



## **A Reflection on Priesthood**

*“What a man is called  
to be as a priest”*

*“Is it for me?”*



Dear Friend in Christ

Where am I heading? What is God calling me to do with my life? Am I following God's will or my will? It is not always easy to understand the direction that God wants for us. While the decision on which path to follow ultimately comes down to you, understand that you do not need to be alone in making this decision. There are many resources and good people available to help you on the way to know what is your vocation.

Vocation—it is a calling by God to follow a specific path. We all receive them. The question is, do we follow the vocation that God puts before us. A vocation to the priesthood is one of many vocations, and is possibly a road that you are considering. Before you say “yes” to priesthood, there is a need to enter into honest prayer, thoughtful reflection and to have a basic understanding of what a priest is called to do in his life. Priesthood is not a career option, but a total way of living in which a man, once ordained, gives his whole self to God and Church, 100%.

The priest stands as a sacramental witness of the presence of God in the world. This vision of priestly life is lived each day in the parishes of the Diocese of Youngstown and the diverse institutions which serve the needs of the people of Northeast Ohio. The Diocese is part of a tapestry of ethnic, racial, and cultural diversity. Diocesan priests work in this challenging mosaic of humanity.

Requirements to be a part of the proud tradition of the priesthood are understandably high. Emotional maturity, intelligence, a deep and prayerful commitment to serve God and His people are essential. Whatever one's age or present level of education, the Diocese of Youngstown provides the necessary tools, formation, and direction to be an effective priest for the people of God.

Please use this booklet as a resource to help springboard you forward in discerning if God is truly calling you to serve at His table. Then, contact the Vocations Office for more information and to explore where Christ is truly calling you to be.

Sincerely in Christ,  
Fr. Christopher Luoni  
Vocation Director

## **In Service to the Church, the Priest is Called to be:**

### ***One Who Celebrates the Life of Jesus***

This is the very heart of the call to the priesthood. Aware of his own unworthiness, the priest is a man who joyfully walks in the footsteps of Christ. He hears the teaching of Jesus and through his own example, images to others, God's call to a life of holiness.

The celebration of Mass best exemplifies this role. After preaching the Good News, the priest becomes the fragile instrument that makes Christ truly present in His fullness in the Eucharist. The priest is the catalyst of the faith of the Church bringing forth new life.

### ***One Who Reconciles the Sinner to Christ and His Church***

It is the Christian, conscious of his sinfulness and needful of God's mercy who can witness most eloquently to what a priest can mean for a person in the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Broken and humbled, a Catholic in need of healing turns to Christ's priest for the tenderness and forgiveness he or she desperately needs.

The priest is a compassionate listener who is in touch with his own need for God. He offers to others God's own forgiveness. As the ordained representative of the Church, he is empowered to forgive sins in the name of God and the Christian community.

Many an anguished person has felt the healing of God's love in confession. Unable to open up to anyone, he or she can, by the mystery of the priesthood, reach out to Christ.

### ***One Who Teaches the Way of Christ***

Jesus was most commonly called Rabbi or "Teacher." The priest is also called to be a teacher. And just as Christ taught all ages the truth of God's love, so the priest is in touch with children, teenagers, young

adults, single people, married couples, senior citizens—the whole spectrum of human kind. No race, no ethnic group, no human being is excluded. The priest exemplifies Christ’s individual, undivided, and universal love for all.

### *One Who Brings God’s Healing to the Broken*

The pain of living and dying is very often all too visible and all too paralyzing. Quite often, the priest’s words and his caring are all that stand between pain and the person. In the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick, the priest prays with the community for the individual’s healing and peace. The priest is a familiar presence in hospitals, nursing homes, prisons—wherever there is loneliness and pain. The priest very often embodies in a profound way the compassion of God. Having felt Christ’s love deeply, he becomes a wounded healer for others.

### *One Who Celebrates the Most Important Events of a Person’s Life*

It seems that whenever anything significant is happening in a person’s life, the priest is there—always at the heart of life and at the pulse of the human family. Whether it’s joyfully welcoming a new Christian into God’s Church, or witnessing the Lord’s covenant of love in the Sacrament of Marriage, the priest is present. The Church he serves, the people of God, become his spouse, ever changing him and he sustaining them.

### *One Who Fights for Justice Side by Side with God’s People*

So much of the evil around us is occasioned by human hands: the slaughter of the unborn person, the dehumanization of poverty, the institutionalization of violence, the opium of consumerism, the cancer of prejudice. All these and others threaten our world and our very existence.

As Catholics, we are called to fight oppression and evil with the Gospel of love. The priest as proclaimer of this Gospel stands side by side in solidarity with the people of God and often acts as a prophetic voice urging society as well as the Church to involvement. He challenges the forces of apathy and indifference.

## Points for Reflection

### Vocations: A Spiritual Insight

By Rev. Terence Tierney

The call to priesthood comes to us through Jesus himself in the way of a divine invitation just as it did with the Apostles. The genuineness of the Biblical vocation revolves around the fact that the one called sees and understands that God is, in fact, calling him to a special work. If we delve deeply into the Scriptures themselves, we discover vocations by way of divine imperative. St. Paul is the classic example of this type of call.

Throughout all vocations the theme of God's initiative in the call rules supreme. His call is freely given; it cannot be bargained for. The one called is commissioned by God, not by human beings.

“You did not choose me, no, I chose you: and I commissioned you to go out and to bear fruit, fruit that will last...” (John 15:16).

Paul reminds us that he, as an apostle, does not owe his authority to men or his appointment to any human being. He has been appointed by Jesus Christ and by God the Father who raised Jesus from the dead (Galatians 1:1-2)

To all those called, God grants his divine assistance. The Lord constantly watches over those he has chosen for special work, as indeed he guards and looks kindly on all who love and believe in him. In all instances of vocation in Biblical literature, there can be noted a golden thread weaving itself through every example of divine election. This essential element is God's undying assurance of protection through grace. This divine mothering, this firm support, in effect guarantees the successful outcome of the mission of the inspirational effectiveness of the office (Genesis 12:2-3; Judges 6:12-14). The Lord will strengthen his people with a “mighty hand and an outstretched arm and with signs and wonders.”

Oftentimes it happens that the ones chosen react out of fear in the face of a vocation. Moreover, frequently God's call, his gift of a mission or office (service), is met with trepidation.

We often fear that the task will be too much for us; we feel weak and helpless. Sometimes it is one's knowledge of his own self-limitations and meager talent that provokes fear and rejection. On the other hand, genuine humility can evoke this response; "Lord, I am not worthy." But more often than not, rejection of one's divine invitation stems from fear of suffering—of what must be sacrificed. This sad fact remains; Vocations are continually ignored or, worse still, abused because of the difficulties that the call entails.

It is often the knowledge that we are unequal to the task at hand that renders one unsure in terms of accepting his vocation. Moses, it was said, feared the faithlessness of the people (Exodus 4:11). Jeremiah feared he could not speak properly the message with which he was entrusted (Jeremiah 1:6-9). But alas, the Lord dispels all doubt concerning His assistance. He helped Moses to deal effectively with the faithlessness of the people by granting dramatic miracles through His servant's hands. In like manner, the Lord assured Jeremiah that He will place His own words on Jeremiah's lips.

"...Ah, Lord God! I do not know how to speak; I am a child!' But God replied, 'Do not say, I am child. Go now to those whom I send you and say whatever I command you. Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to protect you—it is the Lord who speaks!' Then God put out His hand and touched my mouth and said to me: 'There! I am putting my words into your mouth. Look, today I am setting you over the nations and over kingdoms...'" (Jeremiah 1:6-9).

We have recorded yet another Old Testament example in the case of Isaiah. He is fearful but the Lord makes his words strong and sharp (Isaiah 42:1-2). God grants Isaiah a mouth and tongue for true and effective teaching.

"The Lord God has given me a disciple's tongue. So that I may know how to reply to the weary He provides me with speech..." (Isaiah 50:7).

Turning to the New Testament, we discover Jesus giving His apostles the power to drive out devils in His name and perform miracles in order that others might believe that God sent them, that they really are engaged in a true and authentic ministry (Matthew 10:1-8; Luke 9:1-12). In his letter to the Christian community at Corinth, Paul informs us that God has made him sufficient for the task (2 Corinthians 3,4).

The Spirit of God endows His servants with grace necessary to fulfill the mission entrusted to them or the office which they hold. All the various calls go together to make up the Body of Christ, and the Holy Spirit guides and strengthens for the work to be done. The unity of all the vocations that make up the Church is perfected in its very diversity.

The one who desires to serve, as we read in the third chapter of Ecclesiastes, must prepare himself for the ordeal. The likelihood of suffering runs high; the pain cannot be avoided except at the risk of compromising one's vocation. God gives no sure-fire passport to His chosen which insures their safe and unrestricted passage through the avenues of life.

The ones called will be opposed. However, there is no need to fear, for God is with us—guiding and protecting us. God's help never fails if we refuse to cave into the pressure of earthly life. Jesus promises his apostles and disciples their share of persecution. They were to be expelled from towns for the name of Jesus. But our Lord does not leave us unattended and alone, rather He sends His Spirit to place hope in our hearts and His words upon our lips (Matthew 10:19-20; Mark 13:11; Luke 21:14-15). We should not fear, for we are in the Lord's good keeping and our mission will succeed. Nothing, not even death, can cause its defeat. God does not allow opposition or pain without giving us the necessary grace to overcome the obstacles and bring victory to the mission entrusted to us. The road will not be easy nor the paths smooth; luxury we can ill afford and wealth will not be our material inheritance. Yet peace of mind shall reign in our soul and hope will be our constant companion.

### *What About Celibacy?*

Sexual attraction to another person is one more avenue that we must endeavor to explore. The call of Christ to his service does not render a person neutral with regard to his sexuality. The natural and normal sexual attraction we all have as constitutive of our personalities remains even after we are called. Vocation in no way grants a sure cure for sexual temptation. In fact, quite frankly, the temptation to indulge in this area is perhaps greater after one has sworn off sexual expression than it was prior to commitment. If you feel that your physical desires eliminate you from this call, again I must repeat, you are sadly mistaken. Healthy personalities are persons with a proper sexual identity and balanced sexuality. If you are of this state, then the Church assures you not to worry; you fill one of the prereq-

uisites for orders.

There are no formal taboos outlined for one who feels himself called. He must remain in contact with women as well as men. This is a requirement for healthy psychological growth.

The laws that should govern your sexual life are God's laws of moral goodness and true love. However, there does come a time in one's personal history, if he chooses to follow Jesus' call, that the added dimension of ecclesiastical law begins to touch his or her life.

Sex is a beautiful experience, a redeeming and loving encounter, but an option which priests or religious choose to deny themselves for higher and nobler reasons than mere expediency. If you are celibate because the Church says that you must be, then I believe, sooner or later, you will collide with the Church over this matter and eventually become very unhappy. But, on the other hand, if you are celibate for reasons of a freely chosen nature and because you desire to dedicate yourself totally to the Lord, then inner peace and joy will at length support your sexuality. Will the temptations cease because you are ordained? Will Orders cancel out sexual drives? Of course not; humanity is here to stay. One must learn to live with temptations. The grace of God will help you to deal with them adequately, if not always completely—as when grace is resisted.

Christ never viewed celibacy as a necessary element in the life of an apostle or the foundation upon which a priesthood finds its basis. Rather, he preached that the roots of ministry penetrate deeply into the ground of life, anchoring themselves in the soil of love. Jesus corrected the prevalent error that celibacy is dehumanizing by living unto death the most humanizing of all existences—a life of total love. We cannot deny the inspirational fact that the most human person who ever lived chose to be celibate.

Just as Church history admits to a married ministry, so also does it hold celibacy up as an ideal. There has never been a time in the history of the Church when celibacy was not proposed as an ideal, and there shall never be a time in the history of the Church when Christians will fail to be impressed by men and women who choose not to marry so that they



might express another dimension of love.

I believe celibacy to be much more profound than legal, more Scriptural than canonical, more transcendent than immanent. It seems to me that celibacy bears special witness to resurrection love, a love which is more spiritual than physical, more divine than human.

Celibacy is not a sacrifice but a grace, not a duty but a privilege, not a crucifixion but a divine blessing; it is not the only true Christian witness but a unique one, not the only form of a divine call but a special one. Priestly celibacy finds its origin in the life of Christ.

### *When Does God Call?*

I do not think that anyone who is totally honest with himself can ever pinpoint the exact moment he experiences the call of God. No one is given a vocation in a moment. The call to serve happens over many moments. Sometimes it occurs late in one's life; however, more often than not, God begins to push those he has chosen at a relatively early age.

No one who is called should see himself as being set apart or in some way privileged. To view vocation or the call to serve as requiring high intelligence, good looks, or a vibrant personality or for one to hold these gifts as definitely constitutive of vocations is to misread the grace of God's calling. God works in mysterious ways with diverse personalities, and it is this personal variety that enable the priesthood and religious life to reach all kinds of people: persons with different psychological make-ups and emotional and educational backgrounds and unique talents. God sees to it that all people are covered with His service by calling into it a variety of individuals.

Perhaps the most normal, average folks are those most sought after by the Lord. He refuses to be caught up in favoritism. The Lord does not play favorites. Occasionally, the Lord will call to Himself men who are the least likely of candidates for ministry, persons whose past lives can be characterized as less than virtuous. I keep remembering a man like St. Augustine. We are told that this saintly man of God once rode roughshod over the avenues of virtue, ripping down the signposts

of justice and love, leaving moral wreckage in his wake. Yet this very same man, at some unknown point in his life, recognized the call of God and chose to respond. The power of God's grace is inestimable and irresistible, and history has proven this to be true repeatedly. No one of us is too good to have a vocation, just as one must never think of himself too sinful to be considered a candidate for service in Christ's Church.

Sin is such a glaring reality in each of our lives that if the Lord counted sin against us when He rationed out vocations He would surely be without any legitimate stewards. Remember, nothing you have done, or will do, can ever negate the call of God. If you consider yourself holy, you need not apply for Christ's service; for you do not meet His requirements. To be conscious of holiness is the first step toward presumption and damning pride. One who is really holy is the one who is conscious of it least. The closer you move toward God the further you realize yourself to be from His love. If you are actually moving and growing toward Christ, you become extremely conscious of your own sinfulness. You wonder to yourself, "How could he have overlooked my sins?"

A sense of one's sinfulness is the beginning of life with Christ. No one who has ever lived on this earth has lived perfectly, save Jesus and Mary. Everyone else has died with promises to keep and a great number of debts to pay—to God and to his neighbor. Many think, mistakenly, that those who enter the priesthood or religious life are persons of heroic virtue. Anyone who has ever entertained thoughts of aspiring to serve the Church of Christ, in a special manner, should be aware that personal sinfulness never bars the door. The door is locked only to those who choose to remain self-seekers, caring little about life and love as Christ reveals these absolutes in Scripture.

### *What is Seminary Life Like?*

I found the seminary experience most rewarding and extremely fruitful. The years that I was away studying were the best of my life. I will not be dishonest and say that those days were without struggle or a degree of failure. What I will say is that the good experiences far outweigh the bad. I discovered a new way of living—one which allows me to be myself with all my various limitations, yet one which continually called me to become a more perfect man. Was it difficult? You bet it was! Would I do it over again? Gladly! For the beauty, friendship, and privilege far outdis-

tance any of the necessary struggles. The personal relationships I developed over the years taught me to be a man, inspired confidence, and pushed me toward maturity.

The seminary experience today places the responsibility for growth upon our shoulders. It call each of us who enters to become a mature man of God. The seminary life is as challenging as it is difficult, as beautiful as it is educational. I was reborn in the seminary, for my spiritual life resurrected there. I received more love than I ever gave and many unexpected things happened to me. All for the better, I might add.

### *Why Me?*

With so much suffering in the world today and evil still at large, the world needs individuals who can dedicate themselves to help save the forces of love from defeat. We must offer hope to a world hopelessly confused. God has never failed to answer the needs of the poor or to provide relief for his overburdened people. How can He fail to raise up prophets and priests in our midst? He cannot and He will not fail us. And perhaps He may have called you, or will at some future day, ask your assistance at His altar. He refuses to fail us.

Perhaps God needs your love, as well as your life, in a special way. Perhaps He is speaking to you today through the ordinary events of everyday life. If you listen very carefully, you just may hear His voice. However, no one hears the voice of the Lord unless he takes the time out each day to be silent and reflective. The Lord acts throughout history, in and with the hustle and bustle of daily routines, but His words are only understood in solitude.

The choice is now up to you. You are free to be faithful to your choice. He offers freely, and accepts only a free response. The challenge is apparent, the road winding, but the joy is unsurpassed. To be called is to be given a promise and God is always faithful to His promise.

## PRIESTHOOD ... IS IT FOR ME?

Are you thinking about your future? Where you are going? What are you doing with your life? Have you ever wondered: "Should I be doing something else with my life?" "How can I better serve God and the Church in this world?" "Could God be calling me to be a priest?" "Can I meet the challenges of a priestly life?"

If any or several of these questions are on your mind, you are not alone! Many men are seeking answers to questions like these. Such seeking is what makes discernment an exciting and challenging part of one's life. When done with selfless motivation and a desire to know God's will, it is a time of profound grace.

The Father has a personal plan for you. That plan began at Baptism and continues to unfold throughout your life. His plan for you included your personal vocation to live and love in His Name.

Each person's call is uniquely individual and personal, tailored to character, abilities, gifts and desire. However, there are common elements that clue you into the need for beginning a discernment process.

### *Here are some things to look for*

- † When you realize your life is taking a new direction and you aren't sure where or why. Do you find that you are drawn to your parish community in a greater way? When you give time to Church and community, does it bring greater joy, a sense of purpose, and the desire to be more involved? Do you look at the priest during Mass and imagine that it could be you? These could be signs that God is calling you to the vocation of priesthood
  
- † When you experience that there is more to this life than what you already know. Society gives us its measure for success, a measure that is very worldly. Are you discovering that society's measure, for which you may have longed to meet, is no longer the true measure you want for your life? Do you feel yourself being drawn away from worldly things and gravitating towards that which is more spiritual? These could be signs that God is calling you to the vocation

of priesthood

- † When you feel a sense of restlessness, as if something is missing even when everything seems to be going well. There is stability in your job, yet it does not provide the satisfaction that you seek. Have you dated and thought marriage is a possibility, yet you feel blocked and unable to make the total commitment called for in the sacrament of marriage? You realize that the social life you live, which once was everything, now does not bring the true happiness you are seeking. These could be signs that God is calling you to the vocation of priesthood
  
- † When you realize that there are new options for your life and your future. Sometimes we stay locked on a path in life because it seems to be a safe road. Without it, how would we manage to live. Yet lately, your relationship with God and the community of the Church are giving you refreshment and a sense that there may be a new path to follow. These could be signs that God is calling you to the vocation of priesthood
  
- † When you are evaluating your personal, psychological and spiritual needs, and you discover additional gifts, strengths and talents, for service of God's people. People around you notice a change for the better. You are more engaged and thoughtful of others needs at work, with the family and at church. You are affirmed by others in the service that you give realizing that you have been of great help to them yet not fully understanding yourself how you were able to do or say so much. You find that your prayer life is not only growing, but shifting as you are more aware of the needs of others and your want to help them through your personal prayer. These could be signs that God is calling you to the vocation of priesthood

### *What to do ...*

If you are presently discerning, or think you are ready to enter into a discernment process, the following steps will help:

**Prayer** - spending time with God, speaking to Him, listening to Him, and in that way, coming to know that God helps us to

understand His will. Increasing devotion and reception of the Eucharist is also suggested.

**Spiritual Direction** - regularly and honestly talking over your spiritual life with a priest will enable you to understand where God is leading you. The priest is an objective listener of patterns of the Holy Spirit at work in you.

**Inquire** - seek out happy, satisfied, fulfilled priests and seminarians to find out why they are happy. Ask them their stories and their discernment of God's call.

**Check it out** - look into seminary life. Visit one of the seminaries our diocese uses. Meet the candidates who themselves are discerning a priestly vocation. Come for Mass or evening prayer and a meal. As Jesus invited, "Come and see."

God does not usually jump out of the sky and tap us on the shoulder or knock us off a horse the way He did to some people in the Bible. Ordinarily, God uses very common means to let us know what He is calling us to. It is always very personal to each one of us. There are no absolute rules for this. In one sense, that's a wonderful thing - that God respects our freedom and He wants us to use our head and heart in trying to discern our vocation. Remember that famous line in "A Man For All Seasons," where St. Thomas More says something like "God made the animals to serve Him by instinct blindly, but He made man to serve Him wittingly." That is, to use his wits. We have to use our wits to try to discern what God is asking of us.

In the history of the Church, you will consistently find spiritual writers and theologians saying that there are certain natural signs that God uses by which He inclines us and draws us toward a vocation. The Church has always looked for those signs. If a person has those signs in some degree, then there will be a good chance he is called. You never know for sure ... but all the way along the line, you will be asking yourself if there are present, several discernible signs by which you can judge whether you are called or not.

## Need more help?

*The Office of Vocations is here to assist you with your discernment. We invite you to come and explore the many avenues that lead to priesthood: seminary visits, vocation retreats, talking with priests and seminarians. We encourage you to talk to someone from the Office of Vocations. We want to support you. Don't hesitate to call on us. There is no pressure to join a seminary, only honest answers and information.*

**Call or write:**

**Office of Vocations  
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**330-744-8451**



[www.YoungstownVocations.org](http://www.YoungstownVocations.org)

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## *A Personal Prayer for Vocations*

Gracious God,  
You have given me life  
and have blessed me in many ways.  
Through Baptism You have sent me  
to continue the mission of Jesus  
by sharing my love with others.  
Strengthen me to respond to  
Your will each day.

Help me to become all You desire of me.  
Inspire me to make a difference in  
the lives of others.  
Through the work of the Spirit  
open my whole self  
to understand the vocation  
You invite me to live and  
lead me to choose the way of life  
You have planned for me.

Open the hearts of all to listen to Your call.  
Fill all with Your Holy Spirit that  
we may have listening hearts and  
the courage to respond to You.  
Enkindle in my heart  
and the hearts of others the desire  
to make the world a better place  
by serving as  
Lay Minister, Sister, Priest,  
Brother or Deacon.  
Amen