

Vocation Director Discusses Trends, Issues of Candidates

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Sister Kathy Littrell is associate vocations director for the Oakland Diocese and vocation director for her religious community, the Sisters of the Holy Family, headquartered in Fremont. Recently, she spoke with The Voice about her work of guiding women as they discern a religious vocation.

As a vocations director, you meet with women thinking about religious life. What advice do you give them to guide their discernment process? Probably the first thing I ask is what they are looking for and why. If they don't have a sense that everyone has a vocation and that vocation isn't just priest, Brother or Sister, I try to help them look at their various vocation options in order to discover what might be the best fit for them.

God doesn't call us to become something we are not, but to live out our baptismal call through the gifts and talents we have as the person God created us to be.

The discernment process involves not only prayer, but knowing yourself well and listening to others who are able to help you clarify what you might be called to. Often the piece that is missing is those other persons so I encourage them to get a spiritual director and to identify those people who can help them in the discernment process.

In talking with women about a religious vocation, what do you find are their primary reasons for wanting to enter religious life?

Assuming the person is a reasonably healthy candidate, it is usually looking for something more... some aspect of spirituality or communal life.

Most healthy candidates that I talk to are already involved in some area of service or ministry and don't need religious life in order to do ministry. They have a prayer life and are involved in their parish community, but they feel called to belong to something larger than themselves and to the communal element of religious life.

How does a woman go about finding the right religious community for her?

Discovering if religious life may be the life choice a person is called to is actually the first phase of discernment. If it seems a person is called to religious life, then the discernment becomes one of which community.

I am often talking to women (and as the associate vocation director for the diocese, to men considering the option of religious priest or Brother) who don't know about religious communities in the ways that people did when they were taught by a particular community or ministered alongside a particular community.

I ask them about their own prayer life, what ministries they are involved in or what they see themselves involved in, and how they are currently in relationship to others and how they see themselves in community. This at least begins to help me point them towards communities that they might want to get to know and also helps them to begin to recognize something about a community's spirit that might fit with who they are.

After a person begins to spend time with a community getting to know its members and ministries, she can work with that community's vocation director. It is much like feeling called to marriage, but not having met the right person to make a life commitment with. You don't just marry someone to get married. You need to get to know someone well enough and you need to know enough about yourself to be able to mutually make a life commitment.

Is there a "typical" candidate for religious life today?

I don't know if I would say "typical," except for some similarity in their reasons for wanting to consider religious life. I do notice trends though, the main one being age.

Most of the women that I meet with who are seriously looking at religious life are in their 30's or in their late 40's - early 50's. The women in their 30's are somewhat established with an education and career and find that they are looking for something more. The older group is almost contemplating a second career. They are looking at the possibility of early retirement, have had some fulfillment in the first half of their life and they feel called to serve in a different way. Both groups feel a call to the spiritual/communal element of religious life.

The other big trend and shift, even just over the last seven years, is the style of communication and the quality of the candidates I hear from.

When I first began working in vocation ministry I was still receiving letters requesting information from a variety of age groups, but often they were not the most viable of candidates. I can't remember the last time I received a letter. Now the communication is all e-mail and the women are healthy candidates.

There are younger women who are also asking about religious life. I receive e-mails from the 18-25 age range who are just gathering information about what religious life is, how you know if you might be called to this lifestyle and something about individual communities.

These are usually one-time communications, but I find it a positive trend that this generation of young adults at least see religious life and priesthood as a possible life choice whether or not they ever choose this as their vocation.

When considering a woman for religious life, what would you cite as obstacles that would make it unlikely that she should pursue entrance into a community?

On the part of a religious community, the criteria would be around whether or not celibacy would be a healthy life choice for the individual, if they had good intimacy skills, if they had the ability to live a communal lifestyle and if they had the ability to live the mission and ministry of the particular religious community.

Some obstacles may be an obstacle to religious life. Others may be obstacles to a particular religious community. Communal life, service and prayer are part of all religious communities, but the way these elements are lived out varies. Different congregations emphasize these elements differently depending on the purpose of the group's founding and the spirit of the congregation.

Another obstacle could be age or health issues. Policies vary from community to community. But the bottom line is whether the person is a healthy candidate and can the person live the mission and ministry of the congregation.

On the part of the women themselves, the obstacles vary. Sometimes it is family relationships. Sometimes it is the life commitment itself. They are looking for the communal and spiritual elements that are often missing in our society, but aren't seeking a life commitment and at some time during their discernment they find something else that meets what they are looking for.

Another obstacle, I hate to admit, is some negative perceptions about us as women religious - they see an over emphasis on work that appears to be workaholic, or they don't see how they can fit into a group of women without much diversity.

Surprisingly, among the viable candidates I speak with, the vows themselves are not obstacles. They don't have a problem with looking at right relationship with material goods, life long celibacy, or obedience to Gospel values and the spirit of a particular congregation.

Generally, what is a religious community looking for in a candidate? Do communities have age restrictions? Education requirements?

In general, a candidate would need to be single and Catholic. She would be person of prayer and service. She would be involved in a faith community. A full practicing Catholic Christian who feels that the best way for her to live her vocation is in community as a vowed member. She would have healthy relationships and good intimacy skills. She would be able to live in a communal setting and be a part of a group that has a vision greater than herself. And her current life would already show evidence of all of the above.

Then more specifically, there would be a fit with the individual congregation in regards to ministry, mission, prayer and community life.

Speaking very generally, most communities have some education requirement. It is usually something like at least two years of college and/or work experience after high school. Some communities may require more or less.

There is more diversity around age policies. The age limit is usually between 35–45 depending on the community. Some communities accept women up to 50 and some have no age policy at all. Obviously, the older a candidate, the more this question needs to be asked as a part of the discernment process.

Whether a community has an age policy or not, the two major issues are around the ministry of the community and the communal nature of religious life. The older a candidate, the harder it is to adapt to community life. The ministry issue is one of whether the person can be actively involved in the mission and ministry of the particular community.

Can a woman who is widowed or divorced enter a religious community? What if she has children?

The short answer is yes. A women needs to be single, Catholic and female and have free will to enter a religious community.

If she is widowed or divorced, documentation that she is currently single would be obtained during the application process, either a death certificate, or that she has obtained an annulment etc.

The more practical part of the process would be to make sure that there was enough time for the grieving process or healing to take place so that the person had the ability and freedom to discern religious life.

As far as children are concerned, a person cannot have a dependent child and enter religious life. Once the child is at least over 18 and no longer a dependent, it is an option to consider religious life. With grown children and grandchildren, it depends on the individual and the relationship they have with these family members if religious life is a healthy life choice for them.

Many religious vocations today seem to be emerging within ethnic communities. How are religious communities preparing to receive such candidates?

I can't answer the how to part of this question. What I can say is that diversity is a real issue that most communities are dealing with. This issue encompasses ethnicity, as well as ecclesiology, theology, and generational differences. Communities are dealing with the diversity issue through awareness, education, looking at the diversity that already exists in the congregation, among other things.

I know that looking at ways to work with and assess candidates from various ethnic groups is very much a part of the ongoing education and updating of the vocation directors of the various religious communities who belong to the National Religious Vocation Conference.

What is the usual length of time a woman would spend in formation before making her first vows?

The formation process is a process that continues a woman's discernment process at a different depth. In the first phase, the candidate lives and works with the community she has chosen to enter. This is called either candidacy or postulancy and is usually six months to a year. The next stage is the more formal novitiate in which a woman is received into the community and spends about two years as a novice. After this, a woman would take first or temporary vows.

Can you tell me a bit about your own discernment process? How did you decide to become a Sister of the Holy Family? How many years have you been a Sister? What ministries have you been involved in over the years?

My own discernment process is very similar to the process of those women considering religious life today. I didn't know many religious growing up. In college I found myself working in parish ministry and working with a few Sisters and felt an attraction to their lifestyle. I didn't actually seriously consider religious life until about 25 and then worked with a spiritual director and one particular vocation minister who helped me discern possible communities. I then took the time to meet with individual vocation ministers of different congregations.

The Holy Family Sisters were mentioned to me by a friend from another community who had worked with them and saw something in me that she thought fit with them, so I also took the time to get to know them as well. The more I was involved in the mutual discernment process with the Sisters of the Holy Family the more this seemed to be true.

This June will be 20 years with Holy Family. Except for vocation ministry during the past seven years, I have been involved solely in parish ministry and in various aspects of religious education and faith formation. This has included sacramental preparation, middle school and high school faith formation, as well as Children's Liturgy of the Word. I have lived in the Diocese of Oakland, the Archdiocese of San Francisco, and in Hawaii.

How has religious life changed since the time when you entered? What changes do you think are likely to occur in the next 25 years?

This is a difficult question. There aren't really a lot of external changes I can mention. I think some of the obvious things that people see are the fewer numbers and the increase in the age of members.

But I also have seen a lot of what feels to be positive, although subtle changes in the way we struggle to live religious life. The fact that we are attempting to address internally the issues of how we live communally and spiritually together and that these are the same issues the women who are considering religious life are looking for, seems a positive to me.

I can't begin to guess the changes that will likely occur in the next 25 years, but I think the changes will come from a more feminine and interdependent style of communal life -- a re-looking at how religious life can serve those communal and spiritual needs that are missing in First World-dominated culture.

I also think ministry needs change as we look at a global world; the changes will come from what emerges in the ways communities respond.

I also think that communities will remain small, will continue to look at various ways to reconfigure etc, but I also believe that religious life as a lifestyle will remain a viable life choice for some.