Columns
Religious Life



Nearly 900 sisters and guests are gathered Aug. 10, 2023, at the Leadership Conference of Women Religious assembly in Dallas. (GSR photo/Dan Stockman



by Susan Rose Francois

NCR Contributor

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

July 29, 2024

Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

Dear gentle readers:

I would like to invite you into a thought experiment that has taken hold of my prayer, dreams, and wonderings of late. It is related to the perennial conversations about vowed religious life, particularly during this change of era, often described as one of diminishment, scarcity or even a crisis of vocations.

What if, instead, we considered the present demographic shift — the intersecting dynamic of both the aging/passing of the dominant age cohort and the quantity/quality of those being called to enter the vowed life in the 21st century — as exactly what is needed, called for and desired by God for OUR times? Let me explain.

Earlier this year, I had the opportunity to hear Sr. Nathalie Becquart, undersecretary of the Vatican's synod office, speak in the Archdiocese of Newark. Her overall remarks about the synodal process were insightful, yet there were two points she made which have taken hold of my imagination in terms of what is happening in religious life today, 60-plus years after Vatican II, which called for both the adaptation and renewal of religious life (in *Perfectae Caritatis*) and the recognition of the call to universal holiness of the people of God (in *Lumen Gentium*).

> What is ours to do, then, is always to read the signs of the times and meet the needs of the age.
>
> Tweet this

First, Sister Nathalie presented a much-needed reality check. Not only is synodality essentially "about the reception of the Second Vatican Council," she said, "but the history of the church teaches us that the reception of the council, it's at least 100 … 150 years. So, we are just half-road, and that’s why we need patience and it's not easy.”

The sweeping changes implemented, experienced and witnessed in past decades by today's dominant religious life age cohort, now in their 70s to 90s, marked the beginning of renewal, not the end. The torch is now passing on to the next

generations to continue the adaptation and renewal of religious life during this change of era, and beyond, for the sake of mission. So what is our generation to do?

To answer this central question, I have been sitting with the second point in Sister Nathalie's talk that caught my attention. When the council wrote *Lumen Gentium*, the dogmatic constitution on the church, they chose to place chapter two on the people of God before chapter three on the hierarchy. "That means you need to read chapter three with the glasses of chapter two," she said. In terms of synodality, this leads to a vision of co-responsibility where "those who are in charge exercising their authority are not separated from the community but inside churning together." All the baptized "are bound together as the body of Christ." called to a "relationship of mutuality, interdependency." She sees this as the root of "the most important spiritual attitude for synodality," namely humility. "It's embracing our own vulnerability. It's about recognizing the needs of the others," she said.



Xavière Missionary Sr. Nathalie Becquart, undersecretary of the synod, responds to a question during a news conference at the Vatican Sept. 8, 2023. (CNS/Justin McLellan)

As a Catholic born about a decade after the council, I sometimes take for granted the involvement of lay people in the life, mission and ministry of the church. Yet *Lumen Gentium* marked a radical shift in the recognition of the call of all the people of God to serve Christ's mission. "Upon all the laity, therefore, rests the noble duty of working to extend the divine plan of salvation to all [people] of each epoch and in every land," it said.

The generations of vowed religious who first answered the call to the adaptation and renewal of religious life also helped to implement this shift through the faithful accompaniment, education and empowerment of the people of God. I believe that God calls the people needed to meet the wants of the age. Returning to my thought experiment, then, does it not make sense that as more lay women and men have been called to ministry, the number called to vowed life would decrease, that this is right and just, a rightsizing if you will, and something to be celebrated rather than lamented?

I sometimes worry that my elder sisters, looking at the numbers of those passing vs. those entering the community, feel a sense of failure at some level closer to the unconscious. Yet, in the context of my thought experiment, has renewal to date not been a success? They creatively answered the call of *Perfectae Caritatis* to "both the constant return to the sources of all Christian life and to the original spirit of the institutes and their adaptation to the *changed conditions of our time*." (Emphasis mine.)

Related: LCWR leaders talk about unprecedented transformation of religious life

Today our sponsored ministries, including St. Joseph's School for the Blind. started by the Sisters of St. Joseph of Peace 133 ago, and Waterspirit, our ecological and spirituality ministry, founded by Sr. Suzanne Golas 26 years ago, are being creatively and compassionately led by our competent lay partners, inspired by our charism of peace and committed to meeting the needs of our rapidly changing world. In the spirit of synodality, the sisters are involved and engaged but no longer the primary actors.

This does not mean that we do not have a critical role to play. Yes, what vowed religious are called to do for the sake of mission today and tomorrow is in some ways different from the past. In other ways — again the constant return to the source and original spirit — it is exactly the same. "Institutes should promote among

their members an adequate knowledge of the social conditions of the times they live in and of the needs of the Church," *Perfectae Caritatis* says.

What is ours to do, then, is always to read the signs of the times and meet the needs of the age.

Advertisement

My thought experiment leads me to believe that the church does not need large numbers of vowed women to teach and nurse or even to be principals or chief executive officers of nonprofit organizations. Social and ecclesial conditions have changed, and there are others better poised and prepared to do these important things. We are also no longer needed to prepare the laity for ministry, but rather to work with and alongside them.

We are being called into the next evolution of the dynamic relationship of mutuality outlined in *Lumen Gentium*:

> Let no one think that religious have become strangers to their [brothers and sisters] or useless citizens of this earthly city by their consecration. For even though it sometimes happens that religious do not directly mingle with their contemporaries, yet in a more profound sense these same religious are united with them in the heart of Christ and spiritually cooperate with them .

As we reimagine religious life during this change of era, we are graced to realize again that we are not set apart. Yet we do have a unique call framed by the strength of our common life, the depth of our spiritual tradition and the freedom of our vows. We are called, even in our own vulnerability, to be humbly present to the vulnerabilities of those on the margins. How might the Holy Spirit be calling us to synodality, to journey with the people of God, as people vowed to the Gospel?

The closing call of *Perfectate Caritatis* still rings true today:

> Religious institutes, for whom these norms of adaptation and renewal have been laid down, should respond generously to the specific vocation God gave them as well as their work in the Church today. … Let all

religious, therefore, rooted in faith and filled with love for God and neighbor, love of the cross and the hope of future glory, spread the good news of Christ throughout the whole world so that their witness may be seen by all …

Amen.