

Who would want to be a priest?

Kurt Barragan says the stresses and strains of parishioners become those of a priest. The reputation of the priesthood has been badly shaken by abuse allegations in recent years.

It's a difficult job at the best of times, with training longer than that for doctors, long hours and minimal pay.

Nevertheless, the Roman Catholic Church says it is seeing a small increase in the number of men prepared to forego family life and dedicate themselves to God - something it is hoped the Pope's visit will encourage.

But who are these men?



Kurt Barragan, 29, is in his fourth year of training and is due to be ordained in 2012.

He first considered the priesthood when he was 16, but did not make the final "nerve-wracking" decision to commit until he had spent almost four years working as a civil servant.

Kurt admits the priesthood can seem like a lot of "don'ts" but says everything falls into place when you fully understand its purpose - and believe the Gospel offers the "most perfect happiness".

"What I'm interested in is bringing other people to that path for happiness," he says.

Spiritual father

The key "don't" for many people of course, is sex. There is currently some debate within the Catholic Church over whether celibacy is still an essential requirement for a priest.

But Kurt, who has had relationships with women in the past, says celibacy is essential to allow him to single-mindedly dedicate himself to the church.

"That doesn't mean marriage and children aren't attractive to me, just that I also feel I can better serve the world as a spiritual father to many people, that's what God has in mind for me," he explains.

Priests serve in a variety of roles, from the traditional parish priest, to chaplains in prisons, hospitals or the army, and teaching roles.

Luke says the seminary experience involves a great deal of self-examination through prayer. It is a job which involves working with people at pivotal moments in their lives.

"You can switch very quickly from helping people who are dealing with grief at a funeral, to those who are preparing for marriage, or having their baby baptised," Kurt says.

"You are always immersed in the lives of the people you serve, so their stresses and strains become yours."

In the Southwark diocese, where Kurt is based, priests are paid through stipends - donations from parishioners in exchange for holding a service or saying a prayer - and the collections at Christmas and Easter. They are given accommodation in their parish.

In a big, wealthy parish, a priest could earn around £10,000 a year, but in a small parish this could be as little as £1,500. This could be topped up by Catholic charities to £4,000.

"It's not a huge income, the aim is to have enough money to live on and a healthy recreation, beyond that what do you need it for?" he says.

"When I was a civil servant you were told to work seven hours and 12 minutes a day, as that worked out as a 36-hour week. There's no priest I know who works as short a day as that."

'Caricatured view'



Luke de-Pulford, 26, also considered the priesthood. He spent a year studying in the seminary at the English College in Rome before deciding it might not be for him.

He says in seminary you explore yourself and your vocation through prayer.

"For some people, what remains constant is that calling to be a priest and for some people it changes,

and I think I'm in that latter category," he explains.

He is reflecting on the experience and while he would not rule out returning, he feels he probably wants to one day have a family.

Father Langridge is responsible for vocations in Southwark Both men say they had interesting reactions when they announced their vocations.

Luke says some friends said they could not understand his decision because in their view he was "someone who could get a job and potentially get a girlfriend".

"It was really tough, especially as they had a caricatured view of the Church and what it stands for. A lot of people thought I was wasting my life, but I believe if I had a vocation to be a priest there could be no higher calling," he says.

Father Stephen Langridge, chairman of England and Wales' vocations directors, says there was a boom in the number of vocations in the aftermath of World War II compared with the 1920s.

He says there was another rise in men entering seminaries following the visit of Pope John Paul in 1982. Figures from the National Office for Vocations show this peaking at 156 in 1985 before falling to a low of 22 in 2001. But over the past five years numbers have steadied at about 40 per year.



Fr Langridge says England has been used to a relatively high concentration of priests compared to other countries - about one for every 350 parishioners. But the fall in vocations since the 1980s means a priest in a parish may now be responsible for two or three

smaller churches.

In an attempt to address the shortfall, in recent years the Church has changed its recruitment strategy.

Instead of simply asking people to become priests, they now encourage Catholics to pray and discern what God wants them to do. Marriage is also viewed as a vocation, which helps keep people's minds open to hear a call to the priesthood instead.

Fr Langridge explains: "That means a youngster who'd always thought about marriage, perhaps in the stillness of their prayer suddenly thinks, 'perhaps there's something else.' So the seed of a priestly vocation is sown in that way."

About 60% of the people who come forward for interview are for one reason or another not suitable.

"Sometimes it's a fervour of piety but the person doesn't have the human qualities to enable them to hack the life. But that means that 40% of people would make good trained priests," he says.

This new intake of priests know they have a great deal of work to do to overcome the overall damage to their reputation from such scandals as child sex abuse cases.

Kurt says it makes him more certain the Church needs better priests than perhaps it has had before.

"Every time I read one of the stories in the papers it makes me incredibly sad. Because no-one goes into the priesthood without the highest ideals, so to know that there have been priests who have betrayed people's trust in such an awful way is just incredibly painful and my heart goes out to people who have been wounded by that," he says.

"My generation of priests is going to have a lot of work to do in regaining that trust."

BBC - Sarah Bell