Columns
Religious Life



School Sisters of Notre Dame dance as part of an African prayer during the Assembly of the Whole in Kansas City, Kansas, in July 2022. (Julie A. Ferraro)



by Julie A. Ferraro

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

January 3, 2023

Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

It's that time again.

With the coming of the new year, I'm switching hats from life as a Benedictine Oblate to the topic of communications and its importance to communities of women religious (and men, too).

I began writing fiction in 1973. During that five-decade span, I've learned the importance of telling a good story. When I branched out into journalism, those stories became even more important.

In the late 1990s, I expanded my communications skills into websites and then to various social media platforms. The importance of these communication technologies to ongoing generations cannot be discounted.

That's why — as a sort of New Year's resolution — I'm recommending that women's religious communities take a serious look at their websites.

The purpose of a website for any religious community, in my opinion, is threefold: attract vocations, lay associates (oblates, affiliates, or whatever term is used) and donors. That the information posted on the pages also keeps friends and relatives of current members current on activities is a definite plus.

The design of the pages themselves can be based on a template or an original configuration, and they may vary widely. They may be maintained in-house by the sisters, by a designated employee or outsourced to a firm specializing in websites.

That's why it always befuddles me when I pull up a community's website and find grammatical and typographical errors, broken links (links that don't go to the proper page), missing photos or graphics, or information that's out of date.

Not that I search for these problems deliberately, but I find them in the course of browsing the web.

In this era when women's communities face an uncertain future due to aging members and lack of incoming vocations, keeping current information on a website might not seem a priority.

But it is.

A woman — whether in her 20s or even 50s — in the early stages of discerning how God wishes her to be of service to those in need, used to turn to a book I found on my local library shelf many years ago. It contained listings of the communities, each with a photo of a member in the respective habit — from the basic to the elaborate — and contact information for inquirers.

Today, such a woman turns to the internet.

Imagine putting a term like "refugee advocate" or "monastic prayer" into a search engine. Clicking the link to a women's community, what if you found on the Current Events tab or Vocation page, only dates from two or three years ago — or, worse, nothing at all?

Most women's religious communities create publications on a yearly basis, or more frequently. Trying to find files from years earlier can be disheartening for someone curious about what the community has been doing recently.

The tendency in such instances might be for the woman searching for contacts to move on, reaching out to another community that has their website in good order.

It may sound sad, but it's the truth. The impression seekers get when a website features news from months prior is that the community either does little in the way of social outreach or places scant value on their communications.



Poor Clare Sisters process during a Eucharistic celebration at the Roswell, New Mexico, monastery in October 2016. (Julie A. Ferraro)

Of course, for the majority of communities of women religious, this lack of activity is not the case. But updating the website can fall by the wayside when other matters take precedence, such as providing adequate care for aging members or determining the future of the community's land and buildings.

With their numbers decreasing, women religious often are no longer able to focus on one particular ministry; many have two or three assigned duties that must be juggled, in addition to finding time for prayer. The rapid advancement of technology has left some struggling to catch up with their training — not just on the computer, but with phones or other devices.

There may be a list of reasons a website is left untended. There is a common belief that once the pages are set up and go live, there is no need to revisit them. For

women religious, though, it's vital to keep visitors returning to the site, and that is accomplished by refreshing the information on a regular basis.

One method to ensure a website is engaging others: Ask associates or friends to look at the pages and offer their honest opinions. Sometimes laypeople have a different eye for details and can provide insights into what grabs a person and holds their interest.

Advertisement

With those suggestions in mind, women religious should dedicate at least a few hours a month — if not more — to making updates to the website. If a community employs a communications director, or assigns a sister to the task, a bit of oversight to be sure information is posted will only augment the process.

A further effort is required for those communities with a social media presence: daily posts reflecting on Scripture readings or saints' feasts are great. Resolve, for this new year, to post photos of "sisters in action" — faces of real sisters doing real tasks, whether it's baking brownies, planting flowers, washing windows, participating in a study group or class or welcoming guests to dinner.

Women discerning their vocation, donors, friends and relatives are drawn to a community when they see images of their activities captured spontaneously rather than posed. Such photos can also be uploaded to the website to convey the spirit of the community's charism.

A genuine smile, voices raised in song, a sister snuggling a kitten — no words can speak louder about the joy of such a life.

Please, sisters, as a kickoff to 2023, review your websites and social media, resolve to take the time to keep them up to date, and let them speak to the world of your love for your ministries.