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Second Annual Survey on Trends in Catholic Religious Vocations

Sixty-two percent jump in inquiries into Catholic religious life

30 percent increase in number of people in first stages of formation

Chicago, February 26, 2008—Catholic religious communities reported on average a 30 percent increase this past year in the number of individuals in initial formation—the period before final vows. In addition, 62 percent of participating communities reported an increase in vocation inquiries in the past year.

The positive trends in religious vocations detected last year continue, according to the VocationMatch.com Second Annual Survey on Trends in Religious Vocation, sponsored by Vision Vocation Guide, published by TrueQuest Communications of Chicago on behalf of the National Religious Vocation Conference.

The majority of those who are considering religious life are under 30 and quite serious about choosing religious life—about one in five plan on entering a religious community in the next year, while another 64 percent are "seriously considering it."

Back in the habit—for women and men

Echoing the countercultural appeal of religious life to younger Catholics, it appears that many discerners are looking for more obvious outward expressions of their commitment to religious life. Vocation directors—both men and women—commented on an increased interest among inquirers in wearing a habit or traditional religious garb.

Not surprisingly, those discerning the call to religious life also consider essential or very important: praying in community and devotional prayer (73 percent each); living in community (67 percent); peace and justice outreach (66 percent); and above all living a life of faithfulness to the church and its teachings, which was ranked as very important or essential by 90 percent of discerners.

Personal contact—real and virtual—essential

Personal contact with a religious priest, sister, or brother continues to be the most helpful source of vocation information, considered essential or very important by 82 percent of discerners. Ranking next in importance is a community's website, with more than 70 percent rating it important or very important in gathering information about a community. In what will surely be a growing trend in our YouTube culture, several discerners even remarked on the helpfulness of videos on vocation websites. "Come and See" weekends and discernment retreats followed a close third in order of importance. Spiritual directors and vocation-related websites also ranked high in importance with more than 60 percent saying they found these resources very helpful.

It takes prayer

Prayer is far and away the most important discernment tool used by inquirers, with 97 percent ranking it as essential or very important to making a decision about their vocation. At the same time, discerners see the "discipline of prayer" as the most challenging aspect of religious life, followed by the vow of celibacy and a life of service. In what will be good news to aging communities, "living with people who are not my age" was ranked least important by discerners.

"It's nice to have women in their early 20s inquiring about our community," commented one vocation director. A male vocation director concurred, saying he was most surprised by "the increase in inquiries from younger men, i.e., 18-22 years old." Another vocation director added that discerners seem to be "younger in age, yet quite clear in what they are looking for and what they have to offer."

Surprised by joy—and diversity

When discerners were asked what most surprised them about their exploration of religious life, the "diversity of communities and spiritualities" ranked high as well as the "great joy" found among religious men and women. But for some, what is most surprising is that they are even considering a religious vocation at all: "As time goes by," said one young man, "it seems more and more likely that it is for me. A year ago would have laughed if someone had suggested that I enter into religious life."

While it's true that 53 percent of religious inquirers responding to the survey were under 30 years of age, a healthy 36 percent of them were over 40, 20 percent over 50. One respondent was pleasantly surprised to learn that, "At age 54 it is still possible to live your life for God." "My lifelong dream may finally be coming true," added another.

In what may speak to a dearth of positive images of religious life in the wider culture, many discerners commented on how "normal" and "human" and "ordinary" those in religious life seemed.

Good news for the life of the church

The fact that discerners are finding opportunities to view realistic portraits of those in religious life is good news, says Patrice Tuohy, executive editor of VISION Vocation Guide and VocationMatch.com. "Religious vocation as a life choice has been off the radar screen for too long. What this crop of discerners is finding is that the option of life as a brother, sister, or priest may be the one that satisfies their hearts desire above all else."

For Brother Paul Bednarczyk, C.S.C., executive director of the National Religious Vocation Conference, through which VISION Vocation Guide is published, the most promising trend is the increased numbers entering religious life. "The fact that we are seeing an increase, not just in inquirers but in those in initial formation, is very encouraging. The church has commissioned the faithful to create a culture of discernment, and it seems we are beginning to see the fruits of our labor. This is very good news for the future of consecrated life and the life of the church."