

Questions | Other vocations | Prayers

COMMON QUESTIONS

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

Joining a religious community takes time—typically three to nine years—and involves several stages. While these vary, the basic stages include: candidacy, novitiate, and vows. In addition, becoming a religious priest generally takes four years of college, followed by several years of seminary, a college for preparing men for priesthood.

How important is prayer?

Prayer is central to religious life both in solitude and in community. Many in religious life spend about two hours a day praying at Mass, saying the Liturgy of the Hours and the Rosary, holy reading, or reflecting on scripture. Whatever shape it takes, prayer is a way to stay in communication with God and offer praise and thanksgiving, seek forgiveness, and petition for the needs of the world.

Do men and women religious work?

Just like most adults, religious sisters, brothers, priests, and nuns spend a portion of each day working—some in paid jobs related to their community's charism, or spirit of the community; others in the ministries of their religious institute. The work of those in religious life often centers around serving others. Religious strive to share their lives with others and reveal Christ in all they do.

After people enter religious life, what happens if they are attracted to others in a romantic way?

Sisters, brothers, priests, and nuns experience normal human needs, feelings, and desires. As celibate people they choose to channel those feelings into other healthy directions. They work at remaining faithful to their vows of chastity through prayer, closeness to Jesus, good friendships, and physical exercise. It isn't always easy to remain faithful to one's vows, no matter one's life's calling. Dealing with challenges honestly can make a vocation stronger.

Can I spend time with family and friends after I enter religious life?

Each religious community has its own policies, and some, particularly cloistered,

are fairly restrictive. However, all communities recognize that the support of loved ones is crucial for novices as well as vowed members and encourage contact with family and friends.

OTHER VOCATIONS

GOD CALLS all of us to be true to ourselves and live in ways that bring us the greatest joy, whether that be within marriage, single life, holy orders, consecrated life, or other vocations, such as:

Associates Single and married laypeople who have a close bond with religious communities that offer this form of membership. Associates commit to integrating the community's charism, or spirit, into their way of life and usually take part in some activities of the community.

Secular third orders Laypeople who follow the inspiration and guidance of a religious institute in their daily lives. Third order members are usually received into the religious community in a particular ceremony and pledge themselves to certain prayers and religious practices.

Permanent deacons Men ordained to minister in preaching, liturgy, counseling, and other forms of service in a diocese after a formal period of formation. Deacons may be married at the time they receive Holy Orders.

Diocesan hermits A relatively rare but ancient form of life that involves living a life of prayer and contemplation in solitude with the approval of the bishop.

Secular institutes A form of consecrated life in which members commit to a life of celibate chastity, poverty, and obedience while providing Christian witness wherever they live and work.

Consecrated virgins Women who commit to living in perpetual virginity supervised by the local bishop. Candidates for consecration must be women who have never been married, had children, or lived in violation of chastity.

Lay ecclesial movements Church organizations focused on a particular ministry or spirituality, or both. Examples include Cursillo and Focolare.

VOCATION PRAYERS

Prayer for discernment

LORD, help me to:

BOLDLY take charge of my life, aim for the most beautiful and profound things, and keep my heart pure.

RESPOND to your call, with the aid of wise and generous guides, and realize a proper plan for my life to achieve true happiness.

DREAM great dreams and always have a concern for the good of others.

STAND with you at the foot of the cross and receive the gift of your mother.

WITNESS to your Resurrection and the hope it brings.

BE AWARE that you are at my side as I joyously proclaim you as Lord. AMEN.

—POPE FRANCIS

Prayer for focus

DEAR LORD, focus my faith on you. Like Mary, Blessed Virgin, help me to see the great things you have done for me. By your mercy you lift me up and satisfy my hunger. *I give you glory.*

DEAR LORD, focus my hope on you. Like Paul the Apostle, help me to concentrate on whatever is true, honorable, just, pure, lovely, and gracious. *I give you praise.*

DEAR LORD, focus my love on you. Like Julian of Norwich, doctor of the church, help me to rest assured that all shall be well. Show me your meaning in all things, which is Love. *I give you thanks.* AMEN.

— VISION VOCATION GUIDE

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

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



Basic terms | Types | Way of life | Process

« **Vo-ca-tion** \vō-ˈkā-shən\ **NOUN:** a summons or strong inclination to a particular state or course of action, especially 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* (summons) and earlier *vocare* (to call) from *vox* (voice). »

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 the terms *nun* and *sister* are often used interchangeably, 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 a minister of mercy and compassion in ways that express the charism of his religious institute. Striving to imitate Christ, a brother relates to others as Jesus did, as a brother to all.

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 ministry. 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/archdiocese. He is accountable to his bishop and the people he serves. A diocesan priest makes promises of obedience and celibacy to his bishop, but not vows of poverty or community living.

TYPES OF RELIGIOUS VOCATIONS

APOSTOLIC Apostolic religious communities are engaged primarily in active ministries. While prayer and community are important elements of their life, members serve in many ways, including education, parish and youth ministry, healthcare, social work, and care for poor and elderly people.

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. As cloistered religious they rarely leave their monasteries, and all or most of their work is done within the monastery itself.

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 live in relative solitude so that they can better direct their prayer and work toward contemplation, though some contemplative communities are engaged in active apostolic ministries.

MONASTIC Monastic men and women place a high value on prayer and living in community, 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 and ministry.

VOWS Members of religious communities—priests, sisters, nuns, and brothers—and others in consecrated life, such as members of secular institutes, take vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience. Many communities add a fourth or fifth vow related to their charism, such as stability, hospitality, or service to the poor. In most religious communities new members take temporary vows for a specified length of time—and they may renew those temporary vows. The last, binding step is to profess perpetual vows.

PROCESS TO ENTER

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

FORMATION Education and spiritual development that takes place after joining a religious community.

POSTULANT A candidate requesting membership in a religious community before becoming a novice. The period of postulancy usually lasts six months to two years, during which time the candidate lives within the community while continuing his or her education or work experience.

NOVICE A new member taking part in the initial stage of entering a religious community. The novice is typically involved in discernment and formation activities, including studying the community's charism, history, constitution, and way of life and learning more about themselves and their faith lives. This novitiate period usually lasts from 12 to 24 months. Novices then may go on to make their first profession of the 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.

1ST MILLENNIUM

2ND MILLENNIUM

EARLY CHURCH Apostles, Martyrs, Desert Fathers & Mothers

1ST CENTURY

33 | Jesus begins his public ministry and invites all he encounters to “Come, follow me” (Luke 18:22).

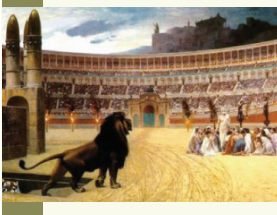


50-65 | Letters of Saint Paul refer to distinct groupings in the Early Church, including groups of celibate women and men dedicated to prayer and charity.

251-356 | Saint Anthony the Great heads the gospel call to sell 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 *cremeites*, meaning “desert dwellers.”

I saw the snares that the enemy spreads out over the world and I said groaning, “What can get through from such snares?” Then I heard a voice saying to me, “Humility.”
—SAINT ANTHONY

313 | Persecution of Christians ends as Roman Emperor Constantine issues the “Edict of Toleration.” Christians seek ways other than martyrdom to give completely to the faith.



2ND CENTURY

3RD CENTURY

4TH CENTURY

5TH CENTURY

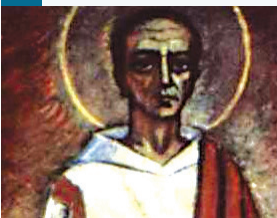
6TH CENTURY

292-348 | Pachomius, a contemporary of Saint Anthony, creates a model for a cenobitic, 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.

The human being is an animal who has received the vocation to become God. —SAINT BASIL

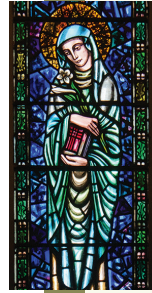
329-379 | Saint Basil establishes large communities of monks in Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey). As bishop of Cesarea, Basil has his monks engage in the apostolic work of teaching and pastoral care.

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.

400-500 | Surge of monastic communities. In 470



Saint Brigid establishes Kildare Abbey in Ireland, a monastery for monks and nuns.

480-547 | Saint Benedict of Nursia founds monasteries and writes his

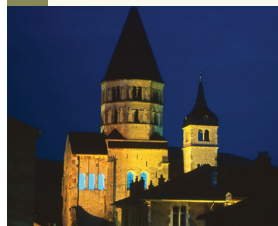
rule for monks still used today. Benedict’s twin sister, Saint Scholastica, heads a community of women. She is later named the patron saint of nuns.

Let all guests who arrive be received as Christ, because he will say: “I was a stranger and you took me in” (Matt. 25:35).
—From the RULE OF ST. BENEDICT

500-600 | Living in community becomes the dominant form of religious life and spreads to France, Germany, and Italy.

500-1600 | In Europe, Monasteries 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 who become bishops and popes.



1050-1150 | Camaldolese and Carthusian hermit and contemplative

7TH CENTURY

8TH CENTURY

9TH CENTURY

10TH CENTURY

EARLY MIDDLE AGES Councils, Church Fathers & Mothers, Church Schools

11TH CENTURY

12TH CENTURY



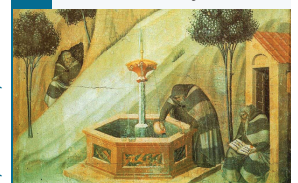
monks are founded by Saint Romuald (in Italy) and Saint Bruno (in the French Alps). Both continue to this day.

He who prays and labors lifts his heart to God with his hands.
—SAINT BERNARD

1098-1300 | Cistercian order (Trappists) greatly increases in number and influence with the help of French monk **Saint Bernard of Clairvaux**. The first Cistercian monastery for women is established in Dijon, France in 1125.

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 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).

HIGH MIDDLE AGES Great Schism, Crusades, Peak of Holy Roman Empire

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.



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.

Be who God meant you to be and you will set the world on fire.
—SAINT CATHERINE

14TH 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.

15TH CENTURY

1517 | Augustinian priest Martin Luther proposes his *95 Theses* for church reform in Wittenberg, Germany, resulting in his excommunication and

RENAISSANCE & REFORMATION Sacred Art Flourishes; Rise of Humanism, Counter Reforms

16TH CENTURY

symbolically beginning the Protestant Reformation and its accompanying social and religious upheaval.

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 globally.

Every way of preparing ... to find the Divine Will ... for the salvation of the soul is called a Spiritual Exercise.

—From Ignatian SPIRITUAL EXERCISES

17TH CENTURY

1545-63 | Council of Trent encourages renewal of religious orders and new forms of religious life.



1540-1850 | Founding 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

ENLIGHTENMENT Rationalism, Reaction & Revival

18TH CENTURY

INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION Catholic Social Teachings

non-cloistered sisters (1633). Many religious institutes are founded to meet social needs in the wake of the French Revolution and other European conflicts.



1809 | Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton founds the first apostolic community of women in the United States in 1809.

19TH CENTURY

1890-1965 | Servant of God Mother Mary Elizabeth Lange establishes the first African-American



women's religious community in 1891; **Charles Uncles** is the first black man ordained 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.

20TH CENTURY

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.

1962-65 | Second Vatican Council convenes bishops worldwide to address calls to reform the church. Religious communities are urged to return to their

AGE OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE Accountability, Transformation, Human Dignity

21ST CENTURY

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.

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).

—PERFECTAE CARITATIS

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.