Voices of Sisters

Religious Life



Annie Killian (second from right) professed first vows July 3 at the Dominican Sisters of Peace motherhouse in Columbus, Ohio, July 3, 2022. With her are sisters in the Collaborative Dominican Novitiate, Hyde Park, Chicago, where she spent her canonical year, 2020-21. They are, from left, Dominican Sister of Peace Cathy Arnold, Adrian Dominican Sr. Lorraine Reaume and Maryknoll Sr. Faithmary Munyeki. (Courtesy of Annie Killian)



by Sr. Annie Killian

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"Sister, remember to stir into flames the gift you have received!" With these words, members of Giving Voice blessed one another as we concluded the 2022 National Gathering in San Antonio, Texas. Over 75 sisters in the Giving Voice movement of women religious under 50 gathered July 14-17 at the Oblate Renewal Center to pray, listen and dream together.

We felt the Spirit moving among us, and our hearts burning with passion for our common call to be strong women-disciples of Jesus. The weekend included prayer and ritual, table conversations and Emmaus walks, storytelling and faith sharing. Our facilitator, Griselda Martinez-Morales, a Sister of St. Joseph of Lyon, invited us to reflect on our present experience of religious life. We yearn to live joyfully amid the myriad complexities of our suffering yet beautiful world. In the face of systemic poverty, hunger and war, women religious are called to imagine possible futures that will be sustainable and life-giving for all creation.

Giving Voice sisters embody the global reality of religious life today. Those who attended the gathering belong to some 40 congregations, come from 16 countries and speak 13 languages. The gift of our global sisterhood made the gathering a Pentecost experience!

I value Giving Voice for lifting up the rich cultural diversity among younger members based in the U.S. At our gatherings, organizers are intentional about de-centering white American culture, which is dominant in most religious congregations, and making space for sisters coming from African, Asian, and Latin and South American contexts. In conversation, we use a circle process that invites everyone into conversations that matter.

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A peer-led and self-organized movement, Giving Voice models horizontal leadership structures that eschew hierarchy. Members volunteer to serve on the planning team and committees. These opportunities to serve provide younger women religious with experience in leading prayer services, facilitating peer dialogue, and sharing their ideas and resources.

Giving Voice creates a space for envisioning the emergent future of religious life, as the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, or LCWR, is encouraging sisters to do. The truth is that our experience of religious life today is one of fragility and vulnerability. We need to be transparent about that reality and resilient in the face of it so that our communal life will be a sign of hope that endures and love that remains.

Sisters under 50 face a range of realities: some currently serve in leadership for their congregations, others belong to communities that have decided to close. Many carry the trauma of the marginalized people whom they accompany in ministry. We grieve the loss of older sisters who brought us into religious life as we take up the weight of responsibility, uncertainty and suffering they have borne.

Yet we are collectively convinced that vowed life is a gift to us, our church and world. To accompany one another and build resilience, we need the space that Giving Voice creates to share our sacred stories of God's life-giving love.

As a Dominican Sister of Peace, I feel that I have received gifts from my experience of initial formation in my congregation that I can share with my Giving Voice sisters. Our Ministry of Welcome team encounters every discerner and incoming member as an adult. Our formators seek to learn about and respect each woman]s culture. The process is personalized, not coercive.

Newer members in my congregation have benefited from such culturally sensitive, adult formation, as have sisters in groups with similar emphases. We are equipped to support our peers whose experiences have not been as beneficial. Hearing about our program can help other sisters ask for what they need from their own congregations.

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In light of the increasingly global makeup of younger cohorts in religious life, incoming members need formation programs that develop skills for healthy intercultural living. Many of us have inter-congregational and even inter-charism experiences during novitiate and know firsthand the positive stretching and growth that can happen within a healthy intentional community.

During my canonical year at the Collaborative Dominican Novitiate in Hyde Park, Chicago, I lived with Dominicans from different congregations and a Maryknoll sister. Listening to both Dominican and Maryknoll sisters share their experience of vowed life in community and ministry imparted to me this wisdom: Our mission to make God's love visible begins in community. We witness to God's love for the world by the quality of our communal life — by encountering one another with mutual respect. The more diverse our communities, the more powerful and prophetic our witness will be.

I left the 2022 Giving Voice gathering inspired by sisters who are forming new inter-congregational and intentional communities. Their experiments fill me with a sense of adventure and boldness, reminiscent of the spirit of *ad experimentum* (as an experiment) that women religious embraced after the Second Vatican Council. The present time is another transitional moment in the history of religious life, and it impels new Spirit-led ventures.

The sisters of Giving Voice are grateful for the LCWR congregations whose support made our gathering possible. We return with hearts aflame. Bonded by our love for Jesus, we walk in solidarity as peers in religious life — Gospel women, fully alive!