

Editor's Desk

Dear Editors: I received an introductory issue from February 2003, which contained an article on sexual abuse which moved me deeply. I shared this article with our chancellor and recommended your publication. He agreed that the article contained information both vital and helpful to our diocesan priests. [*Sexual Abuse and You: consequences*, by Rev. Robert Wheelock, OFM Cap, Feb 03, p. 24].

--Noah Simpson, NM

Dear Readers:

The staff of *Pastoral Life* wishes everyone a blessed Christmas and New Year. There is a tradition in the old Ojibwe times of a winter thanksgiving. Winter is harsh in the northern Great Lake region of Michigan, Wisconsin, Minnesota and Ontario. It's a splendid season, but unrelenting. It is an opportunity for intense spiritual reflection. It is a time to take stock of the winter cache. If there is plenty of food, then some of it is shared with neighbors, particularly widows with small children and elders. Generosity and gratitude go hand in hand. They bless and thank Gichi Manitou (Grandfather in Heaven) for creating the day and for creating us. This sacred, yet rather simple ceremony is remembered around the time of the Western New Year.

This is a good time for fond remembrances of God's blessings and of family members. There is a couple in lower Michigan who collects all their Christmas cards into a basket. They pull out a different card each day of the New Year, read it over again and then send up a special prayer for the person(s) who sent them that card.

Wishing all our readers blessed memories,

—The Editorial Staff of *Pastoral Life*

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Youth Ministry and Vocation Recruitment

DAREN J. ZEHMLE

The reality of the shortage of priests in the United States of America and the problems and difficulties that will arise as a result of this shortage is becoming all too apparent in many parishes today.

There have been many suggestions and discussions as to how this shortage might be remedied, with answers ranging from full-time lay ministers to the ordination of women as priests. But, the solution can be found in the most obvious of places - our youth.

In years past, many young people felt encouraged to consider a life as a priest, sister, or brother. These vocations were presented to youth in Catholic schools, at Mass, within the family, and the parish at large. It was not uncommon for half of the boys in a class to have been talked with about the possibility of a priestly vocation. In more recent years, we [have become] reluctant to suggest the possibility of a religious vocation to our youth. Our society today has become "totally dominated and im-

prisoned by an individualistic, materialistic and hedonistic interpretation of human existence."¹

Each of these three elements is contradictory to the virtues of the religious life of poverty, chastity, and obedience. We have become too concerned about overly encouraging our youth toward a vocation as though we have "pushed" them into something that they do not truly wish to do. Indeed some would argue, that "sometimes our understanding of the call to ministry is limited to vocations to the priesthood and religious life. The Church, however, continues to need people to serve as full-time liturgists, liturgical musicians, religious educators, and other pastoral leaders."² I would have to disagree with the conclusion drawn here. In my experience, reality seems contrary to what is argued here. Our understanding of ministry in the Church has shifted toward lay ministry as opposed to the priesthood and religious life. I hear youth ministers and par-

ishes encouraging lay ministry to their youth far more often than they encourage religious vocations. Quite often, lay ministry is encouraged while vocations are not so much as even mentioned. There is something drastically wrong here. Lay ministry is a very important part of the Church, but we should not over-emphasize the need of lay ministers over and against the need of vocations to the priesthood and the religious life. The two should work side by side and support each other, not act against each other.

It is my strong conviction that youth ministry has a powerful role to play in the recruitment of vocations to the priesthood and the religious life. Youth ministers and vocation directors should work hand in hand toward this goal.

Searching like Job

I grew up in a home that was not unlike many others. When I was about four years old, my mother developed a brain tumor, which confined her to a hospital bed in our home and my father stayed home to care for her, my brother, and myself. When I was eight years old my father died of alcoholism. I was, quite naturally, devastated. For a long time, I continually asked God, "Why did you do this? How could you let this happen? What did I do to deserve this?" I simply could not understand.

After my father died, my brother and I lived with our Dad's sister, her husband, and her four children. That made for quite a household, especially when you throw in three dogs, several hamsters, a bird, and a cat. Just two short years later, Mom passed away in the nursing home. I was again devastated. I could not grasp how God could take away the two most important people of my life, especially when I was so very young.

But now, I look back on these two events that shaped my very being with deep gratitude. Not because of the loss of my parents, but rather because of how I developed as a result of these losses. After Dad died, but especially after Mom, I began to pray to God, asking Him for answers, for support, for love. And ever so slowly I began to feel the great love of God and drew great comfort from that experience. When I was seven-teen and went on my first Teens Encounter Christ weekend (TEC), I was able, for the first time, to let out a great deal of the hurt and the pain that I had kept bottled up deep within. It felt so good to be free of that pain after so many years. With that release, the love of God flowed through my body. I could truly feel the healing presence of God around me.

It was in these three experiences that I most deeply felt my call to the priesthood. This call was further manifested in the person of my pastor, who helped me through these difficult experiences without even fully

realizing he had done so. He was always there for me from the moment I first arrived in the parish. As I grew, so, too, did our friendship. He was always there with a listening ear, a compassionate heart, helpful advice, a great joke, and an encouraging sense about him.

My experiences of his care and concern for me, together with my experiences of God's deep love for me, began to foster within me a desire to serve God with all that I could. I remember very clearly how Scripture - especially the passages concerning the calls of the Apostles, Prophets, and all of the commands to preach the Gospel [spoke] directly to me, urging me forward toward the priesthood. This desire developed through grade school and especially into high school as I began to become more and more involved with the parish and with the TEC program. After my TEC weekend, I could not decide exactly what I wanted to do with my life: whether I wanted to teach history or become a priest. It was at this point of indecision that many parishioners came up to me after many of the Masses I served and told me they thought I would make a good priest. They never pushed or shoved, they simply commented. But even with such affirmations, I still was not sure. At one point I decided that I wanted to teach history. And yet, as is often the case with God, the desire of priesthood never left me. It was like

a flashing light in the back of my mind screaming, "Hey, look at me!" And so I did. I looked closer at, and prayed about the priesthood, and came to the conclusion that this was God's call for me: to be a priest. After I had made this new decision, the thought of teaching history no longer appealed to me, and signs of God's call became more and more apparent. I grew more in love with helping at the parish and in the TEC community. This continued through my college years as I devoted most of my time to Campus Ministry and RCIA. All through college, the desire to serve God as a priest only grew.

The calling

There is much that we can learn about the connections between youth ministry and the recruitment of vocations in John 1:35-42.

First, let us take the two disciples of John the Baptist. These two had apparently been with John for some time, because they were there "again" with John (1:35). They had followed John, listened to John, learned from John, until the day the two heard John says of Jesus, "Behold, the Lamb of God" (1:36). The two disciples then left John and followed Jesus. John showed them Jesus and in so doing, invited them to follow the Lamb of God.

Many of our youth, like the two disciples, have been with their youth

ministers for some time. It is the task of the youth minister to point out Jesus to the youth to whom they minister. They are to lead the youth to Jesus [and] show the youth how Jesus is present in their lives. They too are to say, "Behold, the Lamb of God" and to invite the youth to follow the Lamb.

Jesus asked them, "What are you looking for?" (1:38)

Anyone who has had an encounter with the Lord desires to bring others to him so that they, too, might have an encounter with him.

They simply - and oddly - reply, "Rabbi, where are you staying?" (1:38) Jesus' question was an invitation to the disciples to follow him. The two disciples had been with John the day before when Jesus walked past and John declared: "I saw the Spirit come down like a dove from the sky and remain upon him... Now I have seen and testify that he is the Son of God." (1:32-34) They knew of Jesus prior to following him, but they needed the announcement and encouragement of the Baptizer to take that first step. Jesus did not force his way into their lives but gently invited them to learn from him as Rabbi and Teacher. The responses of the disciples indicated their desire to know Jesus better; to follow him and to learn from him, but were anxious to come out forthright and say it, much less to do it. Jesus told them, "Come and see." (1:39). The simple and

humble request of the disciples was answered with the hospitable invitation of the Lord.

The same is true of youth ministry. So many people today, especially our youth, are searching for reason and meaning in their lives. "These [circumstances] naturally offer favorable conditions for embarking on the journey of a vocation which leads toward the total

gift of self to Christ and to the Church in the priesthood [and the religious life]."³ They know of Jesus, the person of his-

tory, they have heard of Jesus on television shows and on the radio, perhaps even in the home, and yet they do not know him. This is not to say that none of our youth know Jesus or have had an encounter with the presence of God. Indeed, many of them have, but so many more have not, or at least have not realized such an encounter. We know, as people of faith, that the only answer to these searches for meaning and fulfillment is Jesus the Christ, the Son of the Living God. Only in him can we find salvation, peace, and meaning for our lives.

When the youth are shown the presence of Christ in their lives, they are often reluctant to openly voice their desire to follow Jesus and to learn from him. But, the desire is

there nonetheless. They just need to be invited. The youth are simply hesitant for fear of rejection of their peers and their family, for fear of a message they cannot live up to, for fear of judgment, and even for a fear of the love they know will come, for love always demands an equal response, and this they know, more so than many of us. The youth are shown Jesus, they follow him, Jesus

Youth who have been shown Jesus and who have spent time with him, invite others to meet Jesus as well.

invites them in, and the youth go to meet him. Jesus says, "Come and see" to our youth and he shows them something new. Secondly, let us look at Andrew, one of those two disciples of John who followed Jesus. After staying with Jesus that day, Andrew runs to find his brother, Simon, to tell him of Jesus and to bring Simon to Jesus. After listening to his brother's words, Simon follows Andrew to Jesus.

Just as Andrew introduced Peter to Jesus, so too do the youth who have been shown Jesus and who have spent time with him, invite others to meet Jesus as well. Anyone who has had an encounter with the Lord desires to bring others to him, so that they, too, might have an encounter with him. Youth ministry is much more expansive than the youth who meet regularly at the parish. It involves the friends of those who meet, and their friends, and their

friends, and so on. Jesus calls them all equally and shows them all something new and he calls them to something different.

When Simon speaks with Jesus, Jesus says to him, "You are Simon, the son of John; you will be called Kephas." (1:42) Jesus calls Simon by name, but at the same time he gives him a new identity, and with this new identity comes a new mission. Peter would come to understand this more fully as the years went on.

In like manner, Jesus calls the youth by name, but he also calls them to something different, something new, and quite likely something they did not think possible. It may very well be that Jesus calls many of our youth to a religious vocation as a priest, brother, or a sister, something they may not think possible, or something they may not have considered at all. It is part of the task of youth ministry to help the youth come to understand where it is that Jesus is calling them and to help them explore all that that call entails; to live the Christian life to the best they can, with the grace of God. The youth minister should not be afraid to speak of vocations or to encourage vocations. Indeed, vocations should be part and parcel of all that youth ministry involves. Youth ministry is about

helping our youth follow the call of Jesus in whatever way he calls them. The Second Vatican Council stressed the universal call of each person to holiness and we do a great disservice to our youth if we do not help them to explore all of the ways in which they might grow in holiness and in service

of God and his people. Vocations, be they religious, marriage, or single life, are not simply a way of life. Vocations, of whatever

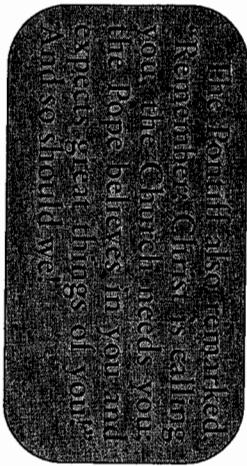
form, are the various ways that God calls people to live their Christian faith and to grow daily in holiness. Each of us is called to one of the three general vocations and it is our task to help our youth discover their vocational calling and to have the courage to do so, and to support them in following their call and vocation.

A Papal invitation

Pope John Paul II believes very strongly in the special role our young people play in the Church today, and in the ways God calls them for the future. And he also believes very strongly in promoting vocations among our young people, for they are not the Church of tomorrow, but they are the Church of today. In his mes-

sage to the young people at the Kiel Center in St. Louis in 1999 the Holy Father addressed the youth very clearly. He said, "The Lord will help you to know his will; he will help you to follow your vocation courageously."

The Pontiff also remarked, "Remembered, Christ is calling you; the Church needs you; the Pope believes in you and expects great things of you!" And so should we!



We hear so often today of the great shortage of priests and religious in the United States, as well as in other parts of the world. Vocations are most certainly out there. One simply needs to look for them. It really is not too difficult to spot a young person God may be calling to the priesthood or the religious life. More often than not, these young people have already briefly considered the notion themselves without expressing this thought to others. And if someone does not suggest the possibility from the outside, the thought will most likely stay just a mere thought and will never be explored or prayed about. If the parishioners of my parish had not commented to me that they thought I would be a good priest, I would not have thought much more of the notion than I al-

ready had myself. I needed their support and their encouragement and their prayers to help in this decision to follow God's call to the priesthood. And so do our youth today. Indeed, our youth are yearning for our support, guidance, and prayers.

All it takes is a simple word of suggestion and a simple word of encouragement. "Pushing" vocations down someone's throat is clearly not the answer. All we need do is plant the seeds within our youth and let the Spirit do the watering, using us if he desires. We need to encourage our young people to be open to the possibility of a religious vocation, and we need to be open ourselves to encourage them.

The Second Vatican Council reminds us of this necessity: "The whole Christian people ought to be made aware that it is their duty to cooperate in their various ways, both by earnest prayer and by other means available to them, to ensure that the Church will always have those priests who are needed for the fulfillment of her divine mission."⁴ The Council goes on to say, "Parents, teachers, and all who are in any way concerned in the education of boys and young men ought to train them in such a way that they will know the solicitude of the Lord for

his flock and be alive to the needs of the Church.⁵ The same could be said of the married life, the single life and the religious life.

I spent a great amount of time this past summer with the youth of our diocese and they are moments and events that I will treasure always; they truly were the crowning moments of the summer. Our youth are very much open to the numerous ways in which God is calling them. Their openness to me and their willingness to share their lives with me are clear indicators that our youth are open to religious vocations, but they know they cannot follow a vocation on their own. They are seeking the aid of the Christian community, and we should not hesitate in offering our assistance.

Endnotes

- 1 John Paul II Pastores Dabo Vobis, 8
- 2 National Federation for Catholics Youth Ministry, From age to Age: The challenge of Worship with Adolescents.
- 3 John Paul II, Pastores Dabo Vobis, 9
- 4 Presbyterorum Ordinis, 11
- 5 Ibid.

⁴Darren J. Zehle is a third year theologian preparing for the priesthood at the University of St. Mary of the Lake/Mundelein Seminary studying for the Diocese of Springfield, Illinois.

A common delimiter found among the clergy and other religious is the personal interest that was afforded them in their vocation search by others.

—Bro. Joshua Seidl, SSP