



### TODAY'S NUN HAS A VEIL - AND A BLOG

The Fourth Sunday of Easter has been traditionally called *Good Shepherd Sunday*. The Gospel, in all three cycles is an excerpt from John 10 in which Jesus speaks of himself as the Good Shepherd who cares for his flock. It is customary on Good Shepherd Sunday to pray for vocations to the priesthood and religious life. A recent edition of *Time* magazine had an article on *young* women entering the convents and how they are changing the sisterhood. I found the article very hopeful. I had no idea that in recent years there has been a surge in vocations to the sisterhood. The following is the article that appeared in *Time* magazine.

*For the IPOD generation, it doesn't get more radical than wearing a veil. The hijab worn by traditional Muslim women might have people talking, but it's the wimple that really turns heads. And in the U.S. today, the nuns most likely to wear that headdress are the ones young enough to have a playlist.*

*Over the past five years, Roman Catholic communities around the country have experienced a curious phenomenon: more women, most in their 20s and 30s, are trying on that veil. Convents in Nashville, Tenn.; Ann Arbor, Mich.; and New York City all admitted at least 15 entrants over the past year and fielded hundreds of inquiries. One convent is hurriedly raising funds for a new building to house the inflow, and at another a rush of new blood has lowered the median age of its 225 sisters to 36. Catholic centers at universities, including Illinois and Texas A & M, report growing numbers of women entering discernment, or the official period of considering a vocation. Career women seeking more meaning in their lives and empty-nest moms are also finding their way to convent doors.*

*This is a welcome turnabout for the church. As opportunities opened for women in the 1960s and '70s, fewer of them viewed the asceticism and confinements of religious life as a tempting career choice. Since 1965, the number of Catholic nuns in the U.S. has declined from 179,954 to just 67,773, according to the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate at Georgetown University. The average age of nuns today is 69. But over the past decade or so, expressing their religious beliefs openly has become hip for many young people, a trend intensified among Catholic women by the charismatic appeal of Pope John Paul II's youth rallies and his interpretation of modern feminism as a way for women to express Christian values.*

*As this so-called JP2 generation has come of age, religious orders have begun to reach out again to young*

*people--and to do so in the language that young people speak. Convents conduct e-mail correspondence with interested women, blogs written by sisters give a peek into the habited life and websites offer online personality questionnaires to test vocations. One site, [Vocation-network.org](http://Vocation-network.org) frames the choice much like a dating service, with Christ as the ultimate match. "For a long time, we neglected to invite people to see what we are about," says Sister Doris Gottemoeller of the Institute of the Sisters of Mercy of America, a national order. "I think we're more ready to do that now."*

*And although the extreme conservatism of a nun's life may seem wholly countercultural for young American women today, that is exactly what attracts many of them, say experts and the women themselves. "Religious life itself is a radical choice," says Brother Paul Bednarczyk, executive director of the National Religious Vocation Conference in Chicago. "In an age where our primary secular values are sex, power and money, for someone to choose chastity, obedience and poverty is a radical statement."*

*That radicalism is, ironically, embodied by the wearing of the veil. Decried unnecessary by Vatican II and shed happily by many older nuns, the headdress is for many of today's newcomers a desired accessory. "A lot of my older sisters would never wear the veil," says Sister Sarah Roy, 29, who is the only member of her Sisters of St. Francis of the Immaculate Conception in Peoria, Ill., to do so. (The others wear a simple dark dress adorned by a pin.) Though she admits "people just stare at you like you're a freak," she adds, "It's a trend with younger women wanting to wear the veil now."*

*Newer nuns see the veil as a public expression of faith, says Cheryl Reed, author of *Unveiled: Inside the Hidden Lives of Nuns*. "You can understand why a woman who has given up sex, freedom and money would want to wear her wedding dress--which is what they consider their habits to be. You want to say, 'I'm special. I gave this up.'"*

*Katharine Johnson isn't sure yet which wedding dress she will choose--a white one or a black one. At 21, she is in her third year of discernment. For now the senior at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign dresses as her classmates do, though on her ring finger she wears a miniature rosary and a favorite T shirt reads, EVERYONE LOVES A CATHOLIC GIRL. She still dates but limits physical contact to kissing. "As I date men and I date convents, I am waiting for God to say, 'This is where your heart belongs,'" she says.*

*Becoming a nun typically takes seven to nine years. After the period of discernment, a woman enters a*

religious community as a postulant, and she reflects upon her vocation and helps with chores around the convent. At the end of what is primarily a yearlong spiritual retreat, the postulant and her advisers in the community decide whether she will become a novice and study Catholic theology and ministry for up to two years. She may then take her temporary vows. After an additional four to eight years during which she serves the convent's mission, she makes her final vows and becomes a professed nun.

At the Sisters of Life Formation House in the Bronx, N.Y., 16 young women are making their way through that journey. They include a former Marine, a professional opera singer, a United Nations aide and a recent Yale grad. They have left behind paychecks, apartments, even boyfriends. Sister Thérèse Saglimbeni, 27, a novice who joined the convent in 2005, recalls watching the sisters playing volleyball while she was a student at the nearby State University of New York Maritime College. "I was with my boyfriend and had said how fun the sisters looked," she says. "He said, 'Well, why don't you join them?' And I replied, 'Well, maybe I will!'"

The other sisters chuckle when Saglimbeni recounts her saucy retort. But many of their loved ones feel less jovial about the women's decision to take the veil. "For those who are called, there is a real falling in love. You are filled with a joy and desire to be with God," says Sister Mary Gabriel Devlin, 32, vocation director at Sisters of Life. "Their families are not experiencing this, so it can be hard for them to understand." The sense of alienation can be even greater when women choose an order that isolates them from their families and others so that they can devote themselves to strict schedules of regimented prayer. Convents like Sisters of Life that combine contemplation with active ministry to the public are the most popular among young women.

While the JP2 generation seeks order and community, Gen Xers are coming to religious life in a quest for meaning after secular society has failed to meet their needs. "It's been my experience that women who are older--in their 30s and early 40s--feel that they've accomplished a lot with their life, but there's still something missing," says Sister Laurie Brink, 45, a professor of biblical studies at the Catholic Theological Union in Chicago who has lectured on the subject and who took her vows at 37. Her generation, she adds, growing up in the wake of Vatican II, was not as schooled in catechism as were baby boomers and millennials. Many also broke from the church when their parents divorced. "My generation," says Brink, "is not good with commitment because we haven't seen a lot of it."

Now they're finding a sense of wholeness by binding themselves to their faith. Sister Melissa Schreifels, 37, first considered becoming a nun when a teacher at her high school in St. Cloud, Minn., suggested it. Because it seemed that "nobody was doing that anymore," Schreifels attended college and launched a career as a pharmacist, volunteering at her church, a hospital library and a

pregnancy crisis center in her spare time. "But there was just an emptiness inside that doing the volunteer work and the pharmacy work didn't fill in me," she says. When a pastor again suggested sisterhood, Schreifels reconsidered. In 2003 she joined the School Sisters of Notre Dame in Mankato, Minn., who do not mandate a habit or discourage her from continuing to work as a pharmacist for Target. Schreifels gave up her Subaru Forester and apartment and moved into a house with the sisters, but her work is considered part of the order's mission to serve the community; her salary goes to support the sisterhood. "I am open to whatever God is asking," says Schreifels.

Although Bea FitzGerald, 66, first heard the call as a young woman, she pushed it aside to raise her seven children. After her husband left in 1968, she put herself through school and supported her family as a registered nurse. Once her children were grown, the call grew louder. She obtained an annulment, joined the Sisters of Charity of Nazareth, based in Louisville, Ky., and, at 51, became one of the growing number of so-called Sister Moms. While widowed or divorced women with grown children have long entered religious life, Sister Moms in the U.S. are now establishing a distinct identity for themselves. Spurred by a dissertation project for her Ed.D. at Spalding University, FitzGerald tracked down 125 of them in 98 religious communities around the country. In the 1990s, she began an annual conference at which the women bond over such unique experiences as telling their children about their choice ("98% are supportive," says FitzGerald).

Nuns of all ages at convents in the U.S. say modern technology is helping them give the world--and prospective applicants--a more realistic picture of their lives. "There are people out there who wonder what being a nun is like," says Sister Julie Vieira, 36. "These are people who were exposed to stereotypes of nuns and don't understand how we really live." So last summer Vieira began a blog titled *A Nun's Life*, in which she has chronicled her days as a sister of the Immaculate Heart of Mary and also a conventional-dressing, apartment-dwelling, master's degree--holding production coordinator at the Loyola Press, a Catholic publisher in Chicago. "Being a nun has not always been my lifelong goal," she writes in one entry. "The whole 'nun' thing kind of snuck up on me when I wasn't paying much attention ... I can't tell you how many times I've been called 'Sister Julie' that it doesn't jolt me or make me look around and wonder who they are talking about."

Sister Joseph Andrew Bogdanowicz, vocation director at the Dominican Sisters of Mary, Mother of the Eucharist in Ann Arbor, credits e-mail to some extent with what can only be described as her order's astonishing growth. Founded in 1997 as an offshoot of a large convent, the Sisters now have 73 members with an average age of 24. In 2006, 15 women entered as postulants. Next August, more than 20 women are scheduled to join them. The order is fund raising for a new convent for them to live in. "We

cannot build fast enough. It's incredible," says Bogdanowicz, 50.

The Franciscan Sisters of Christian Charity, whose average age is 70, are seeking a similar youth infusion. The order, based in Mantiowac, Wis., hired a marketing company from nearby Milwaukee to hold focus groups on college campuses around the state. The marketers then launched a website featuring a blog written by the nuns, along with a slickly produced podcast about a young nun joining the order.

There's also a downloadable song of the month donated by a Christian artist, in response to the focus groups' revelation that "music was one of the highest ways to communicate with" young people, says vocation director Sister Julie Ann Sheahan. Thus the order's radio and TV ads feature a theme song based on a Franciscan hymn. The tune is also available on the website as a ringtone. Its title: *Called to Be*.

Reflecting on today's gospel, Jay Cormier shares with us the follow two stories:

### **A mother's intuition**

It's an amazing story. The mother of a ten-day-old infant hears an explosion upstairs. She runs to her daughter's bedroom. The baby has vanished. She sees that the bedroom window is open—who would have opened it on such a cold night? Before she can make sense of the empty crib and open window, the fire engulfs the bedroom and the mother flees with the other members of her family. The baby is never found. Investigators determine that the baby's remains were consumed in the fire.

But she never believes that.

Then, six years later, she attends a birthday party. She meets a bright-eyed, energetic six-year-old girl. There is no doubt in her mind: this is her baby daughter. The little girl looks so much like her own children. And the dimples—those are her little girl's dimples.

The mother realized that she will need proof. Pretending that the little girl has gum stuck in her hair, the woman takes strands from her hair as she feigns removing the gum. She contacts police. She knows her story is bizarre, but she never wavers from her conviction that her child was taken before the fire and that she is still alive.

A police lab tests the hair sample and finds that the child's DNA matches the woman's, proving beyond doubt that the little girl is her daughter. Police further discover that the little girl was, indeed, kidnapped that night six years before. To hide the abduction, the woman who took her from her crib set fire to the building.

The little girl is now reunited with her real family. The woman who had abducted her—the only "mother" the little girl has known—has been arrested. Difficult days are ahead. The little girl will need kindness, wisdom, love and especially patience as she adapts to her new family.

A state official who helped the mother pursue her case says he had one assurance concerning her story that

prompted him to act: "A mother's intuition can never go wrong."

Love that perseveres despite the obstacles, love that refuses to yield to discouragement and disappointment, love that puts aside personal need and gain for the sake of another is the "voice of the Good Shepherd" and the "hand of God." Despite the tragedy, the mother follows the voice of Christ within her affirming her suspicions; she places her hurt and anxiety in the hands of God and continues to hope. Christ the Good Shepherd calls us to listen consciously, deliberately, wisely for his voice in the depths of our hearts, to listen for his voice in the love and joy, the pain and anguish, the cries for mercy and justice of those around us; Christ the Son of God assures us that we always remain safe and accepted in the loving embrace of his Father. In turn, to be disciples of the Easter Jesus is to be the voice of Christ and the embrace of God for one another in the compassion, peace and forgiveness we work for and offer in the Spirit of the Easter Christ.

### **A lesson in bedside manner**

It was near the end of the E.R. resident's second straight week of 14-hour night shifts. She was nauseated and cold from fatigue.

At 5 A.M. she was called to the examining room to see an 86-year-old man. Looking at the triage report, she had him categorized immediately: He's going to be demented. He won't be able to give me any history. Taking a deep breath, she began.

"I'm sorry to wake you, sir," she said mechanically.

He slowly awoke from his drowsiness. "Thanks for coming, Nurse. Could you get me some water?"

"Actually, I'm the doctor," she said, trying not to overreact, reminding herself that this happens countless times. "Here's some water," offering him a glass.

As he sipped, she started firing questions at him about his symptoms and medical history. His speech was painfully slow, his answers inconclusive. She tossed the chart aside. On to the physical examination.

"My hands are cold," she warned.

"Do what you have to do, Doctor."

The doctor placed her frigid palm in his chest as she listened through her stethoscope. He didn't flinch.

When she finished, he grasped her hand. Then the old man, who moved so slowly and painfully, began to rub her hand rapidly between his. The doctor stared at him with a combination of disbelief and annoyance.

"To warm you up, doctor. My wife also gets cold when she's tired. This helps her. You should be taking care of yourself, not old men like me."

When he finished rubbing one hand, he took her other one. It felt incredibly good; the doctor continued to watch, but now in amazement.

He was the sick one, not her. And yet this man, the object of her impatience, was concerned about her well-being.

The doctor's haste dissipated. At that moment, it was the patient, not the doctor, who had the healing touch.

The "voice" of Christ speaks to all of us—but to hear his voice demands that we come out of the soundproof isolation of our own interests and needs and hear Christ speaking in the plight of the poor, the needs of the helpless, the cry of the persecuted. Easter faith calls us to put aside our own crosses when we hear the voice of Jesus pleading in the struggle of those being crushed under the weight of their crosses; to rise above our own pain when we hear the voice of Jesus crying out in the pain of others; to give from our treasure when we hear the voice of Jesus begging in the poverty of others.

Have a blessed week,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Le Saran". The letters are cursive and somewhat stylized, with a prominent initial "L".