

Exploring the Charism “Menu” of Religious Life

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What if you found yourself thinking from time to time about the possibility that you might be being called to live your life as a religious brother, sister or priest? "Me?", you may ask.. How could God possibly want me to do that? What if this idea just won't go away until you do something about it?

Those Persistent Thoughts

Such “persistent thoughts” seem to be occurring to a number of men and women these days; people who are looking to satisfy a longing in life for something deeper than what they have yet experienced. These people are of high school and college age; they are young adults as well as “young-at-heart” adults. Some have never married, while others, previously married, are now widowed or have had marriages that have been annulled. A number of men and women who are considering religious life today are moms and dads and even grandparents. Should you be one of these above-mentioned people, an important task lies before you. It is one that can bless your life with richness, while at times it may also cause you confusion and frustration. Discovering your call to a religious life vocation is a complex enterprise in and of itself. Yet the task is further complicated by the need to choose from among the many communities out there. You will need to discover which is the one that draws you.

Charism: A Special Blessing in the Church

Each religious community is a special blessing in our church, with its particular mission, spirituality, and flavor. Religious communities share so much in common with each other, and yet, each one has its own unique spirit or “charism”. All communities are called to manifest the Gospel to our church and world, but the Holy Spirit has led each one to grow in its own unique way in reflecting Jesus’ Good News. Hand in hand with your outer journey exploring various religious communities, will be your inner journey of identifying your own unique spirit. When you find the community you feel especially drawn to, you will have found something of yourself. You see, the spirit of those community members is the same spirit that has been present within you all through your life. At a certain point, you will know that your discernment journey has reached a conclusion when you, through your sense of joy and peace, recognize a “kinship in grace” with one particular community.

To Begin, Begin Somewhere

So how do you go about this discernment process? There are a number of possible starting points. You may want to ask to speak with a religious you already know. You can contact the Office of Vocations by phone or visit their website. There are many programs, materials, and people available to help you get started. These resources are meant to lead you into relationships with the people of a variety of communities. Plan to visit those communities that seem particularly interesting to you. Arrange to meet with the vocation director of the communities you would like to further explore. Your visits and conversations will play a critical role as you sort through the maze that may seem to lie before you. Many communities sponsor Come and See evening and weekend programs as a way to introduce you to their communities. Discerners have reported enjoying a few free meals that have come their way along the vocation path.

What's in Their Heart and What's in Mine?

As you spend time with various communities there are some questions you will want to ask yourself: Do I enjoy the way the community members interact with each other and with me? Do I feel comfortable and at home in these

relationships? Do I like being with these people and do I look forward to the times I will spend with them? What happens inside my spirit as I experience prayer with them? Do they have the same longings for our world that my faith stirs in me? Does it seem that these people can help me to grow into all that God has in mind for me? Do they seem receptive to the ways I can call them to grow as well? Does the heart of this community match up with what's going on in my heart?

If you feel an excitement stirring inside of you in your relationship with these people, you may very well be experiencing a call to this particular community. You are well on your way to identifying your charism and their charism as perhaps being the same. Though a charism is something you can read about and talk about, it is not a free-floating entity. It is embodied in the relationships the community members have with each other, with the world around them, and with their God. To understand a community charism, you need to know the people who live it. To understand if this is also your charism, you need to prayerfully reflect on your experience of yourself in relationship with these people.

What about the Vocation Director?

Religious community vocation directors really don't work in competition with each other. If you are in contact with more than one vocation director at a time, there is no need to hide this for fear that you'll be thought of as "two-timing". Most vocation directors actually encourage discerners to experience a wide range of communities. This is a way for you to develop the fine-tuning skills you need for the choice you hope to make. Vocation directors are interested in assisting you in finding what is right for you, should this involve their own community or another choice on your part.

Usually you and the vocation director will begin to recognize together whether your "kinship in grace" lies with her particular community or with another choice. You should be able to count on the vocation director's support for the resolve of your discernment, whether this brings you to her community or to another. It's uncanny that by the time you would find yourself ready to declare your desire to seek membership with a particular community, the vocation director and community members already have a pretty good sense of what you want to say. They will probably already have an idea that you want to head in the same direction with your life that they have already chosen for theirs. They, too, have been discerning.

Prayer and Spiritual Direction

Discernment is prayer. It is learning to be attentive to how the Holy Spirit is present in your own spirit. It is learning to recognize the characteristics of the heart present in the communities with whom you have become acquainted along the way. It is that joyful recognition that in your relationship with one particular community you have come to recognize your own particular spirit, while appreciating the goodness of all the others. It is important that you have the support of a spiritual director during this time of discernment. This person can help you hear what the Holy Spirit and your spirit are saying to you. She/He will encourage you to create the time and space in your life needed to discern well. People who are overly stressed and busy are not in a position to be fully committed to a discernment process. A spiritual director can also help you get through the difficult times of frustration, anxiousness, and worry when you don't seem to be getting anywhere, and answers just aren't coming. Finally, your spiritual director can rejoice with you when you find your resolve and are ready to take the next step. With the support that a spiritual director can offer, you will come closer to knowing the loving God who is inviting you into deeper union as you discover the way this God is calling you.