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World Day of Prayer for Vocation an opportunity to reflect on those who serve

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NCR Today

It requires a courageous heart and steel-like stamina for a young woman or man to contemplate religious life today. Gone are the glory days of large entrance classes and booming institutional ministries. Today's postulants and novices often begin the journey to vows alone or in a very small group. They feel the pressure of the communal hopes and aspirations of rapidly shrinking and aging communities.

Yet well-educated, faith-filled and passionate women and men still knock on doors of community houses seeking an opportunity to "come and see" and possibly enter within.

In our hierarchical way of thinking, the lines of demarcation remain the clearest between lay and ordained. Sadly, the greater the clerical attitude, the deeper the demarcation.

But the line between lay and religious is becoming increasingly malleable. As more laywomen and laymen are theologically trained or take up roles and ministries traditionally filled by religious women or men, it is becoming more of a challenge to rationalize the call to religious life. It is a good challenge, for it demands an honest assessment of the vocation.

In the past, the vocation of religious life was more visible. An identifiable habit ensured recognition and demanded respect. As with all uniforms, the garment sometimes overpowered the person wearing it, associating sanctity and authority with the garb and not the wearer.

Today, many apostolic orders work in the world without the instant identification of a habit. Some choose a modified habit and veil or simple clothing. Some orders, especially international ones, have a wonderful flexibility about habit wearing, leaving it to the individual member or community to decide. This allows

the habit to be an issue of culture, not orthodoxy.

The vocation of a religious brother is, in some ways, even harder to rationalize in today's society. Most people understand sisters and nuns. But why would a man take vows of poverty, chastity and obedience and not "go all the way" to priesthood?

The religious brothers I know best and whom I love dearly are the brothers of the Society of Mary (Marianists). Marianist brothers and priests live and work as a "discipleship of equals." Brothers and priests can both be called to leadership within the society.

For Marianists, being a religious brother is the primary calling. Brothers are called to ordination as the need is discerned, always at service to the community and the church. Equality is not seen as sameness, but as respecting and empowering the gifts of each member of the community. Marianist brothers are teachers and professors, theologians and musicians, doctors and artists, social justice activists and spiritual guides. And some are priests.

Beyond North America and Europe, the vocation of a religious brother is even harder to explain. In many countries and cultures, becoming a priest is a social promotion, a guarantee of respect and prestige. Some men would only consider being a religious brother if it is a stepping stone to ordination.

The religious sisters and brothers I am blessed to know are women and men of courage and faith. They are willing to embrace a countercultural life in order to be witnesses of the Gospel in the midst of the world. They are my models and my mentors. They are my sisters and brothers. They are my friends.

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This Sunday, the fourth Sunday of Easter, is also the World Day of Prayer for Vocations. It is an opportunity to reflect on our own vocations and to pray for all who serve God and others with their lives, whether religious or ordained, single or in a loving relationship.

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