

# Wake up the World: Our Response

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*“Religious life is not a for-profit venture whose product needs repackaging or a new advertising campaign ...” (Schneiders, 2011).*

***Religious life is to be lived; not marketed!***

## 1. Introduction

My mother, who is my most faithful supporter, prays every night for vocations. The elderly Sisters in my congregation, the OLAs, are very faithful also in praying for vocations. Some of them once told me they prayed only for vocations in Africa. They said they believed there was no longer need for vocations here or there was no longer any possibility of vocations in Ireland! I'm not sure how we could justify or explain that kind of thought! I believe their attitude is not unique to OLA Sisters and it does present us with some questions which we have to look at today. One way or the other, we know that Jesus told his disciples to pray so that “the Lord of the harvest may send out labourers into [his] harvest” (Lk. 10: 1-6). That is the only concrete advice Jesus gave on vocation promotion: pray! It is the Lord who awakens a vocation in a person's heart and the Lord who will give him/her the grace to respond. No matter how creative we might be in marketing the Religious Life, in the name of 'vocation promotion', if the Lord does not call someone, then our prayer is may they *not* respond! However, Jesus attracted people and they followed him. We too must be attractive so that through our witness others will hear God's call.

In November last year, Pope Francis met with the Union of Superior Generals in Rome. This was the superior generals of all male religious congregations. It was an informal meeting; he went around, mingled, drank mate, and answered questions. And it was during that meeting, which was then reported in the *Civiltà Cattolica* by Antonio Spadaro, that the Pope invited Consecrated Persons to Wake up the World! That's no small mandate! The task given to me today is to help wake ourselves up as Vocations Directors (!) and help us tease out this mandate and see how we as Vocations Directors can help it be carried out.

I see two parts to my presentation. First there is need to lay before us the background and context of our conversation: I will look more closely at what the Pope asked of us. Then I will try to clarify what we mean by vocation and by vocation promotion, and then I will say a little about the field of Ireland in which we are sent to carry out this ministry today. In the second part of my presentation, I will look at the area of vocations promotion, and discuss how we, as the appointed Vocation Directors of our various religious institutes, might help to do what Pope Francis asks of us as consecrated persons: wake up the world! Witness speaks louder than words and Freedom they say is an inside job. I think both these anecdotes are important for us as we consider the ministry of vocations promotion since this involves looking in at ourselves as consecrated persons and at the witness that we give of our way of life much more than at what we do or say in our outreach to others in the name of promotion. Religious life is to be lived, not marketed. Hence, in the second

part of the presentation, speaking of how we can as Vocations Promoters 'Wake up the World', I will speak first in terms of looking inwards towards our Religious Institutes and the way we live Religious Life today, and secondly in terms of our outreach to young people and the world at large as we consciously seek to promote this way of life.

## 2. The Context of our Conversation

### 2.1. 'Wake Up the World'

First of all let me put the Pope's mandate in context. The Superior Generals asked him about the identity and mission of Religious Life, what does he expect of us, what is he calling us to do, how does he expect us to respond to his call to live the Gospel with greater evangelical prophecy today. In response the Pope said

"The Church grows through witness, not by proselytism... The witness that can really attract is that associated with attitudes which are uncommon: generosity, detachment, sacrifice, self-forgetfulness in order to care for others. This is the witness... of Religious Life... Thus Religious Life ought to promote growth in the Church by way of attraction. The Church must be attractive. Wake up the world! Be witnesses of a different way of doing things, of acting, of living! It is possible to live differently in this world. We are speaking of an eschatological outlook, of the values of the Kingdom incarnated here, on this earth. It is a question of leaving everything to follow the Lord... Evangelical radicalness is not only for religious: it is demanded of all. But religious follow the Lord in a special way, in a prophetic way. It is this witness that I expect of you. Religious should be men and women who are able to wake the world up."

The statement speaks for itself. The Pope reminds us that all baptized Christians are called to follow Christ and are called to do so in a radical way, from the roots of their lives, not in a superficial way. But Religious, by their state of life, witness to that following in a prophetic and charismatic way: they profess publicly to give God primacy in their lives, to live by the vows of poverty, chastity and obedience so that their lives are consecrated to God, following a particular charism in a life of service to God for others so as to realize the Reign/Kingdom of God in this world. According to the Pope, people look at Religious and say "What's happening? These people are telling me something! These people go beyond a mundane horizon" These people, all because of their experience of God's love in their lives and because of their faith, give it all up so as to help the poor, so as to bring the Gospel to faraway lands, so as to change the world and make it a better place where the dignity of every human being as a child of God is recognised and respected... At least that's what Religious life is supposed to do. St Francis of Assisi did that. St. Anthony of Padua did it. Mary Ward did it. Mary Aikenhead. Nano Nagle. Mother Teresa of Calcutta. In their own specific ways all the founders of our congregations did. I'm not so sure all the Religious do! I'm not so sure I do myself! But I suppose that is the challenge Pope Francis is drawing our attention to. He is simply reminding us that Religious are by their very vocation to be prophets, calling the world to wake up from its attachment to what is mundane and what causes most division and pain in our world and in our human relations today.

Would you agree with me that the witness we give as Religious today is often far from being prophetic, and that applies to us as individuals as well as institutions? If we want to wake up the world, we have to wake up ourselves. In the second part of my paper, when I speak of vocation promotion as an internal affair, I will come back to this.

## 2.2. 'Vocation' & Vocation Promotion

When people speak of or even pray for vocations, they usually refer to vocations to the priesthood or the Religious Life. But, of course, vocation is much more than this. The term 'vocation' is rooted in the Latin *vocatio*, meaning a call, a summons, or an invitation. God does not just call a chosen few. Everyone has a vocation. God invites everyone to follow a path of life which will give them the fullness of life.

Our task in the area of Vocation Promotion is to help people appreciate that they are created by God, not by chance, they are loved, they are called, this call is not an obligation or a weight but it is a gift. An invitation, call, summons, requires a response. Responding to God's call is the key to fulfilment in life. We don't just respond once; the challenge is to remain committed to that response in the face of trial and opposition. The ministry of Vocation Promotion is primarily about helping people hear and respond to God's call, and also helping people remain faithful to their response.

I think we must look honestly at *why* we do Vocation Promotion. Do we do it because we need numbers to fill our institutions? Certainly we have a duty to make this way of life known and present it as a relevant and valuable option and naturally it is difficult to be given the ministry of vocations promotion and see no concrete results! However, we must always remember that the vitality of Religious Life is not a matter of statistics or numbers. Convents and monasteries and Religious Life as a whole is not a product we should wish to sell.

A lot more emphasis is put on promoting vocations to the priesthood than to religious life. This is probably because we think we need priests for Sacramental and Pastoral care, Stewardship of parishes, Education of the Christian faithful, Building up of a sense of Christian community. The need for religious is not at all as evident. With the promotion of the laity in the Church since Vatican II, many Religious feel they are not 'needed' and therefore feel there is no longer reason to promote this way of life. I believe it is important to remind ourselves that the Church does not *need* religious per se. Religious do not exist as a way of life to fill a need.

However, Religious life is the oldest vocation life form in the Church, preceding both matrimony and ordained ministry as public vocations in the Church. Religious Life is a call, a gift, and that is why we offer it as a way of life. Religious life is a life on the margins, as all prophets are called to be, on the margins of society and of the Church, of service to both as a radical and prophetic sign and instrument of God's kingdom. Ministry, service to those in need, is an essential part of religious life. However, it is important that we don't present Religious life as being all about what we do. Equally important is our life of consecration and of communion and the witness we give of this.

### 2.3. The field: Ireland today

Ireland is the field to which we are sent to carry out this ministry of Vocation Promotion today and help to 'Wake the World'. We could spend all day asking: Is Ireland asleep and can we help to wake it up; how? Or: If Ireland is asleep, what has induced this sleep and what would it take to wake those who are sleeping? Are we as Church or as Religious asleep and do we need to be woken up? These are very valid questions which could be looked at from any angle but we really don't have time or capability of going into this in great detail today. However, we can make a few remarks:

In today's Ireland there is an increasingly secular and materialistic culture. The recession is supposedly more or less passed, but there is still quite a bit of economic suffering. There is still a high percentage of unemployment, so many young people who emigrated in recent years continue to be abroad, and there is a notable and alarming increase in suicide, homelessness, drugs, and crime. In certain areas of the media a very aggressive and anti-religious secularism can sometimes be manifested, and every attempt is made to put religion, especially anything smelling of Catholicism, more and more on the back burner. There is a loss of trust in institutions and organisations, including in the Church. The never-ending series of abuse revelations which have surfaced over the last 20 years have resulted in a weak and demoralised Church both at the level of local hierarchy and at the level of religious institutes. The Church has, to a certain extent, lost its moral authority. However, churches are not empty even if a lot emptier than they once may have been. There is great family participation in events such as first Communion and Confirmation, with great participation and collaboration of parishes, schools, parents and Godparents in these events. While there is an anti-religious secularism in the media, a very commendable amount of media space is given to religious affairs and celebrations, including even the Angelus and Sunday liturgies. Other religions, particularly Islam, are on the increase largely due to the ongoing flow of immigration and there are some very worthwhile efforts being made at integration and at interfaith dialogue. Despite the recession and the poverty, there is tremendous generosity among the people towards helping financially or with their time and creativity to projects or people in need, both at home and abroad.

This generosity and creativity is particularly notable among young people. Also notable is the level of suicide among the youth, the sense of loneliness and of dissatisfaction, of not being understood, of being alone in the individualistic world of selfies and the superficial relationships of facebook and twitter, of being afloat with no direction in the fast flowing borderless and uncontrolled world of social media. Young people today are searching for meaning; people desire a sense that life has a purpose, that God has a plan for me. In an article in the Vocations Sunday edition of the *Irish Catholic* (Sisters act, April 30th, 2015), which I am sure you all read, Greg Daly quotes Fr Christopher Jamison, director of England's vocations office who believes 'there is a gap in the market for meaning in our culture' and he suggests that one of the ways in which people may find meaning is through Religious Life.

According to the Report which Sr. Gabrielle Farrell gave on behalf of Vocations Ireland at the recent conference in Rome, in this country today there are still a small number of

people entering Religious Life and also discerning, through *Exploreaway* and other programmes, their vocation in life. She said some Religious groups are now receiving new candidates after years of not having any and there is also in these recent years an increase in the number of enquiries to Religious congregations. According to the statistics presented in both the Irish Catholic and the Catholic Times last month, for Vocations Sunday, the tide has turned, at least in Britain. In his article in the Irish Catholic, Greg Daly was very hopeful about Britain but less so about Ireland. He quoted the BBC headline which stated: "Women becoming Nuns hits 25-year high"; the Telegraph stated: "Sister Act: how nuns are staging a surprise comeback in the UK". the Guardian proclaimed: "Superior Numbers: number of new nuns in Britain trebles in five years". With reference to new members, the Catholic Times says that "Both enclosed/contemplative and apostolic orders are on the rise in terms of numbers - there has been a ninefold increase in the number of active religious sisters and a fourfold increase in the number of enclosed sisters in England and Wales." It's important to note that of the 45 women who entered Religious Life last year in England, 27 went to apostolic congregations while the other 18 went to join contemplative orders. This gives an idea of the diverse things young people today are looking for.

We thank God for this turn in the tide in Britain; it certainly gives a sense of life and hope. However, according to Daly, in his article in the Irish Catholic, "In contrast Irish orders have typically received ten or so entrants over each of the last few years, such that beyond a handful of communities there seem few signs of hope".

Hence, while we can say that these are good times for this Seminar we can also say, as Greg says, that for us here in Ireland, there is little hope! I hope that is not the case; however, the challenge is there for us to face. We may not be driven by numbers, since the vitality of Religious Life is not a function of numbers. But we must ask why there is a slower turn of the tide in Ireland and what can we do to ensure young people in Ireland are encouraged to ask themselves "What is God's plan for my life?, and are given the opportunity to hear and respond to God's call. How can we as Religious ensure a growth of a 'culture of vocations' in the Church in Ireland? How can we help to wake Ireland up? I leave us with those questions to come back to later.

#### **2.4. Is there a 'Vocations Crisis' in Ireland today?**

Since the very early days there have been people who felt called to leave all, follow Christ, give Primacy to God and the love of God in their life, live simply without material attachments, be an instrument of change/building a better world with the vision of the Kingdom of God, be of service to others especially the poor/marginalized/rejected. These were always a few... hence their choice of life was different, it was radical. It was different to the multitudes who tried to follow Christ in their everyday life as a member of the 'Church' (baptized).

There were *unusually* high numbers drawn to this way of life between 1900 and 1960s. This then reduced: for various reasons, historical as well as social: Sandra Schneiders in a talk she gave in 2011, identified these reasons as being smaller Catholic families, expanded

opportunities for women, greater participation of the role of the laity in the Church. We can add to that the rise of more and more philanthropic agencies and individuals (NGOS, etc) as well as government assuming responsibility for human rights of the wider society including of the poor (education, health, children in difficulty, social welfare....). Maybe numbers were reduced also, at least partly, because of the 'crash' of the Church from its pedestal; no longer was there much status associated with being a priest or a religious. Probably also because Church and faith issues are now very much on the back burner in most homes in Ireland - in which case, it's not a 'vocation crisis' but what we might call a 'faith crisis' as well as ignorance about the Church and the Religious Life.

The fact that there is a small trickle of people who feel called today to the Religious life is probably normal. The trickle is small, and maybe too small, but it is more normal than the great flow in the first half of last century.

### **3. Vocations Promotion to help us to Wake the World: Internally**

In this second part of my presentation I wish us to look at how we, as the appointed Vocation Directors of our various religious institutes, might help to do what Pope Francis asks of us as consecrated persons: Wake up the world! As I said at the beginning, the ministry of vocations promotion involves primarily looking in at ourselves as consecrated persons and examining the witness that we give of our way of life today.

#### **3.1. Do we ourselves believe in Religious Life?**

The first great challenge which I note today refers to our own opinion of our way of life. A Sister told me recently that this, what we call 'Religious Life', is over; this is past. I have heard this kind of sentiment expressed so often since returning to Ireland just over a year ago. When people, and I mean Religious, speak of Religious Life, they say "this is past, a new way will emerge". When they speak of missionary life, they say it will be lay people or it will be the indigenous congregations.... When they speak of missionary Religious Life, they say missionary Religious Life is finished, and the future of mission is laity...! And so I ask myself, what is past, a new kind of what must emerge, must be wait in hope for something new to fall from the sky? Must those of us who are in this what we call Religious Life today just be grateful for our wonderful past and the great things we or the older sisters of our congregations did in the past, and now simply make as little noise as we can, fade away quietly into the background, caring for our elderly as we prepare to be elderly ourselves and then die a happy quiet death.

Pope Francis in his letter to Religious on the occasion of the Year for Consecrated life said: "I urge you not to join the ranks of the prophets of doom who proclaim the end or meaninglessness of the consecrated life in the Church in our day; rather... Let us constantly set out anew, with trust in the Lord." (par. 3, pg. 12). Thank God for Pope Francis!

But, let us ask: What is past? The big convents which separated us from people who lived in normal houses are past. The religious garb/habit which differentiated religious from other people is past. The big institutional ministries by which we were known are past.

Most of us no longer have members to fill the large convents. If we do it is just for a few years while we care for the large numbers of elderly and infirm. We know that in ten or twenty years we will no longer need them and will have to sell them. Some still use the habit and that is perfectly fine, but most do not. We no longer have personnel to run our big institutional ministries and even if we did we know that such ministries are no longer needed since the government provides social services of all kinds and other NGOs or philanthropic agencies offer more professional and courageous services than we ever did or could.

But the essentials of Religious Life cannot be reduced to big houses, different dress and big institutional ministries. In fact, I know it was not any of these that attracted me to Religious Life and I imagine it was not these that attracted most of the Sisters who entered even in the 1950s or 60s. The essentials of Religious life have not passed: That is Consecration to God above all else, Commitment to God's Kingdom in a life of service. Community. I believe this so-called crisis in Religious vocations today, or the greatly reduced number of applicants, brings us back to look at the essentials of Religious Life and helps us reflect again on the real meaning and gift of this call, this vocation.

Greg Daly, in 'Sisters act', says that the 45 women who entered Religious Life in England last year (2014), were spread across a wide range of ways of living Religious Life, going to about 30 orders or so. "One thing these orders have in common ... is a real sense of their own identity, and a confidence in their particular charism, a belief that they have something to offer the Church and the world". Without any doubt, if we Religious do not have a sense of our identity and a confidence in our charism and a belief that we have something to offer the Church and the world, we cannot expect anyone to be attracted to join us. As Vocation Directors, to help our members to do this must be our priority.

### **3.2. Live what we profess**

The second priority is to help our members to live what we profess and to live it happily. In his letter for this year, Pope Francis told us that "The consecrated life will not flourish as a result of brilliant vocation programs, but because the young people we meet find us attractive, because they see us as men and women who are happy!" (pg. 15)

The real question we must ask ourselves is: Are the people in Religious Life today living it with integrity? Are we offering it clearly and compellingly to people who are genuinely called to it today, even though, for many reasons these will probably be fewer than in past times?

It has been said that responding to the needs of the people still determines where and how we live as Religious. "First the preaching of the Gospel where it is most needed. Then, everything else." The truth is that for many religious congregations in Ireland today, it is

our own needs, that is, the needs of the members of our Institute, which are taking up most of our resources, our time and our energy. This is obviously because most of our members are elderly or infirm and also because of the needs, demands and fears associated with safeguarding policies and implementations, compensation for wrongs done in the past within our structures, new demands of charity laws in Ireland, and other bureaucratic and practical issues of a similar vein.

We profess the vows of poverty, chastity and obedience according to a particular charism and sharing in a specific mission. People know what we profess. But undoubtedly today they question our way of living it. While many people in Ireland today suffer poverty, we Religious, who have taken a public vow of poverty, enjoy at least adequate material wellbeing and often have substantial investments as insurance for future congregational needs. We religious say we witness through our lives to the communion of all people where all things are shared and used for the common good and yet we live in individual apartments, drive our individual cars, have our own bank accounts. I listened to a talk given by Gemma Simmonds at the CORI conference some years ago where she said a young woman went for an experience of community living and found the members never met: they did not eat together, did not pray together and came together only once a day and that was for the Holy Hour of watching Fair City! In today's Ireland we are still thousands of Religious, most elderly but certainly not all, and yet we find it difficult to have, or to believe we have, an effect! How can we witness today to a collaboration between us as religious institutes and between us as male and female religious, so that we give an authentic and credible witness today of Communion. We religious say we give ourselves totally to the service of God's Kingdom especially to those most in need but with so few younger members in Religious communities today the truth is that there simply are very few available energies for service outside the community. While we may feel uneasy about some of these truths, we do not necessarily have to feel guilty. But I suggest these hard questions must leave us challenged. How can we today, in all our communities and as a body of Religious, live and witness to what we profess, and be happy to do so?

As Religious in Ireland we have become afraid: we have been subsumed under the guilt and weight of child safeguarding issues; so much of our energy has gone into this as also has so much of our material resources and our personnel; we are now afraid to be in contact with children, we are afraid to open our doors or our spaces to children or even to vulnerable adults for fear of accusations or of claims; we are shy of speaking publicly or being in the public eye; we are afraid to let people know who we are... But ours is a public life; our call is to be prophetic; our vocation is to witness to a life given to God and to the service of God's reign.

The Pope in his letter tells us that the distinctive sign of consecrated life is prophecy and that is why he is counting on us to Wake up the world (pg. 16). He says: "So I trust that, rather than living in some utopia, you will find ways to create 'alternate spaces' where the Gospel approach of self-giving, fraternity, embracing differences, and love of one another can thrive... At times, like Elijah and Jonah, you may feel the temptation to flee, to abandon the task of being a prophet because it is too demanding, wearisome or apparently fruitless. But prophets know that they are never alone..." (pp. 16-17)



In his message for Vocations Sunday this year, he invites us to reflect on our vocation as an exodus story, and to go forth, less concerned for ourselves, our structures and successes, and go out to meet God's children wherever they are, to feel compassion for their hurt and pain.

As Vocations Directors you cannot be solely responsible for helping your Religious Institute live what you profess, overcome our fears and weariness, and come out of our utopias. However, it is in your portfolio and hence you have a responsibility to find ways to help your Institute reflect constantly on how we might live more prophetically and audaciously that which we profess. This might lead us to changing our structures, opening our spaces, getting out of our comfort zones, leaving aside some of our false securities and taking risks, with faith in the Lord to whom we have consecrated our lives.

### 3.3. Ministry today

Our different Religious Institutes as well as the diverse forms of Religious Life were usually born out of a call to serve and provide a certain ministry. These ministries grew and became institutionalized: serving especially the needs of the poor, the sick, children, Africa... (big schools. Hospitals, orphanages, training centres, homes for the destitute, mission abroad to where the Church was not present and where there was great poverty...). Today we speak of moving from institutionalized ministries to new models of ministry. This is for two reasons: there are not enough resources (personnel and money) to maintain or revive these institutional apostolates of yester years and secondly this is not where religious are most needed today. The needs they were established to respond to either no longer exist or they are being responded to by government or NGOs.

To know what ministries we are called to be involved in today, we must put today's religious with the early religious. They felt called to meet the needs of people in their time - so too we meet the needs of people today, those needs which are not being met. As Vocation Directors it is also part of your portfolio to help the Institute reflect continuously on new ministries to which the Institute might be called to respond, either using its personnel or its material and other resources. As the Pope said to the Superior Generals, "the charism is one but it needs to be lived according to the paces, times and persons. The charism is not a bottle of distilled water. It needs to be lived energetically as well as reinterpreted culturally."

Sandra Schneiders speaks of four types or clusters of ministries today in which Religious are involved: first, the ministry in the area of social justice, founded on or working out of liberation theology or the social doctrine of the Church as they challenge systemic or structural change; second, the ministry with the victims of injustice or of natural disasters, working out of the Gospel of compassion and concretely showing Christ's compassion to these people in their need; third, the ministry of intellectual or artistic reflection and scholarly research in the area of faith seeking understanding; and fourthly, ministry in response to the thirst for meaning and transcendence, in the various fields of theology and of spirituality. (Schneiders, Religious Life in the Future)

Pope Francis mentions the importance of finding new and relevant ministries today – he emphasizes the poor, going out to the periphery. He says that some real contact with the poor is necessary for us to see and understand reality. If we stay in the centre, in our comfortable zones, and try to look at reality from there, we run the risk of being “abstract ideologists or fundamentalists” He insists we must become acquainted with reality by experience, spend time walking on the periphery in order to become acquainted with the reality and real life experiences of people. He says we “must leave the nest which encloses us in order to be sent”! The Pope speaks very strongly on this: “What therefore is the priority of consecrated life? Prophecy of the Kingdom, which is a non-negotiable. The emphasis should fall on being prophets, and not playing at being them. Naturally the devil proposes his temptations to us; one of them is: just appear to be prophets. But, it is not possible simply to play at these things. I myself have seen very sad things in this regard. No: Religious are men and women who light the way to the future.” (Spadaro, *Wake up the world*, pp. 4-5).

The Pope also warns about confusing the institutions we had in the past for our apostolic work with the charism of the institute itself: “there is need to reinforce that which is institutional in consecrated life and not confuse the Institute with the apostolic work. The former perdures; the latter fades away. The charism perdures, is strong; the work fades away. Sometimes the Institute and the work are confused. The Institute is creative, is always looking for outlets. In this way too the peripheries change and a checklist can be made that is always different.”

A challenge in new ministries is not only about personnel reaching into new areas of need to be of service but also it is about using our resources for new ministries. We don't have a lot of active Religious in many of our Congregations. But often times we do have houses or gardens or other physical spaces which could be put at the service of those in need. Maybe some of our land could be used to provide lots for planting vegetables so that people can not only eat but also enjoy the dignity of growing their own veg, enjoy the peace of working the soil, and form friendships with the Sisters and with others who share the lots. Maybe our gardens can provide a place for mediation and quiet reflection where people can feel welcome to come and pray, unwinding from the fast lane of today's Irish family life. In Synge St in Dublin part of the Christian brothers school is used as the Lantern Centre, an intercultural and interfaith centre providing a very important service to immigrants in Ireland today. In Italy one of our OLA schools, no longer in use as a school is used as a stop-over for refugees fleeing from Syria and other troubled parts of the world. Another OLA House in Rome once for OLA student sisters then was given as a safe house for girls who were escaping from the world of trafficking. Creativity, imagination, generosity, openness, audacity.. these are the gifts we need.

Today's new models of ministries are not necessarily institutionalized and therefore are more individualized – however they do not lead to individualism: one member can be involved in this and another in that, but as a religious community everyone supports and shares in the apostolate and recognizes that the charism of the congregation is being lived through these individual ministries. For example, the OLA Sisters in Ireland are many but most are elderly. However one OLA is working in Cuan Mhuire, another in counselling,

another in the episcopal commission for emigrants, another in the lantern Centre, another in interfaith dialogue, another in Ghana, another in Tanzania, and so on. Through each one, the whole Institute is involved. Nobody could not be doing what she is doing were it not for the structures that support us as well as the physical and spiritual support of the whole body. In this way, individual ministries become congregational ministries and it is important that we recognize their value. To help Institutes make the risk involved in opening to new ministries so as to be relevant today is part of the task of a Vocations Director.

#### **4. Vocations Promotion to help us Wake the World: Externally**

The last part of my presentation is to look at how to do vocations promotion externally. I am sure all of you here have far more ideas in that area than I do myself. I read some notes which a Sister brought back from the Ferdinand programme in America. While I appreciate that some good ideas were generated there and many people may have found it helpful, I admit that my reaction to it was that it seemed too much like a marketing programme.

One thing the Ferdinand Programme did propose was a Climate of Vocational Confidence, meaning by this that we build an environment where vocations are invited, and confidently challenged and supported, not just wanted. I think this is the responsibility of every Institute but I believe the Exploreaway programme is a collaborative effort to do just that, and I commend you for it.

I met a young woman recently who is preparing to enter a religious congregation here in Ireland and she was helped in her discernment by the Exploreaway Programme. She told me the greatest attraction for her in helping her choose the religious institute to join, was its founder, in this case Mary Ward, so I think from that we can learn that a 'tool' for vocation promotion is to tell the story of our founders and our early Sisters/Members.

In an article in the Irish Catholic on May 22<sup>nd</sup> 2014, written by Michael Kelly and entitled 'Build a culture of vocations', he speaks of the importance of presenting the option of Religious Life to young people and providing them with the opportunity to know it, ask questions about it, discuss it. So many young people in Ireland today have probably never heard of a Religious beyond what they see on films like *Philomena* or *the Magdalene Girls* or hear about on the news with reference to the Tuam babies or Nazareth homes. All associated only with the negative stories of these places, of course. If we are lucky they may have seen more positive images of Religious as presented in *Sister Act* or *The Sound of Music*! We really do have a responsibility to allow young people first of all know and appreciate that they themselves do not exist by chance but they are loved by God and have a unique personal vocation. Secondly we have a responsibility to allow young people see Religious Life as a beautiful, valuable and life-giving option of life and to let them know the diverse forms of Religious Life which exist in the church and the values and particularities of each of these.

In that same article Michael Kelly gives a very reasonable and practical list of tools or tasks for Vocation Directors: days in schools; presence at career fairs; visit parishes and preach at mass; two vocations retreats a year; a piece on local radio every six months; time preparing and distributing materials; time attending and participating in youth events; time meeting with candidates; ....

Visibility is a big factor in the area of vocation promotion. If people don't see us they obviously won't know us or be attracted to the way of life we live. In the good old days Religious were visible by their dress – identical or even bizarre uniform, usually habits – or their uniform apostolates (schools, hospitals...) - or their common dwelling, convents – a very different style of house and existence to what 'ordinary' people lived. How to be corporately and personally visible today in a way that is not so uniform and ostentatious is a challenge we are all still trying to meet. I would like to suggest that it is through our lives of witness – our communities, our apostolates, our being happy and good people – rather than through any external symbols that we will be visible as religious. This is something we might like to discuss.

The social media is a tool which is emphasised by all in the area of information and communications as a way of being known and being visible, including therefore in the area of vocations promotion. A Benedictine nun interviewed in the Irish Catholic on April 30<sup>th</sup> spoke about the website as an important tool in their vocations promotion. She said: "We don't run schools or help in the parish, such that the community doesn't have an obvious public profile, but the website doesn't disrupt our contemplative way of life at all. We're able to communicate information about our lives and convey something of its joy, mystery, and beauty without taking us out of what we're meant to be doing. It's important to make ourselves known through our website and then leave it at that".

On the internet I have seen diverse methods used by religious congregations to promote vocations. Some seem like stunts: I saw a video of a young Rap priest, another of a young Franciscan friar going out on his skateboard... Is there a reason for such methods? I suppose they are trying to reach out and attract youth in the world in which youth are to be reached. Their motive may not be to net them all into the Religious Life but rather it may be to reach these young people and help them know God's love and recognise they each have a vocation. Young people today seek meaning and purpose, they seek meaningful relationships, they seek direction. Therefore, pastoral methods that seek to reach out to them cannot be condemned. These pastoral methods may be presented in the form of vocation promotion... there is a thin line and I imagine the methods we use require mature discernment. Our goal however, must never be to market Religious Life as though it were a product, since a vocation is from God and must be discerned.

## Conclusion

In this paper I have not fully answered the question: is Ireland asleep, why, and how can we wake those sleeping? This all requires further analysis. However, I have focused on the belief Pope Francis has that the Religious life is that way of life which can Wake the World, by witnessing in a very prophetic and attractive way to those uncommon values of

generosity, detachment, sacrifice, self-forgetfulness, care for others; witnessing by our life of consecration, communion and mission to that different way of doing things, of acting and of living.

I have said that the one in charge of Vocations Promotion is tasked with helping us to Wake the world in two ways: firstly, by helping us to believe in religious life, live the life we profess, and find new ministries (through the use of our personnel and resources) to respond to the needs of the people in Ireland today; and secondly, by finding creative ways to make the notion of vocation as well as the option of religious life known especially to young people who today search for meaning and direction and know little or nothing about this way of life.

The task of a Vocation Director is not very easy. It is not easy for us to always believe in religious life and live what we profess today. While the support and testimony of our older members is encouraging, the lack of younger companions who share our journey can be disheartening. It is indeed increasingly important that as Religious in this country we learn to walk and work together.

The task of a Vocation Director is certainly not satisfying since there will likely be no or very few young people who come to us and ask to join our religious institute; hence, we must continue in the ministry without evidence of results! One simply must have faith that God calls in God's time and the promotion of the religious vocation, despite the lack of visible fruit, is not a waste of time.

May God grant you the patience you need and allow you experience the joy of service in this difficult but very necessary task.

Thank you very much for your attention.

## Buzz in groups:

1. What did I hear that affirmed me and what would I affirm in what I heard?
2. What did I hear that challenged me and what would I challenge in what I heard?

## Questions for reflection

1. **Personal Reflection:** How relevant is Religious Life to me as that which can Wake the World in Ireland today? What is preventing me from Waking the world? How much of the lack of enthusiasm in Ireland do I share in and why? What do I need to wake up?
2. **Group sharing:** Given the many constraints and demands on our personnel and resources, how can we, in all our communities and as a body of Religious, better live and witness to what we profess, and thus Wake the World, in Ireland today?