

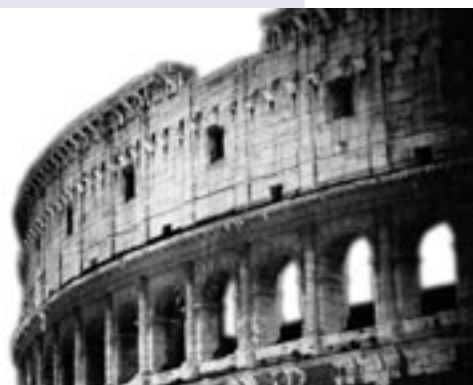
# The Vocation to the Religious Life

## WHAT IS A RELIGIOUS COMMUNITY?

Religious sisters, brothers, and priests are individuals who live out their Christian faith as members of a larger group known as a **religious community** (also called a **religious order** or **religious congregation**). They make special promises to love and serve God for the rest of their lives, dedicated to a life of prayer and service.

There are many different kinds of religious communities in the Church. Each community lives according to a particular set of guidelines which inspires and identifies them and gives a focus to their prayer and work.

## RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES IN THE CHURCH



During the early centuries of the Church, about 1,700 years ago, there were Christians who were inspired by the gospel to sell all that they had, leave their homes, and dedicate their lives completely to God in a special way. They left behind everything so that they could follow Jesus without distractions.

Eventually, as more people chose to live in this way, they began to form communities and live together in places called **monasteries**. As a community, they could help each other provide for their daily needs and work together to support the life of the whole community. Some religious

communities were made up of all men, and others were formed by women. In each community, the members lived a life of prayer and pursued a spiritual union with God. Ever since that time, religious communities have been an important part of the Church and religious life continues to be a very attractive vocation for many people.

*The early martyrdom had ended. A new kind of martyrdom had begun. People give their lives for Christ every day.*

Read Matthew 19:16-21

## PRAYER AND ACTION

Today, there are two main types of religious communities. Some religious communities serve God through meditation, prayer and solitude. These are known as **contemplative orders**. The men and women in these communities live in monasteries. Women's monasteries are also called convents. They live away from the distractions of the world so that they may devote their lives to praying for the needs of the Church. In contemplative communities of women, the members are known as **nuns**. In contemplative communities of men, the members are known as **monks**. The members of

the community also work to support their communities by farming or making and selling goods such as music cd's, communion hosts for mass, and works of art.



Read Luke 8:1-3



## Contemplative – Prayer Apostolic – Active

The second type of religious community is active in the world, serving others in a variety of activities. These communities are known as **active** or **apostolic orders**. In these orders, women are called sisters, and men are usually called brothers unless they are ordained priests. These communities work both in the Church and in the world. They usually have a particular focus such as teaching in schools, caring for the sick, helping

the poor, doing missionary work in far off countries, or working in the media. These communities also spend time in prayer. Their community prayer and common mission unite them.

### CONSECRATED TO GOD

The men and women who join religious communities **consecrate** their lives to God as a way of seeking holiness. To consecrate something means to set it aside or devote it to a holy purpose. To consecrate one's life to Jesus Christ means to devote it entirely to Him.

When a man or woman decides to accept Christ's invitation to leave everything and follow Him in a more radical way, they make vows to live like Jesus in poverty, chastity, and obedience. They participate in a ceremony where they make this commitment, much like a married couple exchanges their vows on their wedding day. They promise Christ that they will live the rest of their lives dedicated exclusively to Him.

The vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience help religious men or women to be free from earthly attachments and distractions. These vows help them to live simply, to be more open with God, and to depend more on Him.

**Poverty** as a vow does not mean being poor. It means sharing possessions in common with the community. Religious men and women who live this vow only have things that can help them in their mission.

**Obedience** is listening to and following God's will in one's life. This is done with the guidance of the religious superior. The vow of obedience also requires going wherever one is needed and giving oneself completely in service to God's people.

**Chastity** for a religious sister, brother, or priest means that they give their body and soul only to Jesus. They enter into a loving and

*The priest, deacon, catechist and religious must...proclaim, be witnesses. But naturally, for this they must listen...on the one hand, with their soul open to Christ, interiorly listening to his Word so that it is... transformed and forms [their] being; and on the other, listening to today's humanity, our neighbours, those of [their] parish, those for whom [they] have been given a certain responsibility.*

– Pope Benedict XVI<sup>15</sup>



Photo courtesy of Supreme Council of the Knights of Columbus

**Consecrate:**  
to set aside,  
devote to a certain  
purpose, make  
sacred.



**Jesus teaches that obedience is the key to a successful mission, even when obeying means accepting the cross.**

*“The world must know that I love the Father and that I do just as the Father has commanded me.”*

- John 14:31

exclusive relationship with Him. Jesus Christ, in turn, gives them special graces and the intense and intimate love of His own heart. Just as married people remain faithful to their spouses, religious men and women remain faithful to Jesus and do not marry or date other people. They avoid becoming intimately attached to people in a way that would distract them from their relationship with the Lord. By doing this, they remain free to love and serve God and neighbor with an undivided heart. Religious men and women may have family and friends with whom they spend time and form loving, friendly relationships.

## RELIGIOUS PRIESTS

A religious priest and a diocesan priest are different. A diocesan priest serves the people of a single diocese under the authority of his bishop. A priest in a religious order ministers to people according to the mission of his community. For example, if the religious order runs schools, then the priest might teach. If a religious priest is part of a missionary order, he might live in a foreign country. If he works in a monastery, he might do farm work in addition to his priestly duties. Like a diocesan priest, a religious priest celebrates the sacraments, and may work in a parish setting supported by his community of religious brothers and priests.

Religious brothers are not priests. They make vows and have responsibilities within their religious community but they are not ordained and do not celebrate the sacraments. A man may choose to be a brother rather than a priest because he wants to fully devote himself



to contemplation or to a particular kind of work such as teaching. Their vocation and ministry is similar to that of religious sisters.

## WHERE DO RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES LIVE?

Religious orders may live together in a community house. Each house may include a chapel, private rooms for sleeping, a kitchen, a dining room, and community rooms for socializing. Some houses have guest rooms for visitors.

A religious sister, brother or priest is not geographically bound by the parameters of the diocese. They live and work wherever the mission of the religious community and the needs of the world call them.

## LET'S TALK ABOUT IT!

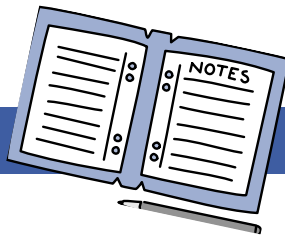
1. Do you have religious sisters, brothers, or priests in your parish? Do you know other religious sisters, brothers, or priests?
2. What are some forms of service that religious communities do that you think would be fun or interesting to do? Why does the Church need some religious orders to be active in the world?
3. St. Therese of Lisieux was a religious nun in a contemplative order called the Carmelites. She prayed very much for the Church's missionaries. Though she never worked in a foreign mission during her lifetime, she played an important role in helping the Church's missions. Why were her prayers important? Why do we need contemplative religious communities that are dedicated to prayer?



### VOCABULARY

Religious community  
Religious order  
Religious congregation  
Monasteries  
Contemplative order  
Nun  
Monk  
Apostolic order  
Active order  
Sister  
Brother  
Consecrate

## Write about it!



### Journal options:

- Read about the life of a founder of a religious community or a well-known religious sister, brother, or priest. Answer the following questions about them:
  1. What do you admire about the religious sister, brother, or priest that you read about?
  2. What about their lives inspires you?
  3. What would our world be like with more people like them?

*If you wish to be perfect, go, sell what you have and give to (the) poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.*

(Mt 19:21)