

Vocations Homily

Second and Third Sundays of Easter Fr. Nathan Reesman, St. Mary's Visitation Parish, Elm Grove

This homily was given in two parts, on two Sundays,
April 15th and 22nd, 2007,
and should be read as a whole.

Part I:

A blessed Easter to everyone- and a blessed Divine Mercy Sunday as well. Since I arrived here at St. Mary's last June, I have preached on several occasions about the vocation to married and family life. I have also preached on religious, or consecrated life. And I have preached almost continually on the vocation of the baptized- that is, the universal call to holiness in the world. But I have said comparatively little about vocations to the priesthood because I was waiting for the right opportunity to do so.

It's a subject that's been on my mind a great deal lately for several reasons. For one, my own one-year anniversary of priestly ordination is approaching, as is the ordination celebration for this year's new men at the end of May. Also, the liturgical calendar is heavy with references to priesthood this time of the year. We've just passed through Holy Thursday, the day the Church has always called to mind Christ's institution of the ordained priesthood. Just prior to that, the priests the Archdiocese gathered around our bishop to renew the promises of our ordination at the Mass of Chrism at the Cathedral.

The gospel for today recounts the moment when Christ breathed on his Apostles, giving them the power to forgive sins and minister in his name as shepherds- a power they handed on to those who would follow them as bishops and priests. Next Sunday we hear Christ's moving invitation to Saint Peter to tend the flock of the Church even to the point of giving up his life. The Sunday after that is Good Shepherd Sunday- a day when Christ, the Good Shepherd, is held up as a model for all who undertake the priestly office.

And maybe, on this Divine Mercy Sunday, some of you found your thoughts returning to the vigil of this feast two years prior, in 2005, when Pope John Paul the Great was called home to the Father's house, as billions around the world watched and prayed. When I think of priesthood, I often think of him.

So, I'm going to spend today, and also next Sunday, preaching about priesthood and priestly vocations. Part one, if you will, is my own vocation story, and I offer it for your consumption, and amusement, because several of you have asked about it since I came here, and also because I'd like to use it to illustrate a couple of points about vocations. Next Sunday I'll have several things to say about vocations to the priesthood in general- so think of these two weeks as a vocations double-header.

As I've told my vocation story over the years, I've done it in the span of an hour, and also in the span of about 30 seconds. So, you're getting one of the abridged versions. I did not grow up in a household much different than that of the average, mainstream, post-Vatican II Catholic. My brother and I were certainly brought up with the understanding that God mattered, that right conduct mattered, and also that service and generosity were essential to a decent life. But when it came to a strong devotional life at home, or a consistent attendance at Sunday Mass, or good catechesis on things Catholic, that was not really my experience.

My parents did make great sacrifices to put my brother and I through Catholic grade school for 9 years each, and I think more seeped into my head than I realized at the time. Perhaps it was my intense personality, who knows, but I always did take Mass seriously when I went, I looked forward to my first Communion and Confession, and during Lent I was eager to make more challenging sacrifices with each passing year.

But I was not one of those people who thought about priesthood as a kid, or someone who practiced playing Mass in the basement. While I had thought about being several things when I grew up, never once did the thought of priesthood cross my mind.

I entered my final years of public high school, and with it high school CCD classes on Wednesday nights, as what might be described as an average, nominally Catholic kid. I may have behaved better than most, but that wasn't so much out of any deep faith as it was out of fear of doing something I would later regret. I received a bible at my Confirmation, and I dutifully put it on the shelf and forgot about it. And by the way, any teenagers who might still be awake right now- I too found Mass to be rather dull at this point in my life. I might have believed something important was happening on the altar, but it had no impact on my daily life, and I had little personal connection to it.

Then, as the story goes, I met this girl. Without fail, as our recent gospels show, it's always the women who rescue us men from our own ineptitude about faith. Her name was Stephanie, and she was a Southern Baptist who had moved to Burlington a few years earlier. We began to date, and as the relationship progressed, I became impressed with her family's witness when it came to prayer, and behavior, and an obvious love of the Lord. Stephanie would often ask me questions about the Catholic Church, and, catechesis being what it was in the 80's and 90's, I had no real answers for her. But, if I ever asked her questions about her faith, she could quickly point out to me where, in the bible, it supported her positions.

Basically, it became clear after awhile that I wasn't going to be able to continue long-term with Stephanie unless I became a Southern Baptist. And at that point, I had no reason to continue being Catholic- staying with her was by far the more attractive option. So, midway through my freshman year at UW Madison, I decided I needed to accept Jesus Christ as my personal Lord and Savior. And I began to pray, and I began to read the bible, and I began to explore faith not so much from an academic perspective, as I had as grade school kid, but from the inside- as a believer.

I spent a summer with Stephanie and her family in Northern Kentucky after my Freshman year in college. I went to the Baptist church with them on Wednesday nights, Sunday mornings, and Sunday evenings, along with bible study and Sunday School. It was during that summer that my faith took on a whole new, more personal shape.

I really wanted to believe what Stephanie believed, and I wanted things to work out for us both, but, she saw long before I did that it wasn't going to. I began to find a few issues with the Southern Baptist approach to things, and she did not have good answers. And, I missed the Catholic Church, though I couldn't put my finger on why.

At the end of that summer, we broke up, and I returned to UW Madison in search of an identity on several levels, chief among them being a religious affiliation. She'd convinced me that the Catholics were all backwards and Hell-bound so I couldn't go that route, but I wasn't really buying her story anymore either. I did know, though, that faith and Christ were very important, and I owe that conviction in large part to her for which I'll be eternally grateful.

Fortunately for me, I ran into a handful of very faithful, and very smart, Catholics at UW. And they took me under their wing and over the course of several months patiently answered all of my questions about the Church. And before I knew it, I found myself Catholic again- and with a vengeance. In fact, I made debating non-Catholics into a sport.

Being Catholic at UW Madison is a recipe for continual frustration. But, having recently decided the Catholic Church was, in fact, everything she claimed to be, I relished the opposition. And, I was surrounded by a group of faithful students at the campus parish who were doing great things on that campus- so, if nothing else, we had each other.

While I had solved the problem of what church I should belong to, I still had not figured out what I was going to do with my life. Those of you here who have children in college will find this to be a familiar story. I was home in Burlington one evening visiting with my pastor, Fr. Dave Reith, now pastor at St. Dominic's, and as I was sharing with him my new-found love of the Church, he tossed the most uncanny suggestion at me: "Have you ever thought about becoming a priest?" My initial reaction was that this was a ridiculous idea. But within the span of a week, three other people all told me the same thing. That was the Spring of 1999- that was the first time I ever began to think about priesthood.

At that point I began to pray a great deal more, asking that God reveal to me what he wanted for me. I began to make arguments with him that went something like this: "God, I don't like hospitals, sick people, old people, dying people- if you want me to be a priest, you're going to have to prove to me that I can handle that." Or, this one: "God, I can't stand children- I can't teach, I can't preach- what in the world do you want me to do this for?"

It was over the course of the next couple of years, as I got involved at the campus parish, as I worked on the staff of my parish in Burlington, and as I prayed like never before, that God slowly showed me all the gifts he had buried inside of me, and how, by some crazy design, priesthood seemed to be the most logical outlet for them. Every objection I tossed at him, he found a way to answer. As it turned out, I didn't mind hospital visits. And, much to my surprise, I discovered I love to teach, especially in grade school classrooms.

There were other challenges. My parents were initially somewhat skeptical about all of this, but they came around as they saw how I was coming alive in it. The same can be said for many of the people who knew me as a kid. And I had to wrestle along the way with the idea of celibacy, and also with the all too human and political face of the Church, but I continued to feel called to move forward.

I graduated early from Madison in December of 2000 so that I could start school at St. Francis Seminary, here in Milwaukee. I had gotten to the point where I was never going to be sure unless I tried it out. And, as seminary wore on, with every passing year, through lots of little challenges that I weathered one at a time, it became clear to me that this is what God wanted me to do.

So, here I am. Much like Thomas in today's Gospel, I think I was struggling to take it all in and to believe it. I really wanted to do the right thing, I didn't want to take too big of a risk, I needed to make God prove it to me somehow, in some dramatic way. But, the fact is, discernment rarely works that way. In the end this vocation, like anything in life, is a leap of faith- the result of a series of encounters with the risen Lord across so many situations and persons over the course of 20 some years of my life.

Now please note: I did not go to a Catholic high school, and I certainly did not go to a Catholic college. This idea of priesthood was not planted in my brain at age 7. I had a serious girlfriend. I seriously considered not being Catholic only a few years ago. I did not come from a huge, Catholic family, and I didn't grow up going to confession on Saturdays. Yet, here I am. What was crucial though, and I'll say much more about this next week, is the fact that I had to undergo a conversion experience of sorts, and that I had to come to understand the necessity and the truth of the Catholic Church and of the Gospel.

I share all of this because there is one crucial thing that I learned early on in discernment, and it's a point all of you need to understand- parents and children alike. I resisted priesthood initially because I thought you had to fit into this mystical "priest mold," some kind of stereotype, in order to have a vocation. When I finally realized, after getting to know several priests, that there truly is no classic mold to fit, at that point I began to think priesthood was possible for me. Every single vocation story of every single priest is unique. It is a profoundly personal gift and mystery.

God uses the ordinary events of our daily lives to paint us a picture, to give us a hint, of what he intends for us. We put all the puzzle pieces together gradually, with the help of others, and always, always with prayer. If my vocation story sounds rather ordinary, that's because many of them are. So rather than looking around the classroom or the parish for the "obvious" priesthood candidate, who "obviously" is anyone but you- look instead at yourself. Look at your children.

God calls all sorts of men to the priesthood. There is no doubt in my mind that he is calling some of you here- some of you here in person, and some of your own sons and grandsons. Don't believe for a second that it could never be you. Everyone should thoroughly explore the possibility. Because you know what? If God can call me, then he can call ANYONE.

Part II:

This past Sunday, on Divine Mercy Sunday, I shared with all of you my own vocation story- or at least a short version of it. And, I did try to skip the dull parts- that's why it was so short. I also promised to return today to the topic of priestly vocations offering some general thoughts on the subject. It is a broad topic, and I have a lot to say about what is a very complicated issue, so the following is really only a piece of my thoughts on this, and a continuation of last Sunday's homily. You can find the text from last Sunday, as well as today's, on the website and also in the bulletin.

The gospel for today's Mass is one of my favorites. In it we hear Christ put to St. Peter the same question that he poses to every single one of us at some point in our lives. It's a question that should give us pause, and our answer cannot be one that is flippant- it has to come from some deep part of who we are, or at least who we want to become.

Jesus asks Peter: "Do you love me more than these?" Three times Peter answers "Yes." Jesus asks Peter to feed the sheep of his flock, the Church, and he explains to him that the task of shepherding is going to stretch him and pull him in directions he does not want to go- it will break him. Peter is ultimately able to fulfill this task only

because of love- a love that does not find its source in him, but rather in the one who calls him. And only when he is stretched to the point of death does he become the person Christ knew he could be.

To be called to follow our Lord as a disciple means that we hear him asking us if we truly love him more than anything else. And loving him more than anything else necessarily translates to caring for those in our midst- it leads to shepherding. Hence the call and our response are both personal and communal in nature.

Every call to priesthood has its origins in this question by our Lord- “do you love me more than these?” “Will you let me lead you? Will you let me break you? Will you die for me? Will you feed my sheep?” Every answer, as I mentioned last Sunday, is really a leap of faith. Like Peter, every man called to priesthood feels compelled to cover up and jump into the water- we are not worthy before such an invitation. But, like Peter, we answer “yes,” and we end up dragging the net full of fish- that is the flock, to the shore of heaven.

Now, at 28 years and five months, I am the youngest priest in the Archdiocese of Milwaukee. There are three of us under the age of 30. We have roughly 200 parishes to staff in this diocese, and at the rate priests are retiring or dying, we are not ordaining nearly enough men to fill the spots we have. So there is a lot of talk in many circles about the priest shortage, about the crisis of numbers, and there are a lot of people who are proposing a variety of potential quick fixes to this situation.

In the face of this, do we conclude that our Lord has stopped inviting us to follow him? Does he no longer want priests to tend his sheep? Or is something else going on?

I would submit that we do not have a vocation shortage at all. Christ continues to ask all of us if we love him more than anything else. And he continues to ask men if we will feed his sheep as priests, even to the point of sacrifice. There is no reason to believe that he has stopped doing so. And if there is a call, then there is a vocation.

No, the problem is with us, and at base it's two-fold: it's an issue of faith or conversion, and it's an issue of Catholic identity.

Honestly, I don't think most of us can truly say that we love Jesus more than anything else, or that we love the Church beyond every other thing that exists. “Do you love me more than these?” he asks. Do you love me more than money, power, prestige, and advancement? Do you love me more than you love the possibility of having a million options at your fingertips? Do you love me enough to risk being unpopular? Do you love me enough to go without a wife and children to make the Church your family? Do you love me enough to do what I want you to do rather than the reverse?

For most of us, the answer is “no.” We have grown so comfortable in our culture, we have grown so used to trusting in our own plans and devices, so opposed to making a leap of faith; we have grown so afraid of making life-long commitments because we see it as some kind of a prison; we have grown so enamored with keeping our options open; we have gotten so good at picking and choosing what we want to believe, so good at waiting for the Church to change- that when our Lord asks us “Do you love me more than these?” we seem to stare at him and hesitate.

Beyond that, we've lost our sense of ecclesiology- our sense of the nature and necessity and truth of the Church. Christianity is not simply “me and Jesus,” or “me and the bible,” or “me being nice to others.” To be Christian requires the Church. Priesthood makes no sense to a generation of Catholics to whom the Church makes no sense, for whom it is not a necessity. In that situation, the pews will be empty and so will the seminaries. That is where we find ourselves at this moment in American history.

So, the reason we don't have enough priests is the same reason why only 33 percent of Catholics go to Mass. It's the same reason why so few go to confession. The same reason why fewer and fewer people are married in the Church. The same reason why family sizes have shrunk. The same reason why Catholics look no different than the rest of the population when it comes to voting, giving, behaving, believing, and living. We need conversion, and we need catechesis- desperately. Those things, not God's call, are in short supply.

Now, I stand before you as a bit of a miracle. I don't propose for a moment that I've got all of this figured out and that I'm mister generous, and mister trusting- faithful- loving- servant- shepherd. Far from it. If my vocation story from last week showed anything, it's that God has the amazing ability to pluck some of us out of the passing

stream of life, shake us off and say: “you are going to do this for me, and I’m going to make you into a priest just to show the world what miracles I really can work.”

I’m doing this, yes, because that’s what God wants, but also because I came to realize that this life, this vocation of priesthood, is the way that God is choosing to purify me, and challenge me, and shape me, and make me holy. So I’m doing this because I too am in need of conversion. And I’m also doing it because I was brought to the conviction that not only does Christ matter, but so does the Church.

All of this means several things. For one, there are certain so-called “solutions” to the shortage of priests that are not going to work. For starters, we gain nothing by watering down what we preach and believe. If we do that, faith becomes comfortable, and if it’s comfortable it’s not worth sacrificing for, and if it’s not worth sacrificing for it doesn’t require love, and before long, it’s no longer faith. You want young men to be priests? Then challenge them. And don’t do them the disservice of convincing them that the Church is going to change her teachings to match the passing whims of the time. That’s mediocrity, and mediocrity inspires no one.

We gain no vocations by saying priests are just like everyone else. There has been a great deal of confusion in the past 40 years about who a priest is. He is not a layperson with a theological degree. Rather, he shares, by sacred orders, in the headship of Christ, and, as *Lumen Gentium* clearly states, he is someone who stands before the throne of God and offers sacrifice. He intercedes for the people in a way that others do not. That has nothing to do with better or worse, but it does have everything to do with difference. Who wants to go to Florida if we tell them it’s no different than Wisconsin? Who wants to be a priest if we convince everyone that we are no different? When we erase difference, we erase vocations.

Allowing priests to get married is not a solution. Sure, at first we may get a few more, but over the long-term all we will do is perpetuate our slide into mediocrity. Our seminaries were full in the 1950’s- is marriage that much more important now to young men than it was then? Or, in fifty years did we change to become a sex-obsessed, commitment averse culture? And if it’s the latter, (and by the way, it is), then a married clergy would be a disaster. What all of us need is conversion, and celibacy exists to call us to conversion- changing it now is to throw gasoline on the fire.

The Church has said unequivocally that we have no authority to ordain women. Those statements, along with what can only be described as a dire need for fatherhood and male role models in society and in the Church, suggest that admitting women to Holy Orders is also not a solution to the problem, at least not in the foreseeable future.

So, what do we do? Well, the fact is, there are no easy answers. And that’s exactly the point. Because history has shown that the Church has done well, that priestly vocations have flourished, not when we’ve made life and all of the answers easy, but rather when hardships force us to turn to God. The beautiful thing about the lack of priests, among other things, is the way that it is forcing us to turn to God in prayer and beg him to send us shepherds. That very process opens our hearts and draws us out of ourselves. And only in that posture will young men hear the call of Christ to love him above all else and serve as priests.

So, first and foremost, we pray for vocations. We offer Holy Hours, morning offerings, Mass intentions, personal prayers. Prayer changes hearts. It will not be a clever program or a doctrinal shift that brings us more priests- it will be changed hearts. And, yes, that is going to take a very long time. And in the meantime I have no idea what will happen to the parish structures as we know it in this Archdiocese. They will change dramatically, and I’ll have to keep working 90 hours a week the rest of my life. But I don’t care. Because I know that quick solutions, those that avoid conversion and conviction, don’t exist.

We also need to invite and encourage. Parents: do not be afraid to ask your sons if they might want to be priests. Please do not stand in their way if they want to pursue a vocation- support them as they discern God’s call. They will only be happy in life if they seek to do God’s will, not yours. [That’s because they’re not your children- they are God’s. He knows what’s best for them.]

I did say last weekend that there is no mold for priesthood, no situation that automatically produces priests. Ultimately, that’s true. That being said, however, some generalizations can be made.

Communities that produce priests tend to be those that have solid families where children are loved, and where they learn that commitment really is possible. They are communities that pray and worship well. They are

communities that put a high value on service, generosity, and stewardship. They are communities that take the Church's teachings seriously rather than questioning them at every turn. They are communities that devote time and energy to teaching and catechesis. They are communities that have a deep love for the Eucharist and confession. All of that is how we get more priests.

And, all of that is why St. Mary's Visitation has a history of producing so many vocations- much of what I am describing exists here. This is a good community of profound faith. Which means, friends, that there are several more vocations seated in front of me. Several more in our school, several more in your homes. Vocations do not grow by themselves, in isolation. They have to be nurtured and supported. All of us have the obligation to create a culture of vocations- one in which young men and women do not feel afraid to take the leap of faith and give themselves entirely to a life in service of the Church. The burden of producing priests rests on all of our shoulders.

Christ invites today just as he's always done: "do you love me more than these?" "Will you be converted, stretched, bent, broken? Will you be led where you do not wish to go?" "Will you be a priest?" He has called all throughout human history, and he calls still today. The answer, my friends, is up to all of us.