

*Responses prepared by faculty of
Sacred Heart School of Theology,
Hales Corners Wisconsin*

1. *Does my age make a difference?*
2. *Will I be accepted simply because I want to be a priest?*
3. *Will I be treated like a “20 something” in the seminary?*
4. *What kind of education is needed?*
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financial/administrative experience. On the other hand, if a person has not been successful at other jobs, it does not present much promise that one will be able to deal successfully with the challenges of priesthood and parish ministry.

10. What options in priesthood are available?

The needs of the church today are many. Depending on one’s background, training and previous employment a great variety of pastoral opportunities are available. Sponsorship implies that one will be serving as a priest in that diocese or religious community. It is important that both the candidate and the sponsor see this as possible. Important factors might be the area of the country (climate, topography, etc.), the particular nature or charism of the sponsor (e.g. rural or urban; ethnic or language needs; unique ministries; and theological orientation). Most older candidates work in a parish setting but one might also inquire about other options, e.g. working with the elderly or in some other specialized ministry.

11. What options outside of priesthood are available?

The church today has an enormous variety of ministries available, both as a lay person and as a permanent deacon. Your local vocation director can help you discern whether your call is to priesthood, or another form of church service, such as catechist, Eucharistic minister, reader, or parish committee membership. In fact, such parish involvement is generally expected of any serious candidate for priesthood before being accepted by a sponsor.

12. What’s the next step?

Because sponsorship is required for seminary admission, contacting one’s diocesan or religious community vocation director is the place to begin.

Often your local pastor can be of help in learning who to contact and how to do it. If the religious community or local diocese has age limits for ordination or accepting candidates, one can inquire about sponsors that would at least consider an older candidate. It is usually more difficult to obtain a sponsor that is too far from the area in which one is known, but depending on an individual’s interests, Sacred Heart can provide a list of potential sponsors that currently accept older candidates. After that, the person must make his own contacts and present his case. After sponsorship is attained, the seminary experience can begin. May God bless you in your journey.

These Frequently Asked Questions have been prepared by Father John Regan,
Vocation Director for the Diocese of Joliet.

If you have further questions or are interested in considering priesthood and seminary formation, contact Father Clint Ressler or Sr. Rosalie Karstedt, CDP

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*Frequently Asked
Questions
about . . .*

Older Priestly Vocations



1. Does my age make a difference?

Yes, it does. Sacred Heart believes that adult candidates can become some of the best priests and we believe that God can call a person at any age. Many dioceses and religious communities have age limits requirements, however, and not all sponsors will accept candidates who cannot be ordained by age 40, 50 or 55. One must check in each case. Nevertheless, many factors besides one's age are considered and many sponsors judge each case on an individual basis. The older a person the more concern a sponsor will have about overall health, ability to support oneself and contribute financially to seminary education, medical/health insurance coverage, retirement benefits, and length of expected ministry. These issues will be addressed by potential sponsors.

2. Will I be accepted simply because I want to be a priest?

As with any candidate, younger or older, a desire or sense that one is called is only one of many significant factors in accepting a candidate for the seminary. The church has many requirements, e.g. academic ability, physical health, mental and spiritual health, evidence of an ability to live a celibate life, realistic idea of what is required of a parish priest which is often demonstrated by a candidate's involvement in a parish community. In many cases age becomes an important factor, as noted above. One's desire for priesthood must be tested taking into account these other factors as well as submitting to a process of discernment needed both by the individual and the sponsor. It is important that we provide the best possible priests to serve the needs of the Church.

3. Will I be treated like a "20 something" in the seminary?

Certainly not at Sacred Heart! Our seminary has over twenty-five years of experience in preparing the adult candidate for priestly ministry. The academic, spiritual and pastoral programs, as well as the living situation, are dedicated to providing a challenging seminary environment where the adult candidate is the norm, not the exception. Sacred Heart provides a peer atmosphere for approximately 100 seminarians who are, in general, between the ages of thirty and sixty, with an average age of 44. Previous professional and academic backgrounds, as well as special needs, are taken into consideration by an experienced faculty and staff.

4. What kind of education is needed?

The full program of preparation for priesthood has been established by the Church in various official documents. Requirements include a theological education, as well as an intensive program of spiritual formation and pastoral preparation. This comprehensive priesthood program is generally four years in length, but Sacred Heart has the capacity to adjust preparation programs according to the background of the applicant. For example, adjustments may be possible for candidates over 60, permanent deacons or those who have been in religious life.

Prerequisite courses in philosophy and undergraduate religious studies are required to take the four year theology program at Sacred Heart. If these courses have not been taken previous to entry, this requirement may add one year of pre-theology to the program for a total of five years.

Ordinarily an undergraduate degree (B.A. or B.S.) is required to begin a master's level (M.DIV.) program in seminary. However, Sacred Heart is authorized to admit candidates over 30 years of age into its theology program with a minimum of sixty (60) college credits. Candidates with fewer college credits can enter the seminary program at Sacred Heart while attending college at nearby Cardinal Stritch University. Once the individual has obtained the required credits, he can begin the theology program at Sacred Heart.

Unless the candidate is much older, e.g. around 60, we recommend working toward the B.A. through Cardinal Stritch. This usually will require a maximum of two years in the Cardinal Stritch program with additional college credits granted by Cardinal Stritch for courses taken at Sacred Heart, e.g. philosophy, basic religious studies, modern languages, and pastoral field education. The candidate completes these requirements for the B.A. in Religious Studies while beginning theology studies at Sacred Heart. A candidate in this situation is able to earn a combined B.A./M.DIV degree in a maximum of 6 years.

5. What if I have been married?

A previous marriage does not, by itself, present any problem. In fact, in many cases, one's marriage can be a significant factor contributing to a grace-filled priestly ministry.

a) What if I am a widower?

Generally it is advisable to wait one or two years after the death of a spouse before entering the seminary. This provides opportunity for grieving, transition and preparing oneself to enter a new, celibate state of life.

b) What if I am divorced?

In itself, a divorce is not an impediment to priesthood. If the former partner is living, an annulment must be granted before admission to the seminary. Some dioceses and religious communities will not accept divorced candidates, but, after careful examination, many others will.

c) What if I have children?

It is important that children be at least eighteen years of age and financially independent of their father before entrance to a seminary. Many of our students report that their adult children are some of their strongest supporters in the seminary.

6. What if I have made mistakes in life?

Priesthood is not just for saints. Actually, the ability to regularly seek forgiveness and guidance from God is an asset in one's vocational discernment. It is important to fully disclose one's history in the

application process so that those assisting in your discernment can be most helpful. Some actions, however, are impediments to acceptance into a seminary and ordination, for example, voluntary homicide, procuring an effective abortion or positive cooperation in either. The same would be true for one who has been guilty of apostasy, heresy or schism. There are other crimes or activities which will prompt hesitancy on the part of any potential sponsor. In addition, if one has had some other seriously detrimental behavioral pattern, e.g. alcoholism or sexual activity, a suitable period of probation must be demonstrated to assure that one can successfully live a sober and celibate life. JA spiritual director is often of significant help in discerning one's readiness for seminary life.

7. Who will pay for the seminary education?

The answer to this basically depends on the agreement between the candidate and the sponsor. The older the candidate and the shorter the projected service in ministry, the more will be the expectation that the candidate pay for some, if not all, of the cost of seminary education. In any case, each sponsor has policies relative to how much of the cost they will pay and how they will support the candidate. For some it will be a loan; for others all room, board and tuition is paid, plus required books. Health insurance is also a factor to be negotiated with the sponsor.

8. Do I have to sell my house?

In general, it is best not to sell anything initially, particularly a house, until one's vocational decision is established. Diocesan priests are not required to take a vow of poverty while religious are. Nonetheless, each case is different. Some diocesan candidates have kept their house and used it as a place to go during seminary vacations or for taking a day off, once they are ordained. Some also intend to keep it for retirement purposes.

9. How important is my work background?

Generally, a sponsor will be looking for some stability or progress in one's work record. Often a person's past experience can become a strong asset after ordination, e.g. experience in a helping or teaching profession, or

