

Reflections on the International Conference: “Vocation Ministry and Consecrated Life: Horizons and Hopes”

December 1-3 Rome 2017

— Sister Sharon Dillon, SSJ-TOSF

I entered this conference with my own hopes and cultural biases, unaware of what the full reality of such a pontifical process would involve. At the entrance, both Archbishop José Rodríguez Carballo, O.F.M. and Cardinal João Braz de Aviz were greeting us, switching languages with each person they encountered. I knew from the warmth and sincerity of their smiles and welcome that what I was about to enter into on the global forum was different from any prior church experience.



With Archbishop Carballo, OFM

Each day was full of speakers in multiple languages, some of which I recognized, such as Italian and Spanish, and others completely foreign. Yet the unity and understanding was incredible. Over 800 people from around the world gathered with the single focus of vocation ministry and consecrated life. In that setting it was difficult to believe there has been any diminishment in consecrated life vocations. Not only was there a varied outward expression of the vowed life, but religious of all ages were there. It deeply touched me that the dominant age group seemed to be 30s to 50s, something I’ve never experienced with a group of religious in the U.S.

The good spirit and high energy was palpable. Circles formed, and greetings were extended during each encounter, whether waiting by a seat in the auditorium or standing in the line to use the facilities. Kindness and sincerity permeated the entire experience. The deep joyfulness of each person present was held up as a key component in inviting youth and showing what religious life is and why it is so needed today.

We could only hope to replicate in our congregations the ease of the co-mingling and the respect for the intercultural diversity at this experience. I was honored to meet individuals from around the world, and am still in awe about the global reach and respect that the NRVC has and shares with others. Many attendees had an affiliation to the NRVC. Also present were leaders from vocation offices around the world, and the introductions continued to the very last day.



Sr. Nathalie Becquart with Sr. Sharon

The content was comprehensive, and was as varied as those in attendance. The U.S. speakers included the previous NRVC executive director, Brother Paul Bednarczyk, C.S.C., now serving as vicar general for his congregation in Rome, and Sister Mary Johnson S.N.D.deN., sociologist and scholar at Trinity Washington University. They were each on different panels. Paul spoke about



Sister Mary Johnson S.N.D. deN.

best practices in U.S. vocation ministry, citing resources on the NRVC website. Mary spoke on sociological changes reflected in the lives of young adults. She pointed out six realities to consider in forming best practices within vocation ministry, including the need to harness the impact of media and the lack of attendance in the pews—therefore needing to meet young adults in places where they already are.

The process for this conference was different in the following ways. First, we were all welcomed by a [beautiful address from Pope Francis](#) who laid out not only his own insights but his hopes for the conference and the value of the input from those gathered. It was very touching. I knew my heart was taken to a place transcending the understanding of religious vocation and religious life, a place where I lack for words. We were being invited into the conversation at an international level to



Cardinal João Braz de Aviz
reading the letter from Pope

assist in the next synod on youth-faith-vocation. The synod would be planned, in part, by our input. Each speaking group gathered at the end of two days and worked together to present insightful and powerful proposals. Many proposals had the same essence despite cultural divides. For instance: the commitment to engage (develop programs) with and for young adults, the need to listen, to hear the stories of young people and the need for the continued evaluation of the role of women in the church.

The full content of the Congress will be made available to everyone, and the NRVC will post more on this. A [short video](#) by Father Toby Collins, R.A. can already be seen on YouTube.

In conclusion, I'd like to share a moment from the final Mass that was pivotal in my own on-going conversion as a Franciscan and as executive director of the National Religious Vocation Conference. This moment was pure mystery and gift to me.

It was Sunday, December 3, the end of a very intense, informative, and involved three days. Many were tired in a good way—we had much to take in with regard to information, culture, and translations; but the joy was always present. Mass had begun with a long but gentle reflection of the leaders of priests, and the ushers were trying to guess how many pews were needed. One of the many things that touched me during this procession was that while the usher was trying ardently to gain more room for the priests, the priests in turn were trying to allow those in the pews to remain where they were seated. It was an engagement of mutual respect.

The songs and readings of the Mass respectfully included different languages; no translators needed. The liturgical experience transcended words, with ritual that was universal. Then it was time for the Presentation of the Gifts, and to everyone's delight, drums were being beaten, in a tempo of celebration and reverence. It took us to Africa for a moment and then into our universal call to holiness. Our spirits soared, and soon we began to sway as if we were one. We focused on that which was being presented: Christ brought forward with full rhythm and respect by religious from Kenya.

That was our celebration of the Presentation of Christ during the mystery of the bread and wine presented for the first Sunday of Advent. It was for me the culmination of the three-day conference, summed up in one action. We are to be Christ present to one another – minute by minute, moment by moment, and in celebratory, joyful action that leads the soul to transcend language and culture to unity with the divine. I still see the presentation over and over in my mind's eye and continue to grasp for the words to describe it.



And so this moving, intense conference came to an end, and my Advent began with a deep encounter of the Presentation of Christ. My prayer is that the fervor and joy of this experience will light our way forward in the coming months.