Vocation to Religious Life and the Stages of Formation

What a vocation is

A vocation is a call from God, a personal invitation to follow Christ more closely and to give one's whole life to Him in service of the Church. Every Christian has a vocation by baptism: the universal call to holiness. Within that, God calls some to marriage, some to priesthood, some to single consecrated life, and some to the **consecrated life** through the evangelical counsels of **poverty, chastity, and obedience**.

Several things are generally said about a religious vocation:

- **It begins with God's initiative.** The person does not "choose" religious life so much as respond to a call that has been placed in the heart (cf. Jn 15:16).
- **It is recognized over time.** Attraction to prayer, a desire to serve, a sense of peace in considering the life, and the confirmation of others (a spiritual director, a community, the Church) are among the signs.
- **It is tested, not assumed.** The Church requires a gradual, careful process so that both the candidate and the institute can discern whether the call is authentic.
- **It is lived in community.** For apostolic and missionary institutes, the vocation is both a consecration to God and a mission, shaped by the charism of the institute.
- **It is a gift to be received and a response to be renewed daily,** not a single decision made once.

Discernment also looks at human and spiritual maturity: the capacity for community life, emotional balance, a life of prayer, health, freedom from coercion, and a right intention (seeking God, not escape or security).

Stages of formation

The exact names, lengths, and details vary by institute, since each follows the Code of Canon Law together with its own Constitutions and *Ratio Formationis*. What follows is the general pattern.

1. Aspirancy (pre-postulancy)

A period of **discernment and accompaniment** before formal entrance. The woman is not yet a member. She learns about the institute, its charism and spirituality, and may live alongside the community for visits or short stays. Her family, background, health, faith life, and motivation are explored. The focus is on asking, *Is God calling me here?* Some institutes have a formal aspirancy program; others use "come and see" experiences or a candidacy period.

2. Postulancy

The **formal entrance** into the community. The postulant lives with the sisters, shares their daily life, and begins to be introduced to prayer, community, and apostolate. This is a time to:

- Mature humanly and spiritually and deepen the life of prayer
- Complete or fill gaps in education and human formation
- Experience community life concretely
- Let the community and the candidate get to know one another

Canonically, there is no fixed universal length, but it commonly lasts one to two years, according to the institute's norms.

3. Novitiate

The novitiate is the **heart of initial formation**. Under canon law, it begins with admission to the institute and a change of habit or formal reception. It is a time set apart for deep formation, and it is the stage when the person truly begins religious life. Its aims are:

- To deepen the relationship with Christ through prayer, Scripture, liturgy, and the sacraments
- To study the evangelical counsels, the history, charism, and Constitutions of the institute
- To learn to live the vows and community life
- To test the vocation seriously

Canonically, the novitiate is a **minimum of 12 months** of actual novitiate time to be valid (canon 648), and not longer than two years, though some institutes add a period of apostolic experience. The novice makes **no vows** yet; she is free to leave, and the institute is free to dismiss her.

4. First (temporal) profession

At the end of novitiate, if both the novice and the institute judge that the call is genuine, she makes **first profession**: she takes **temporary vows** of poverty, chastity, and obedience. She is now a member of the institute with rights and duties. The vows are made for a period (usually one year, renewed), according to the institute's law. Canon law requires that temporary profession last at least three years and no more than six in total (canon 655), with a possible extension.

5. Juniorate

The period of **temporary vows** between first profession and perpetual profession. This stage is sometimes called "juniorate" and may be integrated with professed life in the community. It is a time to:

- Live the vows concretely in daily mission and community
- Complete studies or professional and pastoral training
- Begin or deepen apostolic work
- Grow in maturity and discern readiness for a definitive gift of self

In some institutes, "juniorate" refers specifically to a more structured stage of formation (study and formation) after first vows; in others, it is simply the time of temporary vows. The terminology differs, so it is best to follow the institute's own Constitutions.

6. Perpetual (final) profession

The **definitive, lifelong consecration**. After the period of temporary vows, the sister, if called and approved by the competent authority, makes **perpetual vows**, an unconditional gift of herself to God in the institute. This is celebrated liturgically, often with great solemnity. Perpetual profession is binding for life, and dispensation from the vows can only be granted by the Church in exceptional cases.

Formation does not end here. The Church speaks of **ongoing (permanent) formation**: a lifelong process of conversion, renewal, and growth in fidelity to the charism and to Christ, through every stage of life, including the care of senior sisters and the offering of old age.

At a glance

Stage	Status	Vows?	Main focus
Aspirancy	Not yet a member	No	Discernment, knowing the institute
Postulancy	Entering the community	No	Introduction to community life, human and spiritual preparation
Novitiate	Member in formation	No	Deep spiritual formation, testing the vocation
First (temporal) profession	Professed member	Temporary vows	Living the vows and beginning mission
Juniorate	Professed, still in formation	Temporary vows	Study, apostolate, deepening, readiness
Perpetual profession	Fully incorporated	Perpetual	Lifelong consecration and mission

A few reflections

- **Formation is gradual by design.** The Church wisely allows time for the person to grow and be tested. Each stage asks, *Is this the Lord's call?* and *Is she ready for the next step?*
- **Formation is both human and spiritual.** Mature faith needs mature humanity: healthy relationships, self-knowledge, emotional balance, and the ability to forgive and be forgiven.
- **Formators accompany, they do not decide alone.** The candidate, her formators, and the leadership of the institute all take part in discernment, in the freedom of the Holy Spirit.
- **A vocation can also be recognized as "not here."** A candidate who leaves, or is advised to leave, has not failed. Discernment sometimes shows that God's plan lies elsewhere.
- **The charism shapes everything.** In a missionary community, the vocation is also a call to go, to serve, and to be sent. Formation includes preparing for cross-cultural life, languages, and mission.

The questions are for aspirants to pray over and to discuss with their spiritual companion or formator:

1. Where and when did I first feel that God was calling me, and what has kept that desire alive?
2. What place do prayer, the Word of God, and the sacraments have in my daily life?
3. What attracts me to community life, and what frightens me?
4. What do poverty, chastity, and obedience mean to me, and in which of the three do I feel most invited to grow?
5. Am I ready to move step by step, with patience and trust, and to accept God's answer even if it differs from what I imagined?