

## The Religious Life Vocation: Brothers, Sisters, Priests

Saint Martin de Porres Elementary School in West Oakland has eight religious Sisters from five different Congregations serving the religious, educational, and social needs of the students. This Catholic education offers the students a unique access to learning and to life. One Sister is a social worker at the school, two Sisters are co-principals, four are teachers, and one is a bookkeeper. This true story is one example of what is going on in religious life today.

Religious brothers, sisters, and priests make special vows to offer prayer for and service to the church and to the world. Why do Catholics embark upon what we call “religious life”? Religious life is not self-chosen. It is received as gift. God places in one’s heart a desire to live a life that is committed to deepening one’s relationship with God and in service to others. This call is quiet, and it usually corresponds to natural talents and desires already given by God to an individual. Praise of God and service to others are the hallmarks of religious life.

Candidates in the religious life are given sufficient time to experience, reflect, discern, then freely choose to make a life commitment in this vocation which gives us an opportunity to offer our lives as gift--gift to the church and to the world. Just about everyone likes the gift giving of Christmas and birthdays, but did you ever think of someone offering one’s life as a gift for others? Not only did Jesus do that, but He invites some men and women to deepen their baptismal call by embracing a life that supports prayer and joyful service to Catholic families and to the wider world as well. The life-style of religious provides a focus that invites one-- indeed compels one-- to “make a difference.”

Our world is troubled by war, poverty, lack of education and healthcare; God’s dream is not yet fulfilled. That is why there are so many religious orders today. There are many and various needs which different orders can address in education, healthcare, advocacy for the poor, parish and missionary work. Religious brothers, sisters, and priests become attorneys, teachers, social workers, physicians, nurses, and pastors. In giving up their own families and living a counter-cultural lifestyle, they wish to gift the church and the world with whatever talents they have in fulfilling God’s dream.

To do their work well, religious men and women need time for contemplation, a balance of solitude and community, lifelong learning, and the desire to make a difference. God’s interior call needs to be nourished and expressed in loving relationship with God and others.

As you have noticed, some religious orders wear the traditional “habit”; others wear contemporary clothing, but *all* embrace this vowed life in service and in joy. It is a fact that fewer women and men are joining religious orders today. Interestingly enough, they are learning to make their voices stronger than ever, joining with other congregations with renewed energy, joy and love in serving the church and the world. Their voices are stronger, their caring profound, as they speak with courage in the face of injustice and with tenderness in pastoral care. They are grateful to God for the gift of religious vocation given to them and invite others to embrace a life of praise and purpose.

Sister Patricia Marie Walsh, O.P.  
Minister to the Sick, CCOP