

Next steps proposed to attract new generations to religious life

WASHINGTON – At what one participant called a “critical juncture in consecrated life,” dozens of religious and Catholic lay leaders gathered in Chicago recently to hash out the next steps needed to attract young people to religious life today.

“Together we are seeking to discover a truth of how we may effectively promote religious life to a new generation in a new century,” said Holy Cross Brother Paul Bednarczyk, executive director of the National Religious Vocation Conference, as he opened the invitation-only symposium titled “Moving Forward in Hope.”

The gathering, funded by a foundation that wished to remain anonymous, featured a combination of talks and small-group discussions designed to result in an action plan for promoting vocations in the United States. Brother Bednarczyk said a final report on the symposium and the proposed plans would be presented to the foundation by the end of the year, and made public after a board meeting of the vocation conference in February.

Participants in the symposium included vocations directors, Catholic educators, major superiors, diocesan personnel, parents, young adult and campus ministers, younger religious, media and communications experts, and church researchers and statisticians.

The gathering was a follow-up to a study of recent vocations to religious life conducted by the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate for the vocation conference. The study, released in August 2009, found that although the numbers in religious orders may be decreasing, new members are passionate about religious life and religious communities following more traditional practices have better success attracting younger members today.

Brother Bednarczyk said young people today no longer have the opportunity that past generations had to interact with members of religious communities.

“Just recall the impact that men and women religious have had in your own life,” he

said. "While they taught you how to multiply numbers and how to diagram a sentence properly, through their example they also taught you how to treat others justly and fairly and to show a special sensitivity to the needs of the poor and less fortunate. Maybe during a time of personal crisis, illness or grief, they taught you the importance of a caring presence."

But "a smaller and older religious population has lessened the opportunity for such encounters to occur today, especially with our younger Catholics," he said. "It is testimony to God's providence that despite their lack of knowing another religious personally, today's men and women, even though they are in smaller number, continue to come to the vowed life."

Citing divisions in the church on issues ranging from hierarchal leadership to women's roles to sexuality and immigration, Brother Bednarczyk noted that the study conducted by CARA showed that younger Catholics entering religious life "are clearly disheartened by this polarization they see in the church, in religious life and in their religious institutes."

Those divisions must be acknowledged as part of "the reality to which we attempt to invite women and men to a radical following of the Gospel of Jesus Christ in a life of consecrated chastity, poverty and obedience," he said.

Other speakers raised similar issues, citing a need to recognize the differing worldview of today's young Catholics in order to discover what might attract them to religious life.

For them, "Vatican II is someone else's history," said Brother Sean D. Sammon, a former superior general of the Marist Brothers and former president of the Conference of Major Superiors of Men.

"Today a new generation, many of whose members lack a strong Catholic identity as defined by the practices of the past, is looking at religious life and mission through eyes shaped by a world that is foreign to many of us over the age of 50," he said.

"Theirs does not include John F. Kennedy or the Cold War. Nor is it a world that has cause to remember Woodstock, the sexual revolution, Dag Hammarskjold, a war in

Vietnam, Watergate, the early days of the women's movement," Brother Sammon added. "These persons and events may have been a part of your world or mine, but for the emerging generation, they serve as content of the history books that they read."

He said the greatest differences between the younger and older generations are seen in the "desire to belong to a group whose commitment and fidelity to the church is unquestioned, the wearing of a religious habit, the form of community life and style of prayer."

Brother Sammon said a key ingredient in establishing "the necessary lines of communication between this population and our congregations" is the creation of a "culture of vocation promotion," including the appointment of at least one full-time vocation promoter in each of the congregation's provinces or districts.

"If General Motors or IBM faced the personnel crisis that we have had on our hands for the last few decades, they would have long ago had their best people in the work of recruiting men and women for a career with their corporations," he said. "At the same time, each of us must learn to take some responsibility for this work."

He also suggested taking advantage of "opportunities available to educate as wide a population as possible," such as with a parish adult education course on religious life, yesterday and today.

"In so doing, we might consider targeting parents especially," Brother Sammon said. "They were once one of the strongest allies of those encouraging vocations; they need to be brought into that same position again."

Another crucial factor is visibility, he said, noting that "a number of us from older generations of religious have, to a large extent, become invisible in the places in which we serve and the communities in which we live."

"If we are truly interested in improving the witness value of our way of life," he said, "a number of us will need to find some new and more effective ways to be more visible."