

Frequently Asked Questions by Parents

What is the role of parents in encouraging vocations?

Ultimately you love and support them. The grace that God gives parents is what best nourishes and supports the young person. Thinking always as your son or daughter first is best. Continue to have expectations of him or her.

How can parents talk about Church vocations when what they know about from personal experience is married life?

Parents can talk to their children about the importance of discovering God's purpose in their lives. It can be helpful to them to hear how you discovered that you were called to marriage. As Catholics, each of us has a responsibility to learn about each vocation so that we can support others. Parents need to learn about and understand Church vocations as well as marriage and single life. Some resources for doing this are personal contacts with priests and sisters, reading the lives of the Saints, literature about Church vocations, and web sites such as this one.

How should I react if my son or daughter talks to me about becoming a priest, nun, or brother?

If this hasn't happened yet, maybe you ought to ask yourself how you or your spouse might react. Would it be shock? Concern? Skepticism? Would this be a dream come true for you or your worst nightmare? Knowing and understanding your own feelings and your reasons for them is an important step in knowing how to respond to your son or daughter. The vast majority of teens today feel that if they told their parents they were even "just thinking" about priesthood or religious life, their parents would be completely opposed to the idea, laugh at them, or in some other way not take them seriously.

A vocation is quite simply a call from God. God gives each one of us a vocation and has blessed us with certain abilities and talents. Some of us are called to be married. Others are called to be single. Still others are called to the priesthood or to religious life. One vocation is not better than another. We hope that if your child shows an interest in religious life or the priesthood you will be supportive and encouraging.

I just found out my son or daughter is well along in the decision to enter seminary or a religious community. Why didn't he or she talk with me?

Try not to be offended or hurt that your son or daughter didn't confide in you until now. When considering a calling, men and women often wish to keep things confidential from the people closest to them until they are ready to talk about it. Rest assured your son or daughter both needs and desires your support and encouragement. In fact, your support as a parent is most likely valued more than that of any other figure in your son's or daughter's life.

We are not a very religious family. Where did this vocation come from?

Some parents are taken aback by their son or daughter's news of discernment to serve the Church because they do not consider themselves to be a particularly religious family. While a child's faith, worship, and vocational plans are oftentimes influenced by family practices and expectations, a vocation to serve the Church is a call from God, the author of all life. This call is intensely personal. Although your son desires to discern his call with great attention and fidelity, you are not obliged to alter your current religious practices unless you wish to do so. Still, your son will certainly benefit greatly from your support during his discernment.

If I had provided a better model of marriage for my child, would he or she have chosen to marry?

Some parents have expressed remorse that had they offered a more functional, loving model of marriage that their son or daughter would have chosen a married vocation over a single-hearted vocation to serve God's people and God's Church. In other words, an attitude is adopted, "It's my fault that my son is discerning a vocation to the priesthood." This is very rarely a reality and this sense of causal-guilt should be abandoned.

Although a functional, loving model of married life in the household is very beneficial, several, healthy models of marriage are present in the lives of children and young adults among neighbors, extended family, parishioners, coaches and teachers to name only a few. A vocation comes to a young person in the form of a personal call from God and should never be seen as a last or only option due to a limitation of choice.

How can I best support my son or daughter as he or she discerns?

This is another common anxiety. In many other moments in your child's life, you have felt ready to offer sound advice from your own past experiences. However, because vocations to the priesthood or consecrated life are such unique calls, you may feel unqualified to offer helpful advice. One helpful question you can ask is, "What is the most important thing I can do to assist and support you?" This simple question will mean a great deal. It is a further sign of your unconditional love as a parent.

Prayer will, of course, help. Listen without judging or criticizing and reassure your child that whatever the decision, you will love and accept him. Don't start treating your child differently, and be honest with him about your worries and concerns about a vocation. Another helpful question is, "Is your discernment of a vocation something that you'd like me to keep confidential at the moment?" This will assure your son or daughter of your respect for his or her "pace" of discernment and of its public knowledge.

I am worried that my son or daughter is not suited to serve the Church.

These same concerns are commonly expressed by the very individuals who are in discernment, and are usually due to certain temperaments or failings. The priesthood and religious life requires a high caliber of skills, abilities, and psycho-sexual maturity. However, they are not reserved to "the perfect." If every young man who experienced the first movements in his heart to serve the Church waited until he felt completely worthy to begin his discernment, we may not have any

priests at all! A genuine vocation is not measured by one's feelings of worthiness, but rather by one's desire to respond to God's call to serve the Church as a disciple of Christ.

The academic and formation programs offered in the seminary and in religious communities seek to develop natural skills and abilities and to remedy any weaknesses or deficiencies. Before the discernment process reaches this stage, however, the most supportive action parents can take is to encourage their son or daughter to be faithful to God's call.

Is it normal for my son or daughter to have doubt and faith throughout the process?

Yes, doubt and faith are both part of the process of discerning and preparing for a vocation; questioning is normal and doubt is part of being human. Having doubts about one's abilities and worthiness will happen. But we have to tell ourselves that it is God's Grace that effects the change in us and that makes this possible. We need to realize that sometimes we will naturally move forward under our own excitement and sometimes we will need to very consciously put one foot in front of the other.

What if my son or daughter changes his or her mind? What happens if my son leaves seminary before its completion?

Discernment is an ongoing process. Becoming a candidate with a diocese or religious community does not mean that your child is obligated to become a priest, sister, or brother. Formation directors will help your child discern whether this choice is a good one. Your child may decide that he or she is called to serve the church in some other way, while being married and raising children. Prayer and reflection will help your child develop a better sense of God's call.

It is possible that your son could spend as few as five days or as many as five years in seminary and discern that a life of single-hearted service in the Church is not for him. There is nothing shameful about withdrawing from a program for this reason. The time spent in formation should never be considered a waste. Your son will have grown in holiness, self-awareness, and in personal maturity through the entire process of discernment and by his or her time in a formation program.

Who pays for everything?

Each religious community and diocese establishes its own financial policies concerning its candidates.

Typically, candidates for a religious community are expected to cover the cost of their tuition, room and board and, other related expenses until they profess vows. Dioceses often help their seminarians cover part of their expenses. For both, candidates for religious communities and dioceses, scholarships, loans and grants are available. A lack of finances should never prevent someone from responding to God's call to religious life or the priesthood. Speak to your diocesan vocation director to learn more.

Do priests and sisters remain connected to their families?

Yes, priests and sisters continue to support and be supported by the members of their families. They visit family members and take part in family celebrations and events. Many families find an even stronger bond with children and siblings who have chosen a Church-related vocation. In a unique way, the parish/community also becomes an extended family for them.

If your son's discernment leads him to enter seminary, his departure will be similar to a son leaving home to attend college or to enlist in the military. There will be an inevitable transition period for all parties. If a son enters seminary to study for the priesthood, he will most likely make visits home during Thanksgiving, Christmas, and over the summer vacation each year. Throughout his formation in seminary, he will be encouraged to maintain and develop family relationships through occasional visits and by frequent communication.

I'm worried that my son or daughter will be lonely living a celibate lifestyle.

There is a difference between aloneness and loneliness. A celibate life can be a fulfilling life. Moments of solitude or aloneness are required for prayer, reflection, homily preparation, and rest. Still, no vocation is immune to loneliness; every human being has some lonely moments, whether he or she is married, single, priest or religious. Priests and religious must always be vigilant in maintaining healthy relationships with family, friends, brother priests, parishioners, and/or fellow members of one's religious community, as well as enjoying recreational pursuits.

I'm sad I'll never be a grandparent or have a daughter- or son-in-law.

This is a common response from parents; but, in fact, there are no guarantees you would be one even if your child had not entered the priesthood or religious life. Although the presence of grandchildren would offer much happiness, every parent desires first and foremost that their son or daughter live a joyful and fulfilled life. If God is calling your son or daughter to serve the Church as a priest or consecrated religious person, fulfillment, happiness, and holiness of life will only be fully realized by faithfully responding to this call. The Church recognizes with great respect and appreciation this sacrifice of parents. We trust that God will bless you abundantly, in ways you may not understand now, through your son or daughter's happiness.