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Together in
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God Still Calls: *Discerning Together in Creating a Shared Future*

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For religious life to survive in the twenty-first century, there is need for listening, creating and dialoguing together, between senior members of religious communities and those discerning their call to religious life. This short article will suggest listening and creating together as the foundation for moving into the future. As a member of the executive committee of *Vocations Ireland*, we aim to promote best practices around accompaniment of people discerning their calling from God, as well as creating a culture of vocation in Ireland.

CULTURE OF VOCATION

The term ‘culture of vocation’ is one that has been overused and exhausted in some discussions, but it is still a vital element if we are to build our Church of the future.

Fostering a culture of vocation encompasses all the stages of formation. It involves a continued discernment from the first point of encounter with an enquirer to acceptance into the Congregation’s postulancy and novitiate programmes and on to temporary and perpetual vows. While these are all familiar stages to us in the process of formation, creating a culture of vocation obliges all religious to listen closely for the dots and dashes of God’s creative calling in the postmodern church of the Ireland of today.

GOD STILL CALLS – THE ATTRACTION TO SEEK GOD IS FROM GENERATION TO GENERATION

From the ancient desert mothers and fathers of the fourth century to contemporary religious sisters, brothers, and priests, a small band of men and women in every generation choose to consecrate their lives to God with unique vows that give a radical witness to the Gospel. The challenge and the fulfilment of making such a radical witness, still appeals and speaks to the heart.

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In Ireland, we have a tradition of being a pilgrim people. Places, such as Glendalough, renowned as an early medieval monastic settlement in the 6th century by St. Kevin, still attracts pilgrims from around the globe to visit annually. Another ‘thin place’ is Clonmacnoise, founded by St. Ciarán, also in the 6th century. These ancestors of ours in the faith were drawn to remote places of beauty in their search for the living God, this living God who seeks to be in relationship with us, just as we seek that relationship. The ongoing call draws people of every generation, culture, and place to oneness with the divine in stillness, in silence, and in solitude.

Dr Noelia Molina¹ in a research project on *Religious Vocations in Ireland* points out that in Ireland, of the 1960s there was a ‘cultural vocation’ and many, many joined religious life. This ‘cultural vocation’ has given way to the creation of a new ‘culture of vocation’ which is characterized by inquiry, meaning – making, and the search for authenticity, while attending to the transcendent.

People today practice Yoga and Meditation or Centering and Mindfulness in order to enter into *silence*, and are coming to greater consciousness. As human beings we are moving beyond the rational, technological, and dominating worldview. Many who enter into silence are becoming present to their spiritual depths by nurturing an awareness of the divine presence and action within. Over thirty years ago, Jesuit Karl Rahner predicted that “The Christian of the future will be mystic or will not exist at all”. This is being realized today and from this inner sanctuary our relationship with the divine, indeed all our relationships and our ministries of service flow.

Many interviewed in the research project spoke of the current climate within the Catholic Church, stating that in post secular and postmodern Ireland what we are faced with is not a crisis of vocation, but something much more significant. The crisis of vocation is about public perception of the institutional Church and it is also a *crisis of faith* in relation to God. Ours is a Church of many faces and the institutional image of the Church has been marred over the last two decades with allegations of sexual and institutional abuse. The road to healing is a long one. However, what faith provides for people of all traditions or none is a lens through which to look at life. It gives a person a way of relating to the universe, other people, oneself, and the divine. Searchers today are often at a loss as to where to begin looking or who to speak to about the purpose, meaning and direction of their lives from a faith perspective. What religious could offer is space, hospitality and listening in which to foster this culture of religious vocation.

1. Dr Molina, Noelia. *Religious Vocations in Ireland: Challenges and Opportunities*. Research Project for Vocations Ireland 2017.

LISTENING TO DISCERNERS

The starting point in accompanying an inquirer, discerning their future in religious life, is *listening*. Listening without prejudgement and beyond the words of the speaker to hear their answer to the question, ‘how am I to live my life in relation to God?’ This question incorporates a faith response that comes from the heart and points to “an authentic call coming from a voice within with an invitation to honour ‘the nature of the true self’”.²

Those discerning today have many worthwhile paths to consider, and possibly religious life only comes to mind when, so to speak, ‘all else fails’. They see that the rat race of doing, accomplishing, accumulating of possessions and shallow relationships, lose their attraction, and it is then that the really significant questions come to the surface. That is when professionally trained Vocation Directors need to be on hand, listening, receiving and responding authentically.

In a 2018 publication called *In Our Own Words*³ women religious in the U.S. share their search, questions and discernment process to joining a religious community. Quite a few were challenged by their colleagues, who asked “why bother being a religious when you can do the same thing without being a religious”.

This challenging question brings us to the *essence* of what a religious calling is all about. In a mostly secularized world, the profession of religious vows; poverty, chastity and obedience is a very radical counter – cultural choice. Religious by their way of life call attention to being in relationship with a living, personal and loving God and count all else as nothing in comparison to this primary relationship, which has three expressions, relationship with God, oneself and others and relationship with the world

CREATING A WAY FORWARD

As religious go about recreating themselves and fostering a culture of vocation, we need to bear in mind that the present cannot be lived from the past, that the future will not necessarily look like it did, and while religious life will never go out of style, those joining us today, will form the future with us. Together we create a way of life that honours the past history and tradition of the particular Congregation, while giving an opportunity for self- expression to new members who will make a unique contribution, that is sourced out of their life experience, education and gifts. In this way they

2. Buechner, Frederick *Positive Psychology on The College Campus* Oxford University Press 1973.

3. Keating, Thomas OCSO *God is Love: The Heart of All Creation* DVD Series, 2018.

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fulfil their own aspirations. The present generation of discerners have to consider both commitment to others and personal fulfilment. This is best exemplified by Frederick Buechner's thought on vocation as "where your deep gladness and the world's greatest hunger meet"⁴ bringing together talent, passion, greater good, orientation to others, and the meaning derived out of living one's calling. The call urges you to go past the surface level to do something that has lasting value. Sometimes this call is heard as an inner voice, sometimes as a mental image, sometimes felt as a push from behind, and sometimes experienced as the voice of God.

Future communities for mission, bring into being something new that is created out of vision and realized in word and action. The energy for this act of creation has to come from within. The discerner having met God or often had an experience of conversion as a result of a bereavement, illness or a transition in life, and following in the footsteps of Jesus Christ, then seeks to find a Religious Order that matches their gifts, inspires their vision and brings them into authentic relationships.

INTENTIONAL COMMUNITIES

Women and men discerning a call to religious life today are making their decisions based on those religious communities which they sense are alive, intentionally dealing with transition, and that are living their vows with passion and joy. This is an in-between time, as religious life as we know it is in decline and disintegrating. There is a shift from institutional religious life to smaller intentional communities that form in order to speak and give witness to the Good News, that, "divine love is compassionate, tender, luminous, totally self-giving, seeking no reward, unifying everything."⁵ In making public the vows of poverty, chastity and obedience in community, we follow the way of Jesus embracing the Gospel and living the Beatitudes (Matthew 5:1-12). What religious are about is making God's presence and promise known by witnessing to love, hope, joy, truth and mercy.

In the world of millennials and iGen a great interest is in the *contemplative communities* and enclosed orders. They have a genuine appeal, and wearing the habit is a draw in itself.

These contemplative/enclosed congregations who do not turn from the world, but instead turn loving hearts and minds to praying for the critical needs of the world. The mission of the *apostolic religious* in times past was to provide for the needs in

4. Mousseau, Juliet, RSCJ Kohles, Sarah OSF *In Our Own Words* Liturgical Press, Collegeville, Minnesota, 2018.

5. Palmer, Parker. *A Hidden Wholeness: The Journey Towards an Undivided Life*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004.

education, health care and pastoral work. Today, they focus on the environment, migrants, trafficking, and displaced peoples, health care, and justice issues, such as homelessness. They also offer experience of Centering Prayer, Silence, Lectio Divina and Meditation. In short, religious served and continue to serve the critical needs of the time.

What is common for all religions, is the God question, seeking God with all ones heart. “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbour as yourself (Luke 10:27).

In *God's Grandeur*⁶ we are reminded that we are called to ‘the dearest freshness deep down things’. This is what is alluring, satisfying and fulfilling on the spiritual journey. “The spiritual life is the most important thing there is to do in life and it doesn’t just mean our salvation or our healing or our wholeness or our redemption ...rather, the healing of the whole human condition with its limitations and faults and openness to evil, as well as good.”⁷

No one can live the religious life in community without centering their hearts and minds in the love of God. From our prayer, we receive the nourishment of God’s loving presence, the friendship of Jesus, and the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. In both personal and communal prayer, we are strengthened in courage and confident to live our call of service to others.

If you are up for a challenge, and want to be part of a way of life that is bigger than the sum of its parts, that focuses on the recognition of the reign of God today, that seeks equality and justice for all, then consider discerning a call to religious life. Because vocational calls come from a different place you need to be quiet long enough and often enough to hear them. Listen for the soft voice that Samuel heard and respond, “Speak Lord, your servant is listening (1Samuel 3).

Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,
The worlds offers itself to your imagination,
Calls to you like wild geese,
harsh and exciting
over and over announcing your place
in the family of things.⁸

6. Hopkins, Gerard Manly, *God's Grandeur* 1977.

7. Keating, Thomas OCSO *God is Love: The Heart of All Creation* DVD Series, 2018.

8. Oliver, Mary *Wild Geese*: Bllodaxe World Poets, Northumberland, 2004.