

**Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate
Georgetown University
Washington, DC**

***The Role of the Family in Nurturing Vocations
to Religious Life and Priesthood:
A Report for the National Religious Vocation Conference***

Executive Summary

This report presents findings from a major study of the influence of families in nurturing vocations to religious life and priesthood. The National Religious Vocation Conference (NRVC) commissioned the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA) at Georgetown University to learn from priests, seminarians, women and men religious, and their families about the role of the family in nurturing their vocation. The goal of the research is to provide information that will help families to promote vocations to religious life and priesthood.

For this study, CARA surveyed men and women religious who had entered religious life since 2000 (from lists supplied by the major superiors of U.S. congregations of women and men religious) as well as priests and seminarians who had been accepted into formation for priesthood in dioceses since 2000 (from lists supplied by the vocation director in each U.S. diocese and eparchy). In addition to asking these participants about the influence that their family had on their vocational discernment, the survey also asked respondents to provide contact information for a family member. CARA then contacted those identified family members with an invitation to complete a similar survey to gain insights on the topic from the perspective of the family member. CARA also conducted two focus groups with the family members of these religious, priests, and seminarians to explore more deeply some of the issues relevant to this study as revealed by the survey data.

CARA sent a survey invitation to 2,172 women and men religious and 4,140 priests and seminarians beginning in November 2014 and then conducted follow-up through February 2015 to achieve a high response rate. CARA received completed responses from 1,279 men and women religious and 1,352 diocesan priests and seminarians for a response rate of 59 percent and 33 percent, respectively.

The religious, priests, and seminarians that responded to the survey provided CARA with a total of 1,547 names and contact information (either a mailing address or an email) for a family member. CARA then contacted those family members in late February 2015, in both English and Spanish, with an invitation to participate in a brief survey. By the cut-off date in early April, 892 family members had responded to the survey, for a response rate of 58 percent. Another 15 family members participated in one of two focus groups, held in Washington, DC and in Chicago, IL, in May 2015.

Major Findings

There is no such thing as a “typical” family of a priest or a religious. The purpose of this study is not to discover some secret formula for creating religious vocations but rather to learn from these family members who have produced vocations to priesthood or religious life some of the common experiences, practices, attitudes, and behaviors of these families. The hope is that the characteristics and experiences of these families will be informative and perhaps instructive to other families who might be wondering if there is a potential vocation to priesthood or religious life in their midst.

Starting with a Strong Catholic Foundation

- Family members of seminarians, priests, and religious are usually Catholic themselves and typically grew up in a family in which both parents were Catholic. One in ten responding priests, seminarians, or religious grew up in a non-Catholic family, however, and another tenth grew up in a family with only one Catholic parent. One in five Catholic families that produced a vocation had a priest or a religious already in their extended family.
- Women and men religious, priests, and seminarians are more likely than Catholics in general to have attended a Catholic school for some or all of their education. More than half of men and women religious and two in three priests and seminarians attended Catholic schools for some or all of their education.
- The responding family members in families who have produced a vocation are more likely than other Catholic adults in general to say that their Catholic faith is the most important part of their daily life. Six in ten responding family members say that their Catholic faith is the most important part of their life and another third say that faith is among the most important parts of their life. By comparison, about half of Catholic parents ages 25-45 say that their Catholic faith is at least “among the most important” parts of their daily life. Among all Catholic adults, about four in ten rate their faith as at least that important in their daily life.
- These family members report a more engaged prayer life than do other Catholic parents or other Catholic adults in general. Nearly nine in ten pray daily, compared to just over half of U.S. Catholic adults and just over a third of Catholic parents between the ages of 25 and 45. They also feel more strongly than Catholic adults in general that it is important that younger generations of the family grow up Catholic.

Family Religious Practice When Growing Up

- Two in three responding men and women religious say that their family attended Mass or religious services weekly when they were growing up and another one in ten say they attended more than once a week. Likewise, responding diocesan priests and seminarians report attending Mass when they were growing up with that same level of frequency.

Hispanic/Latino respondents are less likely than other cultural groups to say their family attended Mass or other religious services at least weekly when they were growing up.

- A third of men and women religious and just over a third of priests and seminarians report that their family prayed together a few times a week or more often when they were growing up. About four in ten of each group, however, say that their family seldom or never prayed together when they were growing up. Asian respondents and those born outside the United States are particularly likely to report that their family prayed together daily.
- Family members, women and men religious, and priests and seminarians were each asked to select which of 20 religious practices or customs were important to their family when they were growing up. More than half of respondents in each group reported the same five practices or customs as important to their family: attending Mass, grace at meals, religious art (e.g. crucifix, statues, pictures of saints), active participation in parish life, and sacramentals (e.g. cross, medal, prayer card, scapular).

Building a Culture of Vocation in Families

- Religious faith was at least “somewhat” important to most of these families at the time their family member was considering a vocation. Six in ten say the family was attending Mass together weekly and a quarter say the family typically prayed at home together on a daily basis, apart from prayers said at meals.
- In addition to Mass and regular prayer at home, these family members were also engaged in their faith in more public ways. Eight in ten responding family members report that the family was active in parish life, two in three say the family participated in Eucharistic Adoration, and three in five say the family prayed the rosary together, either at home or elsewhere.
- These families also typically ate dinner together on a daily basis and two in three report that the family gathered together at least once a week for activities other than a meal, such as a game or movie night, family discussion, or family prayer.
- More than half report that Catholic media, such as books, movies, and TV shows, were important religious activities in the family. About the same proportion say that volunteer or charitable service in the community were important to the family.

Encouragement and Discouragement of Vocations

- Three in five responding religious and more than two in five responding priests and seminarians admit that starting a discussion with their family about their vocation was not easy. Three in ten responding religious said their mother had spoken to them about a vocation to priesthood or religious life and one in five said their father had spoken to them about a vocation. Among diocesan priests and seminarians, four in ten said their

mother had spoken to them about a vocation and three in ten said their father had spoken to them about a vocation.

- Although very few Catholics in general have ever encouraged someone to consider a vocation to priesthood or religious life, more than half of the responding family members in families that have produced a vocation say they encouraged a family member to consider such a vocation. And having had a family member ever speak to them about a vocation to the priesthood or religious life made the discussion about a vocation easier, according to the responding priests, seminarians, and religious. Among those who said their mother had ever broached the topic, more than six in ten report that starting that discussion was easy. Similarly, those whose father had ever spoken to them about a vocation were also more likely to say that starting a family discussion about their vocation was easy.
- When first considering a vocation, at least six in ten seminarians, priests, and men and women religious report receiving “some” or “very much” encouragement from their mothers, fathers, grandparents, and siblings. Mothers and grandparents are more likely than other relatives to have offered “very much” encouragement when respondents were first considering a vocation, with at least a third reporting “very much” encouragement from these family members. Three in ten religious and four in ten priests and seminarians report that their father was “very” encouraging.
- Responding religious, seminarians, and priests report increased levels of encouragement currently in their life and ministry from all relatives. At least four in five report “some” or “very much” support from their mothers, fathers, siblings, aunts, uncles, and grandparents, and two in three report as much support from their cousins.
- Few respondents indicate that a family member ever discouraged them in their vocational discernment, but among those men and women religious who do, about a third indicate that their mother or sibling(s) discouraged them from considering a vocation. Among priests and seminarians, one in six say that sibling(s), aunts/uncles, or their father discouraged them from considering a vocation. Fewer received discouragement from their cousins or grandparents.

Supporting and Promoting Vocation in Families

- More than half of responding family members say they have encouraged a family member to consider a vocation to priesthood or religious life. Most often, it is parents or grandparents who encourage vocational discernment.
- Family members recommend acceptance, encouragement, and support for those considering a vocation. They suggest that families should uphold priesthood and religious life as options for young people when they are exploring and considering their future.