

How to Explore Religious Orders and the Diocesan Priesthood

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HUGE catalogues, sometimes telephone book sized, often intimidate people who are discerning a vocation to priesthood or religious life. If you have ever browsed through directories, guides to religious orders, or catalogues of vocation advertisements, then the exposure to so many different options and possibilities has probably made you feel a bit overwhelmed.

It is difficult enough to discern a call to be a priest, sister or brother. So perhaps you have prayed and discerned that God is calling you to priesthood or religious life, but where? Could these be some of your questions?

Am I called to be a sister or brother in a contemplative or an active order? Which order? How will I know?

Am I called to be a diocesan priest? or a priest that belongs to a religious community?

Where do I start?

Let me offer some suggestions for dealing with this quandary.

First of all, some definitions are in order. There are different types of communities in which people live out their Baptismal call.

The person in a religious community takes vows, serves, lives and prays in community and follows the Constitutions and rule of the order. Each religious order is a gift to the Church. Each was founded for a specific purpose. This distinctive purpose and gift is called the charism of the order. It is the kernel or the key to understanding the lifestyle and mission of a particular order. After Vatican II most communities struggled to put their charism into a single phrase or sentence so that their particular mission could be better clarified and better understood. Decisions and choices are made within the context of the religious order's spirit, charism, customs and constitutions.

A diocesan priest is called to serve the local church through parish ministry (although some priests may for a time teach, do retreat work, counseling, and other forms of diocesan service). The diocesan priest makes promises of obedience and celibacy to his Bishop. He does not take vows. The diocesan priest does not take the vow of poverty or live community life with rules and a constitution describing lifestyle. His life's ministry is within the boundaries of a particular diocese. Through parish leadership, preaching and sacramental ministry the diocesan priest journeys through life from the "womb to the tomb" with parishioners. Small groups of diocesan priests (Jesu Caritas) meet regularly to pray and lend support in the living out of their priesthood.

A religious priest belongs to a religious order in which he takes vows, usually lives in

community and his lifestyle and mission is shaped by the particular charism of the community. See information above on religious community.

A brother is a non-ordained man who lives religious life in community. Brothers serve in a variety of ministries. See information above on religious community.

A secular institute is a form of consecrated life in which lay people take vows. They do not live together or wear habits. They manage their own finances and have no single apostolate. Prayer is a part of the life of each member as well as a formation program to prepare for vows.

A third order is an organization of men and women who meet about once a month. They learn the spirituality of the particular order they are associated with in a formation program before making a commitment. The members live in their own homes and maintain their own jobs. Prayer and service usually characterize members of third orders.

In general the monastic life centers around periods of liturgical prayers. The active religious organize their day around the demands of ministry.

PART 1: DOING YOUR OWN HOMEWORK FIRST

Before you begin exploring religious communities it is important that you do some of your own homework first. The first part of this article will offer some suggestions for doing that inner homework. The second part will give you some suggestions for ways of exploring your options.

Knowing yourself and your values is important before you look for a home in a religious community or diocese. Take a personal inventory. Examine the call you are experiencing, preferably with a spiritual director. There is a need for you to articulate the call. At first it may seem a vague, indescribable yearning for something more, a heartfelt sense that God is asking something of you. Hopefully you have been called by God through your Baptism and through your parish community. The call is confirmed through people who affirm, encourage and invite you to think about a vocation. The call to priesthood and religious life does not happen outside the context of the faith community. A call to priesthood is not a private deal between God and yourself.

What do people say to you about your vocation? The person that you are now, with particular gifts, qualities, talents, and spirituality is a clue to the diocese/ community which will eventually be home for you.

As a journal exercise, write down what would be most important to you in living out your Baptismal call as a sister, priest or brother. Prioritize those values, practices and vision. One way to approach this task is to imagine if you were founding a religious order or living as a diocesan priest how you would design the lifestyle, prayer, and

focus of this particular vocation.

One prayerful approach is to spend time getting in touch with your dreams, your holy desires. When Jesus looks at you in the eye and asks, "What is it that you really desire?" as he asked in the first chapter of John, What do you say?

A second journal exercise is to list your strengths, your spirituality, gifts, and talents. Spirituality is the personal style in which you relate to God and live out your faith. Three examples of a description of someone's spirituality could be:

1) My spirituality is based on a reverence for creation as God's gift to us. In the spirit of Francis of Assisi I feel called to promote a sacred ecology. I often experience God's presence through nature.

2) The heart of my spirituality is the Eucharist. I feel called to spend quality time before the Blessed Sacrament. Scripture also is important in my life. I spend time each day quietly reading my bible and meditating.

3) I am excited about God's love. I want to share that love with other people who have not yet discovered how good God is. I experience God's presence in our prayer group, Young Adult Group, and in the retreats we give.

Some examples of what might be listed in the inventory of your strengths, gifts, and qualities would be...

Compassion and patience (People feel free to open up to me without fear of being judged)

Prayerful (I recognize God in daily life)

Talent in organization (I can put on programs, organize, and serve with humility and Joy)

Strength of my convictions (I can articulate well what I believe)

Adaptable and flexible (I am cross-cultural)

With your personality (Where do you find life?)

As you reflect and pray about this inner call you experience, spend time listening to what God has to say. God speaks through quiet quality prayer time, through Scripture, Eucharist, nature, other people, and the events in our lives. Keep track of what has the most impact on you. Which events, phrases, comments pierce you through? God speaks to us in our daily lives in myriad ways. Jot down these experiences and they will give you a clearer sense of which community/diocese resonates with who you are.

Some good questions for you to answer for yourself would also be:

What is there about you that an order/diocese would capitalize on? Which gifts do you bring?

What about you might be troublesome for an order/diocese?

Do you live simply now? How do you live celibately now?

How would you adapt to living in a community situation?

PART II: EXPLORE RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES

Once you have done your homework of personal reflection then you will be prepared to visit communities. Compare it to the real estate business. If you want to rent an apartment or buy a house you go looking with some of your own needs in mind. Before you start exploring religious orders/dioceses you want to have a sense of self, of your own values and call.

The first crossroads you will encounter is that between contemplative and active vocations. The focus of the contemplative is prayer. That is not to say that active religious and diocesan priests are not contemplatives. Neither is it true to say that contemplatives are not in ministry, in service to the Church. I know many busy priests and religious who are genuinely contemplative people. I also know cloistered contemplatives who carry the needs and reality of the world with them prayerfully each day.

Some myths about the cloistered contemplative life are:

You have to be an introvert to be a contemplative.
NOT!

Anyone in a cloister is out of touch with the world!
NOT!

The more loud, vivacious and funny the person is the less she or he is called to the cloister!
NOT!

If any of the above are your reasons for dismissing the idea of a cloistered, contemplative life, you had better look again! Another mistaken notion is that if one lacks social skills, or exhibits an uneasiness with people, the contemplative vocation is the choice for him or her. NOT!

As you discern, ask yourself where the desire is, the energy when you think about your future as a priest or religious.

In the active life the energy lies in imagining your going out to people, to the “marketplace” with the good news. Propelled by a prayer life a person moves out into

istry — teaching, preaching, pastoring, celebrating the sacraments, nursing, etc.

In the contemplative cloistered vocation the desire is to live a life of prayer and penance as a service to the Church and the entire world - to live a life hidden with Christ in God.

Given your background and particular personality, do you feel called to the cloister or to an active ministerial life? Use your imagination and fantasize about yourself in both vocations at different times. Where is there more enthusiasm? That enthusiasm is a good indicator of where you may belong.

At some stage of your discernment, whether you feel called to the cloistered contemplative life or not, I suggest that you visit one of these communities. Go to the Carmelites, Poor Clares, Dominicans, Benedictines, or Camaldolese and ask them to pray for you in your discernment. No better investment!

Reading about religious orders, the lives of the Saints, contemporary periodicals on Catholic spirituality and life can all help you to learn about church vocations. Don't move forward with the information you've accrued over the years from myths, stereotypes, TV or movie images of priests or religious. Part of the discernment process is gathering data or getting information.

THE PEOPLE YOU KNOW

Begin with the priests/religious you know and feel comfortable talking to, your parish priest, or a religious you knew growing up or at school. Ask if you could talk to him or her seriously about a church vocation.

THE VOCATION OFFICE

Call the Diocesan Vocation Director. Each diocese has a vocation office. Some vocation directors are full time; others may have limited time because of other responsibilities. Call the Vocation Office and ask for an appointment. Expect to be asked some questions over the phone before the appointment is set. Some offices have directories and information on the religious communities working in the diocese. You will be able to get feedback, information and direction at your local Vocation Office regarding church vocations. You may also plug into the vocation discernment programs offered.

DIRECTORY OF RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES

Browse through a directory with a highlighter (if it's your own book). If a particular word, phrase, value or charism leaps out at you in the description of a religious order/diocesan lifestyle then highlight it. It is not wise to try and read through a directory at one go. Periodically, continue browsing and highlighting. Later on when you flip through the pages, you may notice a pattern emerging of those values,

charism or spirit that resonate with yourself. It is also a subtle way of educating yourself regarding the different vocations.

Some magazines, such as *Vocations*, and *Prayer*, carry advertisements. I also recommend *Vision Magazine* by the Claretians Publications, and *Your Choice*. They provide ways to obtain more information from an order.

ASSOCIATIONS

A quick opener for getting in touch with your leanings towards a specific vocation would be to list these words on a sheet of paper leaving spaces in between:

MEN

Hermit

Monk

Parish Priest

Active Apostolic Brother

Religious Order Priest

Missionary Priest

Missionary Brother

WOMEN

Cloistered Contemplative

Monastic Religious

Missionary Sister

Active Religious Woman

Traditional form of religious life

Evolving form of religious life

Then spontaneously write one word associations for each category. Write without making any judgments about your words. Just jot down any images, feelings, or descriptive phrases about that particular vocation.

For example: Under “missionary” you may respond: adventurous, challenging, difficult, poor, dangerous..... Under “hermit”: lonely, too quiet, far removed, prayerful, penitential. Again, these are only personal reactions and not necessarily the reality for another person.

Afterwards look over the list. Can you identify yourself with any of those associations? Which one of these would be close to who you are, who you feel called to become?

CALL OR WRITE the communities/diocesan seminary whose description or ad resonates with the call you experience. If you write, keep it brief. Ask for more information and if you can visit one of their convents, seminary or houses. If you phone, ask for an appointment to see the vocation contact person in a local community.

VISIT THE COMMUNITY OR DIOCESAN SEMINARY

Personal contact with live human beings who belong to either the diocese or community is the best way to begin exploring. When you meet the vocation director ask if it is possible to meet members of the community to pray, eat, and socialize with them.

The question you want to keep in back of your mind as you visit is:

Do I feel at home here?

In spite of the inevitable, initial shyness and anxiety, you will feel more at home in some places than in others.

QUESTIONS TO ASK

When visiting you may wonder what to talk about on this first visit. You will also be asked about yourself. This discernment is a mutual process. A vocation director will be interested in the whole of your life - not only the part that you may label "spiritual" - (your age, educational background, job, relationships, family, service involvement to community or parish).

Some good questions for you to ask on a first visit:

What is the charism of your community/of diocesan priesthood? A charism is that particular gift that a religious community or diocesan priest lives. It may stem from the reason it was founded. The charism will give you a sense of this particular community's purpose and meaning. You might want to ask how the community lives out the charism in the contemporary scene.

How do you live community life together?

What ministries are you involved in?

How do you pray together? What's the emphasis in your prayer life?

What kind of candidate is the community/diocese accepting?

If you have done the inner work of Part I (Personal Inventory) then your questions will flow from what is most important to you. For example, if being with the poor and work with the poor is one of your values then ask how the community lives an option for the poor. The same follows for your spirituality, sense of Church, social justice concerns, etc.

Some general questions about how the vows are lived will be determined again on your values. For example, if you have developed some strong friendships with people that you hope to maintain, you will want to ask if friendships outside the community are encouraged. Some orders may ask you to make a break with those relationships.

POVERTY; How are personal needs met? A personal budget? Asking permission? What kind of accountability? What communal expressions of poverty are there? Are the members expected to engage only in ministries that pay a stipend? Salary?

CELIBACY: What kind of preparation/education is there for chaste celibate living? Are friendships outside the community allowed? Encouraged? Is the body viewed as gift or as hindrance to holiness? What is the policy of the community/diocese with regard to homosexuality? How does bonding take place in the community? What mechanisms are in place to promote community?

OBEDIENCE: How are decisions made about ministry? Assignments? Is there a process for choosing leadership? Is dialogue and consultation part of decision making?

MINISTRY: How are members prepared for ministry? How a community does ministry varies depending on the charism. Mother Teresa's sisters, the Missionaries of Charity, give direct service to the poor by attending the dying on the street, feeding the hungry, giving shelter, etc. The Sisters of Social Service are also engaged in legislative efforts to fight for more just benefits and conditions for the poor in our society. Their foundress said that some may dry tears of the poor but "my sisters will work to prevent injury being inflicted in the first place." Both communities serve the poor but in very different ways.

Each community incarnates the Gospel with a focus on a specific aspect of Jesus' message. This may not necessarily be a ministry but a way of being present to the world. For example, the Jesuits' spirituality aims at finding God in all things: the Benedictines treasure the liturgy in Eucharist and the Divine Office as well as the rhythm of work and prayer in daily life; the Franciscans reverence creation, humility and a simple lifestyle; the Dominicans reflect truth, preaching, and value lifelong education and study. As you explore spiritualities, which resonates with your own? Sometimes the community logo, symbol, or emblem will reveal a lot about the order's focus. Notice the language used as the religious describe themselves.

You may also want to find out some basic statistics regarding the community at another time. How many are in the formation program? What is the median age? Which countries are they located in? How many belong to this particular community or diocese?

DIOCESAN PRIESTHOOD

Some special considerations for those considering diocesan priesthood would be: The call to diocesan priesthood comes from the local parish community, is confirmed in the local church, and the priest is sent to the local church.

What support systems are there for the diocesan clergy? What are the educational requirements for the seminary? Does the diocese have its own seminary? Where do

the seminarians study?

What types of ministry are the priests involved in?

What are the urgent needs of the diocese? What kind of person would make a good priest and be able to help meet some of these needs?

What kind of living arrangements do the priests have? Rectory living? Alternative living arrangements?

What is the makeup of the Catholic population of the diocese culturally?

AFTER THE VISIT

After you visit the convent, house of formation, rectory or seminary it is important that you give some quality time to reflect on what happened. Spend time going over the visit. In a notebook write down

1) what you were attracted to or felt comfortable with when you observed the community/ seminary during your visit. (Perhaps you could relate to the way the seminarians joked around together, the camaraderie the brothers had with each other, the way the sisters spoke about the people they worked with.)

2) what you were not attracted to or not comfortable with during the visit. (Perhaps you couldn't relate to their focus, the way they prayed together, what the community was interested in, how they interacted.)

Keeping track of visits to community or seminary in this reflective process will clarify for you where you are not called as well as where you may be called. Get to know the members of the community. Observe them interacting with each other. Get to know their spirituality and ministry and plot this against your own personal history, personality and background.

You will never find the perfect community or diocesan priesthood. It does not exist! Try to distinguish between noticing the reality of imperfection in a community (we are all human!) from the knowledge that this is not the community you are called to join. Two people visiting the same community/diocese could have opposite reactions. Each community is a gift to the Church. There is a colorful diversity in the way religious life is lived in the United States, from a traditional style to those on the frontiers of an evolving form of religious life for the future. You need to find where you could be your more authentic self, where you would be most at home. All this needs to be done in the context of prayer, reflection and hopefully spiritual direction.

MINISTRY EXPERIENCE

One of the prerequisites for entering formation for priesthood or religious life is some experience serving others. You may be involved in a parish ministry (teaching

religious education, being a lector, eucharistic minister, youth leader, etc.). This experience will help you discern your call to ministry.

If you feel called to be a parish priest, ask a priest if you could spend a day following him around. Get a first hand taste of what diocesan priesthood is all about. If you want information on the charism of diocesan priesthood contact the National Conference of Diocesan Vocation Directors for copies of some talks on the subject [NCDVD PO Box 1570, Little River, SC, 29566-1570, (803) 280-7191]. If there is a seminary near you, arrange to spend a day with the seminarians going to classes, liturgy, meals. Ask the seminarians questions.

Another fruitful way to explore a community is to spend a day in ministry with a sister, brother or priest. The vocation director can recommend someone whom you could “shadow” for a day. This will give you an insight into the vision a community may have for the way it serves others. Observe how the priest or religious interacts and is involved in ministry. Some communities offer a week’s experience in the summer of ministering with the community. Others have associate programs where you can live in community and minister for 6 months to a year with the order. Opportunities are listed in Connections: A Directory of Lay Volunteer Ministry. It gives a description of ministry programs, terms of service, and benefits Some live in community with religious. For a directory contact the St. Vincent Pallotti Center at 715 Monroe St., N. E., Washington, D. C. 20017-1755 or (202) 529-3330.

CONCLUDING THOUGHT: GOD IS IN CHARGE!

We would be overwhelmed if we thought that we had to do this on our own. There are so many religious orders, so much literature, so many choices.... But remember that we believe God leads us and guides us. God uses events and other people to help us co-create our future. What may seem like an accidental meeting could well be a providential one. You may have thumbed through pages of directories and tons of advertisements and brochures and then one day “accidentally” meet someone in a grocery store who talks about a particular community or seminary. Keep your exploration in the context of faith that it is God who providentially leads and guides you. Remember that the process is mutual. The community is also listening to God and will give you honest feedback.

RESOURCES:

Guide to Religious Communities for Women
National Sisters Vocation Conference 1983
Available in most diocesan vocation offices or from National Religious Vocation Conference for \$6.00 see information below

Ministries for the Lord

A resource Guide and Directory of Catholic Church Vocations for Men , Paulist Press
1981

Benedictines and Cistercians in the Heartland of America
Knights of Columbus Arkansas State Council and Missouri State Council

Images of Women in Mission
Resource Guide and National Directory of Catholic Church Vocations for Women,
Paulist Press, 1981

Response
Volunteer Opportunities Directory, Catholic Network of Volunteer Service. Phone:
(800) 543-5046

National Coalition for Church Vocations, 5420 S. Cornell Ave. #105, Chicago,
IL, 60615-5604.
Phone (800) 671-6228, for information on a vocation contact person in your area for a
religious community

Diocesan Vocation Offices - often have listing of communities

Vocations Anonymous: A Handbook for Adults Discerning Priesthood and Religious
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