

PRIESTLY VOCATIONS

Reflection for the Fourth Sunday of Easter, Cycle C

Traditionally, the fourth Sunday of Easter has been called *Good Shepherd Sunday*. The Gospel is always from John 10 in which Jesus speaks of himself as a good shepherd.

On this *Good Shepherd Sunday*, I thank all of you who have told me that you daily or frequently pray for me. Knowing you frequently pray for me (and all priests) means a whole lot. Even though I'd include below a particular prayer for priests, your prayer for us can be as simple as this: "*Lord, help Fr. Tobin and all priests to be Good Shepherds to us your people.*" I request you to pray that I (and really all of us) can be *attentive and responsive* to the promptings of the Holy Spirit. I especially need your prayers for direction when it comes to homilies and how to best use my time. In the weekend homily, we priests have the opportunity to speak to thousands of people. These 10-15 minutes are perhaps the most precious and important minutes of a priest's week. None of us would want to waste such a marvelous opportunity. So, especially pray for the person (priest or deacon) who will be preaching next weekend in our parish. Pray that we can put together a message that will touch the hearts of all who will hear us. Wondering where to utilize the hours of any given day or week is also a daily challenge. I am sure both of the above concerns are also concerns for you. Growing in your ability to be *attentive and responsive* to the Holy Spirit and knowing how best to use the precious hours of any given day.

Why I am a Priest

Recently, I finished reading a small book called: *Why I am a Priest*. About twenty-five priests responded to the question: Why are you a priest?

Vocation is a mysterious thing and it is not easy to answer the question: *Why I am a priest*, just as it may not be easy for you to answer the question: Why did you marry your spouse? What conscious and unconscious forces were at work in that decision? My answer to the question today may be different to my answer twenty-five years ago or different to my answer several years from now. Generally, I would say I am a priest because God called and I answered. It is as simple and as mysterious as that. More specifically, I can say that two factors powerfully enabled me to *hear and respond* to God's call.

A supportive family atmosphere. I grew in an atmosphere, which communicated to me that it was a great thing to become a priest. This was also very true in this country in the 40's, 50's and in the 60's. It is not true today in this country nor in Ireland. It takes holy and generous families to foster vocations to the priesthood and religious life. As a parent, you might ask how would you feel and respond if your son or daughter expressed an interest in the religious life. Hopefully, you would be supportive even though you know it would not be an easy life and you might be sacrificing the possibility of having grandchildren. In the past, parents with large families had no problem giving a couple of them to the church.

High school atmosphere. I attended a boarding high school, which had a major seminary attached to it. Each year I would watch some of the best athletes and students go over to the "other side" (the Seminary). In time some of these young men would be in charge of us in our study halls and dormitories. Some were our coaches. Daily we attended Mass with the Seminarians. So we got to see their lives close up. Of course, along the way I also saw some terrific guys drop out of the seminary. This is also a part of 'the mystery' of vocation. If you have a priest friend, the book *Why I Am a Priest*, edited by Frs. Boadt and Hient, might be a nice gift. It is published by Paulist Press phone 201-825-7300 or St. Joseph's Religious Store on Babcock may have it, telephone 725-2284.

How I ended up in Florida?

People often ask me how I ended up in Florida?

When I went into the Major Seminary in September 1965, I had until December of 1965 to decide where I wanted to serve. I could have gone to Dioceses in England, Scotland, Australia, New Zealand and many Dioceses in America. During the fall of 1965, vocation directors from all of the above places came and tried to recruit those of us who had not yet signed up for a diocese. I didn't know where I wanted to go. One week I was thinking New Zealand, another week Scotland the next Sacramento (In the 60's, three-quarters of the priests in Sacramento were native born Irish). Finally, I decided on St. Augustine (Orlando diocese was created in 1967) not because I heard a voice like St. Patrick saying to me "go to Florida". The priest who had come from St. Augustine offered a challenging message and at eighteen years of age, one likes a challenge and adventure. Sunny Florida definitely appealed to me as I experienced the cold wet weather of home. Also, Florida in the 60's had bunches of Irish priests.

What I like most and least about the priesthood and the priest shortage issue

What do I like most about being a priest? The wonderful opportunities I am offered daily to touch peoples lives in significant ways. I get to do this through homilies, my column, one-on-one, funerals, marriages etc, etc. I love the diversity of the priesthood. One never knows what a particular day may bring. I enjoy very much one-on-one meetings with parishioners. I often say to my brother priests and staff there is no substitute for one-on-one meetings with individuals, couples or families.

What do I like least? Administration stuff and challenging or hustling with parents about their obligation to come to church with their children. All in all priesthood is a wonderful way to live one's life even in these difficult times.

So why the shortage of priests? That is the thousand-dollar question. Why were bunches of young men in this country and Ireland going to the seminary in the 40's, 50's, and 60's and very few today? Is it the celibacy issue? Surely, it is an issue in some if not many cases. Yet we must ask if celibacy is the big issue, how come several mainline churches and synagogues are also experiencing a shortage of vocations. In my humble opinion the issue is primarily culturally. In a society that is becoming more and more secular, hedonistic and materialistic ordained ministry and religious life comes across to young people as too otherworldly. That may be a piece of it, but there are lots of factors. We might also ask how come lots of men are entering the ministry in Evangelical churches and why conservative catholic dioceses in our country seem to be doing well at recruiting men for the priesthood. Are catholic families with a conservative or orthodox bent more likely to foster vocations in their families? It seems so. What is the Holy Spirit saying to us, especially to our church leaders in all this? Let's pray that we hear and respond to whatever God is communicating to us.

Fostering Vocations

I think the vast majority of parishes do a very poor job at fostering vocations and the vast majority of the blame for this failure lays with us priests. Why don't we do more in this area? For me it is like asking why don't I do more to promote respect for life, for Natural Family Planning, for outreach to the poor and to non-church going Catholics. There is so much more that any one of us priests could be doing. I need to think and pray more about this issue. Perhaps we need to discuss it. If I called a meeting on the issue of priests shortage and fostering vocations, would you be interested? Some years ago, I read somewhere that parishioners should go up to single men, strong in their faith and say to them "we think you should consider priesthood."

Prayer for Priests

*Keep them, I pray thee, dearest Lord
Keep them, for they are Thine -
Thy priests whose lives burn out before
Thy consecrated shrine.
Keep them, for they are in the world,
Though from the world apart:
When earthly pleasures tempt, allure, -
Shelter them in thy heart.
Keep them, and comfort them in hours
Of loneliness and pain,*

*When all their life of sacrifice
For souls seems but in vain.
Keep them, and O remember; Lord,
They have no one but thee,
Yet they have only human hearts,
With human frailty.
Keep them as spotless as the host,
That daily they caress;
Their every thought and word and deed,
Deign, dearest Lord, to bless.
(John Kinsella)*