

Your Future and Ours

Vocation Ministry Then & Now

Photo & text by Sr. Carol Bredenkamp, SCC

As a “professional” vocation minister in my religious community, my work is different from that of my “counterparts” of 60, 50, 40 and 30 years ago. Actually, sixty years ago a designated vocation minister was unheard of. Catholic parents prayed that one of their many children would choose religious life or the priesthood. It was an honor to have a Sister or Brother or Father in the family. In Catholic schools across the country, Sister would ask the 8th grade or 12th grade classes who might be entering the seminary or convent and several hands were sure to go up. The young person or his/her parents would mention this desire to Sister and that teen would soon be on the way to the seminary or motherhouse. In the case of a girl or young woman thinking about entering our community, the Sister superior or the principal of the school would speak further with the parents, make sure the young person had everything she needed and arrange for her to arrive by train or car at Chicago or, later, Wilmette.

Fifty and forty years ago, the situation was similar. Sisters still comprised the greater part of a young person’s Catholic educational experience. Girls were allowed to enter after 8th grade, but some parents asked them to wait. If possible, the parents might take the teen to the motherhouse for a visit.

Thirty years ago when I entered, the process was a little different. The “culture of vocations” (meaning it was an honor to have a religious in the family and religious were seen and interacted with on a daily basis) was fading out. There were fewer Sisters in the school so religious communities such as ours appointed a Sister to be a “vocation minister”. This Sister would work with the teens and young adults who wanted to enter the community. “Come and See” weekends—where the young women could live with the community and reflect with others interested in entering—were scheduled about four times a year. The young women coming to these weekends were mostly high school graduates (or a few years out of high school). The young woman worked directly with the vocation minister to make sure she had all that she needed to

begin life in the convent. She herself arranged to arrive on a given date and brought with her all she needed.

Twenty and ten years ago, the vocation minister might give vocation talks in high schools where the Sisters taught. She would invite young women to visit the convent. Usually, however, the women who were looking at religious life were older: in their twenties, thirties, or even forties. The Internet was just becoming a reality and communities were looking at how this tool might help the vocation minister. Most communication, though, was still by letters sent through the U. S. Post Office or through phone calls.

Now, communication is at lightning speed. There is a religious life vocation match online that a woman can fill out on her own PC. Then, the vocation minister contacts her either via e-mail, text message, or maybe a phone call. The vocation minister is on *Facebook* and *Twitter*. She is encouraged to post films of the Sisters in ministry on *YouTube*. Phone calls and visits are more frequent. Although “Come and See” weekends are making a comeback, there is more emphasis on individual discernment. The vocation minister is now inundated with questions about charism, ministry, prayer life, community life. Women today have many more options to minister in and for the Church than in previous eras, so they want to know what makes religious life “different”.

And that is an overview of vocation ministry: then and now. †



A young woman at the front gates of the motherhouse in Wilmette, IL. (Photo ca.1949 – courtesy of SCC Western Province Archives)



Vocation Ministry Today

Sr. Carol and Haley display a poster made by the young woman at a recent Confirmation retreat at which Sr. Carol spoke.

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