

# More young women open to religious life

WASHINGTON - Girls often dream of saying "I do" at the altar to their future spouse.

Katrina Gredona hopes she'll be saying those words to Jesus as a religious sister.

"When I look at a community of religious women, I see women who contribute fruitfully to the church and to the world in a very special way and in a very essential way, and I think that's exciting," said Gredona, a student at Seton Hall University in New Jersey.

Ten years ago, Gredona's interest in religious life would have been unique in comparison with the majority of other Catholic girls, as reports indicated a decline in the number of religious sisters in the United States. But recently campus ministers and the vocations directors of some women's religious communities have been noticing a new trend of more young women looking into religious life.

Many vocation directors, in interviews with Catholic News Service and in responses to a survey by Vision Vocation Guide, reported a notable increase in the number of women contacting them for information. A small number of communities reported a stable increase in young entrants.

At the same time, more campus ministries are helping young women learn about discernment and religious life.

The cloistered Dominican Monastery of Our Lady of the Rosary in Summit, N.J., is one community with a significant increase in interest in the order. Founded in 1919, the community has had 15 aspirants spend time with the sisters in the past three years to discern whether to enter the community.

That number is much higher than in previous years, when the community would be lucky to have one aspirant each year, said Sister Mary Catharine of Jesus, novice mistress.

"The Lord is giving these young women the grace to respond to him and he is so powerful and irresistible that they want to say yes to him," she said. "Given our culture, the fact that so many women are feeling that God is calling them to this life and that they want to respond is nothing short of a miracle."

Of the 15 aspirants, more than half entered the Dominican or other communities and

two continue to discern whether they are called to the Dominican community.

Sister Mary Scholastica Lee, vocations director for the Carmelite Sisters of the Most Sacred Heart of Los Angeles, said the change is more than just an increase in numbers – she has noticed more commitment by young women to follow through on their initial interest in her community.

“This year, the desire for religious life seems more deeply rooted,” she said.

In a recent survey sent to 165 communities’ vocations directors, 71 percent said more people inquired about their community recently. Nineteen percent said they have had more candidates preparing to enter in the past three years than in previous years. However, 41 percent said they currently have no women in formation.

The survey was conducted by Vision Vocation Guide, a magazine for those discerning vocations to the religious life and priesthood, and 80 percent of respondents were for women’s communities.

Secular news organizations have recently highlighted rapidly growing communities, such as the Sisters of Mary, Mother of the Eucharist in Ann Arbor, Mich., the Dominican Sisters of St. Cecelia in Nashville, Tenn., and the Sisters of Life in New York, that have up to 15 young women entering each year.

But other communities recently have had a steady inflow of three to seven young postulants, according to Michael Wick, executive director for the Institute on Religious Life in Libertyville, Ill.

Those communities include the Religious Sisters of Mercy of Alma, Mich., founded in 1970; the Sisters St. Francis of the Martyr St. George in Illinois, founded in 1869; the Carmelite Sisters of the Divine Heart of Jesus, based in St. Louis and founded in 1891; and the Benedictine Sisters of Perpetual Adoration in Missouri, founded in 1874.

Sister Mary Gabriel, vocations director for the Sisters of Life, said the girls she talks with want more than what the society and culture have to offer and are drawn to the freedom they find in religious life through living the vocation to which they are called.

“It’s not a kickback to the ‘50s. It’s so different. Young women have seen it all,” she said.

In answer to questions sent to them by CNS, young women shared the reasons they’re open to and discerning religious life.

"I think it's my responsibility as a faithful young person to seriously discern whether or not God is calling me into direct service of the church through religious life," said Lindsay Wilcox, a student at Boston College.

"I am considering religious life because God has placed that inclination on my heart - to totally give my life back to him, who laid down his life for me," said Stephanie Ray, who is preparing to enter the Sisters of Life.

The late Pope John Paul II plays a large role in the new trend, according to several vocation directors and campus ministers interviewed by CNS.

At World Youth Days, the pope challenged young people to live their Catholic faith in a radical way and to not be afraid to seek out God's will for their lives, said Sister Mary Emily Knapp, vocations director for the Dominican Sisters of St. Cecilia in Nashville. Many of the sisters have told her they first started thinking about vocations at a World Youth Day.

The congregation has 228 sisters, the highest number in its history. In early August, Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, the Vatican secretary of state, cited the community as an example of the vitality of the Catholic Church in the United States. The cardinal was in Nashville to attend the Knights of Columbus annual national convention.

Another reason for the increase in the interest in religious life, according to vocation directors and young sisters, is more campus ministries nurturing and promoting vocations.

Sister Mary Gabriel said not long ago it was a "rarity and oddity" to be a college student discerning a vocation. But now she sees girls coming from campus ministries, particularly at public schools, that have eucharistic adoration, Scripture study and daily Mass.

"If you put these together, it's a recipe for falling in love with the Lord," she said.

At the University of Illinois, campus minister Sister Sarah Roy, a young Sister of St. Francis of the Immaculate Conception, said religious vocations weren't talked about much when she attended the university. Now the campus ministry makes the option more visible, and she sees how the students themselves are more willing to consider it.

Likewise, a discernment group at Boston University provides young women with the opportunity to discuss religious life, visit nearby communities and participate in retreats at the end of each semester.

Sister Olga Yaqob, an Iraqi who is a member of the Missionaries of the Virgin Mary

who leads the group, said the overall purpose is to help the girls become familiar with the will of God and prepare them to respond with a “yes” to whichever vocation they are called by God.

Other contributing factors to the increase, according to those interviewed, include:

- Web sites making information on discernment and religious communities easily accessible.
- Dioceses working with religious communities to promote vocations.
- More general interest in spirituality among a growing number of young adults.

It’s uncertain still whether the current increase in interest will lead to a significant increase in the number of those entering, according to Holy Cross Brother Paul Bednarczyk, executive director of the National Religious Vocation Conference, an organization in Chicago serving vocation directors.

“It’s still too soon to say; however, this is very good news,” he said.