News
Spirituality
News
Coronavirus
Spirituality



A November 2019 Nuns and Nones retreat at Mariandale, the Dominican Sisters of Hope's retreat center in Ossining, New York, from left: Maryknoll Sr. Arlene Trant, Dominican Sr. Patricia Magee, Dominican Sr. Connie Koch and Gabrielle Drouant (Courtesy of the Dominican Sisters of Hope)



by Soli Salgado

View Author Profile

ssalgado@ncronline.org

Join the Conversation

April 16, 2020

Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

How is the coronavirus affecting your community? Submit an example we may use in future coverage.

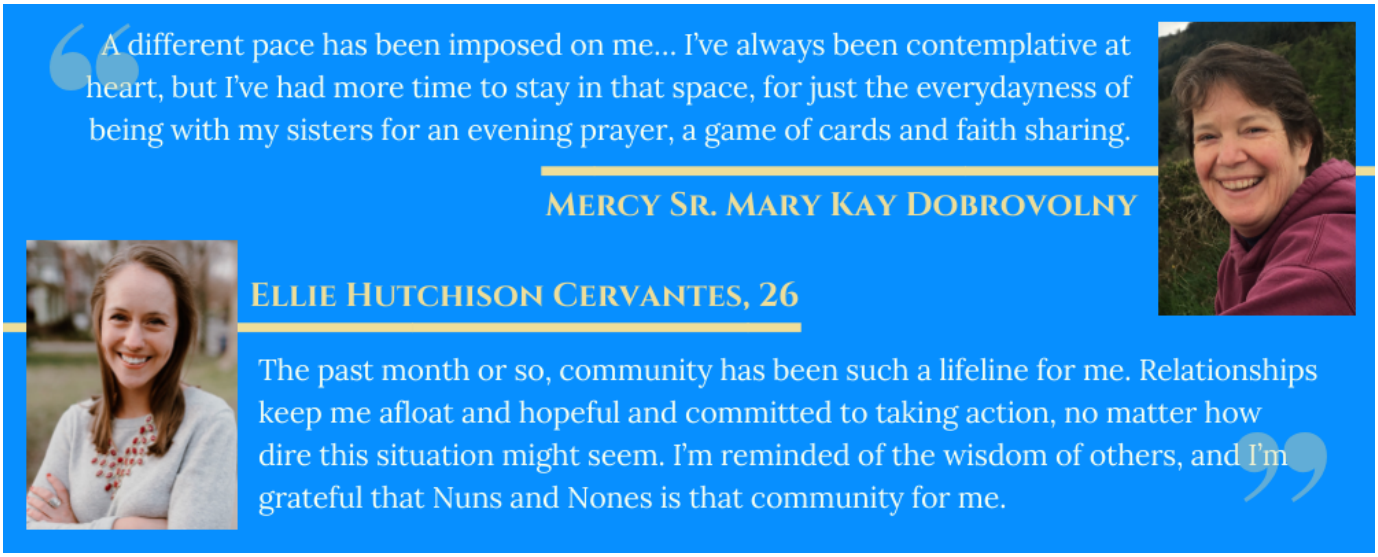
For four years, the Nuns and Nones movement has been cultivating an intergenerational community that addresses the existential questions now plaguing the rest of the world amid a global pandemic.

A heightened longing for community coupled with more time for contemplation and a hope that today's defeats yield a more just future: These preoccupations are snowballing in the minds of most living in lockdown as health officials encourage social distancing to curb the global spread of the coronavirus.

They are the same thoughts and desires that have animated Nuns and Nones since its founding in 2016, when deep dialogue between women religious and spiritually curious millennials grew into a national network of friendships. (Some prefer to call the movement Sisters and Seekers; most of the participating millennials don't identify as "none," shorthand for the box one would check by religion.)

For the group, those original reflections are now magnified.

And while the guiding conversational themes remain largely unchanged — exploring creative contemplation, community life and social justice issues — their prescience and relevance amid the rampant anxiety today are, for its members, not just a source of grounding peace, but also an indication that the movement is striking a fundamental chord.



"Being a part of these conversations has sharpened my understanding of the moment we're in," said Ellie Hutchison Cervantes, a 26-year-old master's student at Union Theological Seminary and one of the leaders of the New York City group.

Before the virus, local Nuns and Nones groups sprinkled throughout the country would meet both in person and via group video calls. Following the national trend, they've taken their regular sessions entirely online.

"It's given me a vital space to process what this moment means collectively and what we can learn from it in order to live differently in the future," Hutchison Cervantes said.

From a monastery in Erie, Pennsylvania, Benedictine Sr. Linda Romey echoed that examination of this crisis.

"A time like this makes one become a little more introspective by nature and ask, 'What's the meaning of all this? How do I make sense of this? Why is there so much suffering?' " she said. "And Nuns and Nones has been asking the same questions."

Insights from wisdom traditions

This intergenerational, interfaith alliance is pitched as a mutual exchange of practices and wisdom. Sisters frequently emphasize the reciprocity in these relationships; it's not just millennials taking notes.

But right now, young people recognize the historic nature of this pandemic and the ensuing isolation and economic recession. With the majority of sisters being older than 70, millennials have become eager to learn from their experiential wisdom.



Dominican Sr. Connie Koch, second from right, said Nuns and Nones organizers tell sisters they want an even ratio of sisters and millennials so everyone can have a one-on-one exchange at their spiritual retreats. The June 2019 retreat's organizing team, from left: Eddie Gonzalez, Diana Marin, Jamie Fleishman, Gina Ciliberto, Koch, and Dominican Sr. Janet Marchesani. (Courtesy of the Dominican Sisters of Hope)

Hutchison Cervantes said she's learned from them to "have a larger view of time, zooming out and not getting caught up in the day-to-day changes."

"People historically have risen to the occasion and overcome the challenges or figured out ways to live amid them. We can similarly find ways to live amid this and find beauty and meaning and inspiration for tomorrow despite the challenges that surround us," she said.

However, the need to stay inside — critical for people over the age of 65, who are at higher risk of severe illness — has made this a unique crisis for sisters, who are accustomed to helping those who are vulnerable from the frontlines. They, like the millennials, are now left wondering what their role and response should be.

"There's a part of me that just feels like I should be somewhere doing something," said Romey, who is a key collaborator in Nuns and Nones.

Diana Marin, a 30-year-old master's student at Harvard Divinity School and a member of the Nuns and Nones core team, which leads the group's operations, said her class readings are helping her cope with the uncertainty, particularly the early Christian contemplative writings that "stand outside of time."

"Reading these texts makes me realize we're in one of those timeless moments, which makes it more important to look at wisdom traditions for the insights that they have because it's directly relevant," she said.



Marin, who lives in Cambridge, Massachusetts, said that, right now, she's drawn to ancient sources that "make meaning at a time when everything seems devoid of meaning. There have been folks who have been holding that for centuries, and I find a lot of solace in having them accompany me."

Seeking meaning is inherent with the human experience, Romey said, pointing to Buddha, Abraham and St. Benedict as examples of the relentless metaphysical quest.

"All the way back to the nomadic tribes, there was something that called them out of themselves, and it still is in us today," she said. "Human beings have always looked for what Nuns and Nones are looking for. At a time like this, I feel like it's intensified."

Consistency in community

Often, a conversation with a millennial member of Nuns and Nones closely resembles one with a sister when they're discussing the group, like countrymen united by dialect. But their commentary on this crisis is practically indistinguishable.

Their shared thinking and constant communication are epitomized in their overlapping reflections and jargon — quoting the same author they are reading, such as theologians Walter Brueggemann or Howard Thurman; reflecting on how "hope is a muscle" that needs to be strengthened, an image inspired by the podcast On Being; and thinking about how they can adapt their pursuit of "sacred hospitality."



Dominican Sr. Connie Koch with Leah Feder at a June 2019 Nuns and Nones retreat at Mariandale, the Dominican Sisters of Hope's retreat center in Ossining, New York (Courtesy of the Dominican Sisters of Hope)

Sr. Connie Koch, a Dominican Sister of Hope in Ossining, New York, sees these unlikely friendships as a new ministry: "I minister to and am ministered by it."

"I am an extrovert off the charts, so in my apartment here, it's been a little bit tough," she said. Koch said she is trying to experience quarantine as a lengthy, quiet Sabbath, invoking a quote by Brueggemann: "Sabbath, in the first instance, is not about worship. It is about work stoppage."

Rachel Plattus sees physical isolation as an opportunity to "go deeper in our personal practice," using just "the resources that we have around us and inside of us."

For the 32-year-old member of the core team, the experience of supporting one another "in collective practice over a long period of time means that in this moment when we really need those practices, we're already in the habit of doing that with each other and for each other," she said. "We have those muscles."

With New York City being the epicenter of the pandemic in the United States, the divinity school Hutchison Cervantes attends encouraged its students to leave the city if they're able, leading her and her husband to live with her parents in Minnesota. Her living situation suddenly upended, Hutchison Cervantes said she's found "comfort and peace" in the consistency with the Nuns and Nones community.

"It's a source of continuity with so much chaos taking place," she said. "Nuns and Nones is one thing that's stayed the same."

Local groups from different states now join each other's calls, a "cross-pollination that's exciting and enriching," she said. Her group now meets weekly rather than monthly.

Marin phrased this online blend of groups as shifting "our geographic location to map onto a 'soul-spirit' location," finding that everyone is more willing to ask and respond to deeper questions.

Advertisement

"I've come to realize there's such vulnerability in isolation," she said. "We're sharing parts of ourselves that are hidden, whether that's our pain or our sorrow or the parts of us that are hard to share. ... But that part of us is also being invited to be witnessed. "

For Mercy Sr. Mary Kay Dobrovolny, the change in her Nuns and Nones conversations is noticeable less in what's being said and more in "the attentiveness to each other on the heartfelt, emotional level."

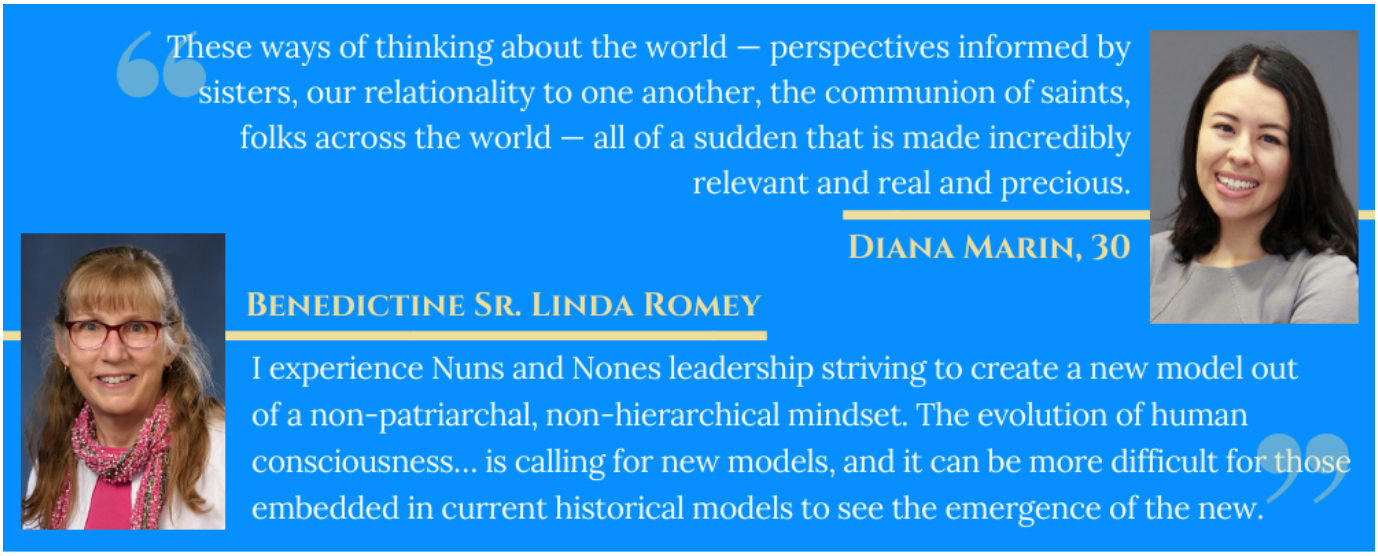
"There's something for me in the listening and being listened to that is hugely transformative. And that happens in community, to be able to see and be seen in profound ways that I think make us more whole," something she experiences in her Mercy community as well as with Nuns and Nones, she said.

"It truly is a community of significance for me. It's become that."

Hope for a transformed future

A founding characteristic of Nuns and Nones — and one that helped seal the bond between millennials and sisters — is their shared concern for social justice issues.

In the time of the coronavirus, that common passion translates into a common hope that the United States' systemic injustices the pandemic has laid bare will remain in the collective conscience when the dust has settled. For Nuns and Nones, the ideal is a transformational reckoning.



"Once we're back out in the world, can we take the use of this time and give that in new ways to those who are going to be hurting in new ways from lost jobs, from death, from illness?" Romey asked. "What will our response be when we're back in the world?"

"If we're not thinking that way, then what's the purpose of community, the purpose of prayer? It is not to take it and keep it; it's to give it away. And that's where Nuns and Nones is coming from, also."

Hutchison Cervantes said this is "a moment in which the injustices and inequalities in our current systems are being exposed."

"It's clear we need to learn how to live differently together," she said, noting that in an "individualist and a capitalist society, the majority of us don't know how to live in a mutually beneficial and interdependent way."

"Nuns and Nones feels particularly relevant in this moment because it's a place where we can remember our responsibility to one another and all living beings. It's also a prophetic community in which we actively envision a more just and beautiful world, and right now especially, in difficult and chaotic times, we need those communities of support that help make those visions a reality."



For Dobrovolny, there's a "dramatic message" in experiencing a virus that "knows no borders."

"How might that fact change how we look at our global community? And can we find ways of being family, how we're all in this together?"

The enhanced appreciation for community and contemplative practices that are a consequence of today's self-isolation, Plattus said, doesn't "have to be simply a crisis response."

"It doesn't have to be the kind of thing where you mobilize in a moment and create these beautiful networks and beautiful ways of resourcing together, and it goes away when the crisis has passed. We don't want that," she said. "We build this for the long haul, and sisters are really important teachers in that."

[Soli Salgado is a staff writer for Global Sisters Report. Her email address is ssalgado@ncronline.org. Follow her on Twitter: @soli_salgado.]

This story appears in the **Nuns and Nones** feature series. View the full series.