

Frequently asked questions about vocations

What is a vocation?

Many people use the word *vocation* (from the Latin *vocare*, meaning “to call”) in reference to the call to be a priest, sister, or brother. However, the Catholic understanding of vocation is much broader: every baptized person has a vocation—a call—to love and serve God. How you choose to live out that vocation is what each person must discern. Some feel called to live as single or married laypeople; others choose consecrated life and join a secular institute or religious community (as sisters, priests, or brothers); still others choose ordination as deacons or diocesan priests.

What is a sister or nun?

A sister or nun is a woman who belongs to a religious order, or community. Many people use the word nun interchangeably with sister, but technically nuns are those who live a cloistered (or enclosed) monastic life; whereas sisters serve in an active ministry. After a period of preparation (called formation) sisters and nuns take lifelong vows. Usually they take vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience; that is, they promise to live simply, to live celibately, and to follow the will of God through their community.

What is a brother?

A brother belongs to a religious community of men. A brother takes religious vows, usually poverty, chastity, and obedience. A brother’s life revolves around prayer, communal living in a religious community or monastery, and a ministry within the Church and society. A brother is not ordained to the priesthood, and thus does not perform the sacramental duties of a priest. Some men’s communities include both brothers and priests, and both have equal respect and status in the community.

What is a monk?

A monk is the male member of a monastic or contemplative order. Some monks make solemn vows. Monasticism is a particular form of religious life built around a rule, such as the Rule of Benedict, and the Divine Office, a set of prayers and psalms chanted or sung at various points in the day. Women who choose monastic life are called sisters or nuns.

What is a friar?

A friar is a male member of a mendicant order, such as the Dominicans or Franciscans, although the term is sometimes extended to others in the monastic tradition.

What is the difference between a diocesan priest and a priest from a religious order?

All priests are ordained to the priesthood through the Sacrament of Holy Orders. However, a man may choose to be a diocesan priest (sometimes called a secular priest) or a religious priest (or order priest).

If he chooses to be a diocesan priest, then he enters the diocesan seminary system, and once ordained typically serves within his own diocese (a geographic territory designated by the Catholic Church). He is appointed to his ministry—most often parish work—by the bishop of that diocese. A diocesan priest is accountable to his bishop and the people he serves.

If a man chooses religious priesthood, he joins a men’s religious community. While he may perform parish ministry, he generally serves in other ways, typically doing work related to the mission and ministries of his religious congregation. A religious priest is accountable to his major superior and the other men in his community for his religious life and his local bishop and the people he serves for his priestly duties.

Why was there such a surge in religious vocations in the last century?

If you consider the continuum of religious life, the extraordinary number of men and women who entered religious life during the last century was an anomaly. Historically, religious sisters, brothers, and priests have always been a small

number of the Catholic population. Some contributing factors to this surge in larger numbers were the limited opportunities for church ministry prior to Vatican II, a large influx of Catholic immigrants entering the U.S., the Catholic Church was growing in prominence and respect, and the similarity in values of the Catholic Church with U.S. societal values.

Are young people still choosing to become priests, sisters, and brothers?

Yes, and there's an uptick in newer entrants. For the second year in a row, over 500 women and men have entered religious life in the United States. Following an unusual surge in the mid-20th century, the number of men and women religious today more closely reflects a number consistent with the beginning of the last century. According to the 2009 NRVC/CARA study, 71 percent of those who have entered religious life and are currently in initial formation are under 40.

Are young adults pressured to join a religious order if they request information?

Trained vocation ministers adhere to a code of ethics that specifically encourages them to allow inquirers a sense of true freedom to choose or not choose religious life or priesthood without any pressure or expectation from others. In fact, extreme pressure to enter religious life is a canonical impediment to admission to vows. Online websites, discussion boards, and email exchanges allow inquirers to seek information anonymously until they feel prepared to make more personal contact.

Most vocation directors acknowledge that their role is to accompany those in discernment, not to recruit them. In addition vocation directors have a duty to their communities and the church to properly assess and offer honest feedback about a candidate's fitness for religious life.

What is a vocation director?

A vocation director is designated by a religious institute to promote vowed membership, to help others discern their vocation, and to oversee the application process of new members entering the community as a postulant. They assist those who are considering the possibility of religious life by providing support, discernment counseling, and information. The Vocation director for a religious congregation answers to the elected superiors of their congregation. The National Religious Vocation Conference is the professional organization for vocation directors of religious communities.

Vocation Directors who work on behalf of a diocese answer to the bishop. They have their own professional organization, the National Conference of Diocesan Vocation Directors.

What is the process to enter religious life?

Typically someone interested in religious life goes through a discernment process where they prayerfully consider the call to religious life, explore vocation options, contact religious communities, and eventually begin a more formal process of discernment with a particular religious institute.

Once a candidate chooses to apply to a community and is accepted, he or she typically begins a formation process starting with postulancy or candidacy, in which the person is introduced to the communal life, ministries, and mission of the community. Following postulancy comes the novitiate, where a person is formally admitted to a religious institute. The novitiate is an extended time of prayer, study and spirituality, which usually lasts for at least one year. After the novitiate, the novice is admitted to temporary vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience. This period of temporary commitment allows for further discernment before he or she makes perpetual profession of vows within a given religious institute.

How many religious institutes are there in the U.S., and how many priests, sisters, brothers?

There are 768 religious institutes in the United States.

Diocesan priests: 25,757

Religious priests: 11,424

Permanent deacons: 18,287

Religious brothers: 4,007

Religious sisters: 45,605

These and additional statistics are found on the [CARA](#) website.

How do religious communities screen candidates?

Religious institutes usually require an extensive process of screening candidates to religious life, which usually includes extensive interviews, background checks, and medical and psychological testing. Candidates must demonstrate a lived commitment to the Catholic faith and an appropriate level of maturity and mental and physical health that the rigors of

religious life require. Candidates who do not meet specific standards set by both Church law and the individual religious institute are not admitted to religious life.

Can married people enter religious? Widowed and divorced?

Religious life in the Roman Catholic Church is reserved for celibates only. Some religious institutes have accepted widowed and divorced people who have had their marriages properly annulled by the Church.

What are the vows of religious life?

The main vows for apostolic women and men in religious life are chastity, poverty, and obedience. Individual institutes may require additional vows. Monastics profess vows of stability, obedience and fidelity/*conversatio* to the monastic way of life, which includes chastity and living simply. By stability, a monastic binds themselves to a specific monastery.

What is the National Religious Vocation Conference?

The National Religious Vocation Conference (NRVC) was founded in 1988 as a professional organization of men and women committed to vocation awareness, invitation, and discernment to consecrated life as brothers, sisters, and priests. The NRVC has an annual membership of almost 1,000 members representing over 350 religious institutes and organizations. The organization is divided into 12 member areas plus international members from 22 countries beyond the United States. The NRVC serves its members by providing education, resources, and services for professional growth.

What is VISION Vocation Guide?

VISION Vocation guide is a print, [online](#), and [digital](#) resource for those interested in entering religious life. Published by TrueQuest Communications on behalf of the National Religious Vocation Conference, VISION is distributed throughout the U.S. and Canada in print and around the world in its digital format. VISION articles and features are also available in Spanish and French online. The magazine is in its 22 year of publication. In 2006, VISION launched its popular [VocationMatch.com](#) service which assists those discerning a religious vocation to narrow their search for the right community. An annual [VocationMatch.com Survey on Vocations](#) helps track current trends.