

The Sprouting of a Vocation

Saint John Bosco is often quoted to have said that one out of every three or four boys has a priestly vocation. It is greatly encouraging to know that God calls so many to the priesthood and even from each of our families. Many are called, few respond. What can be done to encourage our youth or any young man to answer the call to the priesthood? A little insight into what motivates a young man to become a priest might help us to do this. Your writer, a young priest, gives an account here of the pursuit of his own vocation. May this account serve as an insight into what has cultivated at least one and no doubt many vocations.

A newly ordained priest

Sprouting of a vocation

Applying the analogy of a seed we may consider the light by which it springs to life and grows. By this we can understand God who communicates his life to his creatures by the light of truth and out of the fire of his love. As a plant does not have eyes to see the light of the sun but yet grows on account of this light, so the soul does not see God but grows on account of his divine life. Now if a vocation is to reach towards the light of the life of God it must be exposed and sustained by this principle. This light is the knowledge of God, the Word of God Himself. He is made known and loved by the preaching and ministry of Holy Mother Church. Consequently a young boy or man whose heart holds the seedling of a vocation (whether he knows it or not) must be taught, instructed and nourished by Holy Mother Church in the truths of the faith. It is by the light and life of the faith that he will move towards the service of God.

The grace of a vocation has sprouted within your writer's soul especially on account of three lights: by the encouragement of priests, by the words and work of the Liturgy and by the Doctrines of the Faith. Holy Mass was finished. Father M., the parish priest, was carefully cleaning his chalice in the sacristy while your servant, a boy of thirteen years, was returning the candle snuffer to its place in a cupboard. Father broke the silence in a slightly serious tone of voice by saying:

"Hey ah, Timotheos,"

"Yes Father," came the ready reply.

"Did you ever think about becoming a priest?"

"Yes Father."

"Well ah, don't stop thinking about it."

"Yes Father." And so the conversation ended.

Father's double negative statement of "don't stop thinking about it" has been treasured ever since. The double negative form was interesting as it left the matter completely free of an obliging feeling while yet encouraging the idea. The thought of becoming a priest however, stayed far back in the boy's mind just the same. It was made manifest again a year or so later in an answer given to satisfy the curiosity of another questioner: "What do you plan to do after high school?" After a moment of reflection and not wanting to make any deliberation, the following statement was made: "Well, if God wants me to become a priest, I am not opposed."

Time to get serious

Three years later it was time to get serious about the matter. While visiting the Benedictine Monastery of Our Lady of

Guadalupe in Silver City, New Mexico, as a laborer, the young man was advised by the Father Prior to meditate on the words of the Blessed Virgin Mary: "behold the handmaid of the Lord, be it done unto me according to thy word." The meditation made was more or less as follows: "The Blessed Virgin Mary



followed God's will. I have to imitate her and follow God's will. He will make it known to me in time. Now if God wants me to become a priest I am not opposed. If he wants me to become a priest though, the next question must be: What are the proper reasons for someone to become a priest? It seems to me that only real reason to become a priest is for the glory of God and the salvation of souls." and so the meditation ended. A greater understanding of the glory of God and a zealous heart for the salvation of souls had yet to be cultivated. The motives would have to mature over time. There was however, another side to the matter. Was the dear boy ready to leave the things of the world to seek only the things of heaven? This involved a little more than logic. It meant offering oneself unreservedly to do the will of God. The disposition of his will had changed from, "I am not opposed," to, "if God wills, then I will." A firm oblation had to be made.

Need for priests

A few months later a senior priest of the Society of St. Pius X gave a conference on the new apostolate that was being carried out in Poland. He stressed the need for priests for the salvation of souls. This need touched the heart of the senior school boy. He could do something. He might not go to Poland but somehow an extra priest here or there could help to free another for Poland. The oblation was made. "If God wills that I become a priest, then I will it." A visit to the Blessed Sacrament most probably followed.

Not long after, the young aspirant was helping the Rector of the school he attended. The moment offered the Rector the opportunity to ask the boy what were his plans for the future. The following answer was made: "Well, I don't know if I should go to the seminary." Father's paternal reply was that it was a possibility to consider. A later visit to the Rector's office, for one reason or another, was an occasion for the Rector to encourage the idea. His words were very encouraging and left no impulse

of obligation. The matter was completely free. Father's words on this and other occasions were a source of future strength to the grace of the vocation. With such sure direction from his priests the seedling could easily reach towards the great light of the priesthood. An application to the seminary was soon filled and sent out.

Holy Mother Church had thus spoken through her priests to lead her son to the seminary. Her son's response was to do the will of God for his honor and glory and the salvation of souls. Holy Mother Church speaks and works through Her Liturgy

Drawn by the liturgy

In the year 1984 or 1985 at Saint Thomas Aquinas Seminary (at that time located just outside of Ridgefield, Connecticut) His Grace Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre was visiting to confer the Sacrament of Holy Orders. The Church building at the time was under construction. The floor was of plywood, the walls were roughly clad and something of a roof provided an edifice for the Liturgy. The beautiful Altar, His Grace, the sacred ministers, the priests, the servants, the schola, the seminarians and the faithful created the Liturgy. Your servant, at the time a child of five or six years, was told that he was in God's house, even though God couldn't be seen. The child wasn't told however, that God couldn't be heard. At different times during the ceremony a voice sounded forth. It was dignified and venerable. "Is that God?" the boy thought, he wanted to hear it more clearly. He strained to hear what was said and, not understanding, was disappointed when all was finished. "Maybe next time," he thought. And so it was that his mind, ear and heart were captivated by the Holy Liturgy. Many more Sundays would pass while the boy's wonder increased before the Holy Mysteries.

This captivation is not too surprising as it is primarily through the Sacred Liturgy that Holy Mother Church com-

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municates and cultivates the life of God in her children. She leads them to the Altar at least every Sunday. There they join themselves to the prayer of the Sacrifice. Those who are to be ordained Priests to offer the Holy Sacrifice will naturally be drawn to the priesthood through the Liturgy. This was the case of this child at six years of age as he followed in the footsteps of his older brother serving as a torchbearer and in learning the Latin responses to the prayers of the Mass. The prayers that were memorized found a place in his heart. As a deacon years later he would realize the significance of the rest of the Psalm. The singing of the Kyrie, the Gloria, the Creed, the Sanctus, of Vespers and of Compline will become habitual prayers by those who are drawn the singing of God's praises. It is natural to carry the chant and its prayer along with oneself for the rest of the day. These prayers, recited or sung, have struck many a chord in your writer's semi-attentive soul. Liturgical chant thus serves the life of the Church in her vital work of prayer. Its influence on priests, future priests and faithful cannot be ignored as prayer is the very breath of the soul.

Perfect honor and glory

At the core of the Liturgy are the Sacraments themselves. The Holy Sacrifice of the Mass is the core and summit of the Liturgy. To offer it for the perfect honor and glory of God and for the salvation and sanctification of souls is the greatest motive that draws a young man to the priesthood. This brings to mind a crucial meeting once with the Seminary Rector. At one point he had to get down to business with your servant, his seminarian. For quite a few years it didn't seem that he was convinced that the boy had a vocation. He gently suggested that the door was open to leave more than a few times. "Dear boy, why do you want to become a priest?" he asked once directly and in a very serious tone of voice. The response given was equally serious, definite and deliberate. It was: "To offer the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass." It must have had a good effect as the boy was not sent away from the seminary. The an-

swer impressed the boy as well as words of inspiration. Two or three years later the Rector was finally convinced of the boy's vocation and in another meeting spoke his mind with genuine words of encouragement.

Last, but not at all least to mention, is one great and vital light of the Liturgy that brings forth life for vocations. This is the example of good priests, religious and faithful, who know, love and live the liturgy, not simply for its beauty but first as the prayer of the Church for the glory of God and the sanctification of souls. Their profound faith, hope and charity give life to the Church. Such was the example of His Grace Archbishop Lefebvre and now of many of his priestly sons and so many religious and faithful. The burning torch of the Faith is thus passed on through the ages inspiring vocations for the honor of God and the salvation of souls.

Doctrine

Were it not for the teaching of the realities of our Faith there would be no light by which the grace of a vocation may grow. The knowledge of God, of his love for his creatures and of redemption would simply not be known. Thus it is a primary work of Holy Mother Church to instruct her children to know, love and serve God. This is done especially by the teaching of the catechism, by sermons, by Catholic Schools and by the teaching of parents and even older siblings at home. These were the ordinary means by which your writer's vocation has been fostered.

There was a catalyst however, that synthesized and impressed the principle truths of the Faith on his soul. This was done by the preaching of Ignatian Spiritual Exercises twice attended during high school. Having completed the Exercises for a second time a new interest awoke. The desire was to understand and see the link of how the world of the Faith fit together with the world of natural reason and knowledge of philoso-

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phy, of the sciences, of mathematics and so on. The seedling of Faith had to deepen its roots in the understanding of the natural order so that greater lights could be understood and absorbed by its leaves in the supernatural order. The grace of the vocation was thus taking deeper root.

Being contemplative by temperament your writer naturally pondered the truths of the Faith and their importance during his mundane occupations and employments. One employment was to labor in the trade of stone and brick masonry. The labor was demanding and at times monotonous especially when helping to build something of simple utility. Thought of the eternal dimension of life filled the void of the occupation to aspire to a higher service.

Aspirations to higher service were certainly in order. "To whom much is given, much is expected." This saying was a call to responsibility. Having received a very good Catholic education, at least by modern standards, this responsibility was taken seriously but at times needed to be encouraged. This was done in a special way by a venerable older man, master craftsman of stone masonry. He worked, mostly on his own, beautifying the grounds of the school and parish with beautiful works made of stone. The detail of the work, the creation of something beautiful and enduring was found to be inspiring. The dear man would see his aspirant watching him at work. He would send the boy on his way pointing in the direction of the school, saying: "go study, you don't want to do this for the rest of your life." Not long before he died he was very glad to greet his former aspirant who was then wearing the cassock. He respectfully removed his hat from his head to the embarrassment of the former. He assured the young man that it was his great pleasure to do so. His example of faith and respect for the priesthood is now a further lesson for the responsibility to serve God well in the holy state of the priesthood.

Pivotal point

Having received so much of the light of the faith while so much of the world lives in darkness, it was natural to want to share it. A lively faith must bear fruit one way or another. Your servant was then at a pivotal point when others of the world started to ask questions concerning the Catholic Faith. There was a protestant Baptist, a well meaning man who asked what the principal truths of the Catholic Faith were. The answer that was given was a simple recitation and short explanation of the Apostles' Creed. This answer seemed to satisfy him. The next question touched on a particular Protestant difficulty. He asked: "How does a Catholic preacher know that he is sent to preach the word of God?" The need of authority to preach to others was a concern for him. The answer given was an explanation of the Church's teaching Authority. Also given was an explanation of the objective vocation which is the actual call of Holy Mother Church during the ceremony of ordination, to

which a candidate answers: "I am here." Other explanations were given as well. These answers made sense to him. There was nothing to argue about. A humble question was asked, and a humble answer was given. This was the second time that your servant was asked by a protestant for an explanation of the Faith. The first time was a year or so before with a question concerning the Blessed Virgin Mary, of how she is the Mother of God. It was a joy to explain the doctrines about our Blessed Mother. The ready answers to these questions above sparked a desire to help Protestants come to the light of the Faith. The grace of a vocation was budding. The years at the seminary are a huge introduction to the many mysteries and essential doctrines of the Faith. The Faith again, is the light by which the soul lives and grows in the life of God. With the light of Faith and the liturgical life shining so brightly at the Seminary, the seminarians have just to absorb it and grow.

Conclusion

What has been given here is a personal account of the pursuit of the grace of a vocation. It is one instance of many of the like, of the journey towards the priesthood. It is as a seed that springs to life and must grow seeking the light and warmth of the sun, the true knowledge and love of God. May it please God that many potential vocations may draw the light and example they need from all that we can do in living our Faith in its entirety close to the holy liturgy.



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