

Associates embrace orders' charisms

Zoe Ryan | Sep. 27, 2011



Norm Freund, an associate of the Sisters of Charity of the Blessed Virgin Mary, helps Clarke University students Justine Hejlik, left, and Brittany Gosse work on a window at Maria House in Dubuque, Iowa. (Photos by Sr. Elizabeth Avalos, BVM)

Some take up golf, some become unpaid family babysitters, and some develop their spiritual life.

As numbers dwindle for religious life in the United States, lay associates are becoming more and more an acceptable way to keep religious orders' charisms vibrant in the public sphere while order members can focus solely on their religious life and spirituality. And more and more people are joining.

It truly is a phenomenon, Joseph Connell said of lay associates. No religious institute is the same. ... We are laypeople that are attracted to the religious institute and then how we express that varies from congregation to congregation.

Connell, an associate himself, is director of Holy Cross Associates for the Brothers of Holy Cross Midwest Province and is on the board for North American Conference of Associates and Religious, an umbrella group used for networking and resources.

Many orders started lay associations in the years after the Second Vatican Council (1962-65), with Pope Paul VI's directive to religious institutes to re-found themselves, getting back to the charisms of their founders (although you can find lay associates as far back as the 12th century).

Lay associates are members of the laity, Catholic or not, who make a commitment to a particular order to pray, work and learn with its members. They are not vowed members. Associations vary order to order.

Other common names for associates, depending on the religious order, are consociates, coworkers, affiliates and co-journeers.

The movement of associates is evolving, said Sr. Elizabeth Avalos, who is the coordinator of associates for the Sisters of Charity of the Blessed Virgin Mary and is on the core committee of the Bay Area Conference of Associates and Religious, one of the groups under the North American conference's umbrella. I think there is

more involvement of associates. They've been invited to gatherings and I think they're doing that more than they used to.?

A discernment process is required for lay associates, and their length of commitment varies, depending on the order.

Associates are passionate because "we believe that the founders of these religious institutes really gave a gift to the church, through their own gifts founded these congregations, and they're worth preserving," Connell said.

People are looking for a spiritual foundation and have the "desire to come together, to pray together, to learn more about their faith, to learn more about who Jesus is for them, and how it is that they can continue to witness to the Gospel, and they do this within the context of the charism of the community of sisters," Avalos said.

Sounds a bit vague, maybe. About four years ago, Precious Blood Fr. Robert Schreiter, a professor at Catholic Theological Union in Chicago, wrote an essay about lay associations, describing them as not especially focused. He said he thinks it's still the case today, but "one of the things that I've come to observe about them is that it's not a bad thing.?"

Schreiter said that more individualistic societies like the United States tend to have an abundance of lay associates. "If we look at the forms that it takes, where individuals pretty much write up the nature of their commitment or covenant or whatever language is used for that, it reflects very much an individualistic society.?"

He said that for people in the middle-age bracket, the connection is "a way of expressing their own spirituality and their own commitment. It really can't be compared to the profession of vows where you have a very standard kind of formula.?"

Generational differences

If religious brothers and sisters today are old, lay associates aren't too far behind. Associates tend to be over 40 and find themselves with the time and desire to develop their own spiritual life, Schreiter said.

Many more men are joining and many more young people are finding lay association as a way to connect to their faith, said Mary Jo Mersmann, a Sister of Charity associate and co-president of the board of the North American Conference of Associates and Religious.

Schreiter said that the spiritual quests of 20-somethings are less institutional than the generations before them. This could be, he said, because older generations have had more contact with religious brothers and sisters.

"I think that's one of the major things that's going to make a difference," Schreiter said. "We'll see a lot more of that in the next 10 years.?"

Avalos said association provides a more interactive approach to teaching spirituality. "We're not standing up in front of a classroom and saying, 'This is the latest theology.' ... We're sitting with them face-to-face and ... we're learning this together.?"

The Sisters of Charity of the Blessed Virgin Mary first started their lay association in 1970s as a way for former sisters to still be connected to the community of which they were once members, Avalos said.

Today, Avalos said, not all sisters are "on board" with the idea of lay associates, but she's witnessed that over the years, more and more have come around to the idea after connecting with associates, working with them and praying with them.



The creation of the North American conference in 1996 occurred due to the lack of

support for vowed religious in the area of lay associates, whose numbers have been rising since the movement began in the 1960s.

Lay associates of the same order are not always in the same area, so the conference works as a network to connect those living far apart.

Although he said data is still needed, Connell and his colleagues now think there are more than 50,000 lay associates in North American countries, which is a big jump from a 2000 survey by Georgetown University's Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate, which reported 24,500-plus associates (although not all orders responded to the survey). That 2000 survey showed an 11,000 increase from a survey taken in 1995.

Many women religious orders allow men to be associates, and many men's religious orders allow women to be associates. Women's religious orders have tended to have more associations, but since the 1990s men's religious orders have been getting on the boat.

"The women [religious], I think, precisely because of that heritage either in schools or in hospitals, the people have had more contact with them," Schreiter said.

Being taught by Sisters of Charity of Cincinnati from first grade through college is what led Mersmann to become an associate in 2001.

"I wanted to be connected to them because I think that supporting them and their mission is vital, and the work that they have done, I don't want to see it end," she said. She also has friends and colleagues who are sisters.

The successful programs are ones where somebody joins because of the experience of the community, not just because of one member, Schreiter said.

Sharing core values

Norm Freund, chair of the philosophy department at Clarke University in Dubuque, Iowa, became an associate of the Sisters of Charity of the Blessed Virgin Mary because he had (and has) relatives who were (and are) Blessed Virgin Mary sisters and Clarke University was founded by the congregation.

Freund said the congregation's four core values -- freedom, education, charity and justice -- resonated "very strongly with my own spiritual journey." His close proximity to the sisters made him feel called to do something beyond his job as a professor, he said.

"I would say probably among associates my age and younger -- I'm 58 -- that close connection with the core values and sharing them with the sisters and then in our own unique way carrying them forward -- that's a key aspect of who we are as associates," he said.

Money is becoming more a part of the discussion today, Connell said. Religious orders are urging lay associates to become more self-sufficient. Some orders with financial troubles had to let go of their associate program formally, but usually those programs turn themselves into 501c3 organizations and keep the relationship with the order. Mersmann said she thinks that's going to happen more and more as the years go by.

Associates of the Sisters of Charity are in so many different places, geographically and in their lives, Mersmann said, that everyone is doing something different. Some may be helping in schools or working in parishes or working for big companies, but because of who they are, they carry the charisms and spirituality with them into those places where sisters may never have been, Mersmann said.

"We don't do a lot of advertising because we feel that it's like a vocation. ... It's not a club you join," Mersmann said.

Mersmann said that these laypeople hope that congregations will see associates as complementary, not as trying to interfere with or replace religious sisters and brothers.

"We are not here to take over anything, we are not here to replace the sisters in any way, shape or form, because we can't," Mersmann said. "But we want to continue what they've started and we know that that's really of value, and so that's why I think it will continue."

Something to ponder, Schreiter said, particularly as religious congregations with associations dwindle in size: Will the associates still come when there are fewer people in communities with which to associate? Meanwhile, he said, will younger generations who have not had the same level of contact and familiarity with religious communities be less likely to look there for the enhancement of their spiritual lives?

Time will tell, but those are two things that are likely to play a role in the future, he said.

[Zoe Ryan is an NCR intern. Her e-mail address is zryan@ncronline.org.]

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