Opinion
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by NCR Staff

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April 29, 2022
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A recent column from Benedictine Sr. Joan Chittister focused on the dwindling numbers or religious sisters. Chittister wonders if the church as we know it can function as widely as it has without a body of sisters who model the faith and give their hearts to the world around them. Following are reader responses to the column that have been edited for length and clarity.

In response to Benedictine Sr. Joan Chittister's article on diminishing numbers of religious women's vocations, I realize she has more to say and I look forward to her future articles on the topic. And I mean nothing to diminish the value of those vocations, as much of my formation was guided by them from grade school through college.

But I wonder if the diminishing numbers of priests and religious women might finally bring to light the predominant vocation of the laity? Lay vocations are not limited to marriage and single life. By our baptism, we are all anointed as priest, prophet and king in the image of Jesus. Our vocation is to bring the good news of Jesus Christ to the world in our every endeavor. In our family life, yes. But also in our "jobs" as many and diverse as they are, in retirement, in all our activities. We are called to make Jesus' (God's) love visible in everything we do. If we all did this, our world would be transformed!



But I have never heard a prayer in Sunday's prayers of the faithful asking for an increase in vocations of the laity. The laity have never heard a teaching on the importance of their vocation as a real vocation. Pope John Paul II wrote a marvelous post-synodal apostolic exhortation, *Christifideles Laici* or "On the Vocation and the Mission of the Lay Faithful in the Church and in the World." I urge every lay person to read it. Don't waste another day without it.

PEGGY HEBERT

Salina, Kansas

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The opinion piece begins by speaking of the demise of the priesthood yet wonders if religious women's' orders will face the same trajectory. There have been calls for a married male priesthood so, why not married women's orders? It is the church we should gather around, not rectories or monasteries and convents. Many decades ago, religious women not wanting to live in a large community set out in small groups living in apartments or rented homes in the communities where they ministered. Their reasoning for doing so was sound at the time. Is it still true today?

The Catholic Church is shrinking in numbers across the board. Schools, colleges and universities and churches continue to downsize, merge or close. This trend continues into the foreseeable future. Change has come and will continue whether it is embraced or not. Those with a clear vision of what it means to "be church" will be proactive in their ministry and prosper as is Pope Francis. Those who don't will, in his words, become museum pieces.

The choice is clear with the pathway forward for those with eyes to see and ears to hear the sounds of the times. The challenge is to break the mold of old ways of thinking allowing the Holy Spirit to be your guide. Implement the example of Francis on a local level. You reap what you sow.

MICHAEL J. McDERMOTT

Tyler, Texas

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I led a Lenten study, "Soup with St. Luke," which from the first week galvanized the participants, in person and online, with the stunning emphases of the third gospel. It began with a focus on Luke's portrait of Jesus and the disciples, based on the character of the prophets.

And who breaks out into new sunlight but Mary, mother of Jesus (and her aging cousin Elizabeth). No fearful unwed teenager who discovers she is pregnant and runs to hide and quiver, this Mary is a confident proclaimer of the radical overturning of who are up and who are down.

I read in Benedictine Sr. Joan Chittister's post a call for women to accept the vocation of an active community of prophets, and for a church who will make room for them to model, proclaim and invite others of any gender to join that new wave of service and presence. My own dear sister, a seasoned Second Vatican Council nun, of a congregation aging out of past customs, demonstrates for me the spirit of the early founders is rising again in the blood of sisters for a new age.

Thank you, Joan Chittister, and all those earlier waves of women in prophetic service.

JOSEPH J. HICKEY-TIERNAN

Portland, Oregon

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In regard to Benedictine Sr. Joan Chittister's recent column about the decline in nuns, I would like to point out that times have changed. From a woman's perspective, for the good. Back in the 1950s, '60s and '70s, there were few choices for women. If they had no interest in marriage, what could they do? If they joined a religious order, they could become the head of a hospital, college, school, etc. which was not possible in those days for single women or any women no matter how skilled they were.

Now the doors have been opened to women and they can be anything a man can be except a priest in the Roman Catholic Church. The Catholic Church would be wise and just if they would ordain women, not because now they are so desperate for priests, but because it's the right thing to do. Lay women have managed to step in and do all those things in the church that nuns used to do. So why be a nun?

Times have changed. In my opinion, nuns were used and abused by the Catholic Church.

HILARY HUTCHINSON

Beaverton, Oregon

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