

**VOCATIONS IN THE CHURCH  
LOOKING BACK AND LOOKING TO THE FUTURE**

There is no doubt that we live in a world of change. This world of change affects our lives as human beings and as members of the Church. Over this past decade and in the initial years of the present decade as we wait for a new millennium, the forces of change are part and parcel of our daily lives.

Within society changes which were merely hypothetical conversations have become a reality in a short period of time. From isolated continents and nations, we have become a global village with interdependence evident in our joint concerns for finances, energy, population and resources. We have witnessed the cry for freedom and equality, the rise of new nations, the collapse of the Soviet Union, the suppression of colonialism, the emphasis on personal dignity conscious of the realities of racism and sexism.

Within technology, science and medicine, incredible discoveries have been made which have paradoxically enriched and threatened human life and the life of our planet and solar system. At the heart of so many of these discoveries has been the focus on new understandings of the human person from the moment of conception to the moment of death.

A new individualism seems to have taken hold of much of society which looks to one's own needs as the measure of goodness and truth. There is a sexual revolution which touches the lives of individuals and families, as well as society itself. Celibacy and lifetime commitments no longer have the value or prestige which they once enjoyed.

Despite increased opportunities for education and maturation, young people delay vocational decisions regarding life choices with a corresponding demand for a longer educational process to reach a terminal degree necessary to earn a living. Uncertainty and reluctance to make long-term decisions characterize the lives of many people today.

It seems also that experience has become the norm for what is good, true and beautiful. One's own experience becomes the basis for judging the value and validity of what is taking place or should be taking place in our world. It becomes far too easy today to reject or ignore tradition and history.

Change has also characterized the life of the Church. The realities of change in our world have had a dramatic impact on the Church. Such changes have helped and hindered the mission of the Church. However, at the present moment, so much of the life, vitality and hopes of the Church had their seeds planted in the grace-filled event we know as the Second Vatican Council. Though Vatican II lasted for but a few years at the beginning of the sixties, its impact, wisdom and vision have touched all our lives and will continue to do so as the Holy Spirit calls us to reform and renewal in fidelity to the Gospel and our tradition.

Vatican II called people to live out the mystery of faith and salvation in ways that would touch and change their lives. The Catholic community responded well to the liturgical reforms initiated by the Council, and people welcomed the invitation to participate even more in the mission and ministry of the Church. Yet, an immediate impact of Vatican II was a new consciousness of the call to all the baptized to live out their vocation to continue the mission and ministry of Jesus.

### Ministry in the Church Today

Within the Church today, there is the strong emphasis given to the common priesthood of all the baptized. Vatican II reminded the total People of God that they are a "royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people set apart" as the first Preface for Sunday reminds us. As such, all the baptized share in the mission and ministry of Jesus and the Church.

Since Vatican II, and especially in the last ten years, there has been an explosion of ministry which has brought about the involvement of the laity in service to the Church in countless facets of Church life previously reserved to religious and priests. These areas of service touch every dimension of Church life from liturgy to charity, from administration to pastoral leadership. It involves men and women, married and single. All such ministry has enriched the Church and the whole understanding of vocations within the Church has been broadened to recognize the foundation for ministry which is the baptismal vocation of all. Yet, with ministry being shared to some degree by all the baptized, there has been an erosion, in the minds of some, of the distinction or difference rooted in tradition between the ordained and the non-ordained.

The Church does not live in a vacuum. Rather, it exists and becomes incarnate within our world. The cry for values in our world are echoed also within our Church. Today, there is the cry for equality in ministry - ordained and non-ordained - with all ministry being open to men and women, married and single. An egalitarian approach to ministry is a strong force within the Church which Pope John Paul II has addressed time and time again by emphasizing the distinct but complementary roles of priests, religious and laity.

The past decade has seen the repetition in Church teaching of the difference in essence and degree between the ministry of the ordained priesthood and the common priesthood of the faithful. Moreover, ordained priesthood is reserved to only male members of the Church and calls for a lifetime celibate commitment. There is no indication that these expectations of the Church regarding essential components of the priesthood will change. The distinct role and responsibility of priests, religious and lay people within the Church were strongly emphasized in the Synods of this past decade which focused on the role of the laity and the formation of priests.

Yet, forces of change inherent in society have had a powerful impact on the Church in the past decade. If ministry open to all the baptized becomes the focal point of interest and commitment, it will become more difficult to emphasize the teachings and tradition of the Church which calls for an ordained priesthood, a holy order. Many ask today whether priesthood is losing its identity and value. Voices are raised, sometimes in strident fashion, that if the values of equality and dignity of each person with individual rights is the ideal that we live and proclaim, especially in American democratic society, then it will be difficult for many to accept a hierarchical structure which excludes women and married people from priesthood.

#### The Challenge of Vocations to the Priesthood

This brief reflection on what is happening in ministry today is but an expression of realities which touch the life of the Church. The development of ministry within the Christian community has been filled with peril and promise. Yet, as we reflect on vocations in the Church over this past decade and as we prepare for a new millennium, it would be good to be reminded again of the challenge issued by Pope John Paul II to an International Congress on Vocations in 1981 when he said: "The problem of priestly vocations - and also of male and female religious - is, I will say so openly, the fundamental problem of the Church." (1) In 1983, the Holy Father would state: "There is no Church without the Eucharist, and there is no Eucharist without priests. How can the Church exist without the ordained priesthood?" (2)

To say that a concern for vocations, and especially vocations to the priesthood and religious life, is the fundamental problem of the Church is indeed a strong statement. However, it is a statement which Pope John Paul II has reiterated over and over again during the years of his pontificate.

A problem can exist within our life experience which we could well name and recognize. Yet, the impact of that problem does not really have any significance unless it touches our lives. In this past decade, the problem of vocations has touched the lives of many people in a dramatic way. Throughout the United States and Canada, as well as in so many other parts of our world, there are no longer present to us the number of priests and religious to serve the Christian community. Mass schedules have been reduced. In some communities, it is impossible to have Mass celebrated on a weekend on a regular basis.

Catholic hospitals and schools no longer have the presence of religious men and women staffing these institutions as they once did. The priests and religious who remain are often an older and graying collection of people.

As was noted earlier, while all this has been taking place within the Church, there has developed an incredible response of laymen and laywomen to the challenge of ministry in the Church today. People have become increasingly aware of their baptismal call to ministry. As a result, Catholic schools, hospitals and other institutions are able to continue their mission and ministry in an effective way.

Yet, the challenge of vocations becomes most dramatic in the decline of the number of priests available to serve the Christian community. Early in 1991 at a Symposium on Catholic vocations, Dr. Francis J. Butler said, "After a decade of research on clergy, vocations and seminaries, the average church observer could reasonably conclude that prospects look bleak for the priesthood in the next century. The all too familiar statistics - a drop in the Catholic priesthood of 6,780 men over the past twenty years and theologate enrollments plummeting to 3,700 nationally from peak levels of 8,325 - not only tell the story of profound change in our culture and within Catholicism but also foreshadow painful adjustments for the priesthood in the Third Millennium." (3)

As people faithful to the Roman Catholic faith tradition, we realize and appreciate our membership in a hierarchical church. As a People of God, we all share in the priesthood of Jesus Christ, but there is a difference in essence and degree between the common priesthood of the faithful and the ministerial or hierarchical priesthood. (4)

Priesthood is essential to the Church. The priest is ordained to offer sacrifice, to forgive sins, and to exercise the priestly office on behalf of people in the name of Christ. (5) Priests must be servant-leaders of the Christian community through Word and Worship. At the heart of this priestly service to the Christian community is the call to celebrate the Eucharist which gives the Christian community its unique identity as a community of faith and worship. (6)

It is obvious today that there is a tremendous need to focus our vocational efforts on the encouragement of vocations to the priesthood. In choosing this direction as a priority, in no way should we neglect the encouragement of vocations to other ministries in the life of the Christian community. Vocations to priesthood make the most sense within the total context of the ministerial life and activity of the Christian community.

To address the issue of vocations to the priesthood demands an awareness of the realities within the Church today which impact priesthood itself.

Realities Within the Church Today

Over the past ten years, realities have developed within the Church which impact priesthood. It is obvious that there are fewer priests to serve us in the ways in which we have become accustomed. This becomes frustrating for both laity and priests, both of whom live out this reality with different expectations.

Despite the clarity of Church teaching regarding the lifetime celibate commitment asked of priests, there remains the question for some of the credibility of mandatory celibacy as a requirement for priesthood. The development of the Pastoral Letter on Women in the Church and Society focused attention on male supremacy in Church governance which becomes an occasion for anger and resentment on the part of some women.

It is more evident today than ever before that ministry in the Church is no longer dominated by the ordained priest. Ministry is a reality in every parish and diocese which is shared by laymen and laywomen in effective ways. Moreover, the decline in the number of priests has introduced worship experiences which have unfortunately lessened the traditional focus of Roman Catholics on the Eucharist. The actual celebration of the Eucharist is often replaced by a service of the Word and the distribution of Holy Communion.

The coming years will see the continued growth in the number of professional non-ordained lay ministers. This is obvious from the ever-increasing number of lay people, married and single, enrolled in professional programs of ministerial preparation. There will also be an increased appreciation of the sacrament of marriage and the increased presence of married persons in ministry, often sharing their ministry precisely as married persons.

The cry for the equality of women both in the culture of our country and in the Church will only increase which will result in anger and confusion. And, as we know already, with the decline in the number of priests to celebrate the Eucharist, celebrations of the Christian community with preaching, teaching and praying will focus far more on the Word of God.

It seems that we have emerged from the decade of eighties into the eye of a hurricane over which we have little or no control. Yet, if we are to address what Pope John Paul II calls the fundamental problem in the Church today, which is to encourage vocations to the priesthood, then we must be aware of the realities present among us as well as the trends which emerge from these realities.

### The Challenge to the Christian Community

What then is the challenge to the Christian community today? It would be good to recall the words which introduce the publication entitled "The Conclusive Document" which is the compilation of reports from Dioceses throughout the world on ways in which the vocation challenge might be addressed. It states, "Faith assures us that the Lord through His Spirit will never cease to call men and women to follow in His footsteps, as servants and witnesses totally consecrated to the cause of the Gospel. (7) This assurance is helpful, but human action and endeavor must respond to the challenge of faith. Though the document emphasizes that "the whole Church is constituted in a state of vocation and of mission," (8) it recognizes the need to appreciate even more "the fundamental and irreplaceable gift of the ministerial priesthood." (9)

The encouragement of vocations must be seen within the total framework of the pastoral ministry of the Church. Recalling the statement from Vatican II, the Document maintains again that the "task of fostering vocations devolves on the whole Christian community." (10) But how can this be done?

The encouragement of vocations is more than the invitation to an individual to consider service within the Church as a lay person, religious brother, religious woman, deacon or priest. It depends so much on the ecclesial climate or environment which people experience in living out their faith commitment. Some of the factors which the entire Christian community must address would include the following:

1. The Christian community must recapture the meaning, power and significance of the Eucharist as sacrament, sacrifice and the real presence of the Lord. Ways must be found to recognize the full implications of liturgical renewal which calls for full, active and conscious participation in the liturgy of the Church.
2. There must be a willingness to take pride in the best sense of the word of what it means to be Roman Catholic. Disciples of Jesus in the Church are not allowed to be apologetic. Pride in being a Roman Catholic means translating our beliefs into action and the courage to live out the demands of faith. Pride in one's faith demands an investment of time and study to know our faith and be faithful to it, not on our terms or on what seems to be convenient, but on the terms of the Gospel and our faith tradition.
3. There must be a commitment to evangelization which challenges each member of the Church to seek ways to invite others to be members of our faith community or to invite people back who may have left. The encouragement of vocations to ministry within the Church makes little or no sense unless we first dare to be evangelizers.

4. There must be a determination to live out the demands of faith, which is part and parcel of the pride which should characterize Roman Catholics today. Disciples of Jesus cannot hesitate to speak and live the commitments of the Gospel and our tradition in all areas of Church teaching - from war and peace to the economy, from commitments made in relationships to the respect for life from the moment of conception to the moment of natural death. Fidelity to who we are and what we believe creates an environment which is conducive to commitment and service.

5. A final challenge in this non-exhaustive listing is to be sensitive to the ministry which each baptized Christian is asked to share with others. It is only in the appreciation of the total context of ministry that we can appreciate the ministry of religious life and priesthood. Special sensitivity must be shared with women whose talents and gifts are often not recognized or utilized in ways which the Church encourages and promotes.

These challenges are part of the agenda for the total Christian community. These challenges become the critical issues which the Roman Catholic faith community must address if we are to create an environment which is conducive to the encouragement of priesthood vocations within the Church today.

#### The Encouragement of Vocations

As we live out this final decade of the 20th century and face the challenges which confront us as a community of faith, much is being done to address what Pope John Paul II has called "the fundamental problem of the Church" which is the encouragement of vocations to priesthood.

During the past few years, Bishop Elden Curtiss of Helena, Montana, Chair of the National Conference of Bishops' Committee on Vocations, has emphasized the need for vocations to the priesthood. His leadership and vision has encouraged the use of "Called by Name" as a means to promote vocations to priesthood. Many Dioceses which have used "Called By Name" have found it to be extremely effective. Fr. Eugene Hemrick's studies on the vocation issue have emphasized the many positive factors involved in the encouragement of vocations to the priesthood and the need to learn from the experiences of those in seminary formation programs at the present moment. Fr. Hemrick's recent study of priests ordained from five to nine years indicates a high degree of vocational satisfaction and optimism regarding priesthood and the Church. In a study of seminaries in the United States, Sr. Katherina Schuth, OSF, concludes that priesthood continues to attract men who are stable, responsible, highly motivated as well as hardworking and sincere. The Serra Club is discovering a new energy in its efforts to fulfill its mission and ministry to encourage vocations to priesthood and religious life by finding new means of support for potential candidates for priesthood and religious life.

Yet, the entire Christian community needs to be reminded of what Pope John Paul II states so often: "The task of fostering vocations devolves on the whole Christian community, which should do so in the first place by living in a fully Christian way." (11) It is obvious that the lived experience of Church in a vibrant and life-giving way in parish communities becomes a powerful source of encouragement of vocations to priesthood and all ministries in the Church.

We know from the past, and even more so from the present, that vocations are born and nourished within a family. Ways must be found to encourage parents to promote vocational commitments to priesthood and religious life. We also know that priests and religious themselves become the role models and examples for the encouragement of vocations. The invitation by a priest or religious to a young person to consider a vocation to priesthood and/or religious life can sometimes make all the difference. A significant challenge is offered to lay people in ministry today to recognize their obligation to call forth candidates for priesthood and religious life. Just as it would be difficult for a Bishop to ordain a candidate to priesthood who would not be supportive of lay ministry in the Church, it would be next to impossible to endorse the ministry of lay persons within the Church who would not promote vocations to priesthood.

Encouragement of vocations to the priesthood is an ongoing part of the mission and ministry of the Church. It cannot be limited to a one week program each year or included briefly in the Prayer of the Faithful. The encouragement of vocations to priesthood, as well as to all vocations in the Church, must also be rooted in prayer and sacrifice.

We approach the 21st century with a spirit of hope that we will find ways to encourage young men to consider a vocation to priesthood with its responsibilities, privileges and obligations.

In Daniel J. Levinson's, *THE SEASONS OF A MAN'S LIFE*, the author speaks of the time of the development into adulthood as forming and living out the "dream" which is the combination of hopes, desires, expectations and longings and plans for the future. The "dream" has a combination of sources - primarily one's own self, one's interaction with significant others and our interaction in the social settings of our lives. (12)

The Church community has to help shape and form the "dream" for young people today. Priesthood can be the "dream" which young men could consider as a vocation which can make a difference in their lives as well as the lives of others. It could well involve the following:

1. There is a need to articulate the value and importance of priesthood as an essential ministry within the Church which is distinct and different from ministry in general. By understanding and appreciating priesthood as an articulated value for the Church community, a defined value will be present which can and will have more meaning and appeal for priesthood candidates.



2. Celibacy must be seen in a positive framework. In speaking to seminarians in San Antonio in 1987, Pope John Paul II emphasized the need for the priest to know the real living conditions of the people whom he serves and never to be separated from the community. Yet, like the apostle Paul, the priest is set apart to proclaim the Gospel of God. (Romans 1:1)

The Pope challenged the seminarians to realize that each "is called to embrace freely a celibate life for the sake of Jesus and his kingdom in order to become a man for others." Such celibacy "will mean an enhancement of your life, a greater closeness to God's people, an eagerness to give yourself without reserve." By embracing celibacy in the context of priesthood, a priesthood candidate commits himself to a deeper and more universal love. Celibacy especially means the gift of oneself to God where a seminarian shares at the deepest level of human freedom and generosity in the death and resurrection of Jesus. (13)

3. The encouragement of young men to consider priesthood must be realistic. As Pope John Paul II states, living out priesthood and the celibate commitment is difficult. It will require discipline, effort and persevering love. (14) Such discipline, effort and love are also needed in marriage as well as the single life. They are but components of the Gospel.

In the encouragement of vocations to priesthood, there must be a priority given to the search for quality candidates. The decline in the number of available priests should not be a reason for compromising standards and criteria which are essential for effective ministry. Efforts must be made to encourage candidates for priesthood who are men of faith and prayer with mental, emotional, and psychological gifts which will help them be leaders, teachers, proclaimers of the Word of God and gifted with the ability to relate to others in a collaborative way. Candidates for priesthood must also have a psycho-sexual maturity which will enable them to live out the celibate commitment in a life-giving and energizing way.

There is no doubt that this past decade has been a time of unrest and uncertainty in regard to vocations, especially vocations to the priesthood. Yet, I believe the future is filled with hope if we turn to the Lord of the Harvest and dare to be people of faith willing to challenge young people and society today that the Gospel and vocational commitments have meaning and value.

What will the future bring in regard to vocations? Will there be priests to serve us in the years to come? I believe the answer could well be in the minds and hearts of those who are convinced that the challenge to encourage vocations to the priesthood is a priority for the entire Christian community. The challenge is there. May we have the faith and courage to meet this challenge.

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FOOTNOTES:

- (1) Pope John Paul II, Sermon of May 10, 1981
- (2) Pope John Paul II, To the Bishops of the Netherlands, January 22, 1983
- (3) Dr. Francis J. Butler, Proceedings of a Symposium, EXCEPTION AND PROMISE, A Look at Catholic Vocations, January 24, 1991.
- (4) Vatican II, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, 10
- (5) Vatican II, Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests, 2
- (6) Pope John Paul II, Sermon of May 10, 1981
- (7) "The Conclusive Document," Developments of Pastoral Care for Vocations in the Local Churches' Experiences of the Past and Programs for the Future, May 2, 1982, Vatican City, para. 2. This document is the result of the international congress of bishops and others with responsibilities for ecclesiastical vocations.
- (8) *ibid*, 8
- (9) *ibid*, 9
- (10) *ibid*, 18, cf. *Optatam Totius*, 2
- (11) Pope John Paul II, Sermon of May 10, 1981
- (12) Levinson, Daniel J., *THE SEASONS OF A MAN'S LIFE*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, N.Y., 1978
- (13) Pope John Paul II, Address to Seminarians, September 13, 1987, San Antonio, Texas