

Sixteen questions about church vocations



. . . And honest answers to your questions about priests, sisters, brothers, vows, sexuality, community life, and more.

1. What do priests, sisters, and brothers do all day?

Just like most adults, we spend a portion of each day working. We call our work ministry because the model and motivation for what we do is Jesus, who asked that we follow his example of service to God's people.

But we don't just work! In order to live in a healthy, balanced way we try to keep a mix of prayer, ministry, and play in our lives. These three things—prayer, ministry, and play—help us stay healthy so that we can be more effective ministers and happy people.

In the area of work or ministry, many priests, brothers, and sisters have one main job, such as teaching, parish ministry, social work, or hospital work—all of which have somewhat regular hours and predictable demands. Our daily schedule can look different than the typical adult's. Often we have evening meetings, and those of us who are priests or parish ministers usually work on Saturdays and Sundays and take some time off during the week.

The unpredictable demands also lend richness to our lives. These often center around meeting the needs of people, whether those be children in schools, families preparing to celebrate the sacraments, or the sick, elderly, angry, hurt, hungry, or imprisoned. We try to share our lives with others and to reveal Christ in all we do.

Those of us who are members of contemplative communities (communities dedicated to prayer) fill our days with a combination of work, prayer, and recreation. The difference is that we might dedicate more of our time to prayer than other brothers, sisters, or priests. Sometimes we will grow our own food and do income-producing work, like baking and selling the hosts used for Mass, or making cheese or candy. Our prayer usually consists of Mass, silent prayer (called contemplation), reading, and praying the psalm-based Liturgy of the Hours (an ancient practice of praying psalms together at regular

hours throughout the day).

2. How important is prayer in your life?

Because we've chosen a way of life which says that God is most important, prayer is central to our lives. Think of it as a deep level of communication with God, similar to the kind of communication that happens between any two people who love each other. Our relationship with God grows and deepens with prayer.

Since prayer is important, many priests, sisters, and brothers spend about two hours a day praying. Part of that time we pray with others at Mass. We also pray other formal prayers like the Liturgy of the Hours or the rosary, or spend time with others less formally reading and reflecting on readings from the Bible. Part of the time we also pray alone, perhaps reading or just being quiet with God. One of the positive effects of prayer, whatever shape it takes, is to keep us aware of God's activity in the people, events, and circumstances of daily life.

3. Is prayer always easy for you?

Not always! Even those of us in contemplative life—whose ministry is prayer—go through “dry spells” when our prayer time seems dull or uneventful. As we grow in our experience of prayer we learn how to adjust to these changes. We often depend on the support of our communities or the help of a spiritual director (someone like a coach) to help us keep praying during difficult times. [See the articles on spiritual direction on the VISION website.] Those of us who are parish priests have our parish communities and our fellow priests to lead us toward prayer even when we'd rather not be bothered. We try to be faithful even when we don't feel like it.

4. What's the difference between a diocesan priest and a religious priest?

A diocesan priest ordinarily serves the church within a geographic area called a diocese. He ordinarily serves the people as a parish priest, but he may also be involved in many other forms of ministry like teaching, hospital ministry, campus ministry, or prison ministry.

A religious priest is a member of a religious congregation whose ministry goes beyond the geographic limits of any diocese. A religious priest seeks to live a life of poverty, celibacy, and obedience within a community of men. The community shares a common vision and spirituality and often emphasizes a particular type of ministry.

5. What's the difference between a brother and a priest?

A brother is a layman who commits himself to Christ by the vows of poverty, celibacy, and obedience. He usually lives in a religious community and works in a ministry that suits his talents and gifts. A brother might be a teacher, electrician, cook, lawyer, technician, parish minister, or artist. He tries to live his faith by being a “brother” to others.

A priest is ordained for a distinctive role as a minister of the sacraments. He celebrates the Eucharist and witnesses marriages, baptizes babies and adults, and brings God's healing presence to people through the sacraments of penance (confession) and anointing of the sick. He is involved in a variety of

other works as well—most often parish-related—but sacramental life is his special ministry.

6. How are religious orders different from one another?

Each religious order or congregation has a charism—a gift given for the service of the church—that helps them focus on the mission members hope to accomplish in community. That mission could be prayer in a cloistered convent (a home that community members rarely leave), or it could be an active ministry aimed at working with people.

Many congregations are like-minded or have similar ministries, but each is distinct in one respect or another. Many groups of religious men and women were founded at a time when travel and communication were limited. Some congregations were founded for similar purposes and at the same time but in different places by people who didn't know each other.

New communities continue to be formed today in response to God calling men and women to particular forms of spirituality, community, and mission.

7.?How long does it take to become a diocesan priest?

Generally it takes four years of college, followed by five to six more years of seminary study. A seminary is a college or university run by the Catholic Church for educating and preparing men to be priests.

8.?How do you join a religious community?

The process of joining a religious community actually takes some time and involves several stages. While these vary from community to community in name, length of time, and format, the basic stages include:

Contact: A person of high-school age or older who is interested in religious life but is still searching to answer the question “What does God want of me?” can join a program of contact with a religious community. The formation program is usually very flexible. The person may meet monthly with a priest, brother, or sister and share in experiences of prayer and community life. Others may take part in a “come and see” program to visit a community and experience its way of life. [For a current listing of discernment opportunities, log on to www.vocation-network.org and click on “Opportunities.”]

Candidate: This period enables the candidate to observe and participate in religious life from the inside. He or she must indicate interest and have the community agree to accept him or her as a person in the process of joining. The candidate lives within the community while continuing his or her education or work experience. This period enables the candidate to observe and participate in religious life. It also allows the community to see whether the candidate shows promise in living the community's life. A person may be a candidate for one or two years.

Novice: The novitiate is the next stage of formation. This is a special one-to-two-year period that marks a more official entrance into a community.

Novices spend time in study and prayer to learn more about themselves, the community, and their relationship with Jesus. At the end of the novitiate, novices prepare for temporary promises, or vows.

Vows: Promises of poverty, celibacy, and obedience may be taken for one, two, or three years, depending upon the decision of the individual. These promises are renewable for up to nine years. As soon as three years after making temporary vows, a person can make a promise to live the vows for life.

A man studying for religious priesthood must also undergo seminary training. During this time he studies theology, scripture, church teachings, and the skills he will need to be a priest.

9.?What vows do priests, brothers, and sisters make?

Brothers, sisters, and priests in religious communities make three vows, and some congregations make other vows as well. The three most common vows are:

Poverty—We share our goods in common, live a simple life, and realize that we depend on God.

Celibacy—We choose to love and serve God and all God’s people, rather than to love one person exclusively in marriage. We offer our celibacy as a witness and testimony to God’s love.

Obedience—We live in community and try to listen and follow the will of God by taking part in community life, goals, hopes, and work.

10.?What vows do diocesan priests make?

Diocesan priests make promises of celibacy and obedience to their bishop. They do not make a vow of poverty, but they do try to live simply so they can be of service to God’s people.

11. Can priests, brothers, and sisters date?

No, they can’t because dating is meant to lead to marriage, and as celibates we plan not to marry. However, we very much want and need friendships, and we have friends of both sexes.

12.?Are you ever attracted to others in a romantic way?

Of course! We still experience normal human needs, feelings, and desires. As celibate people we choose to channel these feelings—our sexual energies—into other healthy directions. We work at remaining faithful to our vow of celibacy through prayer, closeness to Jesus, good friendships, and healthy physical exercise.

13.?What if you fall in love?

It does happen. The basic responsibility in such a situation is to preserve the original, existing commitment we’ve made—which is to live as a sister, brother, or priest. We try to develop the relationship within the limits and responsibilities of our commitment to celibacy.

Obviously, falling in love can be a very difficult situation for a sister, priest, or brother. Yet we know that all Christians eventually face pain and difficulty in their lives. It isn't always easy to be a faithful spouse or a single person of integrity either. Dealing with such a challenge can make us stronger than ever in our vocations.

14. Do you have to be a virgin to be a brother, sister, or priest?

This is a common question we hear from young people! Past sexual activity does not in itself prevent someone from becoming a brother, sister, or priest. A person's past life is not the main concern. If it were, men and women who were once married could not become priests, brothers, or sisters (and they do). The question is whether a person is willing and able to now live and love as a celibate in the service of others. Some of the great saints—Saint Augustine and Saint Francis of Assisi for example—made other choices before turning to religious life.

15. Can I still be a priest, sister, or brother if I have personal debts?

Usually dioceses and religious congregations require applicants to resolve any personal debts or liabilities before entering a formation program. Many, however, will make exceptions for student loans and will have specific policies regarding a plan for fair and just payment. If someone has a history of excessive spending and accumulated personal debts, especially credit-card related, the person is usually asked to consider seriously his or her ability to live a life of simplicity inherent to a religious vocation.

16. Why do some of you wear religious clothes while others don't?

Those who wear habits or clerical collars do so for various reasons. One is that religious dress is a sign that may be instantly recognized as a symbol of faith in God and commitment to Christianity.

Another frequent rationale is that religious clothing is simple dress and therefore a way to live out the vow of poverty. A sister, brother, or priest who wears religious garb may own a few changes of clothing and be free of the expense of a more contemporary wardrobe.

Some communities wear street clothes, preferring to make their lifestyle, rather than their clothing, their main outward sign of faith. They feel religious dress may create a barrier between them and other people. Furthermore, those who have discontinued wearing habits often say the original reason for them was to wear the dress of the common people, and street clothes are now the common people's dress.

"Sixteen questions about church vocations" is reprinted with the permission of the National Coalition for Church Vocations and the National Religious Vocation Conference, 5401 S. Cornell Ave., Chicago, Illinois. All rights reserved. To order the complete brochure visit www.nccv-vocations.org (order #417).

National Coalition for Church Vocations.