

“If Today You Hear His Voice...”

(Hebrews 3:7-8)

A Pamphlet on Discernment

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Introduction

The post-Vatican Church rediscovered some half forgotten biblical truths: God calls every baptized Christian to become holy; holiness consists not in some extraordinary mortifications but in the perfection of love, and God offers his Holy Spirit to each one of us so that we may reach this holiness; each member has from God a unique gift by which he or she is to build up the community of the Church. All this served to correct a one-sided pre-conciliar perspective: before the Council the average Catholic saw in religious life and in the priesthood *the* way to holiness and to service for the Church. Today, however, the pendulum has swung to the opposite extreme: most Catholics in the United States no longer perceive religious life or the priesthood as a challenge addressed to them. Yet the generosity and religious zeal among American Catholics are no less today than before the Council. There are more lay people than ever before who choose to work for the Church even though they could have made a financially more successful career elsewhere. I also believe that God's inner call to the priesthood and religious life is as much present today as ever before. However, supporting persons and structures are scarce today. Few parents encourage and help discern the vocation of their growing children, few priests and religious offer to young people the inner certainty about the value of their own vocations. The "support structure" would also need a strong ecclesial community in which leaders and members all foster potential vocations.

With this booklet I would like to help the ecclesial community in its task of discovering and guiding potential vocations. I hope to reach those who feel a vague "call" but do not find anyone who can help them understand its meaning. This goal explains the structure of the booklet: after speaking about the signs by which one can tentatively identify a vocation (I), I will present the values of religious life and the priesthood so that the one in whom God is working may discover: "This is what God has been calling me to from the beginning (II). "Then I will explain some of the means by which one can become increasingly more open to God's guidance (III). Finally, I will outline the steps that could lead one to the decision to enter a seminary or religious community (IV).

Of course, one could learn much more about these matters in conversations with a spiritual guide than by reading a book. But, as I said before, I wrote this booklet for those who do not yet have such a guide. However, the more they will think about what they'll have read, the more they will feel the need to find a competent spiritual director.

I. DISCERNING A VOCATION

1. Signs of a Vocation

God addresses us in an infinite variety of ways, and each one of us perceives his voice through the mediation of his own personality. We cannot find two exactly identical ways in which God's call is heard. Still we can point out patterns and present some examples of how God reaches a person. As mentioned before, every person receives a personal call from God, not only future priests, brothers and nuns. But in this booklet I will limit myself to describe some typical signs of a priestly and/or religious vocation.

a) Longing

One of the initial signs for God's call may be a deep dissatisfaction with what you have and what you are. It is very different from self-hatred or hatred of the world. It rather comes from the awareness that all the possible careers you could pursue, all the possessions you could accumulate, even your best friendships are not enough. You are not insensitive to joy. On the contrary. Enjoying a landscape, a piece of art or literature or talking to a friend begets in you a longing that none of these experiences can satisfy. C.S. Lewis describes one form of this yearning:

As I stood beside a flowering currant bush on a summer day there suddenly arose in me with warning, and as if from a depth not of years but of centuries, the memory of that earlier morning at the Old House when my brother had brought his toy garden into the nursery. It is difficult to find words strong enough for the sensation which came over me; Milton's "enormous bliss of Eden" (giving the full, ancient meaning to "enormous") comes somewhere near it. It was a sensation, of course, of desire; but desire for what? Not, certainly, for a biscuit tin filled with moss, nor even (though that came into it) for my own past...Before I knew what I desired, the desire itself was gone, the whole glimpse withdrawn, the world turned commonplace again...

At times you also may remember "the enormous bliss of Eden," the intimations of infinite joy, love and goodness, and you yearn to reach that Reality for which our present life is only a preparation.

b) Gratitude

Someone else may start from an experience which at first seems very much opposed to dissatisfaction and longing. But once it unfolds, it will appear as another aspect of the same experience. You may find an intense joy in living and discover in all that surrounds you (a morning sunrise or a good conversation), signs and messages of Someone. Everything and everyone around you, all that happens to you, becomes a personal gift that fills you with gratitude. A young man who will later become Father Zossima in *the Brothers Karamazov* saw this overflowing joy and thankfulness in his brother who was dying from tuberculosis. This experience was the beginning of his monastic vocation:

“Well, doctor, have I another day in this world?” he would ask, joking. “You’ll live many days yet,” the doctor would answer, “and months and years too.” “Months and years!” he would exclaim. “Why reckon the days? One day is enough for a man to know all happiness. My dear ones, why do we quarrel, try to outshine each other and keep grudges against each other? Let’s go straight into the garden, walk and play there, love, appreciate, and kiss each other, and glorify life”...The windows of his room looked into a garden, and our garden was a shady one, with old trees in it which were coming into bud. The first birds of spring were flitting in the branches, chirruping and singing at the windows. And looking at them and admiring them, he began suddenly begging their forgiveness too: “Birds of heaven, happy birds, forgive me, for I have sinned against you too.” None of us could understand that at the time, but he shed tears of joy. “Yes”, he said, “there was such glory of God all about me: birds, trees, meadows, sky: only I lived in shame and dishonored it all and did not notice the beauty and glory.”

Having seen the beauty and glory of God in his creatures, you may begin to desire the source of all beauty and glory. And in particular, if you have experienced how good, pure and noble a human being can be, you may begin to yearn for the source of all purity, nobility and goodness. In a mood of overflowing gratitude, you want to dedicate your life to Him in a direct and radical way. You cannot imagine for yourself any other way of life than living in His presence and serving Him in everything.

c) Encountering Jesus Christ

Another vocation may start with getting acquainted with the person of Jesus Christ. Reading the Scriptures or talking to a Christian you encounter Him who calls you: “Come

and follow me.” First, you wish you did not hear it. You try to go after your business as usual as if nothing happened. But you cannot. You become aware that you no longer belong to yourself. You cannot arrange your future as you wish. Christ wants you to give up everything and follow him. At times when you feel inclined to obey him, an immense peace overtakes you; when you decide to refuse him, you become sad and escape into distractions.

d) “How can I help people most?”

For some people a vocation may start with a strong desire to help people. You ask yourself: how could I help people in the best way possible? And you dream about becoming a doctor, a psychiatrist, a social worker, a teacher or a nurse. But one day you discover that giving Christ to people matters more than anything else. Uniting them to the Body of Christ in the Eucharist, giving them His peace in the sacrament of penance, shaping and forming Christ in them through teaching and prayer appeals to you most. Healing their souls and bodies for eternal life appears to you more important than curing them temporarily from bodily or psychological disease. As a sister, you will also bring Christ to people; not only distributing communion and bringing them to the sick but also by your prayers of intercession and through the “sacrament” of your own body: you are called to embody and radiate the love of Christ in your words and deeds, in your smile and touch.

Close to this type is that of the “community-builder.” You know that you have a natural ability to create “good community spirit.” People instinctively turn to you for leadership. They sense your security and feel at home in your presence. Your enthusiasm is contagious; you can reconcile antagonists and inspire common projects. Christ may call such a natural leader into his service. In that case you will have to build not just any community, but the “Body of Christ,” the gathering of those in whom Christ himself provides a home for the estranged and lonely people of today’s world.

e) Love of the liturgy

We find many people who are attracted to the religious life and to the priesthood because they are in love with the liturgy. This love may be the sign of an authentic vocation. After all, the central act of the ministerial priesthood from which everything else derives and to which everything else leads is the celebration of the Eucharist. For every religious, too, the center of the day is the Eucharist. If one seeks *the spiritual reality* which the rite expresses, if he is moved by the love of Christ who gives himself to the Father and

to the Church in the Eucharist, his vocation will develop in the right direction. But it is not enough to appreciate *only* the experience of beauty in the liturgy or to seek *only* the warmth and shelter of a human community. Still worse, some seek the altar in order to cover up a deep-seated feeling of inferiority; they want to bask in the aura of borrowed holiness and pontificate over the faithful through the power of the ritual and of preaching. These are clear signs that such a person has no vocation at all or has distorted a beginning vocation.

2. The Natural Driving Forces of a Vocation

Everyone who responds to God's call must draw on some natural "energy resource." Without harnessing a natural driving force, no vocation could, in the long run, survive. It would collapse in a psychological vacuum.

For instance, the ambition to do something really important, to become someone "who counts" may be that precious energy resource which God's grace can use and transform. At the beginning one craves to become important in the eyes of his parents, in the eyes of his social milieu or at least in his own eyes. But, if he listens to Christ, Christ will eventually teach him to lose his life in order to gain it. He will learn to please God more than men and to accept the indifference and even the rejection of people for God's sake. At the end, he may trust God so much that he puts himself and his work into God's hands and is no longer afraid to appear empty-handed before Him.

Likewise, someone with leadership potential will be encouraged to become a good leader. Instead of domineering and pushing people around, he will learn to support, inspire and coordinate the talents of everyone for a common purpose. When meeting with opposition, envy, or hatred, when discovering his own unpurified motives, he will learn humility and patience. He will realize how little he himself can do. God alone builds the house, He alone produces the harvest. The servant must do his best but attribute all the results to the One from whom all good comes.

Intellectual curiosity may also be very useful for God's work. Not only the study of theology but of any aspect of the world and of man is, in final analysis, the study of God's truth, and therefore, sacred. If an intellectual devotes himself to God's service, he must become a better intellectual. Instead of being a complacent possessor and a condescending dispenser of the treasures of knowledge, he will remain a student all his life. Aware of his limitations, he will always be drawn to learn more. Whatever aspect of the world is his field of inquiry and teaching, his respect and desire for the truth will inspire a respect and desire for God in his audience. Let me illustrate this with a true story. During the Communist era Valerie Dienes was interviewed on the state controlled Hungarian television. She was already in her nineties, but in full possession of her extraordinary intellectual powers which made her an internationally known philosopher, linguist and mathematician. She also had a deep Christian faith that transformed and inspired her scholarly research. The interviewer carefully avoided any religious topic. Yet, after the TV show, Miss Dienes received a letter: "I had never heard about you before, for I am just a boiler smith," someone wrote to her, "but while listening to you, I came to realize that God must exist." This is the apostolate of an intellectual. Without even speaking about God,

she could not help radiating a reverence and love for truth that pointed beyond herself to the Source of all truth.

The aesthetically inclined individual has also much to offer to God. Sensitivity to beauty may develop into sensitivity to God. He can also use his aesthetic talents to develop a beautiful liturgy and beautiful surroundings for the liturgy. But he also must undergo a conversion, “a re-evaluation of his values.” Truth, honesty, simplicity and love must be placed before and above any aesthetic value. Paradoxically, if he prefers honesty, humility and truth to cultivating beauty, even his aesthetic taste will develop: he will understand that beauty and truth are inseparable.

3. Common Characteristics of All Vocations

Regardless of the variety of forms religious and priestly vocations may take, we can identify three common characteristics in each of them: passion for God, ability to love people, and readiness to learn from criticism.

a) Passion for God

Many of the characteristics of the different types of vocation I mentioned earlier may also be found in people who are not called to be priests or religious. What points to such a vocation is the singular intensity of passion which manifests itself in various forms: in yearning for something greater than this world can give, in gratitude to God, in readiness to serve Christ and people. In other words, a good vocation always has the potential to develop a passionate “adventure of love” with God. It happens in many different ways, but it is always the same basic experience: the one who is called knows that there is no greater joy than loving God. In comparison to his Beloved nothing else counts. Such a soul will appreciate the prayer of St. Francis, “My God and my all,” or the words of St. Thomas answering Christ who offered him anything he wanted, “only you, Lord.” We cannot expect this love to be aflame at the very beginning, but the soul must have *the desire* to love God and be ready to pay any price for learning it.

b) Capacity to love people

In Christianity the love of God and the love of neighbor are inseparable. A document of the Cistercian General Chapter has put it with classic precision, “Our love should, in a single, undivided act embrace God and neighbor, our neighbor who has been created in the image of God and redeemed by the blood of Christ. Therefore true love should manifest itself in the twofold service of God and man.” This applies not only to an active apostolic order, but also to an exclusively contemplative community.

We can easily delude ourselves about our standing with God. We may enjoy a sweet, heartfelt peace and think that we are in love with God; but if we do not care about the people around us, we are deceiving ourselves. A genuine vocation always includes the desire and the ability to love others for their own sakes rather than as objects of our good works. If one is incapable of honesty in personal relationships and is merely playing a role, if one cannot sincerely give and receive, religious life and the priesthood would only aggravate his problem. But if you feel that you cannot love but have the desire to love,

there is no reason to despair. God is ready to do miracles for one who has faith the size of a mustard seed. “Ask and you shall receive; seek and you shall find; pray and it will be given to you...knock and it shall be opened to you. For whoever asks, receives; whoever seeks, finds; whoever knocks, is admitted” (Lk 11: 9-10). God can heal even the most timid person who has withdrawn from others for fear of rejection. He can make us overcome our dread of loving and being loved.

c) Readiness to learn from criticism

The most dangerous trap on our way to God is our unlimited potential for rationalization. I can easily convince myself that I am kind, generous and loving while everybody else around me sees clearly that I am obnoxious and condescending. At the same time I am surprised that my friend does not see how irritating his self-righteous tone of voice can be. Others often see and judge our actions more objectively than we do. This is one of the reasons why priestly formation and religious life require living in community. I cannot know myself, let alone improve in my relationship with God and with people unless I am positively eager to receive criticism. The balloon of self-importance needs to be pierced and deflated so that I can learn and accept truth about myself. At the beginning this is a very bitter truth and almost impossible to swallow. It means discovering that I am hopeless, I am unable to love God and people sincerely. But hitting rock bottom is at the same time a moment of grace: I no longer put myself--not even unconsciously--above others, but begin to accept them as fellow sinners. I understand that I and my neighbors, *we all together* need God’s forgiveness. Thus accepting the truth about myself is the road to accepting others and adopting the right relationship with God: I must beg for mercy rather than expect a reward.

However, it is not enough to wait passively for God’s forgiveness. While waiting for his grace to transform my heart, I, too, must work on myself with all my strength. As St. Ignatius of Loyola said, “You cannot measure progress by facial expressions, gestures, natural abilities or by the love of solitude. The measure is the determination by which you shape and form yourself.”

II. RELIGIOUS LIFE AND PRIESTHOOD

After examining God's call, we will now take a look at what some of us are called, religious life and the priesthood.

1. Religious Life

Jesus treated people in different ways. Although he preached to all who wanted to hear him and healed all who asked for it, He did not let everyone to become his disciple. The man from whom Jesus expelled many unclean spirits begged him to be allowed to join his company, but Jesus sent him home to proclaim how much God had done for him (Mk 5: 18-20). Jesus chose his disciples with sovereign freedom. He called them and they left everything and followed him (Mk 1: 14-19; 2: 13-17, 3: 13-19, Lk 9: 59).

Unlike other rabbis, Jesus had also women in his entourage who followed him wherever he went and assisted him out of their means (Lk 8: 1-3). They stayed with him under the cross when all but one of the male disciples abandoned him. They observed where and how he was buried (Lk 23: 55). At the first possible time after the Sabbath rest, they returned to the tomb. Thus they became the first witnesses to the empty tomb and to the risen Christ (Mt 28: 1-10; Jn 20: 1-2; 11-18). They were commissioned by him to report the news of the resurrection to the apostles and so, as some of the fathers say, they became "apostles of the apostles."

The religious communities of men and women in the Church originated from the desire to live this life of Jesus' disciples. While we cannot accompany him in the flesh as his contemporaries did, we have a privilege the first disciples did not possess: Through his Resurrection Jesus has become present in a new way: he no longer is walking *next to us* or speaking *to us*, but he is present *within us*, inspiring us *from within*, and by nourishing us with his risen Body, he incorporates us into himself. Thus the intimacy of our relationship with the risen Lord in some sense surpasses that of the first disciples with the earthly Jesus. Yet, our faith that embraces the Christ present in us remains anchored in the experience of the first disciples who heard and touched and saw with their own eyes the Word made flesh dwelling among them (1 Jn 1: 14; Jn 1: 14).

a) Celibacy

Because of this intimate presence of the risen Christ in the believers, religious life is not only a discipleship. We not only learn from him and try to imitate his example; we are

also called to be one with him, as the bride becomes one with the bridegroom. According to the New Testament and the Fathers, the whole Church, men and women, single and married, are all called to become the bride of Christ (2 Cor 11: 2-3; Eph 5: 22-33; Rev 21: 1-4) by uniting themselves in pure love to Him.

Some share in this union with Christ through marriage and others through celibacy. The couples who receive the grace of the sacrament of marriage learn to love and serve Jesus Christ through loving and serving one another. Those who are called to celibacy, freely renounce sexual relations “for the sake of the kingdom of heaven” (Mt 19: 12). They do not despise marriage, but they want to reserve all their psychic and physical energies to prepare God’s reign, the great wedding feast between Christ and humankind. Rather than being bound to one man or woman, they want to unite themselves to Christ directly and help many others to become united with Him. For these men and women (not for anyone else but for those who received the call to celibacy) marriage would mean a division of heart (1 Cor 7: 33-34) and a restriction. Were they married, they would have to honor their self-imposed restrictions; before everybody else they would have to love and serve their own families. As celibates, their vocation is to extend their love to many men and women and to present all of them “as a chaste virgin to the one man Christ” (2 Cor 11: 2).

We may attempt to understand the mystery of Christian celibacy from another viewpoint, the central role of sexuality in personal communion and communication. Unless we have obscured its value by promiscuity, we are very much aware that sexual relations are meant to become an intimate way of communication. In marriage where sexual relations can develop their full potential, giving one’s body to the other may indeed express a radical way of giving one’s whole self, both body and soul to the other. It is indeed the most dramatic way of being in one another and for one another. The celibate, then, senses, often instinctively, that his sexual powers hold “the key” to a radical way of giving himself. Through his celibacy he longs to give God his whole self, both soul *and* body. In the words of St. Paul:

The virgin--indeed any unmarried woman--is concerned with things of the Lord, in pursuit of holiness in body and spirit (1 Cor. 7: 34).

The celibate is, of course aware that God is not a sexual being and he cannot reach God through his sexual powers. (The Bible condemned from the beginning any form of sacred prostitution, the perverse attempt of human beings to reach the Sacred through sexual relations.) The celibate can do only what Mary did: not give away “the key” to her or his own gift of self, that is, renounce sexual relations. Just as Mary, the celibate wants

to remain “unfulfilled,” persevere in the attitude of prayer and expectation. He waits for God’s initiative. He prays that God may look down on the lowliness of his servant (Lk 1: 48), that God may ignite his soul with the fire of His own love. As a result, the energy that would normally be used for loving one’s spouse and children will be transformed into loving God and all those whom God entrusts to the celibate’s care. For the celibate, then, his renunciation of sexual love becomes the form of his gift of self to God and to God’s people.

However, he runs a much greater risk than a married person. If his faith fades and his prayer dries up, he may close in on himself and become in the end incapable of loving either God or man: his humanness withers away in a sterile isolation and egotism. Husband and wife, on the other hand, must at least curtail their egotism, share their income, their time and their bed if they want the marriage to survive.

However, if the celibate does not despair of loving God and man, but keeps trusting and praying, his hope will not be disappointed. He may not feel any more love than before, yet he will be able to help those who come to him and ease the burden of those who suffer from loneliness and despair. His own suffering will enable him to understand and accept those who suffer. Still, his “cross” of celibacy should not be exaggerated. More often than not, it may not be greater than the hardships of those who have to raise a family.

If the celibate’s love for Christ and for people is real, he will bear witness to the reality of Christ who is the source of his love and peace. His presence among people will be a reminder that the “future age” is real since his ability to become human and loving without the natural support of a marriage points to a power greater than his own, the power of God’s coming Kingdom. In the Kingdom there is no need for sexual relations but everyone will be united to the risen, spiritual body of Christ and to one another in a virginal communion of body and spirit.

Looking at celibacy from this perspective, we should not be surprised that the church clings to it in spite of great pressure from her own ranks. In the Roman rite of the Catholic Church only those are ordained to the priesthood who believe they received the gift of celibacy and commit themselves to a celibate life. The Church, of course, could change her law. St. Peter was married, many bishops and priests were married in the first centuries. Even today married men may be ordained in the Eastern rite Catholic churches. The charism of celibacy, as a prerequisite for priestly ordination in the Roman rite Church and for episcopal ordination in the Eastern rite churches developed first as a spontaneous tradition, before it became codified into church law around the end of the fourth century. In our times, the Church considers the celibate state freely chosen for the sake of Christ so

important that she rather accepts a lower number of candidates for the priesthood than change her law.¹

b) Community Life

While celibacy for the sake of the Kingdom is the root and foundation of religious life, it expands and flourishes in community. (Even the first hermits in the history of the Church showed their love for Christ by welcoming guests and by sharing with others the fruits of their prayer and labor.) If we seek God, Christ will lead us into his community. When the risen Christ appeared to Saul on the road to Damascus, he told him, “Get up and go into the city, where you will be told what to do” (Acts 9: 6). The Lord tells the same thing to those whom he calls today: “Go to the Church, to the seminary, to a religious community, where you will be told what to do.”

Modern men and women are torn between two contradictory drives. At times one would prefer to withdraw from the oppressing company of others and do “his own thing,” undisturbed by any outside pressure. At other times the same person may crave to lose his own fragile identity in the anonymity of a group; he wants to feel and think *with the group*. Sometimes most gifted individuals end up brainwashed by a cult that offers them an emotional shelter at the price of individual identity. A good religious community avoids both extremes: a divisive individualism and a mindless group-identity. Only a sufficiently strong person is *free* enough to become a constructive member of a community. Only he can choose to subject his own interests to those of the community and accept the community’s tasks and commitments as his own. Obedience to the superior must be seen in this larger context: he assigns the tasks and responsibilities to each member and sees to it that everyone cooperates according to his own ability for the realization of the goals and ideals of the community. Of course, no religious community is a free-floating, independent group: it is part of the Church and is dedicated to serve the Church.

In community life we experience again and again the truth of Jesus’s words: “Whoever would preserve his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel’s [we could add, “for the sake of his brothers and sisters”] will preserve it” (Mk 8:35). In working generously for the good of the community, our individual talents and unique potential will not be suppressed but rather stretched to the limit. We will be

¹Even if, at a later stage, the church changed her requirement for the diocesan priesthood, priests in religious orders and brothers and sisters in religious orders would still continue to make a vow of celibacy. It is remarkable that in the Eastern rite churches in which most parish priests are married, people prefer the celibate monks to the married clergy for confession and spiritual guidance.

surprised to find out that we can do much more and can handle a much greater variety of tasks and jobs than we had ever suspected.

The greatest asset of community life is that we are “mutually encouraged by our common faith” (Rom. 1: 12). My faith is rekindled by the faith of my brother, my sagging fidelity by his fidelity. I realize that it is Christ who makes him strong and faithful. By acknowledging the gifts of one another, their faith, goodness or wisdom, and by being grateful for what they have received, I myself share in their gifts. In this way, I experience what it means that we are all members of the same body.

Perhaps the greatest trials of community life are those situations where I am forced to admit my inability to love my brothers, when my sins and their sins weigh so heavily on me that I begin to lose hope for the future. Then only prayer can help. But a prayer which comes from faith “the size of a mustard seed.” He who prays this way knows in advance that, if he asks for the ability to love his brothers, God will not, in the long run, resist him. Thus a religious community never becomes a “finished product.” It is both a gift and a task, a present reality and an object of hope. Sometimes it provides a foretaste of our home in heaven, but more often than not, a convincing proof that we are only on the road to heaven.

c) Poverty

Some form of poverty is essential to religious life. Jesus’s words are clear: “If you seek perfection, go, sell your possessions, and give to the poor...Afterward, come back and follow me” (Mt 19: 21).

“Sell all you have”: Jesus knows that clinging to possessions paralyzes the heart and closes it off to God. Everyone needs to be “poor in spirit” which means that no one should become a slave of his possessions but should be generous in sharing what he owns with those in need. Without this attitude no one can enter the Kingdom of God. Those, however, whom Jesus calls to himself, must do more: they actually must give up their possessions. Ever since the time of the apostles, religious communities responded to this call of Jesus. Today there are various degrees and different forms of practicing poverty.

Renouncing material goods does not mean despising them. To the heart freed from craving, material things reveal what they are: God’s gifts, signs of his wisdom, goodness and beauty. St. Francis who never owned an acre of land in his life enjoyed more the blooming meadows of Umbria than those who actually owned these fields.

“Give to the poor”: besides freeing the heart for God, renouncing wealth also has another purpose, to help those in need. Beginning with the first hermits and monks,

religious always produced more than they themselves could use and they shared their surplus with the poor. In the Middle Ages monasteries fed a huge number of poor on a daily basis. Religious also worked in hospitals, ransomed slaves, and taught in schools. Since they do not work for a salary, their schools can more easily accept children from poor families who cannot afford to pay full tuition.

“Come back and follow me”: those who followed Jesus lived from a common purse. The first Christian community followed their example. The members sold their property, gave the proceeds to the apostles who distributed them to each according to his need (cf. Acts 2: 44-46; 4: 32-37). Thus no one owned anything substantial as his own. By sharing material goods they built up a close community. Similarly, in a religious community you do not earn money or accept donations for yourself but for the community. It is, then the superior’s job to distribute to each member what he needs. In this way material goods become both the expression of an existing unity and an effective means for fostering unity and a freely chosen dependence on each another.

2. Priesthood

The identity crisis among priests is, I believe, one of the most important reasons for the sudden decline of priestly vocations after the Council. You must be convinced of the value of what you are doing in order to attract young people to share your work.

Before the Council, the image of the priest was clearly defined in the Church. Every Catholic knew that “Father” is the possessor of immense spiritual powers: he changes the host and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ; he opens and shuts the gates of heaven by granting or refusing absolution; he facilitates the entry of the dying into heaven by giving them the last rites. He controls everything in the parish, both the Church and the School; if you had any problem of conscience, you went to Father.

After the Council, however, people began to re-discover the old Catholic truth that all members of the Church share in Christ’s royal priesthood and that each member possesses a special charism by which he or she should contribute to the building up of the Church. Alongside what was coming to be called “the ministerial priesthood,” a wide range of other ministries arose, from youth minister to marriage counselor to religious education director, all open to lay men and lay women in the parish. The question was asked, what then is the ministerial priest still good for? Except for a few sacramental rites, everything, it seemed, could be taken care of by lay people. And the lay ministries did not impose on the candidate the often misunderstood obligation of celibacy.

Today, after a period of much confusion and experimentation, a new priestly identity is slowly emerging. The new ideal is at the same time more faithful to the biblical and patristic understanding of the priesthood and more adapted to the needs of our times. The priest sees his vocation as a two-fold service: he is the servant of Jesus Christ for His people. His role is to create, shape, and form the communities of the Church by joining them to Christ so that every faithful may live and practice the royal priesthood of Jesus Christ. He still looks at the celebration of the sacraments and especially that of the Eucharist as the center of his ministry. But he understands better today than before that the sacraments transform the lives of the faithful only if they are received with living faith. Consequently, he spends more time and energy on preaching and teaching the word of God in order to enkindle and deepen the faith of his people. His task can best be seen in the eucharistic celebration. By preaching the word of God he prepares the community to receive the word of God made flesh in the Eucharist. As the servant of Christ, the priest alone makes Christ present in his sacrifice under the sign of bread and wine. But the purpose of his priestly action is to actualize the priesthood of the whole community: all the faithful join him in offering Christ and themselves through Christ to the Father.

It would not be right to oppose the role of sacramental ministry and community building. It is by preaching the Word and administering the sacraments that the priest builds up the Christian community. In other words, by feeding his people with the Word and the Body of Christ he builds them into the Body of Christ which is the Church. This, of course, is anything but an “automatic” process. He can feed them with the Word only if he himself is fed by the Word, striving to understand and live the Word in his own life. Because the Church is the Body of Christ, Christ lives and acts in her, each member communicating Christ’s love to the other and to the world. Just as Jesus gave his flesh for the life of the world (Jn 6: 51), a Christian community does not exist for its own sake, but for the sake of the world. Christians cannot remain indifferent to the problems that plague humankind today. They must do their utmost to help eliminate poverty, injustice, oppression and war. Yet they will succeed in improving society only if they do not restrict the Gospel to social justice. Their most important task is to give *Christ* to mankind. Without Christ affluence would only make more unbearable an empty and meaningless life. The high suicide rate of the affluent but areligious Scandinavian countries has proved this convincingly.

Faced with so many tasks, the post-Vatican priest knows that he cannot do his job by himself. He must search for all the talented assistants he can find, not only financial experts and architects, but also people with special spiritual gifts. In a good parish many different lay ministries flourish today. They specialize in the care of the poor, the sick, the liturgy and religious education. They counsel engaged and married couples, help the divorced. The number of these ministries is still increasing. Enlisting the active cooperation of others, coordinating their activities, criticizing and encouraging them is a much greater challenge than the one-man show of old. This new, more sophisticated leadership is badly needed in the Church today. We still see too many instances of the authoritarian pastor. On the other hand, some priests and bishops misunderstood the demands of the postconciliar era: they abandoned the principle of one-man responsibility and allowed the parish staff to go their way without providing guidance and direction. If a pastor or bishop shifts responsibility to others for what is going on in his parish or diocese, the mistake is as grave as if he had tried to do everything by himself. After all, he remains the shepherd who will have to give an account to God for each of his sheep.

Not only the Second Vatican Council, but also the profound changes in the social position of American Catholics make it our duty to re-think the tasks of the priestly ministry. In the 19th century and in the first decades of the twentieth, the Catholic priest was the undisputed leader of a group of uprooted immigrants living on the margins of American society. The German, Irish, Polish and Italian Catholics faced the complex task

of finding their place in a largely Protestant environment that fostered a deep-seated hostility against all ethnic groups and Catholics in particular. Priests provided the much-needed leadership in the Catholic ghetto. They built churches, schools and hospitals, organized trade unions and, to a large extent, managed to preserve the religious identity of their flock. Through the Catholic school system, they even promoted a slow but steady integration of the immigrant Catholics into the mainstream of American life. Today, with the exception of native Indian and Latin-American minorities, the process of integration has been completed. According to a recent survey, the second richest ethnic group in America is that of the Irish Catholics. It is no wonder then that churches and parish halls serve less and less as the rallying points of an insecure minority. Priests are no longer looked up to as fathers and protectors of uneducated immigrants.

As a result of this sociological change, a hardly perceived new challenge is facing the Catholic priest today. More and more American Catholics are in desperate need of an intellectual leadership which would help them preserve their Catholic faith in the midst of an increasingly secular culture. Just as a highly educated Protestant might disdain his fundamentalist origins, many educated Catholics do not find themselves at home in their neighborhood parish. Most priests cannot help them make the connection between their faith and education, between God's revelation and the world of philosophy, science, literature, and the arts. We have forgotten to a large extent that the Catholic Church, precisely because it is *catholic* (having a mission to transform *all* men and *the whole life* of man), has inspired and shaped culture throughout her history. Who could prove convincingly to our laity that the Church is a promoter and inspirer of learning, if not the Catholic priest? Some priests should manifest in their own lives that reason and faith, secular knowledge and theology, scholarship and Catholic identity are natural allies rather than irreconcilable enemies. Such priests would not be teachers and scholars *in addition* to their priesthood, but priests who live and practice their priesthood *through* teaching and scholarly work. They would not punctuate a math class with religious exhortations or give first place in a literature course to Christian authors. They would rather have a reverence for the truth wherever it is to be found. By fostering a knowledge of the truth, they would lead their students closer to God, the source of all truth. Only a commitment to all truths and to the truth *for truth's sake* is Catholic.

The sectarian approach is diametrically opposed: whether non-Catholic or Catholic, the sectarian is interested in the truth only to the extent that it furthers his movement: preoccupied with religion and morality, narrowly understood, he is indifferent or even hostile to "merely" human values, such as science, literature and the arts. If educated, he

uses his learning as a weapon to “defeat the enemy,” the Protestant, the atheist and, more recently, “the exploiting capitalist.”

This then is one of the great challenges the American Catholic priest faces today: to provide intellectual leadership for the formation of a Catholic intelligentsia. He should help them understand and formulate their Catholic faith in such a way that it makes sense in today’s world. He should inspire them to value, criticize and deepen the intellectual life of the country.

I wrote more extensively on the need for intellectual leadership not because this is the only challenge the American Catholic clergy faces today, but because this is the least perceived and most neglected. There are many other urgent tasks that should be explored in a more detailed account. Let me mention only a few. More than 80 million Americans do not belong to any of the Christian churches. We need to devise ways to reach them and explain to them the Gospel of Jesus Christ. We should also educate the rich and middle class Catholics about their moral obligation to help the poor: Catholic lay men and women should cooperate with other Americans in finding ways to eliminate poverty in our country and help Third World countries raise themselves out of the quicksand of an ever-worsening poverty.

Paradoxically, the clergy will be successful in providing intellectual leadership and influencing the social consciousness of Americans only if it does not consider these as the central tasks. The center of the Gospel is God’s call to an eternal communion of life with Himself and with one another by conforming to the life, death and resurrection of His Son. Our transformation into Christ extends to the whole person: hence, it must shape culture and society. Our share in the love of Christ is real only if we love not only by words but also by deeds: hence our duty to help the poor and oppressed. But the Gospel must not be distorted into a mere cultural or social concern. *It can transform the world only because it calls us beyond this world.* Here we can only anticipate and prepare for the wedding feast of heaven.

III. THE MEANS OF REMAINING OPEN TO GOD

Once God has broken through our defenses and we feel more certain that we are called, it is important to keep open “the channels of communication” towards God. Even though God deals with each of us in a unique way, there seems to be a pattern in his treatment of beginners. After a first encounter and “honeymoon,” he usually withdraws, hides and waits. He wants to lure us out of a passive attitude of enjoying warm religious feelings. He leads us away from a fascinated preoccupation with our own experience so that we may search for God himself. He withdraws the heart-warming spiritual consolations in order to test us: “Do you love me or only my gifts: Do you seek me or only your own feelings?”

Let me mention here the most important means that, after the first experiences, help us remain open to God’s guidance.

1. Daily Meditation

One of the most important practices that helps us in our search for God is daily meditation. There need not be any elaborate system for a successful meditation. Each one of us should develop his own way. Here I will present only some general guidelines. *The goal of meditation* is to develop a sensitivity to God’s presence. Even though we often don’t feel his presence, faith can teach us that He is always there: not even a sparrow falls to the ground without his knowledge and will. He constantly sends us “coded messages,” not through earth-shaking extra-ordinary interventions, but through the normal flow of events. But only a sensitive faith can decode the ciphers. In the words of Martin Buber: “All that happens, even the simple flow of events, is a call addressed to me. True faith begins when I become aware that everything that happens has a message for me...I suddenly realize that a presence confronts me.

A prerequisite for Christian meditation is the belief that God will work “mighty deeds” in our own lives similar to those He worked in the history of Israel, Jesus and the Church. What Christ did once in a visible way, he does every day spiritually in the life of the faithful. If we are convinced of this, we will read the Bible not merely as a source of information but as God’s Word spoken to us here and now. This Word is an almighty word as much today as it was yesterday. If we have faith, the Word of Christ will raise us from the dead, will restore our sight and straighten our paralyzed limbs so that we may walk in His way.

The Process of Meditation

a) The most important preparation is *presence to ourselves*. We should not try to escape from ourselves by pumping up some lofty religious emotions. God waits for us inside our real selves, not in an imaginary idealized self. We should admit our poverty: all those feelings, resentments, envies, and cravings that we are ashamed of yet are part of ourselves. God hears only an honest prayer, the cry from the depth of our misery.

b) Once we have gotten in touch with our true selves, we can create some *silence* and *hunger* in our hearts. A story about one of the Fathers of the Desert may help here.

A young man came one day to an old spiritual father and asked him, "Father, teach me how to find God." The old man did not reply but started towards the river nearby. Surprised, the young man followed him in silence. When they arrived at the river bank, the old hermit grabbed the young man, dunked him and held him under water until he almost drowned. "What did you desire most while you were under water?" asked the hermit after he had let the young man catch his breath. "Air, of course," he replied. "If you desire God so passionately as you were craving for air while you were under the water, you will find him," the old man said in conclusion.

If we have this desire for God, we should be confident: our desire of Him is a sure sign that He wants to be found by us. We could not desire Him if His grace were not already at work within us.

c) The next step is to *read* a passage from the Bible (or from a good spiritual book) *very slowly* and *peacefully*, pondering, almost tasting each word.

We may also imagine a scene from the life of Jesus and identify ourselves with one of the characters: depending on my changing needs, sometimes I am the disciple whom Jesus encourages or reprimands, the sinful woman to whom he says, "I do not condemn you. Go and from now on do not sin," or the self-righteous Pharisee whom Jesus tries to shake out of his complacency. Let us allow the words of Jesus to sink in, to make an impact on our mind and heart. Sometimes we will find what we need immediately. Sometimes we will continue reading longer until some words seem applicable to our situation.

d) Then let us ask, "*Lord, what do you want me to do?*" For instance, if I am thinking about the words of Jesus, "Blessed are the peace-makers," I should examine what prevents me from being at peace, what is the cause of my restlessness; what are those situations where my peace could influence others? Then I would ask what is the secret of Jesus' peace, how is it different from the peace of this world? How can it co-exist with struggle and suffering? I beg him with full trust to give me a share in his peace knowing that he inspired this request in me so that he might also grant it to me.

e) Finally, let us *thank God for what we received*--even if we feel that we did not receive anything. It is important that we meditate every day about 20 to 30 minutes regardless of our moods. We will see only later that it was worth the effort. Even if our heart and mind remained empty and dry during the meditation, we still may become sensitive to God's signals during the day. This means that we perceive a harsh criticism, a sincere smile or a beautiful sunset as God's personal gifts to us. God remains quite unpredictable: he takes the initiative when he wants to. But without a personal struggle every day to keep our ears open, we may not be able to hear him when he decides to speak.

When to Meditate?

It depends on individual needs. For some, the best time is in the early morning before the daily chores and duties have drained them of all energy. Some cannot keep their eyes open and their minds going at an early hour. For them the ideal time might be at night, when they are alone and at peace and still wide awake. Some may want to divide the time for meditation between evening and morning. They read the text once at night and think about it peacefully before they fall asleep. They wake up and return to it in the morning. After such conscious and subconscious preparation the words of Scripture will sink in much more effectively than after one cursory reading in the morning.

Are Physical Exercises, Such as Yoga (Lotus Position, Rhythmic Breathing, etc.) Helpful?

They are very helpful—for some people. The exercises calm them down, get them in touch with their bodies and feelings so that they are more ready to listen. But some may not need exercises at all. Just because meditation exercises are a fad, they are not indispensable for everyone. It may be actually harmful if one thinks that yoga in itself can achieve union with God.

Material for Meditation

God's Word that gives light and life is the Bible. So the Bible should be our most important spiritual reading to which we return time and again; yet, at times other books of spirituality or lives of the saints help us make the words of the Bible come alive and speak to us more effectively than the Bible alone. Sometimes, when we don't have any particular question or problem, we may just use the readings of the mass for the day or read through a

whole book of the Bible over a longer period of time by selecting a passage for each day. But if we have a specific problem or question (for instance, what is the meaning of this crisis I have to endure, how could I pray better?) I will try to find those Bible passages that promise an answer to my question. Several Bible editions, such as the Jerusalem Bible, have a topical index that can help us find the texts we are looking for.

2. The Eucharist

One day in the late 1930's Jesus revealed himself to an agnostic Jewish-French woman, Simone Weil:

He took me into a church. It was new and ugly. He led me up to the altar and said: "kneel down." I said "I have not been baptized." He said, "fall on your knees before this place, in love, as before the place where lies the truth." I obeyed.

Indeed the Eucharist is *the Truth*: it sums up the truth about God, humankind and the cosmos. It reveals God made man in the state of pure gift for us and invites us to become pure gifts for God and one another through the same Eucharist. All this takes place in the most humble and hidden way: the incarnate Son becomes present in the form of simple bread and wine. No wonder that from the first moment of its revelation the Eucharist became the greatest challenge for the disciples' faith, an issue that has divided those who believed from those who refused to believe: "This is hard talk. Who can accept that?" (Jn 6:60) However, if we accept the "logic" of God's self-emptying love, the Eucharist becomes that luminous center which sheds new light upon all the other mysteries of faith and shows their bearing upon our communal and personal existence. It is indeed the "mystery of faith" par excellence.

Consecrating, distributing and living the Eucharist is the center of the priest's life and ministry. All his other tasks and activities either lead to a better participation in the Eucharist or are the consequence of Eucharistic celebration. He meditates on the Word of Christ and preaches it in order to whet his own appetite and that of the people for receiving Christ in person. A sincere celebration of the Eucharist will lead to a transformation of the Christian community into Christ: the Eucharistic Body of Christ builds up his mystical Body so that Christians, in union with their Lord, may become nourishing food for each other and for all people with whom they live.

a) The transformation of Bread and Wine into the Body and Blood of Christ

What we offer through the ministerial priest and along with him at the beginning of the Eucharistic Liturgy are actually ordinary bread and wine, yet precisely the reality of bread and wine serves as the basis for multiple, interconnected symbolic meanings.

1) In the Jewish culture where the Incarnation took place bread and wine reminded the people of God's creation. With some effort of empathy even people of very different cultures where other forms of food and drink are more widely used can recognize the symbolic meanings of bread and wine.² It is God's earth that produces the grain and the grape, the raw materials for our gifts. *Thus through the bread and wine we offer to God his own creation, acknowledge our total dependence on the Creator, praise his generosity and the goodness of his gifts.*

2) The bread and wine, however, are not creation in its pristine state before human civilization has touched it. On the contrary, the production of bread from the sowing of the seed through harvesting the grain and baking the bread up to its being placed in the ciborium on the altar engages the work of many human hands with different expertise; it brings into motion the whole intertwining web of human society. The wine in the chalice is likewise the result of a long process of human work and social interaction. While the bread is our most necessary food, wine is the symbol of what is more than just basic nourishment. It suggests an atmosphere of celebration and leisure which are the source of any cultural activity. Wine is used for festive gatherings where people enjoy life and each other's company. *Thus the bread and wine aptly stand for all that is good in human civilization and culture which transforms and perfects (rather than destroys) nature.*

3) Finally, the bread and wine before consecration stand for the human person in the totality of his/her personal, social, economic and cultural relations. On the one hand we spend ourselves in "earning bread" and making wine, in sustaining and enriching the human community, civilization and culture. On the other hand, we are what we eat and drink, the bread and wine signify our lives in the world, our vital energies, our minds and hearts. In other words, *the bread and wine stand for our embodied selves in manifold interaction with society and God's creation.*

To summarize all three aspects we may say that *the preparation of the gifts expresses our intention to offer to God the whole of his creation, our efforts to build a civilization of love, and ultimately our own personal and social selves.* Yet, the structure of all the original Eucharistic rites and the change of offertory into a preparation of gifts by the post-Vatican Western liturgy make it very clear that this is only a preparatory step rather than a sacrificial act in itself. No real sacrifice is possible before and apart from the

²The Church has never considered herself free to substitute the popular food and drink of other cultures for bread and wine (for instance, rice and tea in Asia). This is not a narrow "Eurocentrist" attitude (the origin of the Eucharistic elements comes from the Jewish culture of the Middle East rather than Europe), but respect for the Incarnation. God has become a Jew in a Jewish -Hellenistic culture. Therefore just as the Jewish and Greek Bible will always remain normative and unsubstitutable, so will the ordinary food and festive drink of this culture remain the starting point of the Eucharist in all cultures.

consecration of the gifts. This fundamental fact brings to light both the highest dignity and the deepest misery of the human being: it manifests both our will to give ourselves and all of creation back to God as a perfect gift and our radical inability to do so.

Why can we not offer a perfect gift to God as long as we are left to our own human resources? Biblical revelation, liturgical tradition and theological understanding provide two reasons for this inability.

1) Only the Son knows the Father; he alone understands the Father's infinite splendor, truth and love both in himself and as revealed in his creation. Consequently, only the Son made man can offer himself with such an infinite love, praise and thanksgiving that is worthy of the Father's infinite perfection. Briefly, only God can give a perfect gift to God.

2) Moreover, humankind has sinned. Original sin and the increasing avalanche of personal sins have separated us from God. Burdened by our sins, we cannot approach God and live. This awareness comes to light most dramatically in the experience of Israel, but is also attested in the most primitive religions of humankind. Before we can petition, praise and let alone love God, we need to obtain forgiveness for our sins. From the very beginning of history humankind has felt the need for atonement. Yet the continuously flowing blood of human and animal victims outside and inside Israel attests that no sacrificial victim could provide the reconciliation we had been looking for. Only the innocent Son of God who took upon himself all the consequences of our sins could offer the Father an atoning love in our place and for our sake which would obtain free access for all of us to the Father. Only in this way does God's infinite love and wisdom become fully manifest, a love and wisdom which turns the worst evil into the greatest manifestation of his infinite love.

Even though not a sacrifice in itself, the Preparation of the Gifts is indispensable for the Eucharistic sacrifice. The Father does not destroy our gifts nor does He simply place next to them the sacrifice of his own Son. Rather, He accepts our gifts of bread and wine so that *they* will become our bread of life and spiritual drink, the Body and Blood of his Son. This fact of transformation has been constantly attested in the Church since the second century. It has been expressed in most Eucharistic liturgies much before the philosophical-theological formulation of the doctrine of transubstantiation began. That our gifts are transformed into the true sacrifice of Christ rather than replaced (or placed next to the Body and Blood of Christ) have important consequences for Christian existence. Just as the Father does not reject our material offerings, He does not reject the inner attitudes expressed in them; on the contrary, He takes seriously our efforts at repentance and our desire (already inspired by his grace) to give back ourselves and the universe to Him in

atonement, thanksgiving and praise. As the gifts of bread and wine are changed into the sacrificed humanity of His Son, so are our efforts of offering to God ourselves, our work and all creation to be transformed into the perfect sacrificial attitude of his Son. Through Him, with Him and in Him we can and should become the perfect sacrifice of thanksgiving, petition and atonement.

Thus, we would oversimplify the facts by saying (as it has often been done) that the bread and wine offered to God at the beginning of the Mass constitute our gifts to God while the Body and Blood of Christ are God's gifts to us. We have to add that our gifts at the beginning of the Mass become *the* perfect and acceptable sacrifice only through the consecration as they are turned into the perfect gift of self of the crucified and risen Christ. His gift to us consists ultimately in making *us* "an everlasting gift" to the Father through, with, and in his Son by the unifying power of his Spirit. In order to expand on these themes, we need to consider the theology of the Eucharistic Prayers themselves.

b) Holy Communion

Before Vatican II the prevailing attitude after receiving holy communion was to foster "a personal conversation with the Lord" concentrating on our own individual petitions, praise, thanksgiving, and atonement even though our petitions and atonement often involved other people too. Nowadays the dominating practice is the communion hymn and procession which intends to manifest that by receiving holy communion we are built up into the one body of Christ, the church. By the time we would be able to settle down to some individual conversation with Christ, in many places the parish bulletin announcements drag us back to the mundane realities of daily life.

The nature of the Eucharistic celebration, however, as emphasized by the Council itself, calls for the integration of both aspects. *We can be united to each other only to the extent that we are united to Christ himself; on the other hand, we cannot be united to Christ if we isolate ourselves from our brothers and sisters.* Communion with Christ and with each other are inseparable. Yet, the source of our communion with one another is our communion with Christ. In every Eucharist according to St. Paul "we proclaim the death of the Lord" (1 Cor 11:26). This proclamation means not only reciting words but a real participation in his sacrificial death. Our sinful self that idolizes this world, that lives only for the desire of the flesh (unbridled sensuality) , the desire of the eyes (greed for possessions) and the pride of life (considering ourselves the center of the universe: 1Jn 2:16) must die again and again in every Eucharistic celebration so that we may share in the life of the risen Christ. This means a confident placing of our whole existence into the

Father's hands with gratitude and love and a share in Christ's love for our fellow human beings so that in Christ we ourselves may become nourishing bread and gladdening wine for them.

Our assimilation to Christ is so real that according to Paul those who partake of the one (Eucharistic) bread become one body, the extension of the body-person of Christ into the world (1 Cor 10, 16-17). In other words, just as the personal body of Christ expresses his divine life and communicates his divine love to us, so must our bodies share in the same task. In our bodily, social reality we are to become the manifestation of the bodily reality of Christ in this world. Then we will make the joys and sorrows of each member our own and contribute our part to the good of the whole body.

This twofold aspect of Holy Communion then should also manifest itself in the Eucharistic celebration: common singing and prayerful silence, expressing unity with one another and opening up to Christ in personal prayer should go hand in hand, the one aspect must not suppress the other. Only if we allow Christ to transform us, will we discover and love Him in our brothers and sisters. And conversely, the life of Christ cannot grow in us unless we also accept Him in our fellow human beings.

Interestingly, the more we are trying to create a liturgical celebration which is always novel and exciting, the more people will complain that they are thoroughly bored and that "they do not get anything out of the mass." Such attitudes reveal the intrusion of a consumerist mentality into both the shapers and participants of our liturgical celebrations. We come in order to get some tangible results which prove that going to church was not a waste of our time and energy. If this attitude prevails in an individual or community, a radical re-orientation is needed. We come to give rather than to get something. Yet the Gospel paradox reveals its truth here with a particular force. "Whoever loses his life for my sake will gain it." If we desire to be assimilated to Christ who has become a gift in the totality of his existence, a gift of praise and atonement for God and nourishment for others, Christ will most certainly accomplish this miracle in us; gradually, almost imperceptibly, but in reality and truth. We will experience that the Eucharist is indeed an inexhaustible source of repentance, renewal, trust, love and perseverance.

The Eucharist being the Body and Blood of Christ, has also an effect on our bodies. In the Gospel of John Christ announces "Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him on the last day" (Jn 6:54). That the Eucharist assures the immortality of our flesh remains part of the two thousand-year-old tradition of the Church. This is to be taken not in the simplistic sense that the flesh of those who partake of the Eucharist would not decay. However, the Eucharist, received in faith into our bodies, nourishes and transforms the soul. Our new risen bodies will have a real continuity with

our earthly bodies not because of the identity of the material particles (all our material particles are exchanged within a span of some years in our earthly life) but because of the identity of our soul which will transform the risen body according to its own likeness. In other words, *the Eucharist transforms our souls through our bodies, while our transformed souls will assimilate into their own likeness our resurrected bodies.*

It is an almost universally forgotten truth that the bodily effect of the Eucharist is perceptible already in this life. In every mass the priest prays before communion that his receiving of the body and blood of the Lord may heal both his soul and body. While clinical healings by the Holy Eucharist have always occurred in the history of the Church, the ordinary bodily effect is different from clinical healing but even more astoundingly real. It does promote the healing of the body in the sense that its passions and urges no longer prevent us from living the life of Christ; in fact as it becomes perceptible in the saints, all our actions and words, even our body language begin to radiate that love which comes from Christ and expresses Christ. *The pure flesh of Christ is “contagious”: it will transmit some of its purity to our flesh. His blood is like choice wine: it will communicate to us that “sober ebriety” of the Spirit which knows no limit in loving and serving.*

c) The Adoration of the Eucharist Outside the Mass

As is well known from the history of the liturgy, in the first centuries the only reason to set apart and preserve the consecrated hosts was to provide communion for the sick and dying. It is only in the Middle Ages that the worship of the Eucharist outside the celebration of the Mass developed in the Western Church. The tabernacle was placed in the center of the sanctuary, light burning before it day and night, and all were invited to pray before the Blessed Sacrament. At the same time solemn expositions of the Blessed Sacrament became more and more frequent, the feast of Corpus Christi was established and solemn processions with the Blessed Sacrament through the streets of the city began. In the baroque age worship before the exposed Blessed Sacrament and benediction with it began to be perceived as so important in popular piety as to overshadow even the Eucharistic celebration itself. Up to the first half of the twentieth century “visiting the Blessed Sacrament” had been an essential feature of Catholic spirituality. Religious orders and associations of lay people were instituted for the primary purpose of assuring the perpetual adoration of the Blessed Sacrament, worshipping the Eucharistic Lord as reparation in behalf of all those who neglect and offend him, offering atonement for sinners. Parishes introduced the custom of 40 hour devotion (40 hour uninterrupted prayer before the Blessed Sacrament). Saints like Julian Eymard arose whose vocation was to

explain the importance of Eucharistic devotion with a particular emphasis on the adoration of the Eucharistic Lord in the tabernacle. He is there as a “prisoner of the tabernacle” in his risen state yet in a condition of an even greater voluntary humiliation than in his earthly life. He is not present as a person with civil rights but appears as a mere object, hidden and insignificant.

The liturgical renewal in the twentieth century rightly emphasized the central importance of the Eucharistic sacrifice over against the exaggerated emphasis on benedictions and other Eucharistic devotions outside of the Mass. The conciliar document on the Liturgy, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, does not mention the adoration of the Blessed Sacrament outside of Mass. However, both the encyclical *Mysterium Fidei* of Paul VI and the Instruction of the Congregation of Rites insist on its importance while explaining that worshipping the Eucharist outside of Mass has as “its origin and goal” the Eucharistic celebration of the Mass. In spite of assiduous reminders by the Magisterium, the adoration of the Blessed Sacrament became neglected in many parishes; the tabernacle was often removed to such an inconspicuous place as to de-emphasize the importance of continuous adoration. This neglect had consequences on the Eucharistic celebration itself. Gradually, but often quite perceptibly, the emphasis shifted from the celebration of the Eucharist to the self-celebration of the community as merely occasioned by the Eucharist. The real presence of Christ was not so much denied as left unmentioned both in homilies and in religious instructions. This seems to be one of the reasons why such a large number among younger Catholics does not believe in or rather has no firm knowledge about the real presence of Christ under the sign of bread and wine.

If we try to see the meaning and the value of the adoration of the Blessed Sacrament outside the Mass, we need to start from the fact that its origin and goal is the Eucharistic celebration itself. The Eucharistic Lord remains in the same state as he is during the Eucharistic celebration, the state of self-surrender to the Father and that of nourishing food for us, as long as the empirical signs of bread and wine remain. This state he acquired through his crucifixion and eternalized through his glorious resurrection. He wants to remain with us in this form all the time up to the consummation of history rather than just intermittently, during the short intervals of Eucharistic celebrations.

One may object here that the risen Christ is permanently present in those whom he nourishes in the Eucharistic celebration; in fact, he is omnipresent since he is God. But according to all the biblical evidence the risen Christ remains a true human being and therefore he cannot be ubiquitously present in his humanity. He is indeed present in all those who believe in him and love him, but only to the extent that they allow him to be present through their love and faith. Moreover, as explained above, no Christian will ever

be substantially, totally Jesus Christ. It is only in the form of food (and drink, even though it is less convenient to preserve the consecrated wine) that he is permanently, totally, substantially present in his own crucified and risen humanity.

The Eucharistic presence of Christ fulfills and surpasses the perennial desire of humankind for a sacred place in this universe, a point of permanent contact with the Sacred. The Eucharist is that concentrated divine presence which makes God's extended presence perceptible in all creation. The Eucharistic presence fulfills and surpasses the desire of Israel to have the *kabod Yahweh*, God's glory, dwell in their midst. God's glory can no longer leave his eschatological Temple nor can He allow his Temple to be destroyed since he forever dwells in Jesus, the new Israel.

Of course, Jesus is not the "prisoner of the tabernacle": his being present there does not in any way impede him to be present in other places and to work in human hearts. His becoming present in the form of bread and wine changes the bread and wine, not Him. To say that in addition to the tabernacle Jesus dwells also in heaven is misleading since it implies that heaven is another place analogous to the space of the tabernacle. Heaven is God's transcendent realm that penetrates our world and is present in the most intense way where the risen Christ is present in his humanity, inseparably from the Father and the Holy Spirit and from his heavenly court of angels and saints. Thus, we should rather say that the tabernacle is heaven itself present among us. It is the mysterious ladder Jacob saw in his dream, a ladder that joins together heaven and earth. This ladder, however, is no material object but represents the person of the risen Christ who draws all to himself (Jn 1:51; 12:32).

While Jesus is not restricted by his Eucharistic presence, he freely chose the signs of bread and wine as the form of his permanent presence among us. The incarnate Son does not become bread and wine in the same way that the eternal Son has become man. Bread and wine are not assumed by the Son as his human nature is, "without change and fusion." We cannot speak here about "impanation" as we speak about incarnation. The bread and wine are indeed transformed into the body and blood of the risen Christ, yet they retain their sign value: their visible characteristics of bread and wine point to Christ as our spiritual food and drink. Jesus spoke the truth when he said, "I am the bread that has come down from heaven." His return to the Father, his transcendent form of glorified existence at the Father's right hand, enable him to adopt a new form of immanence among us. His exaltation results in a new descent, more lowly and more humble even than the incarnation itself: The risen Lord is present among us not in the visible form of a human being but as ordinary food.

This tension between Christ's humble form of appearance and his glorious existence in heaven determines our relationship to Him in the Eucharist. Being present before him in the Holy Eucharist, we are in the presence of heaven itself: the joy of the risen Christ reduces the sense of our own personal tragedies and sufferings to size, making us foretaste the ultimate triumph of love. As the great worshipper of the Eucharistic Christ in the deserts of Africa, Charles de Foucauld said: "How can I be sad when my beloved is already in the joy of his Father?" On the other hand, his humble form of presence reassures us of his ability and willingness to make our sufferings his own in a way that surpasses all understanding. From St. Paul who wanted to fill up in his own body what is lacking in the sufferings of Christ, through Origen and Gregory of Nazianzus through Pascal up to our age, the Christian mystic has always been aware that the fullness of joy in the risen Christ coexists with his agony in his members up to the end of the world. This means that the risen Christ extends himself into the very being of the worshipper, suffers and prays through him, with him and in him. In this way He turns our sufferings into a well-pleasing sacrifice to his Father. Thus a mysterious exchange takes place between the worshipper and Christ. Christ makes his own our sufferings and gives us a share in his joy. We need time, time spent in adoration before the Eucharist in order to become more aware of the incredible mystery of this exchange. In such communing with Christ by desire the worshipper will have a much greater understanding and desire for what takes place in sacramental communion. Thus Eucharistic adoration prepares us for a more fruitful share in the Eucharistic celebration.

3. The Sacrament of Penance and Spiritual Counseling

If we want to be transformed into the likeness of Christ in meditation and through the Holy Eucharist, we will soon see that it is not so difficult to avoid external sinful acts. But the more we try, the more we will realize that we cannot clean up our hearts. Vanity, pride, selfishness, and impurity are so deeply rooted inside the person that they taint even our good deeds.

The more we struggle to become a truly good person, the more we discover that we are doing what we do not want because we are a slave under the power of sin. This is the time when the sacrament of penance and spiritual guidance begin to make sense. We need to receive the forgiveness of Christ and his healing power again and again in the tangible human sign of the sacrament of penance. Since we encounter Christ through the sacrament, it makes sense to go to confession regularly even if our confessor cannot help us with personal counseling.

Let us examine the sacrament of reconciliation in more detail:

a) The Need for the Sacrament of Penance

Here we assume the knowledge of the reader about the fact that Christ has instituted this sacrament (cf. especially Jn 20,19-23 & Mt 18,18). We try to answer here the next logical question: Why did Christ, who has done everything in wisdom, establish this sacrament? Answering this question may be easier if we approach it from three different perspectives: the nature of man; the nature of sin; and the nature of the Church.

1) We know that man is neither spirit nor body alone: he is a substantial unity of soul and body. Put more simply, he is both a spiritual and physical being. The result is that he expresses inward feelings outwardly, through physical symbols, gestures, and sounds. Those same outward signs enable him to receive the spiritual communication of others.

Furthermore, man is a social creature. He depends on other members of the human community for his survival and growth, his physical and spiritual well-being. As an example, the child cannot learn what is right and wrong, or know what it means to be forgiven by other people, unless his parents or others help him to experience these spiritual realities.

The way of our salvation has been purposely adapted by God to suit our unique physical and spiritual nature. Thus, in the sacrament of penance, our inward sorrow and readiness to change are expressed in words and actions (confession, acts of penance), and we receive the assurance of God's forgiveness through the words of another human being, the priest.

2) Every sin wants to "crawl underground," stay hidden from us, from God, and from the world. We know that the temptation of every sinner is therefore to rationalize, that is, to hide his guilt even from himself. Each of us feels the impulse to deny, forget, or at least "explain" the evil that we have done.

In penance, however, I am forced to face the reality of my sins. I have to dig them up, bring them out into the open, and acknowledge them without any false excuses. Confessing them offers a first step toward putting them behind me forever.

3) The reason Christ established the Church was to make himself continually present and active among all people. That means that the task of every Christian is to build up the community of God in accordance with his gifts, and to make present the love of Christ when and where he finds himself. At work, among friends, in school, I am charged with bringing Christ's love into the world; for the world can know Christ's love is alive

and active only if it sees Christians inspired by a love it cannot comprehend, a love that points beyond human power.

The consequence of sin is to weaken the Church. Because of sin, the love of Christ will be less effective; it may not reach certain people. As an example, consider a family or a class, and the infectious influence that the selfishness or conceit of one member can have. The spirit of the entire group is endangered by the wrongdoing of a single member. This helps to explain why a Christian who has sinned should seek, not just God's forgiveness, but also reconciliation with the Church his sins have harmed.

b) The Process of Receiving the Sacrament of Penance

Receiving this sacrament involves five steps. First, I examine my conscience in order to uncover my sins. Second, I inwardly detach myself from them through sorrow. Next, at confession, I outwardly present both the sins, and my sorrow for them, to a representative of Christ and the Church. From him I receive God's forgiving word (absolution or reconciliation). Finally, I am given the obligation of compensating for my sins by doing penance.

Let us explore these five steps one by one.

(1) Examination of conscience

Examining our conscience should be a daily exercise, part of our prayer to end the day. If we neglect it, very soon our conscience will grow less and less sensitive to God's will. When that happens, we may find ourselves preparing for a confession without anything meaningful to confess. And this will not be because we are in perfect agreement with God's will, but because our conscience no longer senses what it is that separates us from God.

A helpful way to examine one's conscience is to think of this present hour as the last. What would God say to me if I died now, and I had to give an account to him of my life? Where do I stand, at this moment, in relation to God, to my parents, brothers and sisters, friends, colleagues, and "enemies"? Have I taken care of those whose lives were entrusted to me?

Furthermore, what talents has God given me, and what use have I made of them? How well have I discharged my various responsibilities?

(2) Sorrow

We must first understand what sorrow is not, for purposes of the sacrament. It is not feeling sorry for myself, or brooding morbidly over past actions. Nor is it self-rejection, or a loss of self-respect. While feeling low about myself after I have sinned is normal, this feeling is not sufficient for receiving the sacrament.

Nor is it enough to feel sorry that I have lost the respect of people I admire. To despise sin because it causes me to lose both self-respect and the respect of others is a good beginning, but will not by itself secure God's forgiveness.

I have sinned against *God*. In order to be forgiven by God, my sorrow will have to be directed somehow *towards God himself*.

True sorrow demands that I take an objective look at myself, judging my own actions as God would judge them. I turn away from my sins and decide, with God's grace, to unite my will with his. But my motivation for doing so requires further analysis. Looking a little deeper into this concept of motivation, we can say that the motivation for sorrow falls under one of two types:

Imperfect contrition is turning away from my sins and uniting my will to God's chiefly because I fear God and his punishment. While this form of sorrow suffices for going to confession, I will not obtain forgiveness of my sins unless I then proceed to the actual receiving of the sacrament. As I receive it, God takes my imperfect contrition and makes it perfect; he strengthens my initial goodwill and gives me back the power to love him.

Perfect contrition means that my motive for sorrow is no longer fear, or fear alone, but love for God. Perfect contrition secures immediate forgiveness for sins, even without the actual reception of the sacrament. This is because loving God is a sign that one is already forgiven by God; seeking forgiveness, in love, and receiving the love of God are two aspects of one and the same event. One cannot love God and be rejected by him at the same time.

Perfect contrition would not excuse me from going to confession, however. (After all, my love for God would be a little suspect if I refused Christ's command to confess my sins to a representative of his Church.) A further consideration in this regard is the lack of absolute certainty whether I actually have perfect contrition. Since feeling love for God is not the same as sincerely loving him, how can I know for sure that my sorrow is perfectly motivated? Thus, I will naturally seek the sacrament of penance, both as a means of deepening my conversion, and to obtain the grace of God in resisting future temptations.

As with examining our conscience, contrition should be a daily act, not something hurriedly accomplished before we go to confession. Making a habit of being contrite or sorry for my sins is a very different thing from discouragement or depression: telling God again and again that I am sorry for my sins, and that I want to love him more, is the way of health and peace and joy. The more vigilant and sincere my sorrow, the more God's love renews and uplifts me.

(3) Confession

What must be confessed?

I must confess all mortal sins committed since my last reception of the sacrament. Remember that mortal sin represents a breakdown of the friendship with God. Because Christ no longer dwells in the sinner through his Spirit, the sinner loses God's sonship and the privilege of eternal life. A mortal sin has three essential characteristics:

- 1) It must be a sin as to some grave matter. The act must seriously subvert the order of values created and willed by God.
- 2) One must have been aware of the seriousness of the sin before committing it.
- 3) One must have acted freely in the sinful omission or commission of the act.

What is one recommended to confess?

Although they do not destroy God's life in us, venial sins tend to stifle its growth in us, and push us almost imperceptibly toward mortal sin. Thus, the Church recommends that we should confess all our sins as we recognize them, especially those which appear in patterns and are choking off our growth in certain areas: for instance, repeated acts of selfishness, or a habit of inflating one's own ego by putting down others.

How should our confession be made?

Confession must not degenerate into a mechanical recitation. The penitent should tell the priest of his specific sins, not an impersonal "grocery list" of generalities. On the other hand, he should not be concerned with irrelevant details.

Sometimes, when one has not been to confession for long time, or needs advice, the confession might start with an informal conversation. Obviously, however, talk should turn eventually to a frank confession, *before God*, of one's sins.

(4) Absolution or reconciliation

Although the priest to whom one goes for confession may be a gifted counselor, skilled in listening and offering advice, this is not essential to a proper receiving of the sacrament. The results of reconciliation go beyond what could be expected of any counseling session.

For in the words of absolution, spoken by the priest in the name of Christ and the Church, Christ himself prays to the Father for the forgiveness of this sinner. Through the same absolution, Christ imparts to the penitent his “peace,” reconciliation with the Church and the Father’s forgiveness. This will translate into either a new bestowing of the Holy Spirit (if the sin was a mortal one), or a deeper presence of the Spirit in the penitent (if the sin was a venial one). One hears this expressed in the words of absolution:

God the Father of mercies, through the death and resurrection of his Son has reconciled the world to himself and sent the Holy Spirit among us for the forgiveness of sins; through the ministry of the Church may God give you pardon and peace, and I absolve you from your sins in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

(5) Penance

Although the old “public penance” has been reduced to a symbolic act assigned by the priest, it still serves as a reminder that we must take practical steps to improve our lives. If possible, the penance should help the penitent in his struggle against his main faults. The priest may be helped in this regard if, for example, the penitent himself suggests ideas for penance which appear particularly useful to him.

When should one receive the sacrament of penance?

Church Law obligates Catholics to receive the sacrament of penance at least once a year if they are aware of having committed a mortal sin.

This is a bare minimum, however, and it is recommended that we take frequent advantage of the sacrament, even if we do not have mortal sins. Once a month would be a good habit.

It is important to choose a spiritual counselor or director, who may be someone other than our confessor. We should be able to trust him and to reveal ourselves to him.

Most importantly, he should be able to help us know ourselves in a more realistic way. The spiritual director will not make the decisions for us but will help us define the available options, discern the values which are at stake in each possible courses of action and. With his help we can see more clearly God's will for us: what is the next step He wants us to take.

IV. STEPS IN DECISION MAKING

When you begin to think about a vocation, it is so easy to start off with the wrong question, “Where could I be most happy?” If your first goal is your own happiness, you will never reach it. “Whoever wants to keep his life will lose it” (Mt 16:25). Instead, you should repeat Saul’s question he asked as he was lying in the dust of the road to Damascus: “Lord, what do you want me to do?” (Acts 22:10.) Only by discovering his will for you and by doing it, will you find the peace and joy that literally nothing can take away from you. If you are able to surrender to Christ your life no matter what he wants you to do, you will also feel a sense of relief and freedom. This will be the springtime of your life, the time of growing love and expectation. You will understand what the world can never grasp, that being in love with God can become a much more powerful experience than any romantic love affair.

If you want to remain in God’s love, though, you must remain united with His will. He wants you to follow Him wherever He calls you. You may take only one step at a time, but you should choose the one step *He* wants you to take.

The first step is to answer the question: Should you remain “in the world,” have a job (and most likely) get married and raise children? Is this *your* way of loving and serving Christ? Or is Christ calling you to give up *all* you have and follow him? This is the vocation to celibacy or virginity. It may take different forms, for instance, joining a religious community, becoming a priest, or a combination of both.

The second step is to decide among these forms. There is a difference between the vocation of a diocesan priest and that of a priest in a religious community. Both want to follow Christ and share in his love and work. Yet, the diocesan priest has greater material and personal independence than the religious. He usually works in a parish. If you feel the need to live, pray and work as a member of a community, you may be called to a religious institute. There is a great variety of religious communities, some strictly contemplative, others combining prayer with apostolic work, such as education, care of the sick, and missions. In some, all members are required to become priests; in others, all or most members remain brothers, while again others have both brothers and priests living in the same community.

If you choose the diocesan priesthood, get in touch with the vocation director of your diocese. If you are attracted to religious life, consult one of the following publications:

A Guide to Religious Ministries for Catholic Men and Women. New Rochelle, NY: The Catholic News Publishing. (New edition every year)

Vision Magazine. An Annual Publication of the National Religious Vocation Conference, Evanston, IL: Berry Publishing Services

You may find these publications in the office of any vocation director, in a Catholic school, or in a rectory. Narrow down your choices to a few communities or orders. Write a letter to their vocation directors or call and ask for further information. Arrange to spend some days with these communities so that you can see for yourself whether or not God has prepared a place for you in one of them.

I recommend that you wait for a while after the visits; then observe your state of mind and actions.

1) If your prayer life continues peacefully and your daily activities remain focused on doing God's will; 2) if you do not become aware of any great loss after leaving this or that community, there is a good chance that God does not call you—at least not for the time being—to these communities. Then these visits were a good retreat time for you, whose memory and insights you may cherish for a long time.

If, however, 1) you become more and more aware of an emptiness in your life as you continue to live “in the world;” 2) if giving yourself directly to God in one of these communities appears to you the right thing regardless of the cost; 3) if you begin to realize that the postponing of your decision is motivated by fear, inertia or just attachment to something other than God's will; and especially 4) if you begin to lose touch with God, become superficial, unfocused and even start slipping morally: then it is practically certain that you are resisting God's call.

But perhaps the most telling sign of a true vocation is this: once you put aside all rationalization, **the choice between a religious vocation or life in the world appears to you (not to someone else) identical with the choice between a deep life of faith or the loss of your faith and your salvation. In other words, you come to a more realistic self-knowledge. You become aware that, being the person that you are, for a full gift of yourself to God you need the “stronger medication” of religious life - to use the words of St. Bernard.**

In this case the only right decision is to stop resisting God's grace, give up whatever you are doing (such as finishing your degree or finishing a great project with great personal satisfaction) and apply for admission to the community (or diocese) to which you are most attracted. If you delay, later you may no longer be able to hear the call. Jesus knocks for a

while at the door but then he leaves (Rev 3:20). If you cannot make up your mind, read again and again Lk 9, 57-62.

You may insist that you are still not quite sure. The “trick” to overcome the paralysis of indecisiveness (an epidemic that plagues most of the affluent West) is to accept the possibility of failure. You may not be called to religious or priestly life after all. But even in this case, the time you spent in the community was not a waste. Your attempt of trying to live this form of life will always remain for you a blessed memory, a source of grace and yearning for God. If you can accept the possibility of this kind of “failure,” you will be free. Then you will not be expecting an irresistible “push” from God or the blinding light that struck down Saul on the road to Damascus. You will know, that, normally, God does not act that way. He expects you to make your decision *on the basis of mere probable evidence*. You will know that you can never be “hundred percent sure” about your vocation before final vows or ordination. But if you really love God, you want to show him your love by taking a risk for him. You will never find out whether or not you are called unless you give it a try.

If living in a seminary or religious community makes you more and more self-centered, if you are unable to establish good personal relationships over a longer period of time, this will be a sign that you are not called to that kind of life. On the other hand, if this kind of life helps you become more open and sincere, more capable of friendship, if you can pray better than before, these are signs of a true vocation, even though you may feel that your life is a constant struggle, a constant stretching yourself beyond your limits. Then you can make the words of Paul your own:

It is not that I have reached it yet, or have already finished my course: but I am racing to grasp the prize if possible, since I have been grasped by Christ Jesus.... I do not think of myself as having reached the finish line. I give no thought to what lies behind but push on to what is ahead (Phil. 3: 12-13).

V. THE NEED TO PRAY FOR VOCATIONS

Jesus went around to all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom, and curing every disease and illness. At the sight of the crowds, his heart was moved with pity for them because they were troubled and abandoned, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, “The harvest is abundant but the laborers are few; so ask the master of the harvest to send out laborers for his harvest.” (Mt 9:35-38)

As Jesus is moved with pity at the sight of the shepherdless crowds, we would expect him to turn to his heavenly Father in prayer so that the Father may send laborers to gather in his harvest. After all, what could be more effective than the prayer of the Son? Yet, Jesus also wants his disciples to pray for missionaries. Our situation is worse now than it was at the time of Jesus. The harvest is overwhelming: the huge majority of people who live on this planet have not yet been effectively told about the good news. They do not know that God loves them with a father’s heart; they have no idea that God’s own Son died for them so that they may share in God’s eternal love and joy. But even now Jesus does not want to act alone. He calls on the whole community of the Church to pray for vocations. Still, the dire need for priestly vocations is not yet felt in our country to the point that it really hurts. As a result, prayer for vocations in most places is hardly more than a few petitions added to the prayer of the faithful a few times a year. If parents pray for vocations, that prayer is usually not meant for their own children. How could they wish for their own son or daughter to become a priest or religious when they cannot comprehend that anyone could be happy as a celibate in the love and service of an invisible God?

Thus, many things must change in the mainstream of American parish life before effective prayer for vocations becomes possible. First of all, faith in the basic Christian mysteries needs to be rekindled. We should again feel as our most urgent need God’s forgiveness that comes to us from the Spirit of the crucified and risen Christ. We should again discover that this Spirit of peace that Christ breathed upon the apostles normally comes to us through the sacrament of reconciliation. There should arise a new hunger in the Church for the “bread of God which is the flesh of Christ and thirst for his blood which is the source of undying love” (St. Ignatius of Antioch, Letter to the Romans, 7:3). If we see the sacraments again as Christ’s healing and sanctifying actions among us through his priests and the Eucharist as his crucified and risen Body that wants to unite our bodies to his body and transform our hearts and minds into his own mind and heart, then we will finally realize our desperate need for holy priests. They are to prepare us for the Eucharist and make possible our daily participation in the central mystery of our faith. Then we

might actually begin to suspect that the service of the Sacred Body and Blood of the Lord in the Church may actually become the source of a much deeper joy than any marriage on earth could ever provide.

Let us try to promote and hasten this re-awakening of faith, the condition of effective prayer for vocations. The prayer should start in our families, fathers and mothers offering their children to God even before they are born. They should tell Jesus: "Lord, our only wish is that our child may fulfill your will, and we would be most grateful if you would call him or her to your direct service in the priesthood or religious life." Parishes could organize the public adoration of the Blessed Sacrament at regular intervals for this purpose. Wherever this has already happened, in parishes and religious communities, surprisingly, vocations have begun to sprout. Christ has promised that his Father will listen to all our prayers that we utter in Christ's name, prayers according to Christ's intentions. What could be more certainly a prayer according to Christ's own heart, than prayer for vocations? In fact, He wants to pray "through us, with us and in us"; how can the Father refuse to hear his Son? Let us then approach the Father through his Son with utter confidence, beg Him, and cry to Him. Do not get tired; knock at the door, until the door is opened and vocations begin to blossom among us.

QUESTIONS

After reading the booklet, you may want to think about these questions and answer them for yourself. You may also decide to share some of the answers with your spiritual director.

- 1) What “signs” of vocation do I find in myself? Does it resemble any of the signs discussed in this brochure or is it different? How could I describe it best?
- 2) How long have I been thinking about a priestly and religious vocation? When did it surface first? Under what circumstances?
- 3) What were the events, persons and circumstances that strengthened it?
- 4) What attracts me most in the priesthood or religious life?
- 5) What natural “driving forces” do I see in myself that could be used by God? (For instance, the ambition to help people or build a community, intellectual curiosity, etc.)
- 6) What speaks against my having a vocation?
- 7) Where am I in the decision-making process? (For instance, totally undecided, hesitating between diocesan priesthood and a religious institute.)
- 8) What is the next step God wants me to take? (Such as beginning daily meditation, choosing a spiritual director, etc.)