

## A fact-based assessment of U.S. religious life



The announcement last April of the results of the doctrinal assessment of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious by the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith has provoked strong reactions inside and outside the Catholic Church in the United States. In the process, some commentators have made assertions about the demographics of religious life in the United States that are not based in fact. Regrettably, such misinformed statements create dichotomies that not only mask the complexity of religious reality, but are patently false. In an article entitled "The Sisters: Two Views," published in June on the Ethics and Public Policy Center Web site, for example, George Weigel wrote: "In any case, there can be no denying that the 'renewal' of women's religious life led by the L.C.W.R. and its affiliated orders has utterly failed to attract new vocations. The L.C.W.R. orders are dying, while several religious orders that disaffiliated from the L.C.W.R. are growing."

We believe that the church and the U.S. public deserve an accurate picture, devoid of distortions, ideology and fatalism, of the complex demographics of religious institutes. These demographics are among the most serious issues facing religious life throughout the universal church. A discussion of them demands the greatest precision and sensitivity for the sake of the future of individual institutes, each of which has been entrusted by the Holy Spirit with a unique charism and mission, and which prayerfully deals with issues of revitalization in their general chapters and other deliberative bodies. Precision and sensitivity are also demanded for the sake of the contributions that institutes of women religious continue to make to the church and society, both nationally and internationally.

The information on religious life we report here comes from U.S. data published in the Official Catholic Directory, statistics for the church worldwide published in the Statistical Yearbook of the Church and a 2009 study of religious institutes in the U.S. conducted by the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate at Georgetown University and commissioned by the National Religious Vocation Conference.

## **By the Numbers**

As of 2009, there were 729,371 sisters, 54,229 brothers and 135,051 religious priests in the world. These overall figures, however, mask a wide variation: some countries have experienced a decline in recent years, while in other countries the number of religious has increased.

CARA statistics for the United States show 55,944 sisters, 4,606 brothers and 12,629 religious priests in 2010. As commentators note, there has been a decline in the total number of religious in the United States since the peak in 1965. But the difficulty with that commonly cited starting point is that it denotes an exceptional period in U.S. Catholic history (the 1950s and 1960s). Never, before or since, have numbers serving in vowed and ordained ministry been as high. A longer view, say across the entire 20th century, shows just how unusual that 20-year period was. In 1900, the United States had almost 50,000 sisters. According to the Official Catholic Directory, the number of sisters peaked at 181,421 in 1965. This was an astounding increase of 265 percent in just 65 years.

While the reasons for this unusual growth have been much discussed, the reasons for the drop off after 1965 are more speculative. What we find interesting in the most current research on religious life are those aspects of the generational data that are usually not mentioned. These data, from the recent N.R.V.C./CARA study of recent vocations to religious life, show that simplistic generalizations mask complex realities. We are just beginning to explore some of the key factors about what attracts women to and dissuades them from religious life today.

## **Behind the Numbers**

The N.R.V.C./CARA study surveyed all religious institutes that are based in the United States and received completed responses from about two-thirds of them; these responses, however, account for well over 80 percent of all women and men religious in the United States. Among responding institutes of women religious, L.C.W.R. members are two-thirds of all respondents, institutes belonging to the Council of Major Superiors of Women Religious (C.M.S.W.R.) are 14 percent and 1 percent belong to both groups. The remaining fifth are contemplative monasteries or newly formed religious institutes ineligible for membership in either leadership conference.

1.) One of the most striking findings regarding new entrants is that almost equal numbers of women have been attracted to institutes in both conferences of women religious in the U.S. in recent years. As of 2009, L.C.W.R. institutes reported 73 candidates/postulants, 117 novices and 317 sisters in temporary vows/commitment. C.M.S.W.R. institutes reported 73 candidates/postulants, 158 novices and 304 sisters in temporary vows/commitment. (There are 150 nuns in formation in U.S. monasteries.)

2.) Another key finding is that the youngest generation of religious women looks increasingly similar

to the youngest generation of adults in the church. The sisters and nuns in initial formation today are 61 percent white; 16 percent Latina; 16 percent Asian/Pacific Islander; 6 percent African American and 1 percent other.

3.) A sizable proportion of L.C.W.R. and C.M.S.W.R. institutes have no one in formation at the present time (32 percent and 26 percent respectively). This, of course, does not preclude these institutes having new membership in the future.

4.) The median number of entrants to L.C.W.R. institutes is one, which means that half of the responding L.C.W.R. institutes had no more than one woman in initial formation in 2009. The corresponding median number of entrants for C.M.S.W.R. institutes is four, which means that half of C.M.S.W.R. institutes had four or fewer in initial formation in 2009. Since there are far fewer C.M.S.W.R. member institutes than L.C.W.R. institutes, the key finding here is that only a very small number of institutes are attracting more than a handful of entrants. It is this very small group of institutes, however, that is attracting the most media attention. Few are paying attention to the fine work of N.R.V.C. and the religious institutes from both leadership conferences that have initiated new vocation programs, which have galvanized the energy of the institutes and hold the promise of further growth in the near future.

5.) The vast majority of both L.C.W.R. and C.M.S.W.R. institutes do not have large numbers of new entrants. Instead of focusing a media spotlight on a few institutes and generalizing inaccurately from them, it is essential to probe what is happening across the entire spectrum of institutes to understand the full complexity of religious life in the United States today.

### **Adding it up**

The ecology of religious life in the United States, with more than a thousand sisters in formation programs in institutes of women religious, deserves a nonideological analysis. And the diversity of charisms of the hundreds of religious institutes in this country needs to be acknowledged as a profound gift to the church. The new generations of Catholics who have come to religious life in recent years bring all that shaped them—their experience of God, the church, religion and spirituality, family, ethnicity, education, occupational and professional life and more. The analysis of their discernment of a vocation to religious life is anything but simple.

Their choice of a religious institute, like religious life itself, does not exist in a vacuum. Indeed, the church backdrop against which these demographics are displayed is complex and often conflicted. An analysis of the multiple environments in which religious life is embedded is essential in order to trace interactions that have contributed to the current state of vocations to religious institutes in this and other nations. Most critical in this regard is Sister Patricia Wittberg's analysis of data that point to fewer younger U.S. Catholic women practicing their faith (*America*, 2/20/12). Since a significant number of young adult Catholic women have fallen away from religious practice, religious institutes have the challenge of trying to recruit women who are also struggling with their deep ambivalence about the church. This is an issue that belongs to the entire church, not just to religious institutes.

Given the tension regarding the church and young women, attention must be given to those places that hold the promise of new life. To that end, questions need to be posed: What will religious institutes

have to do in order to build and sustain more multicultural communities and institutes that look like the youth and young adults of the church in this country? What structural and cultural changes will have to take place to ensure a future for new generations of religious whose cultural mix will look very different from the dominant generations in religious life today? And what is the responsibility of the wider church to the vocation efforts of religious institutes?

Jesuit scientist and theologian Pierre Teilhard de Chardin was sociologically astute when he said, “The future belongs to those who give the next generation reason to hope.” We believe that the figures we report here show that there is both hope and challenge in the full complexity of religious life in the United States today.

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