



National Office for Vocation
A pastoral message for Good Shepherd Sunday (4th Sunday of Easter)
Sunday 21st April 2024

My dear friends,

One of the most important elements of the synodal process is learning to listen. We can see this in action in the 'conversations in the Spirit' which have taken place in the international Synod which took place in Rome last October. Bishops and other delegates from different parts of the world sat at round tables listening deeply to each other in an atmosphere of prayer, and often these diverse individuals were able to come to agreement on a way forward on matters which at the beginning of the process seemed impossible to resolve.

Listening deeply is at the heart of discerning our vocation in life. The way in which we listen is not to think of what we want to say; not to have pre-formed answers in mind and to await our turn to speak. In listening like this we become receptive to the holy Spirit. We listen because we are called; every one of us is called to holiness. St John Paul II called this the universal call to holiness, and it applies to every single human person even if they are not Christian. But within this general vocation there are many other calls which we should listen to. One of our modern problems is that our world is very noisy, and it is often difficult to hear our own voices and thoughts in the surrounding din, let alone the words of others. One situation that can occur is we find ourselves on set paths in life, and it is not easy to change direction even if we want to do just that. Commitment to our families and other responsibilities block our ears and we just carry on as before.

Today is Vocations Sunday, traditionally a day for asking young men and women if they are called to the priesthood and religious life. There is no doubt that the church needs priests to celebrate the Eucharist and other sacraments, and Religious to offer a living witness to the values of the Kingdom of God. Without them, we would be a very impoverished Church. But how do we work out whether God is calling us to a particular vocation? One simple test is whether following a particular path in life gives us joy. If we are happy and content, or at least think we will be, then it is worth giving it a try. I am not saying that we should be deliriously happy all the time but there should be an underlying knowledge that we have chosen the right path in response to God's call. Following a vocation is not an obstacle course that has to be overcome. There will be difficulties, but an inner state of contentment is important. This develops as our friendship with Jesus grows, and our sense of purpose becomes clear. Following a vocation does involve making a leap of faith but it is not a leap into the unknown. Just as there are risks in getting married no matter how much we prepare for it, so there are risks in offering yourself for priesthood and religious life. In all cases we have examples of happy and fulfilled people living their vocation.

If we listen deeply within our prayer, we may hear that call from God. But we may hear God speaking to us through our families or in our circle of friends. Usually, it is not a very clear call, just some hints and nudges, or a notion that keeps coming back. I would like to suggest to you two ways forward which apply to every Christian, but I think they have special meaning for someone who is discerning a particular vocation.

Pope Francis at the end of the international Synod gave two directions of travel for the participants. The first was to spend time before Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament. This he said would free us in spirit so that we would avoid other attractions. Adoration is a special kind of prayer which helps us shirk off everything except that one person who is important to us – Jesus Christ. His second point was to steer us towards service of others. In serving others, giving ourselves to other people in response to different needs, we undoubtedly find Jesus.

In today's gospel reading Jesus says that he is the good shepherd: the good shepherd is one who lays down his life for his sheep. Becoming close to Jesus, through prayer and listening, through adoration and service will involve sacrifice there is no escaping that. But the word sacrifice means to make holy, and holiness is what we are all made for and that which we all should seek.

May God bless you as you seek to come closer to the Lord and deepen your understanding of what God is calling you to be.

Malcolm McMahon OP

Chair of the National Office for Vocation
Archbishop of Liverpool
10th April 2024