Visitation School



VISION

annual report 2017-2018

constancy amid change in the Catholic Church

For 2,000 years, new groups have arisen to carry out an eternal mission.

by Helen Wilkie

"Like liquid poured into a container, [genuine devotion] adapts itself to any shape."
– St. Francis de Sales

There is a rhythmical pattern that underlies so many aspects of natural life: tides ebb and flow, the sun rises and sets, flowers bloom and fade. And in spiritual life, too, we can discern a pattern.

"Over the 2,000-year history of the Catholic Church, in every age a new group has emerged according to the need of its service and the grace-filled gift we call charism," said Sister Mary Paula McCarthy, VHM '47. "Right now, monastic religious life is waning, so the mission that has been carried out by monks and nuns is shifting into new hands: the laity."

A keen understanding of this pattern is what prompted the Visitation Sisters to plan carefully for the school's future. "For years now, the Sisters have been passing on their Salesian philosophy of educating young people to a dedicated group of lay faculty and staff," said Head of School Rene Gavic. "The Sisters have taught us well and inspired us to remain joyful and optimistic as we carry forward their legacy."

Of course, the Sisters will remain a presence at Visitation School and in the community. "After each group has had its era of preeminence, they have continued to exist for decades or even centuries," noted Sister Mary Paula. "Each group provides an important and unique service or purpose."

timeline of religious life

50-65
Letters of Saint Paul mention groups of women dedicated to prayer and charity.

251-356
After Saint Anthony the Great embarks on a life of solitude and prayer in the desert, men and women are inspired to follow his example by becoming hermits.

313-400
Houses of monks and nuns appear in the Egyptian desert.

350-370
Saint Basil establishes large communities of monks to teach and provide pastoral care.

386
Saint Jerome creates a monastery in Bethlehem.

How does the transition from monastics to laity fit into the overall arc of the Church? Here is a brief history of major eras in Catholicism:

The solitary hermits

After Emperor Constantine legalized Christianity in 313, believers who gave themselves completely to the faith looked beyond martyrdom for ways to express their fervor. Some who wanted to live and serve God in a serious way moved to the desert, where they embraced solitude, prayer and asceticism.

Monasticism encourages communal life

Eventually, hermits of the desert began to band together in communal houses of monks and nuns. For example, Saint Basil established large communities of monks who taught and provided pastoral care. They become a model for the monasteries that spread throughout the Eastern and Western Christian churches, from Ireland to Asia Minor. As monasteries grew in number, size and strength under spiritual giants like Saint Benedict, they began to minister to people outside their orders. As war and volatility rocked Europe in the years 600-1000, large monasteries became the cultural and economic focal points for entire communities, sheltering schools, hospitals, housing and farms.

Mendicants – traveling religious who lived off alms

During the 12th and 13th centuries, some consecrated religious began to leave communal monasteries in favor of an itinerant life of travel, preaching and ministry. Rather than plying a trade or owning property, even in common, members of the Carmelites, Franciscans, Dominicans and Augustinians relied upon the support of people they encountered as they moved from place to place. This mobility allowed the new mendicant orders to spread the word of Christ.

Apostolic orders serve wider communities

The 16th to 19th centuries saw the rise of apostolic religious orders dedicated to the mission of education and medical care, especially in service to the poor. These orders actively worked to meet a broad range of social needs by running schools, hospitals, orphanages and other vital institutions. The Order of the Visitation of Holy Mary was founded by Saints Francis de Sales and Jane de Chantal early during this movement, in 1610.

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400-600

The growth of monastic communities spreads across Europe, and hermits become less common, although some hermetic and contemplative orders exist to this day.

600-1000

Monasteries become the centers of cultural and economic life as schools, hospitals, guest houses and farms spring up around them.

1121

Monasteries get involved in parish work, and lay associations begin working with religious orders.

1150-1300

Four major mendicant orders – Carmelites, Franciscans, Dominicans and Augustinians – emerge, focused on preaching and caring for the poor rather than a contemplative life.

1500s-1900s

Apostolic religious orders are formed in Europe and the United States to provide education, medical care, and other services.

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A spiritual friend of Francis de Sales, Saint Vincent de Paul, along with Saint Louise de Marillac established the Daughters of Charity in Paris, the first community of non-cloistered Sisters. Another member of their congregation, Elizabeth Ann Seton, began the first free Catholic School in America. Following the French Revolution, Apostolic orders began to serve the social needs throughout Europe.

Laity continue the legacy

During the 1960s, the Second Vatican Council called on all people to lead lives of holiness in their relationships with God and one another. This idea—that everyone can lead a devout life, regardless of vocation—had been a key message of Saint Francis de Sales some 400 years earlier. The current era is seen by many as the rise of the laity, as men and women, outside the clergy and consecrated religious life, carry forward the mission of the Church and respond to the needs of the times. In the words of Saint Francis de Sales, these laymen and women "walk firmly in the way in which the providence of God has placed them."

Inspired by the Holy Spirit, religious communities of men and women rise up, serve a purpose, thrive and recede as others take their place. This ebb and flow has occurred for 2,000 years and will continue for millennia as faith-filled peoples around the world live out the gospel.

everyone can lead a devout life, regardless of vocation

timeline of religious life

1540

Saint Ignatius of Loyola establishes the Jesuits, an apostolic order that today ministers in more than 100 countries.

1610

The Order of the Visitation of Holy Mary is formed in France by Saint Francis de Sales and Saint Jane de Chantal.

1947

Pope Pius XII encourages the development of secular institutes of priests and laity.

1950-1965

Peak growth of women religious communities in the U.S. Women in religious life outnumber men in religious life 4 to 1.

1962-1965

Pope John XXIII convenes Vatican II, which includes key teachings on the role of the laity in the mission of the Church. Religious communities begin hiring lay members to assist in leading their sponsored institutions.

**Timeline information thanks to the National Religious Vocation Conference.*