

ESSENTIALS FOR THE VOCATION JOURNEY

Basic terms | Types | Way of life



Vo-ca-tion \ vō-ˈkā-shən \ **NOUN:** a summons or strong inclination to a particular state or course of action, especially a divine call to the religious life; a response to one's baptismal **call** to follow Jesus as a disciple in a life of holiness and service. From Latin *vocatio*, meaning "summons," and earlier *vocare*, meaning "to call," from *vox*, meaning "voice."



"Calling of Peter and Andrew." From *Sermons* by Maurice de Sully, c. 1320-1330, Paris, Bibliotheque Nationale de France

WOMEN AND MEN IN RELIGIOUS LIFE

SISTER A woman religious who professes public vows to an apostolic, or active, religious institute, distinct from a nun, who lives an enclosed, contemplative life. Sisters have a legacy of dedicating their prayer and ministry to serving wherever the need is greatest, particularly with the abandoned, neglected, and underserved.

NUN Although people use the terms nun and sister interchangeably, technically a nun belongs to a contemplative order, lives in a cloister, and devotes the majority of her time to prayer for the good of the world.

BROTHER A brother publicly professes vows to God and models his commitment by serving others as ministers of mercy and compassion in ways that express the charism of his religious institute. Striving to imitate Christ by living the gospel, brothers relate to others as Jesus did, as a brother.

PRIEST A **religious priest** professes vows in a religious institute and is ordained through the Sacrament of Holy Orders. A religious, or order, priest is accountable to his major superior and the other members of his community, as well as to the local bishop and the people he serves in a wide array of ministries. Religious priests take vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience, and any additional vows of their community. A **diocesan priest** is ordained through the Sacrament of Holy Orders to serve the local church primarily through parish ministry in a specific diocese (or archdiocese). He is accountable to his bishop and the people he serves. A diocesan priest makes promises of obedience and celibacy to his bishop. He does not take a vow of poverty or commit to live in community.

TYPES OF RELIGIOUS VOCATIONS

APOSTOLIC In the context of consecrated religious life, apostolic religious communities are engaged for the most part in active ministries. While prayer and community life are important to them, their members serve in a variety of ways: teaching, parish ministry, healthcare, social work, care for the elderly, work with young people, service to the poor, and many others.

CLOISTERED Contemplative religious communities are often cloistered or partially cloistered—that is, they live separated from the rest of the world to be more focused on prayer, including prayer for the needs of the world. As cloistered religious they rarely leave their monasteries, and all or most of their work is done within the monastery itself, depending on the degree to which they are cloistered.

CONTEMPLATIVE Contemplative religious communities focus on daily communal prayer, especially the Mass and Liturgy of the Hours, and individual prayer, such as *lectio divina*, which is the prayerful reading of scripture. They tend to live in greater solitude than apostolic communities so that they can better direct their prayer and work toward contemplation, though some communities that consider themselves contemplative are engaged in some active apostolic ministries.

MONASTIC Monastic communities fall somewhere between apostolic and cloistered. Monastic men and women place a high value on prayer and living in community life, but many are also engaged in active ministries, such as preaching, teaching, and spiritual direction. Monasticism centers on community life, work, and common and individual prayer.

MISSIONARY Missionary communities focus on promoting the gospel in other countries or areas of their own country where the church is not yet present in a robust form. Missionaries serve in many different places in such ministries as preaching, teaching, advocacy, social services, and other forms of witness.

WAY OF LIFE

CHARISM A religious community's spirit, way of life, and focus, which grows out of its history, traditions, and founder. From the Greek *charisma* meaning "gift," charism guides decisions about mission.

VOWS As members of religious communities, priests, sisters, and brothers take vows of poverty, celibacy, and obedience. Many communities add a fourth or fifth vow related to their charism. In most religious communities new members take temporary vows for a specified length of time—and they may renew those temporary vows. The final, binding step is to profess perpetual vows, or final vows.

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Process | Questions | Prayers

PROCESS TO ENTER

DISCERNMENT The process of reflecting and praying about how to respond to God's call to follow Jesus Christ as his disciple in a particular way of life. This time often involves spiritual direction, wise counsel, and holy reading.

FORMATION Education and spiritual development that takes place during the early months of joining a religious community.

POSTULANT A man or woman requesting and still discerning membership in a religious community before becoming a novice. The period of postulancy usually lasts six months to two years.

NOVICE A man or woman taking part in the initial stage of entering a religious community. The novice is typically involved in discernment, preparation, and formation activities, including studying the community's charism, history, constitution, and way of life. This period usually lasts from 12 to 24 months and is called the *novitiate*. At its end, novices may go on to take their first profession of vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience.

PROFESSION The religious rite in which a person formally enters a religious community by making public vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience, among others. Typically religious make *first profession* and then three to nine years later *perpetual profession*, or final vows.

channel those feelings into other healthy directions. They very much want and need friendships, but they work at remaining faithful to their vows of celibacy through prayer, closeness to Jesus, good friendships, and healthy physical exercise. It isn't always easy to be a faithful spouse, a faithful religious, or a single person of integrity. Dealing with challenges honestly and responsibly can make us stronger in our vocation, whatever it might be.

Can I spend time with my family and friends after I enter a religious community?

Though each religious community has its own policies, and some, particularly cloistered and contemplative, are more restrictive than others, all communities recognize that the support of loved ones is crucial for the novice as well as vowed members of the community and encourage contact with family and friends.

VOCATION PRAYERS

Prayer for vocations

LORD OF THE HARVEST,

BLESS young people with the gift of courage to respond to your call. Open their hearts to great ideals, to great things.

INSPIRE all of your disciples to mutual love and giving—for vocations blossom in the good soil of faithful people.

INSTILL those in religious life, parish ministries, and families with the confidence and grace to invite others to embrace the bold and noble path of a life consecrated to you.

UNITE us to Jesus through prayer and sacrament, so that we may cooperate with you in building your reign of mercy and truth, of justice and peace. AMEN.

—POPE FRANCIS

Prayer for vocation guidance

GOD WHO FORMED ME,

Your living waters flow within me.
They nourish my love for your Word.
They inspire me to follow your Son and pour out my life for others.

I am ready to further your mission.
Help me find the best way to share my gifts in service to you.
Giving you glory will be my greatest joy.

In all that I do, may
I proclaim your truth and give witness to your love.
I trust that you will be ever present—coursing through me
and quenching my thirst for your justice and mercy.
May I forever be worthy of your life-giving call. AMEN.

—VISION VOCATION GUIDE

COMMON QUESTIONS

How can I enter religious life and how long does it take?

Joining a religious community actually takes some time—typically three to nine years—and involves several stages. While these vary in name, length of time, and format, the basic stages include: Contact, candidacy, novitiate, vows. In addition, becoming a religious priest generally takes four years of college, followed by several more years of study at a seminary—a college or university for educating and preparing men of a particular religious institute or diocese for priesthood.

How important is prayer in religious life?

Prayer is central to religious life. Many priests, sisters, and brothers spend about two hours a day praying at Mass, Liturgy of the Hours, the Rosary, or reading and reflecting on readings from the Bible alone or in a group. Whatever shape it takes, prayer helps the pray-er keep aware of God's activity in daily life.

Do men and women religious work?

Just like most adults, men and women religious spend a portion of each day working, some in paid jobs related to their charism, others in the ministry of their religious institute. The work of religious sisters, brothers, priests, and nuns often centers around serving others be they students, families preparing to celebrate the sacraments, or people in need, such as the sick, elderly, imprisoned, or vulnerable. Men and women in religious life try to share their lives with others and reveal Christ in all they do.

After you enter religious life, what happens if you are attracted to others in a romantic way or fall in love?

Sisters, brothers, priests, and nun still experience normal human needs, feelings, and desires. As celibate people they choose to

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

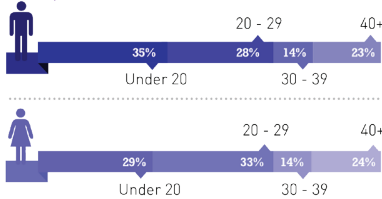
Find more information on religious vocations, religious life today, and information on becoming a Catholic religious sister, nun, brother, or priest at Vocationnetwork.org/en/articles/archive



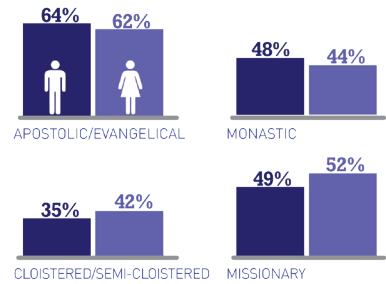
Who answered our VISION surveys



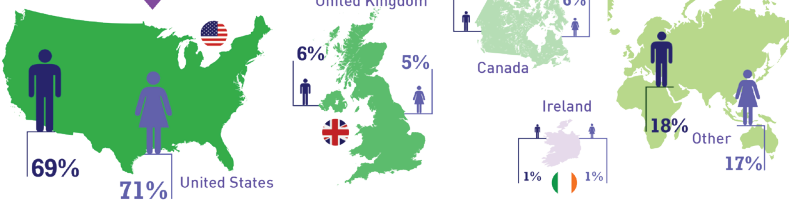
Age



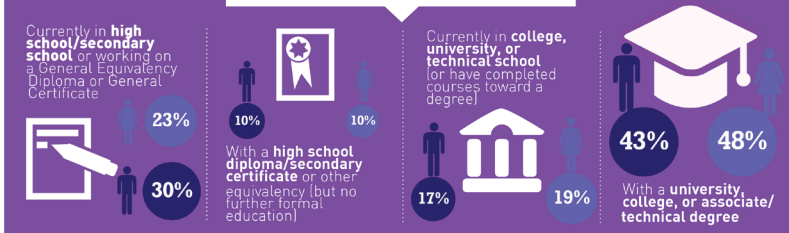
Preferred type of community



Where they live



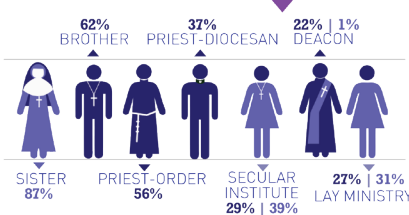
Their current educational status



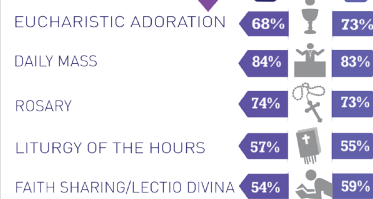
Drawn to living ...



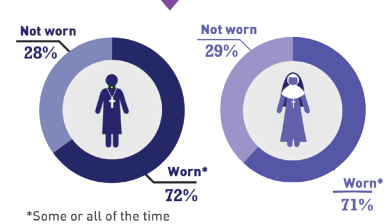
Vocations/lifestyles explored



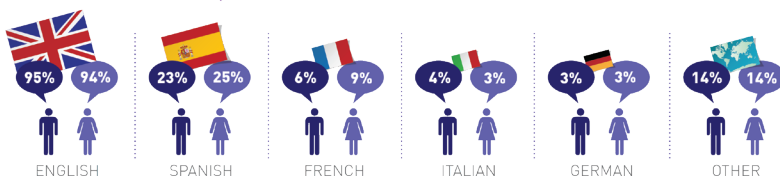
Favorite prayer styles



Habit preference



Language proficiency



Are they debt free? *



*Debt is most often educational debt. The vow of poverty requires a candidate to be unencumbered financially. Communities can apply for grants from the National Fund for Catholic Vocations to help service a candidate's student loans.

Some answers will not sum to 100% because the discerners were allowed to select more than one answer.

Data from VISION's VocationNetwork.org and VocationMatch.com reader statistics, based on 3314 reader responses in one year.

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ESSENTIALS FOR THE VOCATION JOURNEY

Timeline of religious life through the ages

EARLY CHURCH Apostles, Martyrs, Desert Fathers & Mothers	1ST CENTURY 1ST MILLENNIUM	33 Jesus begins his public ministry and invites all he encounters to “Come, follow me” (Luke 18:22).	50-65 Letters of Saint Paul refer to distinct groupings in the early church, including groups of celibate women and men dedicated to prayer and charity.
	2ND CENTURY	 251-356 Saint Anthony the Great heeds the gospel call to live all he has, serve the poor, and live a life of asceticism. He takes up residence in the Egyptian desert to live in solitude and prayer. His story inspires other men and women to live as hermits , from the Greek <i>cremites</i> , meaning “desert dwellers.”	292-348 Pachomius, a contemporary of Saint Anthony creates a model for a <i>cenobitic</i> , or common, way of life based on the early Christian communities sharing goods in common and praying together. The first true monastery is established in Tabenna, Egypt.
	3RD CENTURY	329-379 Saint Basil establishes large communities of monks in Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey). As bishop of Caesarea, Basil has his monks engage in the apostolic work of teaching and pastoral care.	<p>“<i>The human being is an animal who has received the vocation to become God.</i>” —SAINT BASIL</p>
	4TH CENTURY	 347-420 Saint Jerome, scholar and Bible translator, moves to Bethlehem where he sets up and lives in a monastery. One of many men and women religious who have been named doctors of the church for their contributions to theology and spiritual practice.	354-430 Saint Augustine of Hippo writes rules for monks and nuns during his early years as a bishop in North Africa and founds monasteries focused on prayer, reading, and manual labor. Shapes Christian philosophy and theology for the ages.
	5TH CENTURY	400-500 Surge of monastic communities. In 470 Saint Brigid establishes Kildare Abbey in Ireland, a monastery for monks and nuns.	500-600 Living in community becomes the dominant form of religious life and spreads to France, Germany, and Italy.
	6TH CENTURY	 480-547 Saint Benedict of Nursia founds monasteries and writes his rule for monks still used today. Benedict's twin sister, Saint Scholastica, heads a community of women. She is later named the patron saint of nuns.	<p>“<i>First show them in deeds rather than words all that is good and holy.</i>” —SAINT BENEDICT</p>
	7TH CENTURY	500-1600 Monasteries in Europe maintain the literature of the ancient world, and Christian scripture is preserved. Larger monasteries are centers of cultural and economic activity, harboring schools, hospitals, guest houses, and farms.	910 Benedictine Abbey of Cluny in central France spearheads reform of the medieval church and produces leaders, including monks who become bishops and popes.
	8TH CENTURY	 1050-1150 Camaldolese and Carthusian hermit and contemplative monks are founded by Saint Romuald (in Italy) and Saint Bruno (in the French Alps). Both continue to this day.	1098-1300 Cistercian order (Trappists) greatly increases in number and influence with the help of French monk Saint Bernard of Clairvaux. In 1125 the first Cistercian monastery for women is established in Dijon, France.
	9TH CENTURY	1121-1134 Saint Norbert combines a monastic regimen with parish work, foreshadowing the coming of the mendicant, or begging, orders and their service in cities. A double monastery of canons and nuns is established at Prémontré, France. The Norbertine Third Order , or lay association—the first of its kind—is founded. Often referred to as associates, tertiaries, lay associates, or secular tertiaries, such associations continue today.	1150-1244 Mendicant religious orders emerge. In contrast with the previous emphasis on contemplative life and stability, members are free to travel to preach the gospel and respond to the needs of the poor. The four major mendicant orders are the Carmelites (1150), Franciscans (1209), Dominicans (1216), and Augustinians (1244).
	10TH CENTURY		
	11TH CENTURY		
	12TH CENTURY		
EARLY MIDDLE AGES Councils, Church Fathers & Mothers	13TH CENTURY	1209 Saint Francis of Assisi founds a new order. In 1212 Saint Clare joins him and establishes a community for women (Poor Clares). She is the first woman to write rules for monastic life. Over the centuries diverse Franciscan men's and women's communities emerge, with members exercising influence as teachers and evangelizers and promoting piety practices, such as the Christmas crèche, Angelus, and Stations of the Cross.	
LATE MIDDLE AGES Church Schools	14TH CENTURY	1242 Saint Thomas Aquinas joins the Dominicans in 1242. Among the greatest theologians, study of his works is required for those seeking ordination or entrance in religious life.	
RENAISSANCE & REFORMATION	15TH CENTURY	1368 Catherine of Siena enters public life after years spent in solitude as a tertiary Dominican. She champions spiritual reform and church unity and has the ear of the pope. Named a doctor of the church —one of four women so designated.	<p>“<i>Be who God meant you to be and you will set the world on fire.</i>” —SAINT CATHERINE</p>
ENLIGHTENMENT Reaction & Revival	16TH CENTURY	1517 Augustinian priest Martin Luther proposes his 95 Theses for church reform in Wittenberg, Germany, resulting in his excommunication and symbolically beginning the Protestant Reformation and its accompanying social and religious upheaval.	
INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION Catholic Social Teachings	17TH CENTURY	1534-85 Saint Teresa of Ávila and Saint John of the Cross, influential mystics, and writers, begin their reform of the Carmelite order in Spain.	1540 Jesuits are founded by Saint Ignatius of Loyola. Their efforts in education and mission continue to wield global influence. Missionary activities of Jesuits, Dominicans, Franciscans, and Augustinians expand to all parts of the world.
INFORMATION AGE Vatican II, Liturgical Reform, Civil Rights, Human Movements	18TH CENTURY	1545-63 Council of Trent encourages renewal of religious orders and new forms of religious life.	<p>“<i>Go to the poor: you will find God.</i>” —VINCENT DE PAUL</p>
3RD MILLENNIUM	19TH CENTURY	1540-1850 Establishment and growth of apostolic religious communities that emphasize serving the needs of the poor, especially through education and medical care. With Saint Vincent de Paul, Saint Louise de Marillac forms the first community of non-cloistered sisters (1633). Many religious institutes are founded to meet social needs in the wake of the French Revolution and other European conflicts. Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton founds the first apostolic community of women in the United States in 1809.	
HIGH MIDDLE AGES Great Schism, (1054), Crusades	20TH CENTURY	1890-1965 Servant of God Mother Mary Elizabeth Lange establishes the first African-American women's religious community in 1891; Charles Uncles is ordained the first black priest in the U.S. and founds the Josephite order in 1893. Rerum Novarum (1891), the foundational document for Catholic social teaching, calls on clergy, religious, and laity to advocate for justice and social equality. With 180,000 religious women and 42,000 religious men, by 1965, U.S. religious reach their peak.	1947 Pope Pius XII encourages the formation of secular institutes , a distinct form of consecrated life that vows poverty, obedience, and chastity without communal life.
11TH CENTURY	21ST CENTURY	1962-65 Second Vatican Council convenes bishops worldwide to address calls to reform the church. Religious communities are urged to return to their original charism, or guiding spirit, as well as to respond to the needs of the times. All aspects of Catholic life, including consecrated life, experience significant change.	<p>“<i>The purpose of the religious life is to help the members follow Christ and be united to God through the profession of the evangelical counsels (chastity, poverty, and obedience).</i>” —PERFECTAE CARITATIS</p>
12TH CENTURY	2009 Ground-breaking Study on Recent Vocations to Religious Life (NRVC/CARA) sets benchmarks for the new millennium. The 2020 follow-up study confirms that after a steep decline in the late 20th century, entries to religious life remain steady.	2013-23 Pope Francis, a Jesuit, draws attention to religious life when he is elected in 2013. He is one of 34 religious institute members to become pope. The church designates 2015 as the Year of Consecrated Life , and in 2018 Francis convenes an international synod of bishops on “ Young people, the faith, and vocational discernment. ” The 2023 World Youth Day marks the 15th international gathering of youth, lay ministers, clergy, and religious first convened by Saint John Paul II in 1986.	Ongoing In response to God's call, people continue to discern religious vocations, enter religious life, and found new religious communities.