

THE TABLET

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Reawaken the Call

PASTORAL
LETTER *from*
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Preface

My sisters and brothers, we are now just about halfway through the Year of Vocations here in the Diocese of Brooklyn that was given the theme "Reawaken the Call." During a recent pastors meeting, the pastors of the Diocese in Brooklyn and Queens were asked to comment on various aspects of what should be contained in a pastoral letter on vocations. Altogether, the priests of the diocese submitted 142 different recommendations which I will attempt to incorporate into this pastoral letter. One of the most interesting comments presented was that I should not write a pastoral letter, but rather give more time for the priests of

the diocese to discuss with one another what they individually do to foster vocations. This would be an opportunity for the priests to share with one another the joy of the priesthood. An opportunity for this certainly can be arranged as we come to the conclusion of our Year of Vocations.

Introduction

A vocation is a call from God to a particular state of life. In many of my Confirmation ceremonies, I speak to the Confirmandi about the three basic vocational calls that we receive from God. I speak not about a career or profession, but rather a vocation. The first vocation, most numerous among

the faithful, is the vocation to marriage. The sacrament of marriage is what gives new life to the Church and produces those who can answer the call to follow Christ in various ways in married life, in the priesthood and religious life, and in the single life. These three basic Christian vocations are what we must speak about. Our concentration in this pastoral letter will be on the vocation to the priesthood and religious life.

The issue is the call to a vocation. There is no better example than in the Gospel itself when Jesus encounters the rich young man who asks how he finds eternal life; "Teacher, I have kept all these things from my youth up." Looking at him, Jesus felt a love for him and said, "One thing you lack: go and sell all you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me." (Mt 10: 20-21) But the young man goes away sad, for he had many possessions. This is the first vocation story that we see in the Gospel that was refused. We hear about the call of the Apostles and the disciples who did accept the call.

We are at a time in our society today where many people are not listening to the call of Christ. It is Christ who must call us. We cannot give a vocation to anyone. We can, however, pray and become God's instruments in calling forth a vocation for those who hear the call in the depths of their heart from the Lord, Himself. This is our task as the Church in Brooklyn and Queens, to call forth the vocations we need for the mission of the New Evangelization. Without young men and women, and some not so young, who are willing to give their lives completely to Christ and His Church, we cannot accomplish the mission that has been placed in our hands.

We live in a society and culture

which makes it difficult for people to make life-long commitments. We see this, unfortunately, in the sacrament of marriage where the divorce rate among Catholics is almost equal to those couples who are not Catholic. We see it in the unfortunate departure from priesthood and religious life when with enthusiasm people first accept the call and then somehow seem to reject and lose the call. Yes, the priesthood and religious life demands sacrifice. Above all, however, they are lives of fulfillment and joy. Every good thing requires sacrifice.

A vocation, as we accept it, is challenging. It is creative. It is a way of life that challenges the one who accepts it to use their creativity to engage people coming to know, love and follow Jesus Christ. A vocation truly is about an encounter with Christ, Himself, as we heard in the story of the rich young man. Yes, unless someone comes to know and love Jesus Christ they cannot accept the challenge to follow Christ more closely, to find that priesthood is not one choice among many, but rather it is the choice that one must make if one is called to be in a unique relationship to Jesus Christ. This is also true for religious who give up much more by way of vowing poverty, chastity and obedience which makes them more symbols of Christ, who gave His life fully for our sake.

In today's materialistic culture, the choice of a vocation to the priesthood or religious life does mean that the one responding must be ready not only to sacrifice, but also to fall in love with the Lord Jesus in a special way, so that any sacrifice that may be required in a vocation becomes a life-long commitment. A vocation is demanding. The challenge lies in the will of the one who accepts a vocation. The one who



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accepts the challenge can live their life to the full capacity of showing their love for Jesus Christ and His Church and its many members. The challenge of this Year of Vocations has been to go out of our way to identify and ask those who might have a vocation to respond to the Lord's call. We have become instruments in God's hands in calling forth vocations needed for the life of the Church. Truly, there is not just a lack of vocations today, but rather there is a lack of responses to the call that we know that God is giving today. The research that the diocese conducted several years ago with St. John's University showed a startling figure that at least ten percent of the 1,400 young people that responded had at one point considered a vocation to the priesthood or religious life. The call has been heard, yet the responses are few. And so, it is the Lord who tells us to pray to the Lord of the Harvest that He may send sufficient laborers into the vineyard. Jesus said to His disciples, "The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. Therefore beseech the Lord of the harvest to send out workers into His Harvest." (Mt 9: 37-38)

At times it is difficult to recognize that we do face a crisis of an aging presbyterate and a lack of religious women and men to continue the mission of so many great religious communities. When all is said and done, vocations are important. This is not because we lack vocations, but because this indicates a lack of faith in not accepting a vocation to the priesthood and religious life. Priests and religious have high job satisfaction and find lives full of meaning. A vocation truly is the fruit of faith and prayer, which a vibrant parish faith community life must encourage. Each family has a responsibility, as a Catholic family, to encourage its members to consider the possibility of a vocation to the priesthood or religious life. No one can force a vocation, however, everyone can suggest. It is appropriate that someone consider a vocation if they have the right personality and qualities. They might show in some



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way that they are being called to a special vocation in the life of the Church. This should be recognized by those around them, especially their families.

We do emphasize the call of young people to respond to a vocation to the priesthood or religious life. Today, however, there are many of those who are not so young who have experienced the job market and careers. They come to realize that their fulfillment in life can only be complete by accepting the call that sometimes has been put aside in the early part of their life. These vocations demand greater sacrifice in making a commitment because many experiences make it more difficult to give up one's will and self-actualization in order to embrace the priesthood and religious life.

Among those older people who have accepted a vocation, we see that they really have found the true meaning of their life. What they encounter is something which has no comparable experience in their past life. The Church needs vocations to the priesthood and religious life. The Church

needs the sacraments, especially the Eucharist. Together, it is our responsibility as the Church in Brooklyn and Queens to call forth those vocations that exist in the Diocese of Brooklyn for the sake of the people of God.

Obstacles to Vocations Today

The digital generation of today often is distracted, even depressed at times, and often incapable of having productive human relationships because many come from dysfunctional and broken families. Families today seldom give time for prayer and devotions which were in the past the impetus for young people to consider seriously vocations to the priesthood and religious life. Our culture presents a rather negative view of the life in the Church.

The challenge of celibacy is an obstacle for many, not realizing that celibacy is a gift. If one possesses that gift, then they will be able to make the commitment. At the same time, our world makes it difficult because of the noise that is out there on social media. This does not allow them to give suffi-

cient time to prayer and meditation, which are the infallible means of discerning a vocation to the priesthood or religious life. Past life experiences are certainly another obstacle for many to overcome. They do not easily experience that by putting less emphasis on the material things they will find joy in the spiritual side of life. They need to answer the call that is in them. We need to help them to overcome the pressure that they feel from their own peers not to respond to a call, but rather to live the good life in our society and not make any sacrifice that might detract from what is considered to be a normal human life in today's world.

Commitment is also a difficult issue in our society today. Today, lifetime commitments do not seem to be popular in marriage and even in priesthood and religious life. Although a discernment period for the priesthood and religious life is a long one, still some may make the wrong decision, which is somewhat understandable. To be afraid of making any commitment, however, is part of the battle we

have to fight today. Some are attracted to married life and having a family, which is a good and noble goal. The lack of commitment to married life, however, is also a problem that we need to address.

When and where can we assist those being called to respond? Hopefully, our Catholic schools and academies and our religious education programs, as well as our families themselves, are the places where we can call forth a vocation that is within our young people. We need to counteract the materialism and consumerism, as well as the noise of our society, by breaking through and by finding new and appropriate ways that will engage our young people in lives of prayer and contemplation. These are the means by

which a call to a vocation can be heard and accepted.

Method

But how can we foster vocations to the priesthood and religious life today? Some suggestions, which came from our priests, are interesting. Certainly, we must begin fostering vocations in the parish. The parish is where vocation teams are important. These people can work together to identify young people who might have a vocation and to pray for them individually. Perhaps even the use of these vocation teams in post Confirmation programs might also be important.

One suggestion that has worked around the country is the encouragement of Eucharistic Adoration. It

seems that dioceses where Eucharistic Adoration is prevalent have received the grace of many vocations. Perhaps here in Brooklyn and Queens we can develop in each deanery one parish where Eucharistic Adoration continues from morning to night, so that people do have a place to pray before the exposed Blessed Sacrament with the specific intention of praying to the Lord of the Harvest for vocations.

But there are many others who can be involved in developing and fostering vocations to the priesthood and religious life. Overall, the atmosphere must be one that does not discourage vocations, but rather encourages vocations. Sometimes our efforts to create safe environment places have discouraged, especially priests, from having

contact with young people. Respecting safe environment rules are very important, however, there are times and places where regular contact can work as long as this is not exclusive, and so that priests are never alone with young people.

Those who have regular contact with young people are our Catholic school and academy teachers and catechists. We must first challenge our teachers and catechists to live their own faith, because as they live their faith, they will see the necessity of continuing the work of the Church by encouraging vocations. There must be a place in our curriculum where we introduce the call of Jesus to young people asking them to consider a vocation to the priesthood or religious life.

At one time, our religious sisters who taught in our Catholic schools were the best recruiters for vocations. They knew the young people who were under their charge and encouraged those who showed signs of a vocation to pursue that vocation. Today, our religious sisters do not have that contact, however, they can still pray for vocations. At the same time, the religious sisters can encourage others to share their charism. As we know, in the recent research compiled with St. John's University, ten percent of 700 females responding said that they would consider a vocation to the religious life, however, they did not know how to pursue such a vocation. The openness to female religious vocations exists, but we need to find new ways to identify young women who might consider a vocation to religious life and find ways to engage them with religious sisters.

Again, the teachers and catechists at our Catholic schools and academies must have the means to present the topic of vocations to their students. It is important that we have curriculum that has lesson plans centered on vocations. This would include encouraging prayer in families and encouraging students to become altar servers, to join the choir and to find other ways in which the students can engage in the life of their parish. We must encourage our young people to find their way to a closer relationship to Christ in the life of the

Church today. This can become the way in which they can find and can see how they too can one day participate in working for the life of the Church.

Another group of people that certainly has direct contact with our young people are our youth ministers. These youth ministers must be encouraged to understand what the call to priestly and religious vocations is all about, so that they too can identify young people who might have a vocation. They should encourage these young people and know how to direct them to pursue discernment for a vocation.

In addition, our Permanent Deacons also are great recruiters. Not only can they show and model what the Permanent Diaconate is about, but they also can encourage the youth with whom they are in contact with to pursue priestly and religious vocations. Truly, there is no one in the Church who does not have responsibility to promote vocations.

The Family

The family is the source of life in the Church. The family certainly is the source of direction when it comes to the pursuit of a vocation to the priesthood and religious life. The Christian family has always modeled itself on the Holy Family of Nazareth where Jesus was nurtured. Being God and man, Jesus needed the necessary human formation, so that as He manifested His divinity to the world He had a solid human formation. And so it is with our children. Parents must give their children the formation that only they can give. They are, as the Church has always taught, the primary educators of their children. Our Catholic schools and academies, and our religious education programs can only be a help to families in fulfilling their responsibilities.

One of the responsibilities that a family has is to direct the future life of their children. It should be clear to families that the lives of their children do not belong to them. Children are not possessions, but are gifts that God has bestowed on the family. Children at times need the guidance to find their true vocation and the happiness in life



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that God wants for them. Families must encourage, always in a positive way, young people to pursue their dreams and understand where God is calling them. This can never happen, however, if the family is not practicing their faith. Unfortunately, so many today are not participating in the weekly celebration of the Eucharist, although parents may even send their children to Catholic schools or religious education programs. Parents themselves often are not involved in their religious education; they do not accompany their children. This, perhaps, is the most important fact that we find today contributing to the lack of vocations to the priesthood and religious life. Vocations come from strong Catholic families. Vocations come from families with numerous children. Without our

involvement, as priests especially, in support of families, we cannot make up for the deficit that comes from a lack of parental guidance in vocational choices.

The work of encouragement in the family is an important one. Children gradually must find their own way in life. However, a child may show signs, sometimes very early on, of what they would like to do in life. Sometimes their dreams are fantastic; becoming a rocket scientist or an astronaut. But gradually as maturity comes, more realistic ideas of what God wants them to do in life, or at least what they would like to pursue, comes to light. In a delicate way, families need to encourage their children not only to think and dream, but also to pray. Pray about vocations, and pray in the family about what God wants them to do in life. To

support children in this way is truly important. Without this kind of parental guidance, our children will never understand what their true call in life will be.

Children must be encouraged to understand what a vocation is all about. Perhaps one great way of doing this is to invite a priest or religious to your home for dinner, so that in a relaxed family atmosphere a young person might see the human side of a priest or religious and understand the person behind the collar or the habit. Sometimes families do not understand how in just a few words they can discourage their children from considering a vocation to the priesthood or religious life. Children should not be frustrated. They should be encouraged to find their true vocation. We know how true it is that it is

not a parent's vocation. Rather, it is the child's vocation. That vocation flows from the desire of the family to support their child in whatever way the Lord leads them. Prayer in the family is critical to vocational discernment. Without family prayer, without regular attendance at the Eucharist, without understanding what the priesthood or religious life is all about, vocations cannot be encouraged in the family structure.

Grandparents are also very important today, as often it is the grandparents who seem to transmit the faith to their grandchildren. Grandparents have the wisdom of many years and can point out to their grandchildren the ways of the Church, not only from the past but also the way the Church moves to the future. My predecessor, Bishop Thomas Vose Daily, was always quoted saying to mothers, "You will never lose your sons if you encourage them to be a priest." How true this is that the priest, religious sister or brother is always the one who stays closest to their parents and grandparents. They are able to assist them as

they age and in their time of need, not only because they do not have any family responsibilities of their own, but also because they have developed a keen sense of charity and respect for people. Perhaps we can develop a program that families can use at home to speak about vocations and how the family can find ways and opportunities to discuss what a vocation means. All of these suggestions present us challenges for the future. This Pastoral Letter, *Reawaken the Call*, is meant to give impetus to more activity in the future years.

The Priest

Only the witness of true disciples can draw others to follow Christ. To be a true disciple necessitates a conversion of life, because the priesthood is not a job or career. Rather, the priesthood is a vocation, as is a religious life, a specific call from God that reminds us that we are chosen for a specific mission in life. To be chosen is never easy, as it involves giving of self and sacrifice. Being chosen involves many manifestations of patience and joy, but

most of all of a spiritual life. People expect priests and religious to be people of prayer. Truly, not only can this attract young people to consider a vocation, but it also can attract families to see that encouraging their children to be priests and religious will truly make them beneficiaries of a happy and fruitful life.

Priests and religious must become messengers to bring the call to young people. Without joy, however, this will never happen. Priests must be joyful bearers of the Good News that will attract, because it is not just ourselves and our personalities that attract, it is the message of the Gospel. It is the message of Jesus. This cannot be communicated unless there is a mature spirituality that involves self-giving, self-sacrifice, which allows priests and religious to be mature and worthy of imitation by others.

The work of invitation is truly important. Prayerful witness is important, while at the same time a visible and concrete invitation is always necessary. In our research on vocations with St. John's University several years

ago, we found that the variable, or the factor that was most common as an obstacle to accepting a vocation for the 1400 respondents was the fact that "Nobody ever asked me." We need to ask. Not for our own sake, but for the sake of the Gospel and the Church. Sometimes we need to emphasize with our congregations and young people, "Who will replace me?" Blessed Justin Russolillo, founder of the Vocationist Fathers and Sisters, once said, "A priest who does not produce another priest is like a tree without fruit." "Who will carry on the work that I have been entrusted with as a gift?" This is a gift that comes from God Himself. Dialogue with our youth is so important. They must be encouraged. They must be invited. They must never feel that any question cannot be asked. To be visible witnesses for the magnificence of your gift of a vocation in the Church is our special call today. When so many negative facts surround the life of the Church today, the reality that is never easy to accept, especially in our own day and age, is the commitment to celibacy. It is the essence of self-sacrifice. It is the witness that at times the Church has failed to give, but always tries to correct herself. All of these messages need to be the work of the priest and religious with those who assist them in doing the work of recruiting vocations in the Church today.

At times we expect young priests and religious to give testimony that they are happy and that they are the future of the Church. It is also true, however, that the mature witness of older priests and religious is also necessary. Some research has shown that

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the Millennials and the other younger generation of today somehow relate better to their grandparents than to their parents. They seem to want mature direction. This can be given by older priests and religious, so they must not think that it is the work only of the younger generation.

As I approach the 48th Anniversary of my priestly ordination in May, I think back to 1970 and remember what I dreamed that I would do as a priest. I thought I would be a parish priest, like the priests who inspired me to think about my own vocation to the priesthood. They were good men, spiritual men who reached out to the youth and inspired them to be good Catholics, so much so that some would even consider a vocation to the priesthood and religious life. I was very blessed to have such great priests and women and men religious who inspired and helped me discern my vocation. It is so important that we have good role models so that young people can be inspired to be like those who mirror Christ for them.

The catechetical work of the priest and religious is also important, as there needs to be contact with the youth in our Catholic schools and religious education programs. We need to have prayer for vocations at weekend Masses. Once in a while, the topic needs to be the subject of our homilies. Our young people must be encouraged to come to the Eucharist. At the same time, priests and religious must be encouraged to come to the classroom.

Teachers and catechists should assist our young people, especially on the issue of a vocational call. Sometimes just speaking personally and honestly is perhaps the best influence that the priest or religious can have on others. Taking time to build relationships with young people in secure circumstances really can go a long way in letting them know what a vocation is all about. We need to encourage young men to visit our high school and college seminaries, as well as the theological program, and

encourage young women to visit convents. Come and See experiences can give an aspect that is a visible one and tangible. Contact with seminarians and novices is also very important. There are many others who can help in inviting young people, and the not so young, to consider a vocation. It is important that in the parish lay people, especially perhaps mothers and fathers of priests and religious, speak about vocations and the joy that their families have experienced in having a priest, sister or brother religious in the family. At our December 2017 pastors meeting, a mother of a priest who works full time in vocation development spoke in a way that was truly inspiring and informative. We need to find opportunities for those who understand the issues to address our families, so that they too can be aware of what they can do to foster vocations.

Specific Programs

The priests who gathered for the discussion on vocations made many suggestions which, hopefully, they

themselves will take to heart. We must understand, however, how vocations can be promoted in our day and age. We must be very clear that the use of social media today is so important; Facebook, YouTube, videos on the life of a priest such as "On the Block", currently shown on our own NetTV, which highlights a priest each week. Young people seem to spend much time on the Internet. We need to find ways to get their attention as does the social media they use day in and day out. Perhaps we must spend some additional money on TV advertisements besides the ones which appear on our own TV station. Obviously, these advertisements must be professionally done, which will attract the attention of our young people. We must be open to getting their participation in the current programs that we offer.

Our Vocation Office organizes many vocation programs for different age levels. The Fraternitas Program is for middle school students (6th to 8th Grades), dedicated to instilling Christian values in these young men

with the goal of fostering a true Catholic Gentlemen. The program gathers monthly at our Cathedral Preparatory Seminary in Queens and allows us to accomplish this mission through: prayer, catechesis, sports and Sacraments.

The Jeremiah Project is a program for high school boys who show some interest in a vocation to the priesthood and/or college seminary. This program invites students to participate in a monthly overnight experience at the Cathedral Seminary House of Formation in Douglaston and shares in the fraternity of our college seminarians.

The Evenings of Fraternity are held on Monday evenings. These monthly gatherings include a holy hour, a conference presented by a Brooklyn priest, and dinner at the St. John Paul II House of Discernment for men considering priesthood.

Discernment Retreats are offered during Advent, Lent and Holy Week for men who are of High School age or older.

Our Project Andrew dinners with a bishop present are organized



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throughout the Diocese in Brooklyn and Queens and are held in the local deaneries, high schools and colleges. These gatherings afford priests the opportunity to invite individuals whom they might think have a priestly vocation, or the qualities needed in a good priest, to have dinner with one of our bishops in a relaxed environment. During the evening, the participants share in dialogue about the life of a priest and a priestly vocation. These gatherings have proven to be very fruitful over the years.

To find out more information about these programs, visit our vocation office website at www.brooklyn-priests.org and www.whatsmycalling.org

At the end of our Year of Vocations, we will have a better idea what all of these programs have produced and which are more successful than the others. There certainly are some groups who can be particularly helpful in getting the message out about vocations.

All of our apostolic movements in the Diocese in Brooklyn and Queens, of which there are many, and the various ethnic and language apostolates, can attract youth with their parents. They can address the specific language capabilities to carry on ministry. We need to challenge them to promote vocations and to produce vocations for the Church.

Here is a concrete example. At the Our Lady of Guadalupe celebration held on Dec. 12, 2017 at the Co-Cathedral of St. Joseph, over 1,400 young people were in attendance. Can we not tap that youthful energy to produce vocations for the future of the Church in Brooklyn and Queens? Our Catholic high schools, most of which are not under the direct supervision of the Diocese of Brooklyn, are also important places for the development of vocations to the priesthood or religious life.

In recent years, we have attempted to assign a young priest to serve as a chaplain at all Catholic high schools in Brooklyn and Queens. Also, all non-Catholic colleges and universities



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located in Brooklyn and Queens have chaplaincy programs. These are critical because it is there that young people are making their life decisions. We need to be present with even more concrete programs and zeal.

Conclusion

When all is said and done, it is so important that we recognize that the work of promoting vocations is the work of the Spirit and demands our sacrifice and prayer. We cannot give anyone a vocation. A vocation comes from the Lord Himself. What we need to do is to call the vocation forth. We call it forth by example, by living healthy and holy lives as priests and religious. We call a vocation forth by directly asking a person to consider being a priest or religious, assuring them that there is no comparable



vocation in the world today. Vocations come from families who are actively participating in the sacramental life of the Church. It is my hope that this

reflection on the need for vocational work in our Diocese in Brooklyn and Queens will produce the vocations that the Church needs.