

Why don't the monks help out in the parishes?



Dear Father Kerper: With so many parishes closing or being twinned because of so few priests, why do we still have priests sitting around in monasteries or religious houses? This seems to be a waste of manpower? Didn't Jesus say, "Go forth and preach the gospel!"

In order to respond to your suggestion about using "order priests" to work in parishes, we need to consider two points: the proper meaning of vocation; and the key differences between "secular" and "religious" priests.

The word "vocation" comes from the Latin word *vocare*, which means "to call." As Christians we believe that God has created each of us for some purpose. First, God "calls" us to the general vocation of being Christians, then into a "state of life," such as marriage, religious life, the single state, or holy orders. Within these "states of life" we then discern what "tasks" we are called to perform. This involves choosing an occupation, preparing for it by education, and then doing the tasks well.

People called to marriage and family life have a common vocation, but they do not all live in the same way. They have a vast variety of occupations and professions, which, in various ways, harmonize with the more general vocation of marriage.

Just as married people are not interchangeable, neither are priests. Though all priests share in the Sacrament of Holy Orders, there are distinct personal vocations within the priesthood itself. These fall into two broad categories: secular and religious.

Almost all parish priests you meet are "secular," which means "in the world." The Church uses this term because these priests carry out their spiritual mission "in the world." As such, their work involves many "non-spiritual" activities, such as managing finances, guiding parish groups, and so forth, always under the direction of their bishop.

In most cases today, parish priests live alone, operate with a high degree of independence, and remain in their own dioceses forever.

By contrast, "religious" priests belong to communities, not to dioceses. These communities — or orders — originated from "charisms," a term that means a special quality, grace, or focus. For example, some orders specialize in teaching, caring for the sick, or engaging in liturgical prayer.

“Religious” priests, unlike “seculars,” also take at least three formal vows: poverty, chastity, and obedience. Secular priests make promises of celibacy and obedience to their bishops, but not poverty. Most diocesan priests, unlike religious, own their cars, pay taxes, and hold investments in their own name. Some even own houses.

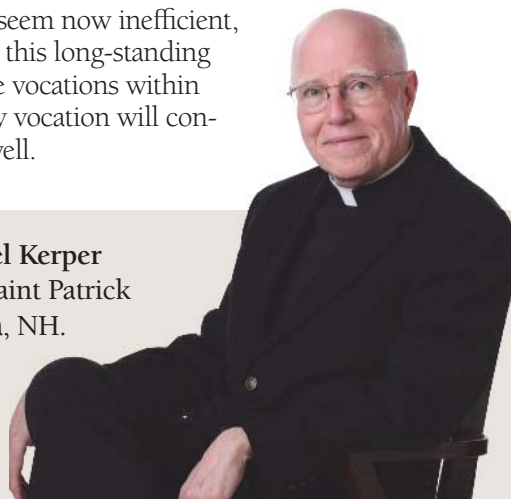
These two different “styles” exist so that the priesthood can accommodate itself to different settings and tasks. The more independent, mobile, and “activist” style of the secular priest works well in busy parishes, whereas the more communitarian and austere style of monastic orders fosters deeper spirituality, especially through an abundance of liturgical and contemplative prayer.

For sure, some religious priests, notably Vincentians, Dominicans, Franciscans, and Jesuits, serve generously and successfully in some of our diocesan parishes, and the Benedictines even have their own parish, Saint Raphael’s in Manchester. But most of these religious orders now have fewer priests than in the past, and so have gradually withdrawn from parish work, choosing instead to focus on other forms of ministry.

Because we tend to value action over prayer, contemplation, and study, some Catholics see religious priests, especially monastics, as wasteful. This, however, misses the absolute importance of prayer in the life of the Church. In a sense, monastic prayer, which is always offered on behalf of the whole Church, mysteriously assists the work of diocesan priests in many hidden ways.

By treating secular and religious priests as interchangeable pieces on the chessboard, we might temporarily fill some gaps, but at an enormous spiritual price. The Church would suffer in at least three ways: first, we would lose the constant prayer of the monastics and other religious priests, which has sustained the Church for many centuries; second, the diversity of active charisms within the priesthood would eventually lose its organizational form; and third, the priesthood would become monolithic, entirely consumed by parish work.

Vocations, which come from God, are always mysterious. In many cases, they do not make sense from a strictly human standpoint; but God guides them nonetheless. Though the ancient division of the priesthood into its “secular” and “religious” forms may seem now inefficient, we must trust that this long-standing tradition of diverse vocations within the unitary priestly vocation will continue to serve us well.



■ **Father Michael Kerper** is the pastor of Saint Patrick Parish in Nashua, NH.



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