

PRIESTS, DEACONS AND EREMITICS IN THE UNITED COVENANT

Some of the qualifications for priesthood:

1. Must be called to the priesthood
2. Must be a member of one of the Spiritual Communities that merges with the United Covenant
3. If married, both spouses must be members of the United Covenant (if the non-clerical spouse apostatises later, it does not necessarily disqualify the faithful priest)
4. Can not be guilty of ever committing a serious crime (murder, inappropriate sexual conduct, adultery, etc)
5. Can not be a drunkard, addicted to drugs, or married to more than one spouse (regardless of culture)
6. The priesthood is open to all men and women, married or single, who are at least 30 years of age and psychologically sound and are able to read and write in his/her native language, with a proficient knowledge of English or Spanish. Some exceptions regarding age will be reviewed on a case by case basis.

SENIOR PRIESTS

Rev. Abba Charles (USA) - Senior Priest and Abbot

Rev. Fr. Shamon (Spain) - Second Senior Priest

DIOCESAN PRIESTS

Rev. Fr. Jonathan (USA)

Rev. Fr. Petros (Brazil)

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DEACONS

Some of the qualifications for deacons:

1. Deacons are appointed from among the faithful men and women of the Spiritual Communities that merge with the United Covenant.
2. If married, both spouses must be members of the United Covenant (if the deacon's spouse apostatises later, it does not necessarily disqualify the faithful deacon)
3. Can not be guilty of ever committing a serious crime (murder, inappropriate sexual conduct, adultery, etc)
4. Can not be a drunkard, addicted to drugs, or married to more than one spouse (regardless of culture)
5. The diaconate is open to all men and women, married or single, who are at least 20 years of age. Some exceptions regarding age will be reviewed on a case by case basis.
6. Deacons are not "clerics" in the same manner as priests but they do belong to the class of "holy orders." A candidate to the diaconate is suggested to the Teacher of Righteousness and Teacher of Light based on the recommendation of his/her priest. If approved, he or she serves as a lay-deacon for one year. If his/her services are satisfactory during the entire year, he/she will be appointed as a deacon. The deacon's main responsibility is to assist the priest in carrying out his duties regarding baptismal and membership records, gathering the congregation for worship, reading the holy text during worship services, and assisting the priest at a liturgical service but not conducting the service itself.) In the event that a priest is not available the deacon may perform marriages and baptisms. A deacon may also lead the prayer rope service without the presence of a priest. It is also the responsibility of the deacon to report to the Teacher of Righteousness and the Teacher of Light concerning all activities of his/her office, including that of the priest. It is not the responsibility of the deacon to reprimand either his/her priest or the congregation. A priest can not remove a deacon without permission of the Teacher of Righteousness and the Teacher of Light. Some deacons are appointed in territories that do not have priests.

SENIOR DEACONS

Rev. Deacon Michael (Terra Nova) - Senior Deacon

Rev. Deacon Adrian (Terra Nova) - Senior Deacon

OTHER DEACONS

Rev. Deacon R. (Yemen)

Rev. Deaconess A. (Uzbekistan)

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The Synod of the Religion of Light

Mir Izgadda

Mar Chayim

Mar Seraphim

Mar David

Abba Charles

Father Shamon

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POUSTINIK (DIOCESAN HERMITS AND ANCHORITES)

A poustinik is a term (in the United Covenant) used to identify a diocesan hermit (male) or diocesan anchorite (female). A poustinik is not always a cleric. In the United Covenant of the Religion of Light, the term poustinik refers to both clerics and the laity who live alone, praying for others and themselves on a daily basis, living a life of penance and charity, makes themselves available to the membership and the public as far as it is possible (especially by offering prayer and if possible sharing food). They are recognized by the Religion of Light as an official poustinik under a specific diocese in their general location.

Qualifications:

1. Must be in good standing with the Religion of Light.
2. Must be spiritually mature, psychologically sound, and very serious about his/her responsibilities.
3. Must be able to live alone in a small home, typically away from society with minimum technology and comforts of modern society, and self-sufficient without entanglement with worldly employment and politics. A limited number of visitors may be received if necessary.
4. Must be single (never married), no children, and no desire for marriage.
5. Depending on the location, the diocesan hermit/anchorite will need to have a working

knowledge of basic herbal medicine according to his/her local area.

6. Must be able to read and write.

7. Must not have any serious criminal record (murder, inappropriate sexual conduct, etc), no use of alcohol, tobacco or illegal drugs. If after a brother or sister becomes a hermit/anchorite he/she breaks one of the requirements, he/she will no longer be considered as a hermit/anchorite depending on the seriousness of the infraction.

8. While a non-clerical poustinik does not council the priesthood, they may serve as private confessors for priests and be spiritual companions to a priest when the priest is troubled with various situations. The hermit/anchorite must be able to practice the strictest ethics and privacy in all situations.

There are currently 9 diocesan hermits/anchorites throughout the world. There are 8 in India, while only 3 are in the United States and only 1 in Pakistan. It is very difficult to meet the qualifications of a poustinik. If one wishes to serve in such capacity, he/she should contact their local priest. The priest will make this information known to the Teacher of Righteousness and/or Teacher of Light with information as to why the priest feels the individual would be able or not able to serve in such a capacity. The information will be reviewed and replies will be made to the priest within 90 days. The potential diocesan hermit/anchorite will be required to write a 14-page document concerning his/her life and experiences in the Religion of Light, as well as why he/she as a candidate meets the qualifications, including proof of such qualifications. Within the document, 5 of the 14 pages must include a detailed rule of spiritual life. The rule is a personal statement of intent and goals which one will live by as a diocesan hermit/anchorite. We note here that most individuals applying for diocesan status are denied due to lack of qualifications.

A diocesan hermit/anchorite remains under the authority of his/her priest as well as one of the senior priests in the Religion of Light. There are currently 2 senior priests - one in Spain and the other in the United States.

Diocesan Hermits in the U.S.

Brother Dennis Howell
Brother Dorje
Brother Moise DeCosta

Private Hermits/Anchorites (those without diocesan status)

Any member (not married) can serve as a private hermit or anchorite if his/her priest feels they are suited for such a calling. His/her responsibility is to pray for his/her own needs as well as other members of the Religion of Light and for the conversion of the world.

These individuals are not referred to as poustinik or diocesan hermits/anchorites, and

thus are not under the same qualifications. There is no formal investiture. A private hermit/anchorite can be blessed by the priest (or a deacon if a priest is not available) without a public ceremony.

They are not permitted to wear a habit or any type of attire or insignia or jewellery that would identify them as being canonically recognized by the diocese.

Such individuals should have a reliable source for sufficient income and not solely rely on the members of the congregation to assist them with housing and other living expenses.

Such hermits/anchorites may be divorced, have adult children (not living in the home). Private hermits/anchorites should not be in a relationship with another person. If the hermit/anchorite becomes involved in a relationship he/she no longer qualifies as a hermit/anchorite.

Private hermits/anchorites are not required to write a letter of intent but must request council from his/her priest explaining why the desire exists to serve in such capacity.

A private hermit/anchorite may refrain from serving as such at any time without permission of the priest; however, he/she must make this known to the priest.

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Additional notes

1. In the United Covenant, the hierarchy does not always follow the traditions of all the Spiritual Communities. For example, there are no Bishops. Under the Creator and the Messenger, the offices of responsibility include: the Teacher of Righteousness, the Teacher of Light, the Patriarch, Priests and Deacons. A local congregation may appoint Readers, secretaries, treasures, and so on for their own needs. These positions should first be filled by deacons if possible.

2. Since the office of Archdeacon is a special responsibility for the Thomasines and St. Thomas Christian Spiritual Communities, there is no appointment for this position in the United Covenant. At one time an Archdeacon was appointed for Uzbekistan, but that country's needs changed over time and that office was no longer needed. The office of "Senior Deacon" is not the same as "Archdeacon." If an individual Archdeacon and his/her spiritual community merges with the United Covenant, he/she will retain the title originally given. The title, at least within the United Covenant, will be viewed as a deacon. It does not hold any higher ranking than other deacons. If the Archdeacon becomes a member of the United Covenant, but without merging his/her spiritual community, he/she will not retain the title of Archdeacon, but will be known as deacon instead.

3. The Synod of the Religion of Light consists of the Messenger, the Teacher of Righteousness, the Teacher of Light, the Patriarch and senior priests. Deacons may be re-

quired to serve as advisors to the Synod or as observers when called upon.

4. The Council of Priests consists of all active priests. The Senior Priest serves as the president of the Council.

5. In some Spiritual Communities, a monk or nun is automatically considered a priest. Within the United Covenant, this is not the case. A monk or nun can be appointed as a priest if he/she qualifies. In this case, the priest is known as a hieromonk. A monk or nun who came from another Spiritual Community may remain as a monk or nun, but they are not automatically considered to be a hieromonk.

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