

Vocations...

What is Religious Life?

"Religious life" is a phrase used to designate a way of life that dates back to the early centuries of the Christian church. Today it designates a way of life chosen by a Christian woman or man, based on the values of the Christian Gospel, and formalized by the public profession of certain vows. The men and women who are called to choose this way of life have prayer, community and service as the major pivots of their life, all in the service of mission (i.e. the unfolding of the reign of God in our world.) For the last several decades that mission often takes the form of working for justice in societies all over the world.

To some, the decreasing numbers of religious women and men would seem to point to a way of life that is becoming extinct. However, it is the large numbers of religious in the late 19th and early 20th centuries that is the anomaly. Since religious life began in the early years of Christendom, there have never been large numbers who have been called and responded to this way of life. Thus, it would appear that the diminishment being experienced by religious congregations is a return to more normal numbers and perhaps to a deeper ownership of the gospel values that are the foundation of the life.

What does formation mean?

Formation is a rich and complex process; it is difficult to find a word that conveys the formation reality with all its nuances. One phrase used is "personal development in community."

When a person senses a call to become a religious of a certain institute, there are still a lot of unknowns...for the person and for the congregation. So for the first few years, the woman or man lives the life of the institute, gets to know the members of the community, their spirit, the particular works they do, their history and what it means to become a vowed member. By stages, the person becomes more deeply involved in the institute, its life and its work, until at some point he or she is ready to make a permanent commitment to that way of life.

During these initial years, the person is accompanied by one or more community members who offer the wisdom, guidance, explanations and information needed and who encourage personal growth and community involvement. This process of the person getting to know the institute and themselves as members, and the institute getting to know them, is called 'formation'. Being attuned to the action of the Spirit within the person and the institute is at the heart of formation.

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