

Pastor's Pen: What is Discernment...and what it is not

Last week I talked about vocations. A vocation is NOT a career, but an identity that one has in relationship to God and those around us. Each of the four vocations (single, professed religious, matrimony, and holy orders) has a specific identity which helps build up the Body of Christ and transform the world around us.

The art of discernment is about finding out what God intent is for each and every person. How does God want you or your child to serve Him and His Church? Each is necessary to the good of the whole Body of Christ. While God forces no one to follow His plan, He will make known to us what that plan is. It won't come through an angelic vision. So how does it come?

In talking with Fr. Chris Aubuchon, the vocational director of the diocese, he pointed to a tool for discernment put out by Focus (Fellowship of Catholic University Students): RIM. RIM stands for relationship, identity, and mission. Usually, in discernment most go to mission first. That is, do I want to be married, a priest, or a nun? This is putting the cart before the horse. Proper discernment begins with a relationship.

Building a Relationship

A vocation is rooted in service to God and His people. To find out what one's vocation is starts with a relationship with God and His people. The major building block of that relationship with God is the same as it is in our human relationships: communication. When we speak of communication with God, we are talking about prayer. A prayer life is absolutely essential to the discernment process. Prayer is more than hurling words in God's direction. It is openness to Him in our lives expressed through our words and actions, both individually and communally. Pope Benedict XVI remarked, *"This is the message I want to share with you today. I ask you to look into your hearts each day to find the source of all true love. Jesus is always there, quietly waiting for us to be still with him and to hear his voice. Deep within your heart, God is calling you to spend time with him in prayer. But this kind of prayer, real prayer, requires discipline; it requires making time for moments of silence every day. Often it means waiting for the Lord to speak. Even amid the business and stress of our daily lives, we need to make space for silence, because it is in the silence that we find God, and in silence that we discover our true self. And in discovering our true self, we discover the particular vocation which God has given us for building up His church and the redemption of our world."*

We build a relationship with God through taking time to pray. We cannot presume what God wants from us. Sometimes that means sitting in silence; especially in front of the Blessed Sacrament. It definitely means keeping connected to God through the sacramental life of the Church, especially through Mass and Confession. Living outside a state of grace will greatly curtail that relationship and ability to discern.

Our faith is more than words. Those words must find themselves expressed through our actions. Great relationships are built upon selflessness and a willingness to serve. This willingness to serve and be selfless leads to the second step in discernment: identity.

Identity and Discernment

Once a person has wedded themselves by God's grace through prayer to a life of selfless service, then one can start to also see themselves in the larger vocations. Cultivating service and selflessness go a long way to making sure that one does not enter a vocation for power. The camp I ran for 11 years had a motto, "Lead in order to serve, not to rule." It is my belief that if a young man builds a life of virtue, which by its nature is other-centered, then it will be both easier for him to discern a vocation and live out that vocation in a manner pleasing to God.

Service and selflessness encourage us to look beyond ourselves. It is there we find the core Catholic identity. In it we follow Christ who said of Himself, "The Son of Man came to serve and not to be served and to give His life as a ransom for the many." (Matt 20:28) This is our identity. Without this identity we cannot properly discern God's will nor can we properly and fruitfully live any vocation without it. Nothing so obscures discernment as a selfish heart.

Mission

The final step of discernment is leaving yourself open to the particular mission God is calling you to live. These missions are the four vocations I spoke of last week. Three of the missions have official discernment processes that are done prior to any vows being taken. For matrimony, that process is called courtship. Not all people we date we end up marrying. That courtship becomes a discernment process that alerts us to whether we should marry. It is essential that both parties are open to knowing the other and allowing the other to know them. It is essential that mutual service is cultivated.

For the professed religious life, that process is a novitiate, where both the person and religious community discern together whether the person is called to the religious life and to that particular community. One does not say, "I am going to be a brother or nun" and then treat the formation process as hoops to jump through. Many times, discernment is done and the answer becomes clear that one is not called to this particular vocation. The seminary operates under the same dynamic when it comes to priesthood. A seminary is an atmosphere in which the young man can ask himself the questions that need to be asked and allows himself to be known so that discernment can be done by the seminary as well. A young man does not come to the conclusion that he is going to be a priest and then joins the seminary. Our diocese would not allow a man to join the seminary in such a state. Many times the answer comes back 'no.'

No time spent in discernment is time wasted. God builds us up to our good and the good of all.

Note to Parents

Parents can be the single greatest help to their children when it comes to vocational discernment or they can be the greatest obstacle. They will stand before God for whether they helped or hindered. It is not helpful to force your child into a vocation. It then becomes about your will and not God's will. It is not helpful for you to forbid and try to dissuade your child from a particular vocation. Again, it is then about your will and not God's will. Certainly no Catholic parent wants to make themselves God's rival in their children's life. Pray with them and for them. Help them in their quests to seek God's will. Why? Because it is in God's will that your child will find joy and fulfillment.