
ABOUT THE CANONS

Episcopal religious communities come in two canonical flavors: *Religious Orders* and other *Christian Communities*. Members of a Religious Order are committed for life or a term of years to holding their possessions in common or in trust, to celibate life in community, and obedience to their Rule and Constitution.

Members of a Christian Community are also committed for life or a term of years to obey their Rule and Constitution. Their Rule *may* entail life in community, common property, or celibacy, but not *necessarily* require them.

To be recognized, all communities need at least six professed or full members, and must be approved by and registered with the Standing Committee on Religious Communities of the House of Bishops. They also need what's known as a Bishop *Visitor* or *Protector*: either the bishop of the diocese where their "mother house" or other headquarters is located, or a bishop serving with the approval of this diocesan. This Visitor is guardian of the community's constitution, and acts as arbiter in matters the community can't settle on its own.

THE RECTOR'S ROLE

What should a rector do when a parishioner comes up and says, "I want to join (or start) a religious community"? First of all, vocations to religious life should be taken as seriously as vocations to ordained ministry. There is no canonical sponsorship requirement for rectors and vestries regarding vocations to religious life; but that does not mean they should not be involved. Clergy should consider whether the person is seeking a way to exercise a ministry that could better be realized though greater involvement in the life of the parish.

Clergy should be relieved to hear that the chief role in vocational discernment is played by the religious communities themselves. They have vocations directors, systems for determining the nature and validity of the call, and their own systems of postulancy and novitiate. The rector should play a primarily pastoral role, guiding the person to an appropriate community.

OPTIONS

The first step, then, is to make sure that the individual has examined the options. While it's true that the Holy Spirit has not run out of gifts, and that new forms of religious life emerge, there are over thirty communities in the Episcopal Church, with a wide variety of styles and ministries, and rather than founding a new community, it's better to start with a careful look at what already exists. *The Church Annual* and the Episcopal Church's web site have listings of all the recognized communities.

The person should examine these listings and descriptions, contact the communities for more information, and answer certain questions: What am I trying to do? What is my ministry? How do I want to live my life in Christ? Do any of these communities fit the bill?

While there are only two *canonical* categories for communities, in practical terms there are four basic types of religious community in the Episcopal Church today.

† Monastic or conventual communities are the "Religious Orders" of the canon. Their members live "in common" under the vow of celibacy, following either the contemplative, active, or mixed life. Depending on the ethos of the community, the degree of communal focus ranges from a closer "Benedictine" model to a broader "Franciscan" one. Their work and ministry is similarly varied. The Order of Saint Benedict and the Society of Saint Francis come under this heading.

† Some communities require celibacy, but for the sake of their missionary work do not necessarily live in common. An example of this type of community is the Congregation of the Companions of the Holy Savior.

† Other communities focus on a life of prayer and service in common, embracing both single and married members and their families. The first Anglican religious community at Little Gidding was of this type. The Community of Celebration is a contemporary example.

† Some communities focus on work or mission in the world, and require neither celibacy nor common domicile. Their sense of community comes from dedication to a common purpose, a common rule of life and prayer, periodic gatherings, frequent com-

munication, or other unifying principles. The Brotherhood of Saint Gregory and the Third Order of Saint Francis are representative of this kind of community.

It would be a mistake to think all the communities in each category were stamped from the same mold. Each has its unique spirit, and there is considerable variety in ministry and life style. And within the communities each individual member will have some gift or insight into the vows as he or she explores a personal relationship to God mediated and enriched by a community of faith.

IF THE SHOE DOESN'T FIT

If, however, after checking out all of the existing options, none of them seems right, one can begin the long and difficult process of founding a community oneself. Here a crucial question must be asked: Why am I alone? Why is no one sharing my vision? Few founders (ancient or modern) intended to "found a religious order." They were (and are) people of vision called to a particular way of life, whose holiness or mission attracted others. The development of an "order" was usually an afterthought, or a logical development of the call to common life or work. The order was there to serve the holy life or mission, not the other way around.

Sometimes, though, an individual has a calling which cannot be answered in an existing community. At this point counseling and direction are all-important. This is *not* the stage at which to "make vows." That should be the last thing to happen, after the call has been ratified, and a community has begun to form. The history of Episcopal religious life is strewn with failed attempts, and people who dwell in a kind of ecclesiastical limbo, while still "under vows" of some sort.

GOING IT ALONE

There is canonical provision for solitary religious, incorporated in the 1991 revision of Title III. *The Book of Occasional Services* contains a rite called "Setting Apart for a Special Vocation." Its opening rubric states,

Individual Christians, in response to God's call, may wish to commit themselves to the religious life under vows made directly to the bishop of the diocese.

The responsibility for solitary vows rests, then, with the bishop. As Fr Bede Mudge, OHC, wrote in a report to the House of Bishops in 1980, "Free-floating commitments that are incapable of fulfillment are often destructive rather than helpful." Some years ago there was a poignant letter in a church publication from one such solitary, pleading, "Is anyone else out there?"

Spiritual direction should be done by someone who knows about the religious life in all its variety. It wouldn't be a bad idea if every diocesan commission on ministry included a specialist in this field to give guidance and oversight. Other options suggested by Fr Bede include maintaining a list of such skilled people, or encouraging existing communities to act as sponsors or mentors; this has happened to good effect in recent years. This provides the solitary with the support of a community, and ongoing spiritual direction.

A FINAL WORD

One last word of caution: "Do nothing without the bishop." That is an ancient bit of advice, and it still holds true. Souls are at stake; religious life is serious business, both for those who make vows, *and* those who receive them.

CANONICAL REGULATIONS (2012)

Canon III.5.2.e

[Religious Life and the Ordination Process]

If the applicant [for ordination] is a member of a Religious Order or Christian Community recognized by Canon III.14,* the letters of support referred to in Canon III.5 or Canon III.6 and any other requirements imposed on a congregation or Member of the Clergy may be given by the Superior or person in charge, and Chapter, or other comparable body of the Order or Community.

**The printed edition of the Canons incorrectly reads "III.24."*

Canon III.14

Of Religious Orders and Other Christian Communities

Sec. 1.(a). A Religious Order of this Church is a society of Christians (in communion with the See of Canterbury) who voluntarily commit themselves for life, or a term of years: to holding their possessions in common or in trust; to a celibate life in community; and obedience to their Rule and Constitution.

(b). To be officially recognized, a Religious Order must have at least six professed members, and must be approved by the Standing Committee on Religious Communities of the House of Bishops and be registered with the Committee.

(c). Each Order shall have a Bishop Visitor or Protector, who need not be the Bishop of the Diocese in which the Order is established. If, however, the Bishop Visitor or Protector is not the Bishop of the Diocese in which the Mother House of the Order is situated, the Bishop Visitor or Protector shall not accept election without the consent of the Bishop of that Diocese. The Bishop Visitor or Protector shall be the guardian of the Constitution of the Order, and shall serve as an arbiter in matters which the Order or its members cannot resolve through its normal processes.

(d). Any person under vows in a Religious Order, having exhausted the normal processes of the Order, may petition the Bishop Visitor or Protector for dispensation from those vows. In the event the petitioner is not satisfied with the ruling of the Bishop Visitor or Protector on such petition, the person may file a petition with the Presiding Bishop, who shall appoint a Board of three Bishops to review the petition and the decision thereon, and to make recommendation to the Presiding Bishop, who shall have the highest dispensing power for Religious Orders, and whose ruling on the petition shall be final.

(e). A Religious Order may establish a house in a Diocese only with the permission of the Bishop of the Diocese. This permission once granted shall not be withdrawn by the Bishop or any succeeding Bishop.

(f). The Constitution of every Religious Order shall make provision for the legal ownership

and administration of the temporal possessions of the Order, and in the event of dissolution of the Order, or should it otherwise cease to exist, shall provide for the disposition of its assets according to the laws governing non-profit (religious) organizations in the State wherein the Order is incorporated.

(g). It is recognized that a Religious Order is not a Parish, Mission, Congregation or Institution of the Diocese within the meaning of Canon I.7.3, and its provisions shall not apply to Religious Orders.

[Note: Canon I.7.3 forbids parishes to encumber or alienate property without diocesan consent. Religious Orders and Christian Communities are free to acquire or sell such property without other permission.]

Sec. 2 (a). A Christian Community of this Church under this Canon is a society of Christians (in communion with the See of Canterbury) who voluntarily commit themselves for life, or a term of years, in obedience to their Rule and Constitution.

(b). To be officially recognized such a Christian Community must have at least six full members in accordance with their Rule and Constitution, and must be approved by the Standing Committee on Religious Communities of the House of Bishops and be registered with the Committee.

(c). Each such Christian Community of this Church shall have a Bishop Visitor or Protector, who need not be the Bishop of the Diocese in which the community is established. If, however, the Bishop Visitor or Protector is not the Bishop of the Diocese in which the Mother House of the Community is situated, the Bishop Visitor or Protector shall not accept election without the consent of the Bishop of that Diocese. The Bishop Visitor or Protector shall be the guardian of the Constitution of the Community, and shall serve as an arbiter in matters which the Community or its members cannot resolve through its normal processes.

(d). Any person under full commitment in such a Christian Community, having exhausted the normal processes of the Community, may petition the Bishop Visitor or Protector for dispensation from that full commitment. In the event the petitioner is not satisfied with the ruling of the Bishop Visitor or Protector on such peti-

tion, the person may file a petition with the Presiding Bishop of the Church, who shall appoint a Board of three Bishops to review the petition and the decision thereon, and to make recommendation to the Presiding Bishop, who shall have the highest dispensing power for Christian Communities, and whose ruling on the petition shall be final.

(e). Each such Christian Community may establish a house in a Diocese only with the permission of the Bishop of the Diocese. This permission once granted shall not be withdrawn by the Bishop or any succeeding Bishop.

(f). The Constitution of each Christian Community shall make provision for the legal ownership and administration of the temporal possessions of the Community, and in the event of dissolution of the Community, or should it otherwise cease to exist, shall provide for the disposition of its assets according to the laws governing non-profit (religious) organizations in the State wherein the Community is incorporated.

(g). It is recognized that a Christian Community is not a Parish, Mission, Congregation or Institution of the Diocese within the meaning of Canon I.7.3, and its provisions shall not apply to such Christian Communities. *[See Note under III. 14. 1. g above.]*

Sec. 3. Any Bishop receiving vows of an individual not a member of a Religious Order or other Christian Community, using the form for "Setting Apart for a Special Vocation" in the *Book of Occasional Services*, or a similar rite, shall record the following information with the Standing Committee on Religious Communities of the House of Bishops: the name of the person making vows; the date of the service; the nature and contents of the vows made, whether temporary or permanent; and any other pastoral considerations as shall be deemed necessary.

Canons are as they appear in the 2012 edition.

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WHAT BISHOPS AND CLERGY SHOULD KNOW ABOUT RELIGIOUS LIFE

INCLUDING RELEVANT

CANONS

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