

RELIGIOUS LIFE 101

What is the consecrated life all about?

BY SR. PATRICIA M. MCCORMACK, IHM, EdD

WHILE I WAS SUBSTITUTE TEACHING in a Catholic high school, an 11th-grade student asked me, “Are you a real nun?”

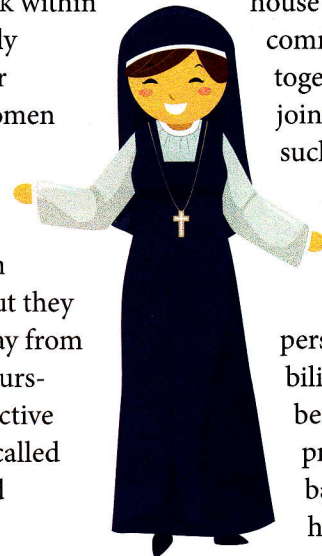
I replied that I was probably as real as they get! The student was stunned, stammering, “I’ve never met a nun.” As we talked, I tried to put religious life into a context she would understand. I asked her to compare or contrast the Army, Air Force, Navy, and Marines. She correctly discerned that they were all forms of military service which differed in customs, dress, regulations, and so on. Just so, though there are identifiable differences among religious communities, the lifestyle of consecrated men and woman is basically the same.

1. Men and women religious consecrate themselves to God by professing three vows. In some congregations a fourth vow is added, often stability or service. Cloistered religious and members of orders such as Carmelites and Benedictines take solemn vows; members cannot own property or receive an inheritance. Active religious take simple vows and may own property or receive an inheritance, but they give up the right to use it.

2. Common vows include chastity (single-hearted love of God that excludes sexual relationships), poverty (a simple lifestyle where resources are shared and gifts or possessions are contributed to the common good), and obedience (accepting the decisions of the Superior as the will of God).

3. Cloistered, contemplative religious live and work within a monastery and rarely leave it. Prayer is their primary ministry. Women contemplatives are called nuns; men are called monks. Active religious live in a convent or friary, but they perform ministry away from it, such as teaching, nursing, or social work. Active women religious are called sisters; men are called brothers.

4. Religious formation takes a minimum of eight years, and ongoing formation extends throughout the lifetime of a consecrated person. Pre-entrance time varies by person and congregation. Postulancy (one year), Novitiate (two years), and Temporary Vows (five years) precede Final (Perpetual) Profession. A man or woman may leave at any time during formation. A dispensation from Rome is required in order to leave after Final Profession.



5. Members within a religious house meet in a chapel for common prayer, eat meals together, relax together, and join in recreation activities such as watching TV or going to an out-of-house activity or event. They have periods of silence and personal prayer responsibilities. Each has a private bedroom, though they probably share a common bathroom. They share household chores and coordinate the use of a common car.

6. Often distinct clothing or religious symbols identify men and women religious as consecrated members of a particular community.

Religious life calls men and women to dedicate their lives to serving God. **T**

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