



*Inlaid into the hearts of all young people
is a desire for greatness*

RELIGIOUS VOCATIONS IN THE THIRD MILLENNIUM – AFRESH!

Updated for Second Volume

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Our world today is one of fast-paced change. All the change around us leads to change within us, and we are seeing new generations rise up quickly. The term *generation* today, as in the past, points to a group of persons distinguished from others by differences in upbringing and formational experiences; and yet, where earlier generations related to preceding generations as children to parents, recent generations—Millennials and iGens—relate to their elders more as younger siblings to older siblings.

This fast-paced change means that, within each group entering religious life today, there may be a variety of “typical” previous life experiences that will influence both how young

women discern their vocations and what formation they will need once they enter a convent. What follows is an updated version of the introductory chapter of the 2017 volume of this book, seeking to describe afresh the generational situation in which we find ourselves in 2021.

THE DESIRE FOR GREATNESS OF THE YOUNG

Letters from the Heart

“I’ve felt an inclination toward religious life since high school, but I did my best to try to bury that idea while I was away at college, hoping that it might just go away so I could proceed with the ‘normal life’ that my friends and family insisted should satisfy me. In an effort to find that satisfaction, I returned to school to study law... I don’t think that I am suffering from any lack of courage, but I am lacking someplace to test that courage. I think my greatest fear is in saying ‘no’ to what may be an invitation from God to ‘come and see’. I don’t want to get down the road, into my forties or fifties and then begin to wonder ‘what if’. What if I had accepted that invitation? Could spending my life for God, in the service of others, be that missing ‘something’ which I can’t quite find now? I really need to find out.”

A Hopeful Discerner

I smiled on that cold November morning when I opened my mail and read, in a rather long and detailed letter, the above words. Written by a twenty-seven-year-old lawyer who is practicing her profession in her father’s law firm in upstate New York, this young woman is not that different from the young man

of the Gospel who approached Our Lord one fine day, almost two thousand years ago, and asked what more he could do for God. For inlaid into the hearts of all young people is a desire for greatness; and once a heart is turned toward God, no one can guess the height and depth and breadth of an individual's magnanimous spirit.

As I read this letter further, I began to hear my own irrepressible laughter. With obvious literary talent, this professional woman described her appearance one recent morning when she had approached her father to inform him she had found a relentless lover who had, indeed, been pursuing her for quite some time. "A heavy date last night, eh?" questioned her solicitous but clever father as he studied his now obviously red-eyed daughter. Equal to the match, the young woman replied, "You can certainly say that, Dad, and he is not anyone you would suspect. But you need to know, Dad, that marrying him is going to necessitate for me a change of employment."¹

The above reflections on this young lawyer's penned interest in a possible religious vocation were published in *Lay Witness* magazine in March 2001. I was Vocation Directress of our then only three-year-old community, and the many vocations we were receiving offered hope that the tide of disappearing religious women and decreasing priestly vocations was turning. Pope Saint John Paul II's call for the New Evangelization, his summons to "open wide the doors to Christ", and the electrified energy that sparked across the globe after each World Youth Day, resulted in many young people diving into an authentic search for their vocations with a burning desire to fulfill the Divine Will.

The 2001-published article continues:

As the vocation directress for our three-year-old religious community, the Dominican Sisters of Mary, Mother of the Eucharist, located in the university city of Ann Arbor, Michigan, I can say that such messages are

ever-increasing in number and conviction. Young women across our country and beyond are valiant in their attempts to find God's will and to embrace it with all the love of their vibrant hearts. There seem to be no barriers that keep them from fulfilling their quest. Age, education, talents, family backgrounds, circles of friends and acquaintances, and their own religious history of fidelity or conversion, young people today are radiating the fire of the Spirit of Truth and blazing excellent trails that seem to be keeping all those who first forged the way in a steady run! My personal theory is that the ranks of religious life (and of the priesthood) were so depleted in the 60s, 70s, and 80s that many vacuums were left in vitally important areas of both the contemplative and the apostolic lives. It has been the new growth arising from the "springtime" predicted and, in large measure, planted and watered by the holiness of our Supreme Pontiff, Pope John Paul II, that is filling these gaps with an influx of priestly and religious vocations whose origins do not always fit the stereotypical vocation prospects of earlier years.

Twenty years later, much of this graced spirit remains, but it must now compete with radical societal and cultural changes. Vocation has always been a challenge: though some souls' road to sanctity is unusually clear to them—due to the richness of their graces and their ability to rise above the currents of society—generally speaking, most young people find it difficult to discover their unique personal dignity, talents, weaknesses, and ultimately, their God-given vocation. And this is especially true today. Self-knowledge is essential for authentic vocational discernment.

What are some of the differences between today's world and the world which crossed into the Third Millennium, and how might these differences affect authentic vocational discernment?

GENERATION GAP

Based on the year you were born, you may be written off as someone who is technologically inept, cynical, unmotivated, or entitled, along with a slew of other negative traits.² Meanwhile, you may view yourself as someone with a strong work ethic, as self-sufficient, a collaborator, or compassionate and determined.³ While some may make sweeping generalizations, leaving you wanting to shout, “I’m not like that”—and perhaps you are not—nevertheless, the stereotypes persist, and the truth may lie somewhere in the middle. Your self-image as a Baby Boomer, Gen Xer, Millennial, or iGen (also called Gen Z) may greatly differ from the image wider society has of your generation. Generational perspective will influence both a young woman’s

vocational discernment process and the formational experiences she will need to embrace God’s call fully.

Baby Boomer:

Born between 1946-1964

Gen X:

Born between 1965-1980

Millennial:

Born between 1981-1996

iGen or Gen Z:

Born between 1997-2021

Pew Research, “Defining generations: Where Millennials end and Generation Z begins”, dated January 17, 2019

MILLENNIAL MUSINGS

Amanda just graduated *summa cum laude* from an Ivy League university. Laurie is a successful businesswoman living in a smart condominium in the city and working hard to pay off student debts. Maria is a nurse but has never felt fully satisfied with her work and cannot understand why. Caroline is a senior in high school, passionate about life and certain God has a plan for her future. What do they all have in common? Each young adult is planning to join a religious community and make vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience.

Who is this generation of Sisters? Where do they come from? What challenges do they face as they strive to give themselves more fully to God?

In 1965, religious life in the USA reached its peak, with the largest number of Sisters serving Christ and the nation. As of April 25, 2016, Millennials (born between 1980 and 1994) officially surpassed the previous largest generation of Americans, the Baby Boomers (born between 1946 and 1964). A comparison of these two generations and what they brought to their vocations proves fascinating.

The Baby Boomers filled their roles in society as loyal members of political parties, proud supporters of the military, defenders of traditional marriage, and active participants in religion. However, one glance at our world today reveals a marked contrast in young people. Today's Millennials are wary of authority; they distance themselves from established institutions, both religious and secular. Sixty-eight percent of Millennials have never been married, and those who do marry tend to wait until later in life. In the 1960s, for example, the average American woman married at age twenty-one and the average man at twenty-three. But in 2018, the average woman married at age twenty-seven and the average man at age twenty-nine.⁴ Among the Baby Boomers, only seven percent of women completed their bachelor degrees as young adults, while today Millennial women with degrees actually outnumber their male counterparts. In the 60s, the majority of women were not in the labor force; now, the majority are, and among the women not working, twenty-two percent cite school as their main reason for not holding a job.⁵ Baby Boomers had the difficult task of trying to understand developing technology; Millennials (as well as iGens) grew up with computers, iPads, and personal phones. Today, over three quarters of their generation has a profile on a social networking site.

Among the challenges, women seem to mature more slowly

today and fear making a life-long commitment. To many young adults, the options are limitless, and narrowing the possibilities to a single vocation can seem daunting. For example, when a Vocation Directress asks a young woman in her late twenties to describe her plans for the future, it is not uncommon for her to hear a vague, uncommitted “I have no idea. Maybe I will get another degree.” The desire to settle down and to give one’s heart fully to another simply is not a priority.

In the past, a Novice Mistress could assume her charges knew the faith and came from homes where religion was practiced. Today, the young women entering need a full course in the Catechism. Their love for the Church and knowledge of essential doctrines often develop mostly after they have entered a religious community.

Still another challenge is that many young women discern their vocation after pursuing numerous other options. By the time they open themselves to God’s call, they are burdened with college debts and few resources to pay off student loans.

The number of women considering a religious vocation has dropped significantly. Those who do consider a vocation are seen as unusual by their peers. Women tend to face opposition from friends and family when they announce their plans to join a religious community.

ENTERING iGENS

While some of the women entering religious life today are Millennials, younger members are from the iGen or Gen Z generation, those born after 1994. What additional challenges and gifts does this new generation bring to their religious vocations?

Generational experts, professionals who claim to understand “the differences between [the generations] and how they can live, and most importantly, work together successfully,”⁶ seem

to agree that iGens or Gen Zers are somewhat overprotected and pampered by their parents. This atmosphere creates a culture of young adults who are able to do all the right things, usually out of fear of disappointing Mom and Dad: to check off the list of requirements needed to get into the college Mom and Dad expect them to attend, to strive to follow rules and to meet the expectations others have of them. At the same time, however, iGens view themselves, according to studies, as possessing “high levels of leadership skills”, although they desire safety and are anxious about venturing out without Mom and Dad. According to Julie Lythcott-Haims, author of *How to Raise an Adult*, those born after 1994 are going to post-secondary schools with Mom and Dad in their pockets—that is, always only a text message away, ready to advise their child regarding the next step that should be taken.⁷

While Generation Z believes they are “independent, self-confident and autonomous,”⁸ studies show that eighteen- and nineteen-year-olds act more like they are high school sophomores who still look to their parents for assistance.⁹ iGens are less likely than preceding generations to have drivers’ licenses, to obtain jobs, and to hang out with their friends away from Mom and Dad.¹⁰ This may actually prevent them from attaining the individuality they perceive that they already possess. Driving a vehicle, holding a job, and being trusted by one’s elders long enough to be without them demands that one make decisions—not simply follow rules—and develop the virtues necessary for true independence.

TODAY’S CHALLENGES ARE JUST THAT!

What does all this mean for the current generation of Sisters? For both Millennials and iGens entering religious life today, there are both challenges and reasons for hope. First off, let us tackle one of the strongest forces shaping young people today: technology.

Today's teens and even those in their twenties have never known a life without technology. It has been an integral part of their existence, and they have taken to it like ducks to water, assisting their parents in their struggles even to program a VCR. Teens can figure out manuals far more quickly than their parents, and they are fearless about experimenting with such gadgets. Personal free time often finds them on their mobile devices, which seem to them as extensions of their bodies and their lives, offering them a whole playground of endless excitement.

While this staying-plugged-in carries with it a host of problems, which can only be alluded to here, we might look at a few of the more serious effects regarding vocational discernment.

1) *Acedia*

In *The Seven Deadly Sins Today*, Henry Fairlie describes *acedia* as “a morbid inertia” that can totally shut down a person’s life because he or she long ago stopped believing that life might involve something more, something better, something of such consummate goodness that it demands the utmost devotion!¹¹ The extreme “busy-ness” to which mobile devices entice young people leads them from one titillating triviality to the next and numbs their interior moral sensibility. Because they are stimulated, active, and entertained, they do not recognize how empty and meaningless their lives have oftentimes become. Moreover, on the occasions that an inkling of such does break into their consciousness, they simply run out to buy the latest game or gadget to fill the interior void.

According to the Online Medical Dictionary, *acedia* results in “a mental syndrome, the chief features of which are listlessness, carelessness, apathy, and

“Restore to me the
gladness of your
salvation; uphold me
with a willing spirit.”
-Psalm 51:12

melancholia.”¹² Kathleen Norris, poet and nonfiction author, in her book *Acedia & Me*, explains the difference between acedia and depression: “Depression is an illness treatable by counseling and medication; acedia is a vice that is best countered by spiritual practice and the discipline of prayer.”¹³ Carrisa Smith characterizes Norris’ thought thus: “[T]he one sin of acedia is responsible for many of the ills of our high-tech, breakneck-paced, yet apathetic, contemporary world. ... In other words, the couch potato and the over-achiever may be suffering from the same problem, which ultimately boils down to the refusal to engage fully with life in the present moment.”¹⁴ How so? The over-achiever may also be compensating for interior emptiness but by the alternative means of frenzied, external activity.

2) Privacy issues

As one retreat priest phrased it for our Sisters, we all carry different baggage resulting from Original Sin. A young person with a healthy self-image, a good family life and thus a support system, and an accurate moral compass will know in whom to confide her insecurities and from whom to seek wise counsel in navigating friendships and the world today. However, one not so blessed or spiritually attentive may entrust such confidences to networking sites that can be hacked or may simply be open to public viewing. Later, if this individual seeks entrance into a novitiate or a seminary, these unguarded statements inevitably become part of the process of evaluation for admission.

3) Lack of social skills

Smartphones have carried Millennials and iGens into a mesmerizing world of instant interactions and information and thus a constant search for updates. A group of friends could be sitting together in silence because everyone is busy on a Twitter or Facebook page. Such communication is anything but social. Children do not know how to handle face-to-face

conflict because so many of their interactions occur through technology.¹⁵ Millennials and Gen-Zers, having been raised on technology, are manifesting yet another, newer symptom: the lack of rudimentary skills necessary for the real world. Can you imagine a vocational candidate using texting lingo on an application, or not knowing the basic social skills needed for healthy communication in an interview? Such problems are worrisome and yet common in today's young people.¹⁶

4) *Lack of academic skills*

Research from The Kaiser Family Foundation shows that students often juggle homework with entertainment. Over half of Millennial students from ages eight to eighteen were using the internet, watching TV, or using some other form of media either “most” (31 percent) or “some” (25 percent) of the time that they were doing homework.¹⁷

As early as 2000, the *New York Times* showed concern about digital distraction. In his article, “Growing Up Digital”, Matt Richtel describes an intelligent young man entering his senior year of high school without having completed his summer reading. The student's explanation: “On YouTube, you can get a whole story in six minutes. ... A book takes so long. I prefer the immediate gratification.”¹⁸ Scientifically, this raises the concern of a generation of young people whose brains will be wired differently, resulting in an incapacity to stay on a thought more than a few seconds. Neuroscientists are presently studying what happens to the brains of young people who are constantly online.¹⁹ Connected with these concerns are the questions raised by the increasing number of schools that rely on internet access and mobile devices inside the classroom. In the end, we might say that technology has created on campuses a new set of social types—not the thespian and the jock but the texter, the gamer, the Facebook addict, and the YouTube potato.

5) Lack of basic life skills and maturity

Generation Z has also been found to mature at a slower rate than previous generations. Jean Twenge, a generational expert teaching at San Diego State University, has found that, at the end of high school, [iGens] act more like 15-year-olds, who are not ready to be independent adults and feel they still need help from their parents. iGen are arriving at college with less experience with independence, so many are not ready to be on their own and thus rely on their parents.²⁰

Universities and colleges are struggling to meet the needs of their freshman classes. Julie Lythcott-Haims, Harvard's former Dean of Freshmen, suggests that parents do not think their children can "be successful unless they are protecting and preventing at every turn."²¹ Lythcott-Haims opines that parental fears of children being abducted, the tendency to give every child a trophy for showing up, and the emergence of the play-date have created a generation of young adults who lack basic life-skills.

Young people are showing up to college or entering the workforce with few of the necessary life skills. Since Mom and Dad have always been there, students do not know how to ask for help. Parents are accompanying their child to job interviews and calling their child's boss because they feel their child is working too hard. When their son or daughter is not achieving the results of which they think them capable, parents scold teachers, principals, and coaches. The result is a generation of young adults who are unable to live independently, make decisions, or stand up for themselves.²² Lythcott-Haims notes that colleges and universities "nationwide [have noticed a] steady decline in the number of [iGen'ers] who seem capable of going out into the world as adults."²³ She proposes that parents, in trying to create a safe environment for their children to succeed, have actually done them a huge disservice.

AND AS FOR HOPE...

Today, despite increasing cyberspace dependency and the collapse of many traditions, some young people continue to base their whole lives on the love of God. Saint Bernard once wrote in his treatise *De amore Dei*, “The measure with which to love God is to love without measure.” In the words of Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI, “To live no longer for ourselves but for Christ: this is what gives full meaning to the life of those who let themselves be conquered by Him.”²⁴ Seminaries and convents remain God’s citadels, strongholds where all people may find Him more easily, wherein the Heart of Jesus tenderly keeps watch. And yes, such truths are most appealing to young people who, by nature and by God’s mercy, are idealistic and desirous of greatness. Witness the phenomenon of World Youth Days (WYDs), now with a history of over thirty years! Millions of youth have decided to brave monumental challenges, live through sacrificial pilgrimages, and sleep on wet, muddy ground surrounded by millions of other youths from around the world, all with the hope of catching a quick glimpse of the Holy Father and of hearing a message that expands their hearts to heroic dimensions! During his Mass at the 2016 WYD Poland, Pope Francis slipped in a warm greeting to the people of Brazil that seems to apply to all the estimated 3.6 million pilgrims in Krakow’s Blonia Park: “I hope that this will be an opportunity to overcome difficult moments and commit ... to working as a

“To live no longer for ourselves but for Christ: this is what gives full meaning to the life of those who let themselves be conquered by Him.” -Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI

team to build a more just and safe country [world], betting all on a future full of hope and joy.”²⁵ The effects of the Holy Father’s presence and message will endure as WYDs stake claim to a permanent place in the hearts of the youth. Why? Because young people were

made to take risks, to display courage, to nurture the world to better things—and all this with the virtue that belongs foremost to youth: hope!

Perhaps the best way to express this hope is by reversing the negatives outlined previously with possible positives.

1) Acedia

Saint Thomas Aquinas's teaching on acedia complements his prior teaching on charity's gifted "spiritual joy," to which acedia is directly opposed. As Aquinas says, "One opposite is known through the other, as darkness through light. Hence what evil is must be known from the nature of good" (*Summa Theologiae*, I, 48, 1).

After World War II, psychologists tried to explain how so many ordinary citizens acquiesced to fascism. The results of their research appear in the 1950 classic *The Authoritarian Personality* by T.W. Adorno.²⁶ In 1998, University of Pennsylvania psychologist Martin Seligman, in his presidential address to the American Psychological Association, urged psychology to "turn toward understanding and building [up] human strengths."²⁷ Seligman's teaching would earn him the title of the world's leading scholar on optimism. Labs changed their focus to study generosity, courage, creativity, and laughter. In 1999, the late Philip J. Stone, professor of psychology at Harvard, taught a positive psychology course to twenty undergraduates. Today there are more than two hundred such courses across the United States, with the University of Pennsylvania offering a master's degree in the field. Obviously, the answer to despair and acedia is found in a positive psychology. But this fact was elucidated many centuries earlier by the great Saint Thomas Aquinas.

"Be not afraid!
Open wide the doors to Christ!"
—Pope Saint John Paul II

The Angelic Doctor, in a superb text from the *Summa contra gentiles* on the fittingness of the Incarnation, opens up for us new perspectives on action “in Christ” (IV, ch. 54). Countering man’s despair at the enormity of a vocation that he feels unable to achieve, the Incarnation of Christ offers a new principle of action that rescues man from the *taedium operandi* and allows

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him to open his heart once again to the gift of divine friendship. Christ, both true God and true man, achieves within himself in a singular way the union between Creator and creature that God desired, and the joy to which man is called if he will only open himself to the gift of divine friendship. Perhaps it is with this in mind that Pope Francis gave the world his 2013 Apostolic Exhortation entitled *Evangelii Gaudium* or “The Joy of the Gospel.” In his writing, *joy* is used 109 times, second only to *love*, which claims first place at 154 times.

Young people are seeking joy; they were made for it—we all are! Young women will notice religious Sisters who smile, whose laughter can be heard echoing through the halls of the schools or across the volleyball court in their students’ competitions. As one young woman said about her own discernment, “I could not stop staring in awe and wonder at the religious Sisters who truly took every step and action for Christ. Every action and smile that was given to those whom they were serving, came from giving themselves entirely as a bride of Christ.” Another young woman, after reading the 2017 edition of this book, said, “The joy of the Sisters shines through pages of this book just like it would in a personal encounter with one of them.”

Might this joy be the antidote to the anxiety and lack of interior freedom that cause today's young people to hide from others behind their iPhones and videogames? Perhaps we have failed to engage youth in pleasurable and instructive experiences which will lift them out of themselves and open their hearts not only to enjoying others but to enjoying God! Such joy is essential before any young woman will ever begin serious consideration of a religious vocation.

2) Privacy issues

Aquinas explains that, under the direction of infused faith, all the moral virtues facilitate the infusion by God of grace's light into a person's will and sensible appetites. Aquinas grants a special role to the virtue of prudence, which acts as a monitor for the other virtues. Without this monitor, youth rush rashly into activities, impelled by a disordered desire for acceptance at any price.

"Be shrewd as
serpents and simple
as doves."

-Matthew 10: 16

We look to the Angelic Doctor again for his explanation of this conundrum: "The truth of the practical intellect depends on conformity with a right appetite" (*Summa Theologiae*, Ia IIae, q.57, a.5 ad 3um). If youth lack moral training, they will never judge ill-advised actions as imprudent, including their sharing of private matters on the internet. These examples underscore the necessity of good moral training for young people. Parents more than ever must exemplify virtuous choices for their children. When this does not occur, religious Sisters may supply this necessary education with the joy, enthusiasm, and delightful freedom which rightfully accompany it.

It goes without saying that coupled with this education in virtue is a necessary education in self-control and inner discipline. If a young woman is serious about the sacramental

life and personal prayer, she will find not only an inner ability to open herself to God's will but also a desire to know and follow it.

3) *Lack of social skills*

Our teaching Sisters know that the best thing we can do for our students is to equip them spiritually for their place in the world. Few schools concern themselves not only with the academic and physical aspects of education but also with the virtuous life by which students will reach their full potential as children of God. Under the leadership of Sister John Dominic Rasmussen, OP, our religious community hopes to fill this gap through the *Disciple of Christ, Education in Virtue*® curriculum, which is being used throughout the country today in many dioceses.²⁸

*"Do to others as
you would have
them do to you."
-Luke 6:31*

By developing virtues such as magnanimity, courtesy, affability, docility, respect, sincerity, and loyalty, the young person learns the proper respect for the dignity of each human person, who reflects the image of the Creator.

As mentioned previously, a primary psychological motivation behind a person's hiding from others through the excessive use of technology is to escape the loneliness felt when faced with self. Pope Saint John Paul II addressed this topic at World Youth Day in Paris on August 23, 1997:

Remember that you are never alone, Christ is with you on your journey every day of your lives! He has called you and chosen you to live in the freedom of the children of God. Turn to him in prayer and in love. Ask him to grant you the courage and strength to live in this freedom always. Walk with him who is "the Way, the Truth and the Life"!

Pope Benedict XVI re-echoed these sentiments in his Apostolic Exhortation on the Eucharist, *Sacramentum Caritatis*, writing that it is only natural for people who participate in the Eucharist to be concerned about the dignity of all. Along with the Eucharist, a healthy and honest daily examination of conscience, along with sacramental confession every two weeks, gains one the self-knowledge needed to discern and pursue one's vocation.

As loneliness drives an increasing number of young people toward the internet, the Dominican Sisters of Mary have given great effort in the creation of learning tools, interesting stories of saints lives, theological programs and stimulating interviews on podcasts which can be enjoyed (and some selections printed out) on *goledigital.org*.

4) Lack of academic skills

Reading what follows, you may detect the Dominican in me as I continue to stress the essential value of the sacraments, the virtues and a good moral life—yes, this is very Dominican—and in particular the virtue of studiousness. In his *Summa*, Saint Thomas Aquinas defines studiousness as “the virtue which disposes a person to apply his mind for the purpose of acquiring and extending knowledge” (II-II. Q. 166.a 1). Interestingly, he links this virtue to the virtue of temperance, which moderates one's appetite to prevent excess in the use of material goods (II-II. Q. 166.a 2). Most young people have to fight the temptation toward distraction during mental work. To labor at study is hard work! Even the great Aquinas himself referred to his study as a “crucifixion at the desk”. Somewhat seriously, my Sisters often use the same phrase—and I certainly agree with them!

Honest efforts at study promote the acquisition of many necessary interior qualities. Study prepares us for prayer and can lead us into it. It readies the soul through the proper use of silence and develops the wisdom by which we draw forth deeper dimensions of truth needed for self-knowledge and a healthy

sense of self-worth. It also results in a workable knowledge of the world whereby the young person can read, think, do business, and find freedom in the realms of creativity and art.

5) Lack of basic life skills and maturity

While there are many concerns regarding Generation Z's level of maturity and ability to function independently, there is also much good that they bring and from which Baby Boomers, Gen Xers, and Millennials alike can learn. So much of our religious life is about community: we pray, eat, work, and recreate together. It is difficult to work with people who are unwilling, or perhaps unable, to collaborate with others. It is a great joy to live with Sisters from Generation Z, because they bring enthusiasm to all that they do; they love to get as many people involved as possible in their projects, overlooking the shortcomings of others and finding ways to include everyone. They are quick to listen to new ideas and to incorporate what they can, striving to bring creative solutions to differences of opinion and thereby integrating as many ideas as possible in any venture.

A Sister ("Sister Director") wanted to do something to help the Sisters relax during the mad dash to the end of the school year. Knowing the musical talent of her Sisters and how much they all love to be entertained, she asked Sister Superior if it would be possible to stage a musical for the Sisters—no easy task, to be sure! Sister Director ascertained who would be interested in participating in such an undertaking and, with curiosities piqued, began to pull music together and recruit help to re-write the words to popular songs from Disney movies. With encouraging notes posted—"All are Welcome!", "Come and Join the Fun!", and "Be a Part of the Chorus!"—the cast began to grow.

Not wanting to leave anyone out, Sister Director asked the older Sisters, "Do you want to be a part of the musical, or are

you more of an ‘audience-person’?” One Gen Xer, not wanting to leave the young Sister in a lurch if she needed extra people, replied, “Well, I am more of the audience-type, but if you really need someone...”

“No, no: we actually would love to have someone in the audience, so that would be great!” Both Sisters were, no doubt, relieved, yet at the same time felt happy about being inclusive and included! iGens are masters at working together, using everyone’s gifts, and helping people develop their talents.

“I am not giving up everything and losing my freedom; rather I am choosing everything God is offering me and desiring a life of increased freedom to do whatever God is asking of me.”

Not only gifted at collaboration and inclusion, this generation also excels at following rules and meeting expectations. In the weeks leading up to a big event, a Superior asked her iGen student-Sisters to be sure to complete all of their school work on campus during the day, so that their time in the evenings at home could be devoted to assisting with the preparations. The Sisters graciously accepted the challenge, even as they were taking an extraordinary number of classes, and were cheerfully available at home to make schedules, organize tours, make food, and so on. A desire to follow rules certainly helps a Sister in her vow of obedience. Of course, grace must build on this natural inclination.

While some may think that the life in monasteries and convents fosters dependence on others and stunts women’s growth in maturity, there is nothing farther from the truth. Religious life in fact forces people to mature. As one young woman preparing to enter the convent explained, “I am not giving up everything and losing my freedom; rather I am choosing everything God is offering me and desiring a life of increased freedom to do

whatever God is asking of me.” The vow of obedience, properly lived, does not mean that Sister X does everything Sister Superior asks of her and must agree with her Superior’s ideas and commands. Instead, it means that, even though she may disagree with the Superior’s decision and reasoning, Sister X does as Sister Superior asks out of her love for God, having given her life wholly and completely to Christ for the salvation of souls, especially her own. That is, by conforming her will to God’s through her acts of obedience to her superior, Sister X is able to discover and understand the rightly ordered relationship with figures of authority. I am reminded of Christ’s words to Pontius Pilate, “You would have no power over me if it had not been given to you from above” (Jn 19:11). Jesus, the perfect Man, chose to be “obedient to death, even death on a cross” (Phil 2:8), out of love for His Father and love for all mankind. And love requires maturity.

As one of our Sisters explains, speaking of a realization during her own discernment prior to entering our community, “I was able to contemplate not what I would be ‘giving up,’ but how I would be freeing myself to love God and others more authentically.” The religious life, in imitation of Christ, is indeed a school of love. As Saint Paul teaches us in his first letter to the Corinthians, “Love does not seek its own interests... [it] bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. ... When I was a child, I used to talk as a child, think as a child, reason as a child; when I became a man, I put aside childish things.” (13:5, 7, 11). Another young woman stated as she prepared to enter religious life, “I am really not losing anything, but gaining *everything*; because, through the religious vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience, I am not only uniting myself to Him who is everything, but also living the life and mission God has always intended for me, and this brings so much fulfillment.” It takes true maturity to see that a life of self-gift brings the fulfillment for which one’s heart longs.

Letters from the Heart

Dear Sister,

Please pray before reading this...Ok, you can begin now...

I'm not sure why I'm writing; besides the fact that I have this nagging feeling inside of me that will not leave. I am a junior studying theology at a Catholic college. I took a year from college in '96-'97 to serve with NET (National Evangelization Team). I have a great love for the youth and really feel that God is leading me in that direction in regards to my career. Presently, I want to be a youth minister anywhere that God could use me.

I have always been against the possibility that the Lord may be calling me to religious life, and have been very adamant about that. So why am I writing you? The other day I went to confession and spent some time with Jesus in the chapel before heading home. As I was walking out of the chapel I did something I have never done before and walked over to the section holding brochures for religious orders. I didn't even really look at them except I saw yours with "Mother of the Eucharist" and grabbed it. I put it in my bag and didn't look at it again until the next day when this nagging feeling to write you began. The only logic I can see is that I have a great devotion to the Eucharist and am struggling to get my relationship with Mary back on track. So maybe I am just intrigued by the title of your order. It was Mary who brought me to the faith and led me to Christ. Unfortunately, I seemed to have put her on the back burner for the past couple of years, but she has been continuously pursuing me. The only other possibility that God has me writing you is to find out more information on your order. That scares me.

This is strange but I have this huge urge inside of me to mention that I would like to meet you, although I'm not sure I really do, but I felt like I had to write it down anyway. This is probably the craziest letter you have ever received and I feel really sheepish about it. So if you think I'm crazy please don't respond...with that said I'm not expecting to hear from you.

(continued)

(continued)

If you are even reading this, I must have had a moment of great courage because this is just not like me. Okay, I'm going to stop this letter of insanity.

Thank you for taking the time to read this. I'm sorry to have taken up so much of your time. It's good to see you Sisters wearing habits. It is so awesome to see Sisters in their habits; it is such a great sign of being wedded to God the Father.

God bless you all! In Christ....

A Hopeful Discerner

If the first email in this chapter left me smiling, the one just quoted left me in peals of laughter! Immediately I knew this had been sent by a young woman who quite possibly had a religious vocation, because she already possessed the necessary virtues of self-knowledge, honesty, an active sacramental life, a great sense of humor, gratitude in prayer, and even an eschatological understanding of the Church and of religious life. The theme of her "nagging feeling" is common among young women called to this vocation and living in the state of grace. Like the good "Hound of Heaven" He is, God gently yet relentlessly pursues!

How many young people today are frequenting chapels, confession, and Eucharistic Adoration, and struggling to get their relationship with Mary back on track? I have reason to hope that the answer is far more than we might realize! In our three yearly vocational discernment retreats, young women come from around the world, sleeping bag in hand—for we have no beds in the school which is the only place spacious enough to house the average 150 women that we receive. In those twenty-four hours, including all-night Eucharistic Adoration, young ladies lay their lives on the line for Christ. And His goodness does not leave them disappointed! Whatever their vocation, they begin

to lean into it spiritually, and, should it be religious life, they prayerfully begin to discern a particular spirituality, charism, and thus religious community. This most important first step continues in the detailed application process of any particular community. For my community, that will include more one-on-one time with the Vocation Directress, the completion of psychological and physical examinations, obtaining reputable recommendations, submission of high school and college transcripts, and additional portions of the official application. Then there is a pre-postulancy week of living at the Motherhouse before a young woman is considered for official acceptance.

In her reference to NET ministry work, the author of the above letter also expresses that she has a heart for helping others know and live their Faith. Thus she already knows that it is in giving self away that one comes to find self. *Gaudium et Spes* expresses it thus: “Man, who is the only creature on earth which God willed for itself, cannot fully find himself except through a sincere gift of himself” (§24). And with that sincere self-gift, grace entices the young woman from her comfort zone into a moment of great courage, a vocational decision.



MARIAN DEVOTION

A woman who does not have, or wish to have, a personal devotion to the Mother of God would probably not begin to understand religious life. After all, a religious is married to Mary's Son, and thus she had best have an excellent relationship with her mother-in-law! A quote from a saintly nun and martyr in the concentration camp at Auschwitz, Saint Teresa Benedicta of the Cross (Edith Stein), elucidates woman's Marian likeness:

The soul of a woman must therefore be expansive and open to all human beings; it must be quiet so that no small weak flame will be extinguished by stormy winds; warm so as not to benumb fragile buds; clear, so that no vermin will settle in dark corners and recesses; self-contained, so that no invasions from without can imperil the inner life; empty of itself, in order that extraneous life may have room in it; finally, mistress of itself and also of its body, so that the entire person is readily at the disposal of every call.²⁹

A woman's soul must be expansive—thus possessing a universal motherhood that knows no bounds. It must be quiet and warm because it holds the lives of others within itself spiritually. Through her love and life, she provides security and peace for others' growth. Her soul must be self-contained and yet empty of self; it must be entrusted *to* God so that it may be entrusted *with* God. Then she will spiritually be another Mary—a woman fully alive with a maternal heart given to Christ and encompassing all His children. Indeed, the spiritual motherhood of religious Sisters serves as an example drawing others to this maternal self-gift. After having read the 2017 edition of *And Mary's 'Yes' Continues*, one young woman preparing to enter the convent said,

I was also so encouraged reading the Sisters' experiences as spiritual mothers, especially to their students. I have

always wanted children (thirteen to be exact), and, though I knew I could be a spiritual mother instead, I have never witnessed that life. Once I read their stories, and how much the Sisters are there to pray with, teach, and just have fun with their students, it helped me to “Be not afraid!” as Pope Saint John Paul would say. And I’m looking forward to the day I can be a spiritual mother myself (God willing!).

SUMMARY

Young women who enter religious life are necessarily products of the age in which they live. In the 1950s and 60s when religious vocations were swelling in the United States, a young woman would have frequently been taught by Sisters, known a few Sisters on a closer personal level of friendship, experienced shared times both inside and outside the classroom, and felt her heart tugging her to knock on the convent door and express her interest in a possible vocation.

By the late 60s, young women had far fewer opportunities to see religious Sisters, let alone engage with them in common pursuits and prayer. Perhaps some of the Sisters they had known left their convents or changed their lives in ways unrecognizable to the young. Fewer girls knocked on convent doors, and this phenomenon continued until Saint John Paul II’s brilliant WYDs began to bear fruit. Once again, young women began to consider religious life, even as newer religious communities were formed to attract their youthful joy and enthusiasm.

Today’s situation is in flux once again. Societal pressures and cultural moral laxity are largely responsible for a new wave of distraction which filters through parents down to their Millennial and iGen children, now grown to their teens and twenties. Vocation Directresses and parents must acknowledge the challenges youth face today, while also giving them generous

support in leading virtuous lives. God continues to call forth vocations, and those who work with young people need to be wise to encourage, bring forth, and nurture possible religious and priestly vocations.

In quick summary, young women today have:

- » Better educations and more experiences with the world;
- » Zeal to lead peers in their personal encounters with Christ;
- » A deep longing for community (in the Church and in their possible vocation);
- » Radical determination, since they often enter religious life in the face of great opposition from family and friends;
- » A natural ability to use media to evangelize;
- » Enthusiasm in all they do and in involving as many people as possible;
- » A natural desire to follow rules and meet expectations; and
- » Hearts on fire with a desire to live good lives and to leave the world a better place for their having lived here too.

In closing, allow me share two quotes which well express religious life and the manner in which the Church asks us to live it as witnesses to a world oftentimes gone astray but still retaining a deep longing for holiness:

[Where] there are consecrated people, seminarians, men and women religious, young people, there is joy, there is always joy! It is the joy of freshness, the joy of following Jesus; the joy that the Holy Spirit gives us, not the joy of the world. There is joy! But where is joy born? Joy is born from the gratuitousness of an encounter! It is hearing

someone say, but not necessarily with words: ‘You are important to me.’ This is beautiful. ... And it is these very words that God makes us understand. In calling you God says to you: ‘You are important to me, I love you, I am counting on you.’ Jesus says this to each one of us! Joy is born from that! The joy of the moment in which Jesus looked at me. Understanding and hearing this is the secret of our joy.³⁰



And finally one of our young Sisters provides great wisdom through her purity of heart: “I am so grateful to be here. Every day is a new adventure! But best of all, I am all His and He is mine. Nothing else could ever make me so completely happy!”





NOTES

- 1 Sister Joseph Andrew Bogdanowicz, OP, "Religious Vocations for a New Millennium", *Lay Witness*, Catholics United for the Faith, 2001, 36-37.
- 2 Lisa Walden, "3 Common Generational Stereotypes", Minnesota Society of Certified Public Accountants, accessed May 20, 2020, <https://www.mncpa.org/publications/footnote/2014-04/3-common-generational-stereotypes.aspx>.
- 3 C. Seemiller & M. Grace, "Meet Generation Z", December 12, 2016, <https://sigep.org/sigepjournal/meet-generation-z/>
- 4 Pew Research Center, "How Millennials today compare with their grandparents 50 years ago", March 19, 2015 (updated March 16, 2018), <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/03/16/how-millennials-compare-with-their-grandparents/>
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Dr. Alexis Abramson, "Generational Expert, Dr. Alexis Abramson", accessed November 11, 2020, www.alexisabramson.com/generational-expert-alexis-abramson/.
- 7 Julie Lythcott-Haims, *How to Raise an Adult: Break Free of the Overparenting Trap and Prepare Your Kid for Success*, (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 2015).
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- 11 Henry Fairlie, *The Seven Deadly Sins Today* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1978).
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