



Vocations Research Project

Determinants of Catholic men entering the priesthood: A Canadian-based analysis

2019

Executive Summary

This report presents results of a survey of Catholic priests from across Canada. The survey yielded a combination of quantitative and qualitative evidence indicating that faith practice, family faith-related activities, parental influence, interactions with priest/religious and relevant academic experiences were key factors influencing Catholic men in Canada in their decision to enter the priesthood. A total of 712 priests participated in this study. The average age of the participants was 63 years-old. Close to 60% of the participants were diocesan priests. Approximately one-third (33%) of the participants entered the seminary directly after attending high school while the average age of participants when they were ordained to the priesthood was 30.97 years. The respondents tended to come from large families, as the greatest proportion (42%) indicated they had more than four siblings. A large proportion (90%) reported that their mother and father were practicing Catholics while they were growing up. The participants' responses reflected the extensive academic preparation required for ordination to the Catholic priesthood, as nearly 60% reported having a Master's degree. The survey also explored aspects of the respondents' family faith life, as well as their faith formation, ministerial, and educational experiences during high school and university prior to their ordination to the priesthood.

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Disclaimer: Fr. Robert Weaver helped design the survey instrument. He did not fill out a survey and he did not participate in the implementation of the survey (via Qualtrics). He had no access to the survey platform (i.e., no access to the survey on Qualtrics) nor to any data until the dataset was completely de-identified and anonymized. Fr. Weaver then resumed his participation in the study by assisting with the empirical analysis, the discussion of results and the writing of this report.

Overview

To empirically assess the **determinants of Catholic men entering the priesthood**, Catholic priests across Canada were electronically surveyed in 2018. This research project was based at the Department of Economics, University of Windsor and sponsored by partners in the Assumption University Vocations Research Project. The survey yielded a combination of quantitative and qualitative data and incorporated a variety of relevant factors including the respondents' demographic information, family faith life, as well as faith formation, ministerial, and educational experiences during high school and university. The impact of various vocation promotion activities such as Andrew dinners, exposure to vocation promotion materials (e.g., websites, videos, flyers, etc.), and discernment groups was also assessed..

Participant Profile

A total of 712 priests participated in this study. Participants could respond to the survey in either one of Canada's official languages, and 65.3% responded in English while 34.7% responded in French.

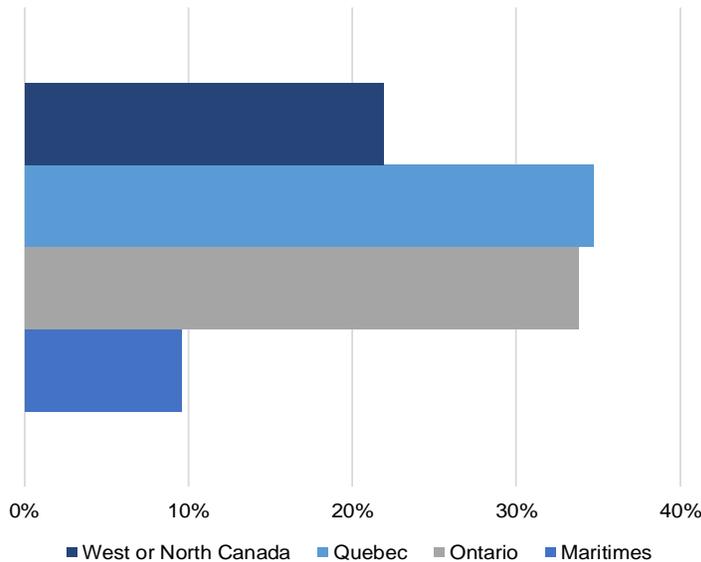
The average age of the participants was 63 years-old. In terms of ethnicity, nearly 80% were White, 0.6% reported being Aboriginal, nearly 2% were Black, just over 3% were East Asian, 0.7% were Latin American, 0.6% were of Middle Eastern descent, nearly 3% were South Asian, and just over 9% indicated "Other" as their ethnic origin. As for their country of origin, **75.7% reported they were from Canada** and 24.3% indicated they originated from a country outside of Canada.

As shown in Figure 1, the study's participants varied in terms of the region in Canada they lived in. **Almost 34% stated they were from Ontario, just over 34% were from Quebec, nearly 22% were from the West/North region of Canada, and just under 10% came from the Maritimes.**

Close to 60% of the participants were diocesan priests while just over 8% reported they were priest-members of a Clerical Society of Apostolic Life of diocesan right (e.g., Companions of the Cross). Just over 31% of the respondents indicated "Other" (e.g., belonged to a religious order) in terms of the specific manner through which they lived out their priestly vocation.

As for when the respondents entered the seminary, approximately one-third (33.1%) did so directly after completing high school. **The average age of participants when they were ordained to the priesthood was 31 years.**

Figure 1: Distribution of respondents by region



Individual and Family Background

The participants were asked a series of questions which pertained to their individual and family background. **A very large proportion reported that their mother and father were practicing Catholics while they were growing up** (i.e., 93.9% reported that their mother was a practicing Catholic, 89.9% indicated the same about their father). The respondents tended to come from large families, as the greatest proportion (42%) indicated they had more than four brothers and/or sisters when asked how many they siblings they had (11% had four siblings and 15% three siblings).

As for the respondents' age when they first considered the priesthood, 41.3% indicated they were under 13-years-old, 27.8% stated they were between the ages of 13-17, 23.3% reported they were between 18-25 years of age, and 4.6% noted they were between the ages of 26-35. Just over 2% were between the ages of 36 to 45 and less than 1% were over the age of 45. In terms of regular familial Mass attendance while growing up, 69% stated they attended Mass “All the time,” 16.2% stated “Fairly Often,” 6.1% reported “Somewhat,” 5.1% indicated “Very little” and 3.7% said “Never.”

The participants were also asked if **their families put a high value (i.e., placed emphasis) on learning more about the Catholic Faith while they were growing up**. To this question 37.5% responded with “Definitely,” 24.9% stated “Mostly,” 16.2% indicated “Somewhat,” 12.4% noted “A little bit” and 9.1% said “None at all.” Furthermore, just **over half (50.7%) of the participants reported that they have at least one close relative who is a Catholic priest, religious, or consecrated virgin**.

Table 1 reports the level of influence that various people in the participants' lives had on their decision to enter the priesthood. As for a priest, 36.9% indicated his level of influence was “A great deal” and 19.7% stated “A lot.” For parent(s), 23.67% expressed “A great deal” and 22.1% reported “A lot.” In terms of a teacher, 14.3% stated “A great deal” and 18.8% noted “A lot.” As for a colleague/co-worker, 1.4% reported “A great deal” and 7.8% indicated “A lot.” Finally, the influence of friend(s) was rated “A great deal” by 9.2% and “A lot” by 14.9%. These findings point towards the strong influence priests in particular have on encouraging vocations to the priesthood, since it was the only group which exceeded 50% (56.6%) of the participants' responses when combining the response choices of “A great deal” with “A lot.”

Table 1: Level of influence the following persons had on respondent's decision to enter the seminary

Persons	A great deal	A lot	A moderate amount	A little	None at all
Parish priest	37%	20%	20%	14%	10%
Religious sister	17%	14%	19%	14%	36%
Religious brother	7%	7%	11%	13%	62%
Teacher	14%	19%	19%	13%	34%
Youth minister	4%	3%	7%	9%	77%
Colleague	1%	8%	10%	11%	70%
Parent	24%	22%	23%	14%	18%
Sibling	7%	10%	18%	23%	42%
Other family	10%	11%	13%	15%	51%
Friends	9%	15%	24%	19%	32%

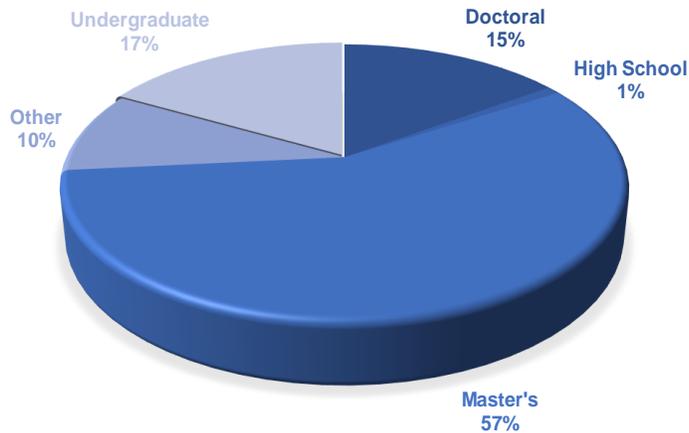
Educational Background

In terms of the participants' educational background, nearly 70% reported they attended a Catholic high school. Of these, about 35% went to a Catholic private school and almost 33% went to a Catholic public school. Other participants reported attending a public school (26.1%) or a private school other than Catholic (2.1%). Less than 1% of the respondents were home-schooled.

The participants' responses also reflected the **extensive academic preparation involved in being a Catholic priest**. For instance, Figure 2 shows that nearly 60% completed a Master's degree and 15.2% indicated they earned a doctoral-level degree.

For those respondents who attended another university prior to entering formation for the priesthood, almost 52% attended a Catholic university while 45.8% went to a public university. Others attended a private university (1.5%) or a religiously-affiliated university other than Catholic (1.2%).

Figure 2: Respondents' highest level of education



University-level Faith-based Activities and Experiences

The participants were asked a series of questions pertaining to their involvement in various university-level faith-based activities and experiences prior to their entering the seminary, to which they could respond either “Yes” or “No”. They were also asked the level of impact the practices they did engage in had on their decision to enter the priesthood. The response choices for level of impact were None =1, A little =2, Somewhat = 3, and Very Much =4. Please note that these responses were for all the level of impact questions cited in this report.

Approximately 14% of the participants reported they were involved in Catholic Christian Outreach (CCO) during university. When asked about the program’s impact on their decision to enter the priesthood, 24.1% indicated “Somewhat” and 20.5% reported “Very Much”. Nearly 14% of the respondents stated they were involved in a Newman Centre while at university. Twenty percent reported the Centre impacted their decision to enter the priesthood “Somewhat” and 17.3% indicated “Very Much.” Furthermore, just over 11% of the respondents reported going on a university-level, faith-based mission trip while at university. In terms of this opportunity’s impact on their decision to enter the priesthood, 20% indicated that it did “Somewhat” and 22.9% responded with “Very Much”.

We also asked about frequency of Mass attendance during university. **A large proportion (87.4%) of the participants attended Mass at least one time per week.** Others attended either two or three times per week (4.7%), approximately once per month (1.8%), a few times per year (1.6%), or seldom or never (4.6%). In terms of where they attended Mass, 42.6% went to a local parish, 34.8% attended Mass on campus, and 22.6% responded with “Other” (e.g., seminary, religious community, monastery, etc.).

Another aspect of the participants' university experience we explored was any courses they took that were especially helpful in their discerning a call to the priesthood. Table 2 shows that **20% of the respondents reported that a course in philosophy was particularly helpful** in this regard. This was followed by a course in theology (11%), Biblical Studies (7%), history (6%), and Sacred Scriptures (5%).

Table 2: Top 5 courses that influenced respondents' call to priesthood

Course	Percentage
Philosophy	20%
Theology	11%
Biblical studies	7%
History (includes History of the Church)	6%
Sacred Scriptures	5%

Pre-Seminary Spiritual Practices and Vocation Discernment-Related Experiences

The participants were also asked about their involvement in a range of vocation discernment-related experiences prior to their entering the seminary. They were also asked about the level of impact these experiences had on their decision to become a priest. Please refer to Table 3 for a ranking of pre-seminary spiritual activities by level of impact on desire to entire the priesthood.

Table 3: Ranking of pre-seminary spiritual activities by level of impact on desire to enter the priesthood

Activities	Percentage reporting level of impact of activity as either "Somewhat" or "Very Much"
Sunday Mass*	87.50
Pray daily**	85.00
Sacred Scripture***	69.77
Eucharistic Adoration	67.19
Rosary	62.67
Liturgy of the Hours	46.27
Chaplet of Divine Mercy	26.59

Notes: *The largest proportion of participants (57.97%) rated the impact of this variable as "Very Much". **The second largest proportion of participants (47.95%) rated the impact of this variable as "Very Much." ***The third largest proportion of participants (37.21%) rated the impact of this variable as "Very Much."

Almost all (97.2%) of the participants regularly attended Sunday Mass and nearly 90% of the respondents indicated that they prayed daily. Over half (56.3%) of the participants regularly prayed the Rosary and over 44 percent regularly prayed/read over the Sacred Scriptures. Nearly 37% indicated they regularly participated in Eucharistic Adoration while about 16% reported regularly praying the Liturgy of the Hours. Just over 6% of the participants stated that they regularly recited the Chaplet of the Divine Mercy.

Well over half (62.6%) of the participants reported serving at Mass (e.g., lector/acolyte/extraordinary minister of Holy Communion) prior to entering the seminary and slightly **over half (52%) went on a discernment retreat.** Similar proportions of respondents heard a priest or seminarian give a vocation talk (51.1%) and read for themselves vocation-related materials (50.8%), such as booklets and/or websites.

Nearly 50% of the participants met regularly with a spiritual director and just over one-quarter (26%) attended a “Come and See” or some other seminary orientation event. Slightly over one-quarter (25.5%) also served as a catechist/religious educator and just under one-quarter (23.6%) belonged to a discernment group. Slightly less than one-fifth (18.4%) of the respondents attended a World Youth Day and 3.9% participated in a course/seminar on the Theology of the Body. Table 4 reports a ranking of pre-seminary vocation discernment-related experiences by level of impact on desire to entire the priesthood.

Table 4: Ranking of pre-seminary vocation discernment-related experiences by level of impact on desire to enter the priesthood

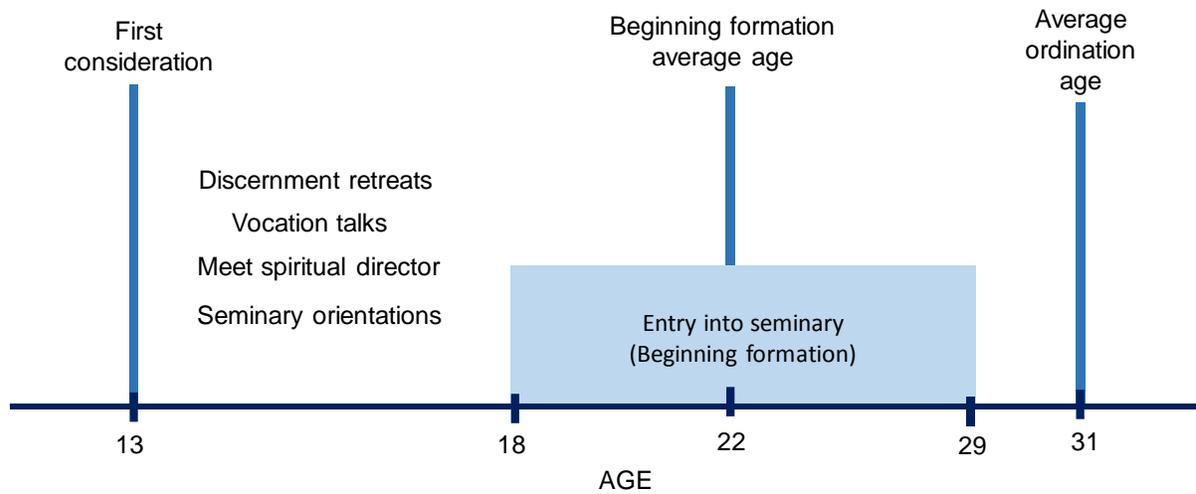
Experiences	Percentage reporting level of impact of activity as either “Somewhat” or “Very Much”
Serving (e.g., Lector/Acolyte/Ext.Min. of Communion*	77.46
Spiritual director**	74.78
Disc. Retreat	67.73
Disc. Group***	65.91
“Come and See”/ Other. Sem. Orient.	59.13
Rel. Ed/Catechist	55.71
Voc. Mat./Websites	52.81
World Youth Day	47.94
TheoBody Course/Sem	35.30

Notes: *The largest proportion of participants (40.49%) rated the impact of this variable as “Very Much”. **The second largest proportion of participants (39.74%) rated the impact of this variable as “Very Much.” ***The third largest proportion of participants (27.27%) rated the impact of this variable as “Very Much.”

Mapping the Path to a Vocation

Based on our analysis of the data, we mapped out the typical path to ordination exhibited by the study's participants. Figure 3 shows that participants often first considered a vocation by the time they reached 13-years-old. The typical age range for when the participants entered the seminary, or began formation, was between 18 to 29 years, with 22 years as the average.

Figure 3: Mapping the Canadian Catholic vocation



The results of the survey also indicate that the average age at ordination to the priesthood was about 31-years-old. Activities found to be particularly helpful in discerning a call to the priesthood were discernment retreats, vocation talks, meetings with spiritual directors, and seminary orientation events.

The decision to become a priest in their own words

The participants offered their thoughts about the importance of pre-seminary spiritual practices, vocational experiences and activities. Below are selected participant responses. They have been edited in order to correct grammatical errors and/or unclear statements without altering their meaning or central theme.

Pre-seminary spiritual practices

✚ *"I always loved the Mass & had a good experience with the priests. Even as an altar boy I knew the priest always had something to say at the most important moments of life & death."*

- ✚ *"Attending the Mass regularly provides clarity in my desire in responding to Jesus and call to serve."*
- ✚ *"My belief in the reality of Jesus in [the] Eucharist created a great admiration for the sacraments. Rosary combined with meditation on Sunday Gospels gave me*

great insights that I began to feel the need to share.”

- + “I always felt feed from God's word and the Eucharist. I enjoyed praying as a community and it's there that my faith grew.”*
- + “People who attended Mass were supportive of our vocation and encouraged it, as did our parents.”*
- + “The Mass became the focus of my discernment and the parish priest reawakened my call to priesthood through his encouragement to pursue it.”*
- + “I saw Mass and [r]eception of the Eucharist as a tremendous gift of [God's] grace that would form and inform my mind and heart in seeking [God's] will for me and ability to grow in some holiness at the time.”*
- + “It was during moments of prayer and during talks at retreats when my faith became more personal. I sensed and developed a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, who I gradually felt calling me to serve Him as a priest.”*
- + “Sunday [M]asses enriched my knowledge of about [the] priesthood. And the devotion to the [B]lessed [V]irgin Mary in the Rosary add[ed] to my interest [in becoming] priest.”*
- + “I was disciplined by my Mom to go for Mass every day from the childhood.”*
- + “I became a server at age 9, and continued through high school. As the years passed and I became acquainted with more priests, I formed a desire to emulate them, especially in the way many related so positively to people.”*
- + “Serving Mass gave me a better ... awarenss of the parts of the Mass and having that "full conscience and active participation" even before Vatican II.”*

- + “It was through spiritual direction that I first began to discern a call to the priesthood and was encouraged to take small steps in that direction (e.g., attending a "Come and See Weekend" at a nearby Seminary).”*
- + “A regular family practice, being an altar server for many years. Understanding little by little, the meaning of the Eucharist.”*
- + “Attending [M]ass was an anchor in my week. I looked forward to it even though my friends didn't go. I was proud to be there with my family.”*
- + “I served the morning Mass at the local convent for many years, often several times a week. The environment of prayer, commitment and service [to] the community, along with the dedication of the priest, really inspired me.”*
- + “My faith life was fuelled by the Sunday celebration of the Eucharist.”*
- + “Through participation at Mass and through volunteering as a leader for a youth group I had greater contact with the priests of the parish that allowed me to see more of who priests were.”*
- + “Sunday Mass was a celebrated and powerful experience.”*
- + “We went to Mass as a family. I liked it. We would finish Mass and discuss the homily.”*
- + “I was an altar server from grade 4 to 8, often daily. Great pastors and I enjoyed being part of the liturgy.”*
- + “That was the family practice and childhood education and examples from parents, especially from mom.”*
- + “I had a very supportive pastor. I also attribute many of the graces received to spending many hours in Eucharistic Adoration, and the recitation of the Rosary.”*
- + Before I began to discern the priesthood, a priest challenged me to pray this prayer: "God help me to know your will and do it in*

my life." Seems simple, but that's the prayer that led me to the priesthood."

Vocational experiences and activities

- + *"I had an excellent and discerning spiritual director."*
- + *"I had two wonderful priests in my life. Both were very open to talking about and encouraging me to consider the priesthood."*
- + *"I was part of the community. I remember once (age 6-8) serving Stations of the Cross and I looked up and wondered if my priest had supper, does he have a favourite colour, does he have any aches and pains, likes and dislikes, is he funny? The day I realized that priests are human too."*
- + *"Serving daily Mass taught me to love daily Mass."*
- + *"Close personal contact with the diocesan vocation director who led the retreat, actual consideration of the vocation, visit to the seminary & meeting seminarians."*

- + *"... Mass attendance [as a youth] gave me the opportunity to be 'close' to Jesus and to pray and sacrifice wholly. Masses were then celebrated very early mornings. It was a good start of my days. The Lord was then my 'buddy' throughout the day."*
- + *"My spiritual director helped me identify where God was calling me. He helped me to accept God's will and at least attempt to participate in God's call in my life."*
- + *"My faith really deepened as a result of a retreat I attended with a parish youth group in 1st year university and then continued to deepen through my involvement with the Challenge Movement (youth movement of Cursillo)."*
- + *"In volunteering as a leader with Lifeteen, I experienced the joy/fulfillment of being able to share my faith with other (young) people. It was there that I really started to get a sense that I was maybe being called to the priesthood. Spiritual direction helped me articulate what was happening in my heart/mind/prayer and get some feedback from a trustworthy guide."*

Other influential factors

Some participants also provided insightful comments on other factors influencing their decision to enter the priesthood. These included the following:

"Mystical" feelings, or encounter/call from God

- + *"Internal sense that my life would not be complete if I did not pursue this direction, at least try it or find out more about it."*
- + *"Encounter with Christ in the [S]acrament of [R]econciliation, mediated to me by the [priest] who heard my confession. I came out of that experience saying: 'What this [priest] did for me, I must do for others.'"*

Current events/world views

- + *"As a young and idealistic man, discouragement with 'great leaders' in history, and connection with the radical unique path of the person (historically and otherwise) of Jesus Christ."*
- + *"Taught high school in [developing country] for two years. Saw the suffering and poor. This had a tremendous influence on my Christian spirituality and maturation as a Christian."*

Family

- ✚ *“Learning about the saints, seeing the example of priests, religious brothers and sisters and seeing that my parents were sincere in their belief and practice of the faith were the most significant influences in my life.”*

Influence of others

- ✚ *“I was greatly impressed by the priests and religious who taught me, especially by one sister in grade school and by several priests and religious in high school. I was also helped a great deal by the priests to whom I went for Confession on a regular basis during high school.”*
- ✚ *“The people of our home parish would often comment that they thought I should become a priest and that was an ‘indication’ for me. My ‘thinking of the priesthood’ was being reinforced by*

them. It was not just my idea but that other people could see this too. [This] was very helpful!”

Education and reading

- ✚ *“Although it's probably implicit in the questions, I have to say that attending Catholic schools all my life (with the exception of kindergarten) was a very significant influence. My Catholic education kept me rooted in my faith.”*
- ✚ *“Reading spiritual works, especially Augustine's confessions, also Teresa of Avila, John of the Cross.”*
- ✚ *“My love for the truth and my conviction that the Catholic Faith possesses the fulness of the truth. This came through my intellectual studies, particularly in the areas of philosophy and theology.”*

Survey Design and Procedures

The survey questions in this study were based on CARA's College Vocational Survey as well as the Family Faith Inventory used in the Strong Catholic Families National Initiative (2017). Moreover, one of the report's authors had an extensive interview with a vocation director from a Roman Catholic diocese in Central Canada in order to assist with the development of survey questions.

Beginning in May 2018, the authors pilot tested the survey by sending it out to vocation directors from Roman Catholic dioceses across Canada for their feedback. The sampling frame was the 2018 edition of the Canadian Catholic Church Directory, published by Novalis. During Summer 2018 an email was sent to all the potential participants which explained the purpose of the study and which invited them to indicate their consent to participate in it. The data collection period did not begin until the study was approved by the University of Windsor's Research Ethics Board (REB). Surveys and well-timed reminders were electronically sent in October and December of 2018 to Catholic priests who were ordained between the years of 1953-2017. The study's participants had the option of responding to the survey in either English or French. The survey was closed on December 31, 2018.

Potential Further Research

We plan to employ more rigorous statistical analysis of the collected data so as to ascertain significant associations between specific variables and the participants' decision to enter the priesthood. One possibility is to divide up the respondents into several subgroups based on their age when they began formation for the priesthood. From there we could conduct multivariate analysis to determine which factors are particularly relevant for entering the priesthood when comparing those who began formation at a younger age with those who began later in life. Future research could also involve collecting more qualitative data from a smaller number of participants in order to generate a more comprehensive understanding of how various factors contribute to a man's decision to become a priest. These factors include peer, media and familial influences, interactions with priests in general and vocation directors in particular, and the presence and impact of boyhood role models.

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