RELIGIOUS VOCATIONS IN IRELAND:

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

A Research Project carried out on behalf of Vocations Ireland by

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CONTENTS

Remember not the former things, nor consider the things of old
Behold, I am doing a new thing (Isaiah 43:18-19).

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

The Irish Catholic Church today is facing the loss of its institutional legitimacy. The Irish Catholic Church began losing its authority and moral hegemony in late 1970s. This process suffered a further demise with the acceleration of Ireland's rapid economic growth and was exacerbated by the public documentation of the Church's myriad sex abuse scandals (Dillon 2015).

Many social scientists and anthropologists claim that a profound cultural shift has taken place in Western society. This shift is described in the literature as a move towards a postmaterial, postmetaphysical, and postsecular society (Campbell 2007; Gibson 2009).

The processes of secularisation, postmodernity and detraditionalisation have therefore greatly affected the Irish Catholic landscape and challenges have emerged that impact on Irish Catholic identity. Secularisation displaces religious values and authority of religious institutions. However, it is important to note that this process of 'exiting from religion' is not to be equated with the renunciation of belief. Secularisation of belief is not the end of belief, but the movement by which the elements of belief break free of the structures prescribed by religious institutions (Hervieu-Leger 2001). Today, Irish self-identity is constructed within a plural spiritual market (Boeve 2007). In 2011, approximately 270,000 people (5.8% of Ireland's population of 4.6 million) indicated that they had no religion, and 7,000 people indicated that were agnostic or atheist. This represents a fourfold increase, between 1991 and 2011, in the numbers reporting no religion (Dillon 2015).

The process of postmodernism has also affected all domains of Irish lifeworld (politics, economy, leisure, education, relationships, art and science) where there is no longer a universal 'truth'. There are simply perspectives and many 'realities' (Boeve 2001). These processes have impacted and continue to impact on Irish Catholic identity.

In this contemporary scenario, the Irish Catholic Church must respond constructively to the many challenges it faces. Postsecularism can also open opportunities to explore the strengths and weaknesses of religious life in Ireland. In his comment of 5 January 2017, Pope Francis said 'there is the urgency to bring into the Christian community a new "vocational culture". This research is trying to elucidate precisely where the crisis of religious vocation emerged in relation to the current Irish social, cultural, economic and religious contexts. While analysing the challenges, it aims to highlight the opportunities that this particular context open up for the Irish Catholic Church.

1.2 Setting and Scope of the Project

The research involves three different survey designs and 16 interviews. The cohort in the survey comprises guidance officers, chaplains and vocational directors. Ten semi-structured interviews were conducted with key informants in different religious congregations (vocational promoters and vocational directors). A further six semi-structured interviews were conducted with young religious[1] (five in temporary vows and one recently committed to perpetual vows) within different congregations. The gathered information elucidates the personal experiences, views and opinions of those interviewed in relation to offering, supporting and promoting strategies for religious vocation. The young religious participants in this study are a 'specific religious-socio-demographic' group with the potential to highlight the different challenges and nurturing ways they encountered when they entered religious life.

1.3 Aims and Objectives

The main objective is to find ways of nurturing a culture of vocation in religious life in Ireland.
The following aims helped to uncover the main objective of the study:

①	②	③
To explore the challenges that the Irish Catholic Church faces in relation to religious vocation.	To explore the opportunities that the current social and cultural climate offers for religious vocation.	To review, assess and offer recommendations on how to nurture a culture of religious vocations in Ireland.

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[1] It is difficult to describe 'young' but for this study young ranges from 18-40 years old.

The feeling remains that God is on the journey, too
(Teresa de Avila).

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Contemporary Societal/Cultural Context

Researchers have been alerting us to how a relocation of the sacred is happening in contemporary society (Delhey 2010; Inglehart and Welzel 2010). In postindustrial, postmaterial and postsecular societies, people will value emancipation from authority. The emancipation from traditional religious beliefs and authorities inevitably opens all kinds of alternative and flexible expressions. The largest cross-cultural longitudinal study of changes in cultural beliefs, values and worldviews is the World Values Survey, undertaken by a global network of social scientists who have surveyed the basic values and beliefs of the publics of almost 100 societies, on all six continents.[2] In almost all industrial and postindustrial societies, values have also shifted from traditional toward secular–rational values, and from survival values toward self-expression values (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Global Cultural Map: Traditional Values versus Secular-rational Values and Survival Values (2010–2014)
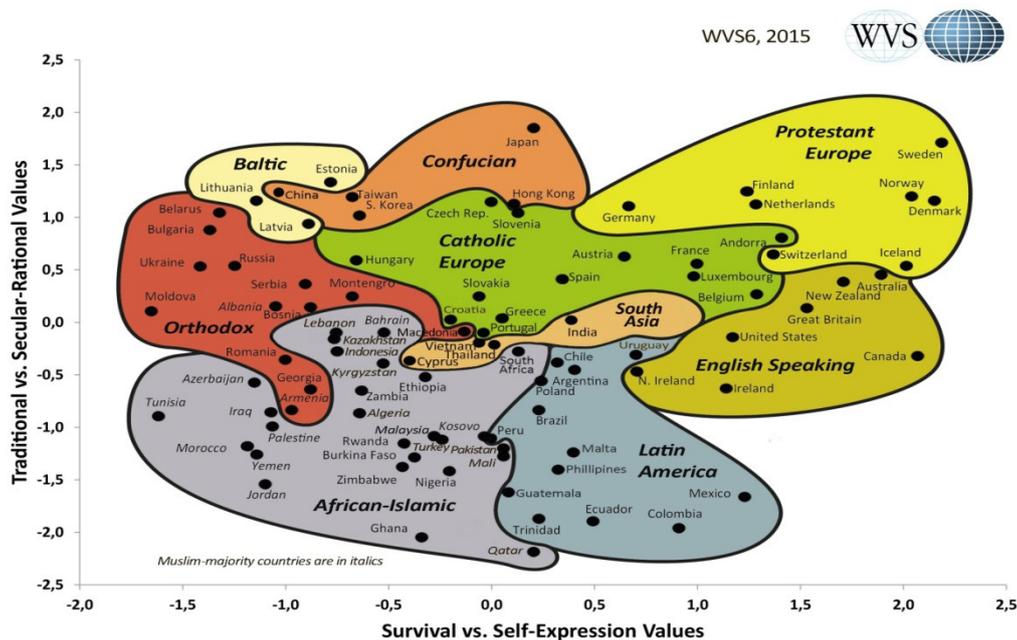
Traditional values emphasise the importance of religion and traditional family ties. In contrast, *secular-rational values* are societies that place less emphasis on religion, traditional family values and authority. Divorce, abortion, euthanasia, and equal gender legality are seen as relatively acceptable. The other two variables in the figure are *survival values versus self-expression values*. *Survival values* place emphasis on economic and physical security while *self-expression values* emphasise environmental protection, gender equality, and active participation in decision-making in economic and political life.

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[2] http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/WVSContents.jsp

It is worth noting in Figure 1 that Ireland does not fit into the Catholic Europe group in terms of cultural values: rather, it belongs to the cultural values of the English-speaking world (Figure 2). Most of the countries, although at a distance geographically from Ireland, are close in term of values and culture system. This data is concerned with how involved people are in religious services and how much importance they attach to their religious beliefs. Another aspect covered by this survey is people's attitudes on the relationship between religion and politics, and Ireland scores high in secular-rational and self-expression values.[3]

Figure 2: English Speaking World
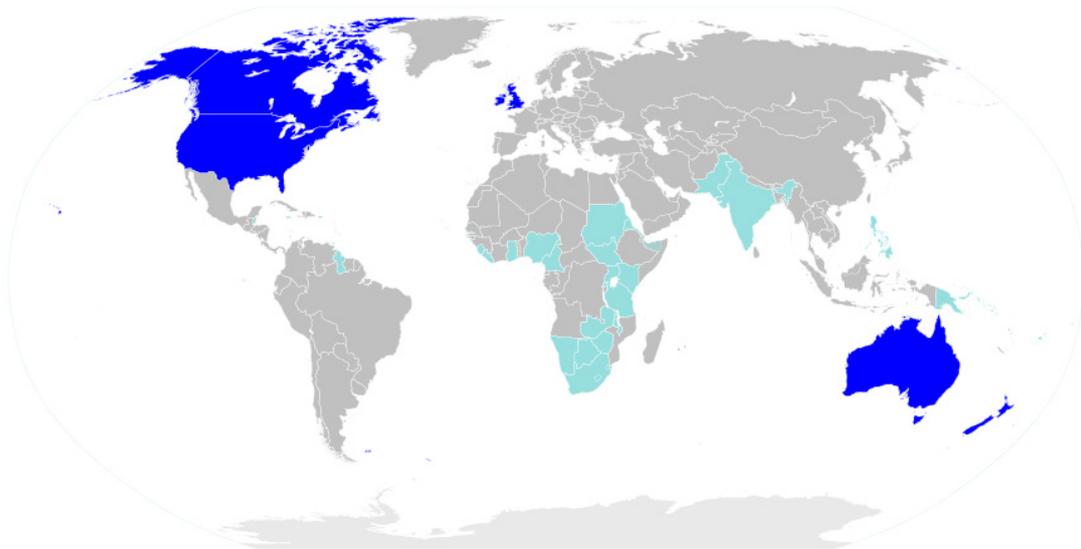
These intergenerational cultural changes are occurring and autonomy, self-expression and quality of life scores high in the value/cultural system of the younger postmaterialist birth cohorts. These generations have a 'market mentality' that has emerged directly from the process of postmodernism. Postmodern thinking allows the discrediting, critique and discounting of everything. This deconstruction has provoked an 'existential anxiety' and stress over the unknown, and this kind of anxiety has brought about a loss of the I-self relationship, related to doubt and an inability to make choices; a lack of safety; and an expression of a sense of meaninglessness. These are feelings of an existential vacuum (emptiness and despair) (Glass 2003; Cloninger 2004; 2006). In postmodernity, things no longer have inherent value, but only exchange value (Rohr 2001).

The younger generation, especially (18-29-years-old) are postsecular, in the sense that there is an increase in 'believing without belonging'. This 'detraditionalisation' affects how the traditions within families are interrupted and not passed on from generations to generations (Boeve 2006). By detraditionalisation is meant the erosion of tradition in religion and society. Today, the younger generation construct self-identity within a plural spiritual market (Boeve 2007). The dual processes of detraditionalisation and secularisation leads to 'an individuation of faith', thus yielding religious and spiritual plurality. The outcome of this plurality in the postmodern context is that every narrative or experience has its own legitimacy and validity. Professor Lieven coined the term 'cultural apophaticism' to describe the soul of this shift of detraditionalisation (Boeve 2006). Cultural apophaticism is an

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[3] http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/WVSContents.jsp?CMSID=Findings

attempt to describe the sacred by negation. Thus, the 'grand, classic religious narratives and stories' have lost their appeal and credibility (Boeve and Lambert 2001).

In view of this contemporary landscape, the Church must not ignore or deny the cultural context in which it is historically embedded. How faith and religious vocations will germinate and grow in the current culture is at the core of this research study. The Irish postsecular context not only present challenges, but it presents opportunities for religious vocations. By surveying and interviewing key informants in the area of religious vocation, this study creates thematic data that can throw light on creative and even radical ways to relate to the contemporary Irish social, cultural and religious terrain.

2.2 Irish Catholic Identity

The title of this section poses two questions: (1) What does it mean to be Irish (one identity, Irishness)? and (2) What does it mean to be Catholic (another identity, Catholicism)? Both parameters are very complex to be described in such a short section and are not within the scope of this project. Irish Catholic identity can be analysed using history, theology, literature, sociology and any other personal reflection. The complexity is that the emergence to arrive at a definitive statement in relation to Irish Catholic identity can open other lines of academic discourses.

The Irish Catholic identity's historic roots cannot be ignored. By the end of the seventeenth century, the majority of Irish people continued to adhere to the Catholic religion. Most of them has been disposed and excluded from political life in Ireland. Conflicts have always established a national unity among the dispossessed. Thus, the Catholic faith became very important as it was clear that everything else was lost (Fuller 2006). The historical fusion of Catholicism and Irish nationalism continue as a powerful political success in dealing with the British in the nineteenth century (Larkin 1987). After the founding of the Irish Free State, nationalists who referred to the unique Catholic heritage of Ireland before independence continued to do so and all policies of the new State reflected their continued support and faith in the Church (White 2006). By the time De Valera wrote the new constitution in 1937, the Catholic religion had a special role in society and the document was adapted to the corporatism popular in Church thinking at the time (Kissane 2003). The incident that always cited as the beginning of the end of the Church's prominence in Irish life was the Mother and Child controversy (1951).[4] Since the 1970s, both terms (Irish and Catholic) have been in trouble. At the time, public discussion focused on the identity of being Irish with the active separation of being Catholic. In line with postmodernism, Irish historians began to question the mega-narrative of the collective Irish, nationalist and Catholic identity. Catholic Irish morality became identified with a repressive era to be left behind. Irish Catholic identity became an archetype that even now it is still in the collective unconscious, mainly because of its historic roots, but it is largely in danger of fading (Twomey 2003).

Catholic identity is best understood for its universality (or catholicity), tradition and sacramentality. These three strands are the cornerstones of what being Catholic means. A Catholic identity recognises the importance of universality of the Church's mission, the continuity of the faith through time, its transmission, and the language of signs and symbols (sacramentality) (Littleton 2006). Catholic identity

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[4] The Mother and Child Scheme was a healthcare programme in Ireland that would later become remembered as a major political crisis primarily involving the Irish Government and Roman Catholic Church. Church leaders feared the scheme could pave the way for abortion and birth control.

is not rigid or inflexible in the sense that there is no room for diversity or different points of view, but that it is not vague in the meaning of theological, spiritual, or doctrinal cores (McBrien 1996).

Today, although 84% of Irish people are currently identify as Catholic, approximately 43% attend Mass (35% in 2012). In the mid-1980s, 85% reported weekly Mass attendance and at the end of the 1990s, approximately 62% did so. In comparison with Europe, Ireland was still lower, with 52% of Mass weekly attendance in 2009-2010 (O'Mahony 2011). The rapid moral erosion of Irish Civil Law is another contributing factor in the ongoing evidence for the transformation of Irish Catholic identity (Dillon 2014). The legalisation of contraception (1978), the legalisation of divorce (1996), the legalisation of same-sex civil unions (2011), the legalisation of abortion (2013), and same-sex marriage (2015) all mark a shift in Irish aptitudes.

2.3 Current Challenges to Irish Catholicism

Undoubtedly, one of the biggest current for Irish Catholism is the result of the evidence documented by Justice Yvonne Murphy's inquiries (2009-2011) into the Church's handling of sex abuse cases.[5] The Church has become rejected by many Irish people, as a huge injustice was done to their moral authority by their scandals, beliefs and teachings. The Irish Catholic Church became a corrupt institution in the minds of many Irish people, lacking transparency (Littleton 2015). In contrast with other European countries, in the political Irish sphere, the Prime Minister (Taoiseach) never mentioned God or Christ in his 2013 Christmas speech. Also in 2013, In the Irish Parliament, Enda Kenny heavily criticised the Vatican's culture of 'clericalism, dysfunction, disconnection, elitism, and narcissism[6]. In the same year, the Irish Embassy to the Holy See was closed (it was subsequently re-opened in 2014). With the rupture between Church and State, and the erosion of the moral and teaching provision in education, many schools are now interdenominational, nondenominational. Schools that were run by different religious orders, because of retirement and the lack of vocations to fill the posts, are now run by trusts and taught by lay people. These changes have implications for the spiritual and faith formation of Catholic children. There is also the loss of religious language and the visibility of sisters and brothers for the younger generation, who are no longer educated by them and in some cases are not aware of their existence.

The Irish Catholic Church has been shaken to the very core of its structure. The actual Church structures are also challenged, especially clericalism as a form of institutionalism (Littleton 2015). The lack of leadership (in politics and socially) is a sign of the post-material, postsecular and postmodern times. It is also manifested in the Church leadership, the so- called clericalism, whose main emphasis is power, arrogance, and superiority, to the detriment of those genuinely serving from the essence of the Gospel.

In this climate, not only was Irish society was 'traumatised' by the abuse/scandals events, but the actual Irish Catholic Institution was also displaying signs of trauma. This is one of the most important

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[5] In 2006, the commission of investigation into sexual abuse attached to the archdiocese of Dublin between 1975 and 2004 produced the *Murphy Report* (2009). This was followed by the *Cloyne Report* (2011) and the Mother and Baby Homes investigation of 800 unmarked mass graves in the Bon Secours Mother and Baby Home (2015). Also, the *Ryan Report*, which was a commission to investigate all forms of child abuse in Irish institutions for children, to 60 residential reformatory and industrial schools operated by Catholic Church orders, funded and supervised by the Irish Department of Education.

[6] Speech was printed in the *Irish Independent*, July 21, 2011, p. 18.

challenges for the religious members of the Church. Egan and Lambert's (2017, 340) explained the symptoms of traumatised systems as:

- Closed boundaries between organisation and external environment
- Centrality of insider relationship
- Stress and anxiety contagion
- Inadequate worldview and identity erosion
- Depression expressed through anger and fear
- Despair and loss of hope

Many religious members in Ireland are stepping in and out of hope and hopelessness and feel deeply hurt by media reports. One of these examples is the depiction of the Sisters of Charity during the controversy over the transfer of the National Maternity Hospital to St Vincent's Hospital. Sister Stanislaus Kennedy said that she was shocked at how the media described her congregation as a 'power-grabbing congregation' and 'a group of old ladies who didn't know what they were doing' and that 'in another context, this would come under elder abuse'.[7] The misunderstanding and misrepresentation of the Catholic Church by the media is often acknowledged by researchers (Conway and Kilcoyne 1997; Kenny 2006;).

Ultimately, it was the media that forced the Church and State authorities to start dealing with child sexual abuse. Kenny (2006) believes that the media did not damage the Irish Catholic Church, but it grew frustrated with the evasion, denial and reactivity of the hierarchical Church. Although the media has been responsible for bringing about a great service to truth, accountability and transparency in Irish Catholicism (Littleton 2015), it has also written a lot of rubbish about religion with great ignorance. Journalists seem to have abandoned the careful, contrasted information to 'sweeping assertions which fuel the lack of understanding of what Catholicism is about, and encourage virulent anti-Catholicism' (O'Loan 2016).[8]

In view of all these challenges, the postsecular and post-Catholic climate in Ireland, along with the abuse cases and the loss of moral authority, have forced the Irish Catholic Church into a spiritual crisis.

Spiritual crisis has been described as a form of identity crisis, where an individual experiences drastic changes to his or her meaning system (Turner, Barnhouse and Lu 1985). A spiritual crisis often arises from the inability to create a conceptual framework to understand, often a traumatic or difficult experience (Bragdon 1993; 2013). At a church level, the crisis of identity and the display of traumatic symptoms within the system equate to a spiritual crisis. But, the core of spiritual transformation is about the response to the spiritual crisis experienced. There are plenty of opportunities to respond to these challenges within the Catholic Church. The healing, and the integration occur when the response is humble, sensitive and in tune with the pastoral needs of people in the current climate. The next section outlines some of the opportunities open to the Irish Catholic Church in the postsecular context.

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[7] Full article appeared in *The Irish Times* Sunday, 15 October 2017.

[8] Baroness Nual O'Loan speaking at the conference organised by Boston College's Centre for Irish Programmes: *Religion in Ireland in the 21st century* 15-17 April 2016.

2.4 Opportunities in Postsecular Ireland

The postsecular and postmodern self is always in 'transformation', as it is fragmented. Thus, the postmodern individual is always looking for transformation as the danger is in becoming fixed. A recent World Value Survey, which conducted representative national surveys in almost 100 countries, stated: 'Although the authority of the established churches continues to decline, during the past twenty years the public of post-industrial societies have become increasingly likely to spend time thinking about the meaning and purpose of life' (Inglehart and Wezel 2005, 31).

The spiritual hunger that engulfs the existential void will continue to ask the deepest questions of meaning and purpose in life for people in these times. How the Catholic message and teachings can help in filling that void is very crucial. The postsecular self is individualised, but with a difference. This individuality is embedded in the contemporary networked self of the larger whole: family, community, society and environment (Hammer 2001; Partridge 2004). The emphasis on creating communal space for people to discuss these deep questions will be paramount.

Also, if the Catholic voice is to be heard it needs to have an 'articulate, cogent, authentic, worthwhile message, a coherent Christian viewpoint' (Littleton 2015, 21) that tap into the postsecular individual who is still looking for debate and discussion about the current situation of the world, especially the ecology question. To regain that 'public voice' is not easy in a system, as explained in the previous section, that shows signs and symptoms of trauma. Trauma has effects in emotion, memory, self, relationships, illness, depression, anxiety and self-destructive patterns. Just giving the pain a name and creating spaces in which to talk about it, can relieve and transform trauma, as a spiritual meaning is attached to it (Lear 2000).

There is a real opportunity for healing and spiritual transformation for the religious members of the Irish Catholic Church to take the lead in such healing for the wider public. The Catholic Church has transformed in previous centuries when 'Christendom was shattered' and on its knee (de Certeau 2000). The present challenge seems enormous but the capacity to engage in virtuous behaviour (to show forgiveness, to express gratitude, to be humble, to display compassion) (Emmons 2000) highlights the significance of developing a culture of compassionate pastoral care. This pastoral challenge opens the opportunity for the Church to be a 'school of prayer and discernment' (O'Halon 2017, 6), engaging in groups in retreats, spiritual direction, *lectio divina*, prayer, meditation on Gospel scriptures, and centering prayer in a myriad of ways that can be exploited for people to start exploring their passion for God.

By contrast, refusal to change, rigidity of thought, and the need to 'go back to the former glory of the Irish Catholic Church', hinder all opportunities in sight. There is a real chance for self-forgiveness, self-compassion, self-acceptance and self-reflection as main mediators in creating a 'compassionate connection' and an understanding of the needs of the individuals at this particular time in history (Kristeller and Johnson 2005).

There is also an open opportunity to engage the laity more in this journey of renewal and in the process of religious vocation. Pope Francis has continued to call for the role of lay people to be bigger and not to be considered 'second class' members.[9] As Ireland continues to struggle with the old saying

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[9] Pope Francis quoting from Pope Paul VI's apostolic exhortation, *Evangelii Nuntiandi,* which praised the role lay people have in pastoral work.

of 'throwing the baby with the bath water', the institutional church has a wonderful opportunity to change structurally, as it has been rocked to its foundations in the Irish context. The challenge of clericalism and the lack of leadership (signs of the times across many other disciplines, not only religion) in the Irish Catholic Church has been pointed out by many researches (Hoban 2005, 2012; O'Hanlon 2011; Littleton 2015). Again, Pope Francis paved the way honestly and consciously to reflect on the dynamics of power within the structures of clericalism, by saying:

> *Clericalism, far from giving impulse to diverse contributions and proposals, turns off, little by little, the prophetic fire from which the entire Church is called to give testimony in the heart of its peoples. Clericalism forgets that the visibility and the sacramentality of the Church belong to all the people of God and not only an elect or illuminated few.*[10]

The prophetic fire is the fuel that will open new opportunities for renovation and restoration of trust and hope. It also inspires the creation of new transitional spaces in which to foster a new culture of religious vocation at this time.

2.5 Conclusions

By analysing the processes of detraditionalisation, postsecularism and postmodernism, new challenges have emerged for Irish Catholic identity. By surveying guidance counsellors, religious vocational directors and chaplains, and interviewing 10 key informants in religious vocation and promotion, this study presents opportunities for these informants to relate their many experiences in encountering people who are considering a religious vocation in Ireland.

Interviewing young religious members entering diverse Irish orders also highlights the support, challenges and opportunities they have encountered by making such a counter- cultural religious decision at this point in Irish history.

The next section outlines how the data (survey and interviews) was gathered, and limitations and challenges encountered in this research study are considered.

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[10] Reporter Joshua J. McElwee, in his article: 'Since 2013, Pope Francis has endeavoured to shift church culture'. This article appeared in the National Catholic Reporter on 9th March 2017.

I am with you always, to the close of the age (Mt 28:20).

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design, Sample and Instruments

3.1.1 Design

The two approaches to this research project involved surveying and interviewing. Three different surveys were designed for chaplains, vocational directors and guidance counsellors. Surveys are a common method in the social sciences to collect information to a pre-determined population or 'population of interest' (Kelley, Brown and Sitzia 2003). The three cohorts in this study were first point of contact for individuals considering religious vocation at different stages in their lives. The survey design used in this study was descriptive, whereby information was gathered on the phenomena of religious vocation by describing certain factors, behaviours, experiences, and knowledge associated with the subject study. Surveys only provide a 'snapshot of things at a specific time'. Thus, interviewing was the second approach to further expand on the important details and depth of the topic investigated. The design of the interviews was semi-structured. After surveying the three cohorts, the researcher had a clear and considered set of questions for the interviews. The questions were in open form thus enabling the interviewees to describe their own narratives and experiences. Interviews were approximately an hour long and transcribed verbatim.

3.1.2 Sample

The selection sample of the three different cohorts of the survey was conducted through gatekeepers. The researcher was given an email list of vocational directors in 40 Irish orders (apostolic, contemplative and missionary) by the Director of Vocations Ireland, Ms Margaret Cartwright. With the next cohort of guidance counsellors, the researcher made email/telephone contact with the president of the Institute of Guidance Counsellors in Dublin, Mr Eddie McGrath, who agreed to circulate my survey to all 1,300 members across the Republic of Ireland. Surveys were sent by email to all members by the secretary of the Institute of Guidance Counsellors in Dublin. Members of the third research cohort, chaplains, were contacted via the gatekeeper Sr Bernadette Purcell, who emailed the survey to the various chaplain coordinators in Waterford, Cork, Galway, Kerry and Dublin Institute of Technology. Along with the surveys, a Participation Information Statement (See Appendix 1) was compiled explaining the nature of the research, the aims and objectives. A Consent Form (See Appendix 3) was also drawn up to ensure that the participants were in full agreement (by signing it) with what the research involved.

Securing a high response rate to a survey can be hard to control, and in the case of this research study the response of the surveys was particularly low, considering how many participants the different gatekeepers emailed it to. Finally, it became clear that semi-structured interviews needed to be conducted to key

informants in the subject of study. A list of 20 key informants in the area of religious vocation was drawn up. The researcher first contacted the key informants by telephone and email, asking for their participation in an hour's interview. Only 10 replied and agreed to conduct the interviews.

Purposive sampling was used for choosing this list. The researcher decided what was needed to be known, and set out to find people who were able and willing to provide the information by virtue of their knowledge or experience (Bernard 2002). The researcher selected the participants who it was thought would be able to provide the qualitative depth experience in telling their narratives about working with religious vocations (Morse and Singleton 2001). Purposive sampling is especially exemplified through the key informant technique (Ritchie 2003), whereby a few individuals are solicited to act as guides to a particular phenomenon studied.

3.1.3 Instruments

The design of the surveys involved 10 questionnaire type questions for chaplains and guidance counsellors and an 11-question survey for the vocational directors. The three surveys shared questions about the number of people who approach them considering religious vocations, their age, and nationality, as well as their awareness about the use of religious promotion, the strategies to nurture religious vocation, their thoughts on how a 'culture of vocation' can be instilled in young people, and the challenges for those considering and living religious vocation. The survey for religious vocational directors included a further question about their lifestyle being either apostolic, missionary or contemplative, or a mix of these. Every survey has the parameter of 'other response, please specify'. As explained above, the surveys were descriptive in nature and the aim was to gather information describing pattern or characteristics of the sample of individuals of interest. The descriptive survey is an easy tool to explore variables and construct themes of interest (Porto 2015).

The design of the interview questions was largely an expansion of the survey questions and the literature review. The following five questions were asked in order to expand on the survey: the strategies of promotion they use; their views on how to nurture a religious vocation; the key challenges for those living a religious life; the key challenges for those considering a religious life; and how to instil a 'culture of vocation' in young people. Other questions were guided by the literature review, such as: their opinions/experience of the climate in Ireland in relationship to the Catholic Church; the changing Irish Catholic identity; the abuse aftermath and how it affects religious members within the church in terms of vocations; the media; education and the Irish Catholic Church; and their experience and feelings about the new generation and their Christian spiritual literacy. Questions were open- ended, as is the norm in semi-structured interviews, to encourage as much qualitative data as possible. Often the participants will develop an interesting narrative that will open up following profound questions in relation to religious vocations. Questions were not sent to participants, but they were told that the interview was an expansion on the survey they had already completed. Two of the informants emailed the researcher with pieces of reflective writing they have gathered before the interview. These writings were deep understandings on the themes related to religious formation. One informant reflected upon the formation process his order was offering in light of 'our current culture and landscape as one of

confusion and identity crisis' (KI 10);[11] and also about the anti-materialistic religious life as a counter-culture decision for people considering religious life. The other informant who sent a reflection piece wrote about how the religion of the future needs to consider the different stages in consciousness in our relationship with God.

3.2 Data Collection and Analysis

3.2.1 Ethical Considerations

A confidentiality statement was composed by the researcher in which she clearly stated that she understood she would have access to confidential information about participants, that their names would be coded, and that she agreed not to divulge or publish this information to unauthorised people or the public in general. The signed statement was sent to Ms Margaret Cartwright (see Appendix 4). The content of this statement was issued to the participants, along with a Participant Information Sheet (see Appendix 1), which detailed the involvement of the research study and confirmed that no potential risks were associated with it. Participants were asked to sign a Consent Form (see Appendix 3) confirming that all confidential data would completely guarded and all information kept in a secure place, and that their anonymity was guaranteed. Surveys and interviews were saved in Dropbox, to which only the researcher would have access. Interview memos were transferred from the researcher's iPhone to Dropbox to which, again, only the researcher had access, and they could be deleted easily. No other person had access to the researcher's computer or Dropbox. Finally, all participant names were coded by KI (Key Informant) followed by a number, and YR (Young Religious) followed by a number, to protect their anonymity in the research analysis.

3.2.2 Data Gathering

Most of the data from the surveys was emailed back to the researcher. Most of the vocational directors' surveys were emailed to the researcher but some were posted to her home and others to Vocations Ireland. All guidance counsellors emailed their survey responses. Some chaplains posted their surveys to the gatekeeper, Sr. Bernadette Purcell, and these were posted back to the researcher. The rest of the chaplains' surveys were emailed to researcher.

Of all 15 interviews, five took place face to face in coffee shops, participants' houses, the researcher's house and the Vocations Ireland office. The remaining 10 were conducted via Skype and the telephone (landline). The environment was always convenient, comfortable and with the sufficient privacy to conduct the interview. Each interview was digitally recorded with the researcher's iPhone with the prior consent of the interviewee. When interviews were conducted via Skype or telephone, the participants were always informed that their interview was been recorded. As semi-structured interviews were used, the researcher adhered to certain fixed questions, but the interview flowed and developed according to the topics that emerged. Interviewing has a life of its own, leaving space for the participants to tell their own stories and experiences, but at the same time allowing the researcher to 'dialogue' with them in a natural manner. Every interview was unique as it unfolded.

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[11] KI 10 means Key Informant number 10. All names have been replaced for codes within the interview and data analysis to protect the confidentiality of the interviewee.

3.2.3 Data Analysis

The data was analysed in two ways. The surveys were analysed by calculating the percentages of their categorical data. Due to the lower response of the surveys, this statistical analysis was done by the researcher and without the need of the SPSS software, which is generally required for more extensive samples. The way the percentages were presented was by calculating the total number of responses and then dividing the number in each category by the total. This is called relative frequency statistics (percentages or shares).

The interview recordings were listened several times and transcribed by happyscribe.co software. After receiving the transcripts by email, the researcher re-listened and rewrote the mistakes from the transcriptions. The researcher read and reread the interviews, making notes and initial ideas on the transcripts in pen. In this way, she was immersed in the reflection and interaction of each transcript. Transcripts were finally coded in a thematic manner. This stage id further described in Chapter 4, where the method of data analysis is discussed.

3.3 Limitations and Challenges

This study is limited as it was conducted on a small scale. It was the original intention of the researcher to analyse large numbers in the surveys by means of SPSS software, in order to present a bigger picture in the percentages of responses. The three cohorts' response can be considered very low compared to the amount of people to whom surveys were emailed. This research finding is worth analysing and is expanded in Chapter 4. Out of 20 key informants approached by the researcher, only 10 answered and it in some cases the researcher was involved in arduous work following up emails and telephone calls. The interviews with young religious were mostly facilitated by vocational directors, who kindly ask their postulants to contact me. Not all postulants who were contacted were willing to be interviewed, and in some cases, the researcher phoned the particular order to enquire about talking to new postulants. It is important to mention that some orders felt that it was too soon for new religious to be talking about their experiences, and felt it was better for them not to be disturbed with interviews. The researcher understands that the discernment process is a profound journey between God and the individual and sometimes the new religious person is not yet ready to talk about such process.

Another difficulty encountered was the length of time required to obtain responses of surveys: only a few vocational directors responded immediately and with enthusiasm. Most responses had to be followed by a series of emails, and telephone calls to the gatekeepers. From emailing surveys up until the closing of the data gathering, more than eight weeks elapsed. From experience, the researcher recognises that if people have not replied a survey within three weeks, it is very unlikely that will respond at all. One factor that may explain the low response rate was timing, and that in September, chaplains and guidance counsellors were only getting into the job after the summer. As can be ascertained from feedback, vocational directors do not always work efficiently with email and some of them rely on the postal service. Confidentiality and anonymity were of course fully guaranteed and in-depth information sheets and consent forms were emailed along with the survey, but some orders still felt reluctant to share information. Littleton (2015, 28) wrote that for some journalists trying to

get an interview with the Catholic Communications Office was extremely difficult, like trying to 'break into Fort Knox'. The present researcher understands this sentiment, as contacting some orders was very difficult.

3.4 Conclusions

Although some challenges were encountered in gathering the data for this research study, the information collected offers a marvellous opportunity to profoundly detail the subject of religious vocations, which is under-researched. To my knowledge, there has never been an Irish study in which vocational directors and promoters, along with young religious, have been interviewed about religious vocations. The most important contribution of this research study involves the detailed insights into the changing state of Irish Catholicism, the new challenges in vocations, how the interviewees felt about their Catholic identity, and the potential for contemporary challenges to present new ways and opportunities for nurturing vocations.

The next chapter presents the data and analysis.

4. PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS OF DATA

PART I

4.1 Method of Data Analysis

4.1.1 Statistical Analysis

4.1.1.1 Data from Vocational Directors

Ten surveys were gathered from vocational directors. A neutral answer of 'other, please' was included in all questions, for answers that did not relate to the participant. Each question is presented in a table illustrating the number of participants who answered the various categories of each question.

Q.1: Please can you indicate your order lifestyle

Answer	Responses	Percentage
Apostolic	6*	60%
Contemplative	2	20%
Monastic	0	0 %
Other: Missionary	2	20%

*Most of the participants belong to an apostolic order while the rest belong to contemplative or contemplative in action and missionary. There was no representation of any monastic order.

Q.2: How long have you been a vocational director?

Answer	Responses	Percentage
≤ 5 yrs	4	40%
5 yrs	1	10%
≥ 5 yrs	5*	50%
Other	0	0%

*Half the participants had been vocational directors for longer than five years but 40% of them had less experience, with less than five years in the job. This question does not specify if they were part or full time, but this issue was developed in the interviews conducted with the key informants.

Q.3: During this period, how many people have approached you considering a religious vocation?

Answer	Responses	Percentage
None	0	0%
≤ 5	4	40%
5 or ≥	6	60%
Other	0	0%

40% of the participants stated that fewer than five people had approached them considering a religious vocation and 60% had been approached by five or more people during their post as vocational director.

Q.4: How old were they?

Answer	Responses	Percentage
20-35 yrs old	6*	60%
35-50 yrs old	2	20%
50-75 yrs old	1	10%
Other: 18 yrs old	1	10%

*This question does not break down all ages of those considering religious life but indicates an age bracket. For example, 60% of the participants encountered candidates in the age bracket of 20-35. The question does not specify the number of candidates or their precise ages.

Q.5: What nationality were they?

Answer	Responses	Percentage
Irish	10*	100%
Other European	2	20%
Asian	1	10%
African	4	40%
Americas	2	20%
Other	0	0%

*This question does not specify the precise nationality of every person considering religious life as the participants did not specify it. Participants were asked to tick the nationality group to which these individuals belonged. This question gives an indication of the nationalities with higher percentages of people considering religious life. For example, the responses indicate that all the participants (100%) had been approached by Irish candidates and 40% had been approached by African candidates. Only 10% of the participants had been approached by Asian.

Q.6: Of those considering religious vocation, specify, if any, how many became:

Answer	Responses	Percentage
Candidates/Postulants	35*	42.16%
Novices	32	38.5 %
Temporary Vows	6	7.2%
Final/Perpetual Vows	8	9.6%
Other	2	2.4%

*This is a specific question and the participants indicated the exact numbers of the different people considering religious life in each category. The total number of candidates seeking religious life was 83. The highest percentage was postulants and novices at 42% and 38%. The postulants who finally made perpetual vows accounted for 9.6%. In the category of 'other', 2.4% were at a very initial stage of the discernment process and had only made an inquiry to the vocational director.

Q.7: Has your order used any religious promotion that you are aware of?

Answer	Responses	Percentage
None	0	0%
Radio/Television	2	20%
Advertising	5	50%
Print Materials	10*	10%
Website/Facebook/Internet	10	10%
Other	2	20%

*All participants used advertising and print materials for vocation promotion while only 20% used radio and television and 20% reported other ways of religious promotion, such as attending national and local gatherings of young people and using Vision Vocation Match. Others wrote about doing podcasts, videos on YouTube to show their way of life, and writing blogs and magazines.

Q.8: What strategies do you think may work for nurturing religious vocations?

Answer	Responses	Percentage
Having a full-time vocation director supported by a team	7	70%
Using new media/presence Online to attract young people	8	80%
Offering discernment programmes	9	90%
Creating a network for potential candidates to meet peers	8	80%
Targeting young adults in secondary schools and college	5	50%
Other	3	30%

* Nearly all the participants (90%) agreed that offering discernment programmes was one of the best strategies for nurturing religious vocations. Using new media and creating networks for potential candidates to meet peers also scored highly. 30% of participants named other strategies that have helped their congregation, such as: living-in time with the community and weekends in the noviciate; collaboration between congregations and dioceses; creating monastic vocations weekends on a regular basis; or live- in experiences for a particular length of time that may suit the person discerning a religious vocation.

Q.9: What do you consider to be the key challenges for those living a religious life today? Pick two:

Answer	Responses	Percentage
Living religious life with enthusiasm	4	40%
Balancing personal, communal, and ministerial responsibilities	1	10%
Age difference for new members	2	20%
Lack of peers in religious life for new members	2	20%
Difference in theology, spirituality and ecclesiology across generational lines	2	20%
The current social climate in relation to Church organisations	6*	60%
Poor support for religious from hierarchy	1	10%
Other	2	20%

* The two main challenges chosen by participants were: the current social climate in relation to Church organisations, at 60%, and living a religious life with enthusiasm, at 40%. Other challenges related by 20% of participants were the ability to cope with the routine of the religious life; the realisation that they have something valuable and distinctive to offer (passion for God and incarnating God's kingdom in a specific relevant way); and the challenge that some religious people fail to grasp the need for change (resistance to Pope Francis).

Q.10: What do you consider to be the key challenges for those considering a religious life today? Pick two:

Answer	Responses	Percentage
Managing their expectations of religious life	6	60%
Having a full commitment to living three vows	3	30%
The current social climate in relation to Church life	5	50%
Isolation and lack of peers in religious life	6	60%
Other	0	0%

* The two main challenges chosen by participants for those considering religious life today were: managing their expectations of religious life, at 60%, and isolation and lack of peers in religious life, at 60%.

Q.11: How can a 'culture of vocation' be instilled in young people?

Answer	Responses	Percentage
By creating more discernment retreats	4	40%
By living experiences in the communities/ministry	5	50%
By holding regular meetings with a discernment group	6	60%
By holding regular meetings with a vocational director	3	30%
By engaging in spiritual direction	7*	70%
By doing Diocesan Vocation programmes	1	10%
By creating discernment vocational websites, Facebook	2	20%
Other	3	30%

* 70% of all participants felt that by engaging in spiritual direction, a 'culture of vocation' can be instilled in young people. Also, regular meetings with a discernment group scored highly, at 60%. Also, 30% of the participants named other strategies for instilling a 'culture of vocation' as:

- Youth ministry and vocation animation.
- Creating a supportive environment through group work and spiritual direction.
- Having conferences/workshops for those pursuing a religious life.
- Cultivating a culture whereby everyone has a calling to be their deepest self.
- Group and one-to-one companionship to support people in wishing to following their deepest desires.
- Small sharing/worshiping groups with outgoing service of community ('You cannot be what you cannot see' – it is a challenge to help young people to see us and our life as a lived reality. This is more than meeting us in the different ministries we engage in – this is seeing us as professionals and for most of us the professional work we undertake could be done without being a religious. So, for me the challenge is helping those who may be interested to encounter our life – apart from our profession).

Eight surveys were gathered for guidance counsellors via email. The guidance counsellors' survey was composed of 10 questions with some slight adaptations to the vocational director's survey above.

Q.1: How long have you been a guidance counsellor?

Answer	Responses	Percentage
≤ 5 yrs	0	0%
5 yrs	0	0%
≥ 5 yrs	8*	100%
Other	0	0%

*All guidance counsellors had more than five years' experience in the job.

Q.2: During this period, how many people have approached you considering a religious vocation?

Answer	Responses	Percentage
None	5*	62.5%
≤ 5	3	37.5%
5 or ≥	0	0%
Other	0	0%

*62% of participants, or five out of eight counsellors, had never been approached by anyone considering religious life. Three counsellors had been approached by students during their term of office concerning vocations.

Q.3: How old were they?

Answer	Responses	Percentage
20-35 yrs old	0	0%
35-50 yrs old	0	0%
50-75 yrs old	0	0%
Other: None/Under 20	8*	100%

*All counsellors responded in the 'other' category in this question, as five of them had not been approached by anyone, and the remaining three counsellors had been approached but only by individuals under 20 years old. The three counsellors had been approached in total by four young people aged 14 to 19.

Q.4: What nationality were they?

Answer	Responses	Percentage
Irish	3*	37.5%
Other European	0	0%
Asian	0	0%
African	0	0%
Americas	0	0%
Other: None	5	62.5%

*All young people approaching the counsellors about vocations were Irish.

Q.5: Of those considering a religious vocation, specify, if any, how many became:

Answer	Responses	Percentage
Candidates/Postulants	0	0%
Novices	1*	12.5%
Temporary Vows	0	0%
Final/Perpetual Vows	0	0%
Other: None/Not sure	7	87.5%

*To the knowledge of the counsellors, only one of the four candidates they encountered had become a novice, while the other three had moved out of the schools and they had lost contact with them.

Q.6: Are you aware of any religious promotion?

Answer	Responses	Percentage
None	4*	50%
Radio/Television	0	0%
Advertising	0	0%
Print Materials	0	0%
Website/Facebook/Internet	0	0%
Other	4	50%

*Half of the counsellors in this survey were not aware of any religious promotion and the other half were aware of the following forms of promotion:

- Seeing vocations stand at the Higher Options.
- Posters at back of churches and Alive! Catholic newspaper and vocations stand at the RDS.
- Magazines.
- Knowing sisters who work in the area of vocations.

Q.7: What strategies do you think may work for nurturing religious vocations?

Answer	Responses	Percentage
Having a full-time vocation director supported by a team	4	50%
Using new media/presence Online to attract young people	3	37.5%
Offering discernment programmes	3	33.5%
Creating a network for potential candidates to meet peers	5*	62.5%
Targeting young adults in secondary schools and college	5	62.5%
Other	3	33.5%

* The two strategies that 62% of counsellors thought would be good for nurturing religious vocations were: creating a network for potential candidates to meet peers, and targeting young adults in secondary schools and college. 37% also believed in other strategies, such as:

- Targeting people who work with the disadvantaged, including charity workers and volunteers, who are probably the most likely candidates for religious vocations.
- Using the network of Guidance Counsellors and inviting speakers into schools through Guidance Counsellors and RE teachers.
- Having the subject included in the Religious curriculum in faith-based schools, so that is explored as a topic. Speak with Trustees about this.
- Inviting guest speakers from different religious congregations to visit schools and give testimony.
- Having closer links with school Chaplain or committed RE teachers.
- Involving young people in faith-based programmes and actually living a life underpinned by faith (as it is evident in Islamic and some Christian communities). For the most part, 'Irish Catholics', especially working-class ones, have little knowledge of their 'faith'. They are cultural Catholics who engage with confirmation and communion because they are expected to, and are supported by their school and neighbours. Even those who enter religious-run secondary schools have little interest in the idea of faith)[12]

Q.8: What do you consider to be the challenges of religious life in Ireland today?

Answer	Responses	Percentage
Faithfully living the vows	4	50%
Balancing personal, communal, and ministerial responsibilities	3	37.5%
Age difference for new members	4	50%
Lack of peers in religious life for new members	6	75%
Difference in theology, spirituality and ecclesiology across generational lines	4	50%
The current social climate in relation to Church organisations	7*	87.5%
Other	2	25%

* Most of the counsellors (87%) believed that the main challenge for those considering religious life today is the current social climate in relation to Church organisations. 25% also named the following challenges: there is not open discussion to explore these challenges; there is not enough peer support for people who live their faith; it needs to be promoted as a positive thing; and there is not good, strong faithful witnesses like St Francis.

Q.9: Of those considering a religious vocation, have you heard any of the above challenges in counselling?

Answer	Responses	Percentage
Yes: please specify which	3*	37.5%
No	5	62.5%
Other	0	0%

* The three counsellors who encountered young people considering religious life heard of the following reasons: the general feedback about secularism and its promotion; the current climate in the Catholic Church; lack of understanding of family and friends; lack of peer support; and the difference in spirituality and theology across the generational lines.

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[12] Sentiment expressed by a guidance counsellor.

Q.10: In your opinion, how can a 'culture of vocation' be instilled in young people in Ireland?

Answer	Responses	Percentage
By creating more discernment retreats	1	12.5%
By living experiences in the communities/ministry	4*	50%
By regular meetings with a discernment group	0	0%
By regular meetings with a vocational director	1	12.5%
By engaging in spiritual direction	2	25%
By doing Diocesan Vocation programmes	0	0%
By creating discernment vocational websites, Facebook	2	25%
By engaging in a counselling process	0	0%
Other	3	37.5%

* Half of the counsellors believed that by living experiences in the communities/ministry would be a good way to instil a 'culture of vocation'. Also, 37% of the counsellors named other strategies to instil a 'culture of vocation', such as:

- Allowing people to speak about their faith openly and positively in a positive environment. There is misinformation and there is currently a culture of secularisation, whereby people are afraid to bear witness to their faith, as they feel they will be interfering with others.
- Developing and promoting religious expression/spiritual self as part of an equal/free/ democratic/ diverse society, which needs to be discussed in school.
- Imbuing the trustees of the schools and their staff with the need for more spiritual formation around this area, in order to help it grow in the schools.
- Utilising resources for staff training in these matters.
- Setting a good example and interacting with those in the clergy who are young at heart.

4.1.1.3 Data from Chaplains

Five surveys were gathered for chaplains via email and post. The chaplain's survey was composed of 10 questions with some slight adaptations to the guidance counsellor's survey above.

Q.1: How long have you been a chaplain?

Answer	Responses	Percentage
≤ 5 yrs	1	20%
5 yrs	0	0%
≥ 5 yrs	4*	80%
Other	0	0%

* Most of the chaplains (80%) had been in their job for more than five years.

Q.2: During this period, how many people have approached you considering religious vocation?

Answer	Responses	Percentage
None	1	20%
≤ 5	3*	60%
5 or ≥	1	20%
Other	0	0%

80% of chaplains had been approached by people considering a religious vocation. 60% had been approached by fewer than five people and 20% had been approached by five or more people.

Q.3: How old were they?

Answer	Responses	Percentage
20-35 yrs old	4	80%
35-50 yrs old	2	40%
50-75 yrs old	0	0%
Other: None	1	20%

*This question does not break down all ages of those considering religious life but indicates an age bracket. For example, 80% of the chaplains encountered candidates in the age bracket of 20-35. The question does not specify the number of candidates or their precise ages.

Q.4: What nationality were they?

Answer	Responses	Percentage
Irish	4*	80%
Other European	0	0%
Asian	0	0%
African	0	0%
Americas	0	0%
Other: None	1	20%

*All people who approached the chaplains were Irish.

Q.5: Of those considering religious vocation, specify, if any, how many became:

Answer	Responses	Percentage
Candidates/Postulants	1	20%
Novices	0	0%
Temporary Vows	0	0%
Final/Perpetual Vows	1	20%
Other: None/Not sure	3	60%

Two of the chaplains were aware that one person had become a novice and that the others had become postulants (though they did not specify how many). The other chaplains were not sure what had happened to the individuals who had approached them.

Q.6: Are you aware of any religious promotion?

Answer	Responses	Percentage
None	0	0%
Radio/Television	0	0%
Advertising	2	40%
Print Materials	4*	80%
Website/Facebook/Internet	4	80%
Other	0	0%

* Most of chaplains (80%) were aware of print materials and website promotion.

Q.7: What strategies do you think may work for nurturing religious vocations?

Answer	Responses	Percentage
Having a full-time vocation director supported by a team	2	40%
Using new media/presence online to attract young people	2	40%
Offering discernment programmes	3*	60%
Creating a network for potential candidates to meet peers	2	40%
Targeting young adults in secondary schools and college	1	20%
Other	0	0 %

*Offering discernment programmes seems to be the most popular strategy among chaplains (60%).

Q.8: What do you consider to be the key challenges for those considering a religious life today? Pick two:

Answer	Responses	Percentage
Managing their expectations of religious life	2	40%
Having a full commitment to living three vows	2	40%
The current social climate in relation to Church life	4*	80%
Isolation and lack of peers in religious life	3	60%
Others	1	20%

*Chaplains considered that the two main challenges for those considering religious life today were: the current social climate in relation to Church life, and the isolation and lack of peers in religious life.

Q.9: Of those considering religious vocation, have you heard any of the above challenges?

Answer	Responses	Percentage
Yes: please specify which	3*	60%
No	2	40%
Other, please specify:	0	0%

*Three chaplains had heard of people considering religious life experiencing the following challenges: full commitment to living three vows; isolation and lack of peers in religious life; the current social climate of the Church; and fears about the age profile.

Q.10: In your opinion, how can a 'culture of vocation' be instilled in young people in Ireland?

Answer	Responses	Percentage
By creating more discernment retreats	0	0%
By living experiences in the communities/ministry	4*	80%
By holding regular meetings with a discernment group	1	20%
By holding regular meetings with a vocational director	0	0%
By engaging in spiritual direction	1	20%
By doing Diocesan Vocation programmes	0	0%
By creating discernment vocational websites, Facebook	1	1%
Other	0	0%

*Most chaplains (80%) believe that living experiences in communities can instil a 'culture of vocation' in young people.

We cannot live in a world that is interpreted for us by others. An interpreted world is not a hope. Part of the terror is to take back our own listening. To use our own voice. To see our own light. (Hildegard of Bingen)

4.1.2 Qualitative Analysis: Thematic Analysis

The approach used to analyse the interview data in this research project was thematic content analysis developed by Philip Burnard (1991). This approach is a system of recording themes and issues that appear in the interviews. Notes on ideas are taken throughout the reading until an exhaustive category system has begun to form. General headings/themes called open coding are drawn up to reflect the content of the interviews. The final stage is to create a list of categories, and collapse and reduce them until main groups or themes are elucidated.

PART II

4.2 Data from Key Informants: Emerging Themes

Ten key informants were interviewed. Nine were religious and vocational directors of their order and one was a lay vocational promotor. From an analysis of the interview data, six main themes emerged, which are outlined in the following sections.

4.2.1 The Discernment Process: Development and Growth

All participants agreed that the call for vocation in the 1950s and 1960s in Ireland was unhealthy. It was 'a cultural vocation', and many who entered at that time left in the late 1970s. Other informants believed that the discernment process at that time was poor and a fertile soil for future troubles. Most of the participants across the interviews (apostolic, contemplative and missionary) felt that the quality of the discernment process was key from the first contact until the point at which it took the person. They believed that the most important thing was that even if the candidates were to leave, they should leave in peace with themselves. Most of the discernment process analysed in the interviews was highly sophisticated in terms of psycho-spiritual preparation. Some of the interviewees expressed it this way:

> *Candidates have to be their deepest self, their greater desire, that is what makes a vocation. (KI 1)[13]*

> *There is a different consciousness now: vocations are instilled with creativity but with authenticity. The consciousness of 2017 is about awakening. (KI 2)*

> *A lot of what is going on in formation has got to do with early life experiences and allows God's healing to touch the deepest wound in ourselves. It is to move you into a place of freedom that you can really embrace yourself. (KI 9)*

4.2.2 The Climate of the Church: 'The Baby did not Drown in the Bath Water'

How vocations were affected by the current climate of the Catholic Church, and postsecular and postmodern Ireland, were among the most prominent themes discussed by every interviewee:

> *It is not a crisis of vocation: it is much more. It is a crisis of faith in relation to God. (KI 5)*

> *The crisis of vocation is about the public perception of the institutional Church. (KI 8)*

> *My own congregation will die off. I choose life. I continue giving retreats, helping people in different projects, running centres for young people to mediate and pray. We have lost our radical edge. (KI 7)*

> *We need to be perceptive and creative and it is not easy. The world has a need of God, but some people do not know they have a need for God. Open a liminal space for them where they can share the deepest questions and find comfort. (KI 6)*

> *Irish people are spiritual, celtic soul, they have a sense of spirituality through nature and the land. Go back to God, discover God. Worship in the Church but you need to have the other: the intimidate relationship with God. Rituals are fine, but do we know the real, deep meaning of rituals? (KI 1)*

The transitional places opened in the context of 'shattered Christendom' (Flanagan 2015) during centuries of the Catholic Church were reflected by some of the vocational directors:

> *Giving your entire life for something you believe… When the Church is under pressure is when it is most dynamic, (KI 2)*

> *The mystics are the people who carry the best of Christianity (through the centuries). (KI 1)*

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[13] KI 1 means Key Informant, number 1. All names have been replaced for codes within the interview and data analysis to protect the confidentiality of the interviewee.

4.2.3 Crisis of Leadership

The postsecular and postmodern era has brought a crisis of leadership in all spheres of life: politically, economically, and socially. Many interviewees called the vocational crisis a crisis of leadership within the Irish Catholic Church, and proposed some strategies that they thought might help in this crisis.

I will challenge anyone in Ireland to find me five good leaders within the Church. They are not servant leaders. (KI 8)

Resources are not put in the right place by the leadership. (KI 2)

The model of understanding God is different in the different levels of the Church. If you cannot see the bigger picture, it is a limiting God. (KI 4)

Some bishops think bringing other congregations into the country may bear fruits, but now we share in the vocation journey and loads of orders are in competition. There is even a fear to work collectively in religious groups around the vocation question. Unity is a witness to the world but it is very disunited at the moment.   (KI 6)

Vocation ministry is a very lonely ministry. Vocation is not taking seriously by the higher leaders. The Pope is coming: we could do a big event in vocation but the higher hierarchy do not want to get involved. (KI 10)

In relation to leadership, one interesting fact that many key informants related was that the new vocation coming must have 'the spirit and the courage of the founders' of the past:

Someone coming has to be like one who has a founding spirit like in the past and who does not get sucked into the dying institutions. (KI 1)

I think just one person with a charismatic nature that she/he can set the passion to the fore again like the founders. These people sometimes do emerge but they are not allowed to act and that is another problem. (KI 9)

Going back to your roots (the foundation), the essence, and start making a difference. I have to do it to show others how to do it. (KI 6)

4.2.4 Connecting with the Younger Generation

All the key informants talked about how to connect with the younger generation, the spiritual challenges and the many opportunities that this new generation pose for the religious life. Some informants viewed these in different ways, but they agreed on many of the strategies for nurturing vocations:

The new generation is apathetic; they feel we are irrelevant, paedophiles; they have no idea. They get their ideas from the media. They have no sense of history and no commitment to any institutions.... New ways have to be found: meditation groups, as they are open for that. (KI 1)

Connection and relatedness is what young people appreciate. It is not about age. It is about your aptitude. (KI 3)

A young woman approached me in an event of vocation and asked me: Why is it so hard to find out about you and your life? We are invisible; need to become visible again. You just have to be present enough for them to know that you are available. (KI 6)

Young people do not know the religious life could be an option. Journey with them, sitting, praying, cup of tea, community, talk about the impact things have on them. Provide the opportunity and spaces where God can grow in them. (KI 5)

Who help young people to discern their lives? I am increasingly encountering people who have no connection with themselves. Meditation practice is important: stillness…I heard my call by being still. (KI 10)

Many interviewees spoke about the problem of the loss of the spiritual language along with the loss of the faith journey for young people, as these are not shown in school anymore:

The language of religious life is gone; it is gone in school; it is a vacuum culture. (KI 4)

There is a problem with the faith language in school. Teachers even have to get educated. They are saying to me that they will have no idea if a young person comes and say they have a call from God. (KI 5)

Finding ways creatively to share the faith story because the faith story has not changed. We need a rebranding and a re-marketing about the way people understand God these days. (KI 6)

The social media was often mentioned in connecting with the younger generation, as the technological generation believe social media to be intrinsically part of their identity. Three main words appeared in relation to young people in the interviews: encounter, engagement and connection. Also, all the retreats, stories, groups that are created for them to obtain spiritual literacy must be experiential for them to give them the time to think.

4.2.5 Hope: Regaining the Spiritual Narrative

Most of the interviewees were enthusiastic about talking of regaining the spiritual narrative in Ireland. They were very hopeful that this theme was one of the keys in nurturing religious vocations and also in becoming visible, unapologetic and powerful – owning the centuries over which their orders have provided spiritual capital for Ireland, and in some cases, continue to provide:

We are latent, holding the spiritual capital in Ireland. The future will be small pockets, charismatic individuals. God is still at work and changing; is still happening. (KI 1)

We need to honour our stories, get back to the reclaim our own narrative…and the Church have been involved in most Spiritual Capital. (KI 2)

There is some kind of movement and opening, but we need to be in the liminal space for the one or two people who may want to hear the message: how conscious are we on how we celebrate our faith that awaken people? (KI 6)

You need to be seen to take back your narrative: the media wants you to become invisible really. (KI 4)

We are not good at communicating good news. Do not let the media write our religious narrative. (KI 2)

4.2.6 Conclusions

Although these were the five main themes discussed by the interviewees, there were also subthemes which were equally important in terms of nurturing religious vocations. Two of these were as follows:

- Living the religious life with enthusiasm and being aware that their own call was often related as a good witness for the new young religious. The experience of the interviewees is that young people are conscious now about whether or not the place is dynamic, and they will not face a burden to look after the older people.

- A recurrent subtheme was the frustration about the lack of time available to many of the interviewees in the ministry of vocation. Some of them need to work full time in other areas of the order and literally they are holding a part-time vocational director job alongside a full-time one. Often, they are tired at the end of a day's work and in the evenings they are preparing printed and digital materials related to vocation. There was also a debate by some about being full or part time in the job. Some were very strong about being full time in the job, to produce results, and others could not be full time even if they wanted to. Some of the interviewees also felt it was a very disheartening ministry to be in it full time.

4.3. Data from Young Religious: Emerging Themes

Six young religious were interviewed. Five were novices or in temporary vows and only one had made perpetual vows. The data from the young religious was very rich and although it was condensed into three main themes, there were many subthemes within them. These themes are as follows:

4.3.1 The Importance of Experiential Spiritual Narrative

Most talked at length about the experience of their own calling from the Spirit. This was important to them. From the researcher's point of view, their stories were spiritually and anthropologically magnificent. Due to the scope of this report, it is difficult to relate these stories with the deepness required. Many young religious related stories of hearing an actual calling whereby they heard their names being called. Visiting sacred places aroused in three of them a 'spiritual awakening' and they could clearly hear the religious call. One young religious talked about 'sacred weeping' (mystical tears) which is a researched religious phenomenon in the literature of spiritual overwhelmed experiences in the liminal space of one own's life changing its course (Anderson 1996).

The importance of this theme is in how these young religious acted after having these 'spiritual awakenings'. Below some quotations are about their first encountered with the order. They felt that these first meetings were crucial to them:

> I prayed about it, then I Googled and I emailed them. There was no name, no photo on their website, just a "contact us" at the bottom. I did not know who to address the inquiry. Then we met and I thought the person I met was very interesting and I wanted to go back. (YR 1).[14]

> When I met with the vocational director, he really related to me and he was interested in my

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[14] YR 1 means Young Religious, number 1. All names have been replaced for codes within the interview and data analysis to protect the confidentiality of the interviewee.

story, and I have the experience of other orders that they wanted to tell me only about how great they were. (YR 4)

Everyone in the order has been so welcoming for me. It is very reassuring. (YR 6)

I had my first calling in boarding school at 16. Later on, I had nothing specific in mind because I did not know anything about the Catholic Church. I visited a noviciate school and I felt at home there and did not need to go anywhere. They impressed me and the vocational director was an active person in community, a social person. Great community and spiritual life. (YR 3)

I read a book about the order and I felt: that is me. That is my spirituality. I went to a weekend with the order then. The challenge is that going to a Catholic order for a weekend to experience their spirituality is undervalued now. Nobody will question if I go for a retreat weekend to a Buddhist Ashram. (YR 2)

I want to learn as much as I can from the order here to be able to go back to my own country and help there in education to the society. (YR 5)

A young spiritual director really helped me in the discernment programme especially when you have a late vocation like mine in the 30s. (YR 4)

Some of the young religious talked about how important was for them to read spiritual narrative from others to be reassured and encouraged, and they gave a lot of attention to the experiential religious process of others. They talked about the importance of reading blogs, magazines, YouTube videos to 'see' the experience of others in the same boat starting the religious life:

I think a Twitter page is important and Facebook. I read the American ones. The American novices have collaborative novices and they write a blog the first year. I read it and I felt, that is me, that is my life[15]. (YR 1)

I was looking on Facebook and I saw the order had volunteers in Africa and I felt that this is a call for me. (YR 4)

The internet is very important but the problem is to find the time to meet and connect with people face to face. (YR 2)

4.3.2 The Counter-cultural Decision: The Post-Catholic Era in Ireland

Many of them talked about the current climate in the Church and how they were or were not affected by it in their own vocations:

Young people have not experienced the abuse scandals but there is a generation lost there. I see the little pockets of very good things happening. A lot of vocations coming through are very life experienced and think better equipped to deal with loads of pastoral issues. (YR 4)

Not everything revolves around Mass and Sacraments: the important thing is creating Christian groups that create awareness of being a Christian and a more adaptable approach to young people. (YR 3)

I say stop measuring religiosity, percentages of Mass attendance. Connection; connection and creating opportunities to meet young people. (YR 2)

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[15]This interviewee is referring to the American website https://anunslife.org/ which is full with vocational resources including Catholic sisters' blogs and podcasts.

My friends were very interested about my religious decision. What I would say to young people is try it out, immerse yourself in it. (YR 3)

In these times there are loads of spiritual movements and they are more appealing with plenty of support, no vows and peers. There is loads of competition but what is different about us? The questions are different. I do not think the Church can do without religious life. (YR 2)

4.3.3 The Generational Gap

This was an interesting theme, whereby all talked about the generational gap: some in a positive way and others in a negative way:

I go to a lot of funerals and it is very difficult. I have a good relationship with the ones in their 80s. I pray about it. (YR 2)

I am not 18/19 years old. I have lived life, had a job, apartment, and here I got treated like I was 18 for a long time. Old days were like that. They were young, inexperienced. We have life experience. (YR 1)

I saw the website has loads of priests in their 70s and 80s and for me then [that] was a no-no. (YR 4)

Living in community was excellent: my first year there. They have a great spiritual life and it is important to have a good start like that because they could be tough times after that in formation. (YR 3)

Vocational weekends really helped me and the members of the order came, and greeted me. They took time to be there with me. (YR 4)

I open my heart to be with them (the older ones in the order) and I will be losing them. You have to open yourself. Your heart can be broken over and over again. (YR 1)

To conclude, it is important to note that none of them were worried about vocations. They felt that now vocations have been normalised, other countries have followed the same patterns, and some felt that in their own order, new entrants were very good and very enthusiastic.

I came into the unknown and stayed there unknowing rising beyond all science.
(St John of the Cross)

5. CONCLUSIONS

5.1 Strengths and Weaknesses of the Study

Some of the weaknesses in this study was that in a small-scale study project, is difficult to draw conclusions for a larger population in all religious orders. A much larger-scale project could produce more significant results. Sixteen interviews were conducted, from which a considerable amount of data was produced. The issue was that there was insufficient time to analyse the data in more depth. The survey response rate was disappointingly low, considering the number of people targeted. A significantly larger quantitative study would be necessary to produce more detailed statistical information.

Some of the strengths in this project are that personal familiarity can lead to unintentional researcher bias, but the researcher had no familiarity with any of the orders or with the specific topic of vocations. This could be considered as strength, as the researcher was completely neutral. Another strength is the researcher's awareness in terms of her own psycho-spiritual journey. The researcher is in tuned with the dynamics of psycho-spiritual processes and this skill is very useful in interviewing and analysing data.

Finally, to the researcher knowledge, this study is original, as there are no previous studies in Ireland in which vocational directors and young religious in the area of vocation were interviewed.

5.2 Further Areas of Research

Many areas of research are open in this study, because the rich data generated required a much deeper analysis and reporting of findings. Some further areas of research which emerged from this study are as follows:

- Further research on the narrative of young religious, their personal calling, and their early experiences on entering the religious life. This would provide a valuable source which could be read and appreciated by other young people considering a religious life.

- Further research on the challenges and opportunities of youth ministry in Ireland. Youth ministry, in light of this research, seems to be the way vocation strategies can be nurtured.

- Further research on the narratives of apostolic sisters who seem to be in more 'vocational crisis' than other orders in Ireland. One sister interviewed expressed in her interview that she would enter a contemplative order now, if she was younger. This research compiled a lot of data on the experiences of the apostolic sisters who are literally in a transitional, liminal space.

- Further research on modern technology and how it will help young religious. Blogging, for example

is journaling, and journaling is spiritual practice. The sisters in the US are blog as a way of recording their spiritual autobiography.

- Further research on how to create living-in religious experiences for young people.

5.3 Conclusions

This study generated rich data in relation to religious vocation. From the 16 interviews, it is clear that vocational directors, promoters and young religious people are very hopeful about the future. The study is enriched by interviewing different forms of spiritualities and theologies in the different orders. All vocational directors interviewed agreed that the important factor in promoting vocation is the commitment to youth ministry. The study highlights the significance of producing a spiritual literacy that connects and reassures young people, and which creates groups, weekends, and daily spaces for them to find solace. The postsecular generation, though not particularly interested in institutions, is very open and receptive to spiritual authenticity and genuine narratives of experience. Mystics, over the centuries, inhabited a socially, culturally and religiously liminal space. To respond to the call of the times is the main challenge in vocations, in order to keep connecting and relating to the younger generation. One of the vocational director sums up this point as follows:

It is irresponsible to give up. I don't know, but perhaps all of these changes have to happen within ourselves and our own willingness to change and to be opened to a new way of doing things. (KI 8)

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Appendix 1: Participant Information Sheet

Participant Information Sheet

Introduction to the Research Study

This research study will investigate, review, and assess the current culture in Ireland in relation to the decline of religious vocations. The Irish Church today is facing the loss of its institutional legitimacy. The processes of secularisation, postmodernity and detraditionalisation has affected the Irish Catholic landscape. Challenges have emerged impacting on the Irish Catholic identity. These contemporary challenges open opportunities to explore the strengths and weaknesses of religious vocation. This study aims at finding ways for nurturing a culture of vocation to religious life in Ireland.

Details of what involvement in the Research Study will require

I am asking you to help me explore contemporary Catholic identity and how to assist; help young adults who wish to discern a vocation to religious life in Ireland.

The participants' involvement in this study is a descriptive, survey research to gather information about different profiles of religious identity and the nature of discernment opportunities on offering support in promoting strategies for the current vocational crisis.This process is strictly confidential. Your name will never be revealed anywhere in the research process. Surveys are just to gather a trend in the current vocational crisis.

Potential risks to participants from involvement in the Research Study
(if greater than that encountered in everyday life)

There are no potential risks associated with this study. I am asking you to share your opinions in the survey by choosing the best responses according to your experience.

Benefits (direct or indirect) to participants from involvement in the Research Study

There will be no direct benefit to you, but your participation is very likely to help finding out more about one of the most crucial crisis in religious vocation in Ireland today. This study will give a voice to guidance officers, chaplains, parents and young adults considering vocation. The final aim is the promotion of strategies for religious vocation in this current and new Irish social context.

Statement that involvement in the Research Study is voluntary

Your participation in this research is entirely voluntary. It is your choice whether to participate or not. As I explain above, I will not be sharing information about you to anyone and it is your right to refuse or withdrawn from the research project.

If you wish to ask any questions, you may contact me at:
noeliamolina@yahoo.com or mobile: **0868119359**.

If participants have concerns about this study and wish to contact an independent person, please contact:

Ms. Margaret Cartwright, Director Vocations Ireland.
Email: info@vocationsireland.com
Tel: 01-2603707.

Appendix 2: Letter to Vocational Directors

Dear Vocational Director,

My name is Noelia and I am doing research for Vocations Ireland on the current crisis of religious vocation. I would be really grateful if you could fill just a 11 questions survey that I have composed for this research. I am emailing you the information sheet of this study and an informed consent for your full understanding of this study.

It is an important study to contribute to the understanding of the current crisis in religious vocations and the Catholic Church in Ireland. Please it will not take too much time to fill. If you have any question please feel free to email me or phone me at 0868119359.

Thanks in advance for your participation in this study

Kindest Regards

Dr. Noelia Molina

Informed Consent Form

Research Study Title

Reviewing Irish Catholic Identity: the Crisis in Religious Vocation (working title)

Clarification of the Purpose of the Research

I am researching the current Irish landscape for vocation in the Catholic Church. The purpose of this study is the investigation of challenges, aptitudes, and benefits for nurturing a culture of vocation in the Irish Catholic Church today. Guidance officers, chaplains, parents and young adults considering vocation are part of the cohort study. Their personal experiences, views and opinions will help to uncover the changing nature of Irish Catholic identity and its impact on religious vocation

Confirmation of Particular Requirements as Highlighted in the Plain Language Statement
You will be required to fill in a survey.

Participant – please complete the following (Circle Yes or No for each question)

Have you read or had read to you the Plain Language Statement? Yes/No

Do you understand the information provided? Yes/No

Have you had an opportunity to ask questions and discuss this study?   Yes/No

Have you received satisfactory answers to all your questions? Yes/No

Are you aware that your interview will be audiotaped? Yes/No

Confirmation that Involvement in the Research Study is Voluntary

Participation in this study is totally voluntary and you have the right to withdraw from the research study. Your confidentiality of data is completely guarded and all information is kept in a secure place. Your anonymity is guaranteed.

Signature:

The researcher has given me my own copy of the information sheet which I have read and understood. My questions and concerns have been answered by the researcher, and I have a copy of this consent form. Therefore, I consent to take part in this research project.

Participant's Signature:
Name, in Block Capitals:
Witness:
Date:

Appendix 4: Confidentiality Statement

Confidentiality statement

Title of Research Project: Reviewing Irish Catholic Identity: the Crisis in Religious Vocation (working title)

Principal Researcher:

I understand that I may have access to confidential information about participants. By signing this statement, I am indicating my understanding of my responsibilities to maintain confidentiality and agree to the following:

- I understand that names and any other identifying information about participants are completely confidential.

- I agree not to divulge, publish, or otherwise make known to unauthorized persons or to the public any information obtained in the course of this research project that could identify the persons who participated in the study.

- I understand that all information about participants obtained or accessed by me in the course of my work is confidential. I agree not to divulge or otherwise make known to unauthorized persons any of this information.

- I agree to notify the two members of the Executive Team (Sr. Bernadette Flanagan and Fr Alan Neville) immediately should I become aware of an actual breach of confidentiality or a situation which could potentially result in a breach, whether this be on my part or on the part of another person.

_____   _____   _____

Signature   Date   Printed name