions” to the “small numbers problems” of vocations, presented by Sr. Mary Johnson, SNDdeN and Sr. Sandra Schneiders, IHM at the Religious Formation Conference’s annual national congress.⁵² A shared formation process that includes graduate-level theology, they suggested, would offer support to the small number of new sisters while making them more visible to other young women—an idea that fits the findings of this report. These types of collaborative learning opportunities can contribute to the religious formation of virtue. The Sisters Initiative could take advantage of national religious conference meetings as well regional meetings of congregations to share learnings and connect congregations to findings on the latest data and research, such as vocations and spiritual formation. Dissemination is woven into all four of the future strategic portfolios and is an essential part of learning and sharing best practices, whether in human development ministries or in innovative new approaches for supporting elderly sisters.



Conclusion

THIS EXPLORATORY STUDY of four vital congregations in Southern California found that a central commonality between the congregations was their ability and willingness to adapt and respond to challenges within the bounds of their traditions. Southern California offers a unique social laboratory for studying religious congregations because, like these four religious congregations, the Catholic Church in Southern California is thriving, diverse and adaptive. Within its limited scope, this study suggests that congregations of women religious can continue to attract young women and serve the church and their community, but it also points to many questions to be explored in future research in Southern California or elsewhere.

Specifically, this study opens the door to further research and discussion about how the Sisters Initiative and other stakeholders can best encourage congregations of women religious to flourish. As the Sisters Initiative works on the second iteration of its strategy, a few questions it might consider include:

- How will the second iteration of the Sisters Initiative's strategy respond to the growing diversity of the Catholic Church in the United States?
- How might the Sisters Initiative respond to vital congregations' innovative efforts towards bridging contemplation and action?
- In what ways might the trends captured in this report reflect challenges the Sisters Initiative is contending with in other parts of the world?

This period of strategy development offers a unique opportunity for the Sisters Initiative to develop a holistic model of congregational vitality and sustainability that can be woven into its future work and the four key portfolios (sisters' education, human development services, knowledge and innovation). With a holistic model, the Sisters Initiative may be able to use its funding to foster the vitality of religious life and help sisters continue their important spiritual witness and missions in the United States and abroad.



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