

Why Become a Priest, Sister or Brother Today?

By Sister Cathy Bertrand, S.S.N.D.

“How did you know you were called to be a sister? Why do you stay in religious life?” If I had a dollar for every time I’ve been asked these questions, I’d be a wealthy woman! In my years as a vocation minister for my community and then on diocesan and national levels, I have come to realize that there are many ways to interpret these questions. I’ve discovered that the real question for many is, “Why would you do such a thing with your life?”

No doubt about it, fewer Catholics are choosing to be priests, sisters or brothers. Even to consider a celibate vocation in today’s climate raises questions. Those making such a choice are likely to be considered very holy or very crazy—or more than a little desperate for something to do!

“Why do this with your life?” There are many possible and plausible answers, but let’s first focus on some factors behind such a question.

If there’s anything people can agree on these days about priesthood and religious life, it’s that there are fewer priests, brothers and sisters and fewer people coming to houses of formation and seminaries, at least in North America. It’s no secret that we are facing a “vocation crisis.” There are fewer such vocations today. Yet we tend to compare every period in history to the late 50’s and early 60’s, when great numbers were entering priesthood and religious life. We need to keep in mind that the vocation explosion of that era was an exceptional phenomenon.

Yet it’s not only these vocations that face a crisis today. Married folks haven’t found it easy sailing either, as the growing phenomenon of divorce indicates. For a variety of reasons, the U.S. Catholic population is faced with serious questions about all vocations and about commitments within those vocations.

The Vocation Climate Today

People still choose religious life and priesthood, but the number is declining. Perhaps here in the United States, we need to question the prevailing attitude that *“more is better,”* no matter what we are talking about. Without question, God’s people deserve competent ministers. We can pinpoint certain factors that are influencing the number of those considering priesthood and religious life:

1. **The cultural trend is way from permanency.** Lifetime commitments are often seen today as undesirable and impossible. Given the life expectancy in this country, committing oneself to anything for a lifetime is, for many, unattractive and impossible. People not only make life-style changes, they may have three or more careers in a lifetime.
2. **Ministry options are multiplying.** Vatican II, in affirming the common call shared in Baptism, deepened our awareness of the dignity of each call—whether it be to the married or single life, priesthood or religious life. The development of lay ministry, though a very positive factor in today’s Church, has a significant impact on those who are considering Church ministry options. Unlike the past, one doesn’t have to be a priest or religious to be involved in Church ministry.

3. **Application processes are more extensive today.** Religious communities and dioceses take great effort in evaluating prospective candidates. Each person is assessed carefully to see if he or she has the skills and talents to serve as a brother, sister or priest. Desire is not the only consideration, and discernment is a two-way street. Not everyone who indicates an interest in priesthood or religious life may be invited to move in those directions. The underlying question is what will be best for the individual as well as for the people of God who are on the receiving end of someone's ministry efforts.
4. **The public image of priests and religious is under attack.** Negative media coverage, particularly due to sexual abuse lawsuits filed against dioceses and communities, has left many people with a sense of mistrust for Church ministers and the inability to see this life-style choice as a credible, "respectable" option. Some of the public have the impression that no priests or religious live what they claim. Stereotypical images of priests and religious in TV and movie productions often fail to show a realistic, contemporary and adult understanding of these life-styles. They are often presented as silly, childish and irrelevant. Priests and religious doing admirable work often go unnoticed.
5. **Family Structures are changing.** At times this has a negative impact on how one looks at options for his or her future. Just to name one example, families are generally smaller these days, and parents want grandchildren. As a result, some parents find it hard to encourage their children to consider priesthood and religious life.
6. **The social climate is not always supportive.** Though the United States struggles to uphold positive values, it is increasingly marked by violence, materialism and individualism. There are few supports for positive values, and we are bombarded with the message that "you can have it all." Such an environment is not supportive for religious and priestly vocations.

Given these hurdles and a modern climate sometimes hostile to cultivating Church vocations, I can understand why people approach us with the question: "Why would anyone want to be a religious or priest today?" Everyone, of course, has a different vocation story to tell. In fact, I never tell mine the same way twice, as my own sense of this choice continues to grow and deepen.

My own story is anything but a best-seller—there were no thunderbolts or lightning strikes. It was the encouragement of family members, teachers, and friends who saw talent and skills in me that could be used in this way. Finally it was the dare of a friend that pushed me to enter a community—a dare which said, "I can't imagine that you'd do this—or stay." Not a good reason to join, but it got me in the door. And only a couple years later did it begin to dawn on me, "Hey, this might work!"

Unlike other religious who say that they have never doubted their decision, I have had many questions and doubts along the way, but I have come to realize that perhaps this kind of uncertainty has been a gift in disguise. The inner questioning is not so strong as to throw me into constant turmoil. But it does prevent me from ever taking this choice for granted, and it keeps me re-choosing to live this life as faithfully and as enthusiastically as I can.

I could have made other choices, but this way of life calls forth my deepest sense of passion and commitment to God and God's people. It is an ongoing adventure shared with members of my own community, other religious and priests and so many others. My choice, I might add, is at the same time both personally costly and fulfilling.

Good men and women today *are* choosing religious life and the priesthood. Unfortunately, these usually aren't the ones who make the headlines. These people represent a wide range of backgrounds, ages and experiences. Perfect people from perfect homes—NOT! Yet they are wholesome and creative people who feel inspired to serve the people of God in a unique way.

The Church needs to strengthen its priestly and religious ranks with happy, healthy people who have a desire to make a difference in the Church and the world—even in the midst of struggle and confusion. We are looking for people for whom God is significant and who have a burning desire to be of service to others. The Church needs people who have leadership skills and can work well with a variety of people. No one is born a sister, brother or priest. Vocations are *God-inspired* and *home-made*.

When we look at the life of Jesus, we quickly notice that he was not halfhearted in calling forth principles. Compelled to bring God's healing presence and reign into the world, he looked potential followers right in the eye and invited them to join him in his enterprise. He had a mission to fulfill and a message to share, and was not about to be stopped by challenges.

Jesus' call for disciples and co-workers must go out today as boldly as ever. His message and mission are still eminently worth sharing. To be a brother, priest or sister is a way of responding dramatically to that call, not the only way, but a highly significant way. Those who open themselves to the power of the Spirit and pursue these options today with faith are surely helping to bring about a new dawn in the Church.

The underlying goal is not to push more people into priesthood and religious life as if we were simply playing a numbers game. The goal is rather to call forth those among us who have what it takes to live and serve in this way. There is no denying that there are unresolved issues in today's Church and world. But as we continue to shape the Church of the future, we need generous and creative ministers among us. Consider it! This could be you, or someone you know.

Spirit of God, You bathed me in the image of Jesus Christ, and you call me to live the Gospel through the life-giving waters of Baptism. Enflame my heart and guide me with wisdom that I may know the path of life which best calls forth the gifts which God has given me. Breathe in me your peace that strengthens and refreshes the heart. Bless me with the courage to say "YES" to God's call for my future.