News
Religious Life



(Unsplash/Jake Weirick)

by The Life Panelists

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Religious life is full of lessons that shape and transform us over time. Along the way, some lessons come easily, while others take time to unfold. Looking back, there are always insights we wish we had known sooner.

This month, we asked our panelists: *What is something you have learned in your religious life that you wished you had learned sooner?*

These reflections offer insights into the lessons that have shaped the vocations of these sisters and continue to inspire their journeys.



Anne Henson has been a Presentation Sister in the Lismore Congregation in Australia for 74 years. During this time, she has served as a secondary school teacher, adult faith educator, and spiritual carer in a residential aged care facility. Now living in a retirement community, she contributes a monthly column to the community newsletter and remains committed to being an attentive listener to family, friends and neighbors.

When I entered the novitiate in 1948, the Presentation congregation (Sisters of the Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary) was categorized as an apostolic religious institute. This meant that while we taught in schools, the community was strictly enclosed. We left our convents only to go to the parish church or to teach in schools. Contact with family was strictly limited to monthly visits. An appointment with the

dentist was quite an outing!

Novitiate formation aimed at separating us from the wicked world. Worldliness, as opposed to religion and spirituality, was considered a category one fault.



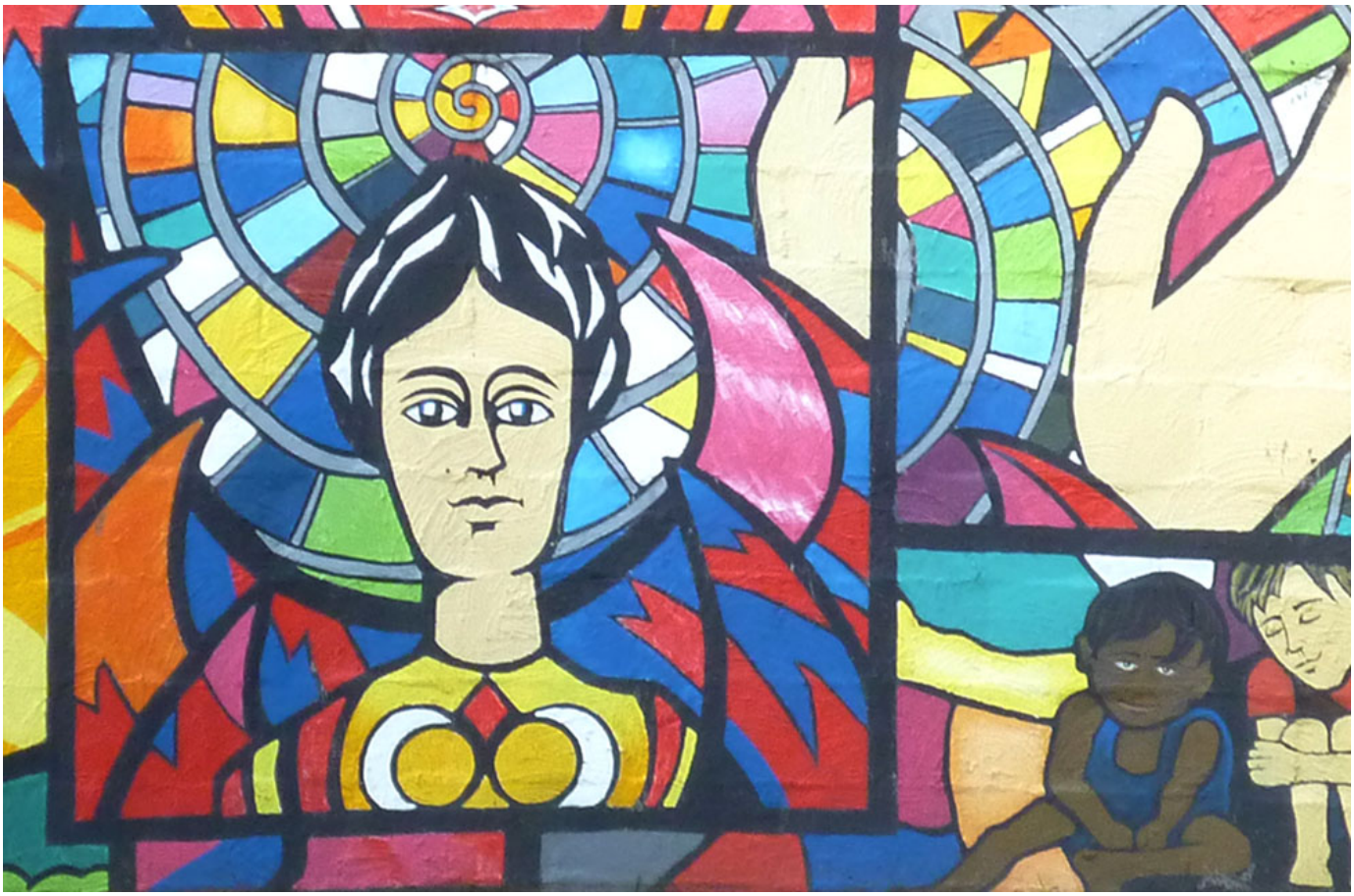
Pope John XXIII leads the opening session of the Second Vatican Council in St. Peter's Basilica at the Vatican Oct. 11, 1962. A total of 2,540 cardinals, patriarchs, archbishops and bishops from around the world attended the opening session. (CNS/Catholic Press Photo/Giancarlo Giuliani)

Then came Vatican II, and, thank God, we sisters responded to the call for renewal. We attended seminars and had access to books by emerging theologians and spiritual writers. We studied the documents of Vatican II — *Lumen Gentium* ("Dogmatic Constitution on the Church"), *Gaudium et Spes* ("Pastoral Constitution on The Church in the Modern World"), and *Perfectae Caritatis* ("Decree on the Apostolic Renewal of Religious Life") — which brought about a reformation in religious life.

I remember it being said that founders of religious congregations must have rejoiced in heaven knowing that their call to minister in the community, especially to the poor and marginalized, was being realized in the renewal of the church and its relevance in the modern world.

Our foundress, Nano Nagle, had established her small community to minister to the poor in the slums of Cork, Ireland. After her death, enclosure was imposed on the group as a condition for recognition as a religious congregation. This completely thwarted Nagle's vision of service within the community.

After Vatican II, we rejoiced knowing the church was no longer merely a disciplinary, controlling structure, but God's holy people. Teaching my students was about God's loving kindness, not the fear of God.



A mural depicts Sr. Nano Nagle, foundress of the Sisters of the Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary, at St. Edward the Confessor Catholic School in Daisy Hill, Australia. (Wikimedia Commons/Daniellecart1)

A book that has greatly influenced my life is Avery Dulles' *Models of the Church*. Understanding the church as Communion, Sacrament, Herald, Disciple, and Servant is far more inspiring and inclusive than viewing the church solely as an institution. At the same time, spirituality was taking precedence over mere piety in our daily lives and community prayer. Establishing right relationships with God, self, others, all of creation, and the times in which we live was life-giving.

Fast forward to Pope Francis' *Laudato Si*' and its message of the interconnectedness of all of God's creation. I now believe that I am called to immerse myself in caring for the Earth and respecting all of God's creatures, both human and nonhuman. There is a spirituality of connection with the world rather than separation from it.

I wish I had known all this when I entered the novitiate in 1948.

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>
> —Sr. Anne Henson
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Anthonia O. Uche, a Nigerian, is a member of the Congregation of the Handmaids of the Holy Child Jesus. With a strong academic background in education, languages, refugee studies and psycho-spiritual counseling, she lives and works in Nigeria. Her diverse ministry experience includes roles as a French teacher, school administrator at both primary and secondary levels, and university lecturer. Currently, she serves as a counselor at Veritas University in Abuja. She is also involved in parish ministry and women's rights advocacy, and has served on a provincial leadership team within her congregation.

Religious life comprises various interrelated components, such as formation (initial and ongoing), spiritual life, apostolic ministry, governance and community life. Among these, living closely with others in community — adjusting to different temperaments and embracing shared responsibilities — was, for me, quite challenging at first. There is no foolproof manual on human nature to refer to. But over time, I have come to appreciate the growth that comes with this adventure of learning to walk together, sharing our joys and struggles, and lifting one another up in prayer. We have become a unique kind of family — not born of biological kinship, but of faith. The power of this sisterhood is profound.

Does Ecclesiastes 4:9-10 not state, "Two are better than one. ... If either of them falls down, one can help the other up"? And Proverbs 18:19, "A [sister] helped by a [sister] is a fortified city"? The experience, more satisfying than any passing pleasure, is better lived than described.



Sr. Anthonia Uche, fourth person from the right, celebrates the birthday of a community member Nov. 2, 2024, in Abuja, Nigeria. (Courtesy of Antonia Uche)

What brought about the transformation? Some amount of docility, definitely, and perhaps a growing understanding of human nature. The realization that each person is unique and must be received with respect, acceptance, love and empathy. Forgiveness given and received. Along with a dose of self-discipline and humor. Openness to the beauty and immense good often hidden in each person, with perfectionism and intolerant prejudice set aside. All of this goes hand in hand with, yes, a certain reverence, as we believe each one to be *imago Dei* incarnate.

That is what I wish I had learned earlier: the realization that everyone is an incarnation of God's image — a true gift to be welcomed and treasured in every encounter. Living my life with this conviction, rather than mere intellectual assent, I have come close to understanding the secret passionately lived by the saints, who made the love and service of God, present in others, their life's mission. To recognize every encounter with another person as an encounter with the living God in disguise requires an act of faith.

With this truth — hidden in plain sight — experientially unveiled (to me, at least), does Jean-Paul Sartre's famous dictum, "Hell is other people," still hold? While his statement acknowledges the conflicts inherent in human relationships, it captures only half the truth. For concealed within — or just beyond — the conflict is the beauty and giftedness of each person, waiting to be discovered and savored in an unending banquet of true life, astonishing in its variety and blessedness.



Betty A. Harbison is a newly professed member of the Sisters of Social Service of Los Angeles, a convert to Catholicism, and a retired 38-year veteran English teacher, writer, singer and artist. She holds a bachelor's degree in English and a Master of Science in Education from the University of Southern California. She now serves as an education specialist at a shelter for battered and homeless women and their families. She fully embraces the challenge and blessing of working with children and adults in

an ever-changing environment. She listens attentively to both parents and children, helping them pursue academic goals and personal excellence, while offering guidance for a fresh start and support in their educational journeys.

Would I have been ready to learn sooner? Probably not. There are so many things I thought I knew but have since discovered I barely had an inkling. For example, I knew religious life would begin an adventure; however, I had no idea it would be a never-ending, ever-expanding one!

Most of my secondary teaching career was spent in a high school that once documented 47 home languages. Before stepping into the classroom, we received training emphasizing cultural sensitivity and inclusion. Yet, I never would have guessed that entering the Los Angeles district of the Sisters of Social Service, much less diverse, could afford me the opportunity to develop deep relationships with Sisters of Social Service near and far, in Mexico, Namibia, the Philippines, Taiwan, and across most of our federation — in Buffalo, New York; Cuba; Hungary; Romania; and Slovakia.



Pope Francis prays with a group of Sisters of Social Service in the library of the Apostolic Palace at the Vatican Jan. 20, 2023, to mark the 100th anniversary of the founding of the order. (CNS/Vatican Media)

As an African American, I grew up with the notion of "ambassadorship," to be a representative for family, ethnicity and Christianity, something that remained at the forefront of my understanding when I entered religious life. However, from the blessing of opportunities to interact regularly with our sisters from around the world, in person and via 21st-century technology, my understanding of "ambassadorship" continued to expand, with its responsibilities and benefits growing exponentially.

Yes, as one of only four African American Sisters in our local society's history and the only one in formation in four decades, I *knew* I had a diplomatic responsibility to share African American culture and concerns with my religious sisters, most of whom had come from the dominant culture.

Yes, I *knew* members of the African American community, Catholic and Protestant alike, rallied to see a new religious from among my people "make it" from entrance through first profession. This role as an ambassador was reaffirmed whenever people proudly introduced me, especially to young people, or quietly pulled me aside to share their insurmountable obstacles in pursuing religious vocations.

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Yes, I *knew* when we gathered as global Sisters of Social Service in Hungary and Romania and our Los Angeles formation group was sent to celebrate the centennial jubilee in Europe, "ambassadorship" would mean augmenting layers to the descriptors of "American" and "African American."

Little did I know how life-changing that event would be! I met and lived with multinational leadership, temporary professed sisters, and novices — gaining

"elders" and "peers" and forever bonding as family. True sister "cousins," "aunts," "great-aunts," and even "grandmothers" welcomed this ambassador "home" — everywhere! Conversational "How are you?" evolved into relational "We're proud … ," "How may I help?" and "How may we pray?"

I never could have guessed the profound truth of Jesus' words now experienced in my religious life: "And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or lands for the sake of my name will receive a hundred times more" (Matthew 19:29).

So grateful for God's gift!



Pulane Makepe, a Sister of the Cross and Passion, made her perpetual profession of vows in June 2024. She is currently appointed to steward community affairs while living in an intergenerational community in Botswana. In addition to her community responsibilities, she is actively involved in ministry at the local parish and collaborates with other women religious and laypeople to address climate change issues. She also serves as the Botswana facilitator for a continent-wide project focused on the renewal of religious life for African women religious.

"*What is something you have learned in your religious life that you wished you had learned sooner?*"

I learned to be more open to embracing myself as I was, particularly in moments of discernment about my life circumstances, exactly as they were. This was especially true during times of transition within community, ministry or formation experiences. This openness led to greater acceptance of change, challenges, successes and, occasionally, unexpected pleasant surprises. I came to appreciate the gift of adaptability and flexibility in moments that called for actions challenging my perceptions of what it meant to live my commitment in different contexts and cultures — situations I had once considered hypothetical rather than realities I would

actually face.

When our sisters share their views during wider online gatherings on various discussion topics, I have become more aware of a sense of freedom, even while living with varying degrees of uncertainty. This uncertainty may relate to the future, perceived injustices in different parts of the world, or even our struggles with the health of our minds, bodies and souls.



(Unsplash/Alex Shute)

When I remain open to discernment in the present moment and accept what arises within myself and others, I find greater freedom in holding that space for one another. Learning this has also helped me listen more attentively in ministry and at work. I have adapted to listening not with the intent to immediately solve or resolve, but to truly hear before responding.

I was reminded of Scripture: "My grace is sufficient for you" (2 Corinthians 12:9) and "Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself.

Each day has enough trouble of its own" (Matthew 6:34). These words helped me understand that grace carries me — and carries others — through many of life's situations. This was especially true in circumstances beyond my control, such as the heavy rains that led to destructive flooding in parts of my country. Rather than feeling hopeless, I was moved to offer encouragement, donate and pray with and for those rebuilding their lives.

May God continue to walk with us and be gracious to us in our discernment throughout our lives.

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Theresa Keller has been a Franciscan Sister of Perpetual Adoration for 45 years. She holds a Doctor of Nursing degree from Rush University and a Master of Public Affairs degree from the University of Minnesota's Humphrey School. A dedicated U.S. Public Health Service provider, she has served in federally qualified community health clinics across rural Missouri, Iowa and Minnesota. Her career spans nursing education, administration and primary care, with a passion for mentoring. Currently, she works in community organizing for justice and peace and is a core member of Gamaliel's Nun Caucus.

When I read the topic "*What is something you have learned in your religious life that you wished you had learned sooner?*" my thoughts quickly turned to Robert Fulghum's book, *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*. My novitiate training (1977–79) could have been titled *All I Needed to Know About Religious Life I Learned in Novitiate*.



(Unsplash/Jon Tyson)

I entered religious life during a time of diminishing vocations in the 1970s, which led to the formation of small community groups or common novitiates. Within my novitiate circle were 10 sisters of various ages. We shared common meals and prayer time. The two novices received instruction from the director on charism, social justice and religious life. After making my first vows, I packed my bag with my learnings and headed out on mission.

Novitiate prepared me well, but it also left some gaps. I do not regret those learning gaps, as I firmly believe that the teacher appears when the student is ready. In the 1990s, as a graduate student, I encountered a new learning experience. At the end of class, when professors asked if anyone had questions, my hand often went up. One day, after answering my question, a professor followed up with, "Next time, ask a better question."

Reflecting now on the past 40-plus years, I wonder: Are women religious asking better questions? I learned that when I asked a client a better question, I received a

better answer. If I ask my community the same questions we asked in the 1970s, I will likely get responses reflective of that time. I do wish I had learned earlier in religious life to ask better questions.

This story appears in the **The Life** feature series. View the full series.