

Biggest obstacle for Catholic nuns lies at home

by [Daniel Burke](#)

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(RNS) If she had listened to her parents, Sister Jenn Graus might never have professed vows last month to join the Congregation of St. Joseph.

Though lifelong Catholics, Graus' parents had met few nuns or sisters near their home in Sterling Heights, Mich., and assumed most were cloistered in remote convents.

They were uneasy when Graus, 27, told them about her religious calling. Would they ever see her again? Would the college education they scrimped and saved for go to waste?

"They had to overcome a lot of apprehension," Graus said. Gradually, her parents warmed to her vocational aspirations after Graus told them that, yes, she would be allowed to visit home, and no, she would not have to give up her teaching career.

Communities of nuns and sisters in the U.S. are weathering a season of demographic decline with far-reaching consequences for the country's vast network of Catholic schools, hospitals and social services.

But as Catholic leaders try to convince more young women like Graus to dedicate their lives to the church, recent surveys suggest that a big obstacle may lie surprisingly close to home.

More than half of the women who professed final vows to join a religious order in 2010 said a parent or family member had discouraged their religious calling, according to a survey conducted by Georgetown University's Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate.

Only 26 percent of the surveyed sisters said their mother encouraged them to consider religious life, and just 16 percent said their father cheered their choice, according to the report, which was released by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops on Feb. 2.

A more extensive survey conducted by the Chicago-based National Religious Vocation Conference in 2009 produced similar results.

After peaking at 180,000 in the mid-1960s, there are now just an estimated 59,000 nuns and sisters in the U.S. More than 90 percent are 60 or older. Less than 1 percent are, like Graus, under 40, leaving far fewer women to staff Catholic hospitals, charities and schools.

The steep drop in women's vocations has drawn the attention of the Vatican, which launched an ongoing investigation in 2009 to determine the causes. A separate probe is looking into allegations of doctrinal dissidence within an umbrella group of Catholic sisters.

In the last two years, just one woman has professed vows to join the Servants, Sisters of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, a 466-member community based in Scranton, Pa.

"Usually, parents are the most resistant," about women entering religious life, said Sister Ruth Harkins, the community's vocations director. "They certainly do not encourage it."

Sometimes parents object because they want grandchildren, or fear losing a daughter. Other times, they fret over their child's loss of freedom and independence -- an understandable but mistaken worry, according to many sisters.

"They really don't understand the choice," Harkins said. "They think we're leading them away and they won't have any contact with their daughter. They feel like they are losing their child."

Priests are more likely than sisters to receive encouragement -- and discouragement -- about their religious vocation from friends and family, according to surveys. That may be because more people are familiar with the priesthood and have strong opinions about it, according to church researchers.

In a presentation to the U.S. bishops in 2009, Brother Paul Bednarczyk, executive director of the National Religious Vocation Conference, flagged the discouragement from family and friends as a troublesome trend for the church.

"Although people want a full-time pastor in their parish or religious sister teaching their children in the Catholic school, ironically, they are reluctant to have their own son or daughter choose that vocation," Bednarczyk said in an interview.

At one time, having a nun or priest in the family was a source of pride for Catholics. Folklore even held that it would help parents and siblings gain a spot in heaven.

But smaller families, changing cultural norms, a lack of knowledge about religious life and the clergy sex abuse crisis all contributed to

a general decline in the desirability and prestige of Catholic vocations, according to Bednarczyk.

"Honestly, entering religious life is countercultural in so many ways," said Sister Mary Joanna Ruhland, associate director of the U.S. bishops' Secretariat of Clergy, Consecrated Life and Vocations. "It can be difficult for parents to see that their sons or daughters are going to lead a difficult life, and a life that may remain hidden in many ways."