

Synodality and new life

By Carol Schuck Scheiber

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A younger generation is entering religious life. Like their forebears, young men and women religious are listening to the Spirit. Might the Spirit be alive in a new, synodal way of being a church? Pictured here are Sisters Mary Pat Gallagher, O.P. (left) and Ana Gonzalez, O.P. Photo courtesy of the Dominican Sisters of Peace.

IT SEEMS TO ME that the Synod on Synodality has something to teach religious communities that are encouraging new membership. The synod—with its concept of “synodality”—is showing all who care about religious life an approach, attitude, and culture that makes sense for religious institutes that continue to invite new life.

Religious life in North America is in a challenging moment. In the last three recorded years, 2019 to 2021, over 1,000 people entered initial formation in U.S. religious institutes. The significance of those new members cannot be underestimated. Despite hand-wringing in popular media, Catholic media, and even among Catholics and religious themselves, religious life is alive. However, the large, older generation of religious is over age 75 now, and those demographics of many elders and few under age 40, feel unsettling, even for the most dedicated religious and friends of consecrated life. And, of course, those inside and outside religious life know that these demographic realities mean many shifts in ministries, properties, etc. We also must remember that the demographic reality in the United States—across the board—now skews older, to greater and lesser degrees.

In the face of this complex reality—new life and a large older cohort—a cornerstone of Catholic belief remains: the Spirit is alive under every circumstance, urging us to be good disciples. Perhaps the Spirit’s sign of the way forward for consecrated life is revealed in the very nature of the Synod on Synodality, which began in 2021 and culminates in October 2024. The form of the synod and the type of Catholic culture it is meant to foster may have messages for religious communities concerned about attracting new members. Perhaps the synod is reminding religious of what they already know and might sometimes take for

granted in the way they live, lead, and invite. Let’s look at how synodality provides insights for vocation ministry.

Listening

The synod preparation incorporated a consciously grassroots form, allowing Catholics at many levels to participate. Religious institutes are organized in a form that likewise allows for grassroots involvement. Chapters, assemblies, convocations, and other forms of coming together to check the pulse of the community are common in religious life. I have noted over 25 years of observing religious life from the outside that institutes with a healthy vocation ministry consciously listen to and involve both their members and young people—including listening to and involving members in questions of new membership.

These communities believe in their future, prioritize vocations, put resources into new membership, and work toward it. They are open to involvement in the lives of young Catholics, and they are open to inviting young Catholics to connect with them. There are no guarantees, but synodal, grassroots, respectful listening/conversing is an excellent starting point for any

The deep, respectful listening that occurred in many places in preparation for phase two of the synod is healthy and helpful at many levels. Many lay Catholics felt heard, and they sometimes completed the synodal listening process with a renewed sense of belonging to a community that cared to listen to them.

It stands to reason that listening is foundational in Christian communities, including religious institutes. Professed religious tend to understand well the necessity of listening since the vow of obedience is central to their lives. The word obedience comes from the Latin *ob audire*, which means to listen intently. This listening involves attentiveness to God, major superiors, and to one another in community. Listening takes an incredible amount of time in a loud, fast-paced world demanding our attention. Some of the best listeners in religious communities are the elders, and they may enjoy the role of encouraging younger members. Conscious listening to members in many forums and for many reasons can help build a positive community, a community a person wants to come home to.

Synodal listening builds up the loving bonds that attract others. This is not listening as an exercise that is required of everyone, such as an administrator calling a mandatory meeting of employees who are expected to play along with corporate's latest initiative. This is the kind of listening that a mom, dad, sibling, spouse, aunt, uncle, or friend does out of love, out of a desire to invest in the relationship, out of a commitment to be family, to maintain a marriage, to enjoy a friendship, to know one's children, nieces, and nephews. That's the kind of synodal listening that seems like a good thing in a Catholic ministry, board of directors, parish council, or religious institute.

Vocation ministry itself is based on synodal-style listening, whereby candidates and the vocation director listen to each other and the Spirit to discern God's call.

Discernment

Another key aspect of synodality is discernment. Synodality is a new word for Catholicism, and the concepts and behaviors it embraces will take time to parse out, be put into action, and form new structures and ways of being. Discernment, on the other hand, is an old church concept and practice. Many people in religious life see discernment as a lifelong practice for personal and communal decision making. The synodal processes of listening, discerning, and acting are symbiotic. Each process impacts the others, and each one is ongoing. Synodality encourages discernment, which takes time and follows listening—that is, listening to movements of the heart, stirrings of the Spirit, analysis of needs, understanding of strengths, and, of course, the voice of God present in all these things, as well as in the quiet of one's heart.

Synodal discernment can, at times, be overlooked if decisions are made in haste. At a time when many religious institutes are discerning their future, members and leaders may need to remember to not miss the moment before them. Living in the precious present can be neglected when schedules become crowded. Discernment begs Catholics and religious to collectively slow down, to be as intentional in building community as they are in right-sizing buildings.

Religious who are concerned about new membership can walk the synodal path of discernment. They can individually and communally discern how best to invite and welcome new members.

Co-responsibility

Closely linked to the possibly inefficient, possibly slow processes of listening and discernment is the process of involving others, with all stakeholders taking "co-responsibility." It won't do to simply talk, listen, and spin ideas, as beautiful as those things are. There is a time to listen lovingly and generate ideas and build bonds. And there is a time to take one's discernment and put it into action. In the language of the synod, there is a time to take "co-responsibility." These actions—conversing, discerning and acting—flow seamlessly back and forth.

Taking responsibility for the mission is a major part of the synod. In fact, leaders say that the synod is meant to foster a Catholic Church lifestyle of co-responsibility. Governance in religious life is meant to build on co-responsibility, as professed members vote for their congregational leaders and work in tandem for the mission.

For communities concerned about vocations, perhaps co-responsibility involves acknowledging the need for and accepting responsibility for spending time with young people and others open to religious life. These activities are a critical part of vocation ministry, and they have enduring value for young people, apart from possible "fruit" in the form of new membership. Ministries directed at the young who are making vocational decisions are often ministries of presence. Ministries of presence are not measured in quantifiable results. What vocation directors frequently seek are community members who will take time to be present among young people, simply for the sake of being present and allowing relationships to develop.

Ministries of presence may lead some to question the value of the time involved. While some religious may wonder if it is even worth it to show up if no one enters the community, religious might instead ask what their presence means to those they spend time with. Religious have sometimes been surprised to learn what a difference their presence makes to young people and their parents. Co-responsibility beckons religious to recognize exactly how valuable time is to young people who are searching for direction in their lives, who desire to be around caring, wise adults, and who can also teach religious themselves how to be in the moment. What vocation directors frequently seek are community members who will take time to be present among young people, to engage in the art of conversation, to build intergenerational relationships, simply

When it comes to vocation ministry, synodal co-responsibility might take various forms: attending Mass at a campus parish, supporting a weekend retreat, sending hand-written cards to confirmandi, offering skills as a musician or graphics artist—the list is long and will vary by community.

An ongoing presence is more important than one-time contact. An example of co-responsibility in the form of presence is Sister Jean Dolores Schmidt, B.V.M., who at 103 years of age, has been showing up on the Loyola University-Chicago campus for decades. Because vocation directors cannot be everywhere, they value community members who keep showing up at specific schools, parishes, and places young Catholics gather. Even members who are unaccustomed to contact with young people can likely shoulder some sort of responsibility.

The time involved with vocation ministry might come at a price. When members invest their time in building up their religious community, they may have to give up other opportunities. The price may be having to reign in a busy ministry schedule in order to make time. It might mean turning down a tantalizing activity. Like the dad who sacrifices evenings and weekends to coach track so his daughter can have a track team at her school, co-responsibility might have a cost. But the dad does it out of love, and the burden will seem light when he and his daughter come to know each other in new ways and grow in love. So too for the community members who sacrifice so they can take part in nurturing new life.

Taking time for others is the essence of religious life. While balance is critically important to avoid burnout or fatigue, as a friend in religious life tells me, the vows are meant to be lived for the life of the world, not for one's own self-actualization.

Synodal co-responsibility, then, goes beyond, "I'll pray for you." Vocation ministers need and want prayer, as do members immersed in any active ministry. Mutual prayer is a given in religious life. The synodal way is for all parties to take co-responsibility for fulfilling the church's mission. And what is a more foundational mission than putting in time so that one's marriage, family, or religious community can thrive? Synod leaders say no matter what role one plays (lay, cleric, consecrated) a synodal church shares a mission to follow Jesus Christ and build the kingdom of God. This vision for the church is aspirational, but we're on our way—or we hope so. We are not there yet.

Openness to the Spirit

As tempting as it is to give in to cynicism or despair about the utility of building a better church community, parish community, or religious community, the Spirit prompts us. Leaving room for the Holy Spirit to work is a key part of being a synodal church. If we still believe in the Holy Spirit, we may need to give over space so the Spirit can enter in. Perhaps we simply stay neutral if that's the best we can do. Or maybe we lend a helping hand or reconsider our despair—just in case something good can come of it.

Here's an example from the work world. Once I was assigned to work with someone I thought had corrupted his role and really should be done with work in his chosen field. I was disgusted and expected failure. As I didn't have much choice, I went through the motions until one day, I realized my cynical attitude was wrong. Maybe I needed to give him a chance, as my assumptions were not entirely accurate. This slow change in my attitude taught me to leave room for grace. It was not a church setting, but the Spirit still showed up when I least expected it, and I believe that is a truth worth applying to the church and religious life in this moment of dynamic change. What may religious have to rethink about vocation ministry? Have religious collectively abandoned a vision that sees vocation ministry as a ministry?

I have my concerns about the Catholic Church. Reading the results of the synodal process of participation opened my eyes to the fact that the issues I'm sad or angry about are things that dismay millions of other Catholics. There are tensions and lots of them. And some days I don't have the patience or desire to persist. But that is where the community kicks in, and I think the same could be true for others who grow weary with their own church community, including those in religious institutes. We need to support each other. Remember how Moses' arms grew tired in the battle with Amalek (Exod. 17)? If he kept his arms raised, Israel prevailed, but if he lowered his arms, Israel began to lose the battle. Moses needed Aaron and Hur to stand with him and hold his arms up high when they felt heavy, which was probably about five minutes after he started!

Communion, support, and the Spirit

This kind of support for each other as we figure out how to be a better church, how to be a more authentic, welcoming, inviting religious community, is also part of the synod. One pillar of the synodal process is communion, and communion is nothing if we cannot support one another when we are weary. Vocation ministry is similar to child rearing: it takes a village. The whole village (or at least a critical mass) has to leave room for the Spirit, for hope for the future. Villagers—community members—are asked to care about the young people, the new generation, who are both the today and the tomorrow.

This invites each of us to realize that for each new person we meet, there is a two-way encounter. It means that our efforts are focused on recognizing that each new person who has never met us before comes with their own hopes, fears, and dreams. In a two-way encounter, our own hearts may be stretched and renewed.

Synodality calls for respectful listening and conversation. It calls for forging a vision together. It calls for co-responsibility to carry out the mission of Jesus Christ. Every Catholic must decide for herself or himself what that means in their own context.

Religious communities, as essential parts of the Catholic Church, likewise are called to consider this idea of synodality. What are its invitations? How could it shape the way communities function? Can the culture of synodality affect how religious think about vocation ministry and how they build the future?

The leaders of the Synod on Synodality remind Catholics that the synod is a spiritual process. “If the Spirit is not present, there will be no synod,” Pope Francis has said. In the same way, religious communities can invoke the Spirit—the Holy Spirit and the spirit of their founders and foundresses—as they follow the synodal path.

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