Voices of Sisters
Religious Life

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Recently my community sent me some articles from the National Catholic Reporter and Global Sisters Report. One I especially liked was by Sr. Joan Chittister, who succinctly portrays the message of Abbot Arsenius in her Sept. 15th column, "Will religious life rise again — and should it?" Abbot Arsenius teaches us religious to come down from the pedestal of "we know everything" to learn from poor and ordinary folk.

Phyllis Zagano, in her October column, questioned whether the Synod on Synodality process can be hijacked by the unhappy senior cardinals. I think she is right in her conviction that it will not, and the conservatives will not be able to hold back the progress of progressive religious endeavors. I think there will be an evolutionary rediscovery of new and creative ways to employ consecrated religious leadership for the digital era.

Institutional religious leadership today is literally overworked. Many are expressing uncertainties about the future. The era of evolution invites us urgently to harken to the winds of change — as the saying goes, "The measure of intelligence is the ability to change."

I was stunned to read that, in 2013, CatholicCulture.org reported, "The secretary of the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life said in an October 29 address that over 3,000 men and women religious leave the consecrated life each year. … The causes, he said, include 'absence of spiritual life,' 'loss of a sense of community,' and a 'loss of sense of belonging to the Church.' "

When I visit them, I notice that men and women religious leaving the institutional life seem to be searching for freedom from institutional and canonical hazards, and are looking for vowed leadership that responds to the challenge of digital evolution and are single minded in their quest to serve God by serving humanity.

With this background, I interviewed a few sisters and one religious brother and a priest who left the institutional religious life, and I asked why they left.

The responses:

> I joined as a nurse to serve the poor people in the remotest areas of India or anywhere in the world and also, I am a writer. Till today I am transferred from one community to another to look after only senior sisters who are bedridden and many died while I cared for them. Today I have a deep satisfaction of serving the poor with medical needs and also, my fifth book is in print.
>
> I left religious life because, it was worse than military lifestyle. Military people work for eight hours and after some years of service they enjoy the benefits of holidays with their loved ones and have a lot more other benefits, with which they serve the nations as well as their families. As a religious from morning till night, I have to be always on the march to serve the institutional needs.
>
> I just left, because I am having migraine headache ever since I joined. I found it too much to work as procurator for dealing with accounts and fundraising.
>
> I left just before my ordination. Before joining religious life, I worked as a public relations officer for a multinational corporation. I was tired of that money and pomp. I wanted peace of mind and serve people and here I was kept busy with constructions of the buildings and accounts. …
>
> I left as a religious priest. Maggie, if only you [knew] the inside stuff of male religious community, you [would] never step into their institutions … it's a competitive world in itself, the survival of the fittest.

These responses made me think that there ought to be immense possibilities for creative ways to envision consecrated religious life for the digital era.

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In another article in NCR, Kate McElwee says that the Vatican's admission "that the teaching on women's ordination is not a consistently held belief among Catholics reveals a spirit of openness and accountability to the people of God."

Neither is religious life a consistently held belief. Given the evolutionary spirit and events everywhere, religious life for the digital era needs reenvisioning, switching gears from doing works of charity to working for systemic change. Instead of continuing to open orphanages and old age homes, we need to work on the root causes: the family value system.

The arrival of the digital era is a challenge to rethink and redesign formation patterns for new adult entrants with new digital skills. We no longer can afford to turn adults into obedient, docile attendants of a patriarchal system.

Formation needs to prepare candidates to face the haunting realities of migration, violence, climate change, politically motivated religious persecution, jingoism, and racial intolerance.

After the Second Vatican Council, there was a creative emergence of communities less dependent on institutions and authorities, and a redefinition of vows and community: every being belongs to my community and I belong to the wider global community of all beings.

In her keynote address Sept. 22, 2022, to the 17th National Convention of the Forum of Religious for Justice and Peace, Apostolic Carmel Sr. Maria Nirmalini, the president of the Conference of Religious of India, said, "Many congregations for that matter

are pretty limited in [their] thinking and perhaps even stuck with institutions as mere administrators."

Pope Francis, in his apostolic letter for the Year of Consecrated Life, said that "the apostolic effectiveness of consecrated life does not depend on the efficiency of its methods. It depends on the eloquence of your lives." This brings us closer to what Jesus told the young man, "*If you want to be perfect, go and sell all you possess. … Then come, follow me*" (Matthew 19:21).

While I was guiding a discernment retreat for a small group of sisters in California, they shared their innovative approaches to the present crisis of homelessness and immigrants. Since there are very few vocations to their community, their innovative response to the crisis was to move into a small apartment and build houses on their huge property for low-income families. They made a deal with the builders, to build a maximum number of houses with minimal ecological destruction. I witnessed their vision: *Sharing what we are and what we have with the poor and needy.* And there are other examples.

Our digitally driven world has given rise to cosmic consciousness, expanding our sense of God beyond the confines of religious places of worship. The interconnected world — with an explosion of digital creativity and technical knowledge — brings creative dimensions to evangelization without requiring institutions like convents and seminaries. People from every caste, creed and religion have found ways of coming together and feeding the hungry, clothing the naked and sheltering the homeless.

I have seen many young adults all over the world dedicating their lives for humanitarian acts of service, besides doing their regular jobs and looking after their families. Can we call them consecrated religious?

The digital era invites us to prepare ourselves with profound inner transformation, becoming active social change agents on behalf of the poor, who are socially and politically exploited and marginalized.

Is this a time to stop advocating *my community* vs. *your community*, *my congregation* vs. *your congregation*, *my religion* vs. *your religion*, and foster a new identity of inclusiveness and coming back to our "Common Home"?

May there be new sudden springs of consecrated religious life for the digital era.