

VOCATION CRISIS:**A COMMUNITY'S****SELF-FULFILLING PROPHECY (2/2)****Moving Toward Revitalization, Renewal
and New Membership**

The renewal of communities and individuals happens when community members involve themselves directly in vocation ministry. There is a significant relationship between vocation ministry and the ongoing renewal of the group. It is a cyclic relationship in which life generates life. The crux of the relationship between renewal and vocation ministry is in the commitment a community makes to allow others to see it as it is today, in its humanness and as it struggles to live up to its professed ideals.

This is difficult for religious communities because religious women and men are hesitant to involve themselves in vocation ministry. There are a number of elements in the renewal process. I will highlight only a few of them by describing a religious community which is overcoming its hesitancy and is moving toward the fullness of renewal by involving themselves in vocation ministry. This religious community is described as an ideal. In reality communities are still moving toward this goal. By contrast, I also describe some of the dynamics which seem to keep communities from moving forward the fullness of renewal.

A religious community that understands and sees clearly its purpose, role and unique charism will stand as a credible and valuable contributor in the Church. This religious community sees its ministry as significant because its members are responding to today's real and pressing needs. This community welcomes new members. These new members will undoubtedly give shape to future commitments. Potentially, they may even involve the community in new ministries. Together, new and old members will determine what the real and pressing needs are today. Individuals are commissioned in the name of the group for their specific ministry. There is never an individual commitment, but one which has the support of the whole body. This community recognizes the importance of being professional. They balance professionalism with a ministerial perspective which gives them a different motivation from others in their respective professions.

A religious community who has a strong awareness of their giftedness for the Church today also recognizes the possibilities for continuing to offer these gifts. They appreciate their history and acknowledge that the future may involve

changes. They welcome those changes which are discerned as elements of renewal and revitalization. This community knows that they are presently trying to bring about renewal. They invite new members **EVEN WHILE struggling** to renew. They expect that the new members will contribute to the renewal.

This religious community extends hospitality at every opportunity and invites non-community members to share in their prayer, socials and meals. They encourage others to express their curiosity and welcome question about their values, goals, lifestyle and ministry. The community members pray regularly in thanksgiving for their vocation and also the vocations of others. They understand their vocation as one among many others in the Church. It is not better or holier in the eyes of God but unique and different. This community personally extends invitations to individuals to consider membership in their group. They extend this invitation because they see themselves as instruments of God's call to others. They invite others because they experience their own vocation as a gift and want others to share in their joy. The community's vocation ministry is seen as part of the ministry of the entire Christian community and, as such, is carried out in the spirit of concern for the individual, the Church and the community simultaneously.

Contrasting this ideal is a description of religious communities who are having difficulty moving toward genuine renewal. For these groups there seems to be a built-in resistance to any suggestion that more openness and hospitality might be good. Often, these communities will avoid any activities which might make non-community members aware that perfect renewal has not yet taken place. Community open houses or allowing visitors in the actual living spaces (eg. dining and living rooms) are not acceptable by one or several community members. Visitors in these instances are ushered into a parlor with the instructions that they should "wait here". Sometimes a few members or even one can keep the whole community from welcoming people into their home. The unspoken fear is simply that others will see who they are and how they live. They might ask too many questions, speak too many observations or scrutinize too carefully that with which they themselves are not yet comfortable. Another fear which is important to name is the fear that individuals have that they might have to get involved. Involvement in vocation ministry automatically will mean making a personal investment. There is a real hesitation for an individual in this community to get involved in vocation ministry. They know that they will experience inconvenience. They are not willing to allow their routine and comfortable lifestyle to be disrupted.

Members of these same communities will not extend personal invitations to consider their life style. Inviting others will automatically open the religious woman or man to questions about their life style and how it is experienced. The potential member will express concerns, observations and judgments which will call for a response from the religious. They are not comfortable sharing their own reflections on the struggle to live a religious life. These community members are often unaware of the sequence of the initial formation program and are embarrassed to any that they do not know what the potential new member could do next with her/his interest.

Lastly, it is rare that this community brings to their common prayer the names of those people who might have an interest in their community. Instead, there are pleas for an increase in vocations with the hope that the Lord will deposit many interested "prospects" on the doorstep of the vocation

office. Also, rarely heard are prayers of thanks for their own vocation or vocalized petitions for an understanding of where they might be called today by God.

Vocation Ministry As A Source of Renewal

It has been my experience that individual community members and whole communities who involve themselves in vocation ministry are renewed and find energy in this activity. The actual involvement in vocation ministry, specifically in offering hospitality, extending personal invitations and praying, is a source of renewed hope in the future. One example which I would like to cite involves my own brothers.

Last summer our summer volunteer program situated itself in one of our existing communities. It was a program which invited young men to experience our ministry and our community life. The volunteers helped out in a remedial reading and math program for youngsters in a poor innercity school. They lived as members of a local community. The experience of ministry to the poor was very significant as was their experience of our community life.

There was some initial hesitation on the part of my brothers about welcoming these young men into their house. They expressed their concerns about having these "outsiders" as a part of the community. (Who could tell what they might do?) Still, fears and anxieties notwithstanding, they opened their doors and hearts to the fifteen volunteers. The five week program proved to be a tremendous blessing for everyone involved. It is especially good to hear my brothers who hosted the summer volunteer program speak enthusiastically about the experience of having the young men in their community. Meal times came alive with conversation about the excitement of the day's ministry and activities. Prayer and liturgy echoed with earnest pleas for assistance in discernment, petitions for those entrusted to their care and utterances of thankfulness for life and all it holds. The brothers could talk again about their accomplishments, experiences and hopes for the future. There were new ears which listened attentively respecting their wisdom, and young inquisitive minds which questioned with a genuine desire to understand. There were shared dialogues on life's familiar questions and concerns flavored now with the young's perspective. The brothers have expressed gratitude for this experience. This kind of interaction with young people is lifegiving and energizing.

Another example of vocation ministry as a source of renewal comes from a religious sister who recently expressed to me her excitement for the ministry. She is a history teacher in a co-educational high school. Two years ago she began to serve as the local vocation coordinator for her community at that high school. Initially, she was reluctant to get involved. Gradually, the usual fears and anxieties gave way to more and more involvement. She talks freely of the experience she is having working directly with young people. She sees herself as one who is walking with them, as they discern God's call to them. She found that some of these young people are considering religious life as an option.

This sister is choosing to be present to young people in out-of-class discovery experiences like retreats, prayer groups and discussions. These experiences are especially geared toward helping them develop their skills for discernment. She is now an active participant in the programs of discovery which her community's vocation office sponsors. She enthusiastically invites the young people entrusted to her care to accompany her on these experiences. Her local community is becoming a place of more hospitality where the young people feel comfortable because they are welcomed sincerely. She speaks about the experience of renewal, about a new perspective on the future, about hope and about feelings of revitalization. Her attitude is infectious and is involving other colleagues, both lay and religious, women and men, in vocation ministry for the sake of the young people in their school. I believe that this is what the process of renewal could look like. I'm sure that many similar examples of vocation ministry as a source of renewal could be related. We would do well to share these with our community members and each other.

Conclusion

First, religious communities cannot look for new membership to define who they are for Church today. They must have a clear purpose and identity which give meaning to their presence today in the Church. Second, they cannot afford to wait for signs of new membership to give them hope for a future. It must be found in the experienced call from God to be instruments of grace and peace for those entrusted to their care. Third, it is clear to me that religious communities cannot wait for the fullness of renewal before they begin to invest in vocation ministry. Struggles for renewal and vocation ministry must be simultaneous precisely because there is a cyclic relationship between them.

We are called as vocation ministers to point out this cyclic relationship. We are called to suggest that involvement in vocation ministry is one avenue for the difficult journey through renewal and revitalization. Our invitations to individual community members will serve as a beginning and make it possible for entire communities to participate in vocation ministry. The first step, and probably the most difficult, is for the group to assess its present attitude about the impact which the last twenty years is having on its self-image and view of the future. Next, it is important to evaluate how these perspectives affect the group's willingness to participate in the pastoral ministry of vocations. This seems to be a frustrating part of the slow and gradual movement toward the fullness of renewal through vocation ministry. This effort on the part of vocation ministers will help other community members to discover that which empowers them for ministry today and will also serve as the basis of hope for the future.

Brother Joe Samson