

Religious Life

Called and Chosen

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Introduction

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free.

LUKE 4:18

Perhaps you're reading this pamphlet because you're thinking about becoming a member of a religious order. Maybe you want to know something about religious life and what it might mean in today's world. What you'll find here are a few short introductory comments and insights about the religious life.

This reflection doesn't presume to be the last word about communal religious life. I hope the pamphlet will encourage you to move to a comprehensive exploration of the vocation to religious life.

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Religious Men and Women

Do you recognize the designations Franciscan, Benedictine, Dominican, Salvatorian, Redemptoristine, or Christian Brother? Perhaps you are familiar with these well-known names: St. Teresa of Calcutta, Sr. Thea Bowman, Sr. Helen Prejean, or St. André Bessette. Or maybe you were taught in school by a favorite teacher or experienced the care of a hospital chaplain simply identified as Sister, Brother, or Father. Wherever and however you encountered a religious woman or man, it was probably in some kind of service or ministry within the Catholic community.

I have countless experiences and memories of religious men and women who formed my Catholic life. I was taught by religious women who were members of the Dominican Order, and the parish I belonged to was staffed by

religious men known as Redemptorists who were members of the Congregation of the Most Holy Redeemer. When we were unable to attend our own parish church for Sunday Mass, we might go to Mass at the Catholic Information Center, which was staffed by the Paulists, or at the Catholic university in town, which was staffed by the Jesuits. Everywhere we went, we found men and women from different religious orders and congregations engaged in some sort of ministry and service.

In my experience with religious men and women, I sensed that there was something different about them, something that seemed to set them apart. But I was unable to clearly identify what it was that made them seem different. I could sense a different spirit in each place. When I was in the church staffed by the Jesuits, the feeling was different than the one I felt in the church staffed

by the Redemptorists. It was not until much later that I came to understand that this feeling was an experience of the unique charism—or gift—of each of the different communities of male or female religious.

The Role of Charism

The Catechism of the Catholic Church teaches that “every person, through these gifts given to him, is at once the witness and the living instrument of the mission of the Church” (CCC 915). But some people in the Church are called to live a public life of witness and service.

From the earliest times in the history of the Church, men and women freely chose to answer the baptismal call of the Lord by trying to live gospel values in a dedicated and focused manner. Women and men were raised up who came to a clear understanding and focus about