

Discerning your Vocation

What is a vocation? How does one discover it? Where does it lead? What has it to do with free will? These are puzzling questions to anyone considering what to do with the rest of their life. Ordinarily they are questions facing a person in teen-age or early adult life but these same questions often reoccur at other times.

The word 'vocation', of course, does not refer exclusively to the priesthood or religious life: these, however, are so extraordinary that in Catholic circles they alone are usually referred to as "vocations."

The word vocation means "a calling" and it is extremely important to keep this in mind. We are created by God and God calls each and every one of us to make use of the realities of our life, our own limitations and potential, the historical moment, and our own emotional, intellectual and psychological gifts and abilities. If a person were to study the writings of the Saints of the Church in this regard, they would discover that a vocation is found in the providential arrangement of the significant aspects of their life as well as the grace which we receive from God to make the best use of those situations. It has been a consistent belief of all Christians at all times that the Lord gives each of us something to do; some work to perform that makes us an essential link in the chain of life and the corporate body of Christ. Parents, for instance, pass on life to their children and by good examples, instruction, encouragement and membership in the Church and by doing so contribute to their child's growth in the life of grace.

Priests pass on life in sacramental and spiritual ways by being a sacramental presence of Christ to those around them. This passing on of life and grace is the ultimate vocation of every Christian. Cardinal Newman sums it up well when he says: "*I am a link in a chain, a bond of connection between persons. God has not created me for nothing. I shall do good; I shall do His work; I shall be an angel of peace, a preacher of truth, in my own place, while not intending it, if I do but keep His commandments.*" The idea of God's special purpose in our life is what gives the individual an awareness of their vocation. As Newman says, "*God had created me to do Him some definite service; He has committed some work to me which He has not committed to another. I have my mission.*"

Once we understand that we have been singled out by the Lord for some particular work in this life, then we must address the question: how is that work discovered? First, we quietly discern or observe our potentials and needs and try to fit them into what we can do best. Often in such a process, God leads us by interior inspiration, by an attraction to do this or that work. The most direct way of discerning a vocation is to pray often and in our prayers ask God to reveal his will for you and your life.

Questions to Ask When Discerning a Vocation to the Priesthood

Thoughtfully thinking about the questions below can help you in the process of discerning whether you are being called to a life as a priest. Writing down the answers in a journal often helps one to reach clarity, as does discussing your thoughts with your parish priest or spiritual director.

- ✦ Name the two top motivating factors for your interest in a religious vocation.
- ✦ What excites you at the prospect of ministering with and for others? Explain each.
- ✦ What, in your estimation, is the number one "mission" of the Catholic Church?
- ✦ What is the difference between serving God and being in love with God?
- ✦ What does a "personal relationship" with Jesus mean to you?
- ✦ What major events, changes, or traumas in your life trigger your attraction toward a religious vocation:
- ✦ Are you able to openly and tactfully deal with others of different thought, theology, practice, piety or devotion?
- ✦ Who has been a mentor or someone you would like to imitate in your ministry and why? If there are several list them all.
- ✦ Do you think the Catholic Church needs to address issues that you feel are important? What are they and what are your solutions?
- ✦ What do you think is the biggest challenge facing the Church in the 21st century and what has given you this impression?
- ✦ Please explain your idea of what "collaborative ministry" entails. Have you ever worked in this fashion (give concrete examples).
- ✦ We face obstacles and resistance with any major decision in our lives. Name the obstacles which at present are hindering you from making an informed or a confident decision towards a priestly vocation. How have you been addressing these obstacles or areas of resistance?
- ✦ Do you prefer to spend time with others or do you consider yourself a private person?
- ✦ What is the difference between being alone and being lonely?

Lord, Are You Calling Me?

How do I know if God is calling me? How can I tell? Who can help me? Where do I go? When will I know? What will I do?

Step One: Ask yourself, first of all, how am I doing with my very first vocation: my Baptismal Call. Am I really a loving and faithful son of God?

Do I actively participate in the Mass, keeping the Lord's Day? Do I use my gifts to pray, to read, to serve, to sing, to play music, to be a greeter, usher, sacristan, etc.? Is Jesus alive in me? Am I alive in Him? Am I living His Gospel? Does my life give

witness to His presence in me? Do I take pride and find joy in my union with Jesus Christ? Am I a true dwelling place of the Holy Spirit? Is prayer important in my life? Do I really try to love others? Forgive them? Speak well of them? Pray for them? Do I enjoy learning about my faith and religion? Am I involved in things that help people?

Step Two: Do I have a desire to serve? Do I have an attraction to doing something with my life? Have I always wanted to be like someone I admired and respected in ministry or religious life? Do I feel driven to help people or to make the world a better place? What do I see myself doing with my life? What do other people think I would be good at?

Step Three: Pray over your calling and talk to God about it and LISTEN. Make a retreat, spend a weekend in a seminary, a convent, a monastery, or a vocation awareness program. Also talk about it with others: friends, parents, your pastor, sisters, priests, brothers, teachers, mentors, your own sister or brother – anyone you trust and who knows you well. Learn about how other people have found their calling.

Step Four: Take a deep breath. Pray, then call, write, or e-mail the vocations director in the diocese in which you have an interest. For the Diocese of Sioux City that is:

Fr. Brad Pelzel
Office of Vocations
PO Box 3379
Sioux City IA 51102-3379
e-mail: vocations@scdiocese.org
Phone: (712) 233-7522

Step Five: Give it a try. You will never know if you have a vocation to be a priest unless you actually test and try it. Application and acceptance into a diocese, a seminary or a formation program is essential to discovering what your true calling is. Do you really want to come to a moment later in your life and wonder if God was calling you to serve the Church back then?

In all of this you have nothing to lose and everything to gain. The experience of pursuing your true vocation, whatever the outcome, will be a rewarding and grace-filled blessing for your entire life.