

Vocation directors discuss monastic roots during meeting

written by Maryanne Meyerriecks |



FORT SMITH — To most laypeople, vocation directors probably seem like the Maytag repairmen — the loneliest people in town.

At the National Benedictine Vocation Directors Meeting, held Oct. 4-8 at St. Scholastica Monastery in Fort Smith, however, 52 Benedictine sisters, priests, and brothers from the United States, the United Kingdom and Australia reported that there is much reason to hope. “There is definitely more interest from people looking into the religious life,” said Sister Kimberly Prohaska, OSB, vocations director at St. Scholastica Monastery. “I get inquiries every day and respond to about 600 written requests for information a year. Gradually, that number may be winnowed from 30 to 10 to 5. Of that number, two or three might enter our community.”

St. Scholastica Monastery currently has two sisters in formation, and a third woman planning to enter when her house sells.

The discernment process includes a weekend visit in which the prospective sister gets to experience monastic life. It might be followed up by a second weekend visit and an “observership” for one to three months, giving the woman a chance to experience monastic life more deeply. At that point, if she is interested in entering the Benedictine order, she participates in a series of assessments and interviews.

“The process takes a minimum of a year,” Sister Kimberly said.

Some women may decide they are called to a more contemplative or apostolic order. Some may decide that they are called to married life or the lay apostolate, but all benefit from the experience of setting time aside to pray and discern God’s will for their lives, she said.

Although St. Scholastica Monastery has experienced an increase in vocations in the past five years, Sister Kimberly stressed that being a vocation director isn’t about the numbers.

“It’s more about the call than about the number of people being called,” she said. “If they’re truly called, they’re going to come. They’ll find where they need to be.”

The 52 attendees included 13 new vocations directors who attended a New Directors Gathering before the general meeting. The gathering covered topics such as “What to Look for in Potential Candidates” and “How to Support One Another in Our Ministry.”

Father Michael Casey, OCSO, a monk of Tarrawarra Abbey in Victoria, Australia, made several presentations. The author of "Towards God, The Art of Sacred Reading" and "Truthful Living" and more than 100 articles, Father Casey believes that a return to Benedictine values — asceticism, silence, leisure, reading, chastity and poverty — is relevant and important for today's Christians. He said Christians must be different from the secular culture in which they live. Implementing these changes in one's life means realigning priorities and setting clear goals and objectives.

He said a monk or religious sister takes eight journeys on the road to monastic life — the journey to self-knowledge, the journey to self-disclosure, the journey to community, the journey to celibacy, the journey to discipline, the journey to the sacraments, the journey to devotion and the journey to understanding.

Abbot Jerome Kodell, OSB, of Subiaco Abbey spoke to the conference attendees about the history of monasticism in the Church, noting that even though times are different today, the essence of the person is the same.

"Because our visibility is not what it used to be," Sister Kimberly said, "our goal is to look back to our roots and explore monastic life, to seek God together in community and live according to the Rule of St. Benedict."

Sister Marilyn Mark, OSB, of Mount Benedict Monastery in Ogden, Utah, said that in a state with few Catholics, "The big thing it reaffirmed was that sometimes people come to us instead of our reaching out to find people. Most have put a real effort into recruiting. We have not. We encourage people to come and meet us."

Sister Katherine Atkinson of Annunciation Monastery in Bismarck, N.D., said, "There was so much information on what to look for in a vocation and how to help a person discern whether she has a vocation to our order or another. Abbot Jerome's and Father Casey's talks were excellent."

The visiting vocation directors had the opportunity to experience some Fort Smith hospitality. At a luncheon held in their honor, Mayor Ray Baker presented them with the keys to the city, along with "pardons" from Judge Isaac C. Parker, most well known as the "Hangin' Judge." They took a trolley ride through the city, visited Immaculate Conception Church and traveled to Subiaco Abbey.

The next biannual National Benedictine Vocation Directors Meeting will be held at St. John Abbey in Collegeville, Minn.