

THE LANGUAGE OF CONSECRATED LIFE

The consecrated life is a remarkably diverse phenomenon within the Catholic Church. Because of the various kinds of communities, vocations, and charisms that we find in consecrated life it can sometimes be a challenge to understand terminology that describes this way of life. Below is a short glossary that you may find helpful.

A.

Abbot: The male superior of a monastic community of men religious such as the Benedictines, Cistercians, and others.

B.

Bishop: The chief priest of a diocese. Bishops are responsible for the pastoral care of their dioceses. In addition, bishops have a responsibility to act in council with other bishops to guide the Church.

Brother: A man who is a member of a religious order but who is neither ordained nor studying for the priesthood. Previously "lay Brother." The abbreviated form is either "Br." or "Bro."

C.

Canon Law: The codified body of general laws governing the Church.

Cardinal: Bishops appointed by the pope to serve as his chief counselors . They form a kind of senate for the Church.

Celibacy: The unmarried state of life. In the Catholic Church, men who are called to consecrated life follow Christ's example and forgo marriage for the sake of community and ministry. Similarly, diocesan priests must also be willing to commit to the celibate state of life.

Charism: Gifts for graces given by God to persons or communities for the good of others and the Church. Examples are special gifts for apostolic service, healing, and particular models of spiritual practices. For consecrated religious, each community will have a unique charism that shapes how the community relates to the world and how its members work, live, pray, and minister.

Chastity: The practice of sexual behavior appropriate to one's state of life. Consecrated religious live a commitment to celibacy so they are expected to refrain from all sexual activity. Persons who are married practice chastity through a monogamous commitment to their spouse.

Clergy: Collective term which refers to those who minister within any religious tradition. In the

Catholic Church It is most often used in reference to ordained ministers although it sometimes also refers to all members of a religious institute or even lay ministers.

Cloister: Part of a convent or monastery reserved for use by members of the institute.

Congregation: (1) The collective name for a group of people who form a parish. (2) A group of men or women who form a religious institute.

Conference of Major Superiors of Men: Organization of major superiors representing communities of consecrated men in the U.S.

Contemplative: A person (or institute) whose life is devoted to prayer and reflection.

D.

Deacon: An ordained minister within the Catholic Church. Deacons proclaim the Gospel, assist with the celebration of the mass, baptize, and preside over the sacrament of marriage.

Diocese: A collection of parishes/churches under the leadership of a bishop.

Discalced: Originally meaning "without shoes," this term now applies to certain communities of consecrated men and women who wear sandals or who may even go barefoot.

E.

Evangelical Counsels: Models of living based on Christ's example in the Gospel. The three counsels are poverty, chastity, and obedience. The purpose of the counsels is to help those who want to dedicate their lives to exclusively and completely to the service of God. Consecrated men and women adopt the evangelical counsels as vows or formal promises.

F.

Father: A title that refers to priests in the Catholic Church, whether diocesan or religious. Often used instead of the more formal "Reverend."

Friar: In the mendicant tradition all consecrated men are known as "friars," a term which is derived from the latin term for "brother." Friars differ from monks in that friars generally are more involved with ministry whereas monks are more focused on prayer and contemplation. The most common use of the term "friar" is found in the Franciscan tradition.

L.

Laity: Members of the Catholic Church who are neither ordained ministers nor consecrated

religious.

Lay Brother: An unpopular term today, lay Brothers are consecrated men who belong to a religious institute. They are "lay" because they are neither ordained nor studying for ordination. They profess the vows of their institute and as such belong to the consecrated or religious state of life.

M.

Mendicant: A term that means "beggar" in the latin and which describes a tradition of consecrated life in which simplicity of lifestyle and the practice of austerity were defining characteristics of the community. In these institutes the members traditionally either worked or begged for their livelihood. There are communities of consecrated men in the U.S. who originated from the mendicant tradition.

Monastery: The dwelling place--both a building and a community--of consecrated men or women (specifically monks and nuns) in the Benedictine order and those who originated within the Benedictine tradition. Monasteries are distinctive in that a sense of separation from the world is a key characteristic of their atmosphere. Another quality of the monastery is the idea of stability, or that a monk or nun will reside in his/her monastery for life.

Monk: Any consecrated man who belongs to a cloistered, contemplative, or monastic community.

N.

Novice: A man or woman in a formal period of training and formation called the "novitiate." Novices live in their communities and are preparing for their first profession of vows which marks the beginning of membership in an institute of consecrated life. Novitiate lasts from 12 to 24 months depending on the community.

Nun: A consecrated woman. Generally speaking, nuns are women who are members of cloistered or contemplative communities although in common use the term is frequently interchanged with "Sister" or its abbreviated form, "Sr."

O.

Ordination: A term referring to the conferral of Holy Order upon deacons, bishops, and priests. The most well-known men who are ordained in the Catholic Church are diocesan priests and deacons. In some religious communities some consecrated men are also ordained.

Order/Society/Congregation: A group of consecrated men or women. These terms are often loosely interchanged in common usage.

P.

Postulant: One of several terms used to designate a man or woman who is a candidate for membership in an institute of consecrated life. Postulancy, the period preceding novitiate, can last from 6 months to two years depending on the institute.

Priest: A man who has received the sacrament of Holy Orders. In some institutes of consecrated life some members are also ordained to the priesthood.

Prior: The superior or similar leader within an abbey or monastery.

R.

Religious: A term (both a noun and an adjective) commonly used to describe consecrated women and men. For instance, a Brother is an example of "a religious" while a priest may be either a diocesan or "religious" priest.

S.

Sister: A consecrated woman who is a member of a religious institute. Often abbreviated as "Sr."

Superior: The leader of an institute of consecrated life. In some institutes this person may be called by another name such as president, director, abbot, prior, administrator, community servant, or another term.

V.

Vocation: A call to a way of life. In general, the term applies to all people: some are called to married life, some to consecrated life, others to priesthood or diaconate, and still others to single life. In the most common usage the term "vocation" is most often discussed in relation to consecrated life or priesthood.

Vow: A promise made freely to God. In consecrated life the most traditional vows are poverty, chastity, and obedience. Some communities have additional vows of stability or apostolic service. Vows can be temporary, lasting usually for a period of one year, or perpetual, lasting for a lifetime.