Columns
Horizons
Religious Life



Sr. Kathryn Press, center, poses with current and previous members of the Giving Voice Core Team. They are, from left, Srs. Melissa Camardo, Erin McDonald, Chioma Ahanihu and Thuy Tran. (Kathryn Press)



by Kathryn Press

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July 12, 2024

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Deep conversations, prayer, one great dance party and a renewed sense of hope summarize my four days in Chicago at Giving Voice's 2024 National Gathering in June. Our time together included input from sister attendees, liturgy, extra long chats over meals, and space for listening. The 11th gathering of its kind brought together more than 60 sisters from 44 congregations, all open to the theme "Being Seeds of Encounter and Communion."

Being seeds

Seeds are small — certainly smaller than the tree or bush into which they will grow. The group of us at St. Xavier University on the southside of Chicago was a smaller number than previous years. Dominican Sr. Christin Tomy presented "Spiritual Aspects of Gardening and Planting," setting the stage for our time together and our musings on the many parables of seeds and growing found in Scripture. The parable of the growing seed is unique to Mark's Gospel and is perhaps less familiar to us than the parable of the sower and the seed. In Mark 4:26-27, Jesus also said, "The Kingdom of God is like a farmer who scatters seed on the ground. Night and day, while he's asleep or awake, the seed sprouts and grows, but he does not understand how it happens."

Our conversations at this National Gathering challenged me to surrender my ideas of what the future of religious life will look like and to put greater trust in God. Like the farmer, God invites us to cooperate, not to control. And then, somehow, like the farmer, we will see that the seeds of religious life will grow into something new and beautiful for the church and the world.

Seeds of encounter

This was my third Giving Voice National Gathering, but my first in five years. The joy of seeing sisters in person, and meeting some for the first time, was overwhelming and deeply healing to my soul. For all the benefits of technology — and it is a remarkable tool — nothing substitutes for being together. Our time in Chicago is an expression of Giving Voice's vision: to cultivate peer accompaniment and community

that empowers young women religious to live their vocation fully.

Giving Voice creates a welcoming space from the moment you walk in the room. This is evident in reflections from both first-time attendees as well as more seasoned participants. I had the privilege of encountering and getting to know better 21 sisters attending their first Giving Voice National Gathering. Together we represented every stage of formation, from candidate to silver jubilarian. Most of us (36 in total) were millennials (born 1980-1994), followed by Gen Xers (21 sisters born 1965-1979), with a handful of Gen Zers (5 sisters born 1995-2009).

Encounter and communion

If the differences in stage in formation, generation, or charism background enrich us, then the presence of the Holy Spirit transforms our encounters into an experience of communion. Being with other women religious fills me with joy. I'm reminded that religious life does have meaning and value, and that others are choosing to live a life of poverty, chastity and obedience. If I had any doubts about whether my life as a sister was "worth it," they were quickly erased by the faithful witness of those around me.

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I could have written about the topics our sister presenters and panelists addressed. They were articulate, insightful and honest. But this gathering was much more about what happened between the sessions, or at least throughout them. At the end of the gathering, my job was to collect the sticky notes we used during our closing ritual. Each piece of paper had two or three words on it that described the sister's experience of the national gathering. The two most common words were "joy" and "hope" — an excellent summary!

Each sister arrived at the gathering like a seed, full of potential. Joy is a fruit of encounter and the joy of our gatherings is contagious. It comes from rejoicing in and receiving one another, much like Elizabeth and Mary at the Visitation. Hope is a seed planted for the future. It's a declaration of faith and trust that our vows have meaning and purpose now and in the future. It is this banner of hope that we joyfully carry into the future.

Giving Voice is a peer-led organization that creates spaces for younger Roman Catholic women religious to give voice to their hopes, dreams and challenges in religious life. We are deeply thankful to the Leadership Conference of Women Religious whose Fund for the Emerging Future of Religious Life underwrote the costs of the conference.