

Family, the Seedbed of Vocations

The following reflections were made available by the Vocations Director of the Archdiocese of Cincinnati:

First, to begin I would like to quote Archbishop Charles Chaput of Denver, writing in the foreword for Christopher West's *The Good News About Sex and Marriage*:

Very few [discussions about the vocations crisis] deal with the most fundamental vocations crisis of all: marriage and family life.

It's no accident that priests and religious emerge from believing, practicing, loving Catholic families...The love between a husband and wife is the foundation stone upon which every other Christian vocation is built.

If you want to do something about the "vocations crisis"...you can begin right here [referring to West's book, which applies to this topic as well.]

In response to that, I received one challenge on the materials that the Vocation Office produced for Vocation Awareness Week: there was nothing included about marriage. At the time, we made a conscious decision to focus solely on vocations to priesthood and religious life. The challenge correctly pointed out that if marriage life is extolled for all of its beauty and challenge, then vocations will also flourish, which I whole-heartedly agree with!

Marriage

If a couple preparing for marriage wants to live in a 'snow-globe,' thinking that their life together will be all happy, bliss and joy, reality has another thing coming to them! While living the married life certainly has days in a snow-globe, there are also many days that are far from it.

In the Church's theology of Marriage, we speak of two ends: unitive and pro-creative. And they are correct: the secret to a successful marriage (at least partly) is to keep anything from coming between you and your spouse, and to be open to life in all that you do. However, I think this definition needs to be fleshed out some more. In the Rite of Marriage, the Church says that 'the love of husband and wife symbolizes that love that Christ has for his Church.' That is a sacrifice, dying to yourself to live for the other. This is not easy in today's day and age. I also propose that there must be something of the mystery of the Christian world contained in the Sacrament of Marriage as well, for no matter how long you are married, there is always something more to learn about each other, you are still a gift from God to each other. Successful marriages are built upon open and honest communication. One of the reasons that Natural Family Planning is successful in cementing a marriage together: they have to discuss many things in the monthly living of their married life. Two final points are that it really helps to have a sense of humor, and a willingness to embrace the Cross in daily life.

One lesson that I learned quickly is that I had to embrace these same ideas and concepts in the seminary: an idea of sacrifice for the sake of the Kingdom; giving life in a unique way; being drawn closer to my beloved, the Church; a priest is daily calling the mystery of Christ upon the altar; communication built in prayer; being able to laugh at the hardships; and a daily embrace of the Cross in my life as a priest.

To extol these virtues in married life helps them to be formed in the next generation of priests, as well as putting them out there for priests and seminarians should help to foster them in married life as well.

Family Life

There are certain things that children must be taught in the family, for they will not get it anywhere else, especially in this day and age: virtue.

Young people today are inspired by the idea that they can live up to something higher, and I think that they want that challenge. They recognize the passing world, the illusory world; help your children to live up to something more! Teach them to be virtuous!

I know this sounds like I want to make your children boring and lifeless, but that is far from the case. The four Cardinal Virtues (from Ancient Greek philosophy) help to navigate the world:

- **Prudence:** making the right decisions.
- **Strength:** being able to do the right thing.
- **Fortitude:** doing the right thing when under stress.
- **Temperance:** finding the path of life down the middle, avoid extremes.

These four are balanced and expanded by the three Theological Virtues:

- **Faith:** trusting in Someone unseen.
- **Hope:** an orientation to a future life in Heaven.
- **Love:** a willingness to die to ourselves to live closer to God.

God has hard-wired us in this way. A person who embraces these teachings has a greater awareness of life, of the joys that come out of this life and how Christ ultimately leads us closer to Himself.

Development of a Vocation

A vocation must be nurtured and strengthened before it can flourish. How?

- 1. Silence:** the world is so noisy, help your children to find a comfort and ease in the quiet, for that is where God speaks to the heart.
- 2. Prayer:** a conversation with God and an entrance into grace. Do you take your children to Adoration where Jesus can speak directly to them?
- 3. Listening:** Prayer is not just asking God for something, and this takes a while to develop. It is a two way conversation, so if we are doing all of the talking, it isn't really prayer.

4. Obedience: teaching your children that to follow your wishes is another way they show love to you, just as it is a way of our showing love to God, by embracing His commands. (notice, you better have the best in mind for your children, just as God does!) Obedience is not a four letter word!

5. Response: a vocation requires action, even when the path is not fully clear. If we sit back and wait for God to clearly outline every step we will ever take, we will never get anywhere!

Priests and religious do not fall out of the sky, they are born and raised in loving Christian families and parishes.

Implicit Modeling of a Vocation

To promote vocations in the family starts very simply: by living out the faith at home. There are very simple ways to do this:

- having a crucifix in every room, plus other religious images
- praying together before meals and bedtime
- celebrating the cycle of the Church year at home
 - Seasons and feasts
- trusting God's presence even in the rough times

The faith of the family at home should be nurtured by events at the parish as well:

- Participation at Mass
 - Lector, Eucharistic Minister, Usher, Choir
 - Singing and responding with the community
- Involvement in other aspects of the life of the Parish as well
 - Retreat programs
 - Adult Faith Formation
 - Parish Picnics
 - Festival
 - Sports programs
 - If your parish is missing something, start it!
 - If you have these programs but find them wanting, work to develop them!

Other aspects:

Do you attend Mass when you are on vacation?

- Does your pastor know your name and your family?
 - Have you ever had him over for dinner?
- Do you speak well of your priest and bishop, even if/when criticizing?
- Do you respect your (Arch)Bishop?

All of these aspects show that the faith is something that is important to you, and that you want your children to have it as well.

Explicit Modeling of Vocation

The specific seed of a vocation to the priesthood and religious life needs to be planted. Joe Campo, director of Grassroots Films in New York City and producer of the DVD, *Fishers of Men*, said the following in a recent interview published in the *National Catholic Register*:

My suggestion is that they show (*Fishers of Men*) to second graders. Where I come from, little boys want to save the world. They want to be police officers and firemen. Why not give them the option of saving souls? That's the priesthood. And you have to give it to them before adolescence. If you do, then adolescence will be formed with this in the heart.

Plant the seed of a vocation in the heart of your children before the cynicism of adolescents blocks it from growing! Help your children to realize that the Faith is not just a static thing, but is something that is active and alive. You can do this by sitting in the **FRONT** of the Church. Yeah, there will be times when they cry and act up, but they are more apt to be engaged if they can see what is happening. A friend of mine made vestments for her son while he was a toddler and in grade school so that he could 'play Mass.' When he graduated from high school, he asked himself the question about priesthood. As of now, he does not feel that calling towards the priesthood, but he had to ask himself the question.

My same friend, as her son grew, had him critique and grade the homilies every week at Mass: what were the good points, what were the bad points, what was the Scripture reference; what would you have said differently and how? He was actively involved in the parish and in the life of faith.

Having taught in a High School and worked in youth ministry before that, young people (teens) often are lacking the vocabulary to be able to talk about how God is active in their lives. Doing these things will help them to develop this vocabulary, and see that the faith is something that is participatory!

Questions for Parents

As a former teacher, I have to give homework:

As a parent, ask yourself these questions:

- 1) What gifts has God given to each of our children?
- 2) How is God asking us to help develop these gifts?
- 3) How can I help our children to find their vocation in life?

Another friend of mine recently gave birth to her second son (plus an older step-daughter). When I first got to know her, she was single and not dating. She really had to wrestle with the question of whether God was calling her to be single for the sake of the Kingdom, to enter religious life or to the married life. She kept getting the answer that she was called to be married. With that assurance, she was very selective in whom she was looking for as a spouse, someone with whom she had a deep spiritual connection. When she finally met her future husband, it just clicked into place. She is convinced that this would not have happened if she had not asked herself the question of what vocation God had planned for her in her life. Get your children and young people to ask the same questions.

Compliments of the Archdiocese of Cincinnati