Blog
Religious Life



(Unsplash/Ross Sneddon)



by Helga Leija

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

September 28, 2022
Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

In 2020, the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life published "The Gift of Fidelity, the Joy of Perseverance," a document that aims to address what Pope Francis referred to as a " 'haemorrhage' that is weakening consecrated life and the very life of the Church." The document was published at a vulnerable time in my life when I was in my second year of exclaustration, a word seldom talked about in public or even in religious congregations.

Exclaustration in canon law (Canon 686.1) is the temporary separation of a perpetually professed member from his or her religious institute, which may be requested by the member and must be authorized by the competent superior. Exclaustration can only be granted for grave reasons and is not to exceed five years. In some cases, exclaustration can be imposed on a perpetually professed member by the supreme moderator for grave reasons, such as a disciplinary measure in order to preserve the community's right to live their life of service to God peacefully.

When I first asked for some time away from my congregation in order to discern my next step, I wasn't completely sure what I needed. I did not know anyone who had been on exclaustration, and I felt confused and anxious. I was going through a very difficult time in my life, and I just knew I needed time to discern.

I was granted three years, during which I worked as a public school teacher, took some college courses, and made a pilgrimage to Spain and another to Mexico City. I was desperately searching for guidance and help in the process. I was like a small boat adrift in the midst of a big storm. The wise women who had been my mentors were no longer there for me. I had to figure things out on my own.

I realize that others' stories of exclaustration might be different. However, the departures in religious life are a reality in our church.

Advertisement

The Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate surveys religious institutes to assess data, such as how many people have entered congregations or how many members have professed perpetual vows. However, they have not surveyed institutes to find out the number of people who have left or gone on exclaustration through the years.

We tend to look at congregations with significant numbers of young members as vital. The members who leave are assumed to not have a vocation and, therefore, are alienated or forgotten.

Is it really a matter of fidelity? I have a few questions.

How are religious institutes defining "fidelity"? According to "The Gift of Fidelity, the Joy of Perseverance," fidelity "enables us to grasp and reclaim the truth of our own being, that is, to *remain* (cf. Jn 15:9) in God's love." Isn't it the role of congregations to assist members, even in time of exclaustration, to live this fidelity, wherever it leads? Or when a member requests a time of exclaustration, does the congregation automatically see it as a request for departure and so is not responsible for helping the person to reclaim the truth of their own being? How can congregations better live this gift of fidelity and the joy of perseverance in their treatment of members who are separated from them "for grave reasons"?

Are religious institutes investing time and effort in shared discernment? When one is discerning about entering religious life, one is assigned a vocation director to help with the process. It is a shared discernment on the part of the person and the congregation. When it comes to exclaustration, should this not be the same? Exclaustration may lead to a request for departure, but it is possible that it may not. The time could be more fruitful for both the congregation and the member who both experience the pain of the "haemorrhage" of losing members if greater care and investment of time and resources attended to the needs of the congregation and the vulnerable member who is separated "for grave reasons."

Are religious institutes giving enough help and guidance to members on leave or during exclaustration? Canon law allows exclaustration for grave reasons, but exclaustration isn't always treated as such. In many cases, people are taking time away because of serious doubts or other issues and need the support of the community more than ever.



(Unsplash/Sage Friedman)

As I discerned, prayed and searched, God led me to an amazing network of people who assisted me in countless ways. I learned to live life differently. It was an opportunity to grow and change. I knew that God had plans for me (Jeremiah 29:11-15). I just did not know what they were, but I trusted them, even if it was difficult. My spiritual director helped me through the most difficult part of the journey.

I realize, as I look back at my time in exclaustration, that although difficult, it was also a time of grace, growth, and an outpouring of goodness. As Pope Francis tweeted at the beginning of his pontificate: "Dear young people, do not be afraid of making decisive choices in life. Have faith; the Lord will not abandon you!"

At the end of my three years, I discerned that God was calling me to monastic life and led me to the right place. I am now privileged to live and pray with the Benedictine Sisters of Mount St. Scholastica in Atchison, Kansas, where I am learning the rhythms of daily life and continue to listen to God. The sisters have embraced

me and loved me. The common life lived at the Mount, although not perfect, can truly be understood as a *schola amoris*, a "school of love." We seek God together.

Leaving my first community, my dear sisters, was the hardest decision of my life. Yet what I learned from them comes with me into my Benedictine life. I am forever grateful.