



## InnerView



### With Sr. Mary Joanna Ruhland, R.S.M., Associate Director of the USCCB's Committee on Clergy, Consecrated Life and Vocations

#### ***Tell us a little about yourself and your experience being called to religious life.***

Our experiences of the Sacraments often require a heart and eyes of faith to see beyond the tangible, visible signs that draw us to the deeper Mystery, Christ, Who is being communicated to or by us. When the bishop who confirmed me anointed me with oil and prayed over me, little was I prepared to understand the warmth that poured over me and the gift of tears that followed. I knew then that the Lord had given me a particular mission and gift, even though I could not articulate what it was on that night.

During my youth I did not have much exposure to women religious. Through my undergraduate studies in theology at the University of St. Thomas in Saint Paul, Minnesota, and graduate studies at Franciscan University of Steubenville, I came to a deeper understanding of my Catholic faith. In these schools I met people who truly desired to love the Lord and do His will. I attended Eucharistic Adoration and grew in my personal relationship with the Lord and with the Blessed Virgin Mary through prayer. The strength to respond to the vocation that God desired for me grew through prayer and frequent reception of the Sacraments.

After my graduate studies and working for two years for the Diocese of Duluth, I entered the Religious Sisters of Mercy of Alma, Michigan in 1998. After the first levels of basic formation, I was given a mission to Rome, Italy, and served there until my arrival in 2010 at the USCCB in the Secretariat of Clergy, Consecrated Life and Vocations.

#### ***What is the primary purpose of this USCCB committee?***

The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops is constituted by about twenty committees that address the various pastoral needs of the bishops in our country. The Committee for Clergy, Consecrated Life and Vocations, and its Secretariat (staff), assist the bishops, both collectively and individually, in the formation and ministry of priests and deacons, the promotion of vocations to the ordained priesthood and consecrated life, and the support of those in consecrated life.

#### ***What are some of the vocation trends that you see emerging?***

A wonderful trend we have seen over the last ten years is a gradual increase in vocations to the priesthood. This, I believe, is a profound witness to the grace and mercy of God. Young men entering the seminary today enter

with a hope of better things to come, which can make their future spiritual and pastoral leadership of the Church in our country even better.

Within the increase in priestly vocations, however, there is an underrepresentation among the Latino population, which is a population that continues to grow in our country. It is our hope that evangelization among all families will strengthen them to live their Catholic faith and prepare their children's hearts to respond generously to God's will, whatever it may be.

Vocations among women's and men's religious communities are clearly increasing among institutes that have a filial love for the Church. Statistics continue to demonstrate that religious communities flourish when their prayer is Eucharist-centered, and when they wear a habit, have a focused apostolate, and live in community.

#### ***Besides prayer, what area of vocation promotion needs more attention?***

In his Message for World Day of Prayer for Vocations this year, Pope Benedict XVI reminded the Church that everyone has the responsibility for promoting vocations. This is really about fostering in our families, parishes, schools a *culture of vocations*.

It requires a foundation of prayer, and it broadens out to an open appreciation for and dialogue about vocations. It also requires the integral witness of priests, as well as men and women religious, who truly love Jesus Christ and His Church. Building a culture of vocations depends on a continual labor of prayer not only to ask the Lord of the Harvest for vocations, but to provide opportunities for young men and women to grow in their prayerful relationship with Christ and respond to His will in their lives.

***What impact do you see that World Youth Days have had in fostering and affirming priestly and religious vocations?***

We have seen in reports of *The Profession Class of 2010: Survey of Women Religious Professing Perpetual Vows*, and *The Class of 2011 Survey of Ordinands to the Priesthood*, that 20% or more of each class participated in a World Youth Day. That is a pretty high percentage, especially when considering that the last two World Youth Days took place in far away countries. I think there is a tremendous opportunity at World Youth Day celebrations to experience the Church in a very exciting way. To experience the vibrancy and joy of others who want to live their Catholic faith, to experience the value of enduring difficulties in one's pilgrimage, to experience God's mercy in the Sacraments and be nourished in catechesis, and of course to pray in the presence of and with the Holy Father, are all part of what can prepare a person to see the meaning of the Gospel and our Catholic faith in one's own personal life. This is a wonderful preparation for a life of faith and prayer, which

is so necessary to respond to God's call to a vocation to the priesthood or consecrated life.

This year at World Youth Day our Secretariat co-sponsored a vocations fair for the first-time ever. The fair opened with the exposition of the Blessed Sacrament and Evening Prayer, led by Seán Cardinal O'Malley, OFM Cap., and continued in an auditorium with featured speakers, opportunities for youth to interact with bishops and



other activities. Speakers included Fr. Robert Barron, founder of the global ministry Word on Fire, and Professor of Faith and Culture at the University of St. Mary of the Lake in Mundelein, Illinois, and Fr. Joseph O'Connor, vocations director for the Diocese of Syracuse. Singer Danielle Rose, religious sisters, religious brothers and seminarians offered personal testimonies, and seminarians put on a game show involving a "Vocations Lingo." Bishop Kevin C. Rhoades from Fort Wayne-South Bend closed the event with Night Prayer and Benediction. A separate chapel was available during the fair for groups and individuals to pray before the Blessed Sacrament.

***Tell us about the website, [ForYourVocation.org](http://ForYourVocation.org), that you help coordinate.***

The USCCB launched [\[YourVocation.org\]\(http://YourVocation.org\) last year to be a resource for both laity and clergy in the promotion of vocations. The site has two goals: First, to help individuals hear and respond to the call from God to the priesthood or consecrated life, and, second, to educate all Catholics on the importance of encouraging others through prayer and activities to promote vocations. The site includes discernment resources for men and women, respectively, ways for promoting a vocation culture within the parish and home, and many resources for educators, youth leaders and vocation directors, including prayers, videos, best practices, lesson plans and vocation awareness programs. The site also has a FACEBOOK page and blog, both of which are accessible through the website.](http://For-</a></p>
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***How can people obtain more information on your efforts?***

The USCCB will be launching its new website this fall. This will be a very good way to learn more about what our office is doing relative to clergy, consecrated life and vocations. On this new site you can anticipate having access to all the resources that are currently available on [ForYourVocation.org](http://ForYourVocation.org), as well as new reports or documents our office will make available.

The Church's celebrations of National Vocations Awareness Week (second week of January), World Day of Consecrated Life (February 2) and World Day of Prayer for Vocations (4th Sunday of Easter) are also good times of the year to check our USCCB vocations and consecrated life web pages. New resources will be made available on these occasions for promoting the priesthood and consecrated life. ☪