

Choosing a Vocation

PRIESTLY AND RELIGIOUS LIFE AMID CRISIS

FR. BYRON MILLER, CSSR

Diminishing vocations to the vowed life. Aging religious. Burned-out priests. The clergy sexual abuse crisis. With so many challenges facing leaders in the Church today, why would anyone consider becoming a priest or religious?

A teen prays during a holy hour for high school students at Immaculate Conception Seminary in Huntington, NY.

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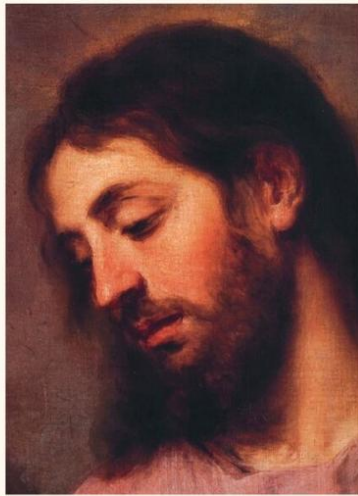
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Fundamentally, people discern a priestly and religious vocation because they're drawn to the attractiveness of Jesus. They desire to be an authentic, radical witness of him and his message of service found in the Gospels. Of course, this attractiveness of Jesus appeals to all Christians. Our discipleship is a universal call by baptism that's lived out in various expressions, including in married, single, consecrated, and priestly life.

Priests express this discipleship primarily by preaching the word of God, administering the sacraments, and committing themselves concretely to service in the reign of God. They find enormous fulfillment as "servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God" (see 1 Corinthians 4:1). This feeling of purpose and meaning accounts for a remark by Archbishop Harry Flynn, DD (1933–2019): "If I had a hundred lives, I'd live every one of them as a priest."

Religious women and men express discipleship by forgoing aspects of one type of life in order to adopt another that's focused in a particular way on Christ. Consequently, their way of life encompasses such factors as mobility or stability; a fairly ordered daily regimen; intergenerational community dynamics; living with people of backgrounds vastly different from one's own; coping with loneliness; and embracing the vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience. Celibacy for priests and religious is an acceptance of the realization that they will never have their own family or children, but are uniquely espoused to God.

Clergy and religious generally derive profound meaning through a lifetime vocation of prayer, witness, and ministry. They gain satisfaction in being advocates of peace and justice, agents of change for the poor and disenfranchised, and companions to countless individuals in all moments of life: by accompanying people in broken relationships and through the loss of loved ones; by witnessing joy and love at a wedding or a baptism; and by praying in communion with others for those who rely on the power of their prayers.



CHRIST HEALING THE PARALYTIC AT THE POOL OF BETHSEDA (DETAIL), BARTOLOMÉ ESTEBÁN MURILLO

When Fr. Karl Rahner, SJ (1904–1984), the influential German theologian, was asked why he became a Jesuit and why he remained one, he replied he was a Jesuit because of good people. He said it wasn't due to the Jesuits' significant impact on the Church or to their reputable universities, or even to their future. Rather, Fr. Rahner witnessed in his fellow Jesuits around the world a total dedication to Christ, a readiness for prayer, and a commitment to ministry, including: a Jesuit imprisoned for Christ, another beaten by police in Barcelona, still another in India who dug wells for the poor. "I do not say," he explained, "that the things of which I speak are only found in the Society of Jesus. All I know is, and the

fact is, I have found them there."

Karl Rahner's experience holds true to this day. Good people are, in fact, still attracted to Jesus and want to become priests and religious—even in the midst of extreme crisis.

Imperfect but Committed to God and Humanity

Ideally, priests and religious are defined and identified by their unconditional commitments to God and people. This dual fidelity does not exclude priests and religious from flaws. Fr. Thomas Merton, OCSO (1915–1968), acknowledges this unsurprising reality in *The Seven Storey Mountain*, his autobiography: "The first and most elementary test of one's call to the religious life...is the willingness to accept life in a community in which everybody is more or less imperfect."

What are some imperfections that priests and religious share with the rest of humanity at large? Despite extensive theological and scriptural training, they may still adhere to a narrow understanding of God's mercy. They can easily become superficial in their prayer life. They often spend too much time watching television or on the internet instead of being engaged in prayer and ministry. And while they may avoid addictive behaviors such as excessive alcohol consumption, they often substitute other addictions for them, like smoking or gambling.

Some Catholics are shocked to find fundamental flaws in their spiritual leaders, as though clergy and religious are somehow immune to vices. Yet the universal human condition seldom surprises most priests who've heard confessions for decades. Penitents—priests, religious, and laity—confess a variety of sins that fall under the Church's traditional list of the seven deadly sins: pride, envy, wrath, sloth, greed, gluttony, and lust.

Most people can accept the chinks in the armor that priests and religious generally share with humanity. But for decades, the all-too-frequent revelation that numerous priests and religious engaged in sexual activity with minors was too painful for some to bear. There's justifiable outrage at the deliberate efforts of some Church leaders to protect the



COURTESY OF STEVE BENDEN, CSSR

institution from scandal, scrutiny, and liability at all costs.

Some people are disinclined to become priests or religious because of the sex-abuse scandals, while others pursue a vocation to follow Christ in leadership roles to help the Church wash itself clean of the sin of child abuse.

The Road to Enlightenment, Accepting Responsibility, and Serving the Right Way

Church leaders are also part of a society where the social issue of child abuse has festered and is not limited to a country, culture, or religion. Because the Church exists in the world, it helps to place the Church's predicament in a wide social context and perspective.

"Sex abuse of children is far from new," notes Steven Mintz, past president of the Society of the History of Children and Youth ("Placing childhood sexual abuse in historical perspective," 2012). "That the young were sexually abused was well known to nineteenth-century Americans," but the reality that it is wrong and inflicts lasting trauma was recognized by an enlightened American society "slowly and unevenly." While Mintz cites such examples as the 1953 landmark Alfred Kinsey study that indicated "fully a quarter of all girls under the age of fourteen reported that they had experienced some form of sexual abuse," it wasn't until 1974 that Congress passed the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act that mandates states to establish reporting requirements in suspected cases.

"What are some imperfections that priests and religious share with the rest of humanity at large?"

If our heightened awareness of underage victims was gradual, so also was our understanding of the perpetrators. "Offenders were regarded as mentally ill and treatable through psychotherapy. Their problem, purportedly, was that they lacked emotional and sexual maturity," Mintz explained. Consequently, Church leaders and their advisors mistakenly thought pedophile priests, deacons, and religious could be cured in treatment programs that addressed their emotional and sexual maturity, or lack thereof.

The Church and society's enlightenment about abuse is necessary to prevent it, but awareness isn't everything. If enlightenment alone altered human behavior, smoking wouldn't remain the biggest cause of preventable disease and death in the US—despite evidence for more than a half-century of its damaging effects. While awareness and protections firmly in place in dioceses and religious communities help the Church assess our dysfunctional failures, continued effort and diligence are needed to prevent sexual abuse from recurring.

Experts also say clericalism is an underlying systemic cause within the Church that allowed sexual abuse to flourish. Clericalism is rooted in temptations that fall under the Church's list of the seven deadly sins. It is "simply the

Commitment to God and Humanity

If you want to identify me
ask me not where I live,
or what I like to eat,
or how I comb my hair,
but ask me what I am living for, in detail,
and ask me what I think is keeping me
from living fully for the thing I want to live for.
Between these two answers
you can determine the identity of any person.

THOMAS MERTON,
MY ARGUMENT WITH THE GESTAPO:
A MACARONIC JOURNAL

manifestation in the Church of very human temptations that are present in every organization: ambition, pride, arrogance and the abuse of power," writes Fr. Thomas Reese, SJ.

Fr. Reese's definition of clericalism not only acknowledges the unsurprising reality that it exists in the Church, but that human temptations "are present in every organization." Now that the secret of pervasive child abuse has been exposed in the Baptist Church, will their response to the scandal avoid the same mistakes made by the Catholic Church? And will the Boy Scouts of America learn from the errors of countless dioceses that have, like the Scouts, filed for bankruptcy?

People calling Catholic leaders to a higher standard is to be expected. But Catholic spiritual leaders shouldn't be subjected to a double standard by those who don't expect the same of themselves and/or their institutions. "No church is perfect because every church...is made up of imperfect, sinful people," wrote the Reverend Dr. Billy Graham. "Someone has said that if you ever found a church that was perfect, it would stop being perfect the minute you joined."

Similarly, Blessed Solanus Casey, OFM Cap (1870–1957), stated profoundly, "God could have founded the Church and left it under the supervision of angels that have no human faults and weaknesses. But who can doubt that as it stands today, consisting of and under poor sinners—successors of ignorant fishermen—that the Church is a more outstanding miracle than any other way?"

Skeptics consider it miraculous that people still desire to become priests or religious in the Church today. Indeed, to imitate Christ in the Gospels by accepting the inescapable reality of imperfect, sinful people and offering them healing is nothing short of a miracle!

Reform, renewal, and resurrection

Historically, reform and renewal in the Church often emerged during crises. Saint John Paul II wrote, "At one time the renewal of the Church took place mainly through the religious orders. This was true in the period following the fall of the Roman Empire with the Benedictines and, in the Middle Ages, with the mendicant orders—the Franciscans and the Dominicans. This was true in the period following



COURTESY OF SCHOOL SISTERS OF CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE

the Reformation, with the Jesuits and other similar congregations; in the eighteenth century, with the Redemptorists and the Passionists; in the nineteenth century, with dynamic missionary congregations such as the Divine Word Fathers, the Salvatorians and, naturally, the Salesians” (*Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, 1994).

Religious life was not only an appealing vocation for responding to the attractiveness of Jesus, but also it was conducive for responding to urgent needs in society. Women religious, in the attractiveness of Jesus, but also it was conducive for responding to urgent needs in society. Women religious, in particular, have an admirable record in discerning the signs of the times and effecting significant change. For example, women religious responded enthusiastically to the educational and humanitarian needs in the African American community immediately after the Civil War. Likewise, the flu epidemic of 1918–19 was a catalyst for the greater involvement of women religious in health-care ministry.

“In former days, when new members were younger and more numerous, they brought new life and energy, as well as a fresh idealism that significantly impacted the community. New members attracted more new members,” wrote Catherine Bertrand, SSND, past executive director of the National Religious Vocation Conference. But today is different. US sisters over age ninety far outnumber those under sixty.

Compared to the prosperity, innovation, and vitality of the past, the current paucity of vocations and the aging of priests and religious have profound implications on people in

the pews and in the sanctuaries of the Church.

Of a priest’s varied duties—pastoral, catechetical, and administrative, to name a few—his sacramental role is primary. “The whole liturgical life of the Church revolves around the Eucharistic sacrifice and the

sacraments,” insists the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1113). While ordinations have rebounded in recent decades, they’re nowhere near the numbers needed to replace priests who die, retire, or withdraw from ministry.

Today, many US religious communities also fall short of the number of active ministers needed to replace their elderly and retiring members. As they struggle to remain impactful in their mission and ministry for God and humanity, they’re reimagining styles of leadership, levels impactful in their mission and ministry for God and humanity, they’re reimagining styles of leadership, levels of administration, and creative ways of partnership. Yet, are there even enough religious women and men—now and in the foreseeable future—to continue attracting new life and energy? Is a younger generation still attracted to the traditional form of religious life or will new expressions emerge?

Amid these formidable challenges, the Church remains hopeful: Resurrection is born in crisis!

“The words of eternal life”

After many of Jesus’ disciples no longer accompanied him and returned to their former way of life, he asked the Twelve, “Do you also want to leave?” Simon Peter replied, “Master, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life” (see John 6:66–68).

Why do good people accompany Jesus in discipleship as priests and religious? To whom shall they go?

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ARE YOU DISCERNING A PRIESTLY OR RELIGIOUS VOCATION?

Being a priest “is as exciting as being a brain surgeon, and as difficult and inspiring,” said Bishop Robert Barron of Los Angeles. If you or someone you know is considering a vocation to the priesthood or religious life, here are some points to ponder.

Becoming a priest or religious doesn’t require perfection. Our Lord assures us that we’re redeemable: “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness” (2 Corinthians 12:9). However, commitment and compassion are essential, along with sufficient competence, health, and psychological maturity.

Despite widespread public perception and psychological maturity.

Despite widespread public perception and misrepresentation, the evidence remains indisputable: the majority of priests and religious are not sexually attracted to minors. Being a priest or religious today doesn’t necessarily entail guilt by association with pedophiles, but it does require a love of Christ and his cross sufficient to withstand humiliation and ridicule.

Clericalism, according to Pope Francis, is “fostered by priests themselves or by laypersons.” By becoming a priest, you’re not part of the problem of clericalism unless you allow yourself to be. The Pope encouraged a group of young seminarians “to be less rigid, avoid narcissism, and discern ‘shades of gray,’” behaviors that can combat clericalism. Ambition, pride, arrogance, and the abuse of power are part of the problem. Furthermore, they are contrary to the characteristics of the priesthood of Jesus Christ.

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