

Vocations to Religious Life and Single Life

*You seduced me, O Lord, and I let
myself be seduced;
You were too strong for me, and
you triumphed.*

—Jeremiah 20:7 (JB)

Captivated by Christ

Vowed religious can cry out with the prophet Jeremiah. They have been captivated by the Lord. Even though their faith in the Lord may bring them derision and reproach, even though they may wish to ignore the burning desire to follow him, they cannot. As Jeremiah lamented,

I say to myself, I will not mention him, I will speak in his name no more. But then it becomes like fire burning in my heart, imprisoned in my bones; I grow weary holding it in, I cannot endure it (Jeremiah 20:9).

Religious are not a class of people in the Church somewhere in between priests and lay people. In fact religious are called from both ways of life, the ordained and lay. Religious are also both women and men. Religious make a public profession of the evangelical counsels (poverty, chastity, and obedience). They vow to follow Jesus in a radical way, the narrower path. They enjoy an intimacy with the Lord that comes from

the total gift of self. Moved by the Holy Spirit, religious desire to be one with Jesus. They want Christ to be present in the world through them.

Religious have been with the Church since its earliest days. Recent years have seen a marked decline in the number of religious. Yet, new forms of religious life are taking form as lay people from both the single and married life participate in the ministries of religious communities by taking on associate roles.

In addition, more and more lay Catholics are committing themselves in a vocation to the single state, a way of life that allows solitude for personal reflection and more opportunities for love and service to the Church.

This chapter addresses the history, practice, and formation of vowed religious life as well as other callings for Catholics today, in particular to the single life.

• What about Jesus Christ captivates you so much you would dedicate your life to him?

• Why do you think religious life is compared with following Jesus along the narrower path?

Powerful Witness

Religious by their three vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience live like Jesus and call others to gospel values. Through these vows, religious exemplify a definition given by a Cardinal Suhard: "To be a witness is to live in such a way that one's life would not make sense if God did not exist."

Religious practice poverty. They do not have their own money and live a simple lifestyle, looking to God for all their needs. This way they can identify with the poor and inspire others to act for the poor and avoid greed.

Religious do not marry. This enables them to have an undivided love for God. Not being committed to one person, they are free to love all people. Their friendships provide the intimacy that everyone needs. Their joyful living of celibate chastity witnesses to the power of God's love.

Religious are obedient by trying to discern God's will for them, which for them are mediated through their community. Decisions about their lives and work are made in dialogue with the community leaders. They also follow a community Rule or Constitutions, guidelines for their congregation that have been approved by Rome. Choosing to obey is another way that religious identify with the poor who are powerless to control their own lives.



The Nature of Religious Life

In Pope John Paul II's apostolic exhortation *Vita Consecrata* ("The Consecrated Life") he compared the gospel story of the Transfiguration to religious life. At the Transfiguration, Peter, James, and John were taken up a mountain where they experienced the glory of Jesus. His face shone like the sun, and his clothing was bathed in white. A bright cloud overshadowed them and a voice declared, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him." The disciples fell prostrate in fear. But Jesus touched them and said, "Rise, and do not be afraid." Looking up, the disciples saw no one but Jesus. Then they went down the mountain. (See Matthew 17:1-8.)

Religious men and women through history have gone up the mountain with Jesus. In many different ways, each had a glimpse of God's majesty. They are so taken with Jesus Christ that they want to be with him. But, like those first friends of Jesus, they cannot stay on the mountain. They have to come down the mountainside and serve Jesus in other people. They begin to love Jesus in other people, especially in outcasts, the marginalized, and the poor. Also like Jesus, they come down the mountain to face the challenges and sufferings of human life. The lives of religious—past and present—serve as a beacon to all the baptized, reminding us of God and revealing to us the kingdom of God.

Tracing Religious Life

The history of religious life in the Church begins in the second century when widows and virgins were treated as special classes of Christians. The widows engaged in active ministry, while virgins lived a life of contemplation and prayer.

About a century later in the East, St. Anthony of Egypt sold his goods and went apart from the community to pray in the desert as a hermit. His holiness attracted the attention of others who came to learn from him. They also brought Anthony supplies for living, including food and water. They lived separately from Anthony but met for worship and instruction. Other early religious were:

- St. Pachomius (290-346). He introduced life in common and a rule to guide his companions. His sister became the leader of a group of nuns he founded.



- St. Basil (329-379). His monks participated in apostolic works.
- St. Jerome (345-419). He was another Church father who substituted intellectual work for manual labor in monasteries. He translated the Greek Bible to Latin.
- St. Eusebius (363). He organized the first clerical monastery.

St. Benedict (480-543) is known as the father of Western monasticism, giving it the basic organization it has today. He too was originally a hermit who attracted followers. Benedict gathered them into a monastery (in Greek, “to live alone”) under the direction of an abbot, a spiritual father and administrator. His monks took an additional vow of stability—besides poverty, chastity, and obedience—meaning they promised to remain in the same house for their entire lives. Benedict saw a monastery as a society that was independent of the world. His motto was *ora et labora*, pray and work. His rule was also used by women religious.

Benedictine monasteries were centers for civilization in the Middle Ages. Monks made laws, taught the people, and promoted agriculture and trade. They also hand-lettered manuscripts, helping to preserve culture. New orders of Benedictines—for example, Cistercians and Trappists—helped foster continual renewal of religious life.

In the Medieval period another new form of religious life developed: mendicant or begging orders. The Franciscans of St. Francis (1181-1226) and the Dominicans of St. Dominic (1179-1221) supported themselves by begging. Unlike the Benedictines, religious in these orders did not take a vow of stability, preferring instead the freedom to live in any house belonging to the order. This freed them to go from place to place evangelizing.

In the years that followed, orders for priests were formed called clerics regular. These new communities did little in common and often did not wear religious garb or habits. One example was the Society of Jesus founded by St.

Ignatius of Loyola (1491-1556). The Jesuits,

as they came to be known, promised to serve the pope anywhere and in any task he asked of them. The Jesuits were also the first to take simple vows instead of solemn vows. Simple vows meant giving up the *use* of one’s property; solemn vows meant owning no property whatsoever. Most religious today take simple vows. Some communities such as the Redemptorists, Passionists, and Salesians, take no public vows.

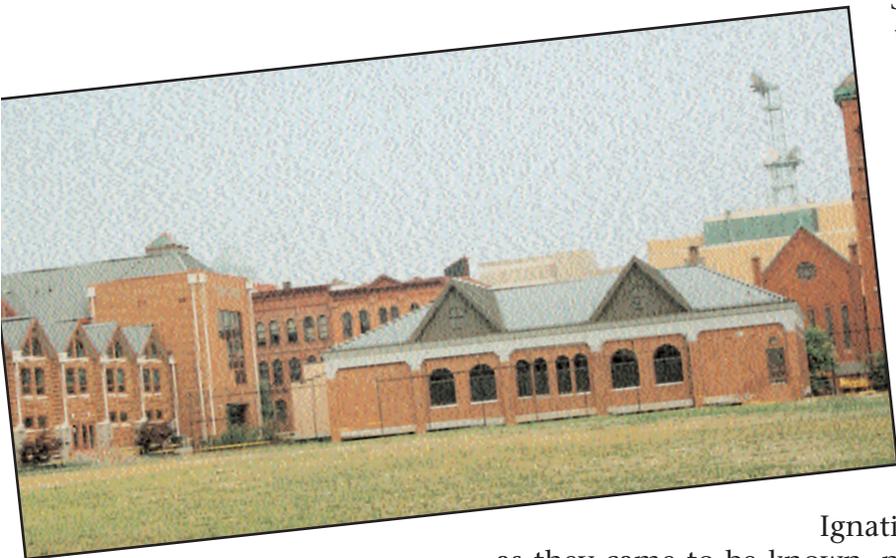
With St. Vincent de Paul (1580-1660) another new concept of religious life began. The order of nuns he founded, the Daughters of Charity, had no convent or cloister. They were free to go into the streets to teach, nurse, and do other apostolic works. Near the same time, St.

Many religious communities model themselves on the Church at the time of the apostles. Read the following passages from the Acts of the Apostles. How are the characteristics mentioned present in religious life today?

Acts 2:42-47

Acts 4:32-37

Acts 5:27-42

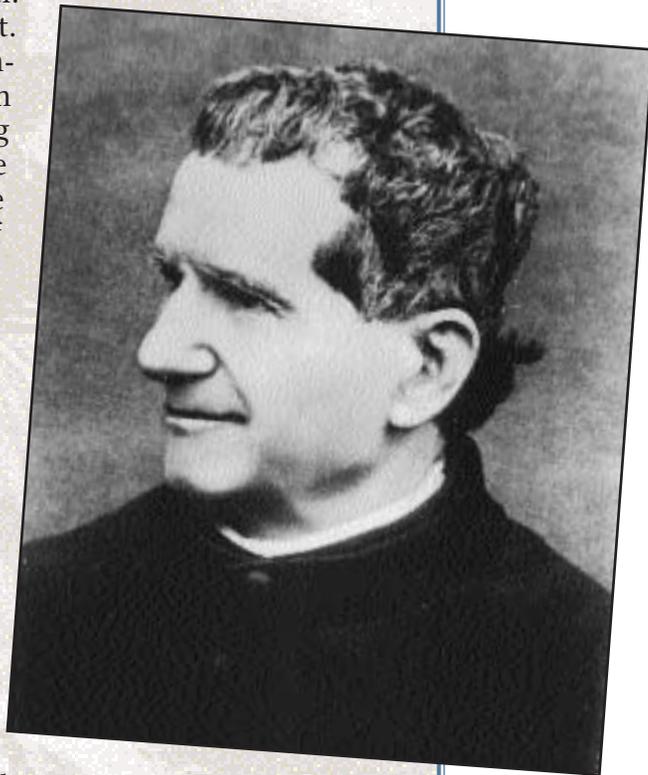


John Baptist de la Salle (1651-1719) formed the first community of brothers, the Brothers of Christian Schools or Christian Brothers. St. John Bosco founded another educational order, the Salesians, in the nineteenth century.

Early Salesians

Many of St. John Bosco's original Salesians (named for St. Francis de Sales) came from the poorest classes in Italy. He described the early days of his community:

Our household was not ideal. There was more than one upset. Clerics squabbled among themselves about the work. . . . From time to time I gave a warning here or there, but most of the time I just let things be, where there was no sin against God. If I had tried to root out all these habits with one stroke, I should have tried to root out all these boys (from the oratory). A wind of independence was blowing everywhere, which made it difficult to exercise command. . . . With prudence one had to work! I did my best not to be wanting in it, for I found so many good qualities in these good clerics: they were rather wild and, yet, hard workers, goodhearted, and so straight in their morals. I used to think, when the first fires of youth had died away, they would be invaluable. And I was not mistaken. (Quoted in *Ten Christians* by Boniface Hanley, O.F.M.)



After the French Revolution (1789-1799) many new religious communities began. Most of these focused on education because the revolution had prevented the faith from being taught and practiced. One of the orders, the Daughters of Charity, was founded by St. Elizabeth Ann Seton in Emmitsburg, Maryland. Her order established the first Catholic school in America.

The Second Vatican Council of the 1960s mandated that religious communities return to their gospel roots and the original spirit of their founders. It also called on them to adapt to the contemporary world. This charge led to a renewal of religious life. Many members left their orders. However, at the beginning of the twenty-first century new forms

of religious life have emerged. As God said to the prophet Isaiah, "Remember not the events of the past, the things of long ago consider not; See I am doing something new!" (Isaiah 43:18-19).

Religious Life in Transition

The numbers of religious have shrunk dramatically since Vatican II. In the mid 1960s there were more than 200,000 sisters in the United States. Now there are about 85,000. Many men and women have left religious life, and fewer young people are embracing it. The majority of religious today are gray-haired. The median age for women religious is 69; for men religious it is 61. Formerly, Catholic parents regarded it as a privilege when their child had a religious vocation. Now they are reluctant to support a child's vocation and may even strongly oppose it, especially if they have only one or two children.

Nevertheless, hundreds of religious congregations for both men and women remain in the Church today. Religious communities are classified as either diocesan or pontifical right. Diocesan communities are subject to the authority of the local bishop. Communities that are pontifical right are directly connected to the Holy See in Rome and may have their *generalate* or headquarters there.

Those religious who have remained or entered their communities in the years since Vatican II have faith in their vocation. They trust the Lord. As older communities die out, new ones arise. In 1991 Cardinal John J. O'Connor of New York founded the Sisters of Life. These sisters take a fourth vow "to protect and enhance the sacredness of all human life." The Sisters of Life administer the Dr. Joseph R. Stanton Human Life Issues Library and Resource Center in the Bronx. The sisters also host retreats for pro-life activists and help women with crisis pregnancies.

In Combermere, Ontario, a secular community of men, women, religious, and priests was founded by Catherine de Hueck Doherty. Called Madonna House, the institution is a training center for the lay apostolate.

Finally, the Missionaries of Charity, founded by Mother Teresa, is flourishing. The Missionaries of Charity reach out to the poorest of the poor, taking in the destitute and the dying, bathing their wounds and helping those near death to die with dignity. The order is composed of eight branches: active sisters, contemplative sisters, active brothers, contemplative brothers, missionary fathers, lay missionaries, volunteers, and sick and suffering co-workers.

• Besides the Transfiguration, what is another gospel story you associate with religious life? Explain.

• Which type of religious life described from history appeals most to you? Why?

• Define the elements of a contemporary religious community that you might found.

Renewed Commitment

A statement from the general meeting of the Sisters of Notre Dame in Rome in late 1998 summarized their continued commitment to their community's mission. It reads,

As Sisters of Notre Dame,

- gifted with a deep experience of God's goodness and provident care,
- led by the Spirit,
- challenged by the Word of God,

we, like Mary, give prophetic witness to Jesus and to his way of life. Seeing in the faces of humanity:

- a hunger for meaning
- a desire for unity
- a yearning for justice.

We commit ourselves to

- deepen and incarnate our spirituality
- build vibrant communities for the sake of mission
- transform society through prophetic action with and for others, especially the poor and marginalized that all may have life and have it to the full.



Characteristics of Religious Life

Religious make a public profession of vows, solemn promises to do something not usually required. They express love for Christ by imitating him as closely as possible. They en flesh in themselves the life he had in this world. Jesus of Nazareth was poor, chaste, and obedient. To be like him, religious vow poverty, chastity, and obedience. As one Franciscan describes it, the vows means, "No money, no honey, and I have a boss!" The three vows enable religious to carry out their mission.

As mentioned in Chapter 1, all baptized people are called to live the evangelical counsels. But religious live these counsels in a public, radical way. Material things, sexual love, and exercising one's liberty can all be good things. Religious surrender these legitimate goods for the sake of a higher good. They have a unique dependence on God in order to serve others for the sake of the kingdom. By their consecration and commitment religious are living signs of God's kingdom.

Community Living

Jesus chose to carry out his mission in community, with both men and women followers. For about three years these disciples were his constant companions. They shared all of life together: labor, food, money, joys, and sorrows. When Jesus sent out his disciples, he sent them out in pairs. He knew the value of companionship. After all, our God is communal, a Trinity of persons.

A distinct characteristic of religious life is belonging to community. From congregation to congregation, community life takes different forms. Each congregation was founded for a different purpose. Each has

its own identity and tradition. The founder or foundress had a particular charism, or gift to offer the Church. For example, St. Dominic founded a community that would promote the intellectual life of the Church through preaching and teaching. In 1890 in Baltimore, Mary Francis Cunningham founded the Mission Helpers of the Sacred Heart to meet whatever Church needs wasn't being met, such as teaching the faith to children who were not in Catholic schools.

Men and women seek out religious communities of like-minded people who share not only their commitment to faith and the Church, but also similar goals for ministry. When Sr. Irene Regina was in the process of discerning her vocation as a young adult named Mary, she attended a diocesan conference on vocations, hoping to get some clues to the ministries undertaken by the various religious communities. She knew she didn't want to be a teacher or a nurse. At the conference, Mary learned about the Daughters of St. Paul, whose main ministry is producing and distributing religious books and media. She eventually joined and professed vows with the community. Now she manages a religious book and media center for the Daughters.



Living in community gives religious greater stability in their way of life, encourages them in holiness, and makes their ministry more effective. Community living also develops one's virtue. Community members interacting are like rocks being shaken in a tumbler. They rub against one another until all the rough spots are gone and they are polished. Community life includes the usual personality clashes and squabbles that are a part of any family situation. But it also offers all of the love and support of family living.

When religious live together in convents, monasteries, or rectories, people of all ages, cultures, and temperaments share space, food, and goods. They share responsibilities such as cooking, cleaning, and shopping. They also share prayer time, experiences, talents, and new ideas. As they share life they try to live out the gospel principles: welcoming, tolerance, forgiveness, listening, withholding judgment, patience, and compassion. As in any family, there are hard times when forgiveness is needed to hold the community together, but a religious house is usually a joyful place.

Sometimes there are reasons why a religious must live alone. For example, there may not be a community house near the person's place of ministry. Religious who live alone still remain in communication with others in the community and experience support across the miles.

Prayer and Service

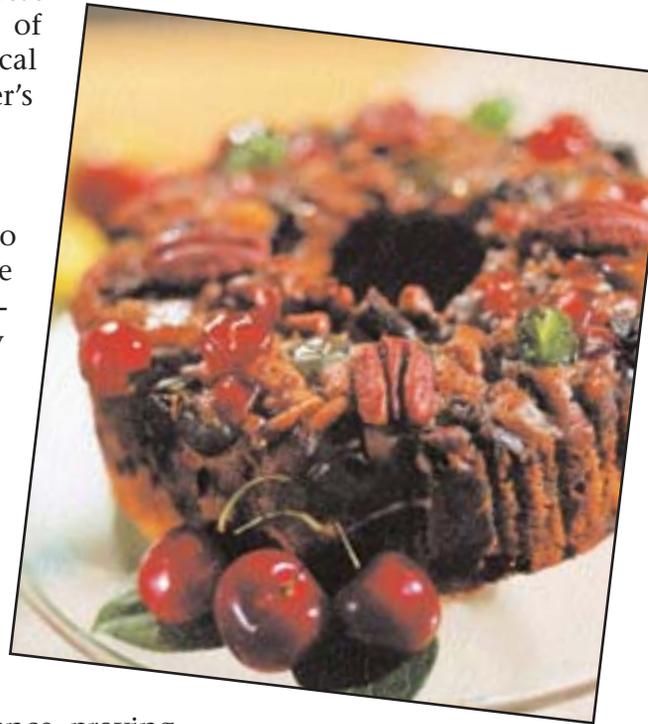
Whatever the particular charism and ministries of a religious community, two commonalities in religious life are prayer and service. Most religious pray the Liturgy of the Hours and are nourished and sustained by daily Eucharist. Religious also devote time each day to personal prayer and meditation on the Scripture. A religious makes an annual week-long retreat.

Just as Christ had a heart for the people on the margins of society, religious have what is called a *preferential option for the poor*. Religious work directly with the poor in soup kitchens, shelters, and jails. Religious also work for societal solutions for ending poverty—for example, legislation or other government efforts. In Washington, D.C., sisters participate in a lobbying effort called the Network. The Sisters of Mercy of the Americas use many traditional and innovative ways to advocate for justice for all. On their web page, they offer form letters on relevant issues. For example, these letters may express opposition to the death penalty or encourage businesses to reinvest in inner city neighborhood. Individuals may sign and address these letters to legislators. A group of elderly School Sisters of Notre Dame have agreed to be studied by medical researchers to aid in their understanding of Alzheimer's Disease.

Contemplative and Active

The gospel tells the story of Jesus' visit to Bethany to see his friends Martha and Mary (Luke 10:38-42). While Martha prepared the meal, Mary sat at Jesus' feet listening to him. Martha said, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me by myself to do the serving?" Jesus rebuked Martha: "There is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part and it will not be taken from her." It is interesting to note that both Mary and Martha are saints, exemplary friends and followers of Christ. These two women represent the two main types of religious life: Mary the *contemplative* form and Martha the *active* form. Some communities are a combination of contemplative and active.

Contemplatives spend their days in solitude and silence, praying, studying, and doing penance. Sr. Monica, a Benedictine nun living in Boulder, Colorado, explains that "the whole life is a struggle against yourself and is difficult, but the joy surpasses the struggle." Most contemplatives live together in a building called a cloister or monastery and seldom leave the premises. Men contemplatives are called monks, women contemplatives are called nuns. Their lives center around praying the complete Liturgy of the Hours. To support themselves, most contemplatives do some kind of work, including manual labor on the property. They may sew vestments for Mass or make communion hosts. Trappist monks are known not only for their vow of silence, but also their tasty fruitcakes, bread, and jellies that are sold to sustain the community. By devoting their entire lives to the Lord, contemplatives are a sign to all Christians to be mindful of God and to think about the future kingdom where everyone will be caught up in contemplation of God.



Report on the founder of a religious community. Explain how others came to gather in the community around this person. Possible subjects include St. Julie Billiart, St. Bruno, St. Elizabeth Ann Seton, St. Frances Cabrini, Blessed Marie-Rose Durocher, and St. Marie Marguerite d'Youville.

FAQ about Being a Monk

(answers courtesy of Benedictine Monastery of Christ in the Desert, Abiquiu, New Mexico)

What kind of food will I eat?

We are mainly vegetarian but we do eat poultry and fish on occasion.

What do I bring?

Casual attire including work clothes (work boots would be helpful but not necessary), a bible, and an open heart.

What kind of expenses will there be?

There is no "entrance fee." Observers and postulants should have sufficient funds to pay their own way (travel, dental care, clothes, telephone bills, etc.) until you become a novice. We provide food and lodging. Starting with the novitiate we pay your health insurance and any expenses that occur.

What health requirements are there?

You must be in good health in order to live our life, but a superman you need not be. Any serious illness will not permit you to participate fully in our day-to-day schedule.

Can we make visits home and receive visitors?

All professed monks are allowed up to six weeks to use either for time away or for solitude here at the monastery. Only four weeks can be taken for the "home visit," which can include visiting family and staying at other monastic communities. There are not restrictions on the amount of time our relatives and friends may visit us as long as it does not interfere greatly with our routine of work and prayer.

How about the priesthood?

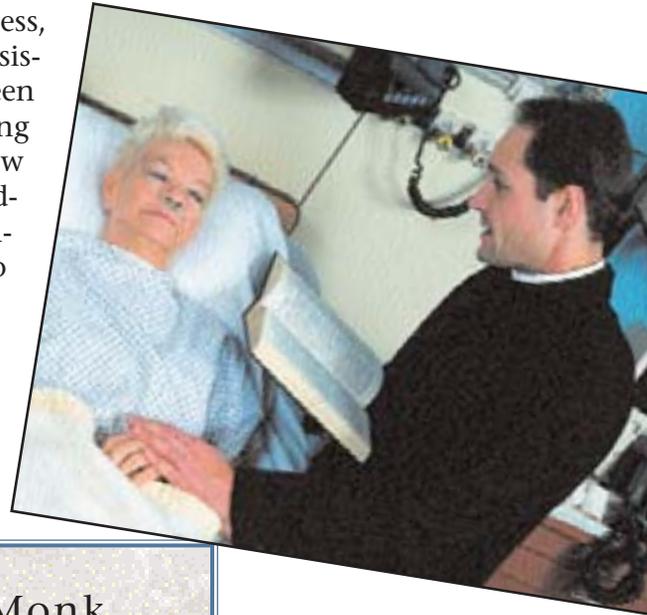
Since we are not an active monastery, there is not a great need to have many of the monks ordained as priests. We have four priests in the community which is sufficient for our needs regarding the sacramental aspect of our life.

What kind of habit do we wear?

We use a short blue tunic with a wide leather belt. Mostly jeans are used, but other types of trousers can be worn. The long habit is not practical in our terrain as rain and snow turn the ground very muddy.

Some contemplatives are hermits, persons who seek God while living alone. Hermits most often live on the grounds of the monastery in a hermitage. The monks or nuns bring the hermits food and drink.

Active religious pray and do penance, too. Their witness, however, is given in the world. These religious are called sisters or brothers. Traditionally, active religious have been teachers and nurses, both staffing and administering schools and hospitals. Today religious responding to new needs are involved in all kinds of apostolic service, including as pastoral associates, pastoral ministers, and chancellors of dioceses. Current social ills have led religious to run homes for battered women, runaway teenagers, the homeless, and people suffering from AIDS. New technologies have called religious to produce movies, books, and CDs for use in Christian education and formation.



Day in the Life of a Trappist Monk

3:15 am	Vigils (45 minutes) reading, individual prayer, breakfast
5:45 am	Lauds (25 minutes) community Mass, thanksgiving
7:30 am	Terce (10 minutes) work begins and lasts until noon
12:15 pm	Sext (10 minutes)
12:30 pm	Main Meal reading, individual prayer, (optional nap)
2:15 pm	None (10 minutes) chores or reading, individual prayer
5:30 pm	Vespers (25 minutes) supper, reading, individual prayer
7:30 pm	Compline (15 minutes) retire at will

Missionaries

Many religious are missionaries, meaning they evangelize either in foreign missions (other countries) or in home missions (their own country). Since the fall of the Eastern European communist block, missionaries have reemerged there. Relaxed anti-religion laws in China have also led to renewed missionary efforts on that continent.

Some missionaries are not technically religious. For example, the Columbans are an apostolic society of secular priests, not a religious order. What they share is a common apostolate to evangelize the world.

Columbans may live alone or with other Columbans depending on their missionary situation.

Related Lifestyles

There are other lifestyles related to religious life that do not require a person to be a fully professed member of a religious community.

For example, many religious orders now have programs for *associates*, or co-members. These are single and married lay people

who have a close bond to the community.

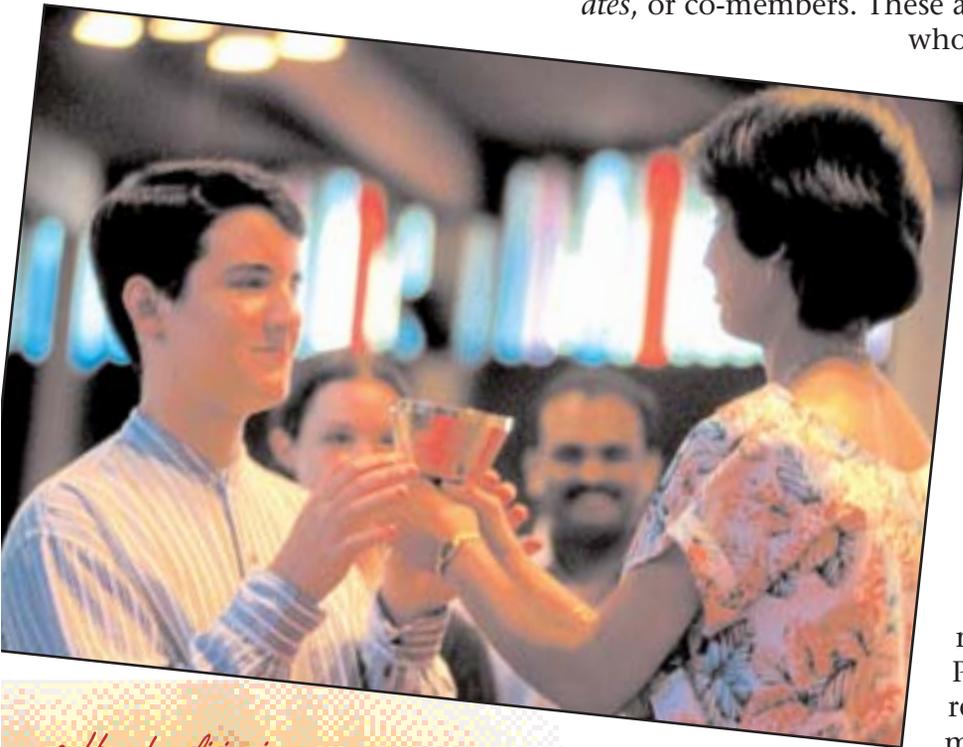
They are drawn to the charisma of the community and pledge to carry out prayer and works of service according to the community's spirituality. The degree of association depends on the individual and on the program set up by the community. Some associates are mainly prayer partners, others are fundraisers. Associates go through a formation program and ordinarily make some type of formal commitment.

Similar to the associate-member status are *third orders*. People in third orders are received into the religious community in a ceremony. They commit themselves to certain

prayers and religious practices. Third orders are also called secular orders and oblates. In the Franciscan community, for example, third orders include single or married laity and diocesan clergy who make a public solemn promise to live the Franciscan way of life forever. There are over thirty thousand third order Franciscans in the United States. Local groups may meet once a week for prayer, Scripture, reading, and sharing. When they die, third order members may be buried in a Franciscan habit.

Secular institutes are institutes of consecrated life for single lay people and diocesan priests. They profess the evangelical counsels and work in the world for its holiness. Unlike members of religious congregations, members of secular institutes ordinarily do not take public vows and they do not live together. One example is the Passionist Secular Institute. The goal of this group is to follow the spirituality of St. Paul of the Cross, to promote the gospel in the workplace, and to gain intimacy with God through prayer and solitude. Members come together for monthly gatherings.

Another form of consecrated life is that of *consecrated virgins*. These are women who live a life of perpetual virginity but remain lay women and support themselves. They are consecrated by their local bishop and



• How does living in community strengthen a religious's commitment to his or her vows?

• Why is a love of and desire for prayer essential for religious life?

• Which type of religious would you prefer to be, contemplative or active? Why?

• Which religious community has a charisma or ministry to which you are attracted?

bonded to their diocese. Consecrated virgins support the clergy through prayer and sacrifice. They are devoted to the Mass, the Liturgy of the Hours, and private prayer. Candidates must be women who have never been married, have no children, and have never lived in open violation of chastity.

The early church had the custom of consecrating women to a life of virginity. St. Agnes, St. Cecilia, St. Lucy, and St. Agatha are well-known virgin-martyrs. This custom eventually died out and was not restored until 1970. There are now several hundred consecrated virgins in the Church today.

Another related form of religious life in the broad sense are *societies of apostolic life*. These are communities whose members do not make public vows but who engage in many good works for the Church. An example is the Knights of Columbus, a lay organization that has about a million and a half members worldwide. Founded in New Haven, Connecticut, in 1882 by Fr. Michael J. McGivney, the Knights of Columbus was intended to provide a structure to provide Catholics with insurance benefits not afforded to them at their workplace due to anti-Catholic bigotry. The Knights of Columbus still provide this benefit along with serving many charitable causes within the Church.



Religious Ministries

Most religious order specializes in a certain ministry that reflects its charism: teaching, healing, praying, prophesying, and reconciling. The chart below lists a sampling of names and ministries of religious orders within the Catholic Church.

Religious Community	Ministry(ies)
Alexian Brothers	Health care
Atonement Friars	Ecumenical work
Augustinian	Prayer
Contemplative Nuns	
Congregation of Christian Brothers	Christian education
Daughters of St. Paul	Media
Glenmary Home Missioners	Rural, southern U.S. ministries
Josephites	African-American ministries
Little Sisters of the Poor	Care of the aged poor
Salesians of St. John Bosco	Education for boys
Sisters of the Good Shepherd	Girls/women in distress
Sulpician Fathers	Priestly training and education

Religious Formation

Do you want to be part of something greater than yourself?
Do you want to live your life in a way that makes a difference?
Do you desire to use your talents to serve humanity?
Do you want to serve God in a radical way?
Are you strongly attracted to Christ?

Do you want to witness to Christ and God's kingdom?
Are you capable of making a commitment?

If you answer yes to some of these questions, you might have a religious vocation. Most religious have experienced their call as a "tug in their heart that won't go away." They have a firm conviction that God wants them to be a religious. Some have felt the desire to be a religious from their youth. To others it has come as a surprise in later years. Some have fought against this call and denied it. Some have been lucky enough to have family and friends who reinforce the call. Others have had their families denounce and even disown them for entering religious life. Everyone's story is different.

Taking the First Step

Those who want to do more than think about religious life need to do some research prior to more serious discernment. An initial step may be to read information about specific communities. Many religious communities now have web sites that provide basic statements of their history, mission, and ministries. Other resources for this initial stage:

- *Vision*, a magazine from the National Religious Vocation Conference;
- the Serra Club, an organization that promotes vocations to the religious life (ask at your parish for a club in your area);
- the diocesan vocation office;
- any priest or religious.

The best source of research is a person who is a member of a particular community. Communities usually have a vocation director who is charge of dialoguing with persons exploring religious vocations. Many communities offer days or weekends where prospective candidates can join with the community for meals, prayer, and activities.

During this initial time of research, a person considering a religious vocation must keep an open mind and pray. For example, if you think you have a religious vocation, you should:

Picture yourself in that vocation. Let it play out in your mind, scene by scene. Imagine telling your parents and friends about it. What do they say to you in response? Do you have a feeling of



rightness? excitement? fulfillment? This is a sign that you are in line with God's plan.

In any case, someone who is considering a religious vocation needs to pray constantly:

- to be aligned with God's values,
- to have the generosity and courage to answer God's call,
- to discern God's will correctly.

Formation to Religious Life

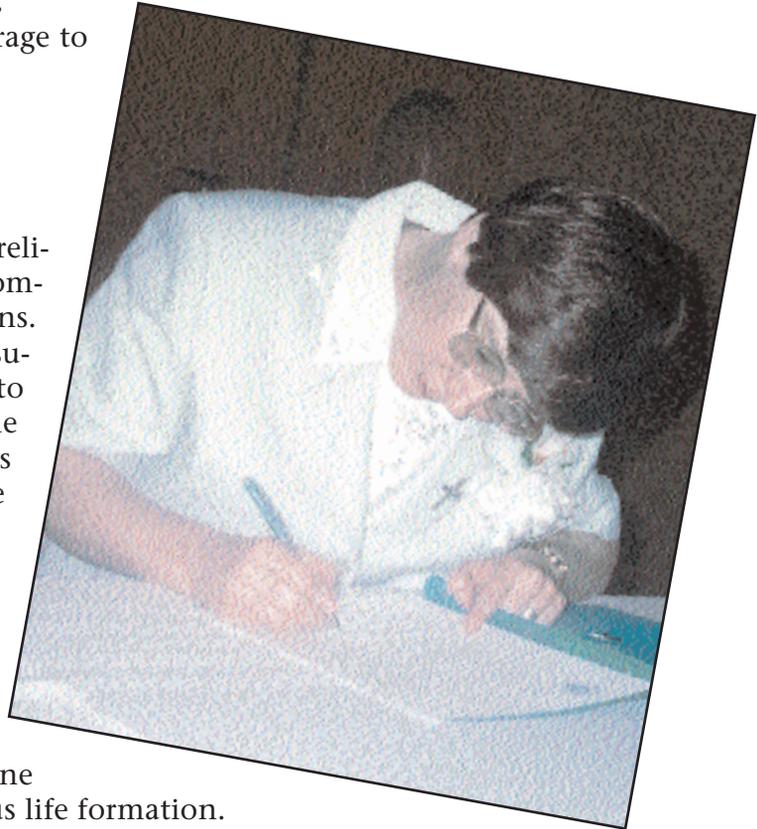
After a person decides to try religious life and enter a religious community, a period of formation begins.

A candidate for religious life usually spends the first year getting to know the community. He or she may engage in one of its ministries and live in one of its houses. At the end of the year the candidate and community mutually decide whether the vocation is an authentic one. If so, the community accepts the candidate into the *novitiate*, the formal preparation for religious life. The person is called a *postulant*, that is, one who is in the beginning of religious life formation.

For about the next year the postulant shares in the life of the community and delves deeper into the spiritual life. She or he takes theology classes and studies the congregation's history and rules. After this period, the postulant becomes a *novice*. A novice begins to live the life of the vows of the community. He or she may study the community's charism. For one of the usual two years of novitiate, the novice may withdraw from active ministry to concentrate more on prayer, God, and the interior life.

At the end of the novitiate, the novice requests entrance into the community. He or she makes temporary vows for a year or two at a time. These are renewed annually for up to nine years. During these years a person may be known as a junior professed. Finally, the person makes final, permanent vows according to the rules of the community and becomes a senior professed. Sr. Sharon Miller, a Glenmary Home Missioner, described how she felt when she professed her final vows:

I had been living the vows since I came to Glenmary. Now, though, there is definitely a new wondrous feeling. The best I can describe it is there is a feeling of completeness. I reckon it is that feeling that comes when your dream finally comes true and you find your place in life. It's a feeling of being at home (*Kinship*).



• Explain how a "yes" answer to the questions on page 56 may indicate that you have religious vocation.

• If you thought that you had a religious vocation, what is one first step you would take?

• Which part of religious life formation is attractive to you? Which part seems most difficult?

It's important to remember that formation programs vary from congregation to congregation, and often depend on the community's particular charism, and whether it is an active or contemplative community. For example, it may take thirteen years before a Jesuit makes his final profession of vows. Also, formation does not end after final vows. Throughout their entire lives religious strive to be more loving as God calls them to be.

One Woman's Vocation

At age 28 many would have considered Katherine Feeley a success. She was an accountant with a high-paying job for a large firm in Chicago. When her roommates moved out of the large upscale apartment that overlooked Lake Michigan, Katherine found herself living alone for the first time. "This was a great time to find out who I was," she recalled.

The questions kept coming. On the way to work Katherine would see homeless people and wonder how she could reconcile her affluence with that poverty. Soon after Katherine attended a week-long silent retreat. This experience drew her into asking who God was in her life. She also asked herself, "Where is my life going?"

Katherine always thought that eventually she would be a wife and mother. She had never thought about the religious life, figuring that it was dying out. Nevertheless, she searched for information about the religious life. One question posed in the Vatican II documents stuck with her: "How will the cry of the poor find an echo in your life?" Katherine took a leave of absence from her job and visited several religious communities. Eventually Katherine contacted the Sisters of Notre Dame who had taught her in grade school and high school. She became a candidate with them.

During her time as a novice, now "Sister" Katherine took scripture courses, shadowed sisters in many different ministries, and volunteered at the peace and justice office of the diocese of Cleveland where she worked on programs that promoted economic development in the inner city and alternatives to teen violence.

After making her first vows, Sr. Katherine went to Washington, D.C., to



work for the Center for Concern, a Catholic research center. As part of that work she attended the Beijing Conference on Women. Later she returned to Cleveland to work for the Office for Women and Church and Society. She says, "Religious life is much more exciting than I expected. It's an adventure. Being a member of a community means you're always being stretched and challenged to seek and serve God."

And, Sr. Katherine is happier now than she has ever been. "I love what I'm doing. Before, I enjoyed my work, but I didn't love my life. Now I love my life."

The Single Life as Vocation

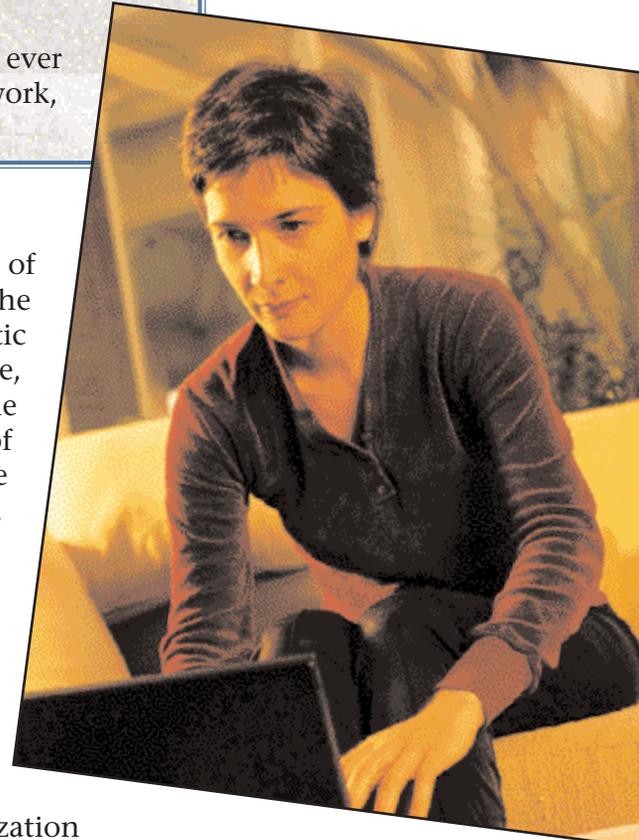
There is another Christian vocation that has many of the same challenges and rewards of religious life: it is the vocation to the single life. The single life is an authentic vocation like the religious life, holy orders, or marriage, although it is not celebrated in ritual as the others are. The single life is often dismissed as a vocation because all of those in the other vocations pass through the single life as a time of transition. You are likely single right now, though you probably have not committed yourself to be single for your entire life. It is those who commit themselves to the single life as a permanent vocation that this section describes.

Who Is Single?

People who are permanently single have come to the realization that the single life allows them the best opportunity to love God and serve others. This realization originates and is sustained by God's grace. Examples of people who have reached this realization are:

- Rosa, 35, who is devoted to caring for her invalid mother.
- Maryann, 43, a language professor at a southern university. Her whole life revolves around her career. She is devoted to her students and travels frequently as part of her job.
- George, 37, who has a homosexual orientation. He understands the Church's call to chastity and is trying to live that commitment.
- Frank, 39, a lay missionary. He has recently spent time teaching school in Guatemala.

Unfortunately, those who are committed to the single life as a vocation are often misunderstood. For example, many people, including parents, feel that no one in their right mind would always want to remain single. They hint, make direct comments, or ask questions like, "When are you going to decide to get married?" These types of comments can be deflected with humor.



There are more serious negative attitudes directed towards singles. Singles are sometimes discriminated against in housing and employment. Even in the Church, a single person may be passed over for a job for a priest or religious who “has more status” or for a married person who “needs the money more.”

Maria Ruiz Scaperlanda wrote an article for *Our Sunday Visitor* about her single brother Ignacio. She confessed that she had perceived his single life with a form of condescension. She felt sorry he didn’t have the joy of knowing the intimacy of marriage, the joy of children, the peace of family. Then when Ignacio had surgery she realized that his choice to remain single was a gifted vocation. Visitors, cards, and gifts came streaming in from the high school where Ignacio worked and the parish where he was a choir member and youth and young adult minister. These displays of affection helped Maria realize that her brother had touched and molded many lives.

Blessings and Challenges of the Single Life

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* observes that single persons “can contribute greatly to the good of the human family” (2231). More and more people are *choosing* to be single, a state of life that is very flexible. The single life has unique, graced opportunities for personal and spiritual growth.

First, the single life offers freedom. Single persons do not have the same types of responsibilities of married people or religious. Because they do not have obligations to spouse, children or religious community, single persons are free to explore careers, travel, meaningful relationships, hobbies, and other fields of interest. Single persons also have time to care for parents and other relatives in need. Single persons can baby-sit nieces and nephews. They can work in community agencies, feed the poor, and do a variety of other services for humanity.

Second, the single life affords solitude and silence. Singles have the luxury of more time and space than married people do to pray and cultivate a deep interior life. They can grow in love for God, if they choose. They have time to discern God’s will. Most creative activities are carried out alone. Single persons might write novels, poems or plays, or compose songs. They might draw, paint, or work with ceramics. Their creative work enhances them as persons and also benefits humankind.

Most importantly, single persons are free to love. Because they are not committed to any one person, single persons are freer to love all others. Their hearts can increasingly resemble the heart of Christ, who loved in a nonpossessive, nonmanipulative, self-giving way. Single persons can nurture a wide range of relationships with both men and women.

Single persons are a sign for the Church. By loving celibately they stand for the spiritual love that binds the Church. They remind married couples of the spiritual love that is a vital component of their relationship and outlasts their earthly life.

Single persons witness Christ’s love to their friends, relatives, coworkers, and neighbors in various ways. They write letters, keep in touch by phone, visit, and show care in many others ways. They volunteer their services to help the needy. Some single persons volunteer

*Report on one of the following
Catholic single persons: Dr.
Tom Dooley, Soren
Kierkegaard, Dag
Hammar skjöld, Flannery
O’Connor, or Jean Donovan.
Explain how the single life
vocation allowed the person
the freedom to work for
humanity.*

with organizations such as the Maryknoll Lay Missioners or Peace Corps. Others make sizable monetary donations to worthwhile causes that those who must support a family often cannot afford.

Of course there are special challenges to single life as with any other vocation. Perhaps the biggest challenge is that the person has no immediate family or community to be with them. When single persons get sick, there's no one in the house to offer immediate care and concern. When single persons are stressed out from work, there's no one at home to absorb the hurt and offer comfort. Likewise, when a single person has a marvelous day, there may be no one to hear about it and share in the joy.

Another challenge is loneliness. To counteract loneliness, single persons need community and a social life. They need to meet people, make friends, and do things with them. They may also participate in a small faith-sharing community through their parish. Single people can and do care for other people's children. They often befriend a young relative or become a Big Brother or Big Sister to a youth in need.

Of course a great challenge faced by single persons is the pressure to have sex. In our sex-saturated society, remaining chaste is difficult for everyone. Still, Christ and the Church hold that sex is exclusively reserved as an experience of committed, married love.

A vocation to the single life must be compatible with a person's temperament and gifts. A person who decides to accept the challenges and reap the rewards of a vocation to the single life should have some or all of the following characteristics: self-confidence, self-reliance, self-motivation, resourcefulness, compassion, and hospitality. To flourish in this vocation single persons need to have a great dependence on God. They must look to God to prove all their needs. Single persons need to work at loving others as much as a person of any other vocation. This is the goal of every person: to love as Jesus—who chose the single lifestyle for himself—did.

Job Opportunity

One of the many employment opportunities for Catholic singles (and married people too) in the Church is the job of parish youth minister. Many times youth ministers who begin a job in their 20s or 30s find the ministry of sharing their faith with you so rewarding that they make a permanent vocational choice to remain committed to the single life so as to expand their ministry in new and challenging ways. Maybe you will accept the challenge of being a youth minister some day. Here is one parish's job description:

Qualifications:

- Must be an active Catholic in good standing with the Church; at least 21 years of age;
- Must enjoy the company of teenagers and communicate well with them and adults;

• How is the single life misunderstood as a vocation?

• How can someone serve the good of the human family as a single person?

- Must want to make a difference in the lives of young people, grades 7-12;
- Must be called to deepen the faith and prayer life of youth;
- Must maintain a flexible schedule and be accessible to young people;
- Must have an openness to a long term relationship with young people;
- Must be able to coordinate other adults, young adults and teens to work with youth;
- Must look forward to taking advantage of training opportunities.

Also, CPR training is required. A college degree is strongly recommended. Participation in the diocesan youth ministers training program is also required.

Review Questions

1. Name and describe the various types of religious.
2. How did Pope John Paul II compare the gospel story of the Transfiguration to religious life?
3. What was St. Benedict's influence on religious life?
4. How has religious life been in transition since Vatican II?
5. Describe the benefits of living in community for religious.
6. How do contemplative and active religious life differ?
7. Explain the meaning of each of the following related to religious life: associates, third order, secular institutes, consecrated virgins, and societies of apostolic life.
8. Name two things a person could do to find out more about religious life.
9. Describe a typical formation process for religious life.
10. Why might someone choose to be single?
11. Name three blessings and two challenges of the single life.

Selected Vocabulary

active religious	religious who minister actively in the world
contemplative religious	religious who spend their days in solitude and silence praying, studying, and doing penance
formation	the process by which a person moves from candidacy to full profession in a religious community
missionaries	religious, priests or lay people who evangelize in other countries or their own
<i>ora et labora</i>	Latin for “pray and work;” the motto of Benedictine communities