

The Challenge of Accepting a Religious Vocation

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Readings: Isaiah 6.1-2a, 3-8; 1 Corinthians 15.1-11; Luke 5.1-11

The scandals rocking the Church have added new layers of worry to the complexities inevitable for anyone considering a vocation to the priesthood or religious life. The questions are difficult enough already: *Is God really calling me? To what precisely? How can he think me worthy? Granted the attractions, how am I going to deal with what seems so hard about such a life? What will my family think? What will my friends say? What if I change my mind later on? What if...?*

There are many questions that arise in vocational discernment. To guide us, the conversation between Simon Peter and Jesus in today's gospel rings true. When Simon Peter saw the huge number of fish filling the nets he and his partners had cast at Jesus's command, he said, "Depart from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man." Jesus replied, "Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching men." This signature phrase in our Lord's way of speaking – "Do not be afraid" – directly addresses some of the questions of discernment. Our worthiness is not the issue, for his grace will heal and shape those whom he calls to his service.

In Luke's text there is an important play on words – but not the one about "fishermen" becoming "fishers of men" that we might expect. Rather, the word used for "catching" (*zōgrōn*) has nothing to do with fishing. The first syllable (*zō*) is rooted in the Greek word for "life" (*zōē*) and suggests that one who follows Jesus will be catching men *alive*: not harvesting a catch like a fisherman but providing through the sacraments a way to the supernatural grace that makes people even more alive by having God's life in them.

Three Particular Challenges

Some of the questions that arise will be unique to this person or that, but let us focus on three challenges to accepting a priestly or religious vocation characteristic of our age: the current scandals, the perception that modern science is rendering religion irrelevant, and the demographic realities of typical family size.

The betrayal of trust that has become evident in recent events includes the sinful conduct of various individuals, the problem of homosexual predators, the tendency of the ambitious to pay more attention to winning promotions for themselves than to helping troubled souls with problematic behaviors. By any realistic appraisal of the situation, things are likely to get worse rather than better for a good while into the future.

So much awful news is saddening and easily overwhelming. But in the ranks of religious and priests who have been living their vocations well, there is a growing sense of the need to turn to God yet more deeply in prayer, and especially prayer of reparation for those who are responsible for the mess. As the recently published journal of an anonymous Benedictine (*In Sinu Jesu: When Heart Speaks to Heart*, Angelico Press, 2016) makes clear, Jesus has been reminding his priests that one of the abiding aspects of living within his mystical body is that we are all in this together. As so often is the case, the innocent end up bearing the burdens of the misdeeds of others. In this we must learn from the example of Christ, who suffered and died for us sinners.

Providentially, not only in today's gospel but also in the first reading we hear of God's way of cleansing and healing those whom he chooses for his work. Isaiah admits, "I am a man of unclean lips, living among a people of unclean lips," and the Lord sends one of the seraphim with an ember taken from the altar. The angel touches the prophet's mouth with it and says, "See, now that this has touched your lips, your wickedness is removed, your sin purged." Then Isaiah hears the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send? Who will go for us?" and he responds, "Here I am, send me!" This is not to say that responding to God's call will be easy, but it does provide confidence that the Lord is in charge, that even now he is cleansing our Augean stables, and that the Lord will give individuals the grace to make the same kind of generous response that Isaiah voices.

Intellectual Resources

A second special difficulty today is the perception that modern science renders religion irrelevant. Among Catholic university students, this is a pressing problem. In many an institution, theology courses tend toward trendy environmentalism and progressive stands on social issues, with little time or attention left for matters of revelation or doctrine, let alone attempts to engage questions about religion and science.

But there are sound ways of handling these topics, and learning about them can help to remove some of the obstacles to considering a priestly or religious vocation. Since these are intellectual questions, answering them requires intellectual effort. In questions about God and creation that arise from the study of subjects like astrophysics and evolution, it is good to know of books like *New Proofs for the Existence of God: Contributions of Contemporary Physics and Philosophy* by Fr. Robert Spitzer, S.J. (Eerdmans, 2010). As Spitzer notes, recent discoveries about the fine-tuning of various cosmological constants reinforce the notion of divine design throughout the cosmos and permit us to make a compelling argument for the existence of God on the basis of the laws of nature operative in the physical realm.

A crucial part of a religious vocation, of course, is a willingness to care for the souls of others, but here too there is an unspoken suspicion that contemporary genetics has reduced human nature to biochemistry, thereby rendering all talk about the soul mere sentimentality or superstition. Among the resources for meeting that challenge is a fine new book by Michael Augros, *The Immortal in You: How Human Nature Is More than Science Can Say* (Ignatius, 2017). There one finds not only a compelling argument for the spirituality of the soul – that is, the need to hold that the human soul is real but not material – but also a vibrant case for its immortality. Unless there is something in our existence that transcends the causally determinate nexus of the physical world, there will simply be no way to explain such things as thinking and making free choices. With sound philosophical arguments like these in hand, the way is open again to considering a life devoted to the care of souls – that is, pastoral concern for the bodily, social, and spiritual needs of persons that is at the heart of a religious vocation.

There are also countless questions about the historicity and meaning of the scriptures – Genesis especially can seem like a naive mythological account that one is hesitant to mention in polite company. But again there are resources available. In his book on the interpretation of Genesis, *In the Beginning: A Catholic Understanding of the Story of Creation and the Fall* (Eerdmans, 1990), Josef Cardinal Ratzinger pointed out the embarrassment of many theologians about scripture's treatment of such topics as creation and original sin. They steadily abandoned more and more of the field in a relentless retreat from holding that the bible could possibly mean what it says. Ratzinger's volume is good medicine for the febrile agitation that can unnerve us in this regard. Like his *Introduction to Christianity*, it gives a sophisticated explanation of what our faith has always been and must continue to be.

There is also something quite important on this topic in today's passage from First Corinthians. At the core of our faith is the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. Modern skeptics – like their ancient counterparts – have been inclined to deny the very possibility of bodily resurrection and thus to use the very mention of it as evidence for the gullibility of believers. But in fact no arguments against the possibility of bodily resurrection are ever presented, as if an enlightened chuckle at this naiveté suffices.

For Saint Paul, either Jesus rose from the dead or he did not. If he did not, then those who claim to have seen him risen must either have been liars or somehow mistaken. To make clear that this is not merely a claim based on some mistake, scriptural accounts go to enormous trouble to point out how many saw him risen, eating, passing through closed doors, and the like. Could the witnesses simply be lying? This would make sense only if those preaching about the resurrection had something to gain by their lies. But here too the argument from suspicion breaks down, for the apostles

gained no power, no money, no prestige, no advantage. They endured hardships, shipwreck, prison, torture, and even death for what they professed, and so Saint Paul concludes that there is no plausible reason for them to have lied.

These points do not, to be sure, address the question of vocation directly. The reason for bringing them up is to remember that the Catholic intellectual tradition offers reliable ways of handling the various questions that can unnerve young Catholics and prevent them from taking seriously the prospect of a religious vocation. What is needed is for preachers and teachers to promote serious intellectual engagement about the relations of faith and learning.

The Domestic Church

The third of the challenges mentioned above might well be the most serious: the demographic realities of typical family size today. It is harder than ever for small families to envision any of their children entering the priesthood or religious life. In raising this issue, my point is not to suggest that we ought to encourage larger families simply so that there is greater likelihood of a religious vocation. Vocations, after all, are not things we ourselves create but calls of invitation from God.

Rather, it seems to me, what we need is to develop prayer within the domestic church of the family. Especially when children are young, things like grace before and after meals, night prayers, and getting to Mass regularly as a family are especially important. Problems arise, I suspect, when children get older, family life gets busier, and activities outside the home become more frequent.

It might help to develop patterns of prayer that can adjust over time, as children become teenagers and as parents themselves come to have different needs and concerns. Despite the challenges of schedules, the inevitable tiredness at the day's end, and the ubiquitous distractions of electronic gadgets, much good comes from a family that commits itself to some daily praying together.

Some suggestions: reciting the rosary together, or perhaps reading aloud the next day's gospel and offering prayers of petition. When children are old enough, maybe a family version of the Ignatian examen – a review of the day that begins with the mention of what we are grateful for, followed by asking for God's light to examine the day that has just finished. The third and longest portion of the examen prayer is to mention what we did and how we felt in the course of the day. This sort of daily review can be especially helpful for coming to know God's will for us, including our vocation. The fourth step involves an act of contrition for any sins that we have noticed, and perhaps setting a better course for the next day. The examen typically concludes with something like the Lord's prayer, as we ask God's help in carrying out whatever resolutions we may have come to.

The practice of family prayer – suitably adapted for our particular circumstances and for the ages of our children – can be a wonderful help in family unity and spiritual growth. Whether our families are large or small, cultivating the family as a domestic church will keep us alert to the invitations that God sends us, including the possibility of a religious vocation, despite the challenges of the present age.

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For Further Reading

- **Rev. Nicanor Austriaco, O.P., [*“Reading Genesis with Cardinal Ratzinger”*](#)**
- **Benedict XVI, [*“Message of the Holy Father for the 50th World Day of Prayer for Vocations”*](#)**
- **St. John Paul II, [*Familiaris consortio*](#)**
- **Rev. Robert Spitzer, S.J., [*“Evidence of God from Contemporary Science & Philosophy”*](#)**

In Short . . .

- ***The current scandals, the perception that science renders religion irrelevant, and smaller family size present challenges to accepting a priestly or religious vocation today.***
- ***Jesus reminds us that we are all in this together, and when the innocent bear the burdens of others’ misdeeds, we must learn from his example of suffering and dying for us sinners.***
- ***Responding to God’s call may not be easy, but we have confidence that the Lord is in charge, giving individuals the grace to follow him generously.***
- ***The Catholic intellectual tradition offers reliable ways of handling the questions that can prevent young people from taking seriously the prospect of a religious vocation.***
- ***Cultivating the family as a domestic church will keep us alert to the invitations that God sends us, despite the challenges of the present age.***