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Internet is mission territory for founders of A Nun's Life Ministry

BY LAURIE STEVENS BERTKE
Special to the Chronicle

SYLVANIA—If you want to know about the real lives of Catholic sisters, it's best to go straight to the source. That's where A Nun's Life Ministry comes in.

Started as a blog in 2006, the ministry has since blossomed into a global online community with visitors from more than 160 countries following the sisters through their website, podcasts and social media.

Sister Julie Vieira and Sister Maxine Kollasch founded the ministry the same year they professed their final vows as members of the Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary (IHM), a

VIDEO:

Visit www.youtube.com/catholicchronicle to watch a video story about A Nun's Life Ministry with photos and video from a podcast they recently hosted with the Sisters of St. Francis of Sylvania.

religious community based in Monroe, Mich. With professional backgrounds in writing, advertising and theology, they turned to the Internet to share their love of religious life.

Sr. Vieira recalls religious congregations were sparsely represented online at the time, especially in the blogosphere. As they wrote about their lives as Catholic sisters, they discovered that readers were eager to engage in discussions and contact them for advice on discernment, prayer and other matters of faith and spirituality.

"They found a certain hospitality in our ministry and in the tradition of religious life," says Sr. Vieira. "That we were sisters was enough for them to know that they would find a safe and welcoming place to ask their questions."

The sisters branched into social media using popular services such as Facebook and Twitter and developed a discussion forum where visitors could talk with others who were discerning vocations. Several years ago while they were living and working in Chicago, they began podcasting, hosting live-streaming programs and archiving recordings through their website, a mobile device app and the iTunes store. Sr. Kollasch notes their podcasts have been downloaded nearly 300,000 times.

At the end of last year they relocated their ministry to Toledo, where they have an office with a small recording studio. They also have a mobile podcasting studio that travels with them around the country for their "Motherhouse Road Trip Series" that features different religious communi-

ties. The hosts are warm and funny and their programs are upbeat, sprinkled with light-hearted banter and references to popular culture. A chat room offered in conjunction with live podcasting events enables listeners to interact with the sisters and enter into the discussion.

Sr. Vieira and Sr. Kollasch took one of their shortest road trips Feb. 20 when they hosted a podcast with the Sisters of St. Francis of Sylvania. The recording is available at anunslife.org.

The website was recently redesigned and serves as a gateway to the online community. It includes podcasts, blogs and articles on religious life, discernment, prayer, spirituality and the Catholic faith.

Sr. Vieira and Sr. Kollasch strive to represent the diversity of religious life, and they have invited sisters and nuns from apostolic, monastic and cloistered communities to be involved in their ministry. Once a month, a sister from a different community facilitates an online "discernment chat" for anyone seeking guidance on how God is calling him or her.

The discernment chat has drawn participants from around the world. Sr. Kollasch remembers one occasion when they were joined by a young man from the Netherlands who was just beginning to think about Dominican life. It just so happened that a Dominican sister who had studied in the Netherlands and could speak to him in his native language was also in the chat room to answer his questions.

"I think that's part of the power of it, that people connect with other people around the world and share what it means to be on this journey from all of these different places," says Sr. Kollasch.

She notes A Nun's Life Ministry focuses on vocations in the broad sense. "We are all called by God to do something that will benefit the individual and the world," she says. "Our mission is to help people discover and grow in their vocation."

Sr. Vieira and Sr. Kollasch received the blessing of their religious community to establish A Nun's Life Ministry as an independent nonprofit. They have made the Internet their mission territory, and they believe religious should be positioned to serve as pastoral leaders online.



Sylvania Franciscan Sister Ann Carmen Barone, right, listens as Sister Julie Vieira, a member of the Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, addresses an audience during a live-streaming podcast event that was broadcast Feb. 20 from the motherhouse grounds of the Sisters of St. Francis of Sylvania.

Photo by Laurie Stevens Bertke/
Special to the Chronicle



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Sylvania Franciscan Sister Sharon Derivan, right, listens as Sister Maxine Kollasch, a member of the Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, addresses an audience during a live-streaming podcast event that was broadcast Feb. 20 from the motherhouse grounds of the Sisters of St. Francis of Sylvania. Listeners from around the world were invited to meet the Sylvania Franciscans by tuning in to the podcast that was hosted by A Nun's Life Ministry as part of its "Motherhouse Road Trip Series."

"People will say, 'there's a lot of garbage out there' and that's true. But if we don't go in there and make it a more hospitable place, that's all it's ever going to be, instead of being able to really use it to reach out and build those relationships and bring that spirit of the Gospel to it," says Sr. Kollasch.

Toward this end, the founders of A Nun's Life now offer consultation ser-

vices to help religious communities and other institutions connect with an online audience.

"We talk about it as a theology for social media," says Sr. Kollasch. "We look to the Catholic tradition, we look to the traditions of religious life, to say, 'how can that help inform the ways we can use social media to bring about that spirit of the Gospel online?'"