



**NRVC**  
National Religious  
Vocation Conference

# RELIGIOUS LIFE TODAY

A REPORT FROM THE NATIONAL RELIGIOUS VOCATION CONFERENCE  
ON THE 2020 STUDY ON RECENT VOCATIONS TO RELIGIOUS LIFE







## ENDLESS STORY OF CALL

ON AVERAGE, AROUND 200 PEOPLE A YEAR MAKE PERPETUAL PROFESSION AND ABOUT 400 BEGIN THE PROCESS OF FORMATION.

**G**OD CALLS.  
MEN & WOMEN RESPOND.  
RELIGIOUS LIFE CONTINUES.

### Religious life in the United States today

Diversity is the hallmark of religious life today. No two religious institutes among the 700 plus that exist in the United States are exactly alike and neither are any two members within those communities exactly the same. Variety is found in the spirituality, charisma, size, and mission of religious communities and in the cultural, ethnic, generational, and educational backgrounds of newer members.

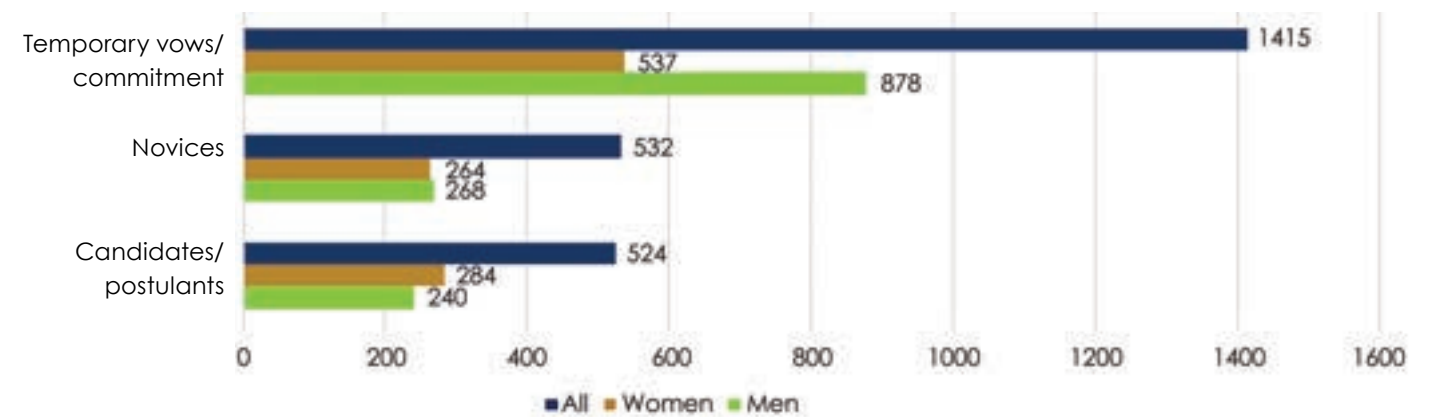
The 2020 NRVC/CARA Study on Recent Vocations identified more than 3,500 women and men who entered religious life from 2003 to 2018. On average, around 200 people a year make perpetual profession, and about 400 begin the process of initial formation. The rate of those entering formation has remained consistent in the past decade and represent a leveling off from a decline at the end of the prior century. Entrants and religious institutes see formation as a time for deeper discernment about whether consecrated life is a good fit. This helps ensure healthy members and healthy communities.

Women and men entering religious life—whether their institutes are apostolic, cloistered, evangelical, missionary, monastic, or societies of apostolic life—are aware of the changing demographics reflected in the numbers of newer members and the cultural and generational diversity. As one new entrant said, “We can flip the perspective to: What’s the gift of smallness? What’s the gift of the global church entering religious life? What’s the gift of intergenerational diversity? And have that be the starting point of conversation about religious life today.”

STATISTICS COMPILED FROM THE RESULTS OF THE 2020 STUDY ON RECENT VOCATIONS TO RELIGIOUS LIFE.

FIND ALL OF NRVC'S STUDIES, INCLUDING THE 2020 VOCATIONS STUDY AT NRVC.NET.

NUMBER OF RELIGIOUS IN INITIAL FORMATION IN 2018\*



\* A total of 2,471, as identified by religious institutes in the 2020 Study on Recent Vocations. The actual number of men and women in initial formation is likely higher as not all religious institutes participated in the study.





## INTERCULTURAL LIVING

NEWER MEMBERS REFLECT THE RACIAL AND ETHNIC DIVERSITY OF THE UNITED STATES.

### Characteristics of newer entrants

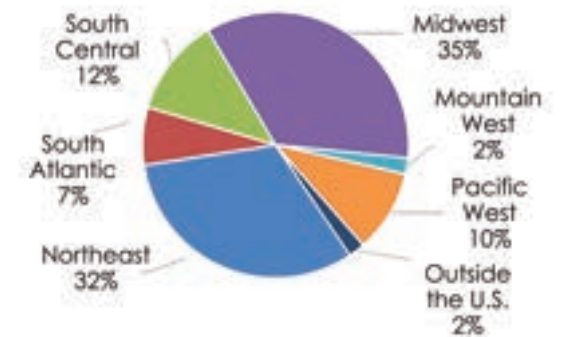
Young, culturally diverse, raised Catholic, and educated in Catholic schools: These are key characteristics of recent entrants to religious life. Most considered religious life by the time they were 21 and the average age of entrance is 28.

They were supported in their consideration to enter religious life primarily from diocesan priests, religious, friends, and parishioners. Family support grew stronger upon entrance. They made use of many resources to learn about religious life and discern their vocation. Most newer members participated in a “Come and See” experience before finally entering religious life.

The majority of those in initial formation come from middle-class families. They were drawn to the charisma, spirit, and community life of the religious institute they entered. For women, prayer and the way the vows and gospel values are lived among members also influenced their decision to enter their community. For men, the future of the institute, its location, and its ministries were influential in their choice.

*“ I wanted something more. I wanted to live a life that was intentional, that was in community, where I would be challenged to be my best self, to give myself to the world in love. ”*

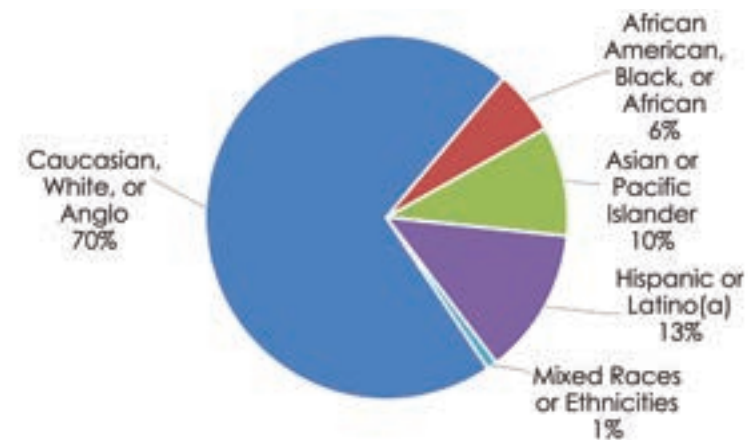
LOCATION OF PERPETUALLY PROFESSED



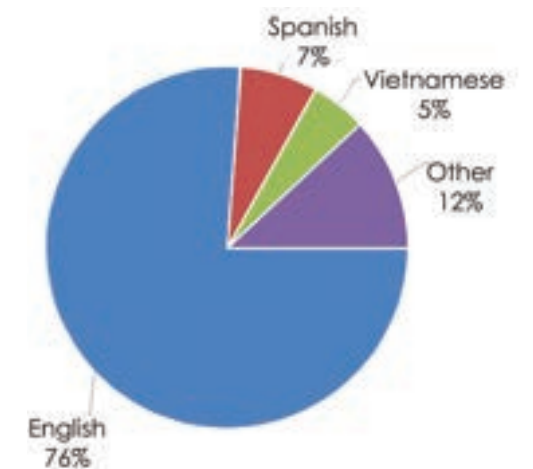
### Intercultural living

Most newer members prefer living with members of different cultures and are more racially and ethnically diverse than professed members. A quarter of newer members were born outside the U.S. (coming from 68 countries) and their first language is among 50 different languages.

RACIAL/ETHNIC BACKGROUND INITIAL FORMATION



FIRST LANGUAGE







## INTERGENERATIONAL COMMUNITY LIFE

NEWER MEMBERS SEE COMMUNITY LIFE AS WHAT IS DISTINCTIVE AND ATTRACTIVE ABOUT RELIGIOUS LIFE. MOST PREFER TO LIVE IN LARGER COMMUNITIES.



### Community life

Many newer members see community life as what is distinctive and most attractive about religious life. Healthy and holy community life includes praying together, celebrating holidays and feast days as a community, living with other members, and sharing meals.

Living at or near a ministry site and living simply in solidarity with the poor, marginalized, and neglected is ranked as "somewhat" to "very" important. The younger a respondent is, the more likely he or she is to prefer to live in a larger community, especially one with at least eight members. This is consistent with findings from the 2009 study of newer members.

“ What attracted me to my community was their joy. Since entering and being received, I feel whole for the first time in my life. ”

### Intergenerational living

Thirteen percent of perpetually professed are younger than 60 and the identical proportion are aged 90 or older. Major superiors and newer members acknowledge the challenges for new entrants who may be alone in formation or lack peer support within congregations. However, newer members were not deterred from entering by these circumstances.

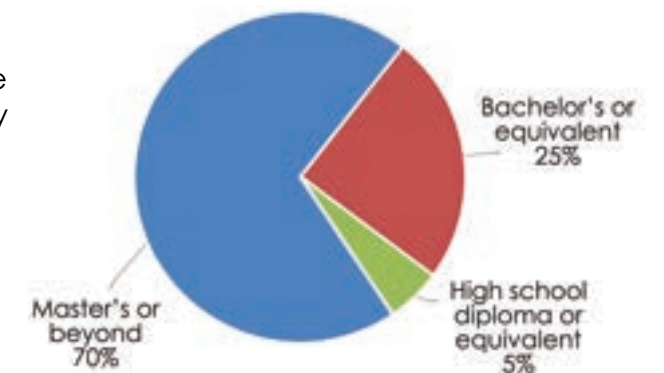
In ranking their attitudes about various aspects of communal life, newer members give their religious institutes the highest ratings on their care and support of elderly members. Almost all newer members prefer to live in communities with members of different ages (93 percent).

“ It is the 80-year-old brothers, the wisdom figures of the community, that are always the first in the chapel and the last at the dining room table. They are always there—the hour before we have morning prayer, Mass, or whatever. ”

### Education

Most perpetually professed members, both men and women, have at least a college degree. The majority of newer members come with considerable education as well as ministry and work experience. Seventy-one percent of newer members had at least a bachelor's degree before they entered. Nearly all newer members rank ongoing formation and lifelong education as important.

EDUCATION AMONG PERPETUALLY PROFESSED







## PRAYER AND SPIRITUALITY

PERSONAL PRAYER, DAILY EUCHARIST, AND LITURGY OF THE HOURS CHARACTERIZE THE REGULAR PRAYER LIFE OF MOST SISTERS, BROTHERS, AND PRIESTS.

### Prayer and spirituality

Personal private prayer characterizes the regular prayer life of a majority of sisters, brothers, and priests in almost all responding institutes along with daily Eucharist and Liturgy of the Hours.

“As I was growing in my prayer life, I realized that I really wanted my whole life to be that intimate communion with God, to be that life of prayer. And the more that desire grew, the more I saw the way it's lived out in religious life.”

#### HOW IMPORTANT TO YOU ARE THESE TYPES OF PRAYER?

Percentage responding

	“Somewhat” or “Very Much” %	“Very Much” Only %
Personal private prayer	99	91
Daily Eucharist	95	85
<i>Lectio divina</i> /spiritual reading and reflection	89	57
Liturgy of the Hours	88	70
Exposition of the Blessed Sacrament	85	66
Nonliturgical common prayer (e.g., rosary, devotions)	72	38
Faith sharing	70	35
Common meditation/centering prayer	62	37
Journal writing, poetry, prayer blogs	56	26
Ecumenical/interfaith prayer (e.g., Taizé)	27	8
Prayer using an app/online resources	16	24

Respondents of diverse ethnicities are more likely to report that faith sharing, ecumenical/interfaith prayer, and prayer using an app/online resources are “very” important to them. Among all respondents, a desire to be Christ-centered, live the spirituality of the community, and use their gifts for the sake of others is a common aspiration.

“My hope for each of us is rootedness in Christ and living the spirituality of the institute more deeply and sharing this treasure with those [to whom] we minister. I hope for final and holy perseverance for each member in living vows to the fullest.”





## ATTRACTION TO RELIGIOUS LIFE

DESIRE FOR PRAYER, SPIRITUAL GROWTH, DEEPER RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD, SERVICE, SENSE OF CALL, CHARISM, AND THE JOY OF THE COMMUNITY ATTRACTED NEWER ENTRANTS TO THEIR VOCATION.



### Attraction to religious life

Newer members are most likely to say they were attracted to religious life by a desire for prayer, spiritual growth, and a deeper relationship with God. To only a slightly lesser degree, most newer members also say they were attracted to religious life by a sense of call to consecrated life and a desire to be of service and part of a community.

In turn, they were attracted to their specific religious institute by its prayer life and mission, followed by the community life and the example of members of the institute. Ministries of the institute are also important to most newer members.

Newer members to religious life first became acquainted with their religious institutes in diverse ways. As in NRVC's 2009 study of newer members, the most common way to meet a religious community was in an institution, such as a school, where the members served. Besides institutional settings, other relatively common ways of becoming acquainted with the institute were through an internet search of websites, a relative or friend in the institute, working with a member of the institute, or print materials.

“ I started thinking about religious life because I just felt like something was missing. I was attracted to living in community with other people with the same charism, the same spirit, the same hopes for the world with our differences. ”

### Vocation discernment

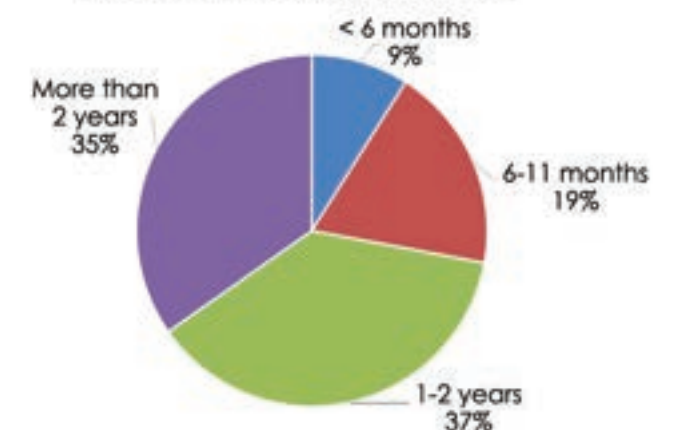
The majority of recent entrants to religious life were invited by someone to consider religious life and discern a vocation. Men were just a little more likely than women to say that someone invited them to consider discernment (70 percent compared to 64 percent).

Most respondents indicate that they were in a formal discernment process for more than a year. Compared to Vatican II-age respondents, Millennial and Post-Vatican II newer members were more likely to say that websites (such as community sites and VISION Vocation Network), and social media were “very” helpful to them in their discernment.

Most religious institutes (75 percent) report that they have a vocation director, co-directors, or a vocation team. On average, vocation directors serve in vocation ministry for seven years.

Vocation information on the institute's website or a distinct website for vocations is the most common form of publicity used in the past five years. Three in four religious institutes use print materials (e.g., prayer cards, brochures, posters) to promote

LENGTH OF DISCERNMENT







# MISSION AND MINISTRY

NEWER MEMBERS WERE ENGAGED IN MINISTRY BEFORE THEY ENTERED RELIGIOUS LIFE. THE MISSION AND MINISTRY OF THEIR INSTITUTE INFLUENCED THEIR DECISION.



Photos: Middle left, by Benjamin Bulard, Cullman Times; bottom right, courtesy of St. Louis University

vocations. Social media is used by 62 percent of religious institutes. Half of religious institutes use the NRVC's VISION Vocation Guide, VocationNetwork.org, and VocationMatch.com.

“ I did all my research online; googled the congregations; found their mission and charism statements; reached out to several; visited several, and in one, the relationships were easy. They kept inviting, and I kept saying yes. They're still inviting, I'm still saying yes. ”

## Ministry experience

Most newer entrants to religious life were employed before they entered, usually in a full-time position. Slightly more than half were engaged in some form of ministry on a full-time or volunteer basis. Four in ten were involved in campus ministry, young adult ministry, a Bible study group, or music ministry.

PRE-ENTRY MINISTRY ENGAGEMENT	
Liturgical ministry (e.g., lector, extraordinary minister)	59
Youth ministry, parish youth group, or LifeTeen	54
Other volunteer work in a parish or other setting	52
Campus ministry or group	43
Young adult ministry or group	41
Bible study group	39
Music ministry, cantor, choir	37
Faith formation, catechetical ministry, RCIA	31
Right to Life March in Washington, D.C.	27
World Youth Day	17
Steubenville High School Youth Conference	15
Religious institute volunteer program	12
FOCUS	7
National Catholic Youth Conference	7
Military service/Armed Forces, active or reserve	2
From Service to Sisterhood volunteer program	<1

“ After college I taught on a Navajo reservation where I met a member of our community. She was always doing things like cutting bushes, mowing grass, and waxing and stripping floors. She'd ask for help. I was finding God in those things. Faith through action is what drew me to community. It blossomed from there. ”





## CALL AND RESPONSE

NEW ENTRANTS HOPE TO SEE THEIR COMMUNITIES BE BOLD, TAKE RISKS, AND WORK COLLABORATIVELY. THEY HOPE TO GIVE AS MUCH LOVE AS THEY HAVE RECEIVED.

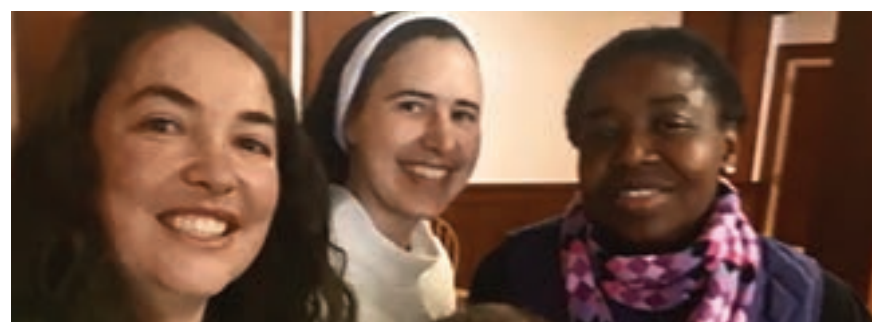


Photo: Upper right, by Matt Cashore

### Abundant hope for the future

Though fully aware of the concerns and challenges that their communities face, newer entrants to religious life are optimistic about the future. They desire more vocations, which, they believe, goes hand in hand with young-adult outreach and evangelization, including a better use of technology and online presence. They hope to see their communities be bold, take risks, and work collaboratively with other communities and lay partners. They hope to gain a deeper sense of community and a clarity of mission and identity. They want their communities to embrace diversity as they honor their roots and live their charisms. All of their hopes have at their core a desire to continue the good works of prior generations while forging a new path for religious life.

“ I hope for growth in many ways! Fidelity to the charism, more vocations, development of our apostolates, sending members for further studies, and more wisdom in caring for our sisters as they age. ”

“ My hope is that we work at increasing our numbers by living a joyful witness to the gospel. That we consolidate our ministries, but in doing so, that we work at rebuilding them. I hope that we become men very deeply rooted in prayer, both personally and communally. ”

“ I hope that we continue to read the signs of the times and work to spread the gospel and justice in society and the world. ”

“ I hope to be able to give as much love in community as I have received. ”

### A final note

The process of falling in love with Jesus, the church, one's community, and service to others is unique to each person who enters religious life and is enveloped in mystery. Though no report can fully capture the characteristics and motivations that draw people to this life, we hope that the information presented here and included in the *2020 Study on Recent Vocations to Religious Life* will help vocation directors, members, institute leaders, and the wider church gain a deeper understanding of the unique rhythms, sorrows, joys, and gifts that have always been a part of religious life.

Since 1988 the National Religious Vocation Conference has been dedicated to helping religious communities and those in vocation ministry enthusiastically promote consecrated life, invite the next generation to consider it, and professionally assess and accompany those who express an interest in it. As religious life evolves, we continue with this essential ministry because God calls. Men and women respond. Religious life continues.



Find the complete **2020 Study on Recent Vocations to Religious Life** at [NRVC.net](http://NRVC.net).  
The NRVC is grateful to the GHR Foundation for the grant that made this NRVC/  
CARA study and this brochure possible.

## NRVC vision and mission

The National Religious Vocation Conference has a vision to set the world ablaze with the fire of God's love through the prophetic, joyful witness of religious sisters, brothers, and priests as radical disciples of Jesus. Its mission is to serve as a catalyst for vocation discernment and the full flourishing of religious life as sisters, brothers, and priests for the ongoing transformation of the world.

## Your support of our efforts welcome

### MEMBERSHIP

Choose to become among the nearly 1,000 active members who receive professional development, support, and the many benefits of membership, including a complimentary subscription to our respected HORIZON journal and special rates for participation in VISION Vocation Guide, our comprehensive discerner resource. [nrvc.net/signup](http://nrvc.net/signup)

### SPONSORSHIP & SUPPORT

NRVC offers many opportunities to support our work including a contribution to our annual Misericordia Fund and sponsorship of our biennial convocation. [nrvc.net/donate](http://nrvc.net/donate)

### SUBSCRIPTION

Our award-winning HORIZON journal is an essential resource for vocation directors, vocation ministry teams, and members of leadership to stay abreast of trends in vocations and strategies and tactics for effective vocation promotion. [nrvc.net/signup\\_horizon](http://nrvc.net/signup_horizon)



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