

Consecrated Brotherhood

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For centuries, both men and women have been called by God to consecrate themselves to a life of poverty, chastity and obedience. Most but not all of these people have answered the call to celibate chastity; others, the call to married chastity. The men are not always ordained, nor are they always married; and this state of life is often quite misunderstood.

In the case of men's non-ordained consecration, there is much confusion as to the distinction between such consecration and ordination to the priesthood. Consecration to religious life is just that: It is consecration to brotherhood in a religious community through the vows mentioned above. Ordination is a sacrament distinct from religious consecration. While many religious communities of men have members who are ordained, their *consecration* is to brotherhood rather than to priesthood. For example, a religious superior receives the *vows* of the community members, but cannot (unless he is a bishop) ordain members of the community to the priesthood. That is a sacrament reserved for a bishop, who in many cases is not a member of the religious community to which the ordained members belong.

As for consecrated men being married, some religious communities have membership for people living outside of religious houses or convents ("in the world," as is commonly stated) but still desiring membership in those religious families. Some examples include Dominicans, Franciscans, Norbertines and Servites. These Third Order members, as they are called, may be single or married as well as ordained to diaconate or priesthood. (In fact, many diocesan priests are consecrated members of Third Orders!) They are vowed members of the religious community and live the charism of the founder(s) and the community. Here again is the case of religious *consecration* as distinct from the sacraments of Holy Orders or Matrimony.

Many Roman Catholic men desire religious consecration but not ordination. A lack of awareness of religious brotherhood and its validity as a complete vocation without ordination has left scores of men called to this vocation wondering what they should do with their lives. If they are attracted to the brother's vocation, they are challenged to "go all the way" by seeking ordination. Such a challenge is inappropriate. Here again, the distinction between *consecration* and *sacrament* must be kept in mind. To persuade a man to follow a vocation that might not be right for him comes dangerously close to playing God, Who remains the foremost Vocation Director of the church!

The primary purpose of consecrated life is the personal salvation of each member of the community. Ministry comes second to that. With this in mind, it is necessary to put aside the desperate need for priests in the church today. Religious consecration is not based on filling shortages of personnel; it is based on an individual's call to personal sanctification. If it were based on filling shortages, the many ordained monks who are vowed to a life of seclusion and silence would be ordered out of their cloisters to supply parishes with presiders for Mass. (Some monasteries allow that; others do not.)

During this Year of Consecrated Life, the church seeks to support vowed religious. It is most important that one of the most misunderstood vocations in the church be made visible and understood. There are

men who wish to teach, counsel, work in parish and hospital ministry without administering the sacraments as ordained deacons or priests. There are men who wish to do skilled work to support the well-being of either their religious communities or groups outside of that community. These men are called to a celibate religious life. Communities abound that will receive them, guide them and support them in their vocation. In fact, many of these communities consist strictly of non-ordained brothers. Others consist of both non-ordained and ordained brothers.

The church has a broad variety of vocations to which the faithful are called. The many men who are called to religious vows but not to ordination are an important part of that diversity. Regardless of the shortages of personnel in certain areas of the church, Catholics must remember that a vocation is individual and that God is the Caller to such a life. Religious brotherhood is now just as complete a vocation in itself as it has been for centuries.

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