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Srs. Sujata Jena and Goretti Nayak receive solemn blessings from Archbishop John Barua during their final vows as members of the Congregation of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary on Oct. 11, 2014, at St. Vincent Catholic Church in Bhubaneswar, Odisha, India. (Courtesy of Sujata Jena)



by The Life Panelists

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Editor's note: Next month's installment of *The Life* will be the last for this set of panelists. We are now accepting applications for our 2021-22 *The Life* panel. [Here is how to apply](#). The deadline is Sept. 30.



(GSR logo/Toni-Ann Ortiz)

This month, *The Life* panelists took a step back to look at vowed life from other perspectives. They speculated about the purpose of vows, how the concept of a vow might be broadened, and what new vows might be appropriate for today. They responded to these questions:

Does your congregation take a vow or promise in addition to or aside from the vows of poverty, chastity and obedience? If you were designing religious life anew for our day and time, would you invent another vow? What would it be and why?

R is a Sister for Christian Community from Manila. The five years she spent as a missionary in Peru and El Salvador as well as her apostolate in the Philippine urban slums have provided invaluable insights and experiences that helped shape her views on social justice and the preferential option for the poor. As a journalist, she writes for a travel trade publication in Singapore and has written for newspapers and magazines in the Philippines, Hong Kong, Singapore and Saudi Arabia.

The [Sisters for Christian Community](#) take a fourth vow of individual financial responsibility aside from the traditional evangelical vows of poverty, chastity and obedience (which we express as "serving, loving and listening").

The extra vow means each sister has to be self-supporting throughout all phases of her life. She is expected to pay for all her material needs, including education, food and housing, health care, retirement and death, as we don't have a convent or motherhouse.

Our sister Fran Campbell — one of the first sisters to work with our founder — says that to be self-supporting is "a vow, not a promise" because, in the words of our founder, [Lillanna Kopp](#), "promises are easily changed or weakened. A vow can be neither."



The vow day of Christian Community Srs. Rosa Ocampo and Cornelia Santos in Bohol, Philippines, on April 25, 2016. Santos is fourth from left in the first row; Ocampo is behind her between the two priests. (Courtesy of Rosa Ocampo)

Fran explains that each Sister for Christian Community "vows to be financially responsible for herself in order not to be the financial responsibility of others" as she "shares the same stress and concerns as those whom she serves in her ministries."

I've always been working, so the fourth vow has been no big deal until my job got affected by the global pandemic. I estimate that jobless, I could live off my savings for three to four years. I'm loan-free, live simply and now have a house, ending decades of a nomadic lifestyle.

But at 60, medical appointments become frequent, and the costs of medical procedures have ballooned by at least 20% from pre-pandemic levels. Sobering thoughts ensue: It's tough to get another job at my age. I cannot afford to get sick. And what if I live up to 70 or 80, penniless?

With no income, scant savings and lacking social security in the Philippines (that's another Third World story), I was forced to stop paying the tuition of a university student I had committed to support until he graduated. Donating to a couple of cause-oriented groups is also no longer sustainable.

Yet as I write this, COVID-19 has [claimed](#) the lives of more than 30,000 Filipinos and rendered millions jobless. The situation is expected to worsen as inept, corrupt and immoral government leaders and politicians continue to profit from the people's woes.

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Fran says a fourth vow is always related to two things: current historical events and the particular charism or purpose of a religious order. In the Sisters for Christian Community's case, she points out that the fourth vow is "a response to the civil rights and women's equality movements in the USA during the late 1960s and early 1970s: we share the burdens of one another equally."

With the pandemic raging globally and dirty politicians exploiting the masses, a fifth vow is in order: *[Duc in altum](#)*, "Go into the deep water." Get out of your comfort zone, away from security into insecurity, get involved in the country's affairs.

Row further away from the shore into the high seas, like Peter, who reluctantly agreed with Jesus to go into deep water where he discovered the depth of his grace and left everything to follow him ([Luke 5:1-11](#)).

[Kathleen K. K. K.](#) is from England, a member of the Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary (Loreto). Most of her ministry was spent teaching English and religious education in secondary school and college, but she taught English in Romania over the holidays. She also served at a Loreto mission in Bolivia for four years. She is the justice, peace and integrity of creation coordinator for her region and schools and worked for several months at the congregation's nongovernmental organization office in New York. She does volunteer work teaching English as a second language.

Taking vows is a serious decision, and in religious life — even in the 21st century, and enshrined as they are in mystery and solemnity — they still have relevance for our time.



A vow that embraces ecology would challenge us to understand and confront the major issues around climate change while looking more intensely at the spirituality of Ignatius and the guardianship of the Earth. (Art by Katy Jaques)

However, through the global pandemic, the need for a new vision of how we live in our world has emerged. It has forced us to rethink our priorities and reminded us

about what matters most in our lives as individuals and as a global community. Almost without realizing it, we are doing things differently and embracing, in small steps, new ways of living.

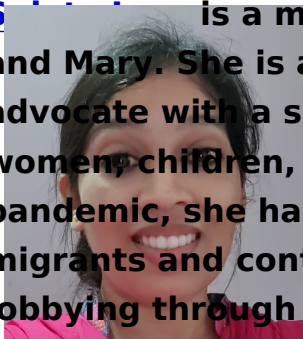
The Second Vatican Council (1962-65) called religious congregations to a time of [aggiornamento](#) in which they were advised to go back to the charism of their founders in order to breathe new life into the church and the world. I entered religious life as the council was ending. For congregations like my own, revisiting our charism included going back to our constitutions and recommitting to the spirituality of St. Ignatius of Loyola.

Finding God in all things is at the core of Ignatian spirituality and is rooted in our growing awareness that our world is sacred and that we are its custodians. In this respect, globally, the lives of people of all faiths (and none) are being redefined by the tenets of "[Laudato Si', on Care for Our Common Home](#)" and the vision of a Jesuit pope. At the same time, the United Nations [Climate Change Conference](#) taking place in Glasgow here in the U.K. in November has galvanized the world into action.

For this reason, I am suggesting a vow that embraces ecology. This would challenge us in a more direct and formal way to understand and confront the major issues around climate change while looking more intensely at the spirituality of Ignatius and the guardianship of the Earth, which is the responsibility of each living person.

It is a radical decision to reevaluate how we live and to lead by example in terms of care for our planet. A fourth vow would commit us to become more informed, more actively engaged in advocacy and more accountable for our actions or lack of them.

As we approach the 60th anniversary of Vatican II, is it time for a new aggiornamento? Could a vow of ecological conversion be the answer?

 **S...** is a member of the Congregation of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary. She is a human rights activist, a freelance journalist and an advocate with a special interest for the cause of the poor, Dalits, tribal women, children, minorities and migrants. Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, she has been actively involved in the safe return of the migrants and continues to work for their rights through advocacy and lobbying through networking with government administrations and civil society groups. Currently, she is working as the deputy director of the

Excellent IAS Academy in Bhubaneswar in the eastern Indian state of Odisha. She is the coordinator of the social projects of the congregation.

I am a final professed sister of the [congregation](#) of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary. I am convinced my vocation to religious life comes along with an abundance of God's unconditional love, mercy and blessings.

We sisters respond to the gratuitous call of God through the public profession of temporary vows (nine years maximum) and then perpetual vows of chastity, poverty and obedience.



Sacred Heart Srs. Sujata Jena and Goretti Nayak prostrate before God as a complete surrender to his will during their final vows Oct. 11, 2014, at St. Vincent Catholic Church in Bhubaneswar, Odisha, India. (Courtesy of Sujata Jena)

If I were to design a religious life anew for our day and time, I would propose a fourth vow. It is a vow against gossip.

What is "gossip"? The Oxford dictionary [defines](#) it as informal talk or stories about other people that may be unkind or not true. Merriam-Webster [defines](#) a gossip as a person who habitually reveals personal or sensational facts about others.

How are religious men and women engaged in gossiping? In religious communities, it usually consists of one or more members talking about someone's limitation in her/his absence. An inner dynamism forms within the group, and judgment is passed on the victim of the gossip.

Sometimes, in our community gatherings we talk less about ourselves, the people we serve, or the challenges in our lives; rather, we talk about others, even those not necessarily members of our community. Someone brings up a topic that engages others, who become active or passive gossipers.



Pope Francis leads the Angelus from the window of his studio overlooking St. Peter's Square at the Vatican Sept. 6, 2020. During his address, the pope spoke about the dangers of gossip in the church. (CNS/Vatican Media)

We know gossip is undesirable and fruitless, and yet we engage almost spontaneously — perhaps, in many cases, because we have nothing much to do.

Why should we take a vow against gossiping? Gossip is unbecoming to our religious life. We are not encouraged to talk one way about people in front of them and a different way behind their backs. Gossip humiliates and demeans a person. Gossip annihilates and assassinates their character.

On Jan. 21, 2018, Pope Francis [addressed](#) some 500 contemplative nuns and urged them not to succumb to gossiping in their convents, comparing it to terrorism.

"Gossip is like a bomb. ... [One] throws the bomb, destroys and calmly walks off," he said.

Gossip destroys people's lives. I know that we have lost some religious as a result — they left communities as they no longer wanted to be victims of gossip. Besides that, it wastes the gossipers' time and energy and weakens the very purpose of religious life just for a meaningless pastime that becomes a habit.

Everything we have is a gift from God. As stewards of these gifts, we must spend our time, gifts and privileges in building a rightful relationship with God, sisters/brothers, and Mother Earth.

Francis [summed](#) it up on Sept. 6, 2020: "Please, brothers and sisters, let's try not to gossip. Gossip is a plague worse than COVID. Worse. Let's make a big effort: no gossiping!"

[Gillian](#) is a former Passionist Nun of St. Gabriel's Monastery who served on the leadership team and as novice director. She is the co-founder — along with Bernadette Bostwick and the late Passionist Fr. Thomas Berry — of an emerging community, the Sisters of the Earth Community at Green Mountain Monastery in northern Vermont. With degrees in Christian spirituality and clinical psychology, she studied



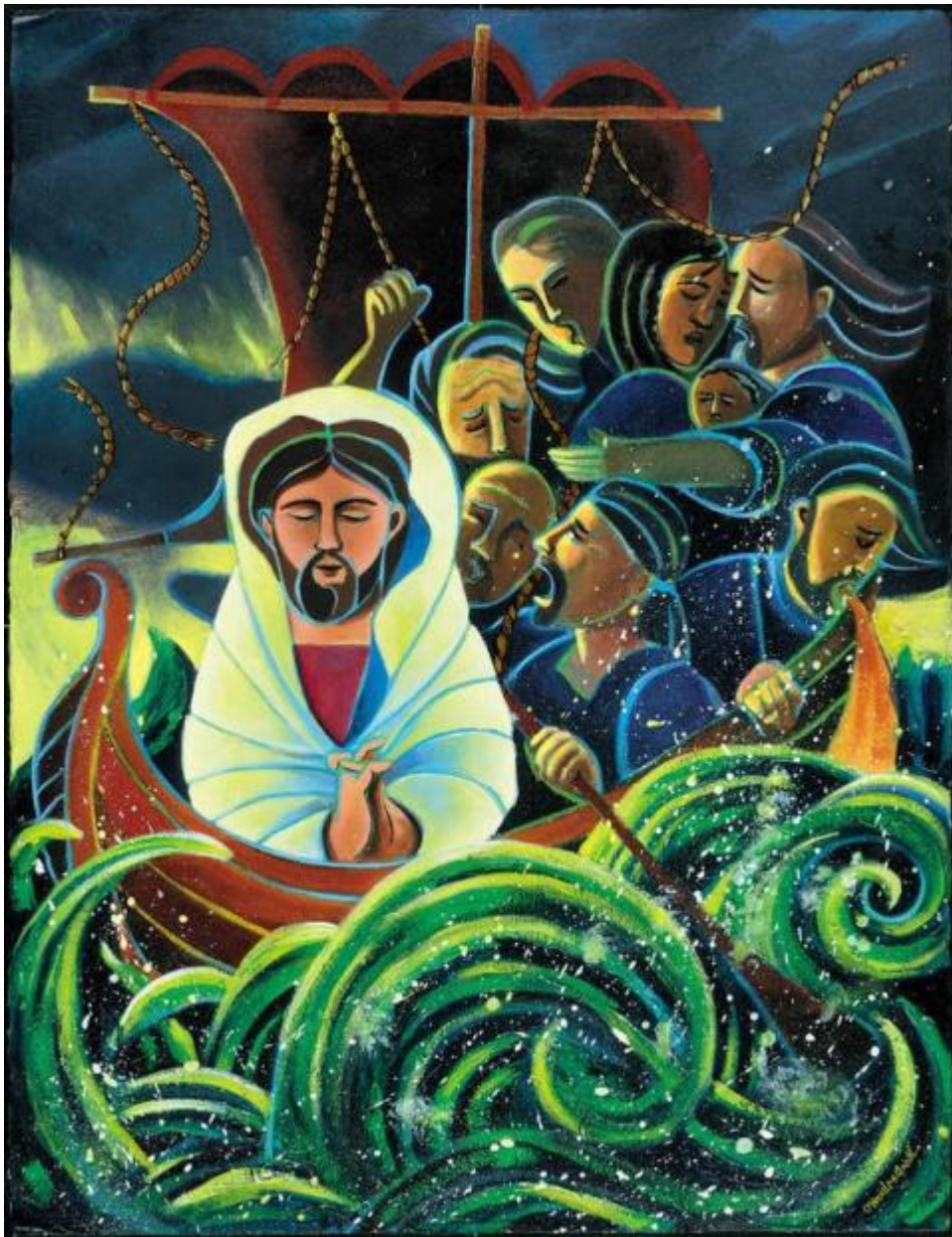
liturgical dance and is a choreographer of that style. The founder of Homecomings: Center for Ecology and Contemplation, she travels around the world giving retreats and programs to religious men and women about the Great Work and the Universe Story.

"When the crowded Vietnamese refugee boats met with storms or pirates, if everyone panicked all would be lost. But if even one person on the boat remained calm and centered, it was enough. It showed the way for everyone to survive."

—[*Thich Nhat Hanh*](#)

The Gospel image of Christ in the boat has appeared again and again in significant ways since my early days in religious life, becoming our "fourth vow" and inner charism as Sisters of the Earth Community.

Every new foundation in the Catholic tradition that comes into existence has both an exterior mission as well as an interior dynamism that is given as gift from the hand of the Divine rather than decided upon by the community.



"No Storm Can Shake my Inmost Calm" by Salesian Br. Michael McGrath (Courtesy of Michael McGrath)

The interior charism of Christ in the boat was not something we chose, but a grace given that was forged from a particular stormy and chaotic struggle our community faced together for several years, interwoven with the collapse of the planet itself as it faces unprecedented storms at all levels of its existence.

An icon by Salesian Br. Michael McGrath, "No Storm Can Shake My Inmost Calm," has a special place in all of our houses, capturing the quality of our interior

orientation as we meet the world, our community and ourselves each day.

In the midst of the storm, Christ holds a position that is:

- Stable;
- Calm;
- Steady;
- Coherent;
- Centered;
- Aligned with source;
- Grounded in love.

The inner steadiness of Christ in the boat has so much gravitas and weight that "even the winds and sea obey him" ([Matthew 8:27](#)). It is our commitment to this orientation, so needed today, that invites us to hold this same position of energetic coherence and calm in the many chaotic and turbulent places within ourselves and world that are in need of a centering presence.

This "fourth vow" keeps us aware of the choice we have to hold steady and calm in many situations where previously we may have used those familiar four words: "I am losing it!"

[D L. Ciangio](#) is a Sister of St. Dominic of Caldwell, New Jersey. With an academic background in fine arts, religious studies, education and ministry, she has been the director (U.S. and international) of Renew International and the director of pastoral services for the National Pastoral Life Center. She has worked extensively in church leadership consultation. Most recently, she has been a university adjunct professor and the chancellor of the Archdiocese of Newark, New Jersey. She speaks, writes and publishes extensively.

Religious life is changing, we all know that. We see change all around us. For the future, I see not necessarily new vows, but maybe particular intentional focuses on how the vows allow us to be free to serve the world.

Many moons ago, as a newly professed sister, I went to a conference for artists at a Dominican motherhouse. An older sister checked me in and for some reason said to me, "Remember, our ministry as religious is to form the laity to take their rightful place in the church."

I admit, I did not know what she meant, but it stuck with me for my whole ministerial life and captured my imagination and influenced me in the ways I was and am called to serve.

As Dominicans, we have been formed with a focus on contemplation, study for truth, preaching, and action for justice. I would say that these are not only values, but ways of living.

Do these constitute vows? In some ways, yes. Jesuits emphasize contemplation and action and seeing God in all things. The Jesuits' [Magis experiences](#) for young people forms them in the ways of experiencing social needs that help them understand working for justice. Sisters of Charity, with a focus on the poor, follow the vision of St. Vincent de Paul with "boundless charity," whether they are in teaching, medical or justice ministries. Along with myriad justice efforts, many communities of sisters are involved in working toward sustainability for the Earth and reversing climate change.

All of these continue to be intentional ways of living out the vows in practical practice.



Students from Siena Heights and Barry Universities plant a rain garden in the Adrian Dominicans' permaculture gardens as part of the Environmental Leadership Education program. The garden catches rainwater runoff from a parking lot, filters it and allows it to soak into the soil. (Courtesy of the Adrian Dominicans/Ashley LeVigne)

The Gospel message is timeless, and we need to interpret and preach about the words and actions of Jesus in our age. Religious can step up and share their charisms of preaching, education and formation, service to the poor — and move the church forward.

I invited other religious to share what they thought a fourth vow could be, and they all said, "We have three great vows that need a depth of understanding in our contemporary time." They also emphasized the importance of living the charism of the order, society or congregation passionately and daringly.

The vows we make in religious life are there to help us serve more freely. But the promises or vows at baptism, which all Catholics renew each year, are the clarion calls to discipleship: to be the hands, feet, eyes and ears of Christ. As Teresa of Ávila [explained](#), "Christ has no body now on Earth but yours."

Going back to the formation and rightful place of the laity, I certainly understand what that older sister was saying to me now. As I look over the amazing ministries I have been privileged to work in and the thousands of people all over the world that I trained, I understand that all have a place and need to have a voice in the church.

The upcoming synod on [synodality](#) called by Pope Francis will hopefully do just that: hear the voices of the laity (and religious) in each country. Not only hear, but *listen* to the experience of people: their longings, pain, and desires for a church that is able to respond to our rapidly changing times.

So maybe a contemporary focus on living the vows today and in the future should be to broaden our call as religious and focus on forming disciples, continuing to accompany others to know Christ and continue his mission to renew the face of the

Earth. This is sorely needed!

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