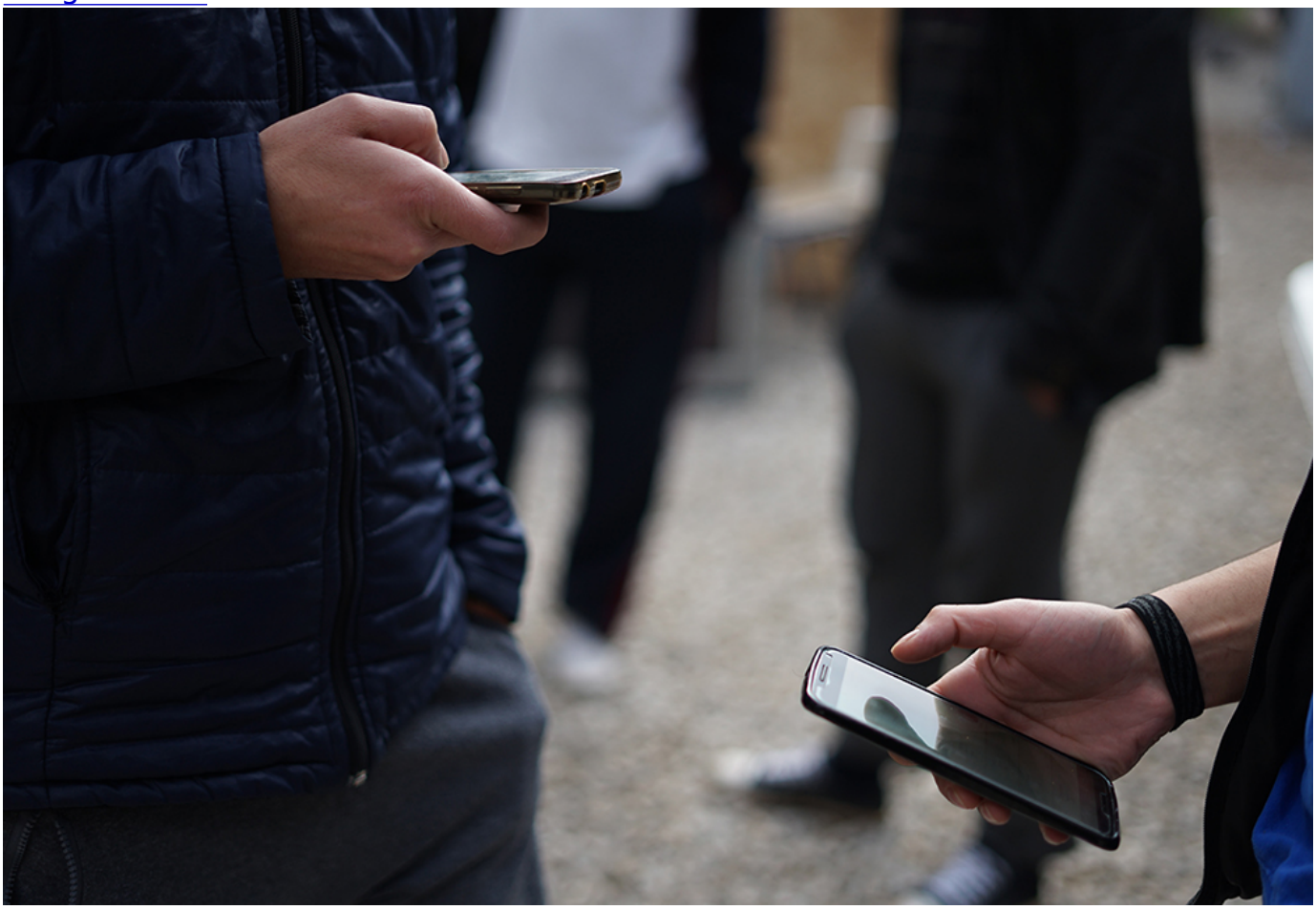
Columns
Horizons
Religious Life



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Religious women take vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. My congregation, the Sisters of Mercy, also takes a fourth vow of service. I recently heard a sister say that the vow of obedience is the "listening" vow, and I found myself reflecting on this. The vow of obedience is the one that is often hardest for me to explain when someone asks about it.

On their website the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops explains obedience like this:

> The role of the community is integral to the obedience professed by a woman religious. Far from being a "blind obedience" in which one simply does what she is told, the obedience of a disciple stretches her to take an active role in sifting through the various influences and calls in her life. Together with the community, she looks reverently at her gifts and talents as well as the needs of the world and strives to know how God is calling her to respond. Truly, the grace of community in this process is to have an extra set of ears with which to hear God's call and invitation in the broader context.

This way of explaining obedience has evolved over time and has changed, especially after Vatican II. I have heard that sisters who experienced religious life before Vatican II often had to listen and respond without having their voices heard.

All of this has me reflecting on how I and others listen to each other. There are so many obstacles in our society that keep us from listening. I find that I often do more than one thing at a time. If I am listening to something on YouTube, I am glancing at my phone or reading a text. Sometimes the temptation in Zoom meetings is to do something else. I know that this keeps me from truly listening and yet I still do it. I wonder what effect this has on how I processed the information.

Did not being fully attentive change how I acted on what I heard or didn't hear while I was responding to a text or another distraction? I see my friends interacting with their families in the same way at times. How many times do they miss what their children or husband just said because of a text or something on their phone?

I get irritated when someone looks at their phone while I am talking to them — however, I have probably done the same thing. I definitely stop listening when I hear my phone ding. At that exact moment I have this urge to check what is not as

important as the person I am talking to. I wish I could solve this for myself and for others, but all I can do is be aware of it and try to truly listen to whatever is happening at that moment.

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When I go back and think about the vow of obedience as the listening vow, what comes to mind is *red cards*. When the Sisters of Mercy are voting on something at meetings or we want to take a "test vote" to see which way the group sentiment is leaning, we use a system of red, yellow and green cards. Green means you agree, yellow means you have some reservations and red means you are not able to agree with the decision.

When this was new to me it always caused me to gasp when there were no red cards. How could I be in a room with more than 300 women, and no one has up a red card. It has to do with deep listening. We have by that point discussed the issue and really listened to each other. Through that listening we are willing to say "yes" even if we are not totally convinced because we see it as being good for the whole. To me, this is the vow of obedience being lived out in our life together as sisters.

Some readers might take a vow of obedience, and others might not: However, we are all called by God to listen to each other in a way that honors the image and likeness of God in each person. The listening vow of obedience has reminded me to use in small ways what I have learned from when we have big decisions:

- To listen to what the sister I live with is really saying and to be attentive and ask questions.
- To try not to be distracted by technology and the "to do" list in my head.
- To truly try to be present in each moment.

This leads all of us to ask: when are the times we are not listening to others because something else is getting in the way? We should try to listen and remember that the person we are listening to is created in the image and likeness of God and deserves our attention.