

Dating is to Marriage what Seminary is to Priesthood

Rev. Brian Bashista, Director of the Office of Vocations

This past Saturday, our diocese was blessed to witness the ordination of three men being ordained to the transitional diaconate. This coming Saturday, Bishop Loverde is to ordain three men to serve as our newest diocesan priests. In light of these grace-filled events, this is a welcomed opportunity to share some thoughts about vocations. In this first part of a two part series we'll look at vocations in general followed by a brief summary of vocation discernment, particularly as it relates to diocesan priesthood. In part two, we'll focus on some of the challenges many face in discovering a priestly vocation.

Our ultimate goal in life is to get to heaven, to become a saint. This call or invitation by God to be united with Him and one another forever in paradise is a universal call. However the way we live out this universal call is not universal. It varies according to the specific purpose or mission for which God has created each of us. This mission, simply put, is our vocation. Therefore the purpose of any vocation, married life, priesthood, consecrated life, permanent diaconate or a dedicated or consecrated single life, is to assist us on our journey to heaven, as well as enable us to be instruments of God's grace leading others there as well.

As the Diocesan Director of the Office of Vocations, many will ask me, "Does God really have a personal, specific vocation in life for me?" St. Paul gives us the answer in his letter to the Ephesians, "*[E]ven as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before Him. He destined us in love to be His sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of His will, to the praise of His glorious grace which He freely bestowed on us in the Beloved.*" (Eph. 1:4-6).

Christ has called us all by name, our first name in fact, at our baptism to share His life, to share His mission of salvation. Therefore we *all* have a vocation. We are all called in some way to play a role in salvation history for love of Christ and His people. All vocations are therefore rooted in love because they are rooted in Christ. This love is sacrificial and self-less, in other words, it is Christ-like and other-directed. The Servant of God, Pope John Paul the Great once wrote, "*Love is not a feeling, it is an act of the will that consists, of preferring in a constant manner, the good of others to the good of oneself.*"

A vocation is a life of love in a concrete and particular form because authentic love is always concrete and particular. It is never sentimental or nebulous. A vocation begins with Christ's total gift of Himself to us and is then realized in our response to His gift, namely our total gift of ourselves to Him for the sake of others. A vocation is the concrete life He has chosen for us and for which He has specifically created us. Therefore we cannot choose our vocation but rather, we discover it. "*You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit....*" (Jn. 15:16). Love is not chosen, it is discovered and responded to. Properly speaking, someone does not choose another to marry but discovers, with the other, a mutually shared Christ-centered love that eventually leads to an invitation to enter sacramental marital love. The same is true for priesthood—one does not choose to become a priest, they discover with and through the Church, Christ's invitation to be one of His priests. The freedom that is

absolutely necessary to enter a vocation is *not* rooted in a choice, but in a response, a response to an invitation. We can choose an occupation or a career, but a vocation is not an occupation or a career. A priest or sister does not live out their vocations from 9-5 anymore than a husband or wife or mother or father lives theirs 9-5. They all do so 24/7, always and everywhere. A career is primarily “what I do; a vocation is “who I am” in Christ in relation to the “other” I am called to love.

All vocations involve some form of being “wedded” to another. This union involves the offering of mutual love and support which then is open to bringing forth new life. For most men this wedded life will be freely entered into with a wife through the beautiful sacrament of marriage and the openness to father children through the order of nature. For other men, those who are called to be priests, this wedded life will be freely entered into with a “Supernatural Wife”, the Church-his Spiritual Bride with whom he will father new sacramental life or supernatural children through the order of grace. It is vital that we discover our vocations. Our fulfillment, our blessedness, our salvation, and more importantly the salvation of others depend upon our acceptance of the mission, the vocation that Christ invites us to embrace.

So, how do we discover our vocation? The first step is to talk to the One who created us. The first step is to pray, to talk and more importantly, to listen to God. The second, like the first is to talk to others. Those called to the married life will talk to others, so too do those called to the priesthood. This is one of the major reasons why my office exists—to talk and to listen. Many men who meet with me never take the step to enter the seminary. For some, this is a realization they come to, for others it is the Church’s realization. The seminary application process is much more rigorous than many realize. Our diocesan application itself is 28 pages long. It also includes a physical examination and psychological evaluation as well as a criminal history and sex offender record check. We ask for eight letters of reference, including among others one from their pastor, professor, friend, sibling and parents. The applicants must write a 10 plus page autobiography and essays answering two questions: "What does the priesthood mean to me?" and "Why I think the Lord is calling me to the priesthood?" School transcripts and sacramental records are additional required documentation.

Praying, talking and listening to God and others are essential to discover a vocation, however, if someone simply does these alone they will never ultimately come to realize their true calling. They must act! Once someone has sensed that God *might* be calling them to this vocation or the other, they must act upon these inspirations. Rather than resist the promptings they should move toward and act upon them. They should place these thoughts before the “other” to see if they are mutually shared. Someone who feels called to marriage can pray and talk about this all they want, but never come close to getting married. They must act upon the promptings they received in prayer and as a result of conversations. They must date and get to know the other, and the other must get to know them. This is also true for someone who feels prompted to explore the possibility of a call to the priesthood. He can pray and have numerous conversations with others but never come close to taking the first step to act upon these promptings by applying to enter the seminary. In fact a man who enters the seminary has no firm idea that he is called the priesthood, just that he senses that he *might* be. On the flip side, he is not being accepted by the bishop to enter the seminary to definitively become a priest, just that the bishop senses that he *might* be. It is as unrealistic for someone to be certain they will marry someone before they date them as it is for someone to be certain they are called to the priesthood before they enter the seminary. Dating is to marriage what seminary is to priesthood. Both are a

type of courtship that leads to the discovery of where someone is truly called, or not called. People who are called to marriage typically date several people before they discover the one to whom they are called to marry. So too, some men date and then enter the seminary only to discover after some time that they are not called by God to be a priest. After leaving the seminary they may again date and ultimately get married. This discovery or discernment is a process of getting to know the other and responding positively to the love Christ is calling them to share. For the future priest, this “spiritual courtship”, while in seminary, takes a minimum of six years after an undergraduate college degree. This is much longer than most experience in a dating relationship that can ultimately lead to the discovery of a vocation to marriage.

In part two, to be published next week, we’ll focus on some of the challenges many face in discovering a priestly vocation.

Fr. Bashista can be reached at vocations@arlingtondiocese.org

http://www.catholicherald.com/faith/detail.html?sub_id=10337

Marriage, perhaps Priesthood...What is God's will?

Rev. Brian Bashista, Director of the Office of Vocations

The Year of the Priest called for by Pope Benedict XVI begins June 19th, the Solemnity of the Sacred Heart and is dedicated in a special way to St. John Vianney, the Curé of Ars, 150 years after his death. In light of this and the diaconate and priesthood ordinations that occurred in our diocese these past two weekends, I offer this second of a two part series on vocations with a particular focus on some of the challenges many face in discovering a priestly vocation.

It is a commonly held perception among vocation directors around the country that many Catholics are not devoting the time, prayer and attention that is necessary to properly discover their vocation in life. It seems that many are not acting upon the vocation promptings they sense with faithful trust or purposeful sincerity. If they are, many are highly susceptible to worldly allurements, misconceptions about discernment, and opposition (direct and indirect) from friends and family that seriously impede or even thwart this discovery.

As I mentioned in part one, Christ has called us all by name at our baptism to share His life and mission of salvation. Therefore we *all* have a vocation. We are all called in some way to play a role in salvation history for love of Christ and His people. All vocations are therefore rooted in love because they are rooted in Christ. This love is sacrificial and self-less—it is Christ-like and other-directed. A predominate worldly, self-centered attitude of, “I want, I prefer, I think” is anything but Christ-like. “For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will, but the will of Him who sent me” (John 6:38). To lay down one’s life for others as a true offering is the fertile, other-directed attitude that best enables a person to discover his or her true vocation. While our own personal desires are a part of the discovery, they are not the beginning or end of authentic discernment. As with Christ, this beginning and end are rooted in God the Father’s desires, and in His plans. What does God want? Why did He create me? What mission does He call me to, and how does He want me to be an instrument of His grace for the salvation of others? These must be the initial and final questions that are asked and answered to properly discover *any* vocation.

To know Christ is to know oneself and by extension to know one’s vocation. Those who strive to make our Lord the first priority in their lives have a much easier time discovering their vocation. Worldly attractions and responsibilities can often crowd out the necessity of making time to pray, to talk to others about vocation promptings, or to act upon the outgrowth of these prayers and conversations. If work or school or the time devoted to sports or hobbies, or even family and friends prevent someone from praying and actively discerning their vocation, then they should never be surprised that it so frustrating for them to discover it. God truly wants to reveal His purpose for our life, and in order to do this, we must *want* Him to reveal *His* purpose.

Many will tell me that they do want to do God’s will. The only problem is they do not know God’s will. If He would only clearly communicate this to them, then they would do it. In other words, if God would only give them some obvious and extraordinary sign like He gave St. Paul or our Blessed Mother then everything would be fine. My response to these commonly held thoughts is threefold. First, extraordinary signs from God are just that *extraordinary*! They are

not ordinary, nor are they ever to be expected, desired or presumed. Second, scripture tells us that it is a faithless generation that seeks a sign—what is needed is trust, fear is useless. Our Lord says, “Do not be afraid”, and this applies especially to vocation discernment. “True love casts out all fear” (1 John 4:18). And third, if God were to tell us in a commanding way that we must enter this or that vocation rather than having us discover and freely respond to it, then the chance of us truly giving ourselves and loving the “other” completely in our vocation is extremely remote. God speaks to us in the ordinary events, persons and situations of our lives. This is how He normally reveals His vocation call—over time—provided we are willing and actively cooperating with these promptings, persons and situations.

Many men that I visit with often recall experiencing seemingly mixed promptings and situations that lead to great confusion and anxiety. They note a strong draw to pursue the vocation of marriage and the desire to date. On the other hand, they also sense promptings that God might be calling them to the priesthood. They are therefore hesitant to take the necessary steps to seriously pursue either vocation. My simple reply is that now they are stuck! Their legs are on diverging paths and they must pick up one leg and walk with *both* feet on *one* path if they are ever going to arrive at their vocation destination. It is also important to note that prior to getting married or becoming a priest they are still free to change paths. Still, some men attempt to walk several “vocation paths” simultaneously. They want to actively date while actively discerning the priesthood at the same time. Who would want to share a potential life together with someone who is only offering half of their heart? Some of these men feel that it is too hard to “give-up” one path over the other. This is a very frustrating and erroneous attitude. An authentic pursuit of a vocation is never rooted in “giving up your life”, but rather in “giving your life to”. The draw to married life is a natural one that all men should have. It is not in contradiction to a call to the priesthood, but an important component of it. If men do not esteem married life, they will never become the priests God intends them to be. No one should ever “run from” a vocation in order to pursue another, but rather move toward their true calling in a positive manner. Years of indecision and reluctance may result in someone never actively pursuing their vocation. God is indeed patient, but the temptation of waiting, “one more year” can turn into endless years leading to a vocation that is never realized. While we are all created for a specific vocation which remains with us forever, we can never presume the grace to respond to our vocation will be offered by God indefinitely. A former Major League Soccer player who recently entered Mount St. Mary’s Seminary was strongly encouraged by many to finish his budding MLS career before entering the seminary. The echoing thought that motivated him to discern a priestly vocation sooner, rather than later—“delayed obedience is disobedience”.

Other men express the attitude of not being worthy or holy enough to be a priest. Here I would have to readily agree. Of course they’re not! No one is holy enough or worthy enough to be a priest—or a husband and father for that matter. Both vocations are gifts freely offered and freely received. God alone is the one who makes us holy and worthy. How true is the adage that “God does not call the qualified, but qualifies the call.” He is not so much interested in ability, but willingness and availability.

Now we come to perhaps the greatest challenge in discovering a call to the priesthood—the opposition of friends and family, particularly parents. Of the 465 men who have been, or will be ordained to the priesthood this year in the United States, 45% said they had been discouraged from considering the priesthood. Of those, nearly 60% said a parent or family member was the

source of this discouragement. This is a disturbing and unfortunately all too common trend. One of the most shocking aspects of being the vocation director here in the Diocese of Arlington is that many faithful Catholic parents, while not directly opposed to their son's consideration of the priesthood, stand in subtle opposition to it. This opposition goes something like this: "You need to go to a regular (non-seminary) college first"; or "You need to work a few years after college to gain real world experience"; or "You need to date more before entering a seminary"; or "If you want to serve others, join the military and try that first". Several parents have told me that in offering this advice, they didn't *tell* their sons what to do. Well, in some sense they did because these young men rightfully trust, love and deeply respect the opinions of their parents.

All of this parental advice may well have been given in complete accord with the will of God. However, more often than not it seems that the will of God was not sought in prayer *before* offering this advice. Here is where the effects of this subtle opposition can be just as devastating and harmful as direct opposition. The essential question that needs to be prayerfully asked, prior to giving any advice is, "What is God's will?" Does God desire that their son discern his vocation in a college seminary after high school? Does He want their son to complete his undergraduate studies at his present institution or do so while discerning at a college seminary? Is it God's will that he work a few years after college? Date more? Enter military service—all prior to seriously considering a vocation to the priesthood? If so, these parents worked in harmony with the Divine plan. If not, they stood in opposition to it.

When vocation promptings come, parents (and really all of us) must faithfully and sincerely respect and support the full exploration of these promptings. There is a higher probability that most men are being called by God to embrace the vocation of marriage. Whatever the case may be, none of us should ever offer a disparaging or discouraging word that snuffs out even the smallest flicker of a vocation flame that could perhaps grow into a burning love for Christ to serve Him and His Church as a future priest.

While the need is still so great, we are extremely blessed in this diocese to have many affable, sacrificial and charitable young men who are seriously considering a call to the priesthood. Their sincerity is contagious and it will continue to be a source of insight and encouragement to others. These men were like so many others well on their way to becoming highly successful in the "eyes of the world", but they are willing to give their lives to a supernatural reality which points "beyond this world". Despite what their friends, family, classmates or co-workers might say, they are willing to seriously explore this road less traveled. Despite their normative questions and concerns, they are to be admired for their courage and faithful witness in taking serious note of the Lord's invitation to "Come follow me".

Anyone wishing to more actively discern their vocation and better understand their share in Christ's mission of salvation may visit www.arlingtondiocese.org/vocations.

Fr. Bashista can also be reached at vocations@arlingtondiocese.org

http://www.catholicherald.com/faith/detail.html?sub_id=10395