

# RELIGIOUS LIFE VITALITY PROJECT

## KEY PROJECT FINDINGS

Catherine Sexton & Gemma Simmonds CJ

FOR THE CONRAD N. HILTON FOUNDATION



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Religious Life Institute

Cover Image: ***Sieger Köder Mary Magdalene at the Tomb***

## **KEY PROJECT FINDINGS: WHERE VITALITY IS TO BE FOUND IN WOMEN'S APOSTOLIC RELIGIOUS LIFE**

The purpose of this document is to present the key findings of the Religious Life Vitality Project to the participant congregations who have collaborated with us on it since early 2013. We express our sincere thanks and appreciation for your generous and patient participation, without which the project would not have been possible.

Of the eighteen religious congregations who initially committed to taking part, thirteen were able to complete all the stages of the project until its end and are now receiving this final feedback. Those who made the difficult decision to withdraw did so for reasons of competing priorities, lack of time, resources and personnel or the exhaustion and desolation that derive from over-extension and urgent structural change. All of this illustrates the pressure on many women's congregations at the present time. We have nevertheless heard from many participants that the very act of taking part and the resultant identification and awareness of many concrete signs of vitality has given you a new source of energy from which to draw strength and energy. We are delighted at this unexpected outcome.

The report will provide both reflection on prioritised themes emerging from the exercise as a whole and feedback provided from guest theologians and from the project team, which is relevant to the work done by your individual congregation as part of the overall project.

The project's methodology is outlined in detail further on in this report. From the responses to the original Survey Monkey questionnaire on signs of vitality which participants perceived within religious life as currently lived within their congregation, 6 dominant themes were collated for further discussion. These were generally accepted by all the congregations. The list below ranks the number of times each theme was prioritised in a given group's responses:

1. Ministry
2. Community and Formative Growth (similar rankings for the first two)
3. Collaborative Working
4. Prayer and Spirituality
5. New Forms of Membership (similar rankings for these three themes)
6. How we are ageing

The theme of Ministry emerged as the priority choice for participants in terms of signs of vitality, with Community and Formative Growth ranking second. Both priorities may reflect the extensive and significant changes within congregational and personal ministries over the last 50 years, and the shift from living in 'total institutions' to new, less hierarchical ways of community structure and governance. The sisters participating in the project seem to have embraced these changes positively.

We offer both an analytical and a narrational framework to describe these shifts: as a movement away from an institutionalised form of religious life that served as the instrument of the church's pastoral outreach to one now informed by the centrality of relationship. This represents a shift from the institutional to the relational. This overarching relational approach has affected all aspects of the lives of women religious: community, mission, membership, and prayer, how women religious understand their charism, how they think of their place within the institutional church and the place of human beings within creation overall. The project finds that women religious have generally experienced this shift as life-giving and empowering, though some have found it challenging to integrate this shift into the culture predominant within their religious lives as regards both community life and ministry. In some cases sisters are looking for spiritual resources beyond those traditionally available to them to help support this shift. The question arises of what resourcing means in this context and how it balances traditional sacramental and other sources.

## FINDINGS BY PROJECT THEME

### MINISTRY

The transcripts provide evidence of at least three sub-themes regarding approaches to ministry:

- the desire to reach and be with the marginalised
- collaboration (internally, across congregations, and with lay people)
- care for creation and the environment.

Each seems responsive to present contexts, both internally and externally; and each holds potential for deeper engagement.

Most participant congregations have moved out of institution-based ministries and now seek to work with the marginalised and most vulnerable. This is expressed as a real desire, even when the physical capacity to fulfil it is diminished, and understood as a sign of vitality which impacts members' lives.

There is evidence of a strong theology of mission, encompassing many elements of evangelisation including: the impact of authentic lives of faith; welcoming people into community; service provision to the marginalised; dialogue with other faiths and with the prevailing culture through engagement with the young. We find here echoes of *Evangelii Nuntiandi* and *Evangelii Gaudium*.

A clear pattern emerges of a desire to live as, be involved with and minister to 'ordinary people'. This is reflected in the growth of interest in ministries of insertion. For some sisters this still means being involved in parish-based ministries. However, for the majority this call means working outside formal parish and church structures/institutions. It is noticeable that few of the transcripts mention the parish or institutional church structures as a place of or sign of vitality. Some sisters describe their attempts to work within and relate to church structures as challenging. They also identify a disconnect between the gifts and experience they bring and what the clergy may be looking for. This relates particularly to congregations who have not traditionally collaborated with parishes either because they managed their own institutions or because they are now retired/returned missionaries.

There is evidence of growth within a new area of ministry which expresses the environmental concerns increasingly held by sisters in some participant congregations, anticipating the calls of *Laudato Si*. These concerns are also paralleled within community and personal lifestyles.

Overall we find a shift in the shape and nature of ministry, informed by a high and strong ecclesiology, away from an instrumental perception of religious as an apostolic work force, towards the *sequela Christi* - following Christ dispersed among the laity and the poor. This is seen as a more authentic reflection of each congregation's charism and echoes the prevailing aims and perceptions of the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life.<sup>1</sup>

'Even in recent years, a time of rapid diminishment in our Province, due to age and falling numbers, we have continued actively to seek new areas of need and to discern our ability to respond to requests for sisters.... During the past 12 years at least 10 new projects have been initiated...This is evidence of our ongoing vitality in our continued availability to serve the poorest of the poor, wherever there is a need, and our willingness to make sacrifices in order to send sisters to meet those needs'.

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<sup>1</sup>The Vatican dicastery is currently preparing an update of the church document *Mutuae Relationes*, which maps out the relationship between religious and diocesan bishops with the intention of making this distinction clear.

The transcripts also show evidence of a strong shift out of communal and corporate-based apostolates into a diversified range of individualised ministries which are more reflective of each sister's particular gifts. While there are some questions about its impact on corporate life and identity, this shift is predominantly experienced as a positive and significant sign of vitality, with many sisters describing how it has helped foster their development as individual women and as religious, beyond being seen solely in their value as an available work force.

These expressions of concern about the impact of increasingly diversified ministries may also point to a tension between individualised ministries and congregational commitments, and a sense of disconnect between a discourse of 'being missioned' and individuals choosing their own personal ministries. This points to a struggle between competing centrifugal and centripetal forces. The lack of sufficient numbers of younger sisters has rendered corporate ministries unsustainable in many cases, but a tension is also perceived between the present reality of individualised ministries and a desire not to lose the power of collective witness offered by a corporate apostolic endeavour. A further concern for sustainability relates to the question of how to maintain ministries which reflect the interests and gifts of an individual rather than a corporate capacity.

Another pattern relates to the openness to the 'ministry of presence' for older sisters. This seems to represent a move towards a model where religious are 'living stories', discreet presences in local life and contexts, or increasingly involved in forms of advocacy rather than apostolically active in the classical sense, 'being with' rather than 'doing for'.<sup>2</sup> This reflects an acceptance of the reality of their situation and an emerging spirituality of diminishment. Such a conversion to reality is a clear sign of the activity of the Holy Spirit. It also echoes the shift from an instrumental perception of religious life as a work force, delivering services on behalf of the institutional church to a perception of religious life as a sign and symbol in its own right of the presence of Christ within the world, of value in itself, irrespective of the apostolic/ministerial output of its members. This is of particular importance for those whose productivity is lessened by age or sickness and for congregations with few, if any new members.

'As a religious having the opportunity to live in a housing estate where the residents experience much marginalisation and isolation from the wider community is very significant and meaningful for me. It is not what we as religious do in the estate for people but I believe it is the fact that we have a presence there in a house with an open door where the kitchen table is a focal point... There is much fun, pain is expressed, tears are shed, unanswered questions keep arising. There's respect and love in these encounters and this is a great source of life and vitality in religious life for me'.

This ecclesiology and fundamental theology of religious life may help sisters avoid the desolation that comes from seeing themselves as non-productive entities, a view which directly contradicts the paschal mystery and fails to see the intrinsic value to the faith community and the world of people living the religious vows with ultimate fidelity.

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<sup>2</sup>An example from a specific congregation

## COMMUNITY AND FORMATIVE GROWTH

The transcripts contain many instances of vitality perceived in changed methods of internal governance and organization within congregations, provinces and communities. This again echoes the perceived shift from the institutional to the relational. Specific examples cited include: developing more participative and 'spiritual' forms of governance in less hierarchical, 'flatter' structures; moves from organization by province to an international, 'one congregation' model and more participatory and consultative styles of leadership leading to greater personal ownership and responsibility on the part of members. Participants perceive vitality in the global and internationalised consciousness, and a move from uniformity towards diversity in forms of living which both drive congregational restructuring, and result from it. The changes again appear to be driven by an awareness of current realities and a desire to make more effective use of the resources available to both mission and ministry. This is viewed as congregations actively trying to shape their futures rather than being reluctantly driven by force of circumstance.

'There are signs that a mentality of geographical separateness is beginning to break down in our congregation... We are becoming more global in our thinking, which is a sign of vitality'.

At local community level there is a new awareness of and desire for community as communion, achieved through more genuine relationships based both on mutual respect and on a new appreciation of the value of each individual and her gifts. This new experience of relationship is clearly appreciated by sisters who see vitality in being seen, heard and listened to as individuals. Many, especially in the Irish congregations, speak of a 'new softness' in their relationships. Sisters identify vitality in the new emphasis on individuals taking personal responsibility for themselves, as communities become less institutionalised. This is also rooted in more nuanced understandings of obedience, based on co-responsibility and communal discernment processes. This enhanced appreciation of structures of governance and improved communications from the centre to the periphery also points to a greater union of minds and hearts. As congregations have become smaller, individuals have been able to participate more at international level and enjoy new opportunities to interact directly with sisters from other countries and provinces. This results in a deeper sense of identification with the congregational charism and we see its effects on individuals and communities, as worked out and communicated by general chapter documents and decisions.

The transcripts demonstrate a concern with how to live in and strengthen community, particularly in the light of diversified ministries, and to identify and provide the forms of support now needed. There are some individual signs of vitality which relate to 'single living' but other sisters clearly continue to find living together under one roof in community life-giving. Some discussions hint at desolation, in the Ignatian sense, at what may have been lost in the shift towards more atomised and fragmented forms of community living. Two congregations in particular showed a certain disquiet about the quality of their community life and relationships and seem to be seeking renewal of both in order to live a deeper and more authentic community. This may also derive from a perception of community life as an integral part of their spiritual health and purpose, and a reason which initially drew individuals to religious life. This also has implications for any possible vocations strategy.

Many transcripts demonstrate a positive engagement with restructuring and strategic change processes and the ability to draw effectively on spiritual resources and those from the world of organisational change management. In this 'bilingual' approach they model good practice which could usefully be shared with other congregations and with the wider church. Other congregations continue to struggle with achieving a balance between ensuring such change processes are inclusive in nature, neither excluding nor leaving any members behind, whilst also freeing individuals with potential to be change agents.

## COLLABORATIVE WORKING

All of this suggests an inward turn towards union and unity in structures and community life, expressed as communion (*koinonia*) with God and one another, with other congregations and organisations, with Associates, lay colleagues and 'ordinary people'. Project participants show an outward turn towards the world in their openness and willingness to collaborate, their desire to be, and to be seen to be, more 'ordinary' and connected to/involved in local initiatives.

'Our ability to change is especially notable since Vatican II and there is a continued awareness of the need to change and be in tune with the 'to-day of everyday'. This demands that we embrace the tensions, be open to discern realities and have an attitude of readiness to shift. Even today, when our average age is well over 70, the openness and readiness to change, to engage in discernment is evident. Hope breaks through...

Members stay and try to live faithful and faith-filled lives at a time when the whole organisation seems to be falling apart.

Currently I experience our group as more real, human & ordinary – walking the same path as our friends & neighbours; there's a greater sense of dependency on God'.

It is not always clear what the sisters mean by collaborative working nor to what extent it is genuinely engaging with lay people in real learning, listening, mutual empowerment and commitment. One theological commentator noted that there is a 'need to get beyond the foothills of collaboration' in exploring the nature of collaborative working as a call of the Spirit. Beyond being driven into collaborative working by need, there could be an urgent and real value in exploring what it means both for and to congregations, particularly in the light of their charism and sisters' concerns over how best to share and communicate it to those beyond the vowed members.

'There is a growing conviction to establish new forms of collaboration with the laity... We continue to move out of our institutional mindset to form new links, working with people, groups and members of other congregations towards common goals. We have developed the capacity to network effectively especially in addressing justice issues... There is a desire to pass on the charism to others, whether members or not'.

The issue of Associates is prominent in the transcripts and not always as a sign of vitality. At least three congregations have developed close, effective working relationships with Associates and speak honestly about the challenge this represents to their understanding of their own vocation. Two congregations are struggling to achieve clarity on how to involve key colleagues/co-workers in internal province discussions while maintaining appropriate boundaries. The question also arises of what happens to the Associate group when there are few, or no religious left in a particular congregation. How is the centre held and how can the charism be passed on in those circumstances?

Lay colleagues or associate members may not themselves be female, Catholic or even Christian. Project participants nevertheless clearly see the popularity of associate involvement and the continuing attraction of their charism as a sign of vitality. What appears to attract and bind them is a deep draw to the charism and the way in which this nourishes the spiritual life beyond what is normally available and a grace of the Holy Spirit at work within the world.

## PRAYER AND SPIRITUALITY

The project found three main patterns in the signs of vitality regarding prayer and spirituality. Firstly there is an evident desire for a spirituality of union and connectedness. Sisters express appreciation for the marked shift from 'saying prayers to prayer', having the opportunity to explore from different prayer forms and spiritual traditions. This exploration shows a strong interest in contemplative and unitive forms of prayer, with significant numbers speaking of a call to live out of 'the contemplative stance'.

Secondly, many participants see vitality in the growing understanding of 'presence' in mission and ministry, with sisters experiencing that they themselves become the mission as their presence embodies their sense of being sent by God. There appears to be a strong connection with their understanding of the vows, particularly chastity, as a physical embodiment of their own commitment, consecration and mission, lived out in a sacramental and public way, in the sight of the people of God. The majority of participants from one congregation live in a care community, yet they vigorously understand their ageing to be a ministerial gift to both their sisters and society at large, in their continued interest in the life and ministry of their province, and in the plight of the poor and marginalised. Through 'a lifetime's awareness still very alive in them' sisters in this retirement community are perceived as ministering to the rest of their congregation through their prayers, encouragement, and open hospitality. This sense of presence as ministry, particularly in ageing, is also seen by those now unable to continue with physical work as a freedom to live the mission of prayer and suffering. A question arises of whether this turn to the contemplative and call to 'presence' is happening generically across women's apostolic religious life, or whether it reflects the age and maturity of project participants within religious life, as 77.5% of the members of the participant congregations are aged 70 – 90.<sup>3</sup> This may also reflect a form of spiritual *kenosis*, possible only when much that supported the institutional religious life of the past has been stripped away. We cannot be sure whether this spiritual *kenosis* is corporate/institutional or personal.

'A sign of vitality is the faith dimension expressed in new and novel ways which are more appealing than the institutional church is offering... We put more effort into the way we pray together, realising it is celebratory rather than a task to be done, perhaps this is the overflow from our new freedoms and our growing sense of personhood'.

Thirdly, the spirituality of some participants is expanding to include an emphasis on cosmology and ecology. This articulates a desire to experience integration with the universe as sisters understand themselves as part of 'something greater'. This is sometimes expressed in a growth beyond the boundaries of the institutional church. It is unclear whether this embracing of eco-spirituality represents a reaction against or a pull towards something. In some reflection groups it seems to represent the yearning for deeper union with all which may be connected with the process of spiritual maturity. Other groups are aware of a potential disconnect between community members who have largely embraced 'eco-spirituality' and those who still adhere to a Gospel-based spirituality and theology.

'Rediscovery of Contemplation as our prayer form is also happening among us as we reflect more and more on our place in God's scheme of things and the universe's way of existing'.

While there is no concrete evidence of this causing tension or divisions within communities, it is noticeable that these reflections on eco-spirituality are not explicitly grounded in a Christian understanding of God, in specifically Christian images or an articulation of the role and presence of the sacramental life of the Church. Within the transcripts as a whole there are few mentions of Mass, Sacraments or the Gospel. As with the lack of mention of the vows, it is unclear whether this is because they are so intrinsic to participants' lives that they need no explicit articulation or because this is not the focus of the research, or because this consciousness is no longer part of the spiritual and theological landscape of the participants' lives. It may simply be that the sisters are hearing a call to live a more connected life, but are experiencing challenges in how to connect this with the patrimony and charism of their congregations. While they may be looking in a variety of directions for spiritual resources, it also raises an important question of why they sometimes appear not to find these life-giving sources within the institutional church.

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<sup>3</sup>We also know participants' number of years in religious life, but this information relates back to those who filled in the original questionnaire and not necessarily those who participated in the reflection groups.

## NEW FORMS OF MEMBERSHIP

New forms of membership ranked the second lowest, with 104 signs of vitality identified. Although it was ranked among the three chosen priority themes by four congregations, only one congregation approached it as the priority theme for discussion. This theme was largely prioritised by congregations who currently have novices present in their province, or who are witnessing significant growth in membership in other parts of the world. In some reflection groups, new forms of membership or vocations work is barely mentioned, while in others, new forms of membership and new membership are conflated. Throughout the transcripts, there is actually very little discussion about new forms of membership, other than Associates.

One of the guest theologians commented on what appears to be the disappearance of vocation strategies among many of the participant congregations. In several discussion groups sisters express surprise that this theme has not been prioritised. For some, this appears to mean a realistic acceptance that they should stop trying to attract new members. Others want to develop this work, and still others believe it should be left to the Spirit. These attitudes might be an interesting signifier of a congregation's openness to a different future, but also seem to point to a more theological understanding of vitality as something other than new membership.

Several congregations show a clear understanding that vibrancy and vitality are not only to be associated with newness and with vocation strategies. The question nevertheless arises of the extent to which willingness to take personal and corporate responsibility for vocations promotion is an indicator of members' belief that religious life still has a future. There may also be a further challenge relating to the willingness of long-standing members to receive and engage with younger aspirants who may come from significantly different cultural backgrounds, with a different (and often more traditional) theological and spiritual stand towards the church.

'We find a sign of vitality in a firm belief in the action of the Holy Spirit and God's continual call to apostolic religious life, though there is uncertainty about the way this will be shaped in the future... The grace of HOPE in face of congregational demographic and personal diminishment'.

## HOW WE ARE AGEING

The theme of how we are ageing ranked lowest overall of all the themes with a total of 102 individual signs of vitality identified, as against 230 noted in relation to Ministry. Only two congregations ranked it among their chosen priority themes. Where ageing does feature in discussions, the concern is principally the response to it, particularly in terms of spiritual challenges and riches. Ageing and personal diminishment are not allowed to depress or inhibit and the project has found an impressive freedom of spirit in this regard, but it remains uncertain whether this derives from the dominant participant demographic or indicates a prevailing freedom of spirit and greater sense of detachment and freedom within women's apostolic religious life more generally.

The project also finds that whilst both the church and religious women are experiencing diminishment, the sisters' high levels of courage and determination differs markedly from the desolation perceived elsewhere in the church in response to falling numbers. One guest theologian identified the sisters' strong sense of resilience as their most significant and enduring form of vitality. In this, sisters model to the church and to wider society consoling ways of living diminishment creatively and witness to the possibility of living loss and relinquishment well.

Several congregations are actively planning for the future beyond the life of the congregation in this country, and for the 'handing on' or expansion of the charism. Others are not planning for beyond the finite life of the congregation and find vitality in living this death well. In that sense, there is a strong, though not necessarily explicit, sense of the paschal mystery alive among these women.

'We are learning humility from our diminished energy and strength, making our contribution to the church and the world a service of presence and friendship that reflects our deepening personal relationship with God rather than one dependent on our doing and looking different'.

Although charism is not one of the themes emerging from the data at Stage 1 of the Project, it features so frequently in the reflection groups that it is clearly a key theme and indicator of vitality among the participant congregations. There is, however, some lack of clarity as to what precisely is understood by the term charism and this is something which could helpfully be explored as a theological category.

Many of the project participants view their congregational charism as a gift to be shared, expanded and developed through working with others. They see that those outside the congregation can contribute to developing the charism, in a true sense of the Spirit being engaged in and through their collaboration. For these congregations, the experience of diminishment has opened up possibilities with regard to the spreading and growth of the charism among lay people. This links the question of charism to that of legacy, which becomes an ecclesiological question as religious begin to see that charisms are given to the church as a whole, involving mission and engaging with culture. It also leaves open the question of the ownership, future development and meaning of religious charisms. Some groups continue to understand their charism as heritage or patrimony rather than something of continuing relevance that will carry them into the future. For these groups the issue may be to what extent the charism is still relevant, and whether it continues to shape their identity in relation to the past.

Several reflection groups show congregations wrestling with identity in relation to both charism and mission and ministry. Some congregations are looking to draw on their charism to shape future ministry. They have already found themselves with a fragmented or diversified range of ministries, and members living in small communities of 2 or 3, and seem uncertain where the charism manifests itself in relation to this or how it can serve to unify them. The project team question whether there is a risk of a lack of charismatic cohesion and coherence for groups no longer linked up through the kind of institutional forms and congregational structures previously experienced. This indicates a useful point for future exploration by project participants.

The clarification of what precisely constitutes a charism becomes essential when there are no vowed members left to keep the charism alive. What does it mean to have Associates without vowed religious in the centre? What happens when those still endeavouring to live the charism are not those originally called to live it, neither consecrated or perhaps even Catholic? Whose charism is it? Who holds it and what will happen to it in the future? When does a charism become historical? When is it no longer a charism and is it possible for it to be revived at a later date? These questions pose both an institutional and a theological challenge to congregations and to the wider church.

## RELIGIOUS WOMEN AND THE CHURCH

A key finding from the project is the paucity of references to the institutional church within the data. There are even fewer where the institution is seen as a positive sign of vitality, with the exception of Pope Francis, although there is also disquiet expressed that he is not doing enough to give women more of the role in governance within the church recommended by the 1994 Synod of Bishops.

Participants appear not necessarily to perceive their religious life as being in significant relationship with the life of the church. The project's guest theologians note that churches, parishes and schools seem a poorer place without women religious, yet these religious seem to be voting with their feet and there is increasing divergence between them and the institution. It is uncertain to what extent this is a conscious choice. Is the disconnect an inevitable structural result of the retirement of women religious from active engagement in institutional ministries, whereby they no longer see themselves as publicly representing the church, or is there an underlying ideological issue here with relation to the church as institution? Does the apparent disquiet relate to specific experiences as women religious, or are sisters reflecting the issues in church and society more generally? To what extent is there here a sense that religious life is an ecclesial reality, mandated by the wider church and expressive of living gifts of the Spirit to and within its structures? The data as it stands does not answer these questions, and so we are left with some important ecclesiological issues, challenges and contributions which have emerged from this study:

**Is this an ecclesiological issue?** Do sisters distinguish the church (the body of Christ) from the hierarchy? They seem to be embedded in one but not the other.

**Is this an ecclesial issue?** There has been tension between (particularly) women apostolic religious and the hierarchy since the Second Vatican Council, so this may either be symptomatic of that dichotomy or a newly emerging form of tension, affected perhaps by recent tensions between religious sisters in the United States and the Vatican. The reported reality of the women religious in Britain and Ireland in this project is that they are finding vitality *extra ecclesiam* rather than within the structures of the church, which some find suffocating. But the question remains of how women's experience of religious consecration can be completed within the church.

**Is this a spiritual question?** The articulation of spirituality is strong, but not grounded in images of Christ. Or is it an ecclesiological question, whereby the spiritual life of sisters is not grounded in the presence of Christ as mediated by the church's sacramental signs?

**Is this specific to women religious?** Are sisters disengaging with the institutional church or has the institutional church disengaged from them? This may relate to experiences specific to women religious or it may be a more starkly delineated version of many women's experience of the church. It may also be that women are drawn to religious life as vowed or associate members precisely because they feel alienated from the church at large and religious life represents an alternative and more conducive space within which they can operate.

**Cultural context:** Are we seeing overall a reaction to the current cultural context, or a reaction to the new context within the church, the 'Francis effect'? Or is the issue of women's distance from the church a response to previous pontificates and their ideological flavours? Does this represent the alienation of women religious from an attitude which instrumentalised religious life in view of its value and purpose? Does it represent a new self-identification, by women religious themselves, of their life lived as an ecclesial and symbolic meaning beyond their value as a workforce? These are the questions women religious must engage with towards a future opened up by their identification of the Signs of Vitality within their consecrated life.



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