



We need a fresh perspective on religious life and a new way of thinking about the present and future.

Most of these particular young people are not possible vocation candidates for Kremsmünster Abbey, but the abbey offers faith development programs to a wide swath of young people because there is a need. The contact with youth is good for members of the abbey. And the programs help build up the wider church.

BY FATHER BERNHARD  
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United States he earned a master's in theological studies at Mount Angel Seminary in Oregon where his thesis was on Benedictine missionaries on Vancouver Island. For his doctoral dissertation on American theology, he was at Duke and Yale. In 2000 he entered Kremsmünster Abbey where today he is director of vocations, novice master, and spokesperson for his abbey. This article is the written version of the talk he gave at the 2014 NRVC convocation.

# 11 reasons to keep building our future

*"See, I am doing something new!" (Is. 43:19)*

**M**Y OWN FAITH JOURNEY that led me into the monastery was shaped a great deal by theologians, priests, and religious in this country. Therefore I stand here in front of you with gratitude and affection for a country where, in my 20s, I found vital religious traditions and outstanding persons in the Catholic Church and beyond. If I can contribute something useful to your ministries through this address, then I will be delighted.

To begin my reflections, I first want to identify common ways of thought that, to my mind, lead us down a blind alley. My first question is: does the past have to be normative for the future?

Trapped in the past?

In the Austrian church we frequently judge our present situation by referring to the past: "If we had as many members as we used to, then ...."

“If we could again staff our school, then...” The implicit assumption is that the future will be mastered if it is like the past. Nobody says this so bluntly, but to my mind this is the underlying belief. This is natural of course. If you are 70 or 80 years old, and so are the bulk of your community members, then of course, it’s natural to think that the future will be bright if it recaptures the abundance you once knew.

This is the logic of the “again,” and with this kind of logic, we do not discover new ways that lead forward. For example in my abbey young confreres might suggest something, and the argument against it is, “We have done this since the year 777, why change it now?” Or, “We have been around for 1,200 years, and we should change our ways because a few young people think so?”

Sometimes our communities appear to have vows that are not obedience, celibacy and poverty, but rather the commonly held assertions: “It has always been like this. If everyone could alter our life, where would this lead?!” These are things I have heard from members of my community. Young people find this a challenge, both within and outside our communities.

Here is another small example. Right now we have a 24-year-old novice. He once picked up the 1965 directory of my community, flipped through it, and said (rightly): “Most of us were already here at that time!” For someone his age, 1965 was the Ice Age; it was the time of dinosaurs. Even our books on the abbey’s history are not recent; they are decades old. This is just one reason we need the perspective of young people, to see what our communities look like, how they are perceived from the outside.

## 1. Numbers never say it all

Connected to this focus on the past, wherever we look within religious life in Austria we find a loss in numbers. It seems that the church and religious orders are losing ground. We stare at these losses.

The key word in our discussions is “still.” How many are there still in your abbey? How many still are teaching in the abbey school? We frustrate ourselves constantly because we compare ourselves to a past that cannot be compared to the present. We concentrate on numbers. Why? I think in our lack of orientation and security, we want to hold fast to something. Also, the dominance of natural sciences in the West means that what counts are things that we can measure. Even if what we’re saying with our numbers is that things have gotten worse and will get worse, it gives us some security to be able to say that, to document it.

In addition, the economy plays a vital role in our world, and in economics, success is measured by increases. We adapt this type of thinking quite easily in religious life, but it isn’t necessarily a good idea. Is success really a matter of increase in our life?

## 2. My abbey is a living example

Now I’d like to take a look at my abbey. It looks quite romantic and peaceful in this photo, but it’s actually quite a busy place. We have a school and an observatory, and it’s quite vast, with many buildings that have been added over time, dating back to our founding in the 8th century.

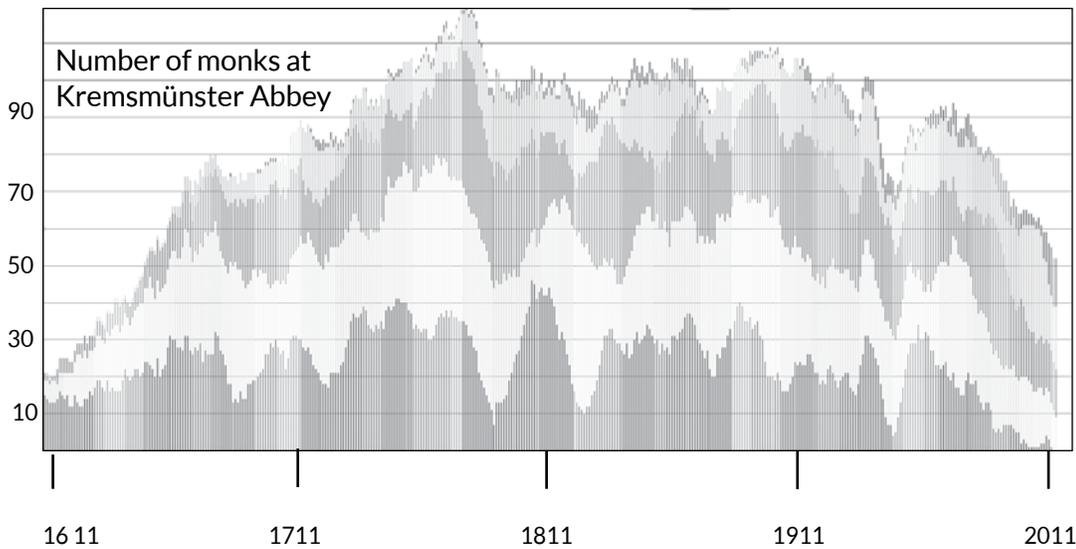
Now here is another picture of my abbey using numbers (see the graph on page 14). This graph shows the changes in the number of monks. If we look at just the



Kreamsmünster Abbey in Austria.

last 300 years, we see that we have never been so few in number over the last 250 years as we are now! And it will go down further. The age distribution is hard to see, but it is indicated by the different shades, oldest the top and youngest at the bottom. Our average age is 60. A third are between 75 and 85. The conclusion, then, is we will die out. There are hardly any monks between 20 and 30. I’m actually the third youngest monk in my monastery at the age of 43; we have one monk in his 20s and one in his 30s.

Looking at the whole graph, we see the last 400 years and detect a different picture. Suddenly we detect that our present situation is not such a disaster but rather that we have had this before: 350 years ago we had the same number of monks as today, and before that, we had even less. We were only 20 men 400 years ago. So it’s a matter of what you look at. This is a history that you might not have here in the United States.



not show that we are conditioned to see more acutely the negative rather than the positive during our times of transition?

What makes this experiment especially interesting is this. The first group takes into account almost exclusively quantitative arguments (less church attendance, fewer vocations), whereas the second group points out mostly qualitative traits

Now let's go further back. I might point out that there are not clear records for every year, but we can still say that during the first 800 years there were, on average, perhaps 20 to 30 monks. During the Reformation, at one point, we only numbered seven!

This means that the times when we numbered around 100 were the exception (that is, from the 1730s to the 1970s)—but the memory of that exception is deeply rooted in a community that is aged and saw these swelling numbers in their younger years. Every year a few pupils from the boarding school settled into the novitiate after graduation. For most of our members today, this kind of large and growing community was normal.

There were two historically unique periods—unique for the large numbers of members: during the 19th century and again in the 1950s. During these two periods, Austria experienced tremendous upsurges in Catholicism. It is only now that my monastery is going back to what is more statistically “normal” over the long period of our 1,200 year history. Clearly, new times call for new standards.

### 3. New times need new standards

Let me tell you about a small experiment that I have conducted with a parish council and then also with a group of religious. First I divided the parish or the religious into two groups. One group I asked to identify signs of a deep crisis in the parish or religious order. I asked the other group to report signs that the parish or religious order is lively and vibrant. In my experience, the first group, dedicated to a disastrous reading of church crisis, has twice as many entries as the second group. Does this

(high relevance of the church in periods of personal crisis, spiritual competence of religious). Once again we see how dangerous it is only to look on numbers and compare our time with a past situation.

A merely quantitative investigation of how the church and our communities develop does not capture vigorous forms of religious practice that emerge ever new. Such a narrow perspective sees success and flourishing communities only in terms of large numbers of members. This type of analysis is not able to capture promising paths into the future—a future that certainly will be different from the past. Such a perspective is blind to new developments in religious life. We have to take pains not to adopt it for ourselves. Otherwise we limit our view to a game of increase and decrease.

The Catholic milieu of the 1950s, when it was part of being Austrian to be Catholic, cannot be compared with the increasingly pluralist world of the 21st century where religion has become a matter of choice. Comparison can be a vice. The Desert Fathers tell us: “Do not compare yourself with others and you will find peace” (*Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, No. 788). We always read this at a personal level—that we should not compare ourselves to a confrere. But I think we also should not compare our time with the past. To my mind, the magic of numbers and the comparison with the past paralyzes the church and religious orders in Austria to a great deal.

We try to implement reforms, to address our community crisis with reforms, and of course many times it doesn't work. Some things have run their course, and we have to be ready to let go. We need a new mindset. We need to be ready to let go ... that does not mean we have capitulated. It is difficult to be open to change within a

culture where long traditions reign and change is often seen as something we do better without.

Yet we need to make room for other things. I want to call attention to the perspective of young people. They do not see a loss if things change and if former numbers are not reached. Young people rather want change and see in it a promise for the future. They do not have the fixed idea that the community they are interested in ought to return to what it was like in the past, and they do not so easily buy into the unrealistic wish that the future is only mastered if the community numbers increase to what they were in the 18th century or after World War II. It's important to free ourselves of false expectations and be open to the future

*"I will lead them into the desert" (Hos. 2,16)*

#### 4. Vocation crisis as spiritual growth?

We all agree that we can and should do our best to increase vocations and prepare ourselves and our communities for the future. But I think it is a temptation to expect this only from our own efforts. Authentic Christian renewal does not start with programs but with a new awareness of God's loving care.

We have to give room to lamentations in our communities because sometimes things are really tough. We have to say goodbye to things that were important for decades. I don't want to deny the difficulty. In my breviary, next to Psalm 74, I wrote "crisis of our monastery." The passage is this: "Our God, why have you completely rejected us?" Verse 9, "There are no more miracles and no more prophets. Who knows how long it will be like this?" The psalms are full of this sense of being lost.

Then we have the example of Hosea. The Lord said: "So I will allure her. I will lead her into the desert and speak to her heart." (Hos. 2:16) The place of love is the desert, where God wants to renew his covenant. "She shall respond there as in the days of her youth, when she came up from the land of Egypt." (Hos. 2:17) Apparently Israel has forgotten God precisely in the land where milk and honey flow, at the worldly feasts, in the sedate life of the bourgeoisie (cf. Hos. 2:15). In the desert, God and his people are together again, returned to their first love that will lead them into the future. Thus renewal starts as an interior conversion. It is God's initiative and not our reasoning that leads us to renewal.

The noted German theologian Gisbert Greshake describes the modern church as having been led into the desert. She has to appreciate herself anew as the pilgrim people of God; the church is called out of the secure



Painting of the Transfiguration over the high altar in the Kremsmünster Abbey

lands where she has been well established. The church, claims Greshake, must return to its formative phase when Israel and the Great Church emerged out of a desert experience. In our time—as in past periods—God wants to start anew to form his people. Our guides must be those people who have fruitfully dealt with the desert. We have to find the oasis in which faith blossoms under current conditions.

If we understand our current situation as one of being in the desert, then we understand why Israel started murmuring and why we shouldn't do it. We can understand why St. Benedict is so hard on murmurers, because one monk can prevent the others from moving forward, from hearing God speak to the community. If we murmur we leave reality where it is and remain on the surface. We point out what is not going well, complain about it—without seeing deeper and realizing that there might be a call for conversion.

Maybe things that are very difficult for us and hurt us can help us to reconcentrate on God. Maybe without

our current crisis we would not need God anymore. This is why Pope Francis is very hard on religious orders and asks again and again if we are really missionaries and if God is at the center of our wealth and might? This is the desert experience. I know it's very difficult—I certainly don't deny that—but I think we need this perspective to understand our time. Perhaps this brings us closer to a broken world, a world that lacks orientation. If our religious houses did not have problems with disorientation, how could we be part of this world? Recently the 95-year-old Helmut Schmidt, former German chancellor, said in an interview, "All of European institutions are in deep crisis." And the church should not be in crisis? And the monasteries and convents? We are part of this world. Perhaps this crisis brings us closer to a people in deep crisis. That is the theological meaning of poverty, not just not having money or being deprived of something.

And then we have the *kenosis*, the outpouring described in Philippians 2. I have experienced *kenosis* in my own community. I recall being the community spokesperson at a time that we were dealing with all of these issues at the same time: the sexual abuse scandal, a lack of vocations, mental tiredness, and spiritual fruitlessness. We had people not even showing up to prayer. I did a retreat at this time, and there was a very wise director there who guided me, and he said, this is *kenosis*. Look at Christ. Did you not know you have to follow him? You need to go to recreation even when you'd really rather read in your room, even when you know the jokes of your confreres will not be that good, when you know you don't prefer their company. This is *kenosis*, enter it! See it with the eyes of God. See it as the fallen Christ. Empty yourself. This is the experience of our communities, and it is our experience personally. We have to teach this to the young people entrusted to us.

## 5. Failure is different with Gospel vision

Now let us turn to St. Benedict. On the one hand, we know he is the very successful founder of monasteries. But his biography can also be read as a series of failures. In Rome he discontinued his studies. In Vicovaro he was asked to become abbot, but he apparently was too strict. So they murmured—and then they poisoned him. He said to them: why did you do this to me, brothers? That is why he is depicted in paintings holding a chalice with a snake coming out. So he left again and returned to a solitary life at Subiaco, *habitavit secum*; "under the eyes of God." He started becoming more and more well-known, but a priest nearby did not like it. He was jealous

of Benedict. So Benedict left. Again.

At Montecassino Benedict writes, "The abbot must understand that he has undertaken care of the sick, not tyranny over the healthy." So we see that desert experiences of failure can become a blessing.

Knowing that we have these imperfections, we need to ask ourselves, Do we depict our communities as being only for the perfect? Are they only for saints? Do we introduce young people to a realistic view of religious life? Are we preparing them for the crises, for the need to recommit after perhaps 10 or 15 years? Do religious who undergo severe challenges see their crises as a call for a new beginning or only as an invitation to reverse their decision to make vows?

Do we talk about the demons? They are a very deep part of our spirituality. Is there Christian life without combat and fighting? All of this is part of our tradition, although it certainly is not part of "Christianity Lite." The road to religious life is not just ice cream and brownies.

## 6. We can be transfigured

And so we turn to the Transfiguration. What precedes this moment in the synoptic Gospels is Jesus speaking about his suffering and death.

In the Kremsmünster Abbey, above the altar in our church hangs a painting of the Transfiguration. It is painted and positioned so that everybody who comes to our church gazes on Christ. When young people come, this is what they see. In the painting itself everybody is focused on Christ: Moses, Elijah, the angels, and three disciples. This means that we too should gaze on Christ to bring people to the center of Christ. This is what the young people see, and this is what they are searching and longing for, too: a relationship with Christ. And so we can ask ourselves, are we centered on Christ, or do we look elsewhere for fulfillment?

This is a question that Pope Francis is asking us. A religious life that is narcissistic does not attract others, does not reach out to them, but it is only concerned about one's own well being. Our lives need to be about more than superficial talking, making bad jokes ... they need to be about zeal, vision, and mission. Let's be critical about ourselves and the appearance we and our fellow sisters and brothers make. Let's re-center our gaze upon Christ. This is our VISION.

As you can see in the painting, the left angel is pointing with his right hand to Christ and with his left hand, he is pointing to Christ transfigured for us in the eucharist. The angel is pointing to the tabernacle.

Christ wants to live in every one of us; he wants to “take his place” in our world, he wants to abide with us, in us. The right angel is touching his heart with his right hand, telling us that faith is a matter of the heart, what counts ultimately is love! With the left hand the angel points to Christ, who is love transfigured.

“It is good to be here” is what the disciples tell Jesus during the Transfiguration story, but the next command is: Go forth! Move into the future, which is MISSION. We cannot rest where we are. “Rise, and have no fear.”

We need confidence that what we stand for has a future. However, the problem is often that consecrated men and women do not believe religious life has a future. This is not new. The ancient abbey of Mondsee that founded our monastery in the eighth century was suppressed in 1791 by Joseph II. What is usually not said is that the monks did not think they had any future, and they asked the emperor to suppress them! There are letters and diaries in our archives telling us that some monks in my abbey did not think they had a future. The thinking went like this: “Benedictine life is dated; it does not make sense in our enlightened world, and celibacy doesn’t make sense; it is stupid.” This was 250 years ago.

And now this is happening again. To my mind, from the perspective as an Austrian monk living in the highly secularized world of Western Europe, the danger to religious life does not come from outside (e.g. new atheism), but from within. It comes from within when we hear a confrere say, “I cannot support a young person to enter in our abbey.”

During my own discernment process, a well known diocesan priest shocked me when he told me, “I really think that in our time you are better off not to join a seminary or a religious order. Today you can serve the church better if you get married, this way of life in the priesthood doesn’t have a future.”

## 7. God’s promise leads us on

Let me turn now to this idea of God leading his people forth to a new land. Genesis 12 starts with this God saying to Abram: “Go forth from your country.” This was not easy for Sarah and him. They faced the prospect of dwelling in tents and accepting a lower standard of living. But I think this might be our story, too—to go forth from the secure lands of the past, of your community, of what you got used to. “Go forth from your country ... to the land which I will show you.” Next: “And I will make you a great nation.” And then, “Now Abram was 75 years old when he departed from Haran.” Seventy-five

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years of age and he had to start anew.

Then in verse seven we learn, “To your descendants I will give this land.” The promised land is for those who are entrusted to us—this is our longing. The young people will inherit the religious life of the future. We can even have the generosity to say, it is great that this other community has young people. Perhaps we will not continue, but religious life will continue. It is not about us; it’s about the church. God has not promised that religious communities as they are, as they used to be, will have eternal life. He only said that the church, the Body of Christ, the pilgrim people of God, will live into the future.

Thus we can read these promises of abundant descendants in the Old Testament not with regard to numbers as we saw them in the 1950s, but with regard to abundant blessings and countless descendants in a spiritual way that cannot be measured merely by worldly standards.

## 8. New times demand new approaches

Now I want to tell you what I try to do as vocation direc-

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tor in my abbey and how we see this leading to a future that God gives us. I do not at all say that I have the recipe for a successful vocation ministry. I am searching myself, and there are certainly more effective and more vivid examples in Austria and Europe than what I present. I simply want to tell, from my limited experience, what I have found helpful and what this tells us about our work and religious life in the future.

Every first Saturday of the month the Kremsmünster Abbey has a half-day program called "Benedict Meeting Place" (*Treffpunkt Benedikt*) for young adults, typically well-educated young people, both single and married, who are in parishes that don't have programs that suit them. Some of them don't even attend church, but they come to us. Religious houses play an important role in meeting this need. We are always surprised at how many people come, usually more than 100 from around the region attend the Benedict Meeting Place.

We start with Benedictine vespers, often with a band and modern music. Then we have a one-hour lecture, usually with a Benedictine spin. Then there is adoration. Eucharistic adoration is important because youth are always having to say things and read things, and they really like just being in the presence of God. We offer confession, and often have processions, too. We celebrate Mass together. Then of course there must be something to eat. Sports, too, are an important part of this program. Sometimes, maybe every three years, we will lead them through the monastery. My confreres can be shocked by the presence of all these young men and beautiful women, but this only happens sometimes, and it is important to the young people to see where and how we live.

Since my community has property in the mountains (for the timber that supports us) we also offer a week-long summer retreat program in the mountains. In addition, we invite young men to come and live with us in the monastery over a weekend.

## 9. We need to be with young people

My community has learned a few things from these experiences. First, we understand that religious communities need to be in contact with young people. The youth need to be part of our world, especially if we don't have many young members. Second, we know that we need time to develop this kind of programming. My predecessor had a parish in addition to being novice master and vocation director, but I do not. You need time to be able to start these kinds of programs.

We need a youthful spirit. We have to invite young

people into our communities—whether they enter or not, we need the spirit of youth to be part of our communities. I know of a community that fully expects to close down in the next several years. They invite young people to come into their community and share in their life. No one will enter, but they do it anyway because their lives have meaning for the young people. The sisters go to their weddings because the young people are part of them. I find this beautiful.

Inviting youth into our communities is also important for the few young people who do enter our communities. They see that other young men and women value religious life. They need “siblings” even if the siblings live outside the monastery walls.

## 10. We should be experts in discernment

In my country religious houses are more or less the only places where young people can find Christian guidance in decision making. Religious communities, along with Catholic university centers and a few parish priests, are the only place where they can find this. For this reason religious should become experts in decision making, in discernment. They should be open to whatever vocation a young person is leaning toward and not push them to enter their order. To offer this kind of guidance, religious houses might sponsor retreats and the like to encourage and support the discernment process.

This was important in my life. A sister of the Society of Faithful Companions of Jesus at Duke University helped me a lot. This was before I entered the monastery, and mostly I talked with her about my girlfriend back in Austria and the difficulty of our separation.

We have to accompany young people on their human and spiritual journeys and leave it up to them and God to make something with their lives. Perhaps we are returning to the time where—as in early monasticism—one spiritual father took much time and attention to guide a single young man to become a good monk.

## 11. Our networks enrich the church

Lay people are associating themselves with religious communities in a natural way, and they then become a new network for us. For example because of *Treffpunkt Benedikt* (Benedictine Meeting Place), young people show up for celebrations at the abbey; they celebrate their marriages in the abbey church. Some even tell us, “Kremsmünster Abbey has become my spiritual home.”

Of the three novices who have left during my time as

novice master since 2007, all of them still are associated with us in one way or another. They entered religious life, at the age of 19, two from our school—too early I think. One is in charge of the music in the *Treffpunkt Benedikt* program, and he sometimes spends weekends with us even though he will marry this summer. The second one sings every Sunday at our main Mass at our abbey church; and the third one is helping me to compile a new book about the abbey. They come back all the time, and recently one of the confreres said to me, “This is wonderful that they remain connected to us. Earlier in my life, it would have been impossible for someone who left formation to come back again.” What is happening is that we have new networks with young people. Several marriages have come out of our activities among young people. And this is also building up the church; maybe their children will be our new members someday. Maybe the laypeople will take on our ministries and build them up. We must enter into this work freely, without knowing exactly what the fruits for the church will be.

Do not get me wrong: I don’t think lay people will simply replace consecrated men or women. The church will always have people called to this particular form of discipleship. But is it not a sign of our times that lay people feel drawn to these spiritualities that formerly were associated only with consecrated people? Our spirituality is much broader, such that many people from all walks of life want to be associated with us. It would be disastrous if we only looked at new members and overlooked the fact that our spirituality is alive in the hearts of men and women who deliberately do not take vows but consider themselves part of the Franciscan, Dominican, or Benedictine tradition, to name just a few.

To conclude, I would like to let the Prophet Isaiah speak because God’s word always speaks to us in our own particular situations. From Isaiah 43:1-2, 18-19.

But now, thus says the Lord,  
who created you, Jacob, and formed you, Israel:  
Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;  
I have called you by name: you are mine.

When you pass through waters, I will be with you;  
through rivers, you shall not be swept away.  
When you walk through fire, you shall not be burned,  
nor will flames consume you....

Remember not the events of the past,  
the things of long ago consider not;

See, I am doing something new!  
Now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? ■