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THE NATIONAL RELIGIOUS VOCATION CONFERENCE is a catalyst for vocation discernment and the full flourishing of religious life as sisters, brothers, and priests for the ongoing transformation of the world.

We long for accompaniment

MUSIC LOVERS everywhere recognize that in pop songs (and songs in many other genres) a common theme is the simple human longing for connection. Connection—be it through friendship, kinship, or romance—is hardwired into humans. We sing it out in bars, basements, and backrooms every day.

For that very reason, the Catholic notion of accompaniment is rooted in the fiber of our beings. Naturally we seek connection, help, relationship, and wisdom when we're on the precipice of a big decision. Those who come to us wondering if life as a sister, brother, or priest is right for them desire what most of the human race wants: connection and accompaniment.

Accompanying a person making major life decisions is a talent vocation directors and other ministers consciously seek to cultivate. The relationship is in demand, and it matters a great deal how ministers conduct themselves because they *can* do harm. But they also do much good, day in and day out.

I'm grateful to the writers in this edition for their efforts to chart what is largely uncharted territory. Whether your title is "vocation director," "companion," "pastor," "mentor" or "spiritual director," I hope this edition helps you. When our church routinely offers vocation accompaniment to young people, all of us will have something to sing about.

—Carol Schuck Scheiber, cscheiber@nrvvc.net



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Updates

Summer 2020 workshops

New and veteran vocation directors are invited to attend our Summer Institute in Chicago at Catholic Theological Union. It is a great opportunity to hone your professional skills and network with other vocation directors.

- Orientation Program for New Vocation Directors, July 8-12, 2020. Presented by Sister Deborah Borneman, SS.C.M., Father Adam MacDonald, S.V.D., and Sister Minnette Welding, I.H.M.
- Ethical Issues in Vocation and Formation Ministry, July 13-14, 2020. Presented by Father Raymond P. Carey, Ph.D.
- Behavioral Assessment 1, July 16-18, 2020. Presented by Father Raymond P. Carey, Ph.D.
- Is it Generational, Cultural, Personality or Pathology? July 16-18, 2020. Presented by Sister Donna Del Santo, S.S.J., Brother Sean Sammon, F.M.S., Ph.D., and Ms. Crystal Taylor Dietz, Psy.D.
- Understanding, Assessing, and Fostering Psycho-Sexual Integration, July 20-23, 2020. Presented by Sister Lynn M. Levo, C.S.J., Ph.D.

Convocation 2020 “Focus on Hope”

All who support a vibrant future for religious life are encouraged to attend the 2020 NRVC Convocation in Spokane, Washington, Oct. 30 - Nov. 2, 2020. The theme is “2020 Vision: Focus on Hope.” The keynote speakers for the event will be:



SISTER ANITA PRICE BAIRD, D.H.M. Baird, a former member of the HORIZON editorial board, belongs to the Society of the Daughters of the Heart of Mary. She worked for many years in leadership positions in her congregation as well as within the Archdiocese of Chicago. A recipient of numerous awards for

leadership and racial justice, her first love is “preaching God’s word.”



FATHER ANTONIO M. PERNIA, S.V.D. Pernia is a member of the Society of the Divine Word. He has held leadership positions in seminaries and S.V.D. institutions of higher education and has served in the Philippines and in Rome in S.V.D. leadership, including as superior general.

HORIZON and NRVC.net will continue to provide details of the upcoming Convocation as they become available.



GHR awards grant for data mapping

The GHR Foundation in January 2020 awarded a \$200,000 grant to NRVC to provide extensive data mining and visual display of the responses to its 2020 Study on Recent Vocations, which the GHR Foundation also helped fund. The study will be released in spring 2020.

With the goal of helping vocation directors in their ministry and using the most current data-mining and story-mapping software, NRVC will gather information on the newest entrants to religious life to create a vivid portrait of the characteristics, influences, and touch points that help shape the individual vocation journeys of men and women who chose to become Catholic religious sisters, brothers, and priests. ■



Sister Nicole Trahan, F.M.I. talks with Kyle McKinney at University of Dayton where she is a campus minister and a vocation minister.

It is a sacred moment to accompany another person on the journey toward self-understanding and spiritual awareness. Let's do it consciously.

Walking with someone in discernment

WHEN I WAS ASKED BY MY COMMUNITY to be vocation director, a host of emotions were immediately evoked. First, I was shocked. Then came trepidation and doubt. Dread and inadequacy followed. “Me? Vocation director? I don’t know how to do that. What a scary ministry! What if no one comes? What if the women who come don’t stay? What if I lead someone in the wrong direction? What if....?”

These responses may be familiar to HORIZON readers; I’ve discovered they are pretty normal responses to the initial invitation to serve in this role. But I also quickly learned how misplaced these responses are, and for one simple reason. Notice the questions I was posing to myself had one thing in common: I, me, I, I, I, me, me, me. As long as the focus or attention is on self, far too much ego is involved. And, as I have believed for a very long time, a ministry founded on ego will fail—and probably needs to. But a ministry that is a response of faithfulness to the working of the Spirit, one that is other-centered, has a much better chance of bearing fruit because it is properly focused: on the slow, steady work of God.

God calls, this we know. And God calls each of us to a vocation, a life

BY SISTER VIRGINIA HERBERS, A.S.C.J.



Sister Virginia Herbers, A.S.C.J., is an Apostle of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. She served in vocation and formation ministry for her community for eight years. She

sits on the Executive Committee of the NRVC Board of Directors, enjoys writing and speaking on a variety of spiritual topics, and currently ministers at St. Louis University as the Director of Spiritual Formation for faculty and staff.

to be lived with a particular way of loving, a unique expression of the life of God in each of us. Walking with someone in the discernment of a religious life vocation means that we must be profoundly aware that God is the real vocation director, and our ministry is meant to be one of accompaniment and discernment of the movements of the Holy Spirit. Given that, my reflections on vocation ministry have led me to believe that there are six crucial elements to walking with someone discerning a religious vocation: encounter, listening, accompaniment, open-handedness, gratitude, and trust. Each element builds upon the others, and certainly they are neither exhaustive nor sequential. I believe they are, however, critical to a healthy and wholesome companionship in discernment.

Encounter

The first step in any vocation ministry is meeting someone. During his pontificate, Pope Francis has spoken much about the need to foster a culture of encounter wherein we experience each person crossing our path as an encounter with the living Christ. I might encounter an individual in vocational discernment through an email, on a retreat, via video conference, or a number of other ways. Regardless, I am encountering a person. That email in my inbox is not just another task waiting for a response; that Skype appointment is not just another time commitment in my schedule; and that retreatant on the Come-and-See weekend is not a potential new member for my community. Each of these individuals is a person to be encountered in their own reality. The moment I stop seeing that email, phone call, or retreatant as a person with whom God has placed me in relationship, he or she quickly becomes a “thing” I need to do or, worse yet, part of an agenda of my own creation.

To encounter another is to relate to another person as a brother or a sister. Pope Francis puts it this way: “When we go into the street, everyone thinks of himself: he sees, but does not look; he hears, but does not listen. . . people pass each other, but they do not encounter each other. . . an encounter is something else entirely. Every encounter is fruitful. Each encounter returns people and things to their rightful place” (from his homily on September 13, 2016, available at <https://tinyurl.com/t8gce34>). Meeting someone who is discerning a religious vocation must mean more than being introduced, and it certainly means more than “finding” someone who might become a new member of my community. It means encountering a person to whom and through whom God is speaking, here

and now, and whose relationship with me and my community is yet to be discerned.

Listening

A wise woman in my life often said to me, “God gave you two ears and one mouth; be sure to use them in proportion.” This tenet has proven invaluable, particularly in the practice of accompanying people through the discernment process. To be a companion on someone’s journey with God is a sacred invitation, and so vocation ministry always takes place on holy ground. The most appropriate stance when we are on holy ground is to realize that we have been invited into a place of incredible privilege and personal vulnerability, and to respond accordingly—with great humility, reverence, and capacity to listen. I must listen to the other person’s story, both what she tells me and what she doesn’t tell me. I must listen to the movements of the Spirit, both in the discernment and in myself. I must listen to my instincts and to my biases. I must listen to the history of my community and its founding charism. I must listen to the voices of truth and goodness and right, and I must listen for the temptations to fear or grasp or doubt.

All this listening is rooted in a stance of selflessness, realizing that God is active in the life of the discernment, leading her in directions of greater love and life. I must listen with a sincere desire to eliminate in both myself and the discernment any preconceived outcomes or any false motives. Honesty is essential. If I fail to listen well and respond honestly, at best I lose opportunities to be helpful. At worst I risk influencing the discernment in negative ways. Cultivating a mind and heart that truly listen is vital for healthy vocational accompaniment.

Accompaniment

After all, it is God who has given the vocation to each one of us. None of us “chooses” our vocation, and no one of us could ever tell another what his or her vocation is. So vocational accompaniment is just that, accompanying another person to discern and discover to what path of life and love God has called her to for full flourishing. What a beautiful and grace-filled gift! As a musician, I have had multiple opportunities to accompany singers, choirs, church congregations, and other instrumentalists. “Accompaniment” is an artful dance of listening, gauging, expressing, and celebrating. It requires attentiveness and responsiveness, choice of approach, application of personal style, and a healthy degree of learning

as you go. This is true of vocational accompaniment just as surely as it is true of musical accompaniment.

When we are blessed to walk with a person discerning a religious vocation, we must be attentive and responsive to his needs, his questions, his inspirations, and his faithfulness to God. We must choose carefully how we walk with each person since there is no single right way to “do” vocational accompaniment. We must realize that just as God’s journey with this particular discernor is unique, so is God’s journey with me as vocation minister, and therefore I bring who I am and who God has called me to be to the ministry of accompaniment.

Although there is no right way to do vocation ministry, there assuredly are some wrong ways. It is therefore incumbent upon me to learn from the mistakes I make along the way so as to be more faithful to the ministry of spiritual accompaniment. By mistakes, I am not referring to missteps that do harm but rather to those that might not reflect an optimal approach. For example, I learned that returning phone calls to discerners while I was travelling was not a good practice. My attentiveness and ability to respond well was sub-optimal, to say the least. I learned the necessity of deliberately choosing the time and place where those return calls happened by making the mistake of choosing poorly in the first place. By contrast, any serious missteps in vocational accompaniment, such as applying pressure to candidates to make a decision, are better categorized not as “mistakes” but as detriments to vocation ministry and disrespectful of those in discernment. These should be red flags, alerting communities to rethink the assignment of the person charged with vocational accompaniment.

Open-handedness

When it comes to desired outcomes, it is very difficult to be open-handed. It is particularly difficult if I have been accompanying a young person who seems well-suited to religious life, who seems to embody a community charism, who is joyful and rooted and prayerful, and who discerns that he or she is not being called to a life of vowed consecration. In these circumstances, if the vocation director has been an attentive listener and a strong companion (as described above), and if the discernor has been honest and faithful all along the way, letting the person walk away from discerning the religious life can be quite painful. But there is no room for ego in the process of vocational accompaniment. The hard work for the vocation director is to hold gently and reverently each person with whom we walk, and to allow for God

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to lead them exactly where they are meant to go. Sometimes this will lead to a very gratifying and joy-filled decision when the person takes vows in our own religious communities; sometimes it will lead to what should be an equally gratifying and joy-filled decision to pursue a different direction of vocation. While difficult, vocation directors must be able to hold each person we accompany with open hands. We are given a sacred trust from God in the ministry of accompaniment; it is not ours to control but only to hold reverently.

This is also true if the person does decide to join our community. Knowing and keeping the distinction of vocation ministry and formation ministry is vital to the health and well-being of a religious vocation. The vocation director plays a unique and important role in the journey of vocational discernment, and once the candidate enters the community, the vocation director must be open-handed in allowing the journey of the entrant to continue with others in the community. Territorialism (“Suzanne really responds well to me and I have journeyed with her so long, maybe I should be the one to continue to work with her”) and favoritism (“Postulant A would be great in our community, but I sure hope Postulant B gets weeded out during formation”) can do major harm to the life of a community as well as to the discernment of newer members. Being open-handed means allowing God to direct the ongoing vocational journey of each individual, remaining present and supportive without being possessive or controlling.

Gratitude

Each person’s vocation is a unique gift from God. God calls us to fullness of life and love, and the journey that leads to that fullness is a beautiful and grace-filled one. When we as vocation directors are invited to be part of that journey with another person, we must first respond with gratitude. God is working and moving in the life of that person, and we have been asked to be witness to that. Even more than witness, we have been asked to be helper, companion, and mentor. This is no small request and we must find ways to maintain our sense of wonder, gratitude, and humility in the process.

When I lose my sense of gratitude, trouble soon follows. The time I dedicate to the discernment process of another must be a gift freely given. It is easy to be grateful when a discerners’ journey leads him or her to respond with the gift of a life given in religious consecration. What a joy and great celebration of gratitude this is! But when a discerners’ moves in a direction away from

religious life, it is easy to wonder if the time and energy I spent with her was “wasted” or “misguided.” Did I lead her well enough? Was there too much pressure or not enough encouragement? Did I do something wrong? How could she just walk away? The ego again pops up to distract me from the truth of the journey: that God is in charge and my vocational companionship has value in and of itself, regardless of outcome. The vocation is between God and the discerners—and when I have helped a woman along the way to discover more clearly who she is in the life of God, then I must remember to be grateful for the gift of both clarity and companionship.

I do not companion someone in order to lead her to my community. I am called to be a companion on a person’s vocational journey to help her draw closer to God and thus be stronger in faithfulness. No time spent in that endeavor can be wasted; it is all gift.

Trust

In the end, the fundamental truth of every vocation is that each one of us matters immensely. Who we are and how we grow into the person God has called us to be makes a difference not just for ourselves but for our world. Being faithful to the promptings of the Spirit and the enticement of God’s love is of critical importance for our lives and the life of all God’s people. We are all on a journey of holiness, each of us called to a special and unique way of being loved by God and in turn sharing that love with others. Our life of faith leads us to believe and to trust that “all things work together for good for those who love God and are called according to [God’s] purposes” (Romans 8:28). Trusting in God’s lavish, indiscriminate, and unconditional love leads us day by day into a relationship that will shape us into the image and likeness of the God who created us solely out of love and leads us ever closer to God’s very self.

In vocation ministry, we are particularly responsible for remembering to trust in this truth and often remind ourselves and those we accompany of its power. God is leading each one of us into God’s abundant life where we find peace, joy, fulfillment, and deep meaning. May each of us remember to take off our shoes and celebrate our common vocation: being the beloved of God. ■

Related reading

“Discovering ‘what God wants’ during vocation conversations,” by Brother Joel Giallanza, C.S.C., HORIZON Spring 2011.



A chance encounter gets Father Kevin DePrinzio, O.S.A. thinking about the story of the rich young man and its wealth of implications for vocation ministry.

Brother Mariano Mendez, O.S.B. talks with two young men.

Lessons in mentoring from the rich young man

NOT TOO LONG AGO, I ACCOMPANIED one of our friars to his biennial eye exam. His doctor was about an hour and a half from suburban Philadelphia where we both live, though in two different local communities. There is nothing like trying to drive with dilated pupils, so I suggested that I take the wheel on the way home. And it was a good thing, since by the time he finished, rain was pouring and rush hour traffic had just begun. We had to pull off the road, wait out the rain, and grab an early dinner. But it was a good excuse to catch up a bit.

Maybe it was the weather, but after we darted through the downpour to the restaurant and dried off a bit—neither of us had an umbrella—and were seated in a booth by the hostess, we found ourselves in a conversation of laments and complaints of “this one” and “that one,” of “this situation” and “that one.” Inevitably our dialogue turned to vocations, a natural topic for us since we have a deep mutual understanding of and passion for this ministry, having both worked in it.

BY FATHER KEVIN
DEPRINZIO, O.S.A.



Father Kevin DePrinzio, O.S.A. is an Augustinian who teaches in the Department of Theology and Religious Studies at Villanova University. He served in

vocation ministry for the Augustinians from 2007 to 2012, during which time he also served on the board and as a regional coordinator for the National Religious Vocation Conference.

THE STORY OF THE RICH YOUNG MAN

As he was setting out on a journey, a man ran up, knelt down before him, and asked him, "Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus answered him, "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. You know the commandments: 'You shall not kill; you shall not commit adultery; you shall not steal; you shall not bear false witness; you shall not defraud; honor your father and your mother.'"

He replied and said to him, "Teacher, all of these I have observed from my youth." Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said to him, "You are lacking in one thing. Go, sell what you have, and give to [the] poor and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me." At that statement his face fell, and he went away sad, for he had many possessions.

—Mark 10: 17-22

Our clothes may have dried, but the conversation was soaked in negativity. What began as good friends catching up and sharing what we initially believed to be healthy venting quickly headed into a downward spiral of doom and gloom. And so, the turn toward vocations did not have a chance. In that moment, we both claimed to "get it": the pressures and expectations, both spoken and unspoken; the everyone-in-the-community-has-an-opinion-about-what-the-vocation-director-could-and-should-be-doing mentality; the numbers game (even though we both know that vocation promotion is not about numbers, we also know of our deep desire for more to join in our company); and being "ghosted" by those whom we had understood to be really good inquirers and candidates full of so much potential for our way of life, those who simply walked away from discernment for reasons undisclosed to us, even though we "should" have been given them. We needed an intervention fast, someone or something to provide a shelter of perspective, or at least an umbrella, to save us from this rain-storm of destruction.

Meanwhile our waitress off and on had been trying to get our attention and jump into the conversation simply to take our drink order. She had already brought us water, and we kept saying to her, "Give us another minute." At the rate we were going, the so-called early dinner we were grabbing would have turned into a late-night snack. All of that changed when, as the waitress was about to walk away for yet another minute, she introduced herself to us.

"By the way," she interjected gently, "my name is Es-

peranza. I'm sorry that I forgot to tell you that earlier. I'll be serving you this evening."

We were served all right; served in the colloquial sense. My brother and I both looked at each other with eyes wide open, our pupils dilated with wonderment. "Esperanza," I said with shock. "What a beautiful and delightful name." It was exactly what we needed to hear.

An opening

Esperanza. That's right. Hope. Esperanza entered our space, our conversation, and finally got our attention. Her bright perseverance shone through the rain clouds that we brought in with us to our booth and opened us up to the realization of something more. At that moment, Esperanza waited on us—and really had been trying to wait on us all along. In fact, she had been waiting for us to allow her to wait on us and serve us. Esperanza had been there, but we were too busy to notice her at first, too busy indulging in what we claimed to be our passion with not much passion at all, sharing our supposed dreams for religious life with what instead sounded like nightmares. Hope indeed had been there the whole time and—quietly and patiently—re-introduced herself to us.

I have found myself returning to that day quite often since then, as it provided me with my own eye exam of sorts, though I did not know I needed a check-up. And as I have reflected on that moment, the phrase "All these I observed," kept coming to me, but I was not quite sure where it was coming from at first, nor why. "All these I have observed." Or so I thought. I was left with questions like: How often does my own context, the state of my own heart and mind, color my observations and perceptions of reality? How often had hope been present to me and I missed it or did not have the eyes to see? How often as religious do our ecclesial and communal contexts color our observations of what is our perceived reality and communal self-understanding? Might there be times that we miss an opportunity when hope is trying to re-introduce herself to us? Might there be times when we—who have been tasked specifically with the prophetic nature of the Gospel because of our public profession of vows—observe incorrectly and thereby forego hope, missing our task at hand?

"All these I have observed." It finally dawned on me that this is the phrase uttered by the rich young man in his response to Jesus. I can remember quite a number of years ago when I participated in NRVC's Orientation Program for New Vocation Directors how it was men-

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tioned in passing not to give up on the rich young man (or Woman) in the vocation encounter. “All these he observed.” Or so the rich young man thought. Might he, too, have missed hope being re-introduced to himself? And might this narrative offer us more observations of hope in vocation ministry and in religious life?

The passage about the rich young man is found in all three synoptic gospels (Mark 10: 17-22, Matthew 19:16-30, and Luke 18:18-30). There is little variation, but what exists is noteworthy.

No matter the gospel, the reader's familiarity with the narrative (usually a conflated version of all three gospels) can run the risk of our missing some challenging observations in the encounter offered by the synoptic writers, which is often the case when reading the gospels. And so, one may need an eye exam of sorts each time Scripture is read, especially as it is the Living—and not static—Word of God that is both engaged and engaging. As an aside, this can serve as a caution for each and every narrative that we read and every individual whom we encounter, no matter our ministry or the situation in which we find ourselves. While familiarity and experience offer a skillset when navigating and negotiating an encounter, they can also block us from seeing with

fresh eyes new details, nuances, and variations offered in each discerners' story, or they can color our observations solely because of past experiences with other individuals. In other words, we must be careful not to conflate a discerners' story with other discerners' stories, even when there are similarities presented (e.g., generational, cultural, etc.). Both regular supervision and spiritual direction can be very helpful to enhance our perspective here, though each has its own purpose, context, and objective.

A story rich in vocation ministry themes

The authors of Matthew and Luke, who would have borrowed the story from Mark, seem to use the story similarly to their Markan source, especially in its placement in the larger structure of the respective gospel, namely, after Jesus blesses the children but before the third prediction of Jesus' suffering and death; the slight exception is in Matthew, who interjects the parable of the laborers in the vineyard in between the story and the third prediction. Interestingly, only Matthew refers to the person as young, while Luke calls the individual an official or a ruler; and Mark neither states the age nor the occupation of the person, only that the individual had many

possessions, a description shared by Matthew and Luke.

In terms of vocation promotion, these nuances actually might prove helpful: as we know from our own communities and histories, vocation inquiry is not limited to the young; entrance may be considered by those who are well established and accomplished in their lives. Sadly all too often these women and men are still referred to as “late” vocations, “older” vocations, or even “second

career” vocations, none of which are useful terms, as such labels can put a value, even if unintended, on the unique encounter that each person has with the Lord in discernment, no matter the age or life experience. This is not to suggest that communities discard age parameters for candidates or stop following best practices regarding the history of inquirers; rather, I encourage being intentional about how we describe each discernment uniquely and with

The rich young man has noticed a shift in his life, or even a lack, something that is beginning to occupy his mind and heart so much that he goes outside himself and seeks the aid of someone to help him sift through it.

reverence. We might see our encounters with inquirers as privileged moments. Regardless of age or occupation, what seems to matter most in all three Markan, Matthean, and Lukan versions of the narrative is the all-too-human encounter that the person has with Jesus. It is an interaction with Jesus that involves a curiosity, an attraction, and a desire for something more in one's life. It is this aspect of encounter recorded by all three synoptic authors that is worth considerable reflection, most especially when observed through the lens of vocation ministry.

Jesus is identified as a teacher, as a source or resource, one who offers aid and insight, as one who is sought out and sought after. While in Mark and Luke, Jesus is labeled as “good,” we may also want to say that the one who approaches Jesus is also good. This rich young man is presented as a well-intentioned person who genuinely desires to go deeper, to be more and do more, in order to “inherit eternal life.” In other words, this person has noticed a shift in his life, or even a lack, something that is beginning to occupy his mind and heart so much that he goes outside of himself and seeks the aid of someone to help him sift through it.

Oftentimes, this is how an inquirer approaches a vocation director. Of course, the vocation director is not

Jesus (!); however, Jesus does model a healthy vocational posture. The inquirer notices something attractive in the director, a quality or skillset that the director can bring to the encounter. Think of the many individuals that meet with those in vocation ministry, not because he or she is necessarily always thinking of a religious vocation, but because the vocation director brings skills of discernment and has a way of welcoming a person to a deeper conversation. Or, sometimes an individual believes he or she has a religious vocation and the vocation director helps the person to discern that it is not a religious vocation that is nudging the inquirer's heart after all.

Lessons about accompaniment

“All these I have observed from my youth” is the response after Jesus presents the commandments to the rich young man. Again, in the account this person considers himself a genuine follower of the law. Many times in the gospels that self-perception is cause for conflict and confrontation in an encounter with Jesus. But it is also always an opportunity and invitation for conversion and deepening in discipleship and commitment. Could Jesus be offering a different observation in reflecting back to the individual? Jesus doesn't negate the young man's self understanding, nor challenge his sincerity in observing the law. It need not be one that negates the person's self-understanding nor qualifies the level of sincerity in being an observer of the law, whether by letter or by spirit. Instead, the encounter with Jesus holds the potential for widening, re-envisioning, and re-framing the lens through which the rich young man sees and understands how to follow the law, how to follow God.

Vocational accompaniment and mentoring function in much the same way. The inquirer that dares to approach the “good” vocation director is one who has observed (at least we would hope!) to varying degrees and understandings, some aspect of discipleship, whether as a cradle Catholic, convert, or re-affiliated member, whether self-identified as progressive, traditional, or “hard-to-pin-down” type of Catholic. There are even some inquirers who converted or came into full communion because they felt called to religious life first. Regardless, the task at hand is to help the individual to articulate a self-understanding of his or her own observances and observations. Interestingly, both words have the same Latin root from the verb *observare*; *ob*, a prefix meaning “in front of” and “before,” and *servare*, “to watch or keep safe.”

The inquirer or discernment holds out what he or she

has noticed and kept safe in his or her heart and presents/articulates it to the vocation director, while the vocation director reflects it back to the one discerning through his or her own observations. In effect, accompaniment and mentoring involve a mutual “holding out in front of” dynamic. Here the vocation director has a further task: he or she has also been entrusted by his or her own religious community as its agent to “watch,” “keep safe,” and “hold out” the community’s charism, all the while accompanying the inquirer or discerner.

Freedom to see and tell the truth

Notice that Jesus is unafraid to tell the rich young man that he lacks one thing. Jesus has total freedom and is grounded: he is able to risk telling him hard truth, truth that may be difficult for him to hear, and, consistent as Jesus is throughout the gospels, he is willing to tell the truth regardless of how it might be received.

To have such freedom is an all-too-often taken for granted quality, yet it is an essential attitude throughout the discernment process. The vocation director’s observations must be grounded authentically in the charism, and he or she has to be able to admit whether or not the individual would be the right fit, not simply for religious life, but for the way of life as expressed in his or her own community or even another community. This is no easy task, however, for every now and then, the inquirer can stir up in the vocation director something that blocks the director from seeing clearly or that colors his or her vision and observations, which could prevent truth-telling and be problematic at some point in the discernment process. There could even be things like a personality conflict or a discerner’s genuine likability, both of which could affect the discernment negatively. Again, supervision in some form helps vocation directors to ensure and safeguard freedom. For instance, most vocation directors can seek out peer supervision among other vocation directors, attend ongoing workshops in which case studies can be presented, etc. (The National Religious Vocation Conference exists for this purpose, among others. Find workshops at nrvc.net.)

Freedom is important for both parties in the encounter between vocation director and inquirer. In our gospel story Jesus is free enough and grounded enough in his invitation to give the rich young man the freedom and space to respond in turn to the truth he observes and the challenge he presents. Perhaps this is the most evocative part of the narrative, as the rich young man walks away saddened—and Jesus does not prevent him

from doing so. If anything, it seems that all that Jesus does is offer a commentary to those present on the difficulty of “selling all,” acknowledging the hardship that the rich young man experiences, leaving the audience and reader somewhat in shock. Might there be a sense in that moment, a desire for the rich young man to turn around and come back to Jesus? Might that desire be shared, too, by the audience and reader? Or perhaps, might Jesus stop him or at least try to go after him? Should Jesus have done something differently?

Unresolved ending, yet with hope

Instead, in all three synoptic narratives, we are left with a discomfort from what seemed to be such a promising encounter. This was not an encounter in which the one who approached Jesus wanted to test him or trap him; no, this was heartfelt and full of so much potential, except for the fact that we do not really know what happened next. It may not have been the last time that the rich young man approached Jesus. We do not really know what went on in his mind and heart as he walked away, other than the fact that the authors revealed that he was sad. The rich young man could have taken some time to reflect further and to sift through those many possessions, in order to have the complete and total freedom that Jesus desired for him.

The vocation director’s observations must be grounded authentically in the charism, and he or she has to be able to admit whether or not the individual would be the right fit.

Indeed, this narrative “lacks one thing”: resolution. All three synoptic writers kept the ending of the story “as is.” Matthew and Luke could have altered the ending but did not. The unresolved nature of the narrative as presented in each of the gospels underscores the sometimes-unknown interior quality of life in Christ, of “what happens next.” As much as there is a needed public and communal expression of one’s baptism, there is also an intensely personal and private aspect to the relationship, one that is unique to each individual. This is not to suggest a life of dis-integration, but it is to highlight the particular way that Christ loves each of us and all of us: Jesus “looked at him and loved him” (Mark 10:21). In the “lack” of the story, Jesus gives the rich young man the space to reflect further, to do the ongoing work of

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discerning more, of observing and holding out all that he possesses in order to determine if he can let go and trust.

The same is true for each inquirer as he or she engages or disengages in the discernment process. In these moments there is an unresolved nature to vocational accompaniment and mentoring, as ultimately it is about aiding the person's response to God's movement in his or her life, and the vocation director is not always privy to what comes next. There are times that, for reasons not always revealed to the vocation director, the discernor walks away, whether for good or for bad. And this is not always easy for the vocation director, as one who has invested his or her time, talent, and treasure in the process. There can be sadness, disappointment, anger, grief, or maybe even relief—all of which need to be acknowledged and revered when they surface.

In a culture that struggles with commitment, over-commitment, and inability to choose (or to choose well), the lack of resolution at the end of the story of the rich young man is essential for us to note and observe. It is not to be overlooked or downplayed, because, while not

necessarily one that is comfortable or desired, it is an all-too-real human experience. This "lack" that can and does happen in vocation ministry, or really in any relationship, need not be understood as an ending without hope, for as part of a human experience it is also a space for God.

Our unresolved accompaniment and mentoring relationships might just present openings and an opportunities to serve. That is, they may hold out and offer hope in a whole new way. Or hope, just might end up serving—and observing—us, in her gentle, yet persistent introduction. ■

SEEKING SUPERVISION

Supervision is a vocation ministry best practice. Learn about resources in your area by asking your member area coordinator(s). They are listed at nrvc.net.



Those considering religious life deserve to work with mentors who have prepared for their important role.

The subtleties of mentoring

USUALLY A 10 P.M. PHONE CALL signals a student canceling an appointment. As I answered the telephone, Molly said, “You’re the most spiritual person I know; could I be a nun?”

This 22-year-old engineering student had never called me before, but I have known her informally for several years. Reflecting on her efficient use of words I wondered how long she had rehearsed that one liner. She gingerly described exploring relationships in what I characterize as a counter-cultural celibate fashion. With each sentence, I marveled at the directness of her questions, her precise articulation, the struggle with emotionally deep relationships, her investigation into family history, and her emerging spirituality. She has become disillusioned with organized religion. She goes to church but feels life must mean more than just attending church and living right. As she talked, I realized she didn’t know about religious opportunities—volunteer programs, charisms, life styles, and the ethnic composition of many religious communities.

I am convinced that we in religious life need to be available for chance encounters like this. Members of the new religious generation, of every age group, want people with whom they can process their call. She asked to keep in touch. I committed myself to being available and to getting her

Mentors do best when they are prepared and self-aware. The best mentors also bring particular skills and qualities to the relationship.

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in touch with several communities. She is definitely at the beginning of her vocational journey. As we venture forth on this journey, I must ask myself what my hopes are for our mentoring. What could go right or wrong? To answer these questions I have grouped my reflections around five issues, namely, identity, intimacy, respect, confidentiality, and culture.

Identity and desire to please

Molly's first step is to discover who she can be in new and different situations. She will need a personal identity strong enough to embrace and integrate an identity as religious within a certain congregation. My role will be to stay deeply in my own skin: woman, religious, professional and with friends of my own. Molly does not desire friendship from me despite the fact we have many similarities both in personality and preferences. A potential landmine in Molly's struggle for identity in a community could be my, the mentor's, own lack of self-knowledge. As mentors we must be leaning posts of groundedness.

Another difficulty at this early stage is a desire to please the candidate that might keep the mentor from reflecting on counter-transferences and transferences, that is, reflecting on how the thoughts, feelings and wishes of one party in the mentoring relationship are taken on by the other party. Perhaps the good times are too comforting to me as a mentor. I may feel happy to be so helpful, energized at our "successful" meetings. Or our interactions are emotionally devastating to me, producing anger, disappointment, envy, extreme sadness. I need to be alert to the possible too-muchness of our relationship.

My emotional needs ought to be met by others, not primarily by Molly. I can help myself help Molly by keeping a journal of our interactions and my emotional reactions. I can commit to sharing the troublesome or notable moments with a trusted confidante. Every relationship benefits from transference and countertransference. The problem emerges in the "too-muchness." Initially, Molly will naturally seek to please me or the community contact. She will emphasize the similarities. I need to balance the similarities with the differences. Infatuation is common in the beginning. The idealization or infatuation can later help a candidate to weather the storms of adaptation. Infatuation is like a honey-

moon period, and it's an expected norm even for older candidates. One healthy way of progressing through the infatuation phase is for the mentor to foster other relationships in his or her life. Other relationships will not take the place of the mentor relationship. But if the mentor "has a life," the candidate will adapt more smoothly and with less emotional turmoil. This progression is enhanced by a mentor with developed intimacy and conflict management skills.

Intimacy skills and compatibility

Molly will benefit from my liking her, an example of positive transference. I hope she finds someone in each community she investigates who likes her. How do we learn to appropriately communicate our likes, dislikes, observations and needs? Many of us suffer underdevelopment of intimacy skills. We give mixed

messages that confuse the candidate. Although a mentor has a relationship of intensity with the new candidate, we are not a friend to the new candidate. Our role includes cheerleading, supporting, observing, listening, and critiquing. We need conflict management skills to hear the candidate's reactions without defensiveness.

As candidates move out of the initial period of infatuation, they will reflect on the woundedness and dysfunction of our religious living situations. If they are right, great! The candidates join what is and help us make it what it ought to be. But we are who and how we are at this point in time. The mentor need not apologize for the process of the community. With developed intimacy skills we can withstand the negativity that accompanies disillusionment with the system. Disillusionment is a necessary step in incorporation. A good mentor supports the candidate here yet gently observes the opportunity for growth in both the candidate and the community.

The fear associated with declining membership may set off landmines of dependency or overcompensation. Have you heard any of these remarks? "Who will take my place when I am gone? How will we continue our ministry if you don't join us?" These are not the essential questions. One is easily tempted to deny the communal sinfulness and to hide in justification or endless explanations. We can misuse the trust and power of our mentoring position if these questions fuel guilt in the candidate.

Although a mentor has a relationship of intensity with the new candidate, we are not a friend to the new candidate. Our role includes cheerleading, supporting, observing, listening, and critiquing.

If we like the potential candidate, we usually find ourselves reflecting on “How is God calling you? Where is the energy in living for you? Do you feel at home with us? Are you willing to accompany us in the not-yet? If we don’t like the candidate, or have too small a vision of who could be a vowed member, we must provide another mentor for the person. The unconscious motivation for entrance for each of us is only gradually revealed. Patience and love are important companions. Honest feedback is important and is based on respect for the individual and the communal process.

Respect for individual and communal processes

Individual and communal processes benefit from a delicate balance. Efforts to maintain this delicate balance can help or hinder the selection process of the mentor. How are the mentors selected? In some communities the vocation team and the council select mentors based on compatibility with the leadership and community “goodness.” Those not selected may feel left out or judged. Those selected may exploit their position by overbearing and manipulative postures. When the community uses a selective rather than volunteer method for choosing mentors, the process clearly says that some members are not perceived as good community models. An in-out list emerges, with those omitted wondering: “What prevented me from making the list?” This exclusivity presents the question: If someone approaches me for entrance, will he or she automatically have a harder time adjusting because of the leadership’s perception of me?

I suggest each professed member have the opportunity to volunteer and train for mentoring. We are different personalities. Allowing people to choose mentor training does not prevent the administrative or vocational team from wielding control. Control of the process does seem to be at the heart of exclusionary approaches. Ideally all those concerned can be respected while protecting the role of both the vocation personnel and administrators. The community could give input about the mentor-selection process. This invitation to participate fits the philosophy of most vocation ministers: that each person is a vocation minister, assuming responsibility for the continuance of religious life. The primary challenge here is to trust and respect one another and to reflect these attitudes in our processes. A simple question to the entire community about who is interested in training to be a mentor could suffice. The training aspect is essen-



The relationship with a mentor is friendly, but it isn’t a friendship.

tial. It develops an understanding of the incorporation process. It also helps determine the prospective mentor’s intimacy and conflict management skills as well as the amount of time he or she has for this undertaking. A good religious is not enough. This mentoring process requires not only a good priest, sister or brother, but also one with training.

As I examine the subtleties of mentoring, I hope Molly will be able to choose her mentor. Most communities choose the vocation person to be the second contact. For Molly I am the first, even though I may not belong to the community she eventually chooses. I have a significant role. I need to keep the conversation avenues open and give her space to explore. How are you addressing your personal and communal shadows: racism, gender or personality biases, ageism, ethnic biases? Are you clear about the community’s expectations and capacity for growth? Is your community training the mentors? What is the selection process? Once the relationship begins, what is the nature of the dialogue? What are the expectations of self disclosure, the parameters of confidentiality?

Confidentiality and culture

RESPECT CONFIDENTIALITY. Who knows what? With smaller numbers of entrants, a candidate ought not feel like a specimen. How do we protect the person’s

reputation and possible future with us? Is the mentoring helping the candidate meet a variety of community members? Are there significant opportunities for personal involvement? How focused is the gathering of information for discernment? To gather data one needs experience. In providing Molly's name to several communities and programs, she has a first hand experience of the literature. I and the people in the communities stay in the wings.

BE IMPARTIAL. I hope each candidate has a spiritual director who is impartial about which lifestyle the candidate chooses. The hazard of re-creating the past looms high in the area of self disclosure. And once again, the candidate ought to be free to self-disclose. But the mentor shouldn't always be this free; nothing the mentor shares ought to be a burden to the candidate.

STAY IN THE MENTORING ROLE! To do this one needs clear boundaries. I hope Molly finds someone who will be clear about boundaries. The potential candidate matures through discussion and free expression. The candidate ought to be able to explore the full gamut of human experience verbally. A listener who can be clear on what is confidential and what will be shared is essential. We need to know our own relational style. If I can't keep secrets, I better say so.

KEEP THE RELATIONSHIP CURRENT. Here the vocation director benefits by stating in writing the feedback needed. Behavioral observations must be the norm. Comments such as, "I just have a feeling she won't fit," although potentially accurate and intuitive, muddy the ability of the candidate to change perceptions or behavior. Mentors need to uncover the source of their feelings. A positive feeling can yield an affirmation; a negative feeling can give us insight into the conversion process. Both good and bad feelings of the mentor and the candidate can provide fruitful reflective tools.

UNDERSTAND ANXIETIES. To mentor is to engender trust, issue a challenge, provide encouragement and offer a vision for the journey. The mentor helps transform fear of abandonment into call for adventure. Anxiety often accompanies the candidate's initial investigation. The anxiety can be masked as bravado or scorn. Underneath lies a deep uncertainty about the ability to succeed "later in life," about losing face before friends or the community, about becoming a vowed religious. This is a starkly unfamiliar realm for most people. If we mentors recog-

nize these fears for what they are, we can act to relieve them gently, rather than attempting to overcome or deny them.

EXPLORE CULTURAL DIFFERENCES. Religious life is its own culture. Our actions and reactions in cross-cultural situations are often based on what we don't know about our own culture as much as what we don't know about the other culture. It is helpful to be aware of our preconceptions, to be ready to admit they may be wrong and equally ready to change them.

Vocation directors are probably most aware of the idiosyncrasies of the "culture" of their own communities. The passage into religious life requires putting down roots, even in a place of exile, and making meaningful commitments to the community while seeking its welfare and praying for it.

Experts in cross cultural adaptation encourage those who serve as bridges (and often mentors play this role) to have a set of skills for cross cultural adaptation. Mentors ought to have tolerance for ambiguity, low goal or task orientation, open-mindedness, a strong sense of self, non-judgmentalness, empathy, an ability to fail, motivation, a sense of humor, warmth in human relationships, self-reliance, curiosity, perceptiveness, communicativeness, flexibility, adaptability and tolerance for difference.

Based on your experience, which of these skills would your candidates value most? Which of these skills does the larger community most value? Which do you value? How about your mentors? How are you applying these skills in daily interactions within the community? Answering these questions can begin valuable discussions.

In drawing my reflections to a close, I am reminded of some wisdom from *Transitions*, by William Bridges. Bridges points out that major changes require "the transformative experience of the neutral zone," a time in which we welcome emptiness and surrender to chaos. "Chaos," he reminds us, "is not a mess, but rather it is the primal state of pure energy to which the person returns for every true new beginning." Likewise, scholar Carol Christ suggests the need for an "experience of nothingness to mediate woman's spiritual quest for a 'new awakening' and a fresh naming of her self." Likewise, we can expect the experience of mentoring to be a growth experience for both mentor and protégé. We continue with the protégé who has already begun, with God, a journey to transformation. We, as mentors, are as Christ was to the Emmaus disciples: companions in their reflection and surrender to the Mystery. ■



What is accompaniment? What are the particulars of this encounter between seeker and mentor?

Accompaniment for discernment

BY NATURE, THE APOSTOLATE of accompaniment is a rich, fertile ground for the discernment of decisions. Through the accompanying relationship, mentors provide a space of hospitality and charity for those accompanied to be their authentic selves, grow in love and imitation of Christ, identify their individual gifts and talents, recognize the desires of their heart, and determine concrete steps for following the voice of Christ. In their relationship with the mentor, the ones accompanied contemplate both small and large decisions that affect their life and vocation. Like Eli helps interpret the experience of Samuel being called by the voice of the Lord in the temple (1 Samuel 3:1-10), so too does the mentor assist the one they accompany in recognizing the voice of the Lord and actively responding to it. Emboldened by the wisdom of the mentor in the path of discernment, the one accompanied is able to respond to the call of Christ: “Speak, for your servant is listening” (1 Samuel 3:10).

Accompaniment during a process of discernment not only seeks growth in faith, but also serves the objective of discerning a particular choice. The choices that accompaniment can fruitfully address include decisions as large as discerning entering the seminary or religious life, deciding whether to get married, or discerning a vocation to the single life. The large, major choices that can be discerned through accompani-

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ment need not be explicitly religious, but can also involve major decisions, such as choosing a college or career path, taking a new job, or considering a move to a new city. In all of these major questions, the mentor serves as a guide and friend, offering wisdom, direction, insight, and affirmation in the other's search for the voice of the Lord.

In addition to the major or vocational questions that require discernment, the apostolate of accompaniment can also serve in a more general development of the gift of discernment in the life of those accompanied. Accompaniment can provide formation that attunes the spiritual senses of the one accompanied, helping him or her hear the voice of the Lord in the everyday realities of life. In addition to major life decisions, accompaniment fosters active contemplation of the will of God through ordinary means.

Discernment is necessary not only at extraordinary times, when we need to resolve grave problems and make crucial decisions. It is a means of spiritual combat for helping us to follow the Lord more faithfully. We need it at all times, to help us recognize God's timetable, lest we fail to heed the promptings of grace and disregard God's invitation to grow. Often discernment is exercised in small and apparently irrelevant things, since greatness of spirit is manifested in simple everyday realities. It involves striving untrammelled for all that is great, better, and more beautiful, while at the same time being concerned for the little things, for each day's responsibilities and commitments (*Gaudete et Exsultate*, 169).

To this end, the mentor assists the one accompanied in the discernment of the everyday, in emotions, experiences, passions, interests, relationships, actions, and desires. This "little" discernment lays the foundation for the path of holiness, on which the one accompanied can more clearly hear the voice of Christ and follow him as a disciple in every aspect of life.

Accompaniment for both "large" and "small" discernment can be implemented in any context. Seminaries, houses of formation, and lay formation programs might particularly benefit from accompaniment for discernment in which a more experienced person introduces the one accompanied to the lifestyle of the vocation. Parishes, Catholic universities, campus ministries, or any situation in which youth are supported by a stable network, are contexts in which this style of discernment might be useful.

Functions of a mentor

The Final Document of the Synod on Young People, the Faith, and Vocational Discernment states:

Spiritual accompaniment is intended to help people integrate step by step the various dimensions of their lives so as to follow the Lord Jesus. In this process three elements can be identified: listening of life, encounter with Jesus and mysterious dialogue between God's freedom and that of the individual.... In personal spiritual accompaniment one learns to recognize, interpret and choose from the perspective of faith, listening to the Spirit's promptings within the life of every day.

From these statements, the principal functions of a mentor within the apostolate of accompaniment take shape. The mentor's overall task is assisting the one they accompany in the integration of his or her life into one vision which maintains focus on Jesus Christ. This integration is cultivated through five components of a mentor's apostolate: fostering a space of listening, providing spiritual guidance that leads towards an encounter with Christ, interpreting experience, Spirit-filled evangelizing, and fearless healing.

Fostering a space of patient listening

The foremost task of the mentor is to provide the one he or she accompanies with a presence of patient listening. The practice of listening is "an encounter in freedom, which requires humility, patience, readiness to understand, and a commitment to formulate the answers in a new way" (Final Document of the Synod of Bishops on Young People, the Faith, and Vocational Discernment, 6). To foster a space of patient listening within the relationship of accompaniment, mentors relate to the ones they accompany with patience, love, respect, non-judgment, and fidelity. Listening is transformative and reflects the way in which God interacts with and ministers to people:

Listening transforms the hearts of those who do it, especially when it takes place with an interior disposition of harmony and docility to the Spirit. So it is not just a gathering of information, nor is it a strategy for achieving a goal, but it is the manner in which God himself relates to his people. God sees the wretchedness of his people and he hears their cry, he is deeply moved and he comes down to deliver

THE ART OF ACCOMPANIMENT

"The Church will have to initiate everyone – priests, religious and laity – into this 'art of accompaniment' which teaches us to remove our sandals before the sacred ground of the other."

Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*

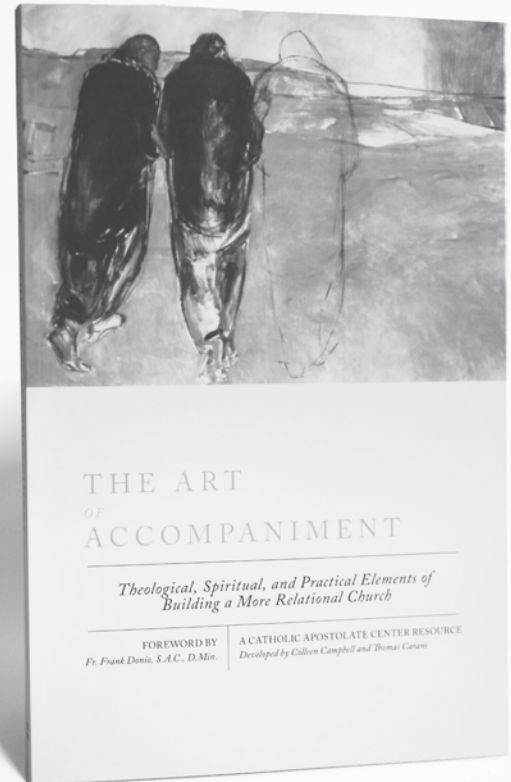
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them.... The Church, through listening, enters into the movement of God who, in his Son, comes close to every human being (Final Document of the Synod on Youth, Faith, and Vocation Discernment, 6).

The practice of patient listening allows mentors to walk with the one they accompany through the person's experiences, receptively pondering the mysteries of life, seeking to hear the voice of the Spirit. In listening patiently to the one they accompany, the mentors give the gift of their presence, allowing people to be heard in a deep way:

Listening makes possible an exchange of gifts in a context of empathy. It allows young people to make their own contribution to the community, helping it to grasp new sensitivities and to consider new questions. At the same time it sets the conditions for a proclamation of the Gospel that can truly touch the heart, incisively and fruitfully (Final Document of the Synod on Young People, Faith and Vocational Discernment, 8).

Like Christ's example on the Road to Emmaus, listening in the apostolate of accompaniment makes possi-

ble the conditions for the recognition of Christ as Savior.

Practically, mentors foster a space for patient listening within the relationship of accompaniment by establishing familiarity with the ones they accompany, asking questions about the ordinary and extraordinary experiences of their life, meeting them where they are by understanding their frame of reference, carrying out their own call with respect and sensitivity, and honoring the relationship of accompaniment through appropriate boundaries and levels of confidentiality (*The Road to Emmaus and the Art of Accompaniment* presented by Father Frank Donio, S.A.C., 31 May 2018).

Spiritual guidance toward encounter

The apostolate of accompaniment refers to a shared journey between mentor and the one accompanied; this journey has a definitive destination and purposeful orientation. Because accompaniment is not aimless wandering, it requires that a mentor be equipped to provide spiritual guidance that fosters an encounter with Jesus Christ. Accompaniment helps those accompanied articulate and act on the holy desire for Christ:

In many ways, the young people of today are saying to us: ‘We wish to see Jesus’ (John 12:21), thus manifesting the healthy restlessness that characterizes the heart of every human being: ‘the restlessness of spiritual seeking, the restlessness of the encounter with God, the restlessness of love’ (Final Document of the Synod of Bishops on Young People, Faith and Vocational Discernment, 50).

Therefore, the apostolate of the mentor always serves to promote an encounter with Christ for the one they are accompanying. Through spiritual guidance in the ordinary and extraordinary components of life, the mentor is tasked with assisting the one they accompany in identifying situations where Christ invites them into deeper relationship with him. Mentors help those accompanied attune their spiritual vision to see Christ in the circumstances of their career, interactions with their family, partnership with their significant other, needs of the community, and their own development towards Christian maturity.

Mentors practically make a space for encountering Christ within the relationship of accompaniment through praying with the one accompanied, introducing the person to formative spiritual practices, reflecting on human experience with the person through the light of the Gospel, and assisting the individual in discerning decisions.

Interpreter of experience

Like data for a scientist or marble for a sculptor, the material for spiritual accompaniment is human experience—the living account of what it means and feels like to be a human person in a particular context in a specific period of historical time. In the accompanying relationship, one main role of the mentor is assisting in interpreting this human experience in light of the Gospel in order to discover the movements of the Spirit at work. As “the locus for the manifestation and realization of salvation,” (General Directory for Catechesis, #152) the human experience of the one accompanied sheds light on the call of the Spirit at work in his or her life. For the person of faith, human experience is where the Gospel is actualized and embodied, making present the Paschal Mystery in the life of a human being. In seeing the Paschal Mystery present in personal human experience, faith-filled people come to know the action of God and God’s plan for them in the ordinary and extraordinary events of their life. Therefore, human experience is a method by which people can mature in their faith, dis-

cern their vocation, grow in awareness of God’s action, and love in their life and throughout human history, and ask questions regarding their vocation in God’s plan for salvation. This is the work of the mentor in interpreting the human experience: assisting the one accompanied “to accept the invitation of the Holy Spirit to conversion, to commitment, to hope, and to discover more and more in his life God’s plan for him” (General Directory for Catechesis, #152).

Mentors and the ones they accompany labor together toward this practice of interpretation in the relationship of accompaniment, a space that is well-suited for this component of accompaniment because of its intentional and committed nature. Through the mutual and prayerful reflection upon events, situations, and relationships in the life of the one accompanied, the mentor and the one accompanied let the wisdom of the Gospel and Christian tradition speak to the questions and sentiments that arise from being human—creating a space for dialogue regarding “the correlation and interaction between profound human experiences and the revealed message” (General Directory for Catechesis, #152).

Through the assistance of the perspective of the mentor, the one accompanied evaluates, tests, and discerns the components of his or her experience, listening for the guidance of the Spirit. With the words and images brought forth by the Gospel and Christian tradition, the one accompanied is thus able to advance spiritually and respond prudently to the invitations and promptings of the Holy Spirit—recognizing and naming these movements in his or her personal life.

For a mentor to be properly disposed to interpret experience, he or she must be knowledgeable regarding Scripture, tradition, discernment, cultural sensitivity, and basic human psychology. To acquire the skills necessary for this practice, mentors must exercise active listening, learn basic skills in spiritual direction, and be supported by a cohort of others who are engaged in the apostolate of spiritual accompaniment.

Spirit-filled evangelizer

Because of his or her own encounter with Christ and zeal for mission, the mentor is filled with the Holy Spirit and well-disposed to accompany and send the accompanied out on mission. As they share the journey of the Christian life with the one accompanied, mentors evangelize the accompanied by fostering an encounter with Christ in daily life, drawing connections between the Gospel message and everyday experiences, and en-

couraging the accompanied toward ongoing conversion to Christ through the relationship of accompaniment. Spirit-filled evangelization of the one accompanied occurs also because of the mentor's example and witness. In accompaniment, a mentor must also testify to his or her own love for and experience of Jesus Christ, both explicitly by sharing personal experiences of faith, but also implicitly through friendship with the one they accompany. In facilitating accompaniment, the mentor strives to invite the one accompanied more closely into the community of the church in order to empower him or her to be a missionary disciple: "This missionary vision cannot be accomplished without shared effort by the whole church community" (*Living as Missionary Disciples*, 2).

In evangelizing the ones they accompany, mentors assist in strengthening their bond to the church; to strengthen this bond, the mentor encourages them to participate in the sacramental life, use their gifts to build up the church in unique ways, share the intentions and responsibilities of the mission of the church, and take an active role in their identity as an evangelizer.

Though accompaniment has varied applications and several objectives, Spirit-filled evangelization is its core component. If the mentor properly accompanies by first evangelizing them, those accompanied will be formed to take an active role in the mission of evangelization. As *Living as Missionary Disciples* details, the one accompanied who experiences life-giving formation and transformation in Christ through accompaniment is formed to be an evangelizer:

After reflecting, praying, and experiencing a deep conversion and renewed confidence in the gospel message, a follower of Christ goes outward to evangelize others. The evangelized becomes the evangelizer. This involves outreach to those inactive in their faith, as well as embracing the mission *ad gentes* (to the nations). A community of renewed believers continues to go outward, ultimately leading to the evangelization of society and culture. Evangelizing the culture furthermore involves bringing the gift of *communio* (communion) to secularism, relativism, materialism, and individualism (*Living As Missionary Disciples*, 8).

Fearless healer

Paramount to a fruitful apostolate of accompaniment is the mentor's love, acceptance, and welcome of the one he

or she accompanies. Regardless of challenging or uncertain circumstances in which the one accompanied finds him or herself, a mentor is fearless by being unafraid to encounter the person in these contexts despite messiness, confusion, or chaos of life. A mentor who offers this presence to the one they accompany heals through providing a space in which to meet along the Christian journey. In this sense, mentors are not responsible themselves for healing the one accompanied but are responsible for fostering healing conditions in the relationship. These conditions provide the one accompanied a solid foundation on which to begin active seeking of the Lord. A healing space is not only one that welcomes and respects circumstances of those accompanied, but is one where truth is freely welcomed. To provide a space of healing, the mentor is also unafraid to challenge the one accompanied with pastoral and fraternal correction. To be a fearless healer, the mentor must accept the responsibility to foster a relationship in which Christ can be easily found both in a welcoming and loving hospitality and in the awareness and movement toward the truth.

On the road to Emmaus (Luke 24), Jesus demonstrates creating a space of fearless healing. Jesus first provides a space in which the disciples can freely express their fears and questions. In walking alongside the disciples in their disillusionment, Jesus models a way of ministry that is human: embodied, relational, and derived from experience. This moment of compassion, charity, and listening allows the disciples to trust Jesus, know and believe in his investment in them, and open their hearts to his teaching. Because he chooses to accept the frame of reference in which the disciples find themselves instead of admonishing or correcting them immediately, Jesus forms the disciples for their mission by creating a space for healing in his relationship with them.

Concretely a mentor becomes a fearless healer in cultivating a willingness to walk with the one being accompanied in complex or difficult life situations, practicing a pastoral attitude concerning items of a sensitive or difficult nature, holding space for both non-judgment and fraternal correction when appropriate, becoming knowledgeable about outside resources that can assist the one accompanied in finding greater overall healing, and carrying out the accompanying relationship with both a spirit of prayer and action ("Spiritual Accompaniment of High School Students," presentation, Donio).

Young people have asked for accompaniment in their spiritual journeys. May all who walk the path of accompaniment encounter the fruits to be found along the way. ■



Now that the energy of the youth and vocation synod is flowing into ministry strategy, what should vocation ministers understand? Here is the perspective of a college student who took part in a post-synod gathering.

Young adults in Catholic ministry are beginning to call for new approaches in ministry that can help meet the needs of members in their 20s and 30s. Pictured here are participants in a Parish Ministry and Catechetical Conference put on by the Diocese of Grand Rapids, Michigan.

Four vocation ministry ideas from the synod

The 2018 synod on “young people and vocation discernment” brought forth a number of messages, but four have particular resonance in the world of vocation ministry. First the synod encouraged a broad understanding of vocation. Second, it likewise opened up our definition of discernment. Third it put a particular emphasis on the accompaniment of young people. And fourth, it encouraged a “whole-person” approach to ministry. Each of these foundational concepts has implications for how vocation ministers proceed in their work.

1) Vocation: every Christian has one

Let’s begin with what the synod had to say about the foundation of this ministry: the concept of vocation. Following the synod Pope Francis issued the apostolic exhortation *Christus Vivit* (Christ Lives), which includes this: “The word ‘vocation’ can be understood in a broad sense as a calling from God, including the call to life, the call to friendship with him, the call to holiness, and so forth” (248).

The Holy Father’s words echo the words of young people who gathered to give input prior to the official synod. In their final document young

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people expressed a desire for “a simple and clear understanding of vocation to highlight the sense of call and mission, desire and aspiration,” because the term vocation has “sometimes been presented as an abstract concept, perceived as too far out of the reach of the minds of many.”

Indeed Pope Francis has helped us to re-frame our understanding of vocation and discernment to, as he stated in *Gaudete et Exultate*, “re-propose the call to holiness in a practical way for our own time with all its risks, challenges, and opportunities.” Pope Francis is not diminishing what some call state of life vocations or particular vocations but is indeed lifting up the universal call to holiness that is laid forth in *Lumen Gentium* and, in turn, lifting up particular vocations as well.

The second chapter of the post-synod document is dedicated to vocation and begins with the story of the calling of Samuel. In this story where Samuel repeatedly hears the call of God and mistakenly attributes it to Eli, we see that “for every man and every woman vocation, while it may have strong and privileged moments, involves a long journey,” a long journey that requires accompaniment, a practice we will examine later in this article. This journey on which young people are accompanied is not a straight path to the religious life, the priesthood, the single life, or marriage, but is primarily and integrally a journey of holiness and relationship with Jesus Christ. The pre-synod document lays this out clearly:

The term “vocation” has become synonymous with the priesthood and religious life in the culture of the Church. While these are sacred calls that should be celebrated, it is important for young people to know that their vocation is by virtue of their life, and that each person has a responsibility to discern what it is that God calls them to be and to do. There is a fullness to each vocation which must be highlighted in order to open the hearts of young people to their possibilities.

As Pope Francis has begun to re-frame our understanding of vocation, he has done so after listening to the voices of young people who are calling for a greater understanding of vocation. So too must those who work in vocation ministry listen as well. The call to religious life, priesthood, etc. is not to be ignored or minimized in any way but must be seen as complementary and totally dependent upon a life aimed at holiness which fuels the person to then be sent as an apostle into the world in whichever way God calls. As Pope Francis reminds us in

Christus Vivit, our vocation journey is a response to and participation in a love story that God himself is offering. As anyone who has been in love will remind us, a love story takes time to unfold and is multi-dimensional.

2) Discernment: a lifelong practice

I was talking to a church friend once and asked, “Did you know Katie is discerning?” She looked at me and said, “Brian, everyone is discerning, what do you mean?” This question in and of itself shows where we are as a church with the word “discernment.” In many ministry circles the word discernment has become reductive to mean only our discernment of a vocation to the priesthood or religious life. Pope Francis reminds us that discernment of vocation, both our universal vocation to holiness and our individual particular vocations, must always be seen as service to the church and to the world, and as such, “in discerning [our] vocation, it is important to determine if [we] see in [ourselves] the abilities needed to perform that specific service to society” (*Christus Vivit*).

In fostering vocation, we grow and develop our entire person to discover what God is calling us to. In such, the duty of a vocation director is not just to guide on the path to an individual order or to push someone to accept a singular charism, but to first walk with individuals as they discern where God is calling them in every facet of their life. These facets, while including particular vocation, also include day-to-day relationship, familial, and professional decisions that are a part of the love story that we take part in.

Pope Francis reminds us in *Christus Vivit* that discernment of one’s vocation requires silence, “which enables us better to perceive God’s language.... Yet this silence does not make us close in on ourselves.” Out of this silence, this listening for God’s voice that most often becomes known to us in a soft whisper (1 Kings 19:12), should come humility. In this silence, we allow ourselves to focus our attention on our hearts, “the central point of interiority of the person, where listening to the Word that God is constantly addressing to us becomes a criterion for evaluating our life and our choices” (Final Document of the Synod on Young People, the Faith, and Vocational Discernment).

The Holy Father reminds us that, “we should not start with wondering where we could make more money, or achieve greater recognition and social status.... If we are not to go astray, we need a different starting point.” This humility is not only useful to determine if a voca-

tion to a religious order or community that lives out poverty is where God is calling, but also humility helps us live day to day life, married or single, or, if God wills, in the religious or consecrated life. To properly discern God's will we must resist being reductive in our understanding of discernment and see the need to accompany those who are discerning.

3) Accompaniment: walking with young people

Accompaniment is deeply scriptural; God accompanied the Israelites in the Old Testament; Jesus accompanied his disciples through their time together, with the most noted example being Jesus on the Road to Emmaus. It is no surprise that Pope Francis has put such a heavy emphasis on the practice of accompaniment throughout his pontificate. Accompaniment, especially during vocational discernment, must begin by seeing the person who is being accompanied and his or her experience and situation as sacred ground in front of which we remove our sandals (*Evangelii Gaudium*). When we remove our sandals and see each person we accompany as sacred ground, as individuals whom God has called to a specific vocation, as opposed to an empty cup to be filled with our wisdom. More than telling the person who we are accompanying what we think he or she should do, we must acknowledge that, as the Final Document of the Synod reminds us, “[the young] are constantly called to make decisions that give direction to their lives; they want to be heard, acknowledged and accompanied.” Accompaniment requires a sense of reciprocity that is willing to teach when necessary, but also to learn from the one whom we accompany as that person's experiences might allow us to see things in a new light.

The model of accompaniment Jesus gave us on the Road to Emmaus, a model referred to repeatedly in *Christus Vivit* and the Synod documents, is one that necessarily begins with listening and that journeys with the person. When Jesus appeared to his disciples on the road, he surely knew why they were upset, but he still asked them the question so they could make their feelings and experiences known. Even as he asked the question, he was met with hostility as one of the disciples responded, “Are you the only visitor to Jerusalem who does not know of the things that have taken place there in these days?” Even still, Jesus continued to ask and prompt, to journey with the disciples through their suffering and grief. Only after they had talked and shared what they had to say with Christ did he teach.

While teaching is an important part of a relationship of accompaniment, it is not the starting point, and it is certainly not the climax of the relationship. When Jesus was ready to depart, the disciples urged him to remain with them. It was then in the breaking of the bread that they recognized him. Had Jesus not let them talk, had he not conveyed trust through his willingness to listen and even accept their hostility, what are the chances that they would've urged him to remain with them longer?

4) Minister to the whole person

Vocation ministry requires a renewed understanding of vocation that is not reductive, but indeed seeks the development of the entire person. We must understand that the vocation to holiness will manifest itself in different ways for different people, but that it must always be rooted in the Gospel and the truths of our faith. That truth is that Jesus Christ is calling us all to follow him, not only in our choice between particular vocations, but in how we live our lives through that discernment, and how we continue to discern his will for us even after we've found our particular vocation. Our particular vocation, without a properly understood vocation to holiness, is a shell that is empty on the inside. The missionary call to holiness that young people are called to requires ongoing encounter with the Risen Lord that permeates the daily life of young people. The Final Document of the Synod reminds us:

To speak of human life in vocational terms allows us to highlight some elements that are very important for the growth of young people: it means excluding the view that they are determined by destiny or are the product of chance, or else that they are a private good to be managed at will. If in the first case there is no vocation, because there is no recognition of a destination worthy of existence, in the second a human being thought of as “rootless” becomes “vocationless.” This is why it is important to establish the conditions to allow all Christian communities, building on the baptismal consciousness of their members, to develop a genuine vocational culture and a constant commitment to pray for vocations.

This vocational culture that the document speaks of is cultivated through authenticity, honesty, and a culture of accompaniment that encourages vocation to not be seen as a singular moment of realization in our spiritual lives, but as ongoing moments that help us to see God's plan more clearly.

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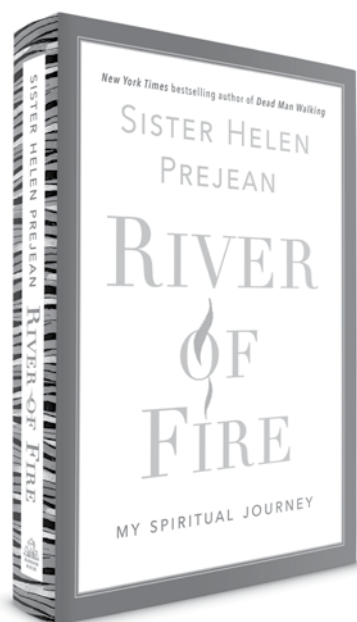


Vocation ministry at its best will encourage ongoing discernment without losing its attention to particular vocations. The attention that discernment gives to the vocation of holiness also helps to cultivate discernment of the particular vocation. Accompaniment is key to any form of discernment. Ideally vocation ministry can move past a model based primarily on events, whose success is evaluated by how many young people attended this or that. This is not to say that we must completely avoid events; they are a great opportunity for initial encounter and for building Christian community, a desire often articulated by young people.

But we must look deeper than events. When we accompany, we see past numbers and see individuals with stories, with desires, with a path that has been ordained by God for them. This accompaniment, importantly, does not only come from vocation directors or spiritual directors, but also from those who are discerning their particular vocation themselves. Building community is vitally important for the ongoing formation and perpetuation of the culture of discernment. This is especially true in a society and culture so focused on individualism and self-ability that it approaches the "contemporary Pelagianism" that Pope Francis writes about in *Gaudete*

et Exsultate. We cannot embark on this journey alone; Christ sent out the apostles in pairs; the most well-known of the saints had companions (St. Ignatius and St. Francis Xavier, St. Francis and St. Clare, St. Vincent Pallotti and St. Gaspar del Bufalo, etc.), and I would wager that those who read this, when they look back upon their vocational journeys, will find they were accompanied as well by great mentors and friends who walked with them on their journey and continue to accompany them today.

The synodal process did not redefine vocation and discernment but rather offered us a new framework through which to look. In this framework, we are encouraged to balance the missionary call to holiness with particular vocation, for the latter without the former is empty. The discernment of vocation must be cultivated through accompaniment which first sees the other person as sacred ground which requires us to take off our shoes and allows us to enter into their journey with great openness, sincerity, and honesty. If vocation directors are willing to see this reframing as a means to forming missionary disciples—married, single, priests, and religious—then the church herself will grow as her members go out with zeal, empowered by the Holy Spirit, to make of all disciples. ■



Sister Helen's story: personal and universal

WITH HONESTY AND CHARM, Sister Helen Prejean, C.S.J. weaves together the threads of her spiritual journey in the book *River of Fire* (Random House 2019). The book, her third, takes readers from her childhood until she begins ministry with a man on death row. Prejean engages, and indeed, teaches her readers through story. She shares her own grappling with personal ambition, prayer, relationships, the complexities of discernment, and her eventual awareness of justice issues as she narrates the various stages of her life, now 80 years long.

The natural storyteller in Prejean's Louisiana blood paints a portrait of her home life in the opening section, "Novice." She admits her inexperience with boys and her curiosity about intimacy. Despite that natural intrigue, Prejean acknowledges that she is uncertain she could settle down with one other person. The inherent ambition of her younger years drives her wish to excel at basketball—a sport she discovers she does not love and is not particularly good at. She wants more. These younger years are not void of discernment, as Prejean determines that she appreciated the intensely quiet retreat weekend now and then, but could never live a cloistered life. Refraining from talking is evidently an impossible hurdle for her. Readers get a glimpse of her novitiate experience—complete with her competitive race toward holiness with another novice. Prejean rounds out this section by reflecting on the saints and the loneliness of the novitiate.

The period of Prejean's life entitled "Teaching and Learning" focuses on her early years in the classroom, which begins by dissecting the major disappointment she experiences when learning she was assigned to teach eighth graders. No doubt, the senior sisters recognized Prejean's boundless energy would resonate with middle school students, but this newly minted and still ambitious sister wondered about the reasons she was found lacking and denied the more prestigious high school posting. Warm exchanges

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with students and Prejean's creatively challenging vocabulary assignments demonstrate her drive and love for her students as she discovers her aptitude as a new teacher. During this period of her life, Prejean begins to learn that patterns of prayer are an essential part of her life as she takes reflective walks with a sister who serves as a mentor and wisdom figure. Through her lesson planning, Prejean gradually realizes that the quiet attention she gives to her lessons is not unlike prayer time in chapel.

Prejean also navigates forming meaningful friendships as a young sister immediately prior to Vatican II. She describes her growing friendship with another sister named Chris, who works grueling hours as a nurse and longs for the access to books that Prejean enjoys. Prejean copies large sections of books in her letters to Chris in order to share what she can. After many attempts and much anticipation, Prejean and her friend, Chris, are able to go on vacation together. This experience is anti-climactic, as she leaves wondering if a deep friendship can be sustained through letters. She leaves vacation with a gaping sense of loneliness. She worries that the expansive love of religious life involved in the attempt to "love all men" means that nuns are in danger of "loving no one in particular."

The next section, "London, Ontario," marks a period of newness and self-discovery in Prejean's life, corresponding with Vatican II's invitation to open the windows. Prejean offers a helpful explanation of Vatican II for readers for whom this is history rather than lived experience. Following these radical changes in the church, parishioners at a parish where Prejean's community taught in the school asked for adult instruction from the nuns in the new theology. Thus Prejean was sent for further study in London, Ontario in order to prepare her to teach theology to adults. She describes her experience of freedom for the first time in her religious life as sisters and priests study and socialize together. Prejean develops a close relationship with a priest named William. While women and men are leaving religious orders and the priesthood to marry, Prejean experiments with a "third way," in which she hopes to be committed to this priest in a celibate, loving relationship. Growing feelings and conflicting expectations make this relationship both rocky and exhilarating.

Prejean describes a great deal of maturing in her re-

lationships and cracks open what raw discernment looks like from the inside in the chapter called "Becoming an Adult Church." During these years, Prejean struggles in her relationships. She sees the pain and longing her friend Chris faces as a hospital sister, deprived of the continued education Prejean enjoys. Prejean continues to find creative ways to support her friend. Meanwhile, Prejean's relationship with William escalates. William continues to make demands on her time with long phone

calls, sends flowers, and acts jealously of how Prejean spends her time. Despite Prejean's attempt to put a positive spin on all things William, he has a problem with alcohol and eventually scares her with his violent behavior. Prejean utilizes the many tools of discernment as she shares all with her close friend Chris, finds a spiritual anchor in the Psalms, and goes on a soul-searching retreat. These spiritual guides lead her to create clear boundaries on her relationship with William. She realizes that the secrets she was keeping were unhealthy. Prejean experiences growth and freedom as a result of successfully negotiating her relationship

with William.

Finally, after and even because of her experience negotiating the rough relationship waters with her priest friend, Prejean is able to move into new roles and discoveries regarding justice. Throughout the book, Prejean reflects on her family's racism, her lack of understanding of Jesus and of poverty. Even though she meets Martin Luther King, Jr. through happenstance, she does not yet understand the necessity of moving beyond charity to working for justice. In the section entitled "River Rapids," Prejean's experiences of trial and error in understanding God's call will readily resonate with many people. These experiences, which include a healthy dose of embarrassment, precede self-revelation and insight.

During the years following Vatican II, Prejean embraces the role of novice director and takes the spiritual formation of the novices seriously. She describes the divide in her community (and likely in other communities of women religious) between two types of sisters—"the 'spiritual' sisters" and the 'social justice' sisters." She is adamant that spirituality was the most important aspect of religious life, something she emphasizes in her work with the novices. However, in 1980, Prejean attends a conference in Terre Haute, Indiana, where she hears that: "Integral to that good news is that the poor are to be poor no

Prejean's experiences of trial and error in understanding God's call will resonate with many people. These experiences, which include a healthy dose of embarrassment, precede self-revelation and insight.

longer.” She realizes that she does not know anyone who is poor and that charity is not enough. When she experiences her conversion at the age of 41 and realizes that Jesus was an advocate for the poor, she is wholehearted. She wants to dive in, and her instincts for forming community are apparent. However, she has to fail monumentally before she is ready to take a more modest path of learning to walk with the poor and know people who are poor before she can advocate for them. She describes her fear when she enters the projects for the first time. Ultimately, Prejean learns that genuine prayer is the ability to take on someone else’s suffering and work for change. She admits to needing her community to remind her that she should “never leap ahead of grace.”

River of Fire is an engaging spiritual journey that invites others to reflect on their own unfolding journeys to spiritual maturity and insight. Prejean’s spiritual memoir would be an excellent book to read with others. It would spark conversations on discernment and could readily lead to questions, such as:

- How is Helen Prejean’s spiritual journey similar to or different from your own?
- When have you experienced new insights (or growth) around your understanding of God, the holy, or theology?
- In your experience, what is the relationship between prayer, work, and justice?
- What insights does reading Prejean’s story give you about living the vows and negotiating relationships?
- What are the relationship issues someone in discernment might have to negotiate today?

This is an excellent book to put in the hands of those discerning religious life or those who have recently entered religious life. The humor and reality portrayed here will resonate with those who are serious about growing in their own spiritual lives. ■

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