

VOCATIONAL DISCERNMENT 101

Dear Director of Youth Ministry,

You can play a vital role in helping young people explore their vocations. No one can “give” someone a vocation, but we can all work to expose them to God, to prayer, and cultivate good soil so if the call comes it can take root and bear fruit.

Here is a helpful article on vocational discernment, as well as information on the resources provided by the Office of Vocations. More information is available at www.ArlingtonVocations.org.

When you come across young people open to a vocation to the priesthood or religious life, please share with them information about the discernment groups of the Office of Vocations:

***Quo Vadis** (for boys) and **FIAT** (for girls) offer activities to help high-school aged men and women grow in their relationship with Christ and learn more about all vocations. Annual events include camps, days of recollection, convent and seminary visits, ropes-course, etc.*

*For men and women over 17, we have the **Men’s** and **Women’s Discernment Groups** offering annual retreats and days of recollection as well as seminary and convent visits.*

If you or anyone you know is interested in being added to the email list for any of these groups, send an email to vocations@arlingtondiocese.org.

You can always contact the Office of Vocations (703-841-2514 or the email above) with questions about helping young people explore their vocations or for more info about vocations.

Thank you for your efforts to promote vocations.

Discernment

When our modern ears hear the word “discern” we think of its modern definition to see, perceive or distinguish; but in Latin “*discernere*” literally means to separate, set apart, or divide. The Latin is more active than what we normally think of as discernment. Therefore, rather than simply discerning your vocation (seeking to know the answer), instead try **exploring** your vocation. When you explore something you are active, not passive. When you explore something you don’t quite know what you are going to encounter; this is why we explore. Finally, when you explore something there is no expectation that you will get it right the first time.

Vocation

A vocation is all about love. It is a life of love in a concrete, particular form that comes from God. Each vocation begins with His love for us. In that love for you He is calling you to a particular form of life. This love involves first His total gift of Himself to you, and then in response your total gift of self to Him. Christ our Lord tells us in the Gospel according to St. John, “You did not choose me, but I chose you” (Jn 15:16). His choice for you is what makes a vocation different from an “occupation” or a “career”. You can choose an occupation or a career for yourself, but a vocation (from the Latin *vocare*, “to call”) is HIS choice for you and which He invites you to undertake for love of Him. Often we are taught to ask, “What do I want to do in the future?” or “What life will I choose?” The better way to think is, “What does Jesus want for me?”, “What life will bring Jesus the greatest glory?” and ultimately to say, “I want what Jesus wants.”

VOCATIONAL DISCERNMENT 101

A vocation is the particular life He has chosen for you, and for which He has specifically created you. He is God and therefore knows which life will best bring about your salvation, your happiness, and His greatest glory. His call will completely fulfill you as a man and a father, or a woman and mother. A vocation means to be sent by Jesus on a mission to help Him bring His salvation to the world, and so will call for much love, heroism and sacrifice on your part, made possible by the grace of God. The key to discovering your vocation is first to allow Jesus to show His merciful love to you. This love will make you capable of loving Him in return.

Keys to Unlocking the Secret Within

A Vocation is a call from God to share in His mission in the world, and it is given to us for our salvation and to cooperate in the salvation of others. We receive our vocation at the moment of our Baptism. It's the secret of whom God wants us to be that He places deep within our hearts, and we spend the first part of our lives trying to unlock that secret. This why we often speak of *discovering* our vocation rather than *choosing* a vocation.

Why would God keep it secret from us? We know our Lord loves us and does not play games with us, so why would He not tell us immediately who we are and what vocation He has called us to live?

It must be that the process of discovering our vocation is itself beneficial to us and to our ability to live the Vocation most fully. Here are some examples of how searching for the hidden call can be beneficial:

- Working to figure out this hidden call builds dedication and resolve. This determination is a powerful aid to your ability to live your vocation throughout the rest of your life.
- Properly searching for your vocation requires humility and trust, which help you to be more reliant upon God's providence. This is also crucial to living your vocation well.
- To be effective in your vocation (no matter what it is), you must be good at listening to God and praying to Him. Time spent with Jesus exploring your vocation builds up your relationship with Christ and your ability to hear and listen to Him.

So how do you go about unlocking that secret of God's particular call?

Here are some practical suggestions which are a good basis for a diligent discernment. Doing these things will not turn you into a priest or religious, but they are keys which move you toward the goal of becoming holy and more open to the grace of God at work in your life.

1. **Daily Mass:** if you are not going every day or cannot go every day, then start small. Just go one more time than you are already going to Mass each week, and then as you get used to that add another until you find yourself frequenting daily Mass.
2. **Daily Rosary:** If you are not currently in the habit of praying a rosary each day, just start with one decade and build up the habit from there.
3. **Daily Holy Hour:** Many people do not have the opportunity to pray a holy hour every day, so try to just spend 10-15 minutes of quiet meditative prayer each day, and maybe have a more extended period once a week of 30-45 minutes.

VOCATIONAL DISCERNMENT 101

4. **Liturgy of the Hours:** also called the Divine Office, it is considered the prayer of the Church. Five times a day priests and religious stop to pray Morning Prayer, Daytime Prayer, Evening Prayer, Night Prayer and the Office of Readings. Many lay people join in saying this form of prayer daily. If you are not familiar with it, there are apps and websites dedicated to explaining how to pray these hours. Maybe just start with Night prayer, the shortest and the most regular.
5. **Frequent Confession:** The sacrament of discernment is Penance, because every time you go to confession you have to compare who you are with whom God is calling you to be. I recommend for someone seriously discerning a vocation to the priesthood or religious life to go to confession every 2-3 weeks, or at the very least once a month.

Each of these is a goal to work towards; sometimes we need to take small steps toward doing them better before we can fully achieve the goal. It is important to remember to set attainable goals for your situation, and don't get discouraged when you fail. As Our Lord did after He fell when carrying the Cross, get up and keep moving! If you persist in doing these things faithfully, you'll be well on your way to unlocking the secret of the vocation within you.

Cultivate your Vocation

Not a Problem, But a Tree

It's easy to think of vocational discernment as a problem to be solved. Plug the right information into a computer program (I like this, I don't like that; I am good at this, I am not good at that; people say this about me, etc.) and *voila*...you get an answer. Or to treat discernment like it is a math problem: if we just manipulate the variables enough we will eventually solve for x (x being our vocational call from God). But the answers to the fundamental questions - who we are, why we exist, and what God wants us to do - are not questions of logic. They can't just be "figured out".

A better way to think of discernment is as a tree. After all, Jesus calls us to bear fruit that will last, so it's His analogy!

Let's say we are given a tiny sapling and told it will fruit after some time. We don't know what the fruit is at first, but if you think about it, that isn't the important thing to focus on at the beginning! We need to give our tiny tree good conditions for growing. We need to provide it with fertile soil, give it water, make sure it is in proper light, protect it from harsh weather. This will take time, effort, and most importantly patience.

After years of cultivation, if we give our tree proper attention, then we'll see the first fruit blossoms, followed by the fruits themselves, and eventually we will discover with great joy what the fruit is.

A vocation also requires a similar cultivation. If we are to produce good fruit, we need to place ourselves in the right conditions, adapting ourselves so that we are open to answering the call of God.

Allowing the Fruit to Mature

The basic conditions for cultivating a vocation to fruition are:

VOCATIONAL DISCERNMENT 101

- **A real desire to give oneself totally to God.** This does not require perfect abandonment; in fact, too often we use our own imperfection as a pretext to avoid answering God's call. The point is that the desire should be sincere, and we are willing to work toward total abandonment to God.
- **Total trust in God.** Jesus tells us to be like little children in our reliance on our Father for all things. Fear (of ourselves, our own fragility and sinfulness) is probably the main obstacle to good discernment. God can and will give us the means to overcome any obstacle, no matter how insurmountable it seems, if we allow ourselves to trust His limitless goodness and love for us.
- **Faithfulness to personal prayer.** God speaks to our hearts to help us understand what He wants for us. This is only possible if we are developing an intimacy with Him which allows us to hear and speak to Him.
- **Immersion in the Word of God.** Answers are often found in Sacred Scripture, especially the Gospels; however, they are generally not found by opening the Bible and reading a passage. Allowing the scriptures to influence and form our minds and hearts through prayer will help us to be guided more clearly by the Holy Spirit.
- **Patience.** While a sense of urgency in discovering one's vocation is good, patience is also required. God wants to work with us even more than we want to work with Him. His plan, however, may include allowing us to suffer through periods of doubt and uncertainty. This is normal, and if we are patient and faithful, our patience will be rewarded with "fruit that will last."

Early Signs

It is important to note that God does not leave us totally in the dark during the long period of cultivation. Just as our sapling will show signs of its variety early on, like the type of leaf it grows, its bark, even the shape of the branches, so God reveals a little of what He is calling us to do as we cultivate our vocations. It is important to pay attention to these details. Your interests, your personality, and opportunities which are presented will help you to get to know yourself as God has created you. This will help you to understand the purpose He has given to your life. This will help you to approach discernment less like logical data plugged into a program to solve a problem, and more like a growing self-revelation of who God has made you to be...the nutrients that help a tree to grow and bear fruit that will last.