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FOR CONGREGATIONS OF
Women Religious

Women Religious Glossary

Definitions of terms specific to women religious

Updated January 2026

WOMEN RELIGIOUS GLOSSARY

Women religious congregations have a unique language that can be difficult for those outside of the community to understand. The following glossary includes terms that are common to many congregations of women religious. They do not encompass all aspects of every congregation's lived experience, but they are a starting point for researchers.

Adapted from and with the permission of the Sisters of Providence, Mother Joseph Province glossary: www.sistersofprovidence.net.

Abbess: The female superior of a congregation of nuns who live in an abbey.

Abbey: An autonomous monastery where nuns live, pray, work, and study. It is governed by an abbess.

Annals: A daily or annual narrative account of activities of a specific ministry, institution, region, or individual. Some congregations call this same record "chronicles."

Aspirant: A woman who is exploring the possibility of joining a particular congregation of women religious, but has not formally entered the congregation.

Candidate: A woman in the early stages of discerning a religious vocation. In some congregations, candidate refers specifically to the first period after a woman has formally "entered" the religious congregation.

Charism: A gift or grace freely given by God to a person or congregation, for the good and service of others and the Christian community. Religious congregations seek to live the charism which is received through their founders as God's gift to the church.

Chronicles: See: "Annals"

Cloister: See: "Enclosure"

Constitutional Enclosure: Often used by apostolic congregations, the parameters of the enclosure are defined by the congregation's own constitution (rules) and charism. This can sometimes be referred to as "semi-cloistered." For example, a congregation may not allow sisters to leave the convent except to attend to their ministry work, attend Church, or for medical reasons.

Convent: In common usage, the term refers to a house of women religious, but may also refer to the living space of women religious within a larger institution where they work, such as the convent wing of a hospital.

Discernment: A process of prayerful reflection which leads a person or community to an understanding of God's call at a given time or a particular circumstance of life. It involves listening to God in all the ways God communicates with us: in prayer, in the scriptures, through the Church and the world, in personal experience, and through other people.

Enclosure: Enclosure (also known as cloister) can have different meanings depending on the congregation, but essentially it is the physical and spiritual separation from the outside work within a convent or monastery. There are three main types of enclosure: monastic enclosure; constitutional enclosure; and papal enclosure.

Extern: A member of a cloistered congregation who performs tasks outside of the monastery's enclosure, which allows the cloistered nuns to maintain an entirely contemplative way of life. Their duties could include grocery shopping, managing the gift shop, taking sisters to appointments, attending vocation events, and any other business that needs to be conducted in person.

Final Vows: See "Perpetual Vows"

First Vows: See "Temporary Vows"

Formation: The time and process in the life of a person who is preparing for profession of vows in a religious congregation. During formation, a person is initiated into the life and ministry of the congregation.

Habit: Religious garb worn by members of a religious congregation as a sign of dedication to God and the mission of Jesus. Usually, the parts and color of the habit changed through the levels of formation to indicate which state a woman was in the formation process.

Lay Sister: A member of a religious congregation employed in manual labor, specifically caring for the physical needs of the sisters. This included the cooking, cleaning, laundry, and other duties needed to operate a convent, motherhouse and other facilities where women religious lived.

Leadership: The sisters or nuns elected to serve as the head of the congregation. Her title varies between communities and throughout different time periods and can include: president, general superior, mother superior, coordinator, prioress, etc. She is often assisted in her role by a group of elected sisters or nuns who serve as her council, team, etc.

Ministry: In the context of religious life, an individual's life work or occupation. For example, a woman religious who works as a nurse is said to have a ministry in health care. Just as a lay person may change careers, a religious may have several ministries throughout life. It may also refer to a particular institution or work of a whole religious congregation, such as a ministry to the homeless.

Monastery: A general term for a building or group of buildings where nuns or sisters live in community.

Monastic Enclosure: Broad term that applies to the parts of the convent or monastery which are restricted to the public and where only sisters are allowed.

Mother: Title usually given to a sister who leads a group of women religious administratively, as superior, or as foundress of a ministry.

Motherhouse: The original house from which a religious congregation is established. Usually the seat of administration of the religious congregation from which the superior general and council govern.

Novice: Following the period of postulancy or candidacy, the candidate is received as a novice and becomes a formal member of the congregation, but has not yet taken vows. During a period of one or two years, the novice continues her study of prayer, religious vows, the spirit and charism of the religious congregation, and continued discernment of her life calling. This phase of preparation is called the novitiate.

Nun: In general, all women religious, even those who are more properly called sisters. While nuns and sisters are addressed as "sister," there is a distinction made in the Catholic Church which is generally not made by the public. Nuns take solemn vows and are cloistered, that is, they reside, pray and work within the confines of a monastery. Sisters take simple vows and live a life governed by a particular mission, vision, and charism.

Papal Enclosure: The strictest form of enclosure, papal enclosure is governed directly by the Holy See and requires total separation from the outside world to foster a life of prayer. Nuns are not allowed to leave the boundaries of the monastery except in defined circumstances (e.g. to receive healthcare). The rules also define under what circumstances a member of the public may enter the enclosure (e.g. a priest visiting to give sacraments to a sick nun or someone coming in to do repairs). Papal enclosure is used exclusively by contemplative communities.

Perpetual Vows: The making of a permanent commitment within a religious congregation through vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience.

Postulant: Sometimes known as pre-novice, a postulant is preparing to be admitted as a novice into a religious congregation. A postulant "requests" to be admitted to a religious congregation; postulancy is the first stage of religious life before becoming a novice.

Prioress: The female superior of a community of nuns who live in a priory.

Priory: A small monastery where nuns live, pray, work, and study. It is governed by a prioress.

Profession: In a religious congregation, the act through which women and men consecrate themselves to God by making vows, usually of poverty, chastity, and obedience, although there may be others depending on the congregation. Profession is normally made initially for a certain length of time and is called First or Temporary Vows. After a period of discernment and instruction, a religious takes Final or Perpetual Vows.

Profession Class: The group of sisters who go through formation and take vows at the same time. Congregations have unique names for profession classes, such as band, party, profession group, class, groups, circles, etc. For example, Sr. Helen and Sr. John Vianney are members of the same "party", meaning they professed together in 1954.

Province: A regional subdivision of a religious Congregation under the jurisdiction of a provincial superior.

Sister: In general, all women religious, even those who are more properly called nuns. While nuns and sisters are addressed as "sister," there is a distinction made in the Catholic Church which is generally not made by the public. Nuns take solemn vows and are cloistered, that is, they reside, pray and work within the confines of a monastery. Sisters take simple vows and live a life governed by a particular mission, vision, and charism.

Superior: The head of the house, ministry or institution responsible for directing the sisters and all persons in the house for which she was charged.

Temporary vows: Women in temporary vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience spend a prescribed number of years living in community and sharing in full-time ministry. Temporary vows are taken after the novitiate.

Vocation: The word stems from the Latin verb *vocare*, which means to call. Thus, a vocation is a calling to a way of life (rather than a particular job). Examples of vocations include marriage, religious life, or single life.

Vows: Men and women commit themselves to God and to the service of the Church through public promises called vows. Ordinarily, members of religious congregations profess the vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience, although there can be others depending on the religious congregation. They are usually promised for a certain number of years before Final or Perpetual Vows are taken.