

Aging of Religious congregations poses challenges for the Church

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By Sister Mary Garascia

More than 15 years ago around this time of year, I got a call from a priest pastor. He implored me to speak at Mass on the weekend of the December special collection for retired Religious. His reason — “because, Sister,” he said, “we are a relatively new parish, and we have never had any Sisters here, so some people have never seen one!”

Today, there are many more Catholics who have never met a Sister. In 1965 there were 181,421 Sisters in the US; today there are around 40,000 — a 75% decline. Of those 40,000, more than half are retired Sisters well over 70 years of age, and only a small percentage of Sisters are 50 years of age or younger. A recent study predicts that in the next 10 years, of the 420 U.S. religious orders of women, 300 will age out of existence. There are lots of reasons for this decline. In my opinion, the two main reasons are usually not discussed. The first reason is small family size, which became the norm in developed countries after artificial birth control was introduced 50 years ago; parents want grandchildren! The second reason is the decline of religious practice, generally. In 1965, 76% of U.S. Catholics attended Mass each Sunday. Today only 24% do so. These same two trends have also led to a precipitous decline in vocations to the priesthood. Frequently in every parish today we hear a prayer for vocations to the priesthood and religious life. That is good! But we also need to pray and reflect on some deeper implications of this situation because it affects not only Sisters but the entire U.S. Church.

One set of concerns has to do with the traditional “work” that Sisters have done. In the U.S., Catholic schools staffed largely by Sisters were a main way our Catholic faith was passed from generation to generation. Among older priests and lay leaders serving today, a very high percentage experienced at least some years of Catholic education. As the numbers of Sisters diminished, so did the number of Catholic schools. Faith formation programs created to replace them struggle. Many children today are brought for sacramental instruction by parents whose own faith instruction ended when they were children; many more are not brought at all. How to hand on the faith today and how to form future lay leaders is a pressing issue for all of us.

Another traditional work of men and women in religious orders has been missionary work. Worldwide a lot of it is still being done today by Sisters in their 70’s and beyond. The inexorable aging process of religious congregations will cause the end of many foreign missions and diminish the capacity of our U.S. Church to minister in other countries. The institutional support for mission work will likely need to come from Dioceses instead of religious orders.

Missionary work, the Catholic school system, and many Catholic

outreach programs in the social justice area were made possible by the lifestyle of religious order members. The vow of poverty helped us grow in personal holiness by living simply. The vow of celibacy meant we did not have the financial obligations of parents. And so simple living and no children meant we could work for lower salaries. Lay people cannot do that too long if they want to be married, buy a house, and raise and educate children. Outreach programs to the poor, to immigrants, to prisoners, to the homeless, to gangs, to addicted persons, to special needs persons — all will need considerably more financial support from the U.S. Church to be sustained with lay leadership. Where will that money come from, given that Catholics give less to their Church than other faith groups do, and given that so many Catholics do not even attend Church regularly?

Like lay people, Religious are not ordained. So, you could think of us as sort of specialized lay people. Our way of life highlights and strengthens certain core values of Catholicism; we specialize in some things the Church needs. Some examples: prayer, something we all should do, is both practiced as a central activity and studied in this way of life. Religious live in communities of people not related by blood, not bound together by nationality or necessity or friendship but only by faith. When it is lived well, religious communities exemplify what it means to be the body of Christ — imperfect and sometimes difficult people, somehow able to travel together in order to share God’s love beyond the limits of kin. Advocacy and action for people on the margins of society is another thing we have specialized in. As we religious women become less visible and present, how will these core values be nurtured in our Church?

We Sisters think that our way of life will survive, but it will be very much smaller in the next decades. Meanwhile, Religious congregations are planning effectively for their future, and for many that means a gradual completion of their historical phase. Of course, there is grief in this. But there is also peace, gratitude for the life we have lived, and trust that the Spirit has something new in mind! Being born, living, dying are all phases of life itself, and each phase is filled with the presence and purpose of God.

The changing of seasons mirrors the paschal mystery of dying and rising, and it is in late Fall when the national collection for retired religious takes place. The collection is an occasion when all of us can pray about the challenges that the increasing scarcity of Sisters presents to our Church.

Sister Mary Garascia, PhD (Theology), is a member of the Sisters of the Precious Blood of Dayton Ohio, where she now resides. Until recently she lived and ministered at The Holy Name of Jesus in Redlands. You can follow her weekly Sunday scripture blogs at PreciousBloodSistersDayton.org.