

## Vocational Discernment: Creating a Culture of Vocations

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This past summer, the Archdiocese of Washington made history. Cardinal Wilton Gregory, Archbishop of Washington, ordained sixteen new priests to serve this local Church; sixteen new laborers in the vineyard of the Lord, sixteen men who listened to God's call to give their life in service to God and his Church and who are committed to following Christ in a radical way. Everyone in attendance at the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington, D.C., felt privileged to witness such an historic moment and the presence of the Holy Spirit. Its atmosphere was palpable—every pew, every side chapel, even the aisles overflowed with the lay faithful from all around the archdiocese and beyond, religious men and women, seminarians, deacons, and the family and friends of the ordained. Additionally, over 210 priests concelebrated the Mass with Cardinal Gregory, along with our retired archbishop and our auxiliary bishops. The gift of so many new priests brings real joy to the Church, and a real springtime of what is possible when we respond to God's call in our lives.

Every time I attend an ordination, I recall my own ordination eight years ago at the National Shrine. I remember also my unique path of discernment—from studying engineering to working abroad, then going to law school and practicing law in Washington, D.C.—and how the universe conspired with God to open my heart to this incredible life of priesthood. It is a reminder that each of us is called by God for a specific role in his marvelous plan of salvation. Each of us has a responsibility to properly discern our vocations.

### Vocations Generally

Mark Twain once said: "The two most important days in your life are the day you were born and the day you figure out why."<sup>1</sup> The WHY is what we call our vocation. To begin, vocation comes from the Latin word *vocare* meaning "to call, summon, invoke." In creating us, God made each of us for a particular purpose and a plan. I like to distinguish three levels of vocation. The first level of vocation is one that every baptized person shares, regardless of who they are or what position they hold, that is, the universal call to holiness (LG 40). We are all called to be saints, to live out the life of Christ heroically in all that we do. The second level of vocation is the "state in life" vocation, which refers to priesthood, religious or consecrated life, married, and the single life. These must be specifically discerned through prayer, study, spiritual accompaniment, a discovery of one's gifts, and an openness to share them. The third level of vocation concerns one's "career," for ease of description, although a vocation is never limited or reduced to a job.

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<sup>1</sup> As Catholic Christians, we know that there is a third important date, which is more significant than the other two—the day of our baptism. Baptism opens up heaven to us with eternal consequences that endure beyond this lifetime.

However, if lived well and for the purpose of glorying God, one's "job" as an educator, doctor, lawyer, etc. can be a means for holiness. The better distinction between vocation and job or career is that a vocation is *who* you are; a job is *what* you do.

All vocations begin in the home. My vocation story is no different. I grew up in a Catholic family and went to Catholic schools through high school. Priests were a part of our family, and one of my parents' closest friends in college became a priest who later served at our parish. We prayed together as a family, and my parents were very active in the Church, setting the example for my sister and me to be involved as well. My parents provided the fertile soil for me to be open to responding to God's call which would be cultivated later in life.

Being a priest for eight wonderful years and as part of the vocations team in the Archdiocese of Washington, one of my duties is to assist young men in discerning their vocation. I jokingly call this "finding my replacements." No, I'm not going anywhere, but I have a strong desire to support other young men and women, Black Catholics especially, to consider priesthood and religious life—those who will come after me. And to encourage them to consider this incredible life that is both joyful and fulfilling. No one can deny the dearth of Black and Brown faces on seminary vocation posters from dioceses around the country and the lack of Black and Brown faces in seminaries and houses of formation. We must do better as a Church and as a community to assist our young people to be open to a life of service in the Church.

We know the awful history of racism in the Church, especially when it comes to priesthood and religious life—Black men and women were prevented from entering seminaries and convents because of their skin color; the experience of racism and isolation once they entered, which caused many of them to leave (and even leave the Church); the discrimination they experienced in ministry after being ordained or professed. The low numbers of Black priests and religious today stem from these conditions that persisted in the Church. It is perfectly understandable that mothers and fathers wanted to protect their sons and daughters from this potential trauma and discouraged religious vocations.

### **Creating a Culture of Vocations**

Thankfully, things have changed, yet few of our young people in the Black community are responding to God's call. For the Church to be truly Catholic, her spiritual leaders must reflect her members. The Church needs her Black sons and daughters to respond to the radical call to give their lives to serve God and His Church. Without them, she is not fully herself. What we need is to create (or re-create) a culture of vocations in the Black community, one that promotes, supports, sustains, and cares for all vocations in the Church—priesthood, religious and consecrated life, permanent diaconate, marriage, and the single life.

All vocations begin at home, in the family. They do not simply fall out the sky. I consider myself lucky to have grown up in a strong Catholic family with parents who

made faith, prayer, and going to Mass a priority, even on vacations. We must encourage families to pray together, attend Mass together, talk about the faith, and to engage in service activities together. Parents are the first teachers of the faith to their children, and we must equip parents with the tools to pass on the faith to their children. Families and parishes need to work together to provide opportunities for our children to take ownership of their faith so that it becomes relevant to their lives amid all the other obligations they have. Parish religious education programs and CCD classes are necessary but limited. Helping a young person grow in knowledge and practice of their faith requires a real encounter with God and a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Parishes and especially families must create the conditions for young people to invest in their faith as a way of life. This will help build solid, healthy Catholic families, which will lead to solid, healthy Catholic parishes and potential vocations.

Parents are incredibly influential in the lives of their children. Encouragement from parents for their children to consider a religious vocation gives them permission and the space to be open to God's call. What a huge relief I felt when I told my parents of my decision to enter seminary and the consolation that my mom's words gave me: "We already knew (of your vocation)." Parents should talk to their children about vocations. A word of encouragement or a simple acknowledgement of priesthood and religious life can be the spark that sets in motion a possible vocation that God had already planted deep within. Parents have their own ideas for their children's future, which is normal, but sometimes that could be at odds with God's plans. Instead of THY will be done, MY will is done! One of the greatest gifts that a parent can give to God would be the gift of their son or daughter.

The community of lay faithful also has a vital role in the vocational discernment of our young people. The slogan, "if you see something, say something" applies here too. Of the sixteen new DC priests ordained, every one of them mentioned a family member, mentor, or a priest who was influential in their discernment and encouraged them to pursue their vocation. If a Church elder or a parishioner notices the reverence at how a young person serves at Mass, or loves to pray, or is respectful towards others, or hangs around the Church, or shows up at every event, perhaps they too may have a vocation. If you see qualities in a young man that you want to see in your priest, let him know that. Similarly, if there is a young woman who could be a bride of Christ as a religious, tell her. It is quite remarkable what others may see in us that might be difficult to see in ourselves. Your encouragement too gives them permission to consider what God's plans are for their lives and that they have your support.

There seems to be a great divide in what priests do and what people *think* priests do. The unhealthy barriers between priests and laity needs to be removed. We had priests as part of our family and invited them to our home regularly. That is how I got to know them and realized that they were regular people like everyone else. I love getting invited to parishioners' homes because I get to know them and their families better—their joys,

frustrations, hopes, dreams, concerns—and learn ways to serve them better. It is important to have priests as part of the family, to share their life with you, to get to know them as real people (because we are!), and to destigmatize whatever false notions of priesthood that persist. We were not created to be alone, and even priests need healthy relationships with their parishioners to thrive. And priests also need to encourage young men and women to consider vocations to priesthood and religious life.

### **Some Challenges to a Culture of Vocations**

Several challenges do exist to creating a culture of vocations. The scandals of the Church—especially the sin of racism, the wounds it has caused, and the lack of healing—have limited the number of Black vocations, resulting in the lack of visibility and exposure to Black priests and religious. It is hard to imagine yourself doing something if you do not see others who look like you in that vocation. The hard reality too is that those who enter often feel alone or isolated and sometimes unsupported in their formation program. Thankfully, several organizations exist to provide the support for our young people in formation as well as in religious life and priesthood—the National Black Catholic Clergy Caucus, the National Black Sisters' Conference, the National Association of Black Catholic Deacons, and the National Black Catholic Seminarians' Association.

The challenges of family life and the breakdown of the family pose a particular difficulty. While parents can be the greatest influencers for their children to consider a vocation, they can also be the greatest influence against considering a vocation. When parents do not approve or encourage or talk about vocations and give the impression that it is unimportant, then it will not be important or even a consideration to their children. Additionally, there is a diminished sense of religion generally in our culture, which has made it difficult to find value in spiritual realities over the enticements of the material and secular world. Young people these days have so many distractions that easily drown out the voice of God. More options in education, sports, and other extracurricular activities abound for young people these days to pursue various careers and professions to make a lot of money. Parents want their children to be successful, which usually equates to material success. A life of poverty and ecclesial service usually does not fit that description nor is attractive. We must recover this religious sense and reprioritize it in our culture and in our families.

Ultimately, fear prevents us from responding to God's call. There is the fear of what God is asking of us, the fear of what others may think, the fear of losing something, the fear of being alone or the only one, and even the fear of unleashing something that is beyond your wildest dreams. Some of these are legitimate fears, but God has a response. He is never outdone in generosity when we pursue his will, and He would never call us to something that will make us miserable. He desires our happiness more than we do. We must make real efforts to expose our young people to the beauty of the priesthood

and consecrated life, that it can be lived out well and joyfully and bring about your greatest happiness and fulfillment.

### **The Importance of Marriage**

I have been speaking mostly about vocations to the priesthood and religious life. However, none of those vocations would be possible without the vocation to marriage. And we certainly have work to do in the Black community. Marriage rates have been declining in the Black community for the past several decades, falling nearly 30% from 1950 to 2019. Also, rates of divorce among Blacks are higher than whites. There are a number of societal factors causing this, but the ability to share lot, life, and love with another in a committed relationship for a lifetime truly is a gift from God, especially when it is lived out with the help of his grace.

Marriage, like all other vocations, starts too in the home. Marriage prep for couples begins when they are children. They learn all about marriage from what they observe their own parents, the interactions between their mother and father, and relationships with other family members. We must insist upon marriage catechesis for couples and provide robust marriage preparation as well as marriage enrichment. Also, I find it helpful to partner married couples with engaged couples to accompany them through the process and during their marriage. They would serve as guides to answer questions, be a source of encouragement and wisdom, and talk through some of the real challenges of married life.

It is important too to celebrate marriage in the parish community. When I served in the parish as a parochial vicar, I loved every first Sunday when we acknowledged birthdays and anniversaries. After announcing the anniversaries, we counted all the years of marriage among the couples, and very often would reach into the hundreds of years of marriage. It was something to be celebrated because marriage is not easy, but it remains the foundation of our families, which lie at the heart of the Church.

### **Final thought...**

Most folks today would say that there is a vocations crisis in the Church, with the shortage of priests and religious and with parish closings and mergers due to the lack of priests to serve our parishes. I do not ascribe to this notion at all. Absolutely, we need more priests, but I think there is a *response* crisis. I believe that real problem is that we are not responding to God's call. God is in the business of calling people since the days of Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, David, the Old Testament prophets, the apostles, saints and holy men and women throughout human civilization. God calls everyone, not just certain folks in certain communities. God never stops calling us to himself, to share in his life. Problems arise when we do not open ourselves up to what he offers to us.

And we as a Black community do a disservice to ourselves and our children and young people and, dare I say, impoverish the Church, when we do not promote and encourage vocations in our community. The Church needs her Black sons and daughters in all states of life in the Church. The Church is not fully who she is without the witness

of her Black sons and daughters. As Pope Paul VI said in 1969 during his papal visit to Uganda, “you must give your gift of Blackness to the whole Church,” especially to the Church in America. God gave unique gifts to the Black community to be given to and shared generously with the Church, which includes vocations. We pray that we may create a culture of vocations in the Black community, that our families may be strengthened and become places where the faith grows and vocations emerge, and that they may be a new springtime for our young people to respond to God’s call and discover the joy of giving their lives in service to God and His Church.