



A Comprehensive Guide for Priests:

Helping Women Discern the Call to Consecrated Life

As priests, you have a profound role in guiding women toward discovering their vocation in life. For many women, this involves discerning whether they are called to consecrated life—a unique and beautiful vocation within the Catholic Church where women dedicate themselves entirely to God. Your role as a spiritual father, mentor, and guide is invaluable in helping women at various stages of life explore the possibility of this call and respond generously to God’s invitation.

Consecrated life is a way of following Christ more closely, embracing a life of prayer, community, service, and dedication to the Gospel. Within the Church, there are five main forms of consecrated life: **eremitic life, consecrated virgins and widows, religious life, secular institutes, and societies of apostolic life.** Each form has its own charisms, spiritual focus, and approach to living out the evangelical counsels of poverty, chastity, and obedience. While each path is distinct, all forms share the goal of leading women closer to God and serving the Church and the world in a radical way.

This guide is designed to help priests navigate conversations with women discerning consecrated life, providing a structured approach that meets women where they are, considering their age, spiritual maturity, and life experience. By using this guide, you can help women at different stages—high school, college, young adulthood, mid-life, and beyond—understand the various forms of consecrated life and discern where God might be calling them. It offers talking points, relevant Scripture passages, practical suggestions, and spiritual practices that can aid in this important process.

The Priest's Role in Vocational Discernment

As a priest, you are entrusted with the responsibility of guiding the faithful to discover their vocation and embrace God’s plan for their lives. When it comes to helping women discern

consecrated life, this involves more than simply providing information about different forms of consecration; it requires walking with them on a journey of spiritual growth and deeper intimacy with Christ. Your guidance can make a profound impact on their ability to hear God's voice and respond with openness and trust.

Your role includes:

1. **Spiritual Direction and Support:** Offering ongoing spiritual direction can help women clarify their call, discern the movements of the Holy Spirit, and overcome obstacles that may hinder their response. Encouraging regular confession, Eucharistic adoration, and daily prayer is also crucial in fostering a life attentive to God's will.
2. **Providing Information About Consecrated Life:** Women discerning consecrated life often need a better understanding of what each form entails. It is helpful to explain the unique charisms, commitments, and lifestyles associated with eremitic life, consecrated virgins and widows, religious life, secular institutes, and societies of apostolic life.
3. **Encouraging Vocational Encounters:** Encouraging women to participate in retreats, "Come and See" weekends, or visit communities can provide practical insights and firsthand experiences. You can also facilitate connections with consecrated women who can share their own journeys of discernment.
4. **Addressing Fears and Misconceptions:** Many women may have fears about leaving behind other life plans or worries about being "too old" to discern. Your role includes reassuring them that God's call can come at any stage of life and that He gives the grace needed to follow His path.

High School (14-18 Years Old)

Theme: *Discovering the Possibility of a Call*

Talking Points:

- **Introduction to Discernment:**
 - At this age, it's essential to encourage young women to cultivate a personal relationship with Christ through prayer, Mass, and Scripture. Explain that

God's plan for their lives includes the possibility of a vocation to consecrated life.

- **Scripture:** "For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope." (Jeremiah 29:11)
- Practical Steps: Encourage them to set aside time for daily prayer and to begin thinking of their future in light of God's plan.

- **Introduction to the Five Forms of Consecrated Life:**

Helping women understand the diversity within consecrated life is a key part of discernment. Each form of consecration is a response to God's invitation but manifests differently:

- **Eremitic Life:** For those drawn to solitude and contemplation, the eremitic life offers a way to dedicate oneself entirely to God through prayer and penance in a hermitage. It is an invitation to live out the Gospel in a radical, hidden way.
- **Consecrated Virgins and Widows:** These women embrace a special consecration while living in the world, committing to a life of perpetual virginity or dedicating their widowhood to God. They serve as signs of the Church's bride-like devotion to Christ.
- **Religious Life:** The most well-known form of consecrated life, religious women live in community under a specific rule or charism, engaging in prayer, apostolic work, and service. This path provides structure through vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience.
- **Secular Institutes:** Women in secular institutes live out their consecration within the world, often remaining in their profession while committing to a life of poverty, chastity, and obedience. This path combines a deep spiritual commitment with active involvement in society.
- **Societies of Apostolic Life:** These women dedicate themselves to apostolic works while living in a community, sharing life together, and often focusing on a particular form of service such as education, healthcare, or missionary work.
 - **Scripture:** "You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit—fruit that will last." (John 15:16)
- **Encouraging Openness:**

- Encourage openness to God’s will and help them understand that discernment is a process. Explain that they don’t need to have all the answers yet, but they should start listening for God’s call.
- **Scripture:** “Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.” (1 Samuel 3:9)
- **Practical Steps:** Suggest participation in youth retreats, vocation talks, or visiting religious communities to see different forms of consecrated life firsthand.

College/Early Adulthood (18-24 Years Old)

Theme: Deepening the Discernment Process

Talking Points:

- **Deepening Spiritual Life:**
 - College years offer an opportunity to deepen their faith and commitment to discernment. Encourage frequent reception of the sacraments, daily prayer, and finding a spiritual director to help guide them through their discernment.
 - **Scripture:** “Be still and know that I am God.” (Psalm 46:10)
 - **Practical Steps:** Daily Mass, Eucharistic adoration, and journaling about their discernment journey can help clarify God's calling.

Exploring the Five Forms of Consecrated Life:

To help young women consider where they might be called, it’s important to delve deeper into each form of consecrated life. Below is a more detailed exploration of the five forms of consecrated life in the Catholic Church: **Eremitic Life, Consecrated Virgins and Widows, Religious Life, Secular Institutes,** and **Societies of Apostolic Life.** Each section includes the nature of the call, what the life entails, who it might appeal to, and how it reflects a particular aspect of Christian discipleship.

1. Eremitic Life: A Solitary Life of Prayer and Penance

Overview:

The eremitic life is a form of consecrated life where individuals live as hermits, dedicating themselves to a life of deep prayer, penance, and solitude. Hermits typically withdraw

from the world to focus intensely on their relationship with God, living in physical and spiritual isolation.

Who It Appeals To:

- Women who feel a profound call to silence and solitude.
- Those who are drawn to a deeply contemplative life, away from the distractions of the world.
- Individuals who find joy in simplicity, self-denial, and offering their lives for the salvation of others through prayer and penance.

What This Life Entails:

- Hermits live alone, devoting their lives to prayer, fasting, and penance.
- Daily life revolves around a structured prayer routine, often including the Liturgy of the Hours, Scripture reading, and Eucharistic adoration.
- Hermits live independently, sometimes under the supervision of a bishop or religious superior.

Scripture Inspiration:

- *“But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.”*
(Matthew 6:6)

Reflection:

- Eremitic life reflects the heart of Christian discipleship through radical intimacy with God, echoing the lives of the Desert Fathers and Mothers who sought complete communion with the Lord in the wilderness.

2. Consecrated Virgins and Widows: A Life Dedicated to God in the World

Overview:

Consecrated virgins and widows are women who dedicate themselves entirely to Christ while living in the world, outside of a religious community. Consecrated virgins live a life of perpetual virginity, while consecrated widows offer their lives to God after the death of their spouse.

Who It Appeals To:

- Women who desire a total commitment to Christ but feel called to live in the world.
- Those who are drawn to prayer and service but are not called to join a religious order or community.
- Widows who, after the loss of a spouse, feel called to consecrate the rest of their lives to God.

What This Life Entails:

- Consecrated virgins live in their own homes, often pursuing careers or apostolic work while dedicating their lives to prayer and service to the Church.
- Consecrated widows also remain in the world, using their life experiences to support and serve others, especially within the Church.
- They publicly vow perpetual virginity (in the case of virgins) or consecrate their widowhood (in the case of widows), typically in a liturgical rite presided over by a bishop.

Scripture Inspiration:

- *“The virgins who were ready went in with him to the wedding banquet. And the door was shut.”* (Matthew 25:10)
- *“A widow who is really in need and left all alone puts her hope in God and continues night and day to pray and to ask God for help.”* (1 Timothy 5:5)

Reflection:

- This vocation reflects Christ’s invitation to intimate union with Him while living in the world, allowing consecrated virgins and widows to bear witness to the Kingdom of God by their faithfulness and dedication to prayer.

3. Religious Life: Living in Community with a Specific Charism

Overview:

Religious life involves living in a community under the vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience. Religious sisters or nuns dedicate their lives to prayer and service, following a particular rule or charism set by their order's founder.

Who It Appeals To:

- Women who feel called to live in community and desire to serve the Church and the world through a particular mission or charism.

- Those who want a balanced life of prayer, community living, and apostolic work.
- Individuals who are inspired by the lives of the saints who founded religious orders, such as St. Francis of Assisi, St. Teresa of Avila, or St. Ignatius of Loyola.

What This Life Entails:

- Religious sisters live in a convent or monastery and dedicate their lives to communal prayer, often praying the Liturgy of the Hours.
- Depending on the order’s charism, sisters may engage in a variety of apostolic works, such as teaching, nursing, social work, or missionary activity.
- Religious orders vary widely, from contemplative communities (focused on prayer) to active communities (focused on service and ministry).

Scripture Inspiration:

- *“And all who believed were together and had all things in common; and they sold their possessions and goods and distributed them to all, as any had need.”* (Acts 2:44-45)

Reflection:

- Religious life reflects the call to live in radical discipleship, in imitation of Christ, alongside others in a community committed to a shared mission and deepening communion with God.

4. Secular Institutes: Consecrated Life Lived in the World

Overview:

Secular institutes are organizations for laypeople and clergy who live in the world but commit themselves to the evangelical counsels of poverty, chastity, and obedience. Unlike religious life, members do not live in community but are consecrated to God while working in secular professions.

Who It Appeals To:

- Women who feel called to remain in the world, holding a job and engaging in everyday life, while living out a consecrated vocation.

- Those who want to live a life of total consecration to God but feel called to transform the world from within, through their professional and personal lives.
- Women who desire both autonomy in daily life and deep commitment to a form of consecration.

What This Life Entails:

- Members live on their own, often continuing in their professional careers while committing to a deep life of prayer and following the charism of their secular institute.
- They take private vows and remain spiritually connected to the institute, receiving spiritual formation and guidance.

Scripture Inspiration:

- *“You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden.”* (Matthew 5:14)

Reflection:

- Secular institutes reflect the call to be a leaven in the world, consecrating one’s daily work and life to God while remaining fully engaged in society, thereby witnessing to the presence of Christ in the midst of the world.

5. Societies of Apostolic Life: Groups Focused on Apostolic Work

Overview:

Societies of Apostolic Life are groups of men or women who come together for a specific apostolic mission, such as education, healthcare, or evangelization. They do not take religious vows like those in religious orders but live in community and commit themselves to the mission and life of the society.

Who It Appeals To:

- Women who feel a strong call to serve in a specific apostolic ministry while living in community.
- Those who may not feel drawn to take religious vows but still wish to live a life of consecration through apostolic work.

- Individuals who want to share a common mission with others, dedicating themselves to the Church’s work in a more flexible structure.

What This Life Entails:

- Members of societies of apostolic life live together in a community dedicated to prayer and the society’s apostolic mission, whether that’s teaching, healthcare, or evangelization.
- They do not profess religious vows, but they live according to the rule or constitution of their society, with a strong emphasis on prayer and the apostolic mission.

Scripture Inspiration:

- *“The harvest is plentiful but the laborers are few; therefore, pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.” (Luke 10:2)*

Reflection:

- This form of consecrated life reflects the Church’s missionary mandate, offering women the opportunity to live a life fully dedicated to the apostolic work of the Church, while still participating in the community life of their society.

Growing in Discernment:

- Encourage them to reflect on where they experience joy, peace, and fulfillment. These can be signs of where God is calling them.
- **Scripture:** “Take delight in the Lord, and He will give you the desires of your heart.” (Psalm 37:4)
- **Practical Steps:** Encourage participating in “Come and See” weekends at convents, spending time in service to others, and forming friendships with women in consecrated life.

Mid-Adulthood (25-40 years old):

Theme: Making a Life Decision

Talking Points:

Discernment as a Life Decision:

- As women enter this stage, they may begin to seriously consider what path God is calling them to for the rest of their lives. Encourage prayerful reflection and deeper discernment about their vocational call.
- **Scripture:** “Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways submit to Him, and He will make your paths straight.” (Proverbs 3:5-6)
- **Practical Steps:** Silent retreats, extended time for prayer, and regular meetings with a spiritual director can help women make this life-defining decision.

Considering Apostolic Work and Community Life:

- Present the option of Societies of Apostolic Life, which allows women to combine professional work and apostolic service while living in community.
- **Religious Life:** Emphasize the variety of religious orders, each with its unique charism, and encourage women to explore where their gifts align with these communities.
- **Scripture:** “Whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.” (1 Corinthians 10:31)

Encouraging Confidence in God's Call:

- Help women overcome fears or doubts about leaving behind a professional career or other life path. God calls us at different stages, and He provides the grace to follow His call.
- **Scripture:** “For we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.” (Ephesians 2:10)

Later Adulthood (40+ Years Old)

Theme: *Fulfilling a Lifelong Call*

Talking Points:

- **Reflecting on Life Experience:**

- Encourage women to reflect on how God has worked through their past life experiences. Vocational discernment at this stage often involves recognizing how the Lord has prepared them for a specific calling.
- **Scripture:** “In all things, God works for the good of those who love Him, who have been called according to His purpose.” (Romans 8:28)
- **Practical Steps:** Consider organizing a personal retreat to reflect on their life journey and how God may be calling them to dedicate their remaining years to Him.

Late Vocations:

- Reassure women that late vocations are valued in the Church. Some religious orders welcome older vocations, and consecrated virgins or widows often enter their call later in life.
- **Consecrated Widows:** Encourage widowed women to consider dedicating themselves entirely to God in prayer and service.
- **Scripture:** “The Lord will fulfill His purpose for me; your steadfast love, O Lord, endures forever.” (Psalm 138:8)

Pursuing Consecration in Solitude:

- For those drawn to solitude, the eremitic life may become more attractive in later years, especially for women who have lived active professional lives and now seek a deeper contemplative relationship with God.
- **Scripture:** “But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.” (Matthew 6:6)

General Practices for All Stages of Discernment:

Prayer and Eucharistic Adoration: Encourage all women, at any stage, to spend regular time in front of the Blessed Sacrament. Being in God’s presence is essential for listening to His voice.

Scripture: “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.” (Matthew 11:28)

Spiritual Direction: A spiritual director is invaluable in helping discern what God is calling them to. Encourage regular spiritual direction as part of the discernment journey.

Sacramental Life: Frequent reception of the sacraments, particularly Confession and the Eucharist, helps women stay in tune with God's will and open to His grace.

Community and Support: Whether through parish groups, religious communities, or discerning peer groups, surrounding oneself with a supportive, faith-filled community is crucial to a healthy discernment process.

Scripture: "For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them." (Matthew 18:20)

Conclusion: The Joy of Serving as a Spiritual Father

Your role in accompanying women on the path of vocational discernment is both a privilege and a responsibility. This guide aims to equip you with the tools needed to foster genuine discernment, provide encouragement, and lead women closer to Christ. By offering spiritual direction, sharing insights on consecrated life, and addressing concerns with compassion, you can help women discover the beauty of following God's call and respond generously to His invitation. May your guidance help women embrace their vocation with courage, joy, and love.

God's call is a gift, and your role in helping others discern His voice is a beautiful witness to His unending love for the Church.