Religious Vocations in the Diocese of Baton Rouge

National Vocations Awareness Week
January 9 - 15, 2012
So you want to become a priest or a religious brother or sister; what to do?

By Laura Deavers

Prayers of the Faithful during Mass often request the faithful to listen and respond to God's call to ministry – especially the priesthood or consecrated life.

If a person thinks God is calling him or her to a special vocation, what are the first steps the person can take? Father Matthew Lorrain, diocesan vocations director, and Sister Lucy Silvio CSJ, vicar for men and women religious, give information about how the person can proceed to determine if in fact God is calling.

Most often a person who is pursuing a vocation to the priesthood or consecrated life of a religious brother or sister will seek out someone he or she feels closest to – a family friend, a priest, a teacher – someone who has some association with the vocation God may be calling that person to, said Father Lorrain. "Usually I am not the first person called."

The diocesan vocations office in the Catholic Life Center has reading material on answering God's call and throughout the year offers programs on discerning God's call. Father Lorrain and Sister Lucy are available to answer specific questions on how to become a priest or enter the consecrated religious life.

The diocesan vocations office, in conjunction with other Louisiana diocesan vocations offices, and the two seminaries in the state, sponsor programs for those who are considering a priestly or religious vocation. At Come and See Weekends, for example, men and women are able to spend time with others who are also trying to determine what God is calling them to do.

"They are able to visit with priests and seminarians," said Father Lorrain. "Also, those considering religious life are able to hear answers to questions they had not thought about." He added that they are able to pray together and get an informed idea of what the formation process is like.

The Come and See Weekends focus on high school juniors and seniors, and those of college age.

The next step for those inquiring is predicated by their age. Father Lorrain said a person of high school age would have to wait until he or she graduates. Then the candidate for priesthood or religious life would meet with Father Lorrain or Sister Lucy.

Those wanting to enter religious life would receive information from Sister Lucy about the many ways they can live out their calling. There is the monastic life, where the members spend their time in prayer; missionary life, in which the members live and work in Third World countries; and religious orders, that have as their mission education, health care, or social or pastoral service to God's people. A copy of the magazine "Visions" is given to each person Sister Lucy meets with, since this publication has information on many of the religious orders and communities in this country.

Sister Lucy advises each inquirer to have a spiritual director to help in discerning God's call. As with men who are interested in becoming priests, Sister Lucy said those interested in religious life must finish high school before they can proceed. She also encourages them to attend Come and See Weekends or Life Awareness Retreats so they can meet others who are going through the same discernment process.

Once a person decides on a religious order to join, Sister Lucy's role as vicar for religious comes to an end, though she said she is always available for consultation.

Father Lorrain said some young men are mature enough to enter the seminary right out of high school, while others benefit from having a few years of college. He added that 40 is the upper age limit for men entering seminary, but there are exceptions, depending on the candidate.

The application process to enter seminary includes physical and psychological assessments, letters of recommendation, academic transcripts, an autobiography, a criminal background check and a recommendation from the diocesan vocations board. The recommendation is sent to the bishop, who makes the final decision.

If a potential seminarian has not completed college or has not taken some of the required courses, he will attend St. Joseph Seminary College in St. Benedict. Upon completion of the undergraduate degree, the seminarian then enters the seminary and completes his studies.

National Vocations Awareness Week takes place Jan. 9-14

WASHINGTON (CNS) — The U.S. Catholic Church is celebrating National Vocations Awareness Week Jan. 9-14 to promote vocations to the priesthood, diaconate and consecrated life through prayer and education.

This distinctive week gives Catholics an opportunity to renew prayers and show support for those who are considering one of these vocations.

"It is our responsibility to help children and young people develop a prayerful relationship with Jesus Christ so they will know their vocation," said St. Louis Archbishop Robert J. Carlson, chairman of the bishops' Committee on Clergy, Consecrated Life and Vocations.

"Through a culture of vocations in families, parishes, schools and dioceses, Catholics can nurture an environment of discipleship, commitment to daily prayer, spiritual conversion, growth in virtue, participation in the sacraments and service in community," the archbishop said. "Without this environment, promoting vocations becomes simply recruitment. We believe we have much more to offer our young people."

People can visit the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' Facebook page – face book.com/usccb – during the week to see examples of clergy and religious. They also can view reflections under the vocation retreat tab, where each day a Scripture passage, reflection and prayer will be posted.

National Vocations Awareness Week began in 1976, when the U.S. bishops designated the 28th Sunday of the year for this event. In 1997, the celebration was moved to coincide with the feast of the Baptism of the Lord, which was Jan. 9 this year.
Father Moroney promotes vocations at casual lunches with students

By Barbara Chenevert
Staff Writer

It’s the question that always comes up: “Did you ever want to get married?”

A seventh-grade student poses the question to Father Mike Moroney, pastor of St. Alphonsus Church in Greenwell Springs, during one of the gatherings the priest hosts for students at his rectory.

Once a month, Father Moroney has lunch with about a dozen seventh- and eighth-grade students from St. Alphonsus School in an effort to encourage them to think of their vocation, whether it be to the priesthood, religious life, married life or single life.

“It’s an opportunity for them to get to know the rectory and the priest, and to see that priests have lives just like everybody else,” he said. “They can ask questions. It doesn’t have to be about vocations. It can be about the church or whatever. We talk about different vocations a priest or religious can have — teaching, nursing, college professors. We don’t push,” he said.

A lunch of homemade hamburgers, chips and drinks is prepared by Tony and Jeannine Cockerham, who represent Knights of Columbus Council 2801.

“We have to prod them and get them laughing, but before long they will start asking Father Moroney questions like, ‘Did he ever have a girlfriend?’” Tony Cockerham said.

“If all pastors who had schools would do this, it would really be helpful for our vocations,” Jeannine Cockerham said. “This puts a real face and a human element to the priests. Father Moroney is very interested in sports, and the kids like that, she said.

For most of the students, the lunch represents their first time inside a rectory.

As a group arrives for a Dec. 15 lunch at the rectory, Father Moroney breaks the ice with a question. “Any of ya’ll have tickets to the big game?” referring to the Jan. 9 BCS championship game.

As the students hesitantly answer, he switches the subject to Christmas, then deer hunting, then their pets until finally a relaxed atmosphere takes over and they are all willing and eager to talk. After each person introduces himself or herself, Father Moroney talks to them about the various occupations that religious or priests can have in the medical field, teaching profession, parish ministry or service to the poor.

Deacon Ronnie Hebert chimes in with information about the life of a deacon, encouraging the students to let God into the decisions they have to make and to be open to him. The Cockerhams talk briefly about the blessings of married life.

Then the table is open to questions, and the students are not hesitant to ask:

“How old were you when you knew you wanted to be a priest?” “Why can’t priests get married?” “What responsibilities does a priest have?” “How much is a priest paid?” “What interests did you have as a kid?” “What is your favorite time in the liturgical year?”

And of course, “Did you ever want to get married?”

Father Moroney takes it all in stride, giving complete answers to each question.

“I love children. If I were not a priest, I hope someone would have wanted to marry me,” he said with a laugh. “But when I made this decision, I knew I had to live with it and give marriage up,” he told the students.

Father Moroney, who was born in Ireland, said he was 21 and working for an engineering company in London when he decided to become a priest.

He was doing volunteer work with a priest who worked with kids who had run away from home, and that sparked his interest in a vocation to the priesthood. When he met the late Bishop Robert Tracy and Bishop Stanley Ott, who was not yet a bishop, he decided he wanted to serve in the Diocese of Baton Rouge, where he has been his entire priesthood.

Priests can’t get married because it is a law of the church, he told the students. The rule could change at some time in the future, but for now there are a lot of good reasons for it, he said. Priests are always on the go and don’t have much time for a family, he said.

A priest is on call 24/7, he told the students. They celebrate Mass, visit the hospital and homebound, conduct funerals, counsel people struggling with various issues, and some oversee a school.

The vocations program at St. Alphonsus is in its fourth year, although Father Moroney said he has hosted similar programs in other church parishes where he has served. So far, at least one student who attended the lunches in the past is now in a discernment stage for a religious life and has returned to St. Alphonsus to talk to the students.

The vocation talks go hand-in-hand with what the students are learning in religion class in the school, Father Moroney said. And a similar program is also in place for

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He will enroll at Notre Dame Seminary in New Orleans. Seminary tuition is paid by the diocese and by the family, when possible. “We are paying the lion’s share of it,” said Father Lorrain. “The cost is never an issue when we are determining a man’s call to serve God.” He added that this is the reason the seminary scholarship funds are so important.

In this diocese seminarians need to know that they will become pastors within a few years of their ordination, which will require leadership and maturity as individuals, said Father Lor-
Young women religious say prayer is big part of discerning vocation

By Emily Lahr
Catholic News Service

WASHINGTON — When she professed her vows, the ceremony was like a divine wedding, said Sister Bethany Madonna, a member of the Sisters of Life in New York.

The church was filled with flowers and the voices of the nuns as they chanted the hymns, she said. “Heaven comes down to earth.”

Sister Bethany, raised in a Catholic family in Melbourne, Fla., always thought she would be a mother and have a large family. “I always thought I would be married to a wonderful man like my dad.”

After studying abroad in Italy and living with two communities of sisters, she fell in love with the beauty of religious life, she told Catholic News Service. When a friend invited her to go on a “nun run” — participants visit several convents in the United States to promote the word of God through retreats, prayer groups and lay ministry formation, among other ministries. Verbum Dei has four centers in the United States. Besides San Francisco, the community is in Chicago, New York and Los Angeles, and in a number of other countries.

Sister Sara Postlethwaite, a member of the Verbum Dei community based in San Francisco, the Verbum Dei sister. In 2004, she planned a four-month trip to the Philippines to search for answers about her vocation; she stayed eight months.

“I was expecting a set of instructions,” Sister Sara said, but her full discernment of a vocation came when she returned to England.

In 2006 she arrived in San Francisco as a Verbum Dei novice. She took her first vows in 2008. Until she takes her final vows in a few years, she continues to study theology at the Jesuit School of Theology in Berkeley, Calif.

“God doesn’t stop calling women,” said Sister Carmela Marie, a member of the Dominicans of Hawthorne, N.Y.

The religious community, founded by author Nathaniel Hawthorne’s daughter, Rose, ministers to people with incurable cancer. Sister Carmela said they accept terminally ill clients who have run out of options, cannot afford hospice care or have nowhere to go.

Sister Carmela, who grew up in Hinatuan, Philippines, always was attracted to religious life but her family discouraged her from pursuing it.

“For them it was like throwing my life away,” she said. She came to the United States to continue a career in nursing. Once in the United States, Sister Carmela felt a void without her family, and God was ready to fill it, she said. She entered the Dominicans of Hawthorne without informing her family in the Philippines.

At first, her parents were shocked when they learned she had chosen religious life, but now they are proud of her, she said. “My mother is proud to have a religious in the family.”

Three years after she enters the community, a Dominican novice takes temporary vows, and five years after that takes her final vows. Sister Carmela called the length of the discernment process “wise.”

This past September, Sister Anna Harper received the Hawthorne Dominican habit and a new name for religious life.

Harper, from Immaculate Conception Church in Denham Springs, said she was attracted to the community’s care of cancer patients. A nursing student in college, Harper had worked with cancer patients since she was 19.

“I really liked being able to get to know the patients,” said the novice, 26. Her day begins every morning at 5. Her schedule consists of prayer, classes, patient care and chores.

All four women religious CNS interviewed said the process of discerning one’s calling to religious life is a beautiful yet difficult journey. They advised young women considering religious life to trust Christ and to spend time with him in silent prayer.

“When I was 19, I would tell them to go find an adoration chapel,” said Harper. A survey on religious life in the United States that was released a year ago, showed that 75 percent of the women religious who responded said they had regularly participated in retreats before they entered a convent. Two-thirds said they had regularly prayed the rosary or participated in adoration.

The four who spoke to CNS encouraged young women thinking about becoming a religious to talk to a spiritual director and not be afraid to take the next step.

“You can test the waters, but at some point you have to wade in,” said Sister Carmela.
Grant awarded to study Hispanic/Latino vocations

WASHINGTON (CNS) — The Secretariat of Clergy, Consecrated Life and Vocations of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops has been awarded an $85,000 grant from the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation to explore why Hispanics/Latinos are underrepresented in the U.S. clergy and religious.

The study aims to identify common and distinctive cultural traits that affect the openness and ability of Catholic youth to respond to a call to a vocation to the priesthood or religious life. The secretariat has commissioned the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate at Georgetown University to conduct a national survey of never-married Catholics, ages 14 and older, to study their views about vocations and their own consideration of a vocation.

The one-year grant from the Los Angeles-based group will also be used to fund a seminar on consecrated life for the U.S. bishops.

Statistical data found in two reports commissioned by the secretariat, “The Class of 2011: Survey of Ordinands to the Priesthood” and “The Profession Class of 2010: Survey of Women Religious Professing Perpetual Vows,” indicate fewer than expected religious vocations among the Hispanic and Latino Catholic population in the United States.

Father Shawn McKnight, executive director of the secretariat, said Hispanics/Latinos constituted 15 percent of the ordination class and 10 percent of the religious profession class, but they are 34 percent of the total adult Catholic population.

“There is not enough objective data to explain the reasons for their underrepresentation,” Father McKnight said.

The secretariat seeks to identify specific reasons for their underrepresentation, to guide the efforts by dioceses and religious communities to promote vocations.

In the same reports, other cultures have shown a stronger representation of members becoming priests or religious. For example, Asians constitute 4 percent of the adult Catholic population in the United States, yet 10 percent of the past year’s ordination class were Asian. This has been a consistent trend during the past 15 years. In the 2010 class of women who made their religious profession of perpetual vows, 19 percent of the entire class was Asian.

The identification of cultural elements that support and challenge a culture of vocations among Asian, Latino and the general youth populations would also help collaborating organizations, such as the National Religious Vocations Conference and the National Conference of Diocesan Vocation Directors and those involved with the evangelization of young people.

“This study will aid in the new evangelization by serving as a helpful resource in determining emerging needs within the church as well as assisting in the development of timely and effective responses,” said Peter Murphy, executive director of the U.S. bishops’ Secretariat of Evangelization and Catechesis.

“The success of ministry among a growing number of Hispanics/Latinos requires leadership from the Hispanic/Latino community itself, especially in the priesthood and religious life,” added Jesuit Father Allan Deck, former executive director of the U.S. bishops’ Secretariat of Cultural Diversity in the Church.

“This proposal is the single most important effort to find the best ways to provide the priestly leadership necessary for Hispanics/Latinos to flourish in the church,” he said.
Sister Keri Burke heard God calling her

By Laura Deavers

“\textit{What are you doing here?} These are the words Keri Burke kept hearing, but no one around her had said them. She finally realized God was the one asking her what she was doing with her life because he had something he wanted her to do. God’s plan for this young woman, who was born in New Orleans but grew up in Baton Rouge, was for her to devote her life to caring for his people by becoming a member of a religious community.

In September, Burke became a member of the Marianites of Holy Cross during a Mass in the chapel at Our Lady of Holy Cross College in Gretna, attended by members of the order, her family and many friends. She had known many members of this order over the years because her mother had a cousin who was a member of that order.

Sister Keri graduated from Redemptorist High School and then earned a degree in math education at Louisiana Tech. Her family moved to Slidell while she was in college, and so when she graduated she took a teaching position in St. Bernard Civil Parish, where she taught for three years before moving to Pope John Paul II High School in Slidell.

Her strong sense of caring for God’s people, especially the children, was tested when she taught in the public school system because the administration of her school enforced an extreme interpretation of the separation of church and state. Sister Keri related that she “was not freely giving myself to the kids because I could not tell them I was praying for them.”

At Pope John Paul High School her first teaching assignment was freshman religion. One day, as part of the lesson, she asked the class, “If God called you today to be Moses to the Israelite people, what would you respond?”

“I realized that the question was not for them but for me,” Sister Keri said, noting it scared her. Because she did not want to have to find an answer to that question, she asked to be reassigned as a math teacher, her preferred academic subject, rather than a religion teacher.

While talking about the path that her sister took to join a religious community of women, Sister Keri admitted that her understanding of religious women had been based on what Hollywood presented in movies and television shows: women who spent all of their time in prayer. Her life was based more on Matthew 25 in which God blesses those who took action to help those in need. But as she tried to convince herself that God really didn’t want her, she felt haunted by the words she heard in God asking her, “What are you doing here?”

A few years after the episode in the freshman religion class, Sister Keri said she was coaching the volleyball team at the state playoffs when she again heard, “What are you doing here?”

“I turned to my assistant coach and told her I was coaching the team, only to realize that she had no idea what I was talking about because she hadn’t said anything,” said Sister Keri.

After a similar episode occurred at the beginning of the softball season, Sister Keri knew she had to find some answers to what she was doing with her life.

While working a Teen Encounter Retreat with Sister Renee Daigle, vocation director for the Marianites of Holy Cross, Burke told Sister Renee she wanted to talk to her at the end of the retreat. When the two women talked, it became clear what God was asking of Sister Keri.

Burke explained to the director that she never thought she would be a member of a religious order but was scared it could be what she was being called to do.

She said telling Sister Renee that she was interested in joining the Marianites of Holy Cross was very freeing.

After telling her parents, sisters and brother about her plans to become a member of a religious order and receiving their affirmation, Sister Keri entered the Marianites of Holy Cross in front of Sister Suellen Tennyson, third from left, congregational leader for the Marianites of Holy Cross, and Sister Kathleen Stakelum, formation director for the Marianites of Holy Cross. Father Tony Rigoli OMI, left, pastor of St. Jude Church in New Orleans, celebrated the Mass during which the vow ceremony took place on Sept. 24 at Our Lady of Holy Cross College in Gretna. Photo by Laura Deavers | The Catholic Commentator

Vocation to priesthood a life, not a career, says parochial vicar

By Emily Lahr

Catholic News Service

WASHINGTON — A vocation to the priesthood is a life, not a career, said Father James Arwady.

“Once I got into seminary, God took over,” said the priest, who was ordained in 2010 and is parochial vicar at St. Thomas a’Becket Church in Canton, Mich. Father Arwady, 38, was a successful engineer for the automobile industry before he felt called to the priesthood. He studied philosophy at Pontifical College Josephinum in Columbus, Ohio, for two years, and six years of theology at Sacred Heart Major Seminary in Detroit. He was ordained for the Detroit Archdiocese.

He advised all men who are discerning a call to the priesthood to “pray, pray, pray” to understand themselves and to hear their calling.

“Prayer is our lifeline,” Father Arwady told Catholic News Service in a telephone interview.

Jerry Byrd, who is currently studying for the priesthood, never imagined he would become Catholic, let alone a future priest, but today can hardly wait to live out his vocation.

“It’s funny how God gets his way,” said Byrd, 30, a member of St. Louis Church Parish in Batesville, Ind., who is at St. Meinrad Seminary in Indiana. He will soon be ordained as a transitional deacon, one of the final steps before priesthood.

Byrd talked to CNS about his spiritual journey. He grew up a Southern Baptist and was taught that Catholics were not Christian. He remembers going to Mass with a Catholic friend and sitting in the balcony of the church, hoping no one would notice he was not participating.

To his surprise, “it rocked my world,” he recalled, particularly with regard to the elevation of the host.

At age 17, he enrolled in a Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults program to become a Catholic. Before he joined the church, he heard a homily delivered by a priest one Sunday that sparked his interest in the priesthood.

“We need young men to be priests because we need the sacraments,” said the priest. “If you think you can do it, you probably can.”

He said even his mother, who at the time had no understanding of Catholicism or the priesthood, gave him a clay chalice after the Easter Vigil in 1998.

“I always thought that God had set you apart to be a minister,” his mother told him.

Byrd said his discernment process was not easy. He studied music in college, where he wrestled with two vocations — marriage or the priesthood. He continued to date and work as a youth minister for three church parishes. Finally, his girlfriend at the time encouraged him to enter the seminary.

Even in the seminary, he said, he would wake up some mornings and argue with himself over why he was there.

“It’s hard to really surrender,” he said, but noted it takes support from others during the discernment process. “Discernment is not about ‘me’ doing it, it’s about ‘us’ doing it,” added Byrd.

He also said he was encouraged about vocations, noting that when he entered St. Meinrad five years ago, there were 90 seminarians; today there are 135, and 140 are preregistered for next fall.

Byrd said the vocation to the priesthood is a beautiful love story. “It’s about falling in love, head over heels in love” with God, he said.
Archbishop says Catholic homes play major role in fostering vocations

By Emily Lahr
Catholic News Service

WASHINGTON — The theme of Pope Benedict XVI’s message for the 2011 World Day of Prayer for Vocations pointed to the important role Catholic home life plays in the promotion of vocations to the priesthood and religious life, said Archbishop Robert J. Carlson of St. Louis.

“The theme which the Holy Father chose places the burden on the local church to reflect on how it develops a culture of vocations,” said the archbishop, chairman of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops’ Committee on Clergy, Consecrated Life and Vocations. “We know that the vocation comes out of the home.”

“Every Christian community, every member of the church needs consciously to feel responsibility for promoting vocations,” especially in an era when God’s voice “seems to be drowned out by ‘other voices’ and his invitation to follow him by the gift of priesthood,” the pope said.

Pope Paul VI instituted the day of prayer in 1964 as a way for Catholics to focus on and pray for vocations.

In an interview with Catholic News Service, Archbishop Carlson said the majority of newly ordained priests said they were influenced by their church parish in their discernment for the priesthood.

According to results of a survey of members of the 2011 ordination class, released April 25, 66 percent of the respondents said it was their parish priest who encouraged them. Forty-two percent identified their mothers as having a major influence on their decision.

The annual national survey is conducted by the Center for Applied Research in the Apostle.

Archbishop Carlson said church parishes need to find a way to encourage the wider community to be more supportive of young men who choose a vocation to the priesthood, since many of them begin the discernment process at age 16.

Nine in 10 ordinands reported being encouraged to consider the priesthood by someone in their life. Of those responding ordinands who reported that they were encouraged to consider the priesthood, two in three (66 percent) said they were encouraged by a parish priest.

The survey showed that 57 percent of ordinands in the class of 2011 said they were discouraged from pursuing a vocation by friends and classmates, 52 percent said they were discouraged by a parent or other family member.

“Most young people don’t understand what discernment is all about,” Archbishop Carlson told CNS. “They have not been taught the formation first, said Archbishop Carlson.

The archbishop said he prays that those discerning a call to the priesthood will have the courage to listen and respond to their vocation.

“We invite them to listen to what they are hearing deep within themselves as to how God might want them to live their life,” said the archbishop. “And then (we) give them the support so they can have the courage to say yes.”

SISTER KERI: Affirmed by family

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Having those close to her support her decision was important to Sister Keri, who affirmed, “I can’t live life without the people I care about.”

Sister Keri has been teaching math at Cabrini High School in New Orleans but has other options for ministry as a Marianite of Holy Cross. Already she has had many opportunities to see the world through the eyes of a woman who has committed her life to following God’s call. These experiences make her see the world differently, which has helped her grow into the person God needs to care for his people.
Trappists communities unite to promote vocations

By Marnie McAllister
Catholic News Service

TRAPPIST, Ky. — Since the 1940s, when acclaimed writer and contemplative Father Thomas Merton drew the world’s attention to the Trappists’ Abbey of Gethsemani in Nelson County, men have come from around the world to join in its ritual life of prayer and work.

Father Merton died in 1968, and in the wake of his death, that interest has gradually waned.

Now, for the first time in its modern history, the Abbey of Gethsemani is working to promote vocations to monastic life. And it’s joining with other communities of monks and nuns to produce a coordinated campaign.

Until now, “we never needed to” promote vocations, said Brother Luke Armour, Gethsemani’s vocation director and choir master.

Gethsemani is home to one of the largest Trappist communities in the United States. The monks there are working with 16 other Trappist communities around the country to educate people about monastic life and, perhaps, attract some people to such a life.

Trappists are a branch of the Cistercian Order — formally, the Cistercian Order of the Strict Observance — who adhere closely to the Rule of St. Benedict, a book of guidelines for monastic life. There are 17 Trappist communities in the nation. Five are communities of women, called Trappistines.

Representatives of 16 of these communities met in March at Holy Spirit Abbey in Conyers, Ga. — near Atlanta — to coordinate their efforts.

Trappist Father Alberic Farbolin, a monk at the New Melleray Abbey in Peosta, Iowa, organized the meeting in Conyers in his role as the U.S. regional secretary for formation and vocations.

The vocation campaign, he said, will meet some challenges but also will offer opportunities to reach people in ways the communities couldn’t on their own.

“The Cistercian monks and nuns in the U.S. have traditionally sought to promote vocations locally, each house going its own way,” he noted in an interview conducted by email with The Record, newspaper of the Archdiocese of Louisville.

The meeting in Conyers generated “a good bit of energy and excitement,” he said. “A number of interesting ideas surfaced at the meeting which I am now in the process of trying to implement.”

Among their first fruits is the website trappists.org. It includes a listing of all the communities in the United States, information about visiting the communities, writings from “a monk’s diary” and “a nun’s diary,” and a question-and-answer section.

The site serves at least two purposes in Father Farbolin’s view.

It serves “to engage and communicate with young adults on the Internet — hoping to share with them an impression of who we are. It’s also a means to easily connect inquirers with those monks and nuns who are assigned and trained to work with them in discernment.”

“Our goal,” he said, “is not to attract thousands to the website, but to engage that very small group whom God might be calling to live in this very unique and beautiful way.”

The Trappists hope to convey something about their lives, too, in the form of a DVD that’s being planned.

Father Farbolin said the communities of Trappists in the United States range from about 10 members to 65.

The Abbey of Gethsemani, founded by a group of Trappists from France in 1848, is home to 50 monks.

The abbey saw its peak in membership, with 270 monks, in 1955. The youngest monk there today is 44. The eldest is Brother Camillus, 86, who’s lived in the community for 71 years. Three men joined the monastery in 2010.

Father Farbolin said New Melleray Abbey, where he serves, has seen a “falling off of inquiries” over the last 30 or so years. Those who have come “tend to be more mature, with careers behind them and a good bit of life experience.”

“The diversity of their backgrounds, nationalities, personal philosophies and family situations is really astonishing,” he noted. “Diversity is a good single descriptor for the state of our initial formation programs these days.”

The abbey at New Melleray will see two men make solemn professions this summer, said Father Farbolin. An account of this process can be found in the “monk’s diary” section of the website under April 6.

Others who are in discernment with the Iowa abbey include a microbiologist who became a hermit and a man who studied law with President Barack Obama, he said.

Such diversity is a hallmark these days of the Abbey of Gethsemani, too, said Brother Armour.

A few of the monks came to the monastery from Kentucky, he said, but the majority came from all over the United States and the world, including, Ohio, New York, New England, Texas, Peru, Vietnam, the Philippines and Canada. Their ages, backgrounds and talents vary widely, too.

Brother Armour, whose service as choir master at the abbey taps his skills as a musician, came from New York nearly 40 years ago.

“When I came as an aspirant, I was shown great care. I have indelible memories,” he said. “Now I’m in this chair (as vocation director); the roles are reversed. I take that role seriously and thankfully.”

He said he’s also prepared to find new ways of doing his job and adapting to the needs of young people.

During the conference in Conyers, the vocation directors discussed some characteristics of today’s young Catholics. Some of their attributes will fit well with monastic life, while others will make engaging them a challenge, said Brother Armour.

Young Catholics today tend to “value community, they need to feel welcomed by church and religious congregations,” he said. “We need to extend a welcome.”