

Joy and encouraging vocations

By Sr. Constance Veit, I.S.P.

I do a lot of outreach to the young on behalf of my religious congregation, so I try to be aware of trends in vocations work and the common traits of emerging generations.

Recently I took some time to review the latest *Study on Religious Vocations*, co-sponsored by the National Religious Vocation Conference and the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate, hoping that it would give me an “aha moment” on how to interest young women in our community of Little Sisters of the Poor.

I was struck by a section of the report entitled *Intergenerational Living*. According to the 2020 NRVC/CARA study, a mere 13 percent of perpetually professed members of religious communities are younger than 60, while the same proportion are at least 90 years of age.

These are pretty sobering statistics!

I was consoled to read the following testimony from a young religious: “It is beautiful to have all different generations and ethnicities in one community, in one house, if we allow ourselves to see that beauty.”

What a hope-filled attitude on the part of a young religious! It really inspired me to stop bemoaning the aging of our religious communities and start seeing the beauty.

So, as we observe National Vocations Awareness Week, I would like to address a message of hope to my fellow women and men religious who, like me, are not so young anymore! May you too take heart in realizing that young people seeking religious life are not as deterred by the older demographics of most of our communities as we thought. They don’t seem to mind that many of us are older – but they do hope that we will live simply, in solidarity with the poor, and that we will live and pray together in a spirit of joy.

So how do we connect with the young? Let’s take a few cues from Pope Francis!

We might begin by striving to become young again. The pope has suggested that we seek to renew our youthfulness at every stage of life.

“As we mature, grow older and structure our lives,” he wrote, “we should never lose that enthusiasm and openness to an ever greater reality.”

In *Christus Vivit*, our Holy Father encouraged us to let ourselves be loved by God, for he loves us just as we are.

A young friend and former FOCUS missionary told me that this is the essential message we need to communicate to young people. They need to know that they are loved as they are, even though God wants to give them more.

God “values and respects you,” we might say to them, borrowing from the pope’s words “but he also keeps offering you more: more of his friendship, more fervor in prayer, more hunger for his word, more longing to receive Christ in the Eucharist, more desire to live his Gospel, more inner strength, more peace and spiritual joy.”

This joy is something about which the pope very often speaks, and it is something that speaks deeply to young people in their vocational discernment.

It is something they see in the quality of a gaze or a smile, in the serenity with which a consecrated person embraces trials or suffering, and in the generous gift of self to the poor day after day.

Pope Francis insisted on joy in a recent speech to Discalced Carmelites,

“It is ugly to see consecrated men and women with a long face. It is ugly, it is ugly. Joy must come from within: that joy that is peace, an expression of friendship.”

God forbid that any of us become ugly as we grow older!

In *Christus Vivit*, the exhortation he wrote following the Synod on young people in the life of the church, Pope Francis reminded us that Christ is alive and he wants us to be fully alive.

“When you feel you are growing old out of sorrow, resentment or fear,” he wrote, “he will always be there to restore your strength and your hope.”

So, let’s ask Jesus, “himself eternally young,” to give us hearts that are ever young and capable of loving, ready to welcome the new generations who knock on our doors just as Elizabeth welcomed the Virgin Mary into her home in the Visitation.

Let’s witness to these young women and men the JOY that fills our hearts, and is eager to fill theirs as well, if only they give themselves to Him!

Sister Constance Veit is director of communications for the Little Sisters of the Poor.



Caption for photo: The author (lower left) enjoying community time in San Francisco. Next to her is Sr. Cecilia Mary Sartorius, who recently left us for the Father's House. Sr. Cecilia served as a superior for many years and in many locations, influencing younger Little Sisters with her joyful spirit. During the Year for Consecrated Life she wrote, "Pope Francis has said, 'If the warmth of God, of his love, of his tenderness is not in our own hearts, then how can we, who are poor sinners, warm the heart of others.' I have been blessed to possess this warmth and joy throughout my entire religious life. On reflecting on my past 50 years of consecrated life, I see how often minor fears and inward hurdles, when handled to the best of my ability, would somehow produce a positive outcome and were rewarded with a deepening of joy."