



# Online Ministry as a Catholic Sister

## *Giving Voice to the Reality of Religious Life*



By Sr. Maxine Kollasch, IHM

**"N**uns on the Internet? Really?" That was one of the first emails we received after launching *A Nun's Life Ministry* online in 2006.

We explained in reply that not only is it possible for Catholic sisters and nuns to be online, but it is also part of our very nature as women religious to go wherever the people are. Just as religious have gone out on mission, traveling to new places to provide education, health care, and pasto-

ral care, so too we turn to the Internet to be present to the online community. For nearly nine years, I have ministered online, connecting with people from across the world and using social media and Internet technology in ways that come from the heart of the Gospel and the tradition of religious life.

### A Call to Online Ministry

When I was received as a novice in 2001, I had no idea that online ministry would become my calling! At the same time, I knew that my congregation, the

Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary (IHM) of Monroe, Michigan, was deeply committed to the liberating mission of Jesus, wherever that mission took us! One of my favorite sayings from my congregation's Redemptorist co-founder, Father Louis Florent Gillet, is "We desire to be everywhere when we see so many needs!" Although he wrote these words in the 19th century, long before the Internet existed, I believe he would have fully embraced the online community with the same humility, simplicity, and zeal that he did in his everyday life on the Michigan frontier.

The notion of going out on mission in the online world was something that Sister Julie Vieira and I began talking about a few months before we professed final vows in 2006. After much prayer and conversation with each other and our IHM sisters, we followed the call to online ministry and launched *A Nun's Life*. We began writing about our lives as sisters on a blog that quickly expanded to a full website at *aNunsLife.org*, allowing for more information and interaction with our visitors. We further expanded to Facebook, Twitter, and a variety of other social media. Within a few years, we began to broadcast over the Internet using livestreaming podcasts, so that people could see us, hear us, and interact with us and each other by way of a chat room.

### The Inspiration for *A Nun's Life Ministry*

The inspiration for *A Nun's Life Ministry* was our own love of religious life. Reflecting on our own “pre-sister” days, we realized that unless people came in contact with real Catholic sisters and nuns, they might not know what this calling is really like, let alone be able to imagine themselves in it! We also realized that there was no shortage of stereotypes about Catholic sisters and nuns—from Sister Mary Martini cocktail napkins to nun characters in movies such as *Sister Act* and *The Sound of Music*. (BTW, I am living proof that not all sisters can sing and play guitar!)

We committed ourselves to using the Internet and social media to give voice to the reality of religious life, doing so through the perspectives of those who are actually living the life! We have collaborated with sisters and nuns in congregations around the world to talk about religious life and to be present to the online community. As religious, we each draw upon centuries of experience within the tradition of religious life in areas such as discernment, prayer and spirituality. We also draw on our unique charisma, be it IHM, Franciscan, Mercy, or Notre Dame, in order to tap into the gifts of our diversity! By connecting religious with the online community, *A Nun's Life* brings the

tradition of religious life into conversation with people's everyday lives.

### Every Person is Called by God

The foundation for *A Nun's Life Ministry* is that each person is called by God to a vocation that benefits the individual and the world. No matter who you are, no matter what your story is, you are called by God! Our mission is to help people discover and grow in their vocation. It is gift to be able to walk with people who want to grow in their relationship with God, who want to make the world a better place, and who are discerning God's calling in life. The Internet gives all of us a chance to connect and to nurture life-giving relationships.

### A Day in the Life of an Online Sister

On some days in my ministry, I don't travel far beyond the short miles between the convent and the office. Yet I am in touch with many people! In the morning, I might be responding to emails from people in Zambia, California, Argentina, and Florida. In the evening, I might be hanging out after our livestreaming podcast in the *A Nun's Life* chat room with people of all ages and all walks of life.

On other days, I travel far from home. In 2013, we launched the Motherhouse Road Trip series, where we travel across the United States visiting different motherhouses, monasteries, and ministry centers of Catholic sisters and nuns. But we don't go by ourselves—the online community comes along on the ride. Whether traveling by air or road, we use social media to share with the online community the sights and sounds of the trip. We introduce the online community to the community of sisters or nuns that we're visiting. We tour their campuses, meet the sisters and the women in formation, and host a livestreaming podcast and chat room conversation.

### Relationships are Key

Just like sisters who minister “offline” in schools and parishes, in cloisters and

in retreat centers, and in prisons and in board rooms, my work also centers on relationships. On *aNunsLife.org* and on all the places we are present online, we emphasize interactivity, engagement, and hospitality. We offer a safe place for people to ask their questions about God, faith, and religious life. We engage pastorally with the person struggling alone with two jobs and three young children. We connect people who are discerning religious life to communities that might be home for them. We converse with religious, scholars, tech experts and many others from a wide variety of fields who are part of this ministry. We pray with people, and we walk together on the spiritual journey.

### Always an Adventure

Being a Catholic sister is truly an adventure. I cannot imagine my life without religious life or the online community! I feel as much at home in the archives of a congregation, researching stories for my new blog “History Nun,” as I do at home, praying with a global community on an evening prayer podcast. I am in awe at how God is truly present in all things and ever drawing us closer – be it online or offline! I am grateful to my own IHM Sisters and to the thousands of other sisters and nuns who share the adventure of religious life. And I am grateful to the World Wide Web for connecting me with an online community that strives to live life fully in the spirit of the Gospel. ■

#### Captions

1. We talk with two Sisters of Providence of St. Mary-of-the-Woods, Indiana, during a livestreaming Motherhouse Road Trip podcast.
2. Sister Julie Vieira (left) and Sister Maxine Kollasch (right)
3. A sister and a college student enjoy time with each other and *A Nun's Life Ministry* at National Catholic Sisters Week 2014.

#### SR. MAXINE KOLLASCH, IHM

Is a member of the Sisters of the Immaculate Heart of Mary in Monroe, Michigan. She is the cofounder and director of *A Nun's Life Ministry*. Sister Maxine has Master's Degrees in Theology and in Advertising and extensive experience in corporate communications.