

The Consecrated Life: Living Vows of Poverty, Chastity, and Obedience

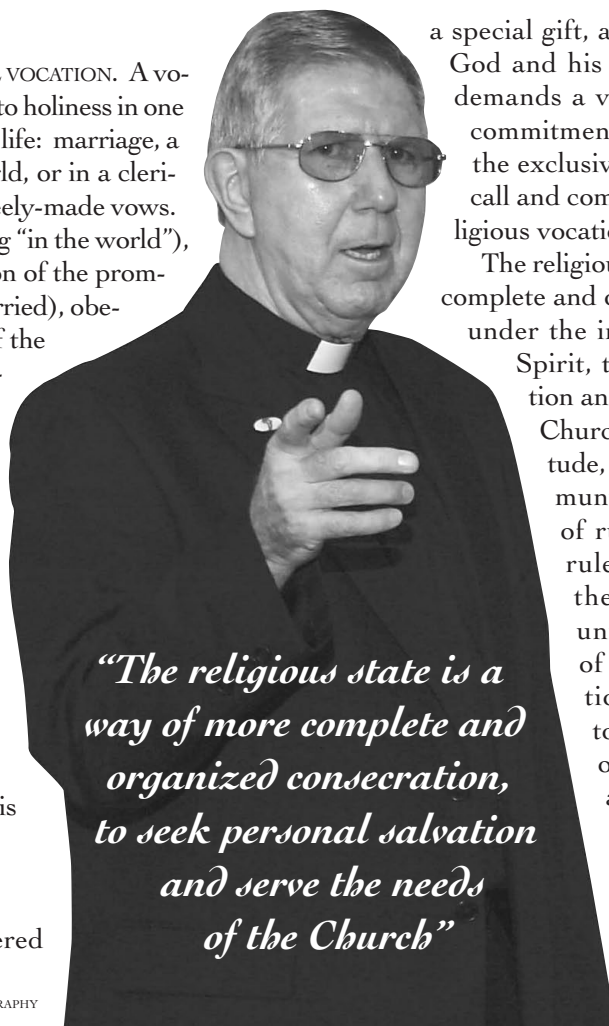
Then the Lord called, "Samuel! Samuel!" and he said, "Here I am!" and ran to Eli, and said, "Here I am, for you called me." But he said, "I did not call; lie down again." So he went and lay down. And the Lord called again, "Samuel!" And Samuel arose and went to Eli, and said, "Here I am, for you called me." But he said, "I did not call, my son; lie down again." Now Samuel did not yet know the Lord, and the word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him. And the Lord called Samuel again the third time. And he arose and went to Eli, and said, "Here I am, for you called me." Then Eli perceived that the Lord was calling the boy. Therefore Eli said to Samuel, "Go, lie down; and if he calls you, you shall say, 'Speak, Lord, for thy servant hears.'" So Samuel went and lay down in his place. And the Lord came and stood forth, calling as at other times, "Samuel! Samuel!" And Samuel said, "Speak, for thy servant hears." ~ 1 Samuel 3:4-10

All are Called . . .

EVERYONE HAS A PERSONAL VOCATION. A vocation is a call from God to holiness in one of three distinct states of life: marriage, a single person in the world, or in a clerical or religious state bound by freely-made vows. The diocesan, or secular (meaning "in the world"), priesthood requires the profession of the promises of celibacy (remaining unmarried), obedience to a bishop, and prayer of the Liturgy of the Hours. The religious order priest, brother, or sister takes vows to live by the three "evangelical counsels" (that is, the "higher calling" by Jesus in the Gospel) of poverty (see Mt 19:21), chastity (see Mt 19:12), and obedience (see Jn 6:38). All states of life are to lead to a love of God, the pursuit of his will, and the ultimate achievement of holiness and its eternal reward. The goal of life for all is the same; only the way is different.

Some are Chosen

Some of the faithful are offered



a special gift, an opportunity to serve God and his Church in a way that demands a voluntary and personal commitment of one's whole life to the exclusive service of God. This call and commitment is called a "religious vocation."

The religious state is a way of more complete and organized consecration, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, to seek personal salvation and serve the needs of the Church through a life of solitude, as hermits, or in a community under a specific set of rules (usually called "a rule") guiding the life of the members through a unique spirituality (way of holiness) and dedication to apostolic action to promote the salvation of souls. Such apostolic action might include the

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A priest of the Society of Missionaries of Africa (MAfr), an order founded in 1868 in Algiers, North Africa

DAVID CHARLES PHOTOGRAPHY

education of children, preaching, care of the poor or the sick, care of orphaned children, or prayer and fasting in a community that stays entirely within its walls.

Religious orders, such as the Benedictines, Carmelites, Franciscans, Dominicans, and Jesuits, have served the Church for much of its history. New religious orders, inspired by the Holy Spirit to meet new needs of the Church, have been founded in nearly every age and part of the world. Within just the last few centuries, orders have been founded by St. Elizabeth Ann Seton (Daughters of Charity), St. John Bosco (Salesians), and Bl. Teresa of Calcutta (Missionaries of Charity), among many others. Each new form of religious life must be approved by the pope.

Lives specially consecrated to (“set apart for”) God have taken a multitude of forms. The hermit, most often separated from the world, lives a life of solitude and silence, prayer and penance. Consecrated virgins, whose life of virginity sets them apart as “Brides of Christ,” may or may not form themselves into organizations, or orders, to carry out their commitments more faithfully. The largest majority, however, exist as religious orders of men and women who have, throughout the Church’s history, rendered service in the propagation of the Faith, in defense against heresies, and in promulgation of social justice and charity. Religious orders have a significant role in the life of the Church, beginning with the formation of ancient monastic institutions in the fourth century to the multitude of congregations that today enrich the lives and mission of the Church and its faithful, as well as providing a vast amount of charitable services to people regardless of their faith.

Secular Institutes

New forms of dedicated life have been prompted by the grace of the Holy Spirit. “Secular institutes” are groups of consecrated people who and live work as leaven in the world to evangelize and bear witness to Christian virtues. They profess the evangelical counsels, and live a communal life in fellowship that is in accord with their particular secular way of life.

Yet another form of dedication are the societies of apostolic life whose members do not always take religious vows but pursue the particular apostolic purpose of their society, living as brothers and sisters ac-

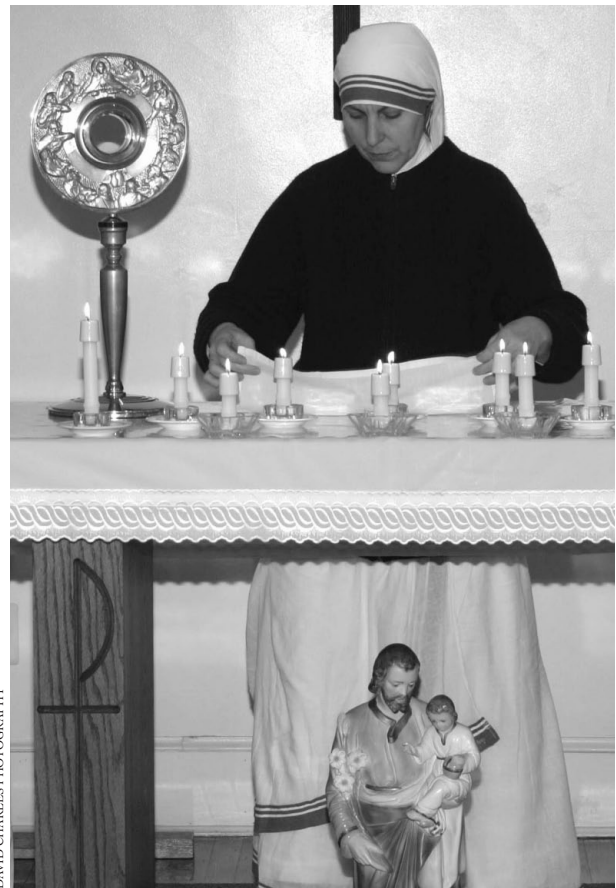
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ording to a particular manner of life. They strive for sanctity and do the work of evangelization.

The Call to Be Perfect

Holiness is the goal to which we are all called. Its attainment is never easy. God has provided us with many ways to become holy. Those who make special commitments, or who follow a call or vocation to consecrated life, do so for the sake of the Kingdom of Heaven. They freely choose to follow the promptings of the Holy Spirit and witness to values that transcend personal possessions, marital love, and the rights of independent action. The consecrated life — religious life as understood in this context — is a special calling. One who follows the call does so because, for that person, it is the way that they will “*be perfect, as [his] Heavenly Father is perfect*” (Mt 5:48).

(CCC 914-933, 1973-1974, 2053, 2687)



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A sister of the Missionaries of Charity (MC) dressing an altar for Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament in an inner-city convent