Columns
Religious Life



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There are generations of religious who were never allowed to say "no." Superiors, or in some cases priests and/or bishops, determined choices for ministry and living. Often, decisions were made based on need — noble, but not always realistic when need did not match interest or ability. In the United States, that kind of decision-making is largely a distant memory as we have come to learn the importance of discernment, including identifying individual strengths as well as, for lack of a better description, limitations. Still, many find saying no a struggle.

"No" isn't easy. It's not the 2-year-old's temper tantrum or the adolescent defiance kind of no I'm talking about. It's not no because change will call us out of a comfort zone or require a change. It is taking an honest look at the reality, needs and how and what we can contribute either personally or as part of a larger group.

It's hard to find Scripture examples of people successfully saying no. Any number of prophets tried to say no; they said yes instead and sometimes ended up miserable or dead. Jonah ended up in the belly of a whale when he refused to go to Nineveh. Moses, for his initial no to confronting Pharaoh and leading the people out of captivity, was not allowed to enter the promised land. Even Jesus, who initially said no to his mom when asked to help their friends at the Wedding at Cana, ended up changing his mind.

In addition to learning to say no, many people also need to learn to accept it when they hear it. In other words, they should not pressure people into something. Encouragement is fine, but there is a fine line between encouraging and pressuring. We need to trust that the no is coming out of discernment, and we should not expect or ask for details about that discernment.

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Here are some examples I am familiar with:

- Ministering in a non-English speaking situation. Language study has happened at three different times, and each time was unsuccessful. It's not that they didn't try or were not interested, ability was simply lacking. Saying no seemed the obvious best response even though the need was great.
- Being invited to serve on multiple committees. Taking an active role in community, local or more global affairs is part of what we sign on for when

joining our congregation. But we need to consider our ministry and other commitments, what gifts we bring, and our overall health and energy. Agreeing to be part of one committee and not all was met with resistance, and the sister was regularly reminded how disappointed "everyone was" in her decision.

- Being available all summer because you're "a teacher with three months off." As someone who ministers in education, this one is close to me. Teachers may not be in school in summer, but they may very well be there. Continuing education and professional development, in part to keep licenses, often occur during summer months. Many teach summer school as well. Build in retreat and maybe some vacation time, and suddenly the "three months off" are gone.
- Accepting another person into the household. Many sisters' living realities are apartments or maybe a small parish home; large convents are rare. There may be extra room, but an empty bedroom isn't the only thing to consider when having another person join the living group. Personalities, expectations, schedules and routines, and general compatibility all need to be considered. One household I was a part of had a very small extra room with space for a bed and chair and nothing more. It was fine for guests or short-term needs, but not for anything more permanent.

How do we know when we are saying no from a place of discernment instead of that 2-year old's tantrum or teenage angst or just not wanting to be disrupted? In addition to the obvious time in prayer, I personally make lists of gifts and challenges that would come from saying yes. And I seek input both from someone familiar with the situation and with a neutral outsider. I find it both helpful in addressing questions I may have missed or chose to ignore. Even with all the input, I sometimes worry I'm disappointing the person I said no to.

I once declined a staff outing because I had two other ministry-related evening commitments that week, and the thought of another night out was too much. When asked about my absence, I hesitantly explained and was met with understanding and the offer to join another time. (I found out much later the group was small because most of us had other commitments that week.)

I'm also paying attention to how I receive no from another person. I have learned to thank the invitee, offer support and not push for further dialogue. I work hard to hide my disappointment; I don't want to put that on the other person. I have to trust they have their reasons. Trusting someone else's no is almost as hard as saying no myself.

I don't have a good answer for how to learn to say no. I started with small things. And I keep practicing. Remember: Saying no is just as healthy and important as saying yes.