

Pastor's Pen: What is a Vocation...and what is not

The word 'vocation' comes from the Latin word 'vocare', which means 'to call.' In our society we use the word vocation to mean many things. Usually it means a powerful feeling toward a career or occupation. I think this common usage blurs what we as Catholics mean when we use the word 'vocation.' In fact, when we use it as Catholics, we do not mean a career, occupation, or job at all. What we mean is far greater.

What we mean by 'vocation' is more the idea of the manner of life in which a person relates to society and to The Body of Christ, the Church. It is a state of life. We believe that vocation is not necessarily formed by aptitudes and abilities as it is by divine design. As God is the one who sees the big picture in a way simply not doable by human beings, we believe that each person is made on purpose and with a purpose. Because we have free will, we can ignore, accept, or reject that calling. God does not force us to serve Him and each other. He calls us to it.

We all start in one of the four vocations: the single life. What does that mean? It means that each of us starts in vocation by which we relate to the world and to God as a single person. Most will leave this group to join one of the other three. God will call some to permanently live within this state. Being single does mean one is beneath calling to the other three; only that one stays in this way of life.

Some might be called to the professed religious life. In this vocation, a man or woman is called to serve God and His Church as a brother or sister. They give themselves over in service to a religious community. Religious orders usually have what is called a charism; a focus of ministry within the Church and society as a whole. Some orders are teachers. Some do health care. Some work exclusively with the poor. Some called cloistered orders, pray for the good of the Church. They might do things like make hosts or vestments to support themselves. In short, they commit themselves to engaging in the spiritual and corporal works of mercy in very specific ways. They remained unmarried, so they take vows of chastity. They also may make promises toward simplicity of life, stability, and renounce private property through a vow of poverty (all property is communal).

The other two vocations are called sacramental vocations: Matrimony and Holy Orders. Each of these require sacramental grace to happen as a fundamental change happens. In Matrimony, the man and woman become one through the exchange of vows and rings. When Catholics marry, they also make promises of fidelity, mutual love, mutual support, and openness to bearing children and bringing those children up in the ways of the faith. The married person is also called to chastity. Here, though, it means reserving the use of their sexuality to each other in a way that leaves itself open to life. By God's grace, the two are made one. This is why Jesus tells us "What God has joined together, let no one separate." (Mark 10:9) It is a bond that points to the inseparable union of Christ and His Church.

For a married couple, they relate to God, His Church, and society as married people. What they do to earn money is called a career. They might have a deep passion for what they do as a career. Those careers might well require a deep passion to be done well. That deep passion is what the world calls a vocation.

When we as Catholics speak of vocation, we make this difference: career is one's job, vocation is one's calling. One's vocation trumps one's job. A married person's first duty, after God, is directed toward their spouse and children. This is more important than the loyalty to one's job or career. It is more important than other relationships. It is more important than the accrual of wealth and power. The marital bond is the primary relationship. This is why sexual infidelity is so heinous. It simulates a marital bond without being a marital bond; it is a mockery of marriage.

For most Catholics, their vocation is Matrimony. For a very small percentage of Catholic men, their call will be to Holy Orders. Holy Orders are comprised of three levels: deacon, priest, and bishop. There are two types of deacons: permanent and transitional. A permanent deacon, as the name suggests, is a man who is ordained to the diaconate and remains as a deacon. He may be married or unmarried, but once ordained, if he is single, he must remain so to be a deacon. If he is married and his wife dies, he cannot remarry and remain a deacon. Usually a deacon will have a job outside of the Church. He earns his living there. A few work for parishes or dioceses as paid employees. Deacons can baptize, witness marriages without Mass, do funerals without Mass, and can do many other ministries within a parish. They cannot consecrate the Eucharist (can't 'say Mass'), Anoint the Sick, nor hear Confessions. Without priests, these three sacraments cannot happen. A transitional deacon moves on to priesthood. For example: I was deacon for a year and assigned to Our Lady of Lourdes in Columbia. That next year I was ordained to the priesthood.

The second level of Holy Orders is priesthood. A priest is one who serves God and the Church in a specific way. He relates to the world as priest. This means he lives simply, is celibate (his sexuality is chaste and ordered to giving witness to the unity of Kingdom of Heaven), and is faithful to the teachings of Christ and His Church. He doesn't earn money by simply being a priest. He earns his money by being a pastor, or a teacher, or chaplain, and so on. In those roles, he has specific things he is to do to maintain the spiritual, fiscal, and educational needs of that to which he is assigned. A priest might belong to a diocese (aka secular priest) or to a religious order. He is assigned by his bishop (for secular) or by his provincial or abbot (for religious) to certain duties. His bishop gives him certain duties and the ability to do sacraments (called faculties) which gives the parish the ability to do its mission. On top of the things that a deacon can do, a priest can also anoint the sick, consecrate the Eucharist (say Mass), hear Confessions, and with the permission of his bishop, he can confirm. The priest is called to selflessly serve those placed in his care.

The third level of Holy Orders is Bishop. The bishops are successors of the apostles. Most serve in dioceses and archdioceses, some serve in diplomatic posts, and some serve within the Curia. Like priests, they are also called to live simple, holy, and celibate lives. They relate to God and His people as bishops. They make their money by running a diocese, by being a diplomat, or working in the Curia. A bishop is assigned to his position by the Pope, who himself is a bishop (Bishop of Rome). Some bishops, called cardinals, are given the additional task of electing the pope when a pope dies. In addition to all the things a deacon and priest can do, they also are given the task of conferring Holy Orders (called ordination) on any of the levels of Holy Orders. Only a bishop can ordain.

All vocations are necessary to the well-being of the Church. Next week, we will talk about how we know what God calls us to be.