



The Call to Religious Ministry

The decision to dedicate one's life to the service of God is a much different one than that of choosing a career.

Selecting a career field—in most instances, an occupation—involves decisions about education, personal skills, preferred job characteristics, desired income levels, and often geographic location. The decision impacts on family life, personal interests and long-range goals. A career decision answers the question, “What will I do with my life?”

The more important decision in life is, "What will I be?" Everyone is called to be with God, whether married, single, clergy or religious. Some people are called to be with God as a priest, brother or sister. It is not a calling to do anything, go anywhere, or become something. It is a call to a state of being.

Commitment

Commitment to a religious career often flows from one's whole being. This commitment is rooted in the core of inner being, and it affects and involves the totality of the person. If one is concerned only with external manifestations in a religious career, then that person is making more difficult the acquisition of a deep and inner sense of fulfillment and personal growth to be found in the pursuit of such a career. Religious careers enable persons to express adequately the being they are. External witness touches generally on the demonstrative; it manifests the character of a religious career, but this alone is not enough. When one attempts to justify the rationale and the validity of a religious career in today's society, there is a strong tendency to remain engrossed merely in its circumferential elements such as service to people in need, improvement of the qualitative aspects of human interaction, and the like. However, there is an important pivotal point from which all other elements spring and in which they are resolved. The act of feeding the poor or comforting the sorrowful is not in itself the living core of a religious career. When one makes an external manifestation the essence of a religious career, this essence is simply too shallow to subsist.



What then constitutes the being and validity of religious careers, and makes them relevant today? The same mystery that made religious careers relevant in the past and inspired men and women to dedicate their lives is present today.

At this point one may ask: "What then is the essence of a religious career? What constitutes the state of a religious career choice? What makes it what it is? What gives it its particular identity?" That by

which the very being of a religious career as a state of life can be distinguished from another state is very simple; it is a very specific consecration, a consecration often contrary to popular belief. It is not a ritual of a self-gift to the Almighty, nor is it man-made. For it is ultimately the Almighty who consecrates and invests a person in a religious career.

The Need for Prayer



Individuals will be aided in a religious career choice through a life of prayer. The prayerful religious person is able to recognize in other persons their intrinsic worth and potential for good. The religious career person is seeking to make visible what is hidden, and touchable that which is unreachable. Prayer, the great power of grace, will help eliminate a behavior which is contradictory to the great principles upon which moral decisions are made. A person embarking upon his career choice must be personally convinced that prayer and faith give

purpose and meaning to this life. In this way, that individual can hope to instill the value of religion in others and manifest this value in him or herself.

The style of religious careers for the years ahead may be determined not so much by those who strive toward this ideal and this goal, as by those others who do not. The audience, the object of activity, the persons whom those in religious careers seek to serve, will determine the mode of relevant activity. The religious is, therefore, challenged to tailor the message to the audience, to communicate on terms which the target group can relate to.

Pursuing a religious career involves a great deal of work. The individual pursuing such a career should pray, seeking to know and gain direction in this regard. The individual should think. The power of the mind may be marshalled to think life through. Reading is important. Learn about the particular organization or denomination in which you anticipate pursuing a religious career. "Knowledge is power," said Socrates. The more one knows about a subject the better one can handle it. The more an individual knows about the particulars of the specific religious career of interest, the better that individual will be to handle the necessary decisions involved. Talking it over with persons whom we admire and trust, perhaps someone already living a religious career, can be most helpful. If an individual wants to pursue a religious career, then that individual should do the things early that will aid him or her in such a pursuit.



Personal Characteristics Needed

Those pursuing religious careers should possess self-confidence, the ability to make hard decisions, and a willingness to accept criticism and listen to people. They must be tactful, have personal drive



and ambition, but yet be tolerant of other's shortcomings. An ability to work under pressure, to live up to moral standards, and ability to get along with others are the ideals to be striven for.

Whatever the denomination or the particular ministry within that denomination, certain predispositions are generally looked for. Good health is desirable as the religious career makes demands upon a person's physical constitution. A good and healthy body aids in the development of a good and healthy mind. A good mind is necessary, as one must be able to combine the spiritual and the intellectual. One must be able to relate meaningfully the theoretical dimensions of religion to the world of practical realities. The well-trained religious career person is thus aided in thinking – deeply – about important things that are necessary parts of the religious career. The supernatural rests upon the natural, and the religious career person must grow naturally and intellectually.

Choosing a life's career can be one of the most exciting, demanding and yet perplexing experiences one is likely to face. The choice made will determine to a large extent the focus of one's energy, attention, and efforts. That career choice offers the possibility of a genuine measure of satisfaction and fulfillment. That career choice will determine the nature of the role and the contribution the individual will make in today's complex and often impersonal world.

A person pursuing a religious career is also a servant, someone doing something, and doing this in a committed way. Giving oneself to the service of others makes that individual a symbol of concern not only in word and deed, but in all of that person's life as a totality of a human person.

Religious career persons are not supermen or wonder women. They are men and women living among men and women—sometimes wounded men and women whose mission is to heal. Often religious career persons are stammering men and women whose mission is to preach; they are often weak persons whose mission is to conquer evil or console.



Surely the religious career offers the reward of full joy and peace for the individual aware of the call, honest in service, and giving freely for others. Incomparable happiness realized in deep personal fulfillment is often the reward for those individuals who have pursued a life's career in religion.

People caring about people can be manifested in the pursuit of a religious career. Religious careers offer opportunities, challenges, and lifestyles for a role of influence in molding the outlook and design of tomorrow's world.

Discerning a Vocation

What is a vocation? How does one discover it? Where does it lead? What has it to do with free will?



These are puzzling questions to anyone considering what to do with the rest of his or her life. Ordinarily they are questions facing a person in teen-age or early adult life but many reoccur at other times. Many women face such questions after their family is raised. A married man, his wife and family may very suddenly face the unexpected possibility of a vocation to the permanent diaconate.

Vocation, of course, does not refer exclusively to religious life or priesthood: these, however, are so unusual that frequently in Catholic circles they alone are called “vocations.”

The word vocation means “a calling”; it is extremely important to keep this in mind. We are called by the providential arrangement of circumstances, by the realities of life, by our own limitations and potential, by the historical moment, and by our own emotional, intellectual and psychological needs. If one follows the teachings of the Fathers and Doctors of the Church in this regard, one comes to accept that a vocation is found in the providential arrangement of significant aspects of life and also by the grace which we receive to make the best of these situations.

The loss of awareness of this providential aspect of vocation is one of the things that leads to an immense insecurity in modern life. When people forget the divine and providential element in their lives, they try desperately to find a course through life like a man on a raft with neither rudder nor map.

It has been a consistent belief of Christians that the Lord gives each of us something to do, some work to perform



that makes us an essential link in the chain of life. Parents pass on life to their children and, by good examples, instruction, encouragement and membership in the Church contribute to their growth in the life of grace.

Single people, including priests and religious, pass on life in a psychological and spiritual way by being a help to those around them. This passing on of life and grace is the ultimate vocation of the Christian. Cardinal Newman sums it up well when he says: "I am a link in a chain, a bond of connection between persons. God has not created me for nothing. I shall do good; I shall do His work; I shall be an angel of peace, a preacher of truth, in my own place, while not intending it, if I do but keep His commandments."

The idea of God's special purpose in our life is what gives the individual an awareness of his dignity and importance. Among great numbers of people we frequently feel like atoms, little and meaningless. As Newman says, "God has created me to do Him some definite service: He has committed some work to me which He has not committed to another. I have my mission. I may never know it in this life, but I shall be told it in the next."



If one is convinced of being singled out by the Lord for some work in this life, how is that work discovered? First, we quietly discern or observe our potentials and needs and try to fit them into what we can do best. Often in such a process, God leads us by interior inspiration, by an attraction to do this or that work, to follow this person, or to marry that one. We will be attracted by a certain kind of work because it fits our capacity and because it opens to us possibilities of security or fulfillment.

The need for inspiration and divine guidance in any vocation cannot be overstressed. The Lord has led many people in mysterious ways. The only Trappist ever canonized, St. Benedict Joseph Labre, was led to his strange vocation not to be a monk but to be a hobo, by going from one monastery to another, vainly trying to fit in because of psychological difficulties.

St. Catherine of Genoa found herself married to the wrong man as a result of a political alliance of her family. Faced with such a situation, she relied on God and spent the rest of her life working with her husband in the service of the poor and sick.

From such experiences at least two rules emerge for discovering one's vocation. Both come from Holy Scripture: "If today you hear His voice, harden not your heart" (Psalm 95); and Our Lord's own admonition: "He who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is not worthy of the kingdom of heaven."

Apostolic Work

The apostolic works performed by priests, brothers and sisters – also called ministries – encompass a wide range of skills and services. Some religious communities specialize in one or a few types of ministries – health care or teaching, for example – while others have members engaged in many different ministries. The work itself does not constitute a religious “career” but is simply the expression of a religious person's dedication to God.



Some of the most common ministries are:

Parish Work	Social Work	Health Care
Home Missions	Campus Ministry	Hospitals
Child Care	Foreign Missions	Nursing Homes
Education Administration Teaching Coaching	Religious Education	Counseling Students Families Adults
Chaplaincies Prisons Hospitals Military	Communications Film TV & Radio Newspapers Magazines Books	Spiritual Direction
	Inner City Work	Retreats

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