

Saying no to a candidate

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ONE OF THE MOST DIFFICULT aspects of my work as a vocation director is speaking a hard word to women who are calling themselves to community.

Father Ray Carey, in training us to be responsible vocation directors at his Behavioral Assessment workshop, said something that I have brought to mind many times: “Once you have concluded that a woman is not called to religious life, you may not waste a day of her one precious life hoping she will come to that realization by herself; you must tell her.” It is difficult to speak the truth with wisdom and love, leaving a discerner with a word of hope. Even when a prospective member has a seemingly strong self-image, it is not easy to hear a hard truth. Furthermore, it is not easy for a vocation director to speak a hard word. The purpose of this article is to make the task of identifying and communicating with inappropriate candidates a bit easier.

Criteria for membership in my community

During 11 years in vocation ministry I have identified six critical areas in which an applicant needs to be healthy to be part of our Benedictine community. An acceptable applicant needs to have economic, social, physical, emotional, spiritual, and psychological health. All six of these factors are essential for our religious life—and probably for religious life in most communities. If one of them is missing, the response to a discerner needs to be “no.” I will examine each of these indicators, then look at ways I might say “no” while speaking both truth and hope. All of what I share here is based on our experience here at Mother of God Monastery in Watertown, South Dakota.

Economically sound

Discernment requires freedom—freedom to come, and also freedom to leave. Those with insufficient finances to sustain themselves if they leave should not be admitted to community.

We can expect that about 50 percent of those who enter formation will leave. New members need to have resources to fall back on, so that leaving does not trigger a situation of poverty or even homelessness. A key question then is: Do discerners have resources that enable them to “land on their feet” if they would leave the community? There are those whose deepest motivation for considering religious life is insecurity about the future. Some discerners are clearly intimidated by the prospect of facing the future alone. Some lack the capacity to develop a secure platform on which to craft their own future. For example, they may lack the social skills or the motivation to attain stable employment; they may have no financial savings or assets. They may be living paycheck to paycheck; they may have been unemployed for a year or more; they may be living on an unemployment check, or even on some other type of social

welfare income. A number of inquirers have been living with parents or other family members. Therefore, we need to ascertain that they have the ability to live independently. Indicators such as these are, at minimum, a yellow flag, more likely a red flag, because they may indicate dependency as a way of life.

Communities are aging populations. We need women and men capable of taking the future of the community into their communal hands and working together toward a secure, purposeful future for the community. Their contributions to the community need to outweigh their needs. Therefore—even though they might be very likable—those without the wherewithal to discontinue a formation program (if needed)—and land on their feet— are not candidates for religious life.

Debt—Debt can be an indicator of fiscally irresponsible spending. As we consider a candidate for religious life we need to be mindful that she or he someday is going to be responsible for the health of the community's finances. Debt is a serious concern. Much credit card debt today is due to over-spending one's budget and to materialistic habits of purchasing "wants" rather than "needs." It is important to assess whether the candidate has attitudes and habits that lead toward vowed poverty and responsible use of community resources. We require that all debt except education debt be paid in full before applying to the community.

What do we say to candidates when we say "no" in these cases? I speak about discernment as freedom—freedom to enter, and also freedom to leave. I ask them for a plan of how they would support themselves if they were to leave. Many discerners believe religious communities are financed by the Catholic church. I speak with them about the responsibility each religious institute has for being self-supporting, and how community life requires inter-dependence: each member a contributor to the whole.

Socially skilled

Loneliness may be due to lack of an ability to bond. This world is filled with lonely people who long to belong. They live disconnected from meaningful human bonds. Sometimes the reason for their loneliness lies in their inability to live in close relationship with others. When a discerner indicates she has family, even children, and is not close to any of them, I want to know why. If she has no viable relationships with family, what kind of relationships will she be able to build within community? When others are blamed for one's loneliness, at best, this indicates a lack of creativity in seeking out meaningful relationships.

Children—Sometimes discerners have children who are unstable and are not independent of parental assistance. Some adult children need parental support in order to survive. The son or daughter might have a congenital condition, or may have been in an accident that has caused a permanent disability, or adult children may have a mental illness or addictive behavior that has destroyed the capacity for sustained independence. Whatever the situation, a woman or man with a dependent (or unstable) adult child is not truly free to enter a religious community. The community will inevitably either need to help support the child, or the parent will spend an undue amount of time torn between parental obligations and community responsibilities.

Over-dependence on virtual relationships—virtual friendships, social networks, Internet use, smart phones, and television can compete with essential community-building communication.

Facebook, Instagram, and other social media are part of the life of many religious. Yet social media relationships can distract from face-to-face community relationships. Over-dependence upon computer use for maintaining social bonds is a serious impediment to healthy religious community life. Entry into religious life necessarily means letting go of habits of entertainment and social communication that draw the new member away from full community engagement. It is imperative for my community to speak clearly to our applicants about expectations for use of technology, and to assess compatibility of the discerner's lifestyle with our policies on the use of technology.

Internet pornography—Pornography found on the Internet is an increasingly prevalent problem, even among candidates to religious life. There is no room for being naïve about Internet pornography; even nice people can have bad habits. Although the incidence of Internet pornography is higher among applicants to men's communities than to women's, all communities should guard against virtual violations of the vow of celibacy. This activity easily becomes addictive, and therefore, for us a candidate who has engaged regularly in Internet pornography, or any other pornographic activity, is unacceptable for religious life.

Guilt can motivate a desire for religious life. Candidates may think religious life will protect them or be a life of reparation for sinful behaviors. This, of course, is not their stated reason for entering community, but it can be a hidden agenda that must be brought to light through behavioral questions asked of candidates.

Anti-social behavior—tendencies toward isolation do not bode well for community. There are men and women who apply to religious community to escape the world and its demands. From the outside, religious community seems to be a quiet, peaceful existence, free from the need to engage in the world. What is not sometimes understood by a discerner is the level of social engagement required to fulfill the charism and mission of the community, as well as to strengthen community life. The ability to sacrifice one's time, solitude, and preferences for the sake of the whole is essential for healthy community living. Good communication skills and a heart capable of compassionate engagement are pre-requisites for community life. Washing dishes, being present for community prayer, and welcoming an unexpected guest at the front door are just a few of the demands that draw us away from solitary contemplation.

What do we say to a candidate when we say "no" in regard to social indicators of unsuitability? I suggest that the candidate find an informal faith community within his or her parish or local surroundings with whom to share community. If I assess that the candidate would benefit from counseling, I suggest she work with a counselor to overcome behaviors that inhibit healthy social interaction. When candidates feel at a loss about finding a counselor, I recommend Catholic Social Services, Lutheran Social Services, their parish, or another trusted social service agency.



Even the most prayerful and sincere candidates can misjudge their own suitability for religious life. The process is two-way, and vocation directors have the responsibility to their communities to admit candidates who are truly in a position to contribute. Photo by Sebastien Wiertz, [Creative Commons](#).

Physical health

Religious life is more demanding than a full-time job. It is a 24/7 lifestyle, and my community requires applicants to be healthy. Candidates are surprised to learn of the rigors of community life. Many see religious life as an easier lifestyle than their current one. There is a prevalent false image of lots of free time to pray, spend hours in adoration, and read. Few understand the stamina needed to live religious life. We do not accept candidates unless we can reasonably expect them to maintain good health for 20 years or more.

Obesity is our most prevalent health issue among candidates. As a vocation director, when I am faced with an obese discernor, I share with her a stark truth. If she continues her present lifestyle, her health can be expected to break down prematurely as the years pass. The community can require obese candidates to begin a weight loss program and demonstrate some success in losing weight before they enter the community. Those who are defensive about this requirement are not accepted into community. Most discernors truly want to lose weight, and a vocational call is an incentive for them to take action. We also know most of them will struggle with this challenge for a lifetime. Severe obesity can also be related to experiences of verbal, physical, or sexual abuse; therefore it is important to screen for deeper problems. Initial formation is not therapy.

To be receiving government disability, whether permanent or temporary, is an unacceptable situation for a woman entering religious life.

Throughout my 11 years as a vocation director I have been disheartened by the number of women on disability who seek community. When I talk with them about the rigors of religious life, some quickly assure me that they could work full-time, but disability payments give them an opportunity to do volunteer work. I really challenge this attitude as an honesty issue, reminding them that our taxes are supporting their lifestyle of dependency.

Sometimes people are on disability due to temporary conditions, such as a serious injury. We have a policy that a candidate must be off disability and working full-time for a minimum of two years before we will permit her to open an application. This policy protects the community from those who think they are healthier than they really are. In addition, it allows a person who has been in recovery for sufficient time to get re-accustomed to a lifestyle with fewer discretionary daytime hours.

What do we say to the candidate when we say “no” because of physical health? For those with physical impediments I emphasize the intensity of religious life and the stamina it takes to be “on call” from early morning to evening every day. I suggest to them two religious groups that accept people with disabilities, one a vowed community, one a secular institute. I suggest they approach their parish and explore spiritual connections they can pursue in their local area.

Emotional health

Emotions, those we consider “positive,” and those that we consider “negative,” are a part of life. The issue, when considering a candidate for community, is how the person expresses or represses emotions of all types.

Emotions expressed through community-building words and behaviors are essential to healthy community living. Furthermore, what is considered proper expression of emotion in one culture or family may be deemed improper in another culture. Being “too loudly happy” all the time, is different than being “too loudly angry”; but there is a community culture of acceptable emotional expression that needs to match the personality of the candidate.

Candidates who have a history of abuse have often developed unhealthy patterns for dealing with emotions. Passive aggressive behavior or the “silent treatment” are patterns for expressing displeasure that are inconsistent with healthy community life. Candidates whose peace is consistently so fragile that it is easily ruffled, tear at the fabric of community. One criteria for evaluating whether discerners who have experienced trauma or abuse have sufficiently healed and are ready for community is how easy it is for their “buttons” to be pushed. Those who are frequently and easily overwhelmed, angry, or upset are still in a wounded space that requires that they do more work on emotional healing before they enter community. We do not expect candidates for community to be perfect models of human behavior—after all, they are entering a community of sinners, not saints—but we do expect them to have a relatively stable and healthy pattern of emotional behaviors. Initial formation is not meant to be therapy!

When it is necessary to say “no” in these cases, I use a body metaphor that seems to help emotionally-wounded women look at their story as a journey from “open wounds to scars.” Open wounds bleed easy and often, at the least touch or irritation. Scars are reminders, but

they do not hurt when touched. A scar does not re-open again and again. I suggest to the discerners that there is help for healing wounds in spiritual direction and counseling. I assure them that healing is possible, and when those wounds have become scars, they can re-open discernment.

Spiritual compatibility

There is more than one spiritual path to the Divine. A candidate for community must be able to experience our community as a spiritual home.

Some communities are steeped in liturgical spiritual traditions; others are more devotional in their communal spiritual practices. It is important to assess whether or not the spirituality of the discerner is consistent with the spiritual rhythm of the community. When candidates question the spiritual practices of the community, this is often an indication of discomfort. I have been asked questions like, “Why doesn’t your community pray the rosary together?” “Why don’t you have the tabernacle in your main chapel?” “Why don’t you have a large cross behind your altar?” Of course there are answers to each of these questions—answers that match the spiritual path of our community. If a candidate shows resistance to our community’s spiritual path, she probably needs to seek out a community more compatible with her spiritual preferences.

There are some discerners who have had little or no spiritual direction. There are some who resist spiritual direction because they believe they get their direction straight from God and do not need outside help. This is a red flag for me. Those who are not open to formation are oftentimes spiritually rigid in their approaches to God.

A key question that must be probed is whether the seeker is willing to be spiritually formed in the spirituality of the founder. One way that we test a discerner’s comfort with the spiritual life of our community is requiring her to fully engage in community life for a minimum of two one-week visits before she is accepted into community. We also share with her key passages of the Rule of Benedict, giving her an opportunity to meditate on these parts of the Rule. We do the same with our charism and mission statement. She needs to know if her heart resonates with our spiritual path.

If there is a serious mismatch at the spiritual level, I very often explain to discerners the difference between devotional and liturgical spirituality. I do not try to present one path as intrinsically better than another, but I do say that God created us differently; therefore we often fit better in one spiritual home than in another. I assure them that God is bigger than one spiritual path and loves us all! I also sometimes have to help discerners understand that they will not be able to mold the community toward their preferences.

Psychological health

Responding to a call to community requires psychological health. Initial formation is not therapy.

Sometimes discerners suffer from one or more mental illnesses. Some are on strong medication as a permanent part of controlling their illnesses. Why not accept them into community? As communities become smaller we have less capacity to absorb those whose behaviors can

disrupt community life or who are likely to have periods when they require diminished workloads or treatment for mental health issues. In addition, members coming into community need to have capabilities for some aspects of community leadership. We need to assess an applicant's ability to be a net contributor to the life and mission of the community.

Psychological testing is, in my opinion, essential. It reveals pathology, and it also points to areas that might become problematic during initial formation. It helps both the discerner and the community to understand where stress points lie. Psychological testing can be especially challenging when the candidate is not versatile with the English language. I believe it is worth the effort and expense to find a culturally appropriate avenue for psychological assessment. [See "[Assessing cross-cultural candidates](#)," by Father Gerard McGlone, S.J. and Fernando Ortiz, p. 12.]

Within our community we have learned how valuable it is for our psychologist to be in collaborative communication with our admissions team. We engage our psychologist in several ways: 1) He does two psychological tests and analyzes the results with both the candidate and the admissions team. 2) He interviews the candidate doing both a detailed sexual history and investigation of key issues that we as a team have surfaced for him to analyze more deeply. 3) The admissions team receives a written report from the psychologist that reviews both the results of the psychological testing and his interview. 4) After receiving the report the admissions team meets with the psychologist to discuss the report and talk through any concerns we have. 5) For those we have decided not to accept, we ask the psychologist how much to share with the candidate when denying admission to the community. His advice helps us to be truthful while bearing in mind the candidate's capacity to hear the refusal without further psychic pain.

In cases where a "no" has to do with psychological health, our message to the candidate depends on who she is and what the concerns are. This depends on how our psychologist has advised us to talk about the reasons for refusal. The nature of the conversation depends upon the candidate's ability and willingness to seek professional assistance. What I can always say is: "No matter how hard this decision is for you to hear, we will continue to pray that you have the strength to believe that our refusal is a part of God's preferred will for your life. We will pray that you will believe deeply that the words of Jesus (John 10:10) apply to you when Jesus said, 'I came that you may have life, and have it to the full.' We will continue to pray daily that your vocational journey leads you to the heart of God's love for you, and that you will experience peace as you walk forward."

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A call to religious life has to be good for the discerner and for the community. As vocation personnel we are agents of our communities, not advocates for the discerner. (That role belongs to the discerner's spiritual director.) Vocation directors have a heavy responsibility because our vows are a public witness. Each member of our community represents the community and the Catholic Church. Mental illness, addictive or anti-social behaviors, and irresponsible actions on the part of a new member can jeopardize the community and even lead to scandal.

Economic, social, physical, emotional, spiritual, and psychological well-being are each essential ingredients in the formula for a healthy applicant. I think of them as a formula: 2(ESP) Minus 1 = NO. ESP is Economic, Social, Physical, Emotional, Spiritual, and Psychological. (And yes, the implication of extra-sensory perception is intentional.)

Sometimes when a key ingredient is missing, it can be acquired. The time to acquire missing ingredients is not during initial formation, or worse, after final vows. These six aspects of health are pre-requisites for entering our Benedictine community. The extra-sensory perception most needed for discerning appropriate candidates for religious life is the guidance of the Holy Spirit. This is the gift we need to go beyond the evidence gleaned by our senses and reach a place of discerned decision-making.

God holds us in the palm of God's hand as we hold each discernor carefully in the palm of our hand. We beg God for understanding hearts to see each person through God's eyes and speak the truth in love.

HORIZON resource

["When a vocation director needs to say no," interview with Sister Helen Cahill, O.P. HORIZON 2003 No. 3.](#)



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