

Building a Culture of Vocations

By Fr. John Linden

Many people these days when speaking of a crisis in vocations will typically be referring exclusively to a crisis in priestly vocations. It may be fair to speak of such a crisis in certain geographical areas in regards to priestly vocations (Blessed be God that this is not so true for our Diocese of Lansing) but there are a couple of matters that are misleading in such references to a crisis in vocations.

Firstly, there is absolutely no crisis in the “call” to vocations to the priesthood. Rather there is only a crisis (in some local areas and cultures) in the response to the call to priestly vocations. God calls precisely the right number of men needed in order to fulfill the offer of Himself in the Sacraments. This should be a hopeful thought for all because it means that a solution to the “crisis” begins with simply encouraging those men, who are called to the priesthood, to respond positively and courageously to God’s call.

However, this is much easier said than done. There is also a second problem that lies in the fact that wherever there is a crisis in the response to any vocation, such as to the priesthood, there is also a simultaneous crisis in responding to the call in all vocations – beginning with a crisis in the call to Sacramental marriage.

A crisis begins when there is no longer any habit in a culture of expecting a commitment from oneself or others to fully meet the demands of a state of life vocation such as marriage or priesthood.

Understanding the Differences in the use of the Term “Vocation”

Many will try to equate vocations to marriage or the priesthood, etc. with vocations to important occupations like medicine or missionary work. Though vocations to being a doctor or missionary are very important, they nevertheless remain personal vocational calls and are not necessarily lifetime vocations. A doctor can leave his or her profession and become a lawyer or teacher without committing any grave sin. On the other hand, a married man cannot be morally justified when he chooses in his middle ages to leave his wife and children because he finds another woman to be more attractive.

Treating all types of vocations with the same approach can lead to difficulties in preparing oneself or others for the lifetime commitment needed in a state of life vocation. If too many hold the belief that a career is the same as a state of life vocation then we can all see where one element of the crisis in the commitment to state of life vocations (like marriage and priesthood) has its origins.

So what do we do to re-build a Culture of Vocations?

To begin with we need to be sure of what the “state of life” vocations are. First of all, every Christian receives their first permanent vocation in the Sacrament of **Baptism**. This is a vocation that is meant to be accepted and acted upon for a lifetime. Baptism is the foundation for Christians which opens the door to the grace needed to live a holy life of love for God and neighbor. **Marriage** is the most common state of life vocation and,

like all the others, is lived out on the foundation of the grace received in Baptism. It is very important to make sure that all young people know that marriage is truly a “call” from God and not just a default vocation in this world. Marriage needs to be discerned as a call just as much as any other state of life vocation. Catholic men may be called by God to serve all of God’s children in the permanent state of **Holy Orders** (Bishop, Priest, or Deacon). Ordained vocational calls from God are discerned especially with and through the Church. One may also be called to be a **Religious** living in a community with others who are striving to focus their lives with total dedication to the things of God. There are also calls from God to be **Consecrated** persons living in the world as witnesses to all about what it will be like to be espoused to God in heaven.

The first thing any of us can do to promote state of life vocations in the Church is to live out our own vocational calling faithfully and joyfully. Making the daily choices to live our vocation in a loving and sacrificial manner is the best encouragement we can give to our children. It helps lead them to a desire to give themselves totally to the call that God has for them.

Never too Young

It doesn’t seem natural at times to talk to elementary students about marriage. We may find it easier to talk about priesthood or religious life in passing (a time or two each year in class, etc.). Neither of these approaches is all that helpful. We may not want or need to talk about every detail of marriage to fourth or fifth graders, and yet, we can and should start talking even to the youngest children about the total commitment needed in successfully living out any state of life vocation. Otherwise, we may be inadvertently leaving our children ill-equipped to discern or live out any state of life vocation. We should not be afraid to talk to children about state of life vocations any less than we fear to talk about vocational calls to such things as careers or ministries in the Church. When we consider which vocations are most important (careers or states of life), no one in good conscious could say, for example, that their job is more important to them than their family. Why then do we so often short-change our children by leading them to apply more concern and emphasis on careers rather than on state of life vocations? If we only talk to them about marriage, priesthood, or religious life, a time or two each year and then about careers practically every day, what are we saying to them about priorities in life?

A Vocation Takes Time to Grow

If, in the culture that we live in, we wait too long to talk seriously to our children about discerning their state of life vocation, we may be making it much harder on them to clearly hear God’s call. When they are young they are often very fertile soil to plant seeds in. It is almost impossible in this culture to avoid rocky ground and weedy fields by the time we are teenagers (see Matthew 13:1-23). Our children will generally not be able to discern their state of life vocation when they are young, yet we can help God in his effort to call every child by encouraging children to think and pray early about God’s call for them. This will greatly increase their chances, in their maturing years, of hearing God’s voice and discerning well what it is that God is calling them to be for a lifetime.

The Call is Free

We must remember that God desires to relate freely and personally with each of His children. God calls but he does not force anyone to respond positively to His call for a person to live in a certain state of life. It would be good for us to imitate God in our approach to discussing vocations with our children. Like God we should not be afraid to call our children, early and often, to consider and pray about their state of life vocation. However, like God, we should not force them to choose at any pace other than their own nor should we force them to choose any state of life vocation other than their own. The absolute best state of life vocation for anyone is the one God is calling them to. Priesthood would not be the best call for a man if God is calling him to marriage nor would marriage be the best call for a young woman if God is calling her to religious life.

Relationship with Jesus Christ is the Foundation

God is in a relationship with all of his children individually and intimately through his first born Son, Jesus Christ. As we have stated, that relationship begins in its sacramental form through Baptism. To build a culture of vocations the first step is to maintain and grow in a good relationship with our Lord Jesus Christ ourselves and then teach our children to do the same. Prayer and the Sacraments are the greatest means on earth for maintaining and developing a good relationship with the Lord. He can also be found in the Scriptures and particularly in the Gospels. No culture of vocations will be fostered if a relationship with Jesus Christ is not the center of our lives as a People of God and if we do nothing to nurture that relationship. The Lord does not will to dominate us in regards to our state of life vocation. He wants only to invite us to a personal and free-willed relationship with Him and with our neighbors in a courageous and committed way of life. God knows what is best for us and has created us for just that vocation. If we endure with faith and trust in our own vocations first and then encourage our children to be willing to do the same, then we will easily help God to continue building a strong culture of vocations in the Diocese of Lansing.

Mary, the Mother of all Vocations

When the Blessed Virgin Mary, by way of reasoned and prayerful inquiry, discerned that God was truly calling her to the vocation of being the Mother of God (see Luke 1:26-38) she had no hesitation in responding freely, “May it be done to me according to your word.” She had no idea what that response was going to ultimately mean for her. She only knew, to the best of her ability, that it was God calling and that He could be trusted.

We don’t always discern as quickly as Mary did what it is that God is calling us to be in this life. And when we do discern God’s call for us we often hesitate in accepting that call and struggle in trusting that God will give us the means to live it out. Let us then turn to the Blessed Virgin Mary, Patroness of the Diocese of Lansing, and ask her to guide and support us and our children in our vocational discernments and in living out our vocational call. May her prayers secure for us the same grace from God that she relied upon throughout her entire life on earth until we fulfill our vocational call here and enter the ultimate permanent state of *eternal life* vocation in heaven.