



Special Report

Placing social science research at the service of the Church in the United States since 1964

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Nurturing Vocations to Religious Life and Priesthood: The Impact of a Volunteer Service Year

A recent national survey of never-married Catholics in the United States by the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate reveals that there is no shortage of Catholics who very seriously consider a religious vocation. If the Catholic Church could encourage just a small fraction of those who are seriously interested there would be no discussions of a priest shortage. What is lacking is a more thorough understanding of how the Church can shepherd more of these individuals into discerning and following the call they are hearing.

For many years, the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA) has collected national Catholic data on the consideration given to a vocation to religious life or priesthood. Additionally, CARA has collected survey data from the men and women who have entered religious life or seminaries concerning their discernment process and vocational choice, asking about their experiences and what factors influenced their decision.

In 2013 CARA surveyed former volunteers (volunteer alumni) for the Catholic Volunteer Network and its member organizations. Sixty volunteer service organizations participated in the study with over 5,000 volunteer alumni responding. This was one of the largest studies of long-term service volunteers (full-time volunteer service for nine months or more) conducted in the United States in recent years.

The research revealed an unexpectedly large number of former volunteers had become priests, deacons, sisters, brothers, or seminarians. Additionally, these volunteer alumni reported giving consideration to a vocation in religious life or priesthood at a much higher proportion than their Catholic peers.

This report uses insights from other CARA research to explore the context of this correlation of a year of volunteer service with the decision to enter religious life or a seminary among volunteer alumni.

Consideration of a Vocation to Religious Life or Priesthood

In a national Catholic poll of never-married Catholics ages 14 and older, CARA asked if the respondent had ever considered becoming a Catholic priest, brother, or sister. Among never married male Catholics 13 percent reported that they have considered becoming a priest or brother. The response among women was similar, as 10 percent have considered becoming a sister.

FIGURE 1A.
HAVE YOU EVER CONSIDERED BECOMING A CATHOLIC PRIEST OR BROTHER?
Never-married male Catholic teens and adults responding as such:

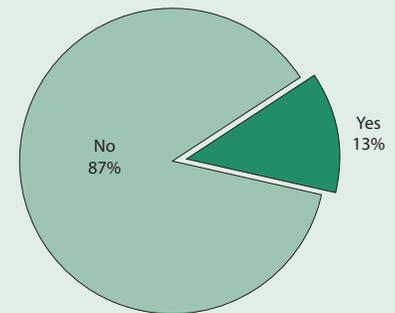
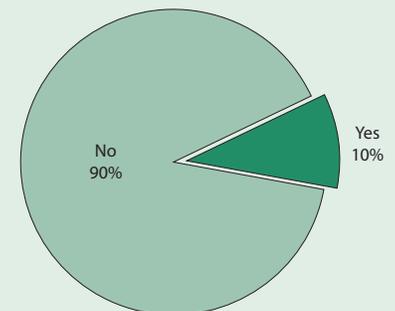
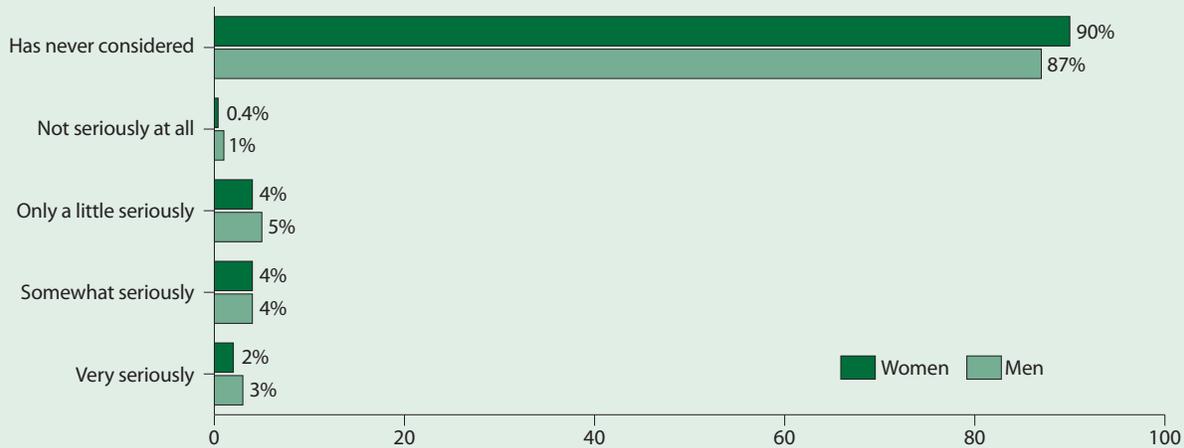


FIGURE 1B.
HAVE YOU EVER CONSIDERED BECOMING A CATHOLIC RELIGIOUS SISTER?
Never-married female Catholic teens and adults responding as such:



Of course, there are different levels of consideration, but 4 percent of both men and women have “somewhat seriously” considered becoming a priest, brother, or sister; another 3 percent of men and 2 percent of women have “seriously considered” it. It is this 2 and 3 percent who have “seriously considered” a vocation to priesthood or religious life that are of particular interest as a source for vocations.

FIGURE 2. HOW SERIOUSLY WOULD YOU SAY YOU HAVE CONSIDERED THIS?



As a proportion, 2 or 3 percent who “very seriously” considered a vocation to priesthood or religious life may appear small, but the actual number of individuals those percentages represent are quite large, especially when compared to the current number of priests, brothers, and sisters.

For example, there are about 43,000 priests and brothers in the United States today, but there are over 350,000 never married Catholic men who have given serious consideration to becoming a priest or brother. Considering that about 1,000 men enter the seminary or religious life each year, this means that only a fraction of 1 percent of those men who seriously consider priesthood or religious life act on that impulse in a given year.

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There are about 54,000 sisters in the United States and more than 250,000 never married Catholic women have given serious consideration to becoming a sister. Considering that about 200 women enter religious institutes each year, this is only a fraction of 1 percent of those women who have seriously considered religious life.

What can the research tell us about what moves men and women from consideration to actualization? After all, if just a very small percentage of those giving serious consideration to priesthood or religious life were influenced to act on that impulse that would dramatically increase the number of men and women entering seminaries and novitiates.

FIGURE 3. NO SHORTAGE OF INTEREST IN VOCATIONS AMONG U.S. NEVER-MARRIED CATHOLICS, AGES 14 AND OLDER

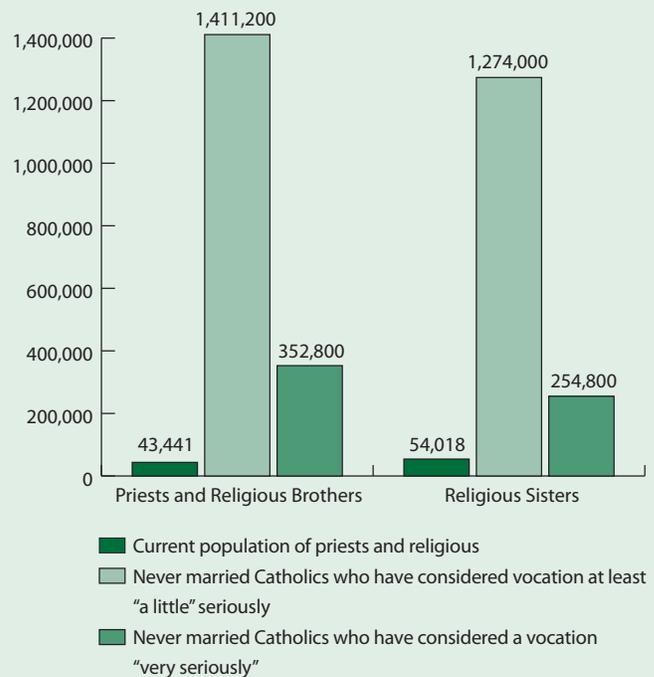
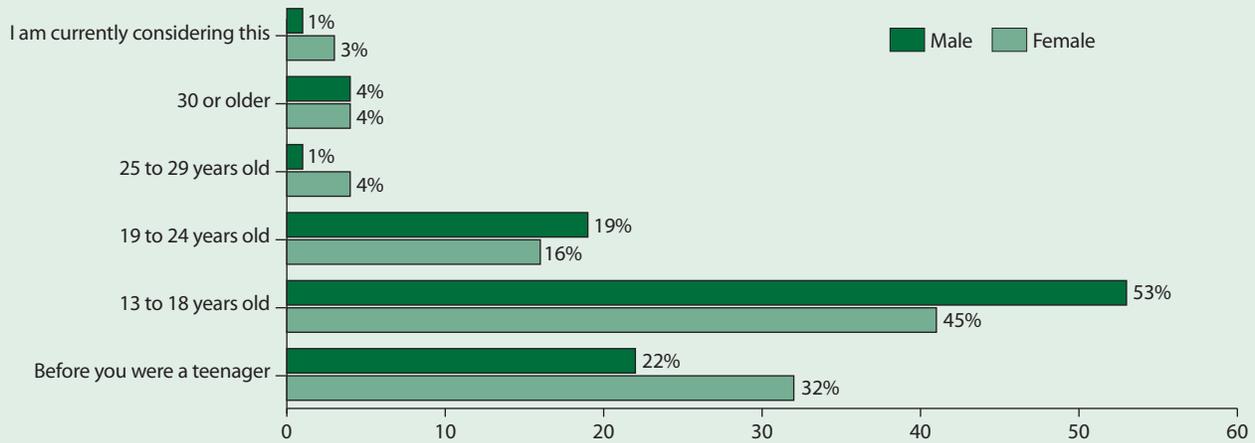


FIGURE 4. WHEN IN YOUR LIFE DID YOU FIRST CONSIDER A RELIGIOUS VOCATION?



Research shows that, for many, the high school and college years are when serious consideration of a vocation initially emerges. This highlights the importance of engaging and encouraging religious vocations at this time of life.

The Influence of College Experience

In a 2012 survey of seminarians and recently ordained priests (both diocesan and religious), respondents were asked how much influence various individuals had on their vocational choice during college. College friends and professors who were priests, sisters or

TABLE 1. INFLUENCE OF COLLEGE PERSONNEL AND FRIENDS ON VOCATIONAL DISCERNMENT (percentage in each category)

	All	Type of College Attended the Longest	
		Non-Catholic	Catholic
"Yes" a priest/sister/brother professor had a "significant positive influence" on vocational discernment	64%	46%	72%
"Yes" a priest/sister/brother campus minister had a "significant positive influence" on vocational discernment	56	55	57
"Yes" a campus minister encouraged vocational discernment	51	46	59
Roommate at college had "very much" influence on discernment	10	6	15
College friends were "very" supportive of vocational choice	56	46	69
"Yes" friends encouraged vocational discernment during college	72	63	84

TABLE 2. "FREQUENTLY" DISCUSSED FAITH, RELIGION, AND PRAYER . . . (percentage in each category)

	All	Type of College Attended the Longest	
		Non-Catholic	Catholic
With Other Students Outside of Class	49%	40%	62%
With Campus Ministry Staff	37	35	41
In Class	29	11	51
With Professors Outside of Class	24	9	43

TABLE 3. LEVEL OF INTEREST EXPRESSED IN FAITH, RELIGION, AND PRAYER BY... (Percentage responding “some” or “very much” interest)

	All	Type of College Attended the Longest	
		Non-Catholic	Catholic
Campus Ministry	77%	70%	87%
Fellow Students	61	49	78
The College as a Whole	42	20	70
Faculty	39	16	69
Administration	33	10	62

brothers had the greatest positive influence on the individual’s vocational discernment, especially if the individual was attending a Catholic college. Campus ministers were also significant influences in both Catholic and non-Catholic colleges. College roommates were rated as having the least influence on one’s vocational discernment.

The same study asked seminarians and recently ordained priests how often they discussed faith, religion, and prayer in the classroom and with various people outside of class during college. Twenty-nine percent indicate that they “frequently” discussed faith, religion, and prayer in class during college. Almost half (49 percent) discussed these things “frequently” with other students outside of class, over a third (37 percent) discussed these things “frequently” with campus ministry staff, and a quarter (24 percent) with professors outside of class. Notably, these discussions of faith, religion, and prayer are far more common among those attending a Catholic college than for those attending a non-Catholic college.

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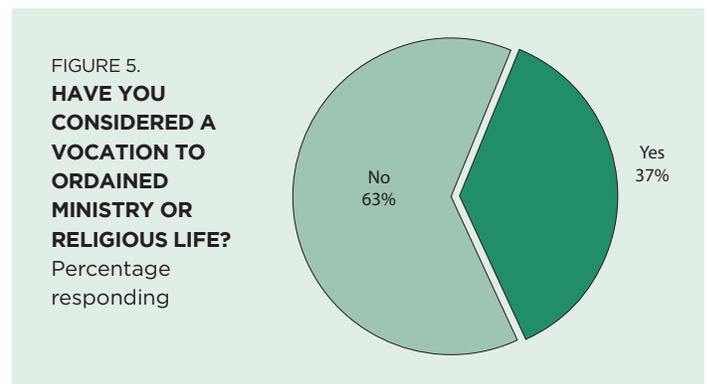
The research indicates that Catholic college environments are more conducive than non-Catholic colleges to discussions of faith, religion, and prayer. As the table above illustrates, those who attended Catholic colleges are substantially more likely to report that these various groups on their campus expressed “some” or “very much” interest in faith, religion, and prayer.

It appears that a Catholic college provides an environment or culture where those considering a religious vocation have the space and

opportunity to deepen and test their discernment. Such an environment or culture is less likely to be encountered in a non-Catholic college.

A Year of Volunteer Service

Opportunities for long-term (nine months or more) volunteer service after college have expanded greatly with the emergence of an increasing number of faith-based service organizations. The Catholic Volunteer Network is the umbrella group for over 200 volunteer organizations, both short-term and long-term. A 2013 CARA survey of over 5,000 volunteer alumni from 60 different volunteer service groups (e.g., Jesuit Volunteer Corps, Maryknoll Lay Missioners, Lasallian Volunteers, Vincentian Volunteers) examined the impact of a year of volunteer service on their life choices, church engagement, and civic activities.



These volunteer service groups often focus their recruiting on Catholic colleges and nearly three-fifths (58 percent) of volunteer alumni graduated from a Catholic college. By comparison, among all Catholic adults only 7 percent have attended a Catholic college (*Catholic Media Use in the United States, 2011*, p.12). This suggests that those entering a year of volunteer service are also more likely to have experienced an encouraging environment for their consideration of a religious vocation at the Catholic college they attended.

When asked if they have considered a vocation to ordained ministry or religious life, over one-third (37 percent) of these volunteer alumni responded “yes.” Among Catholic respondents, the consideration of a vocation to ordained ministry or religious life was even greater. Over half of the Catholic men (54 percent) and one-third of the Catholic women have considered a vocation to ordained ministry or religious life. These volunteer alumni are three or more times as likely to have considered a religious voca-

tion than were the never married Catholics described earlier in this report.

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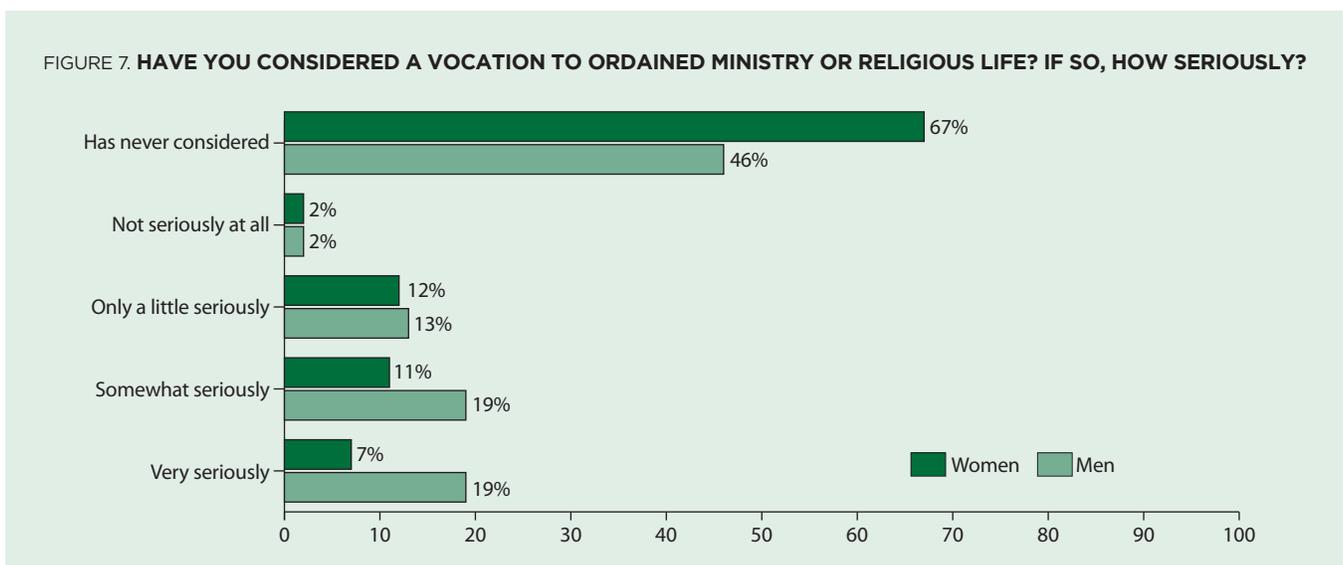
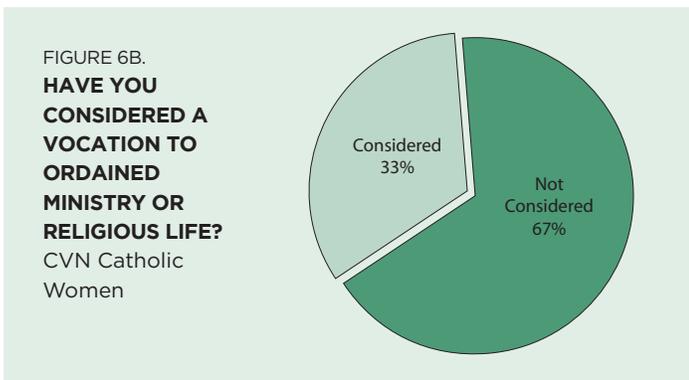
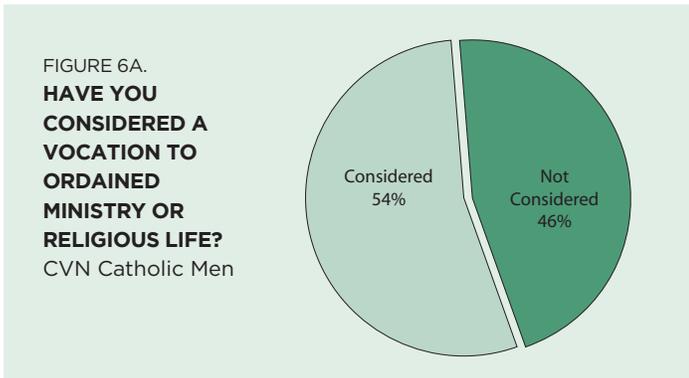


TABLE 4. DID YOU CONSIDER A VOCATION TO ORDAINED MINISTRY OR RELIGIOUS LIFE BEFORE, AFTER, OR DURING YOUR VOLUNTEER SERVICE? Percentage responding:

Before	76%
During	48
After	46

When asked when they had considered a religious vocation, three-quarters of the volunteer alumni said they had considered this before their volunteer service, almost half during their time of service, and almost half afterwards. For those considering a vocation to ordained ministry or religious life, their discernment usually began before their time of service and continued during and after their volunteer service.

TABLE 5. ECCLESIAL STATUS OF CATHOLIC VOLUNTEER ALUMNI
920 Catholic Men and 2,261 Catholic Women Respondents

	Number of Respondents	Percent of Respondents
Priest	36	3.9%
Deacon	14	1.5
Sister	40	1.8
Brother	21	2.3
Seminarian	34	3.7

More than one in ten (11 percent) Catholic men who were volunteer alumni are now a priest, deacon, brother or seminarian. And one in fifty (2 percent) of the Catholic women who were former volunteers are now a sister. Within the larger population of Catholics, the proportion of women and men in ordained ministry or religious life is a small fraction of 1 percent. The alumni of volunteer service organizations have an extraordinarily high proportion of individuals in ordained ministry or religious life.

Conclusion and Implications

The data suggest that there is a process of self-selection occurring, as young women and men who may be already considering a religious vocation opt to attend a Catholic college. During their college years,

those in Catholic colleges are more likely to find the opportunity and encouragement to express and deepen their discernment.

The research on volunteer alumni suggests that volunteering for a year of service in a faith-based volunteer service organization may often be a next step in a young adult's discernment process. This is evidenced by the majority of the men volunteer alumni and one-third of the women volunteer alumni who have considered a religious vocation. Current and former volunteers may well be the most likely and identifiable group of potential vocations to priesthood and religious life.

While the vast majority of volunteers (89 percent of the men and 98 percent of the women) have not pursued priesthood or religious life, nevertheless this is a group of young adult Catholics to whom bishops and the leadership of religious institutes should pay careful attention. The support, encouragement, and engagement with current and former volunteers can have nothing but positive consequences for dioceses and religious institutes through both the nurturing of religious vocations and the future cadre of local church leaders.

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CARA was founded by Catholic leaders in 1964 to put social science research tools at the service of the Catholic Church in the United States. For information on CARA and its mission of research, analysis, and planning, contact:

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