



Sometimes ministry can leave a person feeling hollowed out. That experience has potential to create a sacred space in which the Spirit may be alive and at work.

# Hollowed and hallowed: vocation minister as leader into the future

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“HOPE IS THE THING WITH FEATHERS,” Emily Dickinson once wrote. It “perches in the soul, / And sings the tune without the words, / And never stops at all ....” It may be surprising that the person who wrote such inspiring words also struggled with major depression and anxiety. These words about hope are hard-won, as she says a few lines down, in the storms of her life, “in the chilliest land - / And on the strangest Sea ....”

Dickinson is a credible witness to hope. For her, hope is not the result of piety or wishful thinking, but a raw element forged in the depths of struggle and perhaps even despair. Perhaps in naming our own roughest of places, we as religious and promoters of religious life might also redis-

cover a new hope that can guide us as we navigate not only our ministry but our life calling as well.

## Ever the consecrated cheerleader

*“I will forget my complaining, I will lay aside my sadness and be of good cheer.” — Job 9:27*

As religious, and especially as promoters of religious life, we are often expected to be like cheerleaders, smiling and shouting for joy as we show up for every event to inspire the crowds.

A cheerleader, that is, a leader of cheer, is one who encourages and who organizes activities around encouragement. Cheerleaders embody a sense of spirit and can animate others. They gladden people’s hearts when things are going well and when all seems lost.

But for cheerleaders, it’s not all pompoms and sparkle. Cheerleaders are serious athletes with discipline, strength, and determination. They suffer losses and disappointments just as much as anyone else, except they can’t show it on the field. No one wants to see a sad cheerleader. And so they lay aside any sadness and keep up a good front. Back in the locker room, however, they collapse exhausted on the bench, bandaging up sprained ankles and discouragement.

The work of the vocation minister bears similarities to that of the cheerleader. We are leaders of good cheer, encouragers, and activity organizers. We embody a sense of our community’s charism and are animators of the mission. We lovingly promote the community and religious life whether there are a number of possible candidates or none. We might even feel like we are expected to do back flips off the top of a human pyramid in order engage the crowds!

## Weathering the storms

*“Storms make trees take deeper roots.”  
— Dolly Parton on her Facebook page  
(August 31, 2009)*

What is also true for vocation ministers is disappointment and discouragement. These feelings are real and sometimes we don’t have the space to acknowledge them “on the field.” Even with our good cheer and spirit, we also weather storms “in the chilliest land - / And on the strangest Sea” in our ministry. These storms often come in on three fronts.

**SEEKERS**—The work of vocation ministers is deeply personal and relies on building relationships. We cannot be bystanders in vocations work. We get to know seekers and share our own lives with them. We also suffer the frustration and even heartbreak when there are challenges in the relationship. Even when we are working with someone who has only made one inquiry, there can be disappointment in receiving no response from the seeker. Other examples:

- “Ghosting” by promising candidates you have been walking with for a while.
- Misunderstandings based on cultural or generational differences.
- Tension with the seeker’s family members who may have resistance toward or misconceptions about a consecrated vocation.
- Low turnouts or engagement at retreats or events that required a lot of work and planning.
- The pain of having to say no to people for whom your community is not a good fit.

**COMMUNITY**—Vocation ministers are also in relationship with their communities. They are accountable not only to the leadership team but, it seems, to anyone and everyone who wonders what is happening with new membership. These relationships, too, can present challenges. Some examples:

- The difficulty of not being able to tell community members why a person leaves or never applies.
- The impossibility of equating vocation work with “numbers,” numbers of entrants, numbers of events held, numbers of emails responded to, etc. despite community members’ (and perhaps our own) desire to have quantifiable outputs and outcomes.
- Being underresourced in terms of budget, training and skills, widespread congregational support, and personnel to do vocations work in this brave new world in which we find ourselves.

**SELF**—Finally, we often face personal challenges in the work of vocations. It’s not easy, especially while religious





Hollowness is sometimes just what is needed. Hummingbirds have hollow bones to keep them lightweight for the type of hovering and quick maneuvers they rely on.

life itself is undergoing its own transformation with a future we can't yet see. Some examples:

- The unspoken but painfully real (and unfounded) expectation that we alone are responsible for the future of our community.
- Separation from community demanded by the travel involved in vocation ministry.
- Questions and doubts we might have about our own living into the future of religious life.
- Balancing our vocations work with the demands of other work and responsibilities related to the mission.

What other examples of pressures would you name in terms of your experience relating with seekers and with your community? What storms have you weathered on your own journey as a vocation minister?

## The thing with feathers

*... on the other hand when a gourd is hollowed out, it becomes empty and is of great use to the world because of its emptiness.*

— Dorothy Gilman in *Incident at Badamya*

Early in my journey to religious life, I met a vocation director at a weekend intercongregational event. She mentioned in passing that just the year before she had been discerning leaving her community. I was shocked but managed to maintain my composure. My inner dialogue, however, went wild. Is this person really in the best position to guide seekers? Here she was, ready to abandon religious life and now she's promoting it? In my naivety, I could think of no good reason why she was given the job or why she accepted it.

Now, 25 years later, I get it.

That vocation director had seen some storms. I don't know how many, I don't know what kind. I can imagine she had been swept up into those storms and did a lot of *ora et labora* to find grounding once again. It happened that that grounding would find her back in the heart of her community.

It makes sense to me that she would have been invited to and accepted the position of vocation director. Who better to welcome and guide seekers and potential candidates than one who has faced the edge of her vocation, re-immersed herself in the community's charism, and chosen her home once again in religious life?

I don't know this person's journey, but I do know that the storms of our lives, "in the chilliest land, / And on the strangest Sea ...", can sometimes strip everything away from us and leave us with nothing but the rawness of being.

This stripped-down, hollowed-out space is itself hallowed. Sacred. A space of grace. Writes Jesuit priest and theologian Karl Rahner:

[W]e know—when we let ourselves go in this experience of the spirit, when the intangible and assignable, the relishable element disappears, when everything takes on the taste of death and destruction, or when everything disappears as if in an inexpressible, as it were white, colourless and intangible beatitude—then in actual fact it is not merely the spirit but the Holy Spirit who is at work in us.... ("Reflections on the Experience of Grace" in Volume 3 of *Theological Investigations*, pp. 88-89).

In this space, hollowed and hallowed, we have the opportunity to touch—unencumbered with the accretions of life’s disappointments and successes—the flame of our life’s passion. Our deepest calling, we might say. The thing that makes us tick. Perhaps even the thing with feathers.

What does this space look and feel like within you?

## The Divine Attractor

*You can only become truly accomplished at something you love.... [p]ursue the things you love doing, and then do them so well that people can't take their eyes off you.*

— attributed to Maya Angelou

It is this passion, for life, for meaning, for God, for religious life, that is central to our role as vocation ministers. All the usual forms of vocation promotion may fall away as religious life and the world change, but what will never change is the deep draw and attraction to God at the heart of this life.

While we may not know if the next vocation event will be a Come and See retreat or a one-on-one consultation at the local tattoo parlor, we can be assured that the Divine Attractor (to borrow a term from Denis Edwards and evolutionary science) is alive and well.

The Word made flesh, Jesus crucified and risen, might be thought of as Attractor not only of evolutionary emergence but also of God’s final transformation and fulfillment of the whole creation.... But it can also be understood in a deeply personal and human way of the Jesus who attracts disciples, crowds, and children to himself, and who attracts outsiders to share his table and to experience his healing ministry.

Our own vocation ministry issues forth from the Attractor par excellence, Jesus crucified and risen. Perhaps we might think about shifting our language away from “vocation promotion” to “vocation attraction” for attraction is exactly what we are doing. Of course, that should still be balanced with the expertise of marketing professionals. But it remains the work of attraction at its heart. As vocation promoters, our work of “attraction” participates in the very life of the Risen Christ. In allowing ourselves to be attracted, to be drawn into the divine heart of God, we participate in attracting others to God, which for some people may unfold into a religious vocation.

Our one and only charge, then, becomes to give ourselves unreservedly to and to be witnesses of the Divine Attractor. This transforms everything.

This very personal way of living our calling has always been key to vocation ministry. But in the early 20th century we also had the luxury of the widespread presence of Catholic schools and institutions which literally and figuratively opened the door to encounter and the possibility of attracting others. Our vocations ministry had to adapt to accommodate vocations *en masse*. Today we are experiencing a renewal of our ministry by understanding and tending to vocations *en personne*, that is, the person, rather than the masses, whom we encounter.

We see vocation not as a singular moment of God calling but as an unfolding story in a person’s life in which we, as vocation ministers, are privileged to share for at least part of that story. More than recruiters (though we are that too), we are companions called to accompany people in the unfolding of their story. What is the next chapter? Nobody knows.

But that hollowed and hallowed space is our sweet spot. It’s a perfect place for us to accompany people who are yearning for meaningful ways to draw close to God in all areas of their life. It’s the place we religious know well from years of discerning God’s calling personally and in community. It’s our history and our heritage. And, it’s our horizon. This is an area of vocations ministry that is ripe for exploration in light of the current realities of our day, the worldview of younger generations, and emerging theology around the person, God, earth, and cosmos.

Not surprisingly, religious life itself is shifting to a more person-centered understanding of the life. Let me be clear: in this context, “person-centered” does not mean “individual” or “individualistic.” It does not negate “community” or “common good.” It’s more of a shift to understanding religious life as located not simply in “the whole” or the “institutions” but in each and every person.

IHM Sister and theologian Sandra Schneiders has been reflecting on this emergent shift. In her January 6, 2022, presentation “The Future of Religious Life” for the

All the usual forms of vocation promotion may fall away as religious life and the world change, but what will never change is the deep draw and attraction to God at the heart of this life.

Discerning Our Emerging Future process of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR), she says:

As long as there is one Religious truly living the Resurrection, Religious Life is alive. We do not have to continually take its temperature and pulse, indeed we can't, by counting heads, judging the financial viability of institutions, figuring out how to get the job done with fewer and fewer warm bodies on the front line....

If we once needed a couple thousand Religious to make a dent in a social problem, we may today need only one or two in the right situation with the necessary education and connections to galvanize an effort that can be carried on by many, Religious and lay....

In the long run, it does not matter finally whether our flagship institution survives, our membership rolls lengthen, we are able to "sell" the ideal of Religious Life to the next generations. It matters how we live Religious Life until our own last breath without worrying too much about when that will be. We need all the imaginative creativity, institutional and financial savvy, physical and mental energy we can summon as we make every effort possible to put, and keep, Religious Life and its members, however numerous or few they may be, at the service of the Gospel.

How is the Divine Attractor attracting you? In what ways is this attraction incarnate in how you live religious life and how you engage vocation ministry?

## Save the cheerleader, save the world

*Let us do our part, and God will then do what God wills. This is God's cause, and all will end well. My hope is in God; do not be distressed.*

— Teresa of Ávila in a letter to Roque de Huerta, Madrid (December 29, 1577)

In 2006, a popular TV show called *Heroes* debuted in which ordinary people with heightened abilities joined together to save the world from destruction. The show's tagline, "Save the Cheerleader, Save the World," described the storyline succinctly. If the ragtag band of heroes could save Claire, a high-school cheerleader with a supernatural ability to heal, from sinister forces, then they could prevent a world-wide catastrophe.

While religious life is not up against superpowers or villains, we may feel like it is threatened because of the many changes that it is undergoing at this time in its history and because of the struggles and pressures we face

in vocation ministry. While we don't need heroes per se, we do need ordinary people who are willing to live passionately the call to religious life and to be ablaze with its fire, people who, as Schneiders says, are "truly living the Resurrection."

This is the essential calling of religious, and in a particular way of vocation ministers who stand at the intersection between religious life as it has been and as it is now and religious life of the future. Vocation ministers have one foot in the life now and one foot in the lives of the people who will become the next generation of religious.

It is imperative then that religious institutes and the church do everything in their power to safeguard, equip, and support vocation ministers and the "office" of vocations ministry. Even institutes that no longer have a vocation ministry because they are not accepting new members are still witnesses to the Divine Attractor who continues to attract people to religious life.

In "saving" the consecrated cheerleader, then, we are also saving that deep belief that this world of religious life is worth giving our life and our death to.

Right now, it may be that it is not ours to completely figure out the elusive vocational algorithm to receive new members. Most importantly, ours is to live passionately our calling. It is to give ourselves to God's divine attraction and help others do the same, particularly those searching for a way to know and live their calling. Ours is to hold the hollowed and hallowed space within as sacred and non-negotiable for both vocation ministry and the renewal of religious life itself.

In this way, vocation ministers embody not only the word *cheer* in cheerleader, but also the word *leader*, for each is an active, hope-filled witness of the religious life as it is unfolding and drawing its members and its seekers yet again into the magnetic mystery of the Divine Attractor. ■

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## Related article and video

"Reason for our hope: a testimony to our life, death, and resurrection in Christ Jesus," by Sister Addie Lorraine Walker, S.S.N.D., HORIZON Winter 2021, Vol. 46, No. 1. Video: [tinyurl.com/5e4hc7jy](https://tinyurl.com/5e4hc7jy)

