

*“The vocation to the priesthood matures in the Christian community”.*

1. During the years I served in a parish in The Netherlands, I was struck by the attitude of some Catholic families. They were faithful churchgoers, regularly received the Sacraments and defended their Catholic faith and the Holy Father in their daily environment, which often took a hostile attitude towards them. These parents endeavoured to raise their children as good Catholics. However, as soon as no more than hint was made that one of their sons would have a vocation to the priesthood, they would protest very loudly and say that they wished a career in society for their sons, rather than in the Church. They believed that only in that way their children would find the happiness they planned for them. Thus these parents had the opposite attitude to the theme of this contribution, which concentrates on the maturing of the priestly vocation in the Christian community. As the nucleus of that community is the family in which a child is welcomed, raised and loved, it is also in the first place in the heart of the family that priestly vocations need to be nurtured and grown.

For that very reason the document we are discussing says: “The *family* remains the primary community for the transmission of the Christian faith” (p.7)<sup>1</sup>. Nothing extraordinary is needed from a family in order to nurture vocations to the priesthood: “It can be seen everywhere that many priestly vocations are born in families where the example of a Christian life in keeping with its calling and the practice of the evangelical virtues give rise to the desire for complete self-giving” (p.7). That may serve as an extra incentive to parents to welcome vocations to the priesthood among their sons as part of Christian family life.

2. Before exploring further the elements of the Christian community which stimulate the maturing of vocations to the priesthood, it is helpful to have a closer look at vocation itself, its definition and its origin. There again the document can help. With reference to the priestly vocation it speaks about “the mystery of being called” (p.10), stating: “the Gospels present vocation as a marvellous meeting between God and human beings” (p.10). And, most

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<sup>1</sup> Cfr. CONGREGATION FOR CATHOLIC EDUCATION – PONTIFICAL WORK FOR PRIESTLY VOCATIONS, *Pastoral Guidelines for Fostering Vocations to Priestly Ministry*, Vatican City 2012.

essential, “Christ the Shepherd is the origin and model of priestly ministry” (p.10).

Christ is at the centre of every vocation. It is because of a deep desire to closely follow Christ that young men throughout the ages have entered into that special bond with Christ which is priesthood. It started with the vocation of the Apostles, and will only come to an end at Christ’s Second Coming. With the vocation of the Apostles, completed by the envoy of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, Christ not only instituted priesthood, but also the Church. And the Holy Spirit remains active, as all “priestly vocations are the fruit of the Holy Spirit’s action in the Church [...] a gift from God” (p.18). As we know, the Spirit depends on our affirmation and collaboration for us to bring forth fruits that do not grow from our own desires, but solely from those of the Lord.

3. The document makes an essential statement when it says that “the vocational dimension is not simply the adding on of programmes and suggestions, but becomes the natural expression of the whole community” (p.7). As said at the beginning, it is first of all in the heart of the family that the desire for priestly vocation is born. Thus, vocations to the priesthood are, in a way, preceded by vocations to Christian family life. Therefore, the document rightly states: “care for vocations presupposes, in reality, a strong family pastoral ministry” (p.7). The two should go hand in hand.

Although the family is the first and most important place where vocations are born, it is not the only one. The document refers to at least three other important factors.

First there is the example of priests themselves. “The witness of priests united to Christ [...] has a strong vocational appeal for young men” (p.7). Almost every priest is able to name one or more priests that have made an enduring impression on him and that have helped him to go in the same direction. But, as seen earlier, it is not simply a happy priest who is the very origin of the vocation, but always the personal encounter with Christ. The priest’s joyful and devout service to the Lord may help many young men to discover deep in themselves a similar desire to be close to Jesus in the service to His Church as priests.

Secondly, parish life contributes to a *sentire cum ecclesia*, as well as a sense for the pastoral needs of people. Priesthood is not just an academic exercise, but is about a relationship with God and His people. Therefore, “it would normally be good for boys and young men to have an experience of community life before going to seminary” (p.16). In daily parish life, serving at the altar, meeting people of all generations, the ideal is that one meets

Christ at every moment. As we know, the reality is different: it is sometimes very difficult to recognise His presence. A priest needs to be at the same time a man of God and a man of the world, always faithful to his state of life, in order to be able to bring God to His people, and to help them with their problems in harmonising daily life and the personal relationship with the Lord.

Third, “organized ecclesial groups, movements and associations are to be borne in mind, in that they are valuable educational places for openness to a priestly vocation” (p.23). This does not only concern those who are called to priesthood within these groups, movements and associations. Also, many vocations to the diocesan priesthood have been helped forward at one point or another by an experience with an ecclesiastical movement or association.

Though the document does not speak of this, as a fourth element we may mention great youth events on a diocesan, national, or international level. An important example of this fourth element is World Youth Day. Every edition of this international youth event has seen an increase in vocations, both among the participants and in the ecclesiastical province where the event was held.

4. Family life, priestly witness, parish life, ecclesiastical movements and associations, as well as great youth events all contribute to priestly vocations. In fact, they all are part of the Christian community considered in a large sense, in which the vocation is nurtured. However, none of these elements can be isolated from the other. Most vocations can be traced back to some or all of these elements.

All the elements of Christian community life discovered before are important, but only one of these is essential in a priestly vocation: the personal relationship with Christ. He is the centre of the universe. Therefore, Pope Benedict said: “it is important always to know that the first word, the true initiative, the true activity comes from God and only by inserting ourselves into the divine initiative, only by begging for this divine initiative, shall we too be able to become — with him and in him — evangelizers. God is always the beginning” (8 OCT. 2012).

Christ is at the heart of every vocation. As Pope Francis said in his homily on Palm Sunday: “to follow Christ is good; to go with Christ is good; the message of Christ is good; emerging from ourselves, to the ends of the earth and of existence, to take Jesus there, is good!” (24 MAR. 2013). With that in mind, we may now further reflect together on the elements that bring young men to discovering their priestly vocation.