

## Faith in 5 The Vocation of Priesthood



1. The priesthood is not a job, it is a vocation, a calling. The [Canon law](#) of the Catholic Church holds that the priesthood is a sacred, perpetual, vocational, celibate state. The Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC)1577 states only a baptized male can receive sacred ordination through Holy Orders, conferred upon by God with authority of the Church. By ordination, one is enabled to act as a representative of Christ and serves as Christ's instrument for His Church.

While we belong to the universal priesthood of baptized believers, there is a distinct order of men set apart for priestly functions to minister to the people of God. The CCC 1592 states, "The ministerial priesthood differs in essence from the common priesthood of the faithful because it confers a sacred power for the service of the faithful. The ordained ministers exercise their service for the People of God by teaching (munus docendi), divine worship (munus liturgicum) and pastoral governance (munus regendi)". This sacramental priesthood – also known as the three degrees of Holy Orders - include bishops and priests, with their helpers, the deacons.

Christ chose 12 men to be His apostles, and they in turn, chose men to succeed in their ministry. The sacrament of Holy Orders is the sacrament of apostolic ministry, with validly ordained bishops following the line of apostolic succession - the Church accepts this as a choice by the Lord Himself. Women are not ordained to the priesthood.

2. In order to ensure priests are well-formed and mature, a serious and heartfelt discernment is necessary. Internal discernment involves prayer, reflection and listening to God. Integrity, virtuous character and close affiliation with a Catholic congregation is expected.

"One suited for priestly ministry must exhibit availability, joy, and generosity toward others. The world needs priests who can communicate the goodness of the Lord to those who have experienced sin and failure, ... men who know how to listen to the cry of those who suffer". [According to Pope Francis](#): "...[t]he whole journey must initiate processes aimed at forming mature priests and consecrated persons, who are 'experts in humanity and closeness' and not 'officials of the sacred'."

3. If one in formation is using the priesthood to avoid relationship or fails to deal honestly with personal sexuality or affections, he cannot be effective in his vow of celibacy in his ministry as a priest. Sexuality, affectivity, and relationships are aspects of the person to be examined and understood in the discernment process.

**Why celibacy?** Celibacy follows the example of Christ who was chaste. His purpose is to serve God and the people. It is a gift, a self-sacrificing act - the denial of self for others. St. Paul believed that the celibate state would encourage one's undivided devotion to the Lord, but recognized we are all called to different vocations (1 Corinthians 7:35). In the

Catholic Church, celibacy means one does not marry, and includes abstinence, since the sexual practice is reserved for marriage.

4. **Seminarian** is the term given to one who is discerning God's call to the priesthood. The application process for seminary would include submission of sacramental certificates and academic transcripts. Psychological testing/screening, a criminal background check and interviews are also part of the process.

**Seminary** is where priests undergo formation, the act of being shaped into an effective minister of God to the Church. It is a place of higher theological learning and is an essential component to becoming a priest. A college degree is highly desirable. Typically for a diocesan priest, time in seminary formation will last six to eight years. Application to a seminary requires sponsorship by local church leaders of the parish who know him well. Sponsorship is only given to those who faithfully attend Mass, receive sacraments, and are active in church, community and liturgical events.

5. There are four stages of formation for a priest:
  - a. **Human Formation** – in addition to addressing the sexual/affective/interpersonal aspect of priesthood, good personal habits and a well-formed character encourage growth in holiness.
  - b. **Spiritual Formation** – a deep personal relationship with the Lord is critical. Prayer life, devout participation in the sacraments and an understanding of one's faith will help a priest in the spiritual counsel of those entrusted to his care.
  - c. **Intellectual Formation** - The priest is a teacher of the Faith, and in order to pass and instruct others in the faith, he must know it himself first. The priest's intellectual formation in seminary involves studies with a focus in both sacred theology and philosophy. Studies in philosophy encourage thoughtful reasoning skills, the ability to discern truths and confront cultural confusion. Theology equips one with the skills to understand and speak boldly about the faith.
  - d. **Pastoral Formation** - Throughout priestly formation, seminarians are given numerous pastoral opportunities. Examples include visiting the sick and imprisoned, service to the poor (which can take a variety of forms), religious education and catechesis, service in parishes (both during the summertime and the academic year) and, for upper-level seminarians, administering sacraments (baptisms, marriages or funerals outside of Mass may be celebrated by seminarians already ordained to the diaconate).
6. Completing seminary officially qualifies the seminarian to be called by a bishop to Holy Orders and serve as an ordained deacon. Different countries have varying traditions regarding how long one stays in the position of deacon. Depending on the location, the candidate either enters the priesthood after completing a specified term or can choose to continue as a permanent deacon. A seminarian is a 'transitional' deacon one year before being ordained a priest.

After years of education and training, the bishop ordains the person to priesthood. The ceremony which is within the Mass, includes testimony of the candidate's worthiness and affirmation by the assembly. The candidate makes solemn promises before God to the bishop. He will lay prostrate on the floor as the Litany of Saints is sung. The bishop will lay hands on the candidate's head and prays the prayer of consecration. The new priest is vested in the priestly Mass garments. His hands are then anointed with chrism

oil for sacred duty. During the Presentation of the Gifts, the new priest's family bring the gifts of bread and wine to the bishop. The bishop says a prayer as he hands the new priest the paten with the host and unconsecrated wine. The bishop exhorts the new priest to live the mystery of the Eucharist in his own life. The Rite of Ordination concludes with the Sign of Peace. The Liturgy of the Eucharist is then celebrated by the bishop, with the newly ordained taking a prominent role in his first celebration of the Eucharist as a priest.

7. **What can we do to help our priests?**

Priests have faults and make mistakes just like the rest of us. They need our prayers, love and support to help them live out their holy vocation for the glory of God.



- a. Pray for more vocations to the priesthood.
- b. Encourage young men to discern the call to the priesthood. Support your local seminary.
- c. Before Mass, say a prayer of blessing for your priest. Pray for all of your priests and deacons of the parish.
- d. Offer words of encouragement to our priests, especially after Mass or send a thank you card. A simple hello and a smile are a blessing!
- e. Participate in the Mass and the sacraments. One priest mentioned he wished he could see more smiles among the assembly during Mass. Stay engaged and participate in the liturgy! Volunteer cheerfully to help where you are able.
- f. Being a priest can be isolating and lonely. Invite your priest to your home to get to know your family or offer to take him out. Remember their ordination anniversary, birthday, etc.
- g. Support our priests by complaining less to them. More importantly, do not complain about your priests and avoid gossip about them. God is the One who calls men to become priests. He has a purpose and plan for every priest.
- h. Being a priest is 24/7 and there are demands of many in the church. Be respectful of a priest's time and space as well.
- i. If your priest is reassigned to another parish or a new one arrives, pray for their continued ministry. Ask the Holy Spirit to strengthen them in their new role. Thank God for the blessing of a priest!

**Prayer of St. Thérèse of the Child Jesus**

O Jesus, I pray for your faithful and fervent priests; for your unfaithful and tepid priests; for your priests laboring at home or abroad in distant mission fields; for your tempted priests; for your lonely and desolate priests; for your young priests; for your dying priests; for the souls of your priests in purgatory.

But above all, I recommend to you the priests dearest to me:

the priest who baptized me; the priests who absolved me from my sins; the priests at whose Masses I assisted and who gave me your Body and Blood in Holy Communion; the priests who taught and instructed me; all the priests to whom I am indebted in any other way (especially ...).

O Jesus, keep them all close to your heart, and bless them abundantly in time and in eternity.  
Amen.

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