

Religious can find plenty of reasons to feel anxious today, but our Christian roots offer a balm.

Hope in an anxious age

BY SISTER DORIS GOTTEMOELLER, RSM

Not long ago I received a letter from a sister in one of our Mercy hospitals. Now in her mid-80s and in fragile health, Sister has ministered most of her life in health care, as a nurse, as a supervisor, as a mission leader, and, in recent years as a volunteer. She wrote from retreat, where she had come to the insight that God might be calling her to move to one of our retirement centers. As soon as I could find another sister to take her place, she would like to leave, she told me. She followed this with a list of the 10 or 12 tasks she does which need to be covered: ministering to the migrant population in the area, and serving as Eucharistic minister, patient visitor, ethics committee member, administrator of the fund for needy employees, local parishioner, etc. I mentally noted that when I met with her, I would have to remind her that there are no sisters qualified and available to take her place.

No doubt this story is replicated in your congregation.

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Ministries in which your members have worked for decades or even a century or more will soon be without your presence, if they aren't already. There is a sadness about this. No matter how well we have formed the laity to follow in our footsteps, no matter how many new and challenging ministries community members have launched, we can't leave a long-standing ministry without regret. We may have been outstanding in our service, admired and cherished for our spiritual depth, but memories will dim, and a generation from now we will be part of history.

I remember writing to one of our vocation ministers when I was in congregational leadership. A young sister she had mentored through the entrance process had recently left the Sisters of Mercy. I recognized that most of the young women with whom the vocation minister had worked had followed this path, so I wrote to her to affirm and to thank her for her efforts and to reassure her that they had borne fruit, even if God's mysterious plan is not clear to us. She told me later that I was one of the few persons who recognized the impact that the young sister's departure had on her.

Our vocation ministers are among our most generous and faith-filled members today. They are our ambassadors to the young people who are potential new members. They tell our story and invite a generosity of spiritual response in venues that most of us rarely frequent. They do this with integrity and a freedom of spirit, despite the diminishment described above. Further, they have continued on during the recent apostolic visitation into "the quality of our life" initiated by the Vatican.

Age of anxiety for religious?

Without a doubt many things contribute to a sense of unease in our congregations: the aging of our communities, the precipitous drop in membership, our diminished public visibility, and the sense of a lack of ecclesial affirmation. Some may choose to ignore these signs of our times, but for most of us there is a free-floating anxiety attendant on them. Many congregations are also going through processes of merger and reorganization. On the one hand, these efforts indicate courage and creativity, taking charge of our future. On the other hand,

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they can be disorienting. Cherished motherhouses are abandoned and long-standing customs are changed. All of this takes its toll on a congregation's sense of security. Finally, some congregations have decided not to accept any new members, thus ensuring their demise within a generation.

A recently-professed sister with whom I live shared with me her anxiety. As a candidate, she said she was afraid that

she wouldn't "get it right." She had been a successful educator and professional woman before entering, and she was confident in those roles, but she didn't know how to be a candidate in a religious congregation. After she grew comfortable being a candidate, she was anxious about being a novice—"Is this the way it's supposed to be?" And, not surprisingly, the same questions arose after profession and when she moved into different communities: "Am I getting it right?" Most of us are of an age where we don't have those anxieties, but we may be anxious about a ministry assignment, a relationship, a health issue, or some congregational issue, up to and including whether or not the congregation is on the right path. What are our resources in the face of this generalized anxiety?

The history of every congregation is filled with heroic stories. Founders crossed oceans and continents (with one-way tickets); established missions in the wilderness, in city slums, and in far-off countries; learned new skills and new languages; and, in general, gave the American church its distinctive character. They overcame prejudice and poverty.

They passed on to new members ideals of prayer and the religious life. In my early days in the Sisters of Mercy we were busy opening new parish schools, building new high schools, colleges, hospitals and nursing homes and integrating large groups of new members each year. We assumed we could expect a trajectory of continued growth. Moreover, that growth implied public affirmation and God's blessing.

Instead, today we are faced with diminishment in many quarters. We might like to trade our challenges for those of former days—but we don't get to choose! And God's grace is no less available to us than it was to our 19th century founders and 20th century predecessors. Like them we have to listen to the voices of the poor and act with compassion. Like them we have to marshal our resources and act with courage. Like them we have to renew our purpose and act with confidence. What do we need to remember as we go forward?

Three "must have" spiritual gifts

I would like to suggest three spiritual gifts that are more relevant now than ever before. They correspond to three theological virtues, although not in the usual order. The first is the **surpassing love of God and neighbor** to which our way of life bears witness. The evangelical counsels are more counter-cultural than ever before. No one embraces a life of voluntary poverty and simplicity, of chaste celibacy and of obedience, and lives it with integrity and generosity unless she or he is motivated by a great love. Furthermore, living well in community witnesses to a care for one another that flows from values far different from economy or convenience. Ministry, in turn, is a daily practical expression of love of God and neighbor. Speaking of the components of religious commitment in this way might suggest that they are semi-independent parts of the vocation we have embraced. On the contrary, they are all interdependent, constituting a "way of life" that is unified by a shared spirituality of love.

The world needs this witness as never before, but we may need to overcome a certain reticence in sharing it. There are tens of thousands of active religious in the United States today, but most people's experience of us is limited to an occasional headline describing an extraordinary event or some dispute with the hierarchy. We need to speak of our local communities in our workplaces in the same way that our fellow workers speak of their families, sharing stories and demonstrating the love and affection that unites us. I find that whenever I mention something as simple as what I'm fixing for dinner for the community that evening, it garners an interested response.

We need to occasionally invite others to share our morning or evening prayer, so that they can experience the love of God and neighbor that animates it. Every vocation minister should be able to bring visitors into local communities with little or no prior warning, with confidence that the rhythm of community living will be evident. Lives transparent to the love of God and neighbor are our primary witness.

The second reality guiding our journey forward is our deeply held **faith in God and God's plan**, which doesn't require a blueprint for validation. Having served in congregational administration, I have a great appreciation for planning. We need to identify challenges and opportunities, estimate resources, and organize our responses in an orderly and intentional way. But there is a deeper reality to our lives which eludes this administrative approach. It is the domain of faith. Having vowed our lives to Jesus Christ, we believe, we know, that He is faithful. Jesus doesn't assure us that things will always work out as we had planned, but that He will be with us to the end of the age. A life of faith is open to surprise. (In fact, in the Morning and Evening Prayer of the Sisters of Mercy, on the fourth Tuesday, the response to the morning petitions is "God of Surprises, show us your face." This prompts some interesting dinner table conversations on Tuesday evenings, as sisters share what surprises their day has brought.)

How many times has your faith been tested by surprise? I expected to be prepared for nursing, and I became a teacher. I expected to be hired by a particular university, and I was turned down. I expected to be elected to one office, and I was elected to another. In each case the surprise—and initial disappointment—opened a new path on which God was more present than I could have imagined. God's plan for each of us, and for our congregations, is broader and deeper than any of us imagine. Faith does not exempt us from responsible choices, but it assures us that Someone else has a bigger plan.

The third reality—arguably the most pertinent to our present anxiety—is the **virtue of hope**. Benedict XVI makes a close connection between faith and hope in his encyclical, *Spe Salvi* (2007). He points out that in several Scriptural passages the two words seem interchangeable, e.g., the Epistle to the Hebrews (10:22-23) closely links the "fullness of faith" to "the confession of our hope without wavering." (#2). Grounded in faith, we have the reason for our hope. What we long for and aspire to is not only the perfect union with God which will only be achieved in the hereafter—but also for those means which will help us reach that goal, namely, faithfully living the way of life to which God has called us. Pope Benedict points

out that the first essential setting for learning hope is prayer. "[Prayer] is how we can speak to God and how God speaks to us. In this way we undergo those purifications by which we become open to God and are prepared for the service of our fellow human beings. We become capable of the great hope, and thus we become ministers of hope for others." (*Spe Salvi*, #34) Furthermore, St. Paul assures us that hope can bring us joy even under trial: "Rejoice in your hope, be patient in tribulation" (Romans 12:12).

Traits within reach for all

Arguably our challenges today call for greater faith, hope and love than those of our forbears. We live by faith, and we act in hope. With all of that, we can't expect not to be troubled or anxious. The Gospel of John portrays Jesus himself as troubled at the death of a friend (John 11:33), at the anticipation of his own death (12:27), and at the betrayal of Judas (13:21). His words from the cross,

"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matthew 27:46) still have the power to shock us. Similarly, Jesus' mother was not spared uncertainty and anxiety (Luke 1:29; 2:48). These stories and others (e.g., Luke 1:12; 10:41) keep us from an

easy confidence or casual optimism that all will be well, that we are somehow entitled to expect affirmation and success in all of our efforts. That said, what is asked of us?

The response is both simple and profound, available to every person and every congregation willing to seek and embrace the gifts of a deepened faith, an ardent love and an unquenchable hope. These gifts do not excuse us from the practical actions that help guarantee fruitful ministries and a future for our congregations. They are not an excuse for complacency or inaction. Rather, these gifts are a recognition that the challenges before us are just as genuine as those our forbears faced, and we are no less gifted with the means to meet them—as long as we hold fast to the hope that is set before us. And our response to our modern and post-modern anxiety is not the sole responsibility of vocation directors, no matter how dedicated. It has to be rooted in the hearts and lived out in the behaviors of all members, from the newest to the oldest. This united effort guarantees us a future full of hope. ■

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