Blog
Religious Life



(Freepik)



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Editor's note: *"Evolving Religious Life," a new series from Global Sisters Report, is exploring how Catholic sisters are adapting to the realities of congregations in transition and new forms of religious life. While we write often about these trends, this particular series will focus more closely on sisters' hopes for the future.*



The book of Ecclesiastes tells us that there is a time for everything under the heavens.

"God has made everything appropriate to its time but has put the timeless into their hearts so they cannot find out, from beginning to end, the work which God has done" (Ecclesiastes 3:11).

I believe that *the timeless* that God has put into our hearts speaks of our yearning for the eternal. It is good that we do not know the beginning and the end because, despite the best of our certainties, life sometimes just changes, often from one day to the next, disrupting our perfect plans for the future. Yet, the timeless, the yearning for the eternal, or for God, the One who drove us to give up everything in search of our pearl of great price, is always there to lead us.

When life changes, or when we find out that we are no longer being faithful to God's call for our lives, we have to make a decision to either remain in this new and changed reality where we no longer fit, or we must open ourselves to the possibilities of a new one.

In religious life, women religious commonly experience sudden changes due to their community's merger, reconfiguration, or coming to fulfillment, among other reasons. At other times, religious women feel a call from God to go from one type of community to another, like from an apostolic to a cloistered community, or vice versa, what is often referred to as a "call within a call."

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The church has established a three-year process, based on canon law, to ensure that both the person transferring and the receiving community can determine if it is a suitable match. This time frame enables the individual to assimilate the new congregation's history, charism and mission, among other things. These guidelines are there for two reasons: to establish a solid basis for the transfer process and to prevent a rushed decision.

When a sister transfers between institutes, there can be many important consequences, both legal and canonical. To ensure a smooth transfer, it is important for both institutes involved to have open discussions, come to agreements, and document any decisions made, both between leaderships and with the transferring sister. Different types of institutes and societies may also have their own specific policies and procedures for transfers.

Although transfers between religious institutes are regulated by the church, the Code of Canon Law is very limited in its explanation of what a transfer is or requires. It simply requires agreement from both the departing and the receiving institutes, and a probation time of three years. Nothing is said about how to go about requesting one, and there is no information online or anywhere, really. Transfers, like exclaustration — a temporary separation of a perpetually professed member from his or her religious institute — are things people do not talk about.

I have been drawn to books and materials that explain change, transition, passage, adaptation, etc., ever since I began my process of transfer a little more than three

years ago from my original institute, where I was formed as a religious and professed vows, to a new monastic community, completely new to me.

This search led me to materials by William Bridges. In his book Managing Transitions: Making the Most of Change, Bridges explains that change is not the same as transition. He describes transition as a psychological process that people go through in order to come to terms with a new situation. In other words, change is external, while transition is internal. He also explains that all transitions consist of an ending, a neutral zone and a new beginning.

The stage that Bridges describes as the ending involves a lot of grieving for what used to be. In a transfer process, it is possible the community the person left could experience a form of grieving, perhaps not understanding why their sister has chosen to leave them for another religious institute. Even if they understand, there is still grieving.

The person transferring is answering God's call for her life. I recognize that the experience of transferring can vary greatly among individuals. In my specific case, it was an extremely vulnerable time as I left behind everything and everyone that once shaped my religious identity.

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I had never met anyone who had gone on exclaustration or transferred institutes until God called me to transfer, and then, I realized there isn't much information available. I persisted in my search for accompaniment and found Sr. Anne-Louise Nadeau, a Sister of Notre Dame de Namur who used to run a program called "Divergent Path." Nadeau, from 1987 to 2007, offered a five-day workshop along with a national team of five sisters from five different congregations. This program helped many women in the transfer process, as well as their departing and receiving congregations. The need for the program waned in 2005; since then, Nadeau has been helping sisters in the transfer process on a one-to-one basis, among many other ministries.

This year, there is a group of religious women in the transfer process to Benedictine communities. It took me a long time, but I found Nadeau and she is now journeying with us. From her, I learned that a transfer sister will forever live in a hyphen stage,

or as she said, I will learn to live "with a foot and a piece of my heart in two separate worlds."

And being the editor I am, I love the image: A hyphen connects, and forms something new.

I now realize how important accompaniment is through this journey of intense listening to God as one goes through the process of losing and recreating one's vocational journey, congregational history, etc. I wish that the church could establish more official guidelines, more avenues for help for people who transfer, go on exclaustration or go through the process of dispensation. The process is difficult, confusing and often scary.

It is time for the church to humanize these processes. It is time for us, in religious congregations, to remember that we are dealing with human beings, and that we need to develop more compassion for women who are going through these processes. The least we could do is help them when they are at their most vulnerable time.

I have been blessed to be accompanied by a spiritual director and wonderful mentors. With their help, I am learning to live as a hyphen, still navigating two worlds and beginning to shape a new one. I am very grateful for their guidance.

The journey of transferring has taught me to embrace vulnerability and seek guidance from others. I am slowly learning to remain true to myself and to God's call for my life. My journey of transfer has forced me to both accept change, and to hold onto my inner convictions as I continue to make this journey of consecrated life a meaningful and fulfilling one.

This article was published in Spanish on Nov. 13, 2024.

This story appears in the **Evolving Religious Life** feature series. View the full series.