

## **Vocations: How Is God Calling Me?**

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by Fidelis Tracy, C.D.P.

To be created is to be called by God. The mystery of vocation or call is part of God's love for me. I remember learning as a small child in religion class that God loves me and keeps creating me day by day. So I am convinced that God's creating me is both a gift and a call. I respond to God's love and God's call by becoming more visibly the image of God that I am.

In this *Update* we will take a closer look at this notion of calling, or vocation, especially in relation to the specialized callings of ordination and religious life. It is important to remember, though, that everyone is being called by God. These specialized vocations of ordained and religious life can only be understood in that context. Everyone in the Church is called to help nurture these particular vocations of service to the People of God. So this *Update* is not only for those who are considering religious life or ordained ministry, but also for parents, grandparents, godparents, aunts, uncles—indeed everyone in the Church who is seeking God's ongoing call or who is nurturing God's call in others.

How do we know we are following our call to holiness? It will manifest itself when we become like Jesus: compassionate, forgiving, loving and healing toward others. If I think about the people in my life whom I would readily call holy, I would think of neighbors who reached out to those in need when it was not convenient or those who were concerned about suffering people in poor countries. Or I might associate holiness with courage in adversity, a courage that comes from faith. Holiness is manifested in selfless love, forgiveness and service.

### **Everyone has a vocation**

We may think we know each other well, but our knowledge of each other only goes so far. In our depths each and every one of us is in touch with the mystery of God. At the core of each person is a call, or vocation. It is a call to holiness, to becoming a living response to God's love. Call is common to everyone, yet responding to God's love is meant to be unique and particular for me. Knowing myself and being honest about my dreams and capabilities are the first steps in discovering how I am called to live out my vocation to holiness.

Discovering the mystery of God's calling for me is not like solving the mystery laid out in a novel or TV series. God is not cleverly trying to trick me into suspecting the wrong choice is the right one. As a matter of fact, God is so gracious that as I choose any direction, there are before me a multitude of paths toward my goal of union with God.

As I try to discover whether God is calling me to holiness through marriage or single life, as a priest, deacon or member of a religious community, it is important to remember that my call is not a narrow plan that God is hiding from me. Being relaxed and trusting that God loves me and always gives what I need for my salvation will help me discern my call in a healthy way.

Ministry is not for a chosen few but is mandated by our Baptism. And every ministry, married or

celibate, involves service. The service required of me may be a specifically Church-related ministry such as religious education or pastoral care of the sick. Or it may be service of the poor in a soup kitchen, serving the sick as a doctor or nurse, or caring for children or an aging parent. As a baptized Christian I participate in the life and mission of Jesus by attending to the needs of others.

There is a misconception that one becomes a member of a religious community in order to work in a parish, school, hospital, social service organization or as a missionary to a Third World country. All these ministries can be done by persons who are not members of religious communities.

## **Eight Ways We Can Help**

### Nurture Vocations

Vatican II taught us that, through our Baptism, we all are called to holiness. Each of us must nurture our vocation and others' vocations. This applies in a special way to encouraging priestly and religious vocations, whether we be parents, grandparents, uncles and aunts or mentors. Here's how:

- **Be faith-filled people.** Pray for guidance in decisions, and seek to deepen your relationship with God. Let Christian values guide you.
- **Be generous and of service to others.**
- **Pray.** Let the children see you pray and pray with them in ordinary and extraordinary circumstances.
- **Share faith.** Talk with children about how faith affects your life.
- **Make and demand sacrifice.** Help children see both by example and by what you expect of them that a holy and happy life involves sacrifice.
- **Stay in touch.** Get to know priests and religious by interacting with them as opportunities arise so that you are comfortable with them and understand their commitment.
- **Educate.** Teach children you know about the option of a call to religious life or priesthood as well as the call to marriage or single life.
- **Support.** If a child or young adult speaks of a desire to be a priest, deacon, brother or sister, be supportive.

## **The vocation to religious life**

The call to religious life is always marked by a desire to serve God and God's people, to care for the needy and to bring people to experience God's love. But, since ministry is a part of every vocation, service is not the distinguishing characteristic of a call to consecrated life as a member of a religious community. The uniqueness of the call to religious life is living the vows of poverty, chastity and

obedience in community. The essential service of the religious is to witness to all the faithful that each of us is called to treat things, persons and our own self with respect and as ultimately belonging to God.

At the heart of the call to religious life is a desire to give oneself in love to God in a way so total that the pursuit of union with God makes it impossible for anything or anyone to be more central. One becomes unavailable for marriage.

### The vows

The vow of chastity or consecrated celibacy arises from a hunger to find a love so immense that it impels me to give my whole life in one fell swoop, trusting that the beloved has an infinite desire and capacity for my well-being and happiness. If you feel this hunger to love and be loved in a way that seems to surpass the human capacity, you may be experiencing a call to religious life. Celibacy expresses a desire to be unconditionally attached to Jesus Christ.

A characteristic of consecrated celibacy is a desire to love more and more people, to see all God's children, especially the most needy, as the ones with a primary right to one's care and love. The lives of religious raise for people who meet them a question about the possibility of loving without measure, loving those who have no claim on them as family.

The person called to religious life feels a desire to live simply. The vow of poverty involves assuming a new relationship with things—one that reverences all things, and creation itself, as ultimately given by and belonging to God. Religious share material goods in common and depend on the religious congregation or community to provide what is needed. If you feel a desire to be detached from things, to find your treasure in God, you may be experiencing a call to religious life. Religious poverty witnesses to all people that we do not have an absolute right to accumulate things or to treat them as though they were not for the good of all. The vow of poverty is chosen to express dependence on and trust in God's care for us.

The vow of obedience is often misunderstood as a servile dependence. Actually, it is an acknowledgment that all of us are called to listen to the Holy Spirit speaking through the circumstances of our lives. It is easy to see that married people who have children must make decisions that are good for their family. These may not be the same choices that they would make if they had no responsibilities for each other or their children. They listen to the Holy Spirit revealed in the circumstances of marriage and family.

Religious commit themselves to listen to God speaking through the constitutions and decisions of the community and through those members who are appointed as leaders of the community. God's call is also recognized as coming through the Church and sacred Scripture, the needs of the world and the mission of the community. Listening is always done in prayer and with respect for each person. The witness of obedience is that we are ultimately dependent on God and that a life of interdependence, as opposed to dependence or the illusion of absolute independence, is the way to holiness.

Obedience is assumed to help the religious be honest in his or her search for God's will. If you feel a desire to base your important life decisions more and more completely in a context of God's call, you

may be experiencing a call to religious life.

Each of the vows is rooted in a desire to give self totally to God, to grow in intimacy with Jesus Christ and help people come to love God more fully. Each of the vows is a witness to all people of the primacy of God which is meant to mark the lives of everyone. Because they are about our relationship with God, the vows are always sustained by a life of prayer and by the sacraments. Prayer, both individually and as community, is a central element in the life of every religious.

## Community

Our culture is more supportive of sexual gratification, consumerism and independence than it is of chastity, detachment from material goods and interdependence. Community life is needed to support one who attempts to live values not prevalent in the culture. At the same time, community life is a challenge. We all know that it is difficult to make room in our lives and in our immediate environment for the idiosyncrasies of others. Just think of family gatherings or the workplace and how easily we are annoyed by behaviors that we do not like. Community involves learning lessons of tolerance, self-sacrifice and reverence for persons who are different from us.

Community itself is one of the greatest witnesses that religious life has to offer in a culture where self-interest and individualism can lead to isolationism and even violence.

## Signs of a Call to Religious Life

Love of God that manifests itself in a desire to give one's life as a witness to the immensity of God's love for all people

**Desire to live simply**

**Ability to relate** with a variety of people, to be happy alone or in a group

**Joy in serving others** in any outreach or parish involvement

**Generosity**

**Ability to listen to others** and accept direction when needed

**Desire to love expansively** rather than needing an intimate relationship with one person

**Desire to grow in union with God** through prayer and service of the needy

**The call to priesthood**

A vocation to the priesthood differs from a call to religious life. Some priests, however, are members of religious communities (Franciscans, Jesuits, Dominicans, Precious Blood Fathers, etc.), and so all of the above reflections on religious life apply to them.

Priests are ordained for ministry, which at its heart is a call to lead the members of the Church to holiness by loving and serving the people of a parish or diocesan community. They have a unique call to lead parish communities by bringing them the sacraments and other means to holiness offered through the Church. It is especially through presiding at Eucharist that priests live at the center of the Church and offer members of the Church the most profound gift of God's grace and presence.

In addition to presiding at sacramental celebrations, priests have the responsibility of proclaiming the gospel in ways that inspire and challenge the members of the Church. If you have a love of Scripture and desire to lead the people of God in celebration of the sacraments, you may be called to the priesthood.

Just as Christ's role was to be a reconciler, bringing the broken back into a renewed relationship to God, so reconciling people to God and one another permeates the ministry of a priest. In order to bring healing and health to the Body of Christ, a priest lives close to the people, knowing their triumphs and failures, the pain and joy of the community. He stands with the members of the community at significant moments—when they are joined in marriage, bury their loved ones, in sickness.

It is in these moments that his special relationship to the Body of Christ is most visible. He is at one and the same time the presence of Christ for the community and the representative or voice of the community in its celebrations. The priest knows the privilege and responsibility of modeling the holiness of God for the People of God.

If you feel a deep desire to be at the heart of the Church community, to lead the people by example, you may be called to the priesthood.

Diocesan priests (those who are not also members of religious communities) do not take vows or commit themselves to live in community. They do make promises of celibacy and of obedience to their bishop. These promises are primarily for the sake of ministry but also hold a witness value since they speak of the primacy of God and God's people in the life of a priest.

### The calling to be deacon

Deacons are also ordained for ministry to the People of God. Their ordination puts them in a new relationship to the Church community that requires them to serve the people by aiding them as they journey to union with God. However, their first responsibility is to their families and their second to the way in which they witness in their place of work, the marketplace. The diaconate is primarily a ministry of service, especially to the poor. Deacons share some leadership roles in the worshiping assembly. At Eucharist, they serve at the altar and proclaim the Gospel. They can preach homilies, preside at weddings and at Baptisms. The call to be a deacon involves a love of the Word of God and a desire to serve.

## **Signs of a Call to Priesthood/Diaconate**

Love of God that manifests itself in a desire to give one's life in service to God's People

**Love of the Church** and its sacraments and a desire to celebrate the sacraments with the community

**Love of God's Word** and a desire to proclaim the gospel to God's people

**Desire to model holiness** as Christ's representative among the People of God

**A heart that can listen** to others and reach out in healing

**Ability to be happy** without the intimate companionship of a wife and family

**Generosity**

**Desire to deepen** prayer and relationship with God

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