

Differences Between Religious Life and Diocesan Priesthood

By Fr. Warren Sazama, SJ

(Former Vocations Director, Wisconsin Province of the Society of Jesus)

I often find in my early conversations with men who are thinking about a vocation that they are unaware of or confused by the differences between diocesan priesthood and religious life. I thought, therefore, that it might be helpful to highlight some of these differences.

Let me start with the obvious and say that diocesan priesthood and religious life are both good and important vocations from God in the Church. The Church needs both diocesan priests and religious to be fully vital. Religious life is open to women and men while priesthood is open only to men. Women religious are often called sisters or nuns (although the latter technically refers only to monastic religious). Men religious can be either priests or brothers. Brothers are full members of their religious communities and can do any type of ministry – such as teaching – except administering the sacraments, for example, celebrating Mass.

Some of the main differences between religious life and the diocesan priesthood are that religious take vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience, they live in community, and they have a defining spirituality and unique mission from their founder or foundress (such as Sts. Ignatius, Francis, Claire, Benedict, or Dominic). Diocesan priests, on the other hand, don't take the same vows as religious (poverty, for example), live in community, or have a distinctive spirituality of a given founder.

Diocesan priests serve the bishop and people of a given diocese, or area of the Church, such as Milwaukee, Omaha, the Twin Cities, Los Angeles, or New York. For the most part they serve in the parishes of their diocese under the direction of the diocesan bishop. Their ministry centers around the administration of the sacraments (saying Mass, doing baptisms, weddings, funerals, and hearing confessions).

The ministry of diocesan priests is essential to the life of the Church since they are the ones who lead and offer sacramental ministry in our parishes, and there is no Church without parishes and the sacraments.

One diocesan priest I know referred to diocesan priests as the general practitioners of the clergy and compared religious to specialists. As in medicine, the Church needs both. So, while for the most part diocesan priests serve in parishes, religious can serve in a variety of ways according to the "charism," or unique vision and mission of their founder. That might be in schools, hospitals, orphanages, missions, retreat houses, social justice centers, or other ministries in accordance with the inspiration, special vision, mission, and spirituality of their founder.

Just as there are differences between diocesan priests and religious, so too are there distinctions in religious communities between those that are monastic and those that are "active," or apostolic.

Benedictines are among the oldest and best known monastic communities. Others include the Trappists, Carthusians, and Norbertines. Monks usually take a vow of "stability" which means that they enter a specific monastery and where they intend to spend their entire lives. They live a contemplative lifestyle centered on prayer – including the public singing of the Liturgy of the Hours and Mass and private, personal prayer. The

contemplative lives of monks also usually include some kind of work in the monastery, ranging from farming or baking to teaching or retreats. In some cases a school or university might be affiliated with a specific monastery, making it possible for a monk to teach by day, but return to a monastery at each day's end.

Active, or apostolic, communities, on the other hand, focus more on their apostolic work while also maintaining a regular prayer life.

It becomes a question of emphasis. Contemplative communities emphasize lives of prayer whereas active communities focus more on the apostolate.

This is all pretty general so far; so let me give the specific example of the religious community I know best – you guessed it, the Jesuits. We are an apostolic religious community. Our founder, St. Ignatius, referred to us as “contemplatives in action.” In Ignatius’ view, God wasn’t just to be found in the monastery but “in all things” – very much including our ministry. Ignatius wanted Jesuits to be men of prayer who found God in the world and helped others to grow as disciples of Christ. This Jesuit spirituality is based primarily on the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius, which all Jesuits make in their complete form (a 30-day, silent, individually directed retreat) twice in their Jesuit lives.

The Jesuit charism, or mission, is to form Christian leaders for our world through our schools, retreat houses, parishes, and missionary activities. Whereas diocesan priests usually do one kind of ministry – parish work – in one specific region, Jesuits can be engaged in a wide variety of ministries (such as teaching, spiritual direction, giving retreats, counseling, research, writing, being a missionary, pastor, doctor, lawyer, actor, drama director, playwright, poet, scientist, theologian, philosopher, or historian) and can be called through our vow of obedience to serve wherever in the world we are most needed to do God’s work.

Jesuits live in community, but Jesuit community life is quite different than that of the Benedictines. Unlike the Benedictines, Ignatius did not want Jesuits to be monks and live in monasteries. Rather he wanted us to be available for mission and apostolic work. As a result, Jesuit community life is less structured. We do not pray the Divine Office in common, but we do celebrate Mass and eat meals together and have regular community gatherings which often include faith sharing and apostolic reflection.

If you feel called to spend your life in parish ministry in a specific locale and to live a more independent lifestyle, then you may well have a vocation from God to be a diocesan priest. What attracts me and many others to Jesuit life, on the other hand, are living in community, opportunities to be engaged in a variety of ministries in different places, and the rich heritage of our Jesuit/Ignatian Spirituality. I have found these aspects of Jesuit religious life to be immensely enriching, challenging, and growthful. They continue to give me much to share with others in my ministry as a Jesuit.

The same could be said for members of other religious communities as well as diocesan priests. So for each person called to religious life and/or priesthood, it’s a question of which path – religious or diocesan and, if religious, which community – is most life-giving for you. Which path most arouses your passion and best allows you to joyfully share your gifts in service.

In other words, which choice is the best fit for you?