

## Times are changing and these cloistered nuns are adapting

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### *Adapting to change*

*Although communication has changed drastically in the last decade, Benedictine Sister Nancy Bauer, an assistant professor of canon law at Catholic University of America's School of Canon Law, notes that this is hardly the first time women's contemplative communities have had to confront new technologies. Television, newspapers, telephones, even the printing press have all required communities to adapt, Bauer says.*

*With each new change women's religious communities have had to weigh progress versus their communities' purpose. For contemplative communities, Bauer says that means balancing their call to a "real prophetic witness to the world" with values such as "quiet, silence, reflection, reverence of each other, coming together in prayer, and living peacefully together in community."*

*On June 29, 2016 Pope Francis addressed some of these concerns, issuing an apostolic constitution for women religious' contemplative life. In the document *Vultum Dei Quaerere* (Seeking the Face of God), he talks about contemplative communities' unique role and call in the Catholic Church.*

*In the letter Francis writes that "media can prove helpful for formation and communication." But he also "urge[s] a prudent discernment" to their usage and that they should "not become occasions for wasting time or escaping from the demands of fraternal life in community."*

*Bauer notes that the pope's affirmation of social media usage can be especially encouraging for smaller communities struggling to keep up with modern demands. Social media offers new opportunities for recruiting, formation of younger members, and corresponding with family members.*

*However, Francis does not offer any guidelines, instead giving each community the freedom to decide how much monitoring and usage is required. This will require some trial and error, Bauer says, just as each community has done with each new form of communication.*

*"They have to experiment and evaluate, 'Is this good for our contemplative life and for our ability to reach out to people, or is it invasive, distracting?' and that sort of thing," Bauer says.*

### *A tool for recruitment*

*Benedictine Sister of Perpetual Adoration Maria Victoria's discernment into religious life came at a critical juncture. When her long-time boyfriend proposed to her, she answered with the noncommittal "well, I guess I have to think about this."*

*"It was really in that time of prayer where I asked the Lord if what he was calling me to do was to marry this guy," Sister Maria Victoria says.*

*Instead, she felt a "still, small voice" asking her to consider religious life. Listening to that voice, she turned to the internet and VISION Vocation Network's online vocation match, which allows users to connect with religious orders based on a series of preferences. The website opened Sister Maria Victoria's eyes to orders she had no idea even existed.*

*Eventually she learned of the Benedictine Sisters of Perpetual Adoration at Clyde monastery—a contemplative, monastic community that mainly works within the confines of the monastery—through their website. Now the order's present vocation director, Sister Maria Victoria uses her own discernment experience with social media to show that although the order is "not necessarily active" outside the monastery, they are "very much aware of what's happening outside of the monastery and in the world."*

*"One of the reasons we have social media is to let people know, 'Hey we are praying with you and for you,?'" Sister Maria Victoria says. "It's our way of interceding for the world."*

*Social media is not new to the order. Even before Sister Maria Victoria's entrance in 2007, the monastery had a deep online presence. The order now has one of the larger presences on social media: a general Facebook page, a vocation Facebook page, over 16,000 followers on Twitter, and even a LinkedIn account.*

*Through those accounts they try to "emphasize prayer, what's happening in the church, what's happening in our community, and really stick to that and how can we share our values," says Sister Maria Victoria.*

*In addition to sharing community life, she reports that social media has been integral for vocations outreach, allowing her to publicize vocation retreats and connect with discernment groups.*

*Vocations seem to play a large role in other orders' decision to use social media as well. Some orders report seeking social media to ensure their preservation—a concern that isn't confined to monastic orders. Since 1965 the number of women religious has dropped dramatically—by 74 percent, according to the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA). Social media presents a creative recruiting opportunity for communities who don't typically leave the confines of their convent and helps ensure their continuation.*

*While Carmelite Sister Hilary Case doesn't think social media is "imperative," it certainly helps the Discalced Carmelite Sisters of the Monastery of Our Lady and St. Joseph in Concord, New Hampshire connect with younger generations.*

*"God is not limited to technology," says Case, the vocation director for the community, which is informally referred to as the "Concord Carmels." "However, these media are valuable instruments of knowledge in our time, and we would be foolish not to use them to the best of our ability."*

*Although it's been a "gradual process," the order has recently joined Facebook and Twitter because Case says that's "how so many people communicate."*

*While vocations outreach was an important part of the Passionist Nuns of St. Louis' decision to use Facebook and blogging, their impetus began with various popes' call to reach out to the masses.*

*Sister Mary Elizabeth, the community's elected vicar and vocation director, says the order's decision came from Pope Francis' call to "go out to the peripheries" and Pope John Paul's call to go out to the "highways and the byways."*

*"In essence, they're both saying the same thing, that you need to meet people where they're at right now, and young people are on the internet, they're doing things there," Sister Mary Elizabeth says. "That's why we're getting on the*

*internet more and blogging and trying to share the fruits of our prayers.”*

### ***Considering their mission***

*Although many orders are embracing all the possibilities that social media offers, many acknowledge it can run counter to the fabric of these communities as well.*

*The Cistercians of the Strict Observance live at the Redwoods Monastery in a remote, mountainous part of Northern California that renders cell phones practically useless. There the Trappist nuns focus on “contemplative prayer, simplicity, silence, manual labor, and community,” according to Trappist nun Suzanne Mattiuzzo, vocation director at the monastery. Though the order is cloistered, one of their main services is “hospitality to guests.”*

*“Our Guest House is very busy, especially in the summer months,” Mattiuzzo says. “People crave the silence, peace, and natural beauty that they find in our monastery.”*

*In other words, people go to Our Lady of the Redwoods to escape societal demands and social media. So when they began the discussion on whether to expand their online presence to Facebook and Twitter, there was resistance from some nuns.*

*“It seems so counter to the values that brought us to the monastery,” Mattiuzzo says. “The reason the sisters are most resistant to social media is that it does not reflect the interior nature of our vocation.”*

*Likewise, Mattiuzzo has found that some applicants to the monastery “seem somewhat put off” by social media in general. For now that means the responsibility for maintaining their social media presence rests mostly on Mattiuzzo.*

*In contrast, almost every Concord Carmel nun has integrated technology into both their personal and professional lives. The process has been gradual, partially due to a learning curve between the generations. However, all but one sister currently has a cellphone and all those who need a computer for work have one, according to Case.*

*Case says that although the community doesn’t have any policies or guidelines for usage, younger generations have required additional guidance.*

*“We do work with newcomers to make sure they are not overly dependent on technology, using it to the point where it interferes with the life of prayer or becomes actually unhealthy,” Case says, citing online pornography and dangerous chat rooms as concerns.*

*When the Passionist Nuns of St. Louis first made the decision to participate in social media, their first concern was their cloister. Sister Mary Elizabeth says they didn’t want anything to “jeopardize our papal enclosure status.”*

*“The whole idea is for us nuns to not get too influenced by the worldliness of things so that it effects our total commitment to God,” Sister Mary Elizabeth says. “Older sisters would say, ‘We don’t have these bars to keep us in, it’s to keep you out,’ in the sense of not getting distracted.”*

*In order to ensure their enclosure both physically and mentally, the community abides by guidelines for technology use. Mother Superior holds the sole smartphone in the house, and each nun is required to ask permission before using it. Through these guidelines, Sister Mary Elizabeth believes the order maintains both the physical and spiritual aspects of the cloister.*

*Similar to the Passionists, the Concord Carmels have had to confront whether social media changes the essence of their cloister. Case points out that times have changed since house calls from doctors and groceries delivered by laypeople. “Few monasteries can rely on outside helpers,” she says. This has required the community to reexamine what cloister means today.*

*“Since the Second Vatican Council, enclosure has undergone quite a bit of reinterpretation. The Council called each order or congregation to study its roots and reinterpret its customs accordingly and relate them to the contemporary*

world,” Case says. “One result of these post-Vatican II changes is a shift from thinking of enclosure physically toward conceiving of enclosure interiorly, as an enclosure of the heart for God and his people.”

Case notes that the community has had to adapt “some of our exterior practices to the social changes that have gone on in our society since World War II.”

“Sixty years ago, such communication was not even dreamed of, so of course we have had to work on reinterpreting our mission,” Case says.

While this is an evolving process, Case says, “The mission itself has not changed, to work toward communion with God, ourselves, and others, to pray for the needs of all, to listen for God’s direction and to follow it.”

### **Looking to the future**

As one of the orders going out of their way to embrace social media, the Passionists of St. Louis are looking forward to what the future may have in store. Sister Mary Elizabeth says that the order will continue focusing on posting more resources to enhance spirituality based on their finding that people are “just starving for spiritual Catholic stuff.”

She also expects that social media could become even more streamlined in monasteries as younger members join the ranks. Sister Mary Elizabeth says as the nuns in the monastery age, the community has relied more on the help of the newer and younger members. “Sister Techie,” a nickname for a 29-year-old nun in the community, has been integral in integrating new technologies, like a scanner used to upload original artwork.

Many of the communities are looking forward to updating their websites and social media pages to appeal to newer generations. Case says that the Concord Carmels are overhauling the website to “[help] people looking into contemplative or Carmelite life to be aware of us and consider our community.” Case says the community has also thought about expanding their reach to YouTube.

And despite their insistence on anonymity, the Poor Clare Colettine nuns of Rockford don’t seem to be leaving the public eye anytime soon. In addition to the documentary and an already completed photo series, Reese has plans for another film and audio series about the community.

This doesn’t mean the order—which still has no plans to join the world of social media—still doesn’t question the value of the exposure social media provides. Yet, in the end, the Novice Mistress conceded that the video camera “wasn’t a total disruption of the culture because it didn’t change us. In essence, we remain what we were before.”

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Image: Photo still from *Chosen* (Custody of the Eyes)

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**Kristen Whitney Daniels - US Catholic.org**