News
Religious Life



Sr. Esther Fangman, prioress of the Benedictine Sisters of Mount St. Scholastica of Atchison, Kansas, blesses Emily Bauer, 26, as she is received as into the canonical novitiate with the community Dec. 7, 2019. (Courtesy of the Benedictine Sisters of Mount St. Scholastica)



by Gail DeGeorge

View Author Profile
gdegeorge@ncronline.org

Join the Conversation

February 13, 2020

Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

Offering prayer partnerships. Making personal connections. Creating more retreat opportunities. Seeking new directions in formation by offering more live-in experiences of community life and international experiences. Recognizing that a standardized approach to formation doesn't work with younger women entering religious life and instead using new ways of instruction that encourage them to explore their inner strengths and struggles.

These were among the more than 50 responses to an invitation by Global Sisters Report to share how communities are reaching out to younger women and about new members under age 40 who have joined their community in the past five years. We solicited the submissions following a December story about how U.S. congregations are inviting young women to consider religious life. We shared some of the submissions in two previous compilations that appeared last week following the World Day for Consecrated Life.

This final installment of the series features congregations from the United States, Canada, Kenya, Nigeria and India. They have been edited for clarity and augmented with additional information from follow-up phone calls and emails.

Benedictine Sisters of Mount St. Scholastica

Through a prayer partner program with Benedictine College, students are paired with a Benedictine Sister of Mount St. Scholastica in Atchison, Kansas, which co-sponsors the college, said Sr. Marcia Ziska, director of vocation ministry for the community. About 20 sisters work in the prayer partner program, which is in its 40th year. Five sisters, including three who also serve as prayer partners, also offer spiritual direction for the students and faculty at the college, she added.

Students of Notre Dame de Sion of Kansas City, Missouri, an all-girls school, also come to the community's Sophia Spirituality Center for Kairos retreats several times a year, she added.

"While here, they participate in praying vespers one evening with the sisters, and then five or six [sisters] join them for supper, one sister per table," she said.

Related: Presence is vital to recruit younger women for consecrated life, congregations say

The Sophia Spirituality Center also recently hosted a 24-hour retreat for young adults that included bread-baking, apple-pie-making and a Taizé prayer service. Three sisters organized and directed each activity.

Emily Bauer, 26, began to participate in the prayer partner program as a freshman at Benedictine College and got to know the previous vocation director, Sr. Barbara Smith. Bauer stayed in contact with her and did a "nun run" in which young women visit several women religious communities in the area during spring or fall break, Ziska said.

Bauer began the affiliate program, an initial stage of discernment, with the Benedictine Sisters of Mount St. Scholastica before she graduated from Benedictine College. She became a canonical novice Dec. 7, 2019. She has a master's degree in gerontology from the University of Missouri in St. Louis and is now in a year of study at the monastery.

Sinsinawa Dominican Sisters

The website of the Dominican Sisters of Sinsinawa, Wisconsin, includes an e-commerce bakery, gift gallery and retreat center, and the community also has accounts on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube and Pinterest.

The community also offers retreats through partnerships with dioceses and other congregations and has a presence with local public and private colleges, including sponsored institutions Dominican University in River Forest, Illinois, and Edgewood College in Madison, Wisconsin.

Michelle Horton, the vocation director and an associate, participates in fair trade coffee hour, getting-to-know-you dinners and other campus ministry events. She is a member of the Relationships for Mission Team and does "the vocation work of promoting and discerning with women their call to religious life," a position she's held for more than five years, she said.

Sisters engage with discerners and also share their experience of religious life in a blog, Catherine's Café.

Four women under 40 have entered the congregation in the about the past five years, she said.

"They made a decision about religious life and then looked for a good fit, connecting with sisters through internet searches and retreats," Horton said.



Sr. Quincy Howard signs her profession documents July 30, 2017. Behind her are, from left: Sr. Nicole Reich, Sr. Rosanna Gleason, Sr. Toni Harris, Sr. Jo Ann Timmerman and Sr. Mary Ann Nelson. (Courtesy of the Dominicans of Sinsinawa)

Two had personal experience with the congregation prior to entering. Sr. Quincy Howard, who graduated from Dominican University, entered the community in 2014 at age 38 and made first profession on July 30, 2017. She now works with Network, the Catholic social justice lobby in Washington, D.C. (She has also written columns for Global Sisters Report.) Sr. Nicole Reich previously worked for the congregation, caring for elderly sisters. She entered the community in 2014 at age 32 and made her first profession on July 30, 2017. She is now a spiritual care coordinator with Heartland Hospice in Madison, Wisconsin.

Sr. Christin Tomy entered in 2013 at age 25 and made her first profession on June 19, 2016. She now serves as the care for creation coordinator at the Sinsinawa

Mound Center, the community's motherhouse. (She also is a columnist for Global Sisters Report.) She learned about the congregation through the Dubuque Area Vocation Association women's retreat "Dubuque's Got Sisters." (The Sinsinawa motherhouse is a nine-minute drive from Dubuque, Iowa.)

Sr. Rhonda Miska entered in 2015 at age 35 and made her first profession July 28, 2019. She is an instructor and university minister at Dominican University and a theological researcher at Catholic Theological Union. She reached out to the Sinsinawa Dominicans online, then went to a "Dubuque's Got Sisters" retreat. Miska said she was drawn to the charism of preaching and was looking for a community in the Midwest near her family.

Sister Servants of the Blessed Sacrament

The Sister Servants of the Blessed Sacrament's Province of the Immaculate Conception outside of San Diego holds five to six retreats a year at which the sisters minister, said Sr. Katia Chavez, assistant director of vocations.

Some of those retreats are not specifically for vocations, such as the Follow Christ retreat for confirmation-age students and the Women of Virtue retreat, which targets single women between the ages of 18 to 35.

"Both events orient the person toward entering into a closer relationship with Christ," Chavez said. "We collect information from each of the participants and invite them again to vocation retreats."

The vocation retreats are one day, usually on Saturdays, with one as a weekend retreat toward the end of the school year.



Sr. Bellanira Meda, 37, made her first profession Aug. 20, 2016. (Courtesy of the Sister Servants of the Blessed Sacrament)

"The weekend retreat is intended for women to begin a formal discernment process for candidacy to our religious congregation," she said.

The focus on vocation ministry brings the presence of religious women to campuses of Catholic and state universities, such as the Catholic Campus Ministry at the San Diego State University Newman Center, she said. Sisters participate during Mass and adoration of the Blessed Sacrament, attend retreats, visit the Newman Center, accompany young people on mission trips or FOCUS conferences, and encourage women to attend vocation retreats.

The congregation also participates in a vocation fair at John Paul the Great Catholic University.

"Sensing the interest of women, we kept connected as we invite them to retreats," Chavez said.

Sisters also visit confirmation classes and youth groups, she said, and attend youth Sunday Masses and other youth nights and events.

"We have found that many young people have not seen a religious sister (wearing a habit) in their lives (considering that these young people are 17 at the most)," she said.

Sr. Patricia Rodriguez, 40, made her first profession on Aug. 15, 2018.

"She connected to our religious congregation when the sisters saw her devotion to the Lord as she attended daily Mass," Chavez said. The sister in charge of vocations invited her to a come-and-see event, and Rodriguez began a discernment process in which she was hired as a teacher at St. Mary's School in El Centro, California, where the sisters worked. A few years later, she entered the community and continues to work as a teacher in Our Lady of Guadalupe Academy in Calexico, California, Chavez said.

Sr. Bellanira Meda, 37, made her first profession Aug. 20, 2016. After confiding to her parish pastor her desire to become a sister, she was directed to the diocesan vocation director, who was a member of the Sister Servants of the Blessed Sacrament. Meda is a student at California State University, Northridge, and does vocation ministry at the local level in radio and television. She is part of the organizing committee for the annual vocation congress.

Sisters of Divine Providence

The Sisters of Divine Providence (also known as the Congregation of Divine Providence) in San Antonio works with Our Lady of the Lake University, which the congregation founded, on a collaborative Providence Leadership Program for students, said Sr. Gloria Ann Fiedler, who is with the congregation's vocation ministry.

Students who complete the program have the necessary formation to become a young adult lay associate with the congregation if they choose to, she said. In the last 14 years, the Sisters of Divine Providence has received 190 Our Lady of the Lake students as lay associates through the leadership program.

Advertisement

The congregation also holds a come-and-see annual retreat and participates in a Life Awareness retreat, an annual archdiocesan vocation discernment retreat for both men and women. Up to 18 women have participated each year since the retreat began 14 years ago. A "significant number" of participants have entered religious life, including the Sisters of Divine Providence, Fiedler said.

Four women under age 40 have entered the community in the past five years. Three are in annual temporary vows: Srs. Kate Fitzgerald, Megan Grewing and Christina Chavez. Fitzgerald teaches elementary school children, Grewing is a counselor and Chavez is co-director of university ministry at Our Lady of the Lake University. Sr. Melissa Cessac is a second-year novice.

Missionary Sisters of the Precious Blood, East African Province

The East African Province of the Missionary Sisters of the Precious Blood have 10 vocation animators in Kenya, seven in Tanzania and two in Sudan, the three countries that make up the province.

"About 30 women visit our convent [in Kenya] every year as a way of discerning whether they are called to live religious life, and we are glad to journey with them as they continue to seek where God is calling them," said Sr. Christine Nasimiyu Masivo, the vocation team leader in Kenya.

Some young women become familiar with the congregation through websites, but the animators also meet them in parishes, schools, colleges and universities. Most of the women have finished high school, and many are in colleges and universities, she

said. Most are under the age of 30, with a few from age 30 to 35.



New Missionary Sisters of the Precious Blood made their first profession on Feb. 3 in South Africa, one of the congregation's three international novitiates. (Courtesy of the Missionary Sisters of the Precious Blood)

In the past five years, about 30 women have joined the congregation in East Africa. Their ministries include education, youth ministry, social work, guidance and counseling, medical, domestic and hospitality, agriculture, media and communications, pastoral work and retreat direction.

As a missionary international congregation, postulants attend one of the three international novitiates: St. Bernard's Residence in Toronto; Poli Singisi in Arusha, Tanzania; and Mariannhill Novitiate in Kwa Zulu Natal, South Africa. The novitiate takes two years, then the newly professed sisters go back to their home provinces/regions for leave before going to the congregational provinces and regions they are missioned to.

Society of the Sacred Heart, U.S.-Canada Province

"We have learned that many young women are desiring a radical commitment to God and are very generous and passionate about service to those most in need," said Sr. Mary Finlayson, director of vocation ministry for the Society of the Sacred Heart's U.S.-Canada province. "Many are searching for a community with whom to pray, serve and share life, but they often don't really know sisters, religious life, community, mission, vows, perpetual commitment. ... Therefore, we feel they need a significant live-in community/mission experience before beginning an application process."

The congregation is also searching for new directions in formation to respond to new times, she said.



Nine women made final vows with the Society of the Sacred Heart on Jan. 26 in a ceremony at the chapel of the congregation's Villa Lante in Rome. The sisters spent five months in Rome preparing for their vows. (Courtesy of the Religious Sisters of

the Sacred Heart)

"We have moved to develop a variety of innovative, welcoming communities where young people can have live-in experiences of community life, interprovincial/international novitiates, more international experiences during formation, border experiences, adult formation and intercongregational programs which are new and life-giving movements into the future," she said.

Many millennials enter the Society of the Sacred Heart in countries such as Indonesia, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Uganda, Kenya, Korea, Peru and India.

Nine millennial women from the United States, Korea, India, Uruguay, France, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Indonesia made final vows on Jan. 26 at a ceremony in Rome. Of the 134 women who made final profession from 2007 to 2017, almost all would have been millennials, Finlayson said.

Xavière Sisters, Missionaries of Christ Jesus

"We are a rather small French order of Ignatian sisters, but we are present in six countries (among them, Canada and U.S.), and we have new members almost every year," said Sr. Nathalie Becquart, communication director for the congregation and consultor to the general secretary of the synod of bishops. "We reach them through our ministries, our website and social networks."

She recently started a Twitter account for the congregation in advance of the congregation's 100th anniversary next year and will tweet in English and French. There is one vocations director in France and another in charge of the Ivory Coast, Chad and Cameroon, where the congregation has communities.

"In our different countries, we organize come-and-see weekends and vocational meetings, and we are involved in young adult ministry within parishes or dioceses but also in France with the Ignatian Youth Network," Becquart said.



Ten women who have made their first vows pose for a photo with their formators at an August 2019 gathering at the Xavière Sisters' house in La Pourraque, France. Of the 10, six are from France, one from Switzerland, one from Vietnam, one from the Central African Republic and one from the Ivory Coast. Five of those taking first vows are under 40 years old. (Courtesy of the Xavière Sisters)

Two French postulants joined the congregation in September and October 2019: Marie, 26, is a speech therapist, and Laetitia, 28, is an engineer. (The community does not make public last names of members until they make final vows.)

Two women are in their first year of novitiate: Sonal, 30, is Indian but grew up in Abu Dhabi and moved to Toronto at age 18 to study accounting, then theology. She became a campus minister at the University of Toronto and met the members of the congregation at the Newman Center. She did her postulancy last year in the Toronto community and is now in her first year of novitiate in France. Grace, 23, is from the Ivory Coast and is also in her first year of novitiate.

In her second year of novitiate, Perrine, 31, is from France and has been working in the country in Catholic schools as a librarian. Anne-Patience, 27, is from Cameroon and began her postulancy in 2016 after working as an accountant. Among the 10 women who have professed first vows, six are French, one is Swiss, one is Vietnamese, one is from the Central Africa Republic and one is from the Ivory Coast. Five are under 40 years old.

Apostolic Carmel Congregation, Western Province, India

"Today, we have to reach out to them at their level and not have our set way of reaching out to the young women," said Sister Nirmalini, provincial superior of the Western Province for the Apostolic Carmel Congregation in Bandra, Mumbai. "It has been a challenge."

Most entrants are in their mid-20s, but some have entered in their mid-30s, she said.

"Our experience is that formation has to be customized," she said. "It cannot be the same for all, at least with personality development. We felt that the level of maturity differs, and our old way of putting all in the same box is not working. It has been challenging, but also, our journey has been interesting to accompany them."



An April 2016 seminar in New Delhi for the Apostolic Carmel Congregation's junior sisters included a visit to the Indian president's official residence, Rashtrapati Bhavan. (Courtesy of the Apostolic Carmel Congregation)

In recent years, the sisters began to engage in new ways of instruction, allowing young women entering religious life to explore their inner strengths and struggles through drawings, photos, stories, PowerPoint presentations — even games and fantasy exercises followed by sharing, she said. Nature walks, meditation, planting trees and helping to keep the community's surroundings beautiful encourages them to be eco-friendly. Inter-novitiate classes on various topics and meeting with those in formation at other congregations help novices grow in confidence, she said.

But even with all of that, she said, "our young sisters give up religious life easily, perhaps because of lack of motivation, lack of deep relationship with the person of Jesus, lack of integration with the life they live and what they have learned," she said.

Another challenge is that many of those entering are from rural areas, where the level of education is low and students are taught in the state or local language. When they join the congregation, they learn English, but the pace of learning is slow. Because formation is taught in English, "it could be that they do not fully understand, grasp and be convinced of the implications and demands of religious life," she said.

Since 2010, she said, 27 young women have made their first profession, 17 made final vows and four more will make final vows this year.

"We have introduced new ways of imparting instructions, but it will take time," she said. "There is a gap between the young and the old, and even though we have introduced new ways, when they get into communities after their formation, the older sisters in the community are used to the old way of living and the younger ones are confused with the old and the new at times," she said. "We are trying to update the old, as well, but it is a challenge."

Related: Communities welcome young women to the sisterhood through international outreach

Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur, Nigeria Province

The Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur in Nigeria "live and work with the youth in our parishes and ministries," said Sr. Monica Umeh, a member of congregation's Nigeria leadership team who also formerly worked as a novice director.

The sisters visit churches to talk about vocation to religious life and invite young women to visit their communities. The congregation advertises on a calendar and magazine.

"We just continue to do our work quietly and welcome anyone who comes," Umeh said.

Those interested are expected to attend at least three weekend seminars before the general interview for those ready to continue the process of joining the congregation.

"During that period, we encourage them to check out other congregations in order to help them discern where God is calling them," Umeh said.

In the past five years, the congregation has welcomed about 20 young women.

The congregation's formation period is four years: two years of postulancy and two years of novitiate. After first profession of vows, it takes between six years to nine years at most to make perpetual vows. During these years, the sisters are either in active ministry or studying.

"We have so many aspiring to join us. Some are still studying, and some are waiting for their school results," Umeh said. "In all, there are so many young girls desiring to serve God in religious life."

[Gail DeGeorge is editor of Global Sisters Report. Her email address is gdegeorge@ncronline.org. Follow her on Twitter: @GailDeGeorge.]

This story appears in the **World Day for Consecrated Life** feature series. View the full series.