

# "Is It for Me?"

(Adapted from an article by Martin Pable, OFM Cap.)



Choosing what to do with your life is one of the most important decisions you'll ever make. Christians don't just pick an occupation; they respond to a vocation, a call from God. Our baptism calls all of us to a life of holiness: love of God and service to our fellow men and women. This call can be lived out in one of three special vocations: lay Christian commitment, the priesthood, or religious life. Now, assuming that you have at least some interest in the religious life, you're ready to ask yourself: "How can I tell if I'm really being called, or if this is some crazy idea of mine?"

But first let's deal with a couple of things that might block you from giving the matter any further thought. For one thing, I can hear some of you saying, "Often a pretty picture is presented of religious life, but that's not what I see around me. What I see is religious who are living no differently from anyone else. They live in nice comfortable homes, they dress in the latest fashions, they drive luxury cars, they're always talking about their travels, and they seem to have more freedom than my folks or me. If I want to live that way, I might as well stay where I am."

Good point. That's a hard one to answer, and I won't even try to justify what you're seeing. All I would ask is that you don't use that as a cop-out for yourself. I can assure you from my own experience that there are a good number of priests and religious who are honestly trying to live simply and unselfishly, who are deeply committed to prayer and to things of the spirit. They would welcome you with open arms if that's the kind of life you were looking for. The question is not "How are others living?" but "How do you want to live?" If you look around, you can always find others who are already embodying your ideals.

Another question you might have is: "Why can't I live a radical Gospel life as a lay person?" Well it certainly is possible. People like Dorothy Day have shown how powerfully it can be done. But believe me, not many people can hack it. Why? Well, let's say you're married, and you and your spouse decide you're going to live in voluntary poverty and spend all your free time helping people in trouble. That's beautiful. It's the Gospel. And it will probably work for a while. But what are you going to do when you start having children? You'll feel torn between the attention they need and your projects. And you'll start worrying about their education, and the neighborhood they're living in. At this point most couples have to make an awful lot of compromises with radical living. And they get to feeling guilty about the choices they have to make.

It's easier if you're single. But then the big problem is loneliness. Your friends may admire you, but you can't expect them to join you, or even understand you. It's tough to go it alone as a radical Christian. The other possibility is to join a Christian commune. But the history of communes shows them to be pretty unstable. For various reasons, most of them don't last beyond a few years. There was an article in *Psychology Today*, several years ago, showing that the successful communes were the ones that most closely resembled traditional religious life. So it looks as if radical Gospel living still works best in a religious community where you will have brothers and sisters to both strengthen you and keep you honest.

One other point. You might be thinking, "I can help more people by being a teacher, counsellor, or welfare worker than by being a religious." Maybe, but I'm not convinced of that. I've talked to too many people in the helping professions who have told me about the bureaucracies, the regulations, and the petty power struggles that get in the way of really reaching the people in need. And even if you do succeed in helping them rise out of their poverty and

ignorance, what about their spiritual needs? Who is going to lift their vision beyond the daily struggle for survival? Who will give them something to believe in besides the fancy new car? Something to hope for beyond the pension? Who will teach them the deeper meaning of love? Who will help them discover the fantastic Good News that God loves them as they are, in all their brokenness and hurt? Who will help them to find meaning in their unavoidable suffering, their sickness, their death? The greatest psychiatrist Viktor Frankl used to say that his patients are bringing him these kinds of questions that he's not equipped to answer -- questions they should be taking to their priest or religious. Somebody has to minister to these spiritual hungers of the human heart. Maybe that's not your vocation -- but maybe it is.

Which brings us back to the question: "How do I know? How do I know that God is calling me?" I said earlier that a vocation is always a mysterious thing because it involves a relationship with God. And I said that God doesn't usually jump out of the sky and tell us where he wants us. But I also said that God does make use of certain signs by which we can discern our vocation. Fortunately, spiritual writers and theologians in the Church have been able to identify these signs for us. So we aren't just guessing wildly. Both the individual and the Church can make use of these signs in order to come to a reasonable judgment about a vocation.

What are these signs? Well, there are three of them. And they're really quite simple. First: do I have a desire for the priesthood and religious life? Second: do I desire it for the right reason? And third: am I fit for it? Let's look at each one more closely.

### First Sign

The first sign has to do with desire. That is, do I really want the priesthood or religious life? Am I drawn toward it, attracted by it? Does it give me a certain sense of satisfaction to think of myself as a priest, brother, or sister? A feeling of enthusiasm or joyfulness? I want to stress this because God does not draw us to a vocation against our will. I have talked to people who said, "I don't really want to be a priest or religious, but I think I should, because God wants me to. If I don't go, he's liable to punish me." God doesn't operate that way. If he is truly calling us, he gives us a certain positive inclination toward the life. If we are repulsed or just not attracted by it, that's a sign we are not being called. A vocation is not a monkey on our back, laid on us against our will. That would be unworthy of God. He wants us to be free in our choice, not constrained by fear. So the first sign I look for in a candidate is this natural desire or attraction toward the life. But that's not enough.

### Second Sign

The second sign has to do with motivation. Why do I want the priesthood or religious life? What's behind my interest and attraction? Here the Church is looking for positive spiritual reasons, as opposed to worldly or selfish ones. Some examples of positive reason would be:

- "I want to study the Scriptures and bring their message to more and more people."
- "I think the three vows are the best way for me to dedicate my life to God and his people."
- "I want to extend the knowledge and love of God in this world."
- "I want to live the Gospel of Christ as fully as possible."
- "I want to share a common vision of faith and spirituality with a community and work together for justice and peace."

All these are spiritual, religious reasons. That's what the Church looks for: motivation based on faith, not just a desire to join up with a groovy outfit. Something has to touch us at the level of the Gospel, so that we want in some way to embrace a life based on solid faith convictions.

On the other side of the coin, a number of inadequate reasons can creep in here. For example, a person might see the priesthood or religious life as some kind of security blanket. After all, you will have a home; you know where your meals are coming from; you don't have dependents to worry about; you have security in your old age. These are things a lot of people in the world have to struggle for. If you have doubts about whether you can make it in the world and start running to a seminary or convent, that's not an adequate motivation. As life gets more complicated and more demands are made on people in our society some persons may be drawn to the priesthood or religious life for security.

Another inadequate reason would be loneliness. If a person has a very difficult time making friends, he or she may be inclined to see the priesthood or religious life as an instant friendship society. All you have to do is walk in and you have a whole bunch of friends who will protect you from ever feeling lonely again. Besides being totally unrealistic, that is not a spiritual reason for choosing a vocation. A similar situation would involve the young man or woman who has been disappointed or rejected in love. He or she decides that relationships are too much pain and trouble, so it's off to the seminary or convent. Marriages "on the rebound" seldom work; neither do religious vocations. A committed religious needs to feel that he or she could form a satisfying love relationship with another person, but has freely chosen a different path. It would also be the wrong motivation if someone looked to the priesthood or religious life as a kind of glamour experience or instant status symbol. Years ago, if you were a priest or religious, you had recognition and acceptance wherever you went. Nowadays that's not so true, but you still get special attention from people.

Now it's obvious that none of us has absolutely pure motives for our actions. There's a bit of self-interest in nearly everything we do, and that's O.K. So even in our desire for the priesthood or religious life, our needs for security, companionship, status, and what-have-you could easily be in the mix. The important thing is that these are not the primary driving motivations. It's not always easy to sift that all out, but that's why the Church gives you a period of testing before you have to make a final decision.

### Third Sign

The third sign has to do with fitness. The questions you should ask yourself are: "Do I have the ability to live the life as it should be lived? Can I live it comfortably, cheerfully, and generously, without going to pieces or without a constant drain on my inner resources and energies?" Somehow the life itself must suit you and you must suit the life. And you shouldn't have to be paying a horribly high price, physically or emotionally, just to stay in. Somehow there ought to be a meshing of your personality with the requirements of priesthood or religious life. Many people, very good people, have given the life an honest try but found they just didn't fit. Some people are not cut out for this life, just as some can't teach or be airline pilots or engineers. The priesthood or religious life does not suit some people. They may have great desire and deep spiritual motivation, but they just don't have the personality that fits. They will be very happy and very good in some other vocation. God does not do violence to the person. He respects the individual gifts that each person has.

Likewise, there are a lot of people who are fit for the priesthood or religious life, but they're not attracted to it. Some of your sisters and brothers and friends would probably be excellent priest or religious, but they have no desire for that life - or want it for the wrong reasons. All three signs have to be present at the same time. If any one is missing,

the Church will judge that the person does not have the vocation.

### A Final Suggestion

At this point I have only one other suggestion, and that's prayer. You will never come to know your vocation -- or even your true self -- unless you pray. Whether your vocation is marriage, religious life, single life -- it is a gift of God. And we need to pray for his gifts, especially to be able to recognize what he wants to give us. It took St. Francis of Assisi a long time to discover his vocation. He was certain he wanted to be a knight. But he found out it made him sick. Then he had a dream, and a voice told him to go back to his home town, where he would be told what to do with his life. He went back, but he wasn't told anything. So he began to pray. Every day. All alone. In a dark cave. And gradually, the Lord revealed Francis' vocation to him. Francis was overjoyed. But he never forgot his lesson. He was a prayerful man for the rest of his life.

We can think of no better way to end this presentation than by praying for you. We will use a favorite prayer that comes from St. Paul: "My prayer is that your love may more and more abound, both in understanding and wealth of experience, so that.. .you may learn to value the things that really matter, up to the very day of Christ." (Philippians 1:9-10) and if you want us to pray for you as you face the question "Is it for me?" be sure and get in touch, (Check out [Contact Us](#) on our site.)