

PARENTS AND THE VOCATION OF THEIR CHILDREN

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Mothers and fathers, listen! You ought not to stand in the way of your children's vocation—your son's desire to become a priest, your daughter's aspiration to enter the convent. You ought not to put your foot down and cry out a mighty NO to any suggestion on the part of your offspring that they "give up all things and follow Christ."

You may be going directly against the will of God. You may very well be tampering with the divine workings of a vocation. Who knows? Perhaps God is calling your son or your daughter to be one of His very special disciples even as He called the rich young man those many years ago.

You remember the story of the rich young man.

He was a boy like your boy, a boy like all the young people of the world and of all the ages. Young people are very often a source of mystery to older people.

At one time they seem to be completely unworried about the serious things of life—about other people's property (they destroy it with hardly a worry or a qualm of conscience), about the love and respect they owe to authority and particularly to their parents (they treat their parents like strangers or like servants) and about striving for the attainment of anything except that which meets their fancy and satisfies their feelings at the moment.

At other times they scale the heights of the highest idealism. They'll give the shirt off their back to some poor cold tramp on a street corner. They'll give up their lives in defense of a worthy cause. There is no limit to the sacrifices they are willing to make.

That's the way it was with the rich young man of the Gospel story. This is the story as it was told by St. Matthew in the twentieth chapter of his Gospel.

"And behold one came and said to Him, 'Good Master, what good shall I do that I may have life everlasting?' Jesus answered, 'Why askest thou Me concerning good? One is good, God. But if thou wilt enter into life, keep the commandments.' The young man said to Him, 'Which?' And Jesus said, 'Thou shalt do no murder. Thou shalt not commit adultery. Thou shalt not steal. Thou shalt not bear false witness. Honour thy father and thy mother. And, thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.'

"The young man said to Him, 'All these have I kept from my youth. What is yet wanting to me?' Jesus answered, 'If you wilt be perfect, go sell what thou hast and give to the poor and thou shalt have treasure in heaven. And come, follow Me.'

"When the young man had heard this word, he went away sad, for he had great possessions. Then Jesus said to His disciples, 'Amen, I say to you that a rich man shall hardly enter into the kingdom of heaven. And again I say to you, it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of heaven.'"

The young man simply could not do what Our Lord asked. He was too wealthy, too comfortable, too highly connected with the great and the famous of the world. It was expecting too much of him to think that he could become a beggar like the tramps and the outcasts that one met in the slums of the cities. No, he could not do it. He turned his back on Our Lord and walked away. There were too many obstacles in the way of his vocation.

You mothers and fathers can be obstacles in the way of your child's vocation too. Wealth and high position in the social world caused the rich young man to lose his vocation and possibly his soul. Your excessive and unreasonable love, can cause your child to lose his or her vocation. Is that what you want to happen?

There is no telling what will happen to the boy who is thwarted in his ambition to become a priest. Sometimes it happens that he never finds a settled place in life. He always seems to be a kind of wanderer, a man without a home or a hope of acquiring a home. It is not a rare case when a boy like that loses the Faith entirely in the course of the years that

follow on his parent's prohibition to become a priest.

Neither is there any telling as to what will happen to a girl whom parents have kept out of the convent by threats and pleadings and tears. It has come about more than once in the past that a girl so treated later on fell in love with a man who was already validly married. All the weeping and carrying on of the mother and father then to keep her from an adulterous union with a man who could not be her husband were of no avail. The girl seemed possessed. Her mother stopped her once from doing what she wanted to do. Her mother would not stop her twice. And so the girl abandoned her holy religion and went off to live with the man as though he were actually her husband.

To think that this girl once wanted to be a nun! To think that her mother actually prevented her from fulfilling her desire! Can the mother be glad now that she stopped her? Would the mother rather have her daughter in a bad marriage and in danger of going to hell than in a convent? What fierce regrets must torture the minds of mothers like this one. What would they not give to bring back the past so as to reverse the decision they so foolishly made against their child's wishes.

The arguments that many mothers and fathers use to keep their children from following the vocation that God seems to have given them are varied and devious. None of them are too strong. None of them are based on truly spiritual considerations.

The first argument is that the child is too young. The girl may be a graduate of high school, eighteen or nineteen years old and well able to take good care of herself. But she is too young for the convent. She has not seen enough of the world. Let her go out with boys, attend parties, dance and be merry for a couple of years so that she will have a clear idea as to what she is giving up before she leaps over the wall into the convent.

It is probable that if a girl does not know her mind when she is eighteen years old, she will never know it. It would be wiser for a fickle, indecisive girl to forget about the convent. However, in most cases a girl of that age does know what she wants to do with her life. And a mother who maintains that her daughter is too young to know her mind is only throwing up a smoke screen. Simply said, the mother does not want her daughter to become a nun. And so she uses the "too young" strategy in order to accomplish her end.

And the father who says that his daughter is too beautiful and too cheerful and happy to be buried in the tomblike recesses of the convent where nobody ever laughs, where the nuns kill themselves with penance and where pictures of hell are forever dangled before the eyes of the inmates to keep them in line is a man who does not know what he is talking about.

A convent is not a place of long faces, floods of tears and deep melancholia and unhappiness. The nun who is not content with the life can always leave and resume her life in the world. She can get married and have a family. Nobody forces her to remain in the convent. There are no bars on the windows, no cells in the basement, no keepers with whips in hand to keep the prisoners from escaping.

But if she elects of her own free will to remain in the convent, the chances are a hundred to one that she is very happy and that she would not give up her vocation if the president of the United States came and tendered her a special invitation to return home with a million dollars in her pocket as spending money.

Thus her father is completely wrong in forbidding her to enter the religious life because of the dreariness and the extreme hardness of the life. He just doesn't know. Or he is using the false picture of convent life as a dodge for keeping his daughter at home.

There are times when parents will refuse to allow their son to begin studies for the priesthood on the score that he is needed at home (or will be needed when school days are over) to help support the family

How many families are in such dire need that only through the sacrifice of a vocation to the priesthood can bread be brought to hungry mouths and clothing to naked backs? In all probability the boy will not stay long at home anyway after he finishes school. He will meet a girl, get married and perhaps move a thousand miles away. And that will be the end of any support that he might give his mother and father and brothers and sisters by staying at home and working.

The excuse also is given at times that the boy is the only male child of the family and that he should therefore remain in the world in order to perpetuate the family name.

As far as the perpetuation of the family name is concerned, what difference will it make to the mother and the father in eternity whether or not the name of the family was carried on here on earth? The worry about the carrying on of the family name is purely an earthly worry. There is no scheming or quarreling over so fragile a matter beneath the ground in the cemeteries. And there is no discussion of it amongst either the souls in heaven or the damned in hell. There is no room for the foolish things of time in eternity. Anxiety over the perpetuation of the family name is one of the foolish things of time.

Those who put too much emphasis on an affair like this, that is, those who put so much emphasis on such an affair as to decide against a vocation because of it may not find any pleasure in the family name either on earth or in eternity. The irony of God's providence may step in. A boy who is forbidden to go to the seminary so that he can continue his family name may produce no progeny. He may end up a tramp and bring heavy disgrace upon the family name rather than honour and perpetuation.

And if the mother and father lose their souls because they caused their son to lose his vocation, will it be any consolation to them in hell whether the family stopped with themselves or whether it continued to exist on earth?

Then there is the excuse for keeping a boy at home and away from the priesthood that he will be able to do so much more good for the world if he remains in the world. To fly from the world when there are so many problems to be solved in the world is cowardice; it is a form of escapism. Surely it is not worthy of a real man. Boys become priests very often who are incapable of facing problems and solving them. The men who do the most good are generally found in the world.

For anyone to maintain that generally a man can accomplish more good by remaining in the world than he can by becoming a priest is to talk through the hat. It is a glib and easy thing to say. But it has no substance to it. Most often it is said by people who have an ulterior motive for saying it. The parents of the boy with the possible vocation to the priesthood is a case in hand.

The truth of the matter is that they are not intensely interested in their son's accomplishing a lot of good for the world by remaining in the world. They themselves could do much more good for the world if they wanted to. But their interests do not lie too sharply in that direction. Why, then, are they so interested, and that so suddenly, in their son's remaining in the world so that he can do good for the world?

Once more it would seem like an ulterior motive in operation. They want their son to stay at home with them. They feel that he will not listen to them if they give a direct command. So they show their wish by beating around the bush, persuading the boy to stay at home through the use of the specious argument that he doesn't have to go away to accomplish good. There is good to be done all around him. He can start doing good right at home. He can start working on his parents. This latter statement is made facetiously.

Need anything be said to prove that a priest can do much more good in the spiritual order than can a lay person? Why, the priest carries around with him the keys that can unlock the doors of heaven and lock the doors of hell insofar as he has the power of forgiving sins, even terrible, blood-red, uncounted mortal sins. He can stand at the altar and give a command to God and the heavens will open and His Almighty Majesty will come down past the stars and through the clouds and rest on the white cloth before him who gave the command even though he, the priest, be the weakest and perhaps the wickedest of men.

Dictators have tremendous power. Hitler ruled a dozen nations besides his own. Stalin had millions of people under the heel of his boot. Both of them could kill and imprison and torture human beings without fear of opposition or reprisal. Both of them commanded uncounted soldiers. Both of them made and unmade kings and rulers of countries according to the whim and fancy of the moment.

Yet, both of them together, and with them all the dictators who ever lived did not possess the power possessed by the sickliest of priests. They commanded only that which is upon the earth and that which is circumscribed by time. And the day was bound to come when they would fall, if not by the machinations of enemies, certainly by the decree of death.

The priest commands the heavens. In a sense he commands God. And he will command God as long as he lives, for God made that promise. He said that He would be with the Church which He founded until the end of the world, by which words He meant that He would see to it that the Church in her essential functions, namely, the administration of the

sacraments, the celebration of holy Mass and the upholding of the moral law would not come to an end until the end of time.

As long as there will be a Church, there will be priests. And as long as there are priests, God will listen to their command that He come down on earth and take His place under the appearance of bread and wine in the holy Eucharist of the altar.

Can a man do more good than that for the world—bringing God down into the world in His Body and His Blood, His Soul and His Divinity?

But bringing God down into the world is not the priest's only opportunity for doing good. He baptizes the new Christian, he anoints the dying and sends him off to heaven, he consoles the sick, he instructs the ignorant, he offers up the Mass for the living and the dead. He is the intermediary between God and man.

Would any Catholic mother and father in their right senses say that their son could do more good for people if he remained in the world than he could do if he became a priest? Were they to think and to speak like that, they would prove that they had little understanding of the priesthood as the priesthood was instituted by Our Lord when He was here on earth.

Parents should feel honoured if a child of theirs is called to follow directly in the footsteps of Jesus Christ. How many mothers and fathers are there not in the world who would give anything for so great a blessing. How many good and fervent mothers and fathers are passed over by Our Lord when it comes to the handing out of vocations to the priesthood and the religious life. Perhaps the parents whose son has received the call to the altar or whose daughter has been invited to be the bride of Christ have never shown much real piety at all. Perhaps they are quite run-of-the-mill Catholics.

Yet, God in His inscrutable ways has singled them out as the ones with whom He wants to deal in the signing up of some of their children who will act as His special agents in the work that He Himself came on earth to accomplish the salvation of souls.

Should parents be angry at this and put up all kinds of objections as though Our Lord were imposing on them in asking their children to work and to watch and to pray with Him for a little while? Would they put up objections if the president of the country asked them for a couple of their children whom he wanted to elevate to high places in the government and to send on highly important missions in the interest of the welfare of the country?

Of course they would not be angry at the president of the country. Is any president the equivalent of Jesus Christ? Is it a great honour to serve as an officer in the armed forces and a disgrace to serve as an officer in the army of Jesus Christ?

There seldom seems to be any objection when a son or a daughter gets married, especially if the one marrying the son or daughter is a "catch." Take the case of the daughter. The man she marries may be about as spiritual-minded as a block of stone. The deepest desires of his soul may never rise above the carnal. He may carry the girl to another part of the world. He may not be a Catholic. Is there any objection on the part of the parents if he is wealthy and socially acceptable? Not very often. And not very loud.

The man may even be one of those multi-married individuals. The girl in accepting him is accepting damaged goods. Any objections from the parents? Perhaps. But not the kind of objection that is put up when the girl decides to enter the convent. Just let her suggest the convent and one would think that she had suggested the cutting off of her right foot and the pulling of her tongue from her mouth.

Poor parents who stand in the way of their child's vocation! Do they know what they are doing?

How many confessions was their son destined to hear before he was side-tracked from the priesthood by the spurious objections of his parents? How many souls were counting on his ministrations to find their way into heaven? How many dying people were cheated of the last anointing because he was not there to administer the sacrament? How many sinners had to remain in their sins because they never met or knew the man who through the priesthood was supposed to convert them and bring them back to Christ?

In preventing a boy from becoming a priest, if God has given that boy a vocation to become a priest, parents are preventing souls from going to heaven. Parents are holding open the doors of the prison of hell so that poor, lost, wandering

souls might find an easy entry into it.

In preventing a girl from entering the convent, if it seems that God is calling her to the convent, parents are again making it difficult for people to get to heaven. When a girl becomes a sister, she makes a tremendous sacrifice. She gives up her home, her family, any hope of having a home and a family of her own in the future. She makes a complete and total sacrifice of herself to God.

What great good must come out of such a sacrifice. And what an evil it is to prevent the good from being done by making it impossible for the girl to offer up the sacrifice of her life through the three vows of poverty, chastity and obedience.

Parents should remember that the offering of a son or a daughter is not all pain and sacrifice. Of course the parting is difficult when the boy or girl bids farewell to family and departs for seminary or convent. It seems almost as though the child has been claimed by death.

But the hurt that the heart sustained eventually heals. Time takes care of that. And then the blessings that a religious vocation brings down upon the home and particularly upon the parents in that home make themselves felt.

First of all, there is the feeling of assurance that mother and father have that their daughter could hardly be in better hands than in the hands of Our Lord. She has become the spouse of Christ. She has been especially selected by Christ to be His bride. Surely He will take care of her both in time and in eternity.

Good parents sometimes worry about their children. They know that they are responsible for their welfare in eternity. They have often heard that on the day of the last Judgment children who are lost because of the negligence of their parents will point a finger at their mother and father and demand that Christ condemn them for the awful sin they committed in not seeing to it that their children saved their souls.

Some parents have reason to worry, not because of anything that they have done that was wrong in the training of their children but because the children refused to follow their training and involved themselves in invalid marriages and sinful practices that drove them out of the Faith into which they had been born and baptized. Mothers and fathers worry in cases like these lest their children lose their souls.

They do not have to worry about their daughter in the convent. Her habit of prayer, the good example all around her, the spiritual exercises of her daily life will carry her to heaven when her time comes to die. Mother and father can be sure that at least one of their children is safe and that they need have no fear of giving an account to God on how her life was lived and how she was brought up from her youth.

The second blessing that follows upon the sacrifice of a son or a daughter to God is the promise of Our Lord that He will provide for the temporal and the eternal welfare of those who willingly make the sacrifice. In the nineteenth chapter of St. Matthew's Gospel the following words are to be found: "Every one that hath left house or brethren or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or lands for My name's sake shall receive a hundredfold and shall possess life everlasting."

It is not stretching the meaning of the text too far to maintain that it refers to all the members of the family who consent to a son or a daughter, a brother or a sister leaving home in order to enter the direct service of God at altar or in the convent.

Thus, a brother who gives up his sister can apply Our Lord's words to himself. And so can a mother in regard to her daughter. And so can a father in regard to his son. The consoling part of Our Lord's words consists in this that a girl who has renegade Catholics in her family—a father who has fallen away from the practice of his holy religion, a sister who has sinned deeply through an invalid marriage, a brother who has become a confirmed alcoholic—that girl by giving up her life to God in religion can save the souls of all these unfortunate relatives of hers no matter how far they have fallen. Our Lord says that he who gives up a sister or a daughter as well as a mother and a father will possess life everlasting. Isn't that what all the members of the family do, even the bad members of a family, when they see one of the girls of the family leave home in order to enter the convent? They give her up. And God promises a great reward.

In view of this tremendous promise of Our Lord, one would imagine that parents would get down on their knees and

beg God to give one of their children a religious vocation. To have such a vocation in the family is like taking out insurance on the salvation of all the members of the family.

And now for a final word.

There are some parents who seemingly are blessed by God with a religious vocation being bestowed on one of the members of their family. A boy goes to the seminary. He studies for several years. Then, almost without warning he leaves the seminary and returns to the world. Perhaps it is found out that his talents are not of such a nature as to serve the priesthood. Perhaps his coming home is not his own decision. Rather it is the decision of his superiors. They have told him to return home because of the difficulty he has in mastering the studies that are essential to the vocation of the priest.

Sometimes parents are so deeply disappointed when this happens to their son (and to them) that they weaken momentarily in their faith. They become somewhat bitter and say sharp words that afterwards they regret. They cannot figure out why such a thing should happen to them. They feel like hanging their heads and going into hiding until the disgrace is forgotten.

There is no disgrace in a boy's leaving the seminary when it is discovered that he has no vocation. Neither is there disgrace attached to a girl's coming home from the novitiate when she learns that God prefers that she work out her salvation in the world.

Saints are possible in the world as well as in the convent and at the altar. Let the parents help their son or daughter strive for this sanctity in the world, and through the understanding they show and the help they make more certain the attainment of sanctity themselves.

You mothers and fathers—did you listen to all that was said through the voice of this booklet about your children's vocation to the convent and the priesthood? If you did, you will do all in your power to cooperate with God no matter in what direction He leads your sons and daughters. You will work with God in the moulding of these sons and daughters. In that way you will most assuredly lead them to heaven, and yourselves with them.

EIGHT SIGNS OF A VOCATION

Of perennial interest and importance is the question: How can I know whether I have a vocation to the priesthood or religious life? The question is based upon the erroneous assumption that such a vocation should be so absolute and clear that there would be scarcely any choice left to the free will once it were given. That is not the case. There are certain absolute conditions for such a vocation—conditions without which one can be sure God is not inviting him to the religious life or priesthood; and others that are inherent in free will and dependent upon free will, but inspired by the grace of God as an invitation to follow him. These are the signs:

I. Absolutely necessary conditions:

1. Good health. The priesthood and religious life make great demands on a person's physical constitution: good health is necessary.
2. Ordinary talents. (Except for a vocation as a lay brother or a lay Sister). Priests and religious must teach others; therefore must be able to advance in learn themselves.
3. Reasonable independence. If others are entirely dependent on one in a material or economic sense, it is clearly one's vocation to take care of them.
4. Normal piety. If one is not at least ordinarily devoted to religious practices, it could hardly be expected that he would be fitted for the more than ordinary religious exercises of a priest or religion.

II. Signs of vocation inspired by God in free will:

1. A spirit of sacrifice. An ability to give up lesser but more appealing goods for greater, but more invisible.
2. A spirit of zeal. That special form of charity that makes a youth think of doing something to save souls—many souls.
3. A spirit of detachment. The power that enables a person to be in the world and not of the world. It requires control of the emotions—which means that even when a person is drawn by powerful emotions to love others and cling to others—

he can still govern these emotions and if necessary suppress them. Some sign of this power is necessary for a vocation to the celibate state.

4. A desire to be a priest or a religious.

It may be of long standing or but recently experienced; intermittent or constant. God gives such desires as invitations, not as instruments of force.

The presence of these eight marks in the character of a youth is a sign that he (or she) is being invited by God to be one of His own. The signs will never amount to a certain mandate: the decision will always be left to the free will. Therefore a youth should ask himself this question: "How can I know that I am invited by God to be a priest or a religious?" And should answer: "If I have the proper signs of a vocation."

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