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The Fourth Sunday of Easter (C)
The 44th World Day of Prayer for Vocations

Today, on this 44th World Day of Prayer for Vocations, the Holy Father Benedict reminds us: "The Good Shepherd ... invites us to pray to the heavenly Father, to pray unitedly and insistently, that he may send vocations for the service of the Church."¹

We know that vocations, callings to the service of the Church, do not simply arise within vacuums or in the silence of individual hearts alone. Vocations very often arise within families and within parishes. Future priests do not simply drop out of heaven; they arise from within the people of God.

"My sheep hear my voice," says the Lord Jesus. "I know them and they follow me" (John 10:27). It was within my home parish of St. John the Baptist that I first heard the call of the Lord to serve him and his people. It was because of the prayerful and loving encouragement of my fellow parishioners that I was able to discern his call; without them, I would not be standing here before you today. Of this I am certain.

The vocational story of every priest is different because the Lord calls men to serve him through the very personal

¹ Pope Benedict XVI, Message for the 44th World Day of Prayer for Vocations.

experiences of their lives; no two priests are the same. The Lord continues to call men to his own priesthood so that, as he says through his prophet, "I will appoint over you shepherds after my own heart" (Jeremiah 3:15).

I want to share with you today how the Lord called me to his sacred priesthood, both to encourage those whom the Lord is calling to the priesthood in this parish right now, and to help you support them as well.

We must go back to the beginning, or nearly there. When I was about five years old my Mom developed a brain cancer that confined her to a hospital bed in our home. Dad stopped working to care for Mom, my brother and I. Even so, it was a happy childhood and I was carefree like most children.

On the morning of 20 February 1986 my brother and I awoke and got dressed for school as we always did. Something was different, though: Dad was not up and breakfast was not ready for us. I went to his bedroom to wake Dad, but he wasn't there; apparently, he fell asleep on the couch. I walked over to wake him, tapping him on the shoulder and calling to him. Thinking he must have just been sleeping heavily, I woke Mom and asked her to rouse Dad. She failed, too. We called the ambulance and when they arrived my brother and I were taken outside to wait with the neighbors in the gently falling snow.

When the paramedics came out of the house, one of the two looked at me and said not a word. He simply shook his head and I knew that Dad was dead. My happy and carefree world came crashing down around me.

My brother and I then moved in with Dad's sister, her husband and their four children and Mom was placed in a nursing home. We visited her every Sunday after Mass and during the week. On 18 January 1988, as we were playing with Legos in the living room, building a bigger and better castle than the day before, the nursing home called: Mom had just died. At not quite ten years of age I was an orphan and filled with profound pain and sorrow. My life, personality and thought would forever be marked by these two events.

At this tender age, I yelled at God and asked him, "Why me? What have I done to deserve this?" How could God allow the two most important people in my life to be taken away from me? I never blamed God for their deaths but I demanded an answer.

To this day I have not received an answer, but as I continually questioned him, I slowly found myself praying and in the midst of this prayer I heard him say to me, "It is I. Do not be afraid" (John 6:20). "I am here. I love you." "I will not leave you orphaned; I will come to you," and come to me he did: through the Scriptures, prayer and the sacraments (John 14:18). I slowly came to know that "the Lamb who is in the

center of the throne will shepherd them and lead them to springs of life-giving water, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes" (Revelation 7:17).

I began to feel his loving presence and I began to ask him - subconsciously, but I asked him nonetheless - "Who are you, sir?" As I listened to him in prayer I came to know him and I recognized him as "My Lord and my God" (John 20:28).

In high school, I began to feel him stirring within my heart, calling me to his service. I heard his voice "in a tiny whispering sound" in the stillness of my heart (I Kings 19:12). I came to realize that his love that I had experienced and came to rely upon required me to give it to others; I could not keep it to myself. I heard him calling, "Whom shall I send? Who will go for us?" (Isaiah 6:8). As he called to the Apostles so he called to me, "Come after me, and I will make you fishers of men" (Matthew 4:19). But unlike the Apostles I did not immediately leave everything to follow him. I said, "I am too young" (Jeremiah 1:6) and he responded: "Follow me" (Mark 2:14).

Even so, I thought myself unworthy of so generous a calling; indeed, I am unworthy of it. There were others in my parish more fit for his service, I thought. There were others more popular, more intelligent, more talented, more loving than I, and so I at first declined his invitation, choosing instead to teach history. I could not see why the Lord wanted me,

wounded as I was. I did not yet realize that "In Love's service, only wounded soldiers can serve."²

At this time, I told no one about what the Lord was saying to me, which made even more remarkable what soon happened after: parishioners approached me before, after, and during Mass and told me, "You should think about the priesthood; you'd make a good priest." I was stunned. Within a matter of weeks, it was not simply a handful of my fellow parishioners saying this to me, but dozens, and the number grew with each passing week.

Pope Benedict XVI has said of seminarians: "His soul is filled with amazement, which makes him ask in prayer: 'Lord, why me?' But love knows no 'why'; it is a free gift to which one responds with the gift of self."³ I knew this to be true. I was left with only one question: Why not me? I had no answer and so I knew that I must give myself to his service.

Finally, I decided that my fellow parishioners must see something in me that I did not see and so I took another look at the priesthood and realized that God created me for it and only in following his call would I ever find fulfillment, contentment, joy and peace.

My dear young men in this parish, if you feel or hear the Lord calling you, listen to him and follow him.

² Thornton Wilder, *The Angel that Troubled the Waters*.

³ Pope Benedict XVI, Meeting with Seminarians, 19 August 2005.

There is an urgent need for the emergence of a new generation of apostles anchored firmly in the word of Christ, capable of responding to the challenges of our times and prepared to spread the Gospel far and wide. It is this that the Lord asks of you, it is to this that the Church invites you, and it is this that the world - even though it may not be aware of it - expects of you! If Jesus calls you, do not be afraid to respond to him with generosity, especially when he asks you to follow him in the consecrated life or in the priesthood. Do not be afraid; trust in him and you will not be disappointed.⁴

Let each of us cry out to the Lord:

Lord, look upon these troubled times, which need preachers of the Gospel, witnesses to you, persons who can point the way toward life in abundance! Look upon our world and feel pity once more! Look upon our world and send us laborers!

With this petition we knock on God's door; but with the same petition the Lord is also knocking on the doors of our own heart. Lord do you want me? Is it not perhaps too big for me? Am I too small for this? Do not be afraid, the angel said to Mary. Do not fear: I have called you by name, God says through the Prophet Isaiah (43:1) to us - to each of us.⁵

⁴ Pope Benedict XVI, Message to the Youth of the World on the Occasion of the 21st World Youth Day.

⁵ Pope Benedict XVI, Homily, 11 September 2006.