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For years now I have been listening with interest to the ongoing conversation about the future of religious life. I have read just about everything NCR has published on the topic in recent years and I've talked one-on-one with a number of sisters about this urgent question. What I have often found lacking from this discussion is the same issue that seems to be missing every time the topic of declining priestly vocations arises, too. What about all of the young adults, many of whom hold degrees in theology and ministry, who have not taken vows, but are currently doing what we here would consider traditional work of the church?

Two summers ago, I had the extraordinary opportunity to study several communities of women religious who ran shelters for homeless mothers. The sisters who ran these homes were aging and were small in number. Many of them lived in the shelter with their guests. Most of them had several nonreligious staff members who served as case managers and social workers.

But as dedicated and skilled as the support staff was, I got the distinct sense that most did not quite grasp the deeper mission of the place. Their devotion to their work was not grounded in Catholic social justice tradition or sacramental theology. Watching the differences between the sisters and the clinical staff, I felt like I was looking at a mission and a charism on the brink of extinction.

*Why does it have to end this way?* I wondered.

Every year, hundreds of young Catholic women graduate from universities, graduate programs in religion, divinity schools and seminaries. Many of them go on to be theologians, chaplains, nonprofit leaders, advocates, activists and social workers doing outreach with those facing poverty and homelessness, the incarcerated, victims of domestic violence and sex trafficking.

Their work is not only high risk, it is often emotionally demanding and spiritually draining. If they are very lucky, they work in a supportive environment under a supervisor who is stable, competent and compassionate. Not many have a strong, supportive community behind them. And many do not feel at home, or even safe, in a parish, given the climate in the Roman Catholic Church these days.

Unlike males who seek the priesthood, the institutional church does not support their education or their profession -- even though they, too, spend their lives studying and serving the church.

Unlike women religious, they do not experience some of the securities that often come with religious life. They have to worry about paying their rent, maintaining a household on their own and, in some cases, provide their own medical insurance. If they lose their jobs, there is no safety net to carry them through until they find work again.

But perhaps the greatest deprivation these young women face, is the sustenance that comes with a life of prayer, contemplation and community. Young women are as in need of this support as any of the sisters engaged in similar work.

The number of young adult Catholic women who find themselves in this predicament is not small. And, I believe, they are most certainly called by God in a way very similar to women religious. The difference is that these young women grew up in a culture that, in some significant ways, is radically different from the society in which the majority of sisters in the United States were raised.

The bulk of the sisters ministering in the United States today entered their communities during or before the 1960s. At that time, our culture was still based on the traditional communal structure. People still lived in communities, in a village. Many Catholics identified their parish at their neighborhood. People lived close to family, if not in the same home as extended family. Their communities, their religious traditions, gave them their identities, they told them what their values were and what to believe.

Today, young adults are born into a post-communal individualistic culture, that culture in which the needs and demands of the individual are superior to the needs and demands of the community. Community doesn't tell them what to believe. Individuals have the right to decide what they believe in, what their values are, and how they are going to live their lives. Most young adults in our culture will choose what their religion is and will craft their own morality. This kind of individuality is unprecedented in human history.

So, unlike most humans who have preceded them throughout history, they are not hard-wired to live in community. Most did not grow up surrounded by extended family or in a traditional parish or neighborhood. For this reason, many young adults will look to their partner or spouse to fulfill the role in their lives that community traditionally did. In the individualistic culture, a partner or spouse provides an important part of their identity and their support network. It is probably fair to say that the need for a partner, therefore, is stronger and more crucial to their emotional stability and spiritual health than it was for previous generations.

But so is community, of course. All of this individualism eventually leads to deep isolation, loneliness and rootlessness. But it takes today's young adults a much longer time to realize how vital community is. Adolescence has become a very prolonged state in the new generation. It is probably fair to say that if there were a ritual to mark a young person's entry into adulthood, it would probably be marriage. And young people are getting married later and later because it takes them such a long time to figure out who they are, what they believe in, and what will fulfill them. This is why they are so hesitant about making commitments, especially long term ones.

This cultural phenomenon, I think, provides the basis for why so many communities of women religious have struggled to recruit among college age women or women in their early twenties. Some women in college do not even date, so the idea of making a life

commitment at their age is unthinkable, and the idea of making a life-commitment to communal living, without the option of marriage, is even more unthinkable.

Even I, who was born an old soul, who was passionately interested in church and social justice in high school, did not realize how attractive, how powerful communal, religious life is until I reached my early thirties.

Young women are coming to these realizations much later in life, and their readiness and willingness to make life commitments is arriving later in life, too.

But, this does not mean that young women in their twenties and thirties cannot benefit tremendously from getting to know women religious, witnessing your deeply Catholic lives, feeling the support of your communities, enriching their spiritual practices by learning about your charisms, drinking from the deep wells of your wisdom.

Young women, especially those who have felt called to serve the church, study theology, do faith-based work for justice, are starving for spiritual mentors. They share your same hunger for community, charism, and prayer. They are longing for a safe, sacramental space. They want to be Catholic, as you are, in the truest and deepest sense of the word.

Now, I know what many of you are thinking. These young women can easily join the thriving lay associates and companions programs offered by many religious communities. That is true, and my prayer is that all of this media attention you have been receiving will

raise your visibility among Catholic women who may not know about lay associate programs.

But associates, it seems to me, have a slightly different purpose in religious life. They immerse themselves in the charism of a community and then they bring that spirit into their professional and personal lives.

I suspect that there are many women, and I count myself among them, who desire more. Rather than taking the community's spirit into the world, they wish to dwell fully in the community. They want to live among the suffering or in the retreat house. They want to make a home within their ministries. They want to make a life commitment not simply to a profession, but to a mission. Right now in many communities, lay associates do not enjoy the benefit of having a vote in a community or being part of the conversations that take place at the level of the executive team, which makes this kind of full immersion difficult.

There are hundreds of young adult women who want to answer God's call and who can, both theologically and pastorally, sustain the spirit and mission of your religious communities. And I believe some they can do this *and* be partnered or married. In some cases, my own included, I believe that being in a committed relationship would actually enhance the fruitfulness of some women's vocations to religious life.

For decades, Catholic Worker Houses have found creative ways to accommodate couples. More recently, a multitude of groups are emerging out of what is being called the "new monasticism" movement. These groups are also incorporating couples, some of them even same-sex partners, into their communities.

Interestingly, many of these “new monastics” are actually Protestants who are finding profound meaning and purpose in this ancient Catholic concept. Even young, justice-oriented Evangelicals have been turned on to living in religious communities. These are young adults who grew up so low-church Protestant that they are allergic to liturgy; those who grew up believing that the only prayer that should never be spontaneous is the Lord’s prayer. They live, work, eat and pray together. A few of them even got together recently to write a book of common prayer that looks and sounds a lot like the liturgy of the hours. They’ve discovered what one young Evangelical calls an “awesome bed time prayer called compline.” They are reciting the prayers written by Romero and reading *The Long Loneliness*.

Much as I love my Protestant friends, it almost pains me to see them take the great Catholic tradition of living in a community based on prayer and social justice work and creatively inject it with new life and meaning, while we Catholics sit around and mourn its imminent loss.

Catholic women have the extraordinary benefit of already being rooted in the tradition. All they need is for a religious community to open its doors to them. Most of us would

agree that something new is emerging, but we are not quite sure what it is. I would invite women religious to expand their contemplation to include the voices of young adult women who share a deep understanding of their calling and charism. Even though they may not be ready or willing to profess vows, these young women may hold significant insight into how this prophetic life form might continue to give life to future generations.

You have already created among yourselves a form of church that so many of us are restless for: small, supportive, non-hierarchical, intimate communities that are deeply rooted in tradition, devoted to sacramental life, and grounded in outreach to the poor and marginalized. You have exemplified what is best about the Catholic tradition. This is the kind of Catholic Church that I hope, I believe, can find a new and full life now and into the future.

Although we won't find all of the answers to the mysterious future of religious life, by giving young women a voice, by doing so, sisters will be actually provide a much-needed ministry to a different kind of marginalized community. The most overlooked group in the Catholic Church may well be young adult Catholic women who, regardless of the depth of their commitment to the Gospel and to the work of justice, are excluded from nearly every form of life-commitment to ministry.

Together we may be able to attune one another's prophetic vision and guide one another in reading the signs of the times.