

## Vocations

God may be calling, but is anyone listening?

*But they will not ask his help unless they believe in him, and they will not believe in him unless they have heard of him, and they will not hear of him unless they get a preacher, and they will never have a preacher unless one is sent. (Romans 10)*

Everyone expects that their parish will always have a priest to celebrate Mass and the sacraments, but how can that be if no one is supporting (actively and through prayer) the possibility of vocation to the priesthood? Because there are fewer priests in parishes than ever before, the potential for any influence that they may have with young people is basically limited to Mass times unless there happens to be a priest-chaplain in their school. Once upon a time many Catholic children, at some point in their education, came under the influence of nuns and, in some cases, brothers and were therefore quite familiar with them. These days, unless there is a parish sister, very few children ever come into contact with, or even see, sisters (or brothers) anymore, and how will it ever be otherwise if no one is encouraging (and praying for) vocations to religious life?

How can our young people be expected to consider the possibility of a vocation to a way of life they know little or nothing about these days? How is the voice of God, calling and inviting them, to be heard above the clamour of all the usual job and career considerations with which they are so much more familiar? Is consideration of a vocation to priesthood or religious life given due prominence by career counsellors in our Catholic schools? How comfortable would your son or daughter feel in bringing up the subject of a vocation with you? What would your reaction be? If it's something we don't really talk about, might this make priests and religious - and their chosen way of life - seem a little bit odd or strange?

In reality priests and religious are, by and large, quite normal down-to-earth people who simply listened to that small voice of God that kept working away at the back of their mind. All they did that was different was to dare to listen and let God show them what *he* (as opposed to everyone else) wanted them to do. He also gave them whatever grace and courage it took to make a different sort of choice for a different way of life than might ordinarily be considered the norm.

Of course such a way of life might not offer what the world considers "security" or "benefits", but that isn't what priesthood or religious life is all about. The spiritual benefits speak for themselves and as far as material security is concerned, through the generous support of the people God calls them to serve, priests have all the security they need - a roof over their head, money in their pocket (not a lot, but enough) and food on the table. They will never be out of work and when they

retire their needs will be provided for - all of which gives substance to Our Lord's words in the gospel that a worker deserves his pay.

To find out more about particular religious orders, it would be better to contact them directly than for me to try to talk about them. Instead I would like to speak specifically about the priesthood.

At the heart of the vocation and ministry of a priest are the Mass and sacraments from which flow all the many other aspects of the spiritual and pastoral care that he may be called upon to provide. So, in addition to celebrating Mass and the sacraments, what else do priests do? Well, you name it: they serve in parishes; they are chaplains to schools, hospitals, prisons and ports; they work on the missions; they give retreats; they provide counselling and spiritual direction; they are preachers and teachers... the list goes on and on.

Priests also bring with them to their ministry whatever skills, abilities and experience they gained before they entered the priesthood. They don't emerge from the seminary like identical sausages from a machine; they are still who they always were with all that makes them an individual. Many had jobs and careers before they entered the seminary and, of course, they come from all sorts of backgrounds and walks of life. They bring all of this with them to priesthood and it hopefully makes their ministry all the richer.

At his ordination every priest is asked by the bishop: *Are you resolved to consecrate your life to God for the salvation of his people, and to unite yourself more closely every day to Christ the High Priest, who offered himself for us to the Father as a perfect sacrifice?* How this works out from day to day is a complete unknown until it happens. It can be a bit like a football match. Some days you just seem to wander round in the middle of the field and the ball never comes anywhere near you. Other days it's like being the goalkeeper with shot after shot coming your way requiring instant 100% effort every time – and no shot is ever the same.

When I first wrote this I made a list of all the things I could remember from a typical four week period in what was my parish at the time. In addition to the normal daily Mass schedule, there was the Chrism Mass at the cathedral and a golden jubilee celebration Mass. There were four funerals and therefore four visits to the families involved. There was the Easter Triduum to prepare for and to celebrate and Easter Gardens to set up in three churches of the parish. I prepared eight homilies. I attended four school governors meetings. There were only two callers at the door but one was at 2:30 in the middle of a night when I really needed some sleep! I gave a talk to couples attending our marriage preparation course. I had a meeting with the diocesan accountant on a matter to do with taxes. I called in to the Easter Family Social and I spent one whole day waiting for deliveries to the

house. There was also all the usual day-to-day, and weekly, administrative work to take care of. The assistant priest in the parish could probably give a very different list for the month but one nonetheless just as busy and typical of what a priest can expect to do. And important in all of this is the ability to be adaptable. You could be in the middle of a meal when a call comes to anoint someone who is dying or to pray with a family following a death. From there you head straight to school to talk to a classroom of children and then to a meeting with a couple who are planning to be married.

**F**or someone giving even initial consideration to the question of a vocation, the prospect of giving up the things we are certain about to put ourselves totally in God's hands in this particular way can be very daunting. When society puts so much emphasis on a career and security, leaving everything to follow Christ can feel a bit like a high-wire act without a safety net. But then we need to remember St Peter walking on the water and that all was well as long as he kept his eyes on Our Lord and placed his trust in him.

**A**fter leaving school I started work as a lab technician, fully expecting that to be my career for the foreseeable future. Then along came my first experience of a call to priesthood (aided no doubt by my involvement in my parish) but, apparently, it wasn't to be at the time. Feeling I needed to be doing something active in the life of the Church, I ended up doing four years of lay-missionary work in Zambia and, as a result of my experience of the American Jesuits with whom I was working there, the feeling of a vocation arose once again and I spent two years in their Oregon novitiate until it became clear that, once again, the time didn't seem right. I then spent seven years working in sports and recreation in the Middle East and three years obtaining a degree in America, before my parish priest at home was instrumental in directing me back to the question of a vocation and off I went to Ushaw College and the rest, as they say, is history. It might be said that it took twenty years for me to find out what God was saying all along, except that I'm not sure the call was there all along. It came and went – or perhaps my listening came and went – until God was finally able to lead me where he seemingly always wanted me to be.

**I**n trying to be sure of what God might be saying, it certainly helps to have another pair of ears doing some listening with you, listening to you, someone in whom you can confide and who will be sympathetic and supportive in the discernment you are going through. Most importantly, at some point in this process, you need to contact the diocese's Vocations Director and seek advice from him. And, of course, essential to every step in this process is prayer – both your own prayer and the support of other people praying for you. The initial process doesn't require giving up anything you may currently be doing, it just means putting yourself in a position where you can listen more attentively and test what is going on.

**G**od may indeed be calling – whether to priesthood or religious life - so dare to listen, dare to think about it, dare to pray about it, dare to find out.

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Fr Neil McNicholas

**I**n an address to priests during his 1982 visit to England, Pope John Paul said:

*At some point in your lives, the call of the Lord to a special intimacy and union with him in his redemptive mission became so clear that you overcame your hesitations. You put aside your doubts and difficulties and committed yourselves to a life of total fidelity to the highest ideals of the gospel. Your free decision was sustained by grace. Lift up your hearts! Give thanks to the Lord for your wonderful vocation.*

**A**nd he later wrote, in a “World Day of Prayer for Vocations” message:

*May the Holy Spirit make the entire Church a praying people who raise their voices to the Heavenly Father to implore holy vocations to the priesthood and to the consecrated life. Let us pray that those chosen and called by the Lord may be faithful and joyful witnesses of the Gospel to which they have consecrated their existence.*

*Son of God, sent by the Father to the men and women of every time and of every part of the earth, we call upon you through Mary, your Mother and ours: may the Church not lack vocations, especially those dedicated in a special way to your Kingdom.*

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