

WHAT IS PRIESTLY VOCATION?*

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We have been gathered here to prepare safe, effective and up-to-date guidelines for promoting, discerning, recruiting, safeguarding and financing Priestly Vocations.

Obviously, the first step along this line is to have a clear, definite and theologically sound ideas about the nature of "Priestly Vocation". If the "ministerial Priesthood" itself has been called to question in our days so as to become one of the main topics in the deliberations of the last Synod of Bishops in Rome; if the so-called "crises of identity" among the ranks of the clergy in many parts of the world has become the sad fashion in vogue among a noisy minority, and an ominous sign of our times; how much greater confusion may there be around the more intricate question of the "Priestly Vocation"!

The discussions about the ministerial Priesthood have been stirred up after Vatican II; but the controversies about the "Priestly Vocation" have been agitated since the beginning of our century. However, regarding this two vital issues, we have always had the sure voice and the beginnings of the Church Magisterium to guide us safely amidst the aberrations or misleading opinions scattered around us.

In this exposition that I wish to offer for your consideration, I will just glean from the papal documents and sum up the main issues, ideas and practical applications of the Church doctrine on the "Priestly Vocation".

As we discuss "*What is Priestly Vocation*", let us first see what it is not.

"Vocation" is *not* God's *election, choice or design* concerning someone to become a priest; it is *not* a *decree* of Divine

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Providence by which someone is selected in preference to others and segregated for the priestly ministry. If such would be the case, the discernment of a vocation would be a hopeless case; because, as the Apostle says, "Who has ever understood the Lord's thoughts, or been His counsellor? . . . How inscrutable are his judgements, how undiscoverable his ways! (Rom. 11, 34: 33). No, the lovable designs of God upon us cannot be called a "vocation", because this word, even etymologically, suggests a sort of a "calling", that is, a "manifestation of one's will, not yet manifested to the person concerned." Hence, God's will and providential designs cannot constitute a vocation as long as they are not yet manifested in one way or another. They must rather be termed "source and origin of a vocation" or, as Pope Paul VI calls it, "the first fountain" of the priestly vocation.¹

The priestly vocation, then, may be defined as "the manifestation of God's will electing someone for the priesthood". The manifestation of God's will, and not precisely His election, is what really makes a "vocation". As a matter of fact, God may elect for the priesthood some, nay, as many as needed in the Church; but actually, due to deficiencies of fallible human causes or circumstances, a good number, alas, happen to be *not-called*, that is, are found to be "without vocation"; in other words, the necessary signs to "manifest" God's will or election are not found in them.

This fact answers the intriguing question, more puzzling than ever in our days: "Why so few priests? Why so many "drop-outs" as the years go by, in our seminaries? Why so small the number of applicants that enter or are admitted into the seminaries? Why are seminaries nowadays in many places practically empty or closed, when there are so many towns and villages without a pastor, and so great "multitudes harried and abject, like sheep that have no shepherd" (Mt. 9,36)? Has God forgotten His Church?" No! As the Angelic Doctor, St. Thomas, said long ago: "God never abandons His Church".² He never fails to choose a number of possible aspirants to the priesthood that may be sufficient for the needs of His people. We are the ones who fail to cooperate with God's loving designs. As the Sower of the Gospel, God goes out to sow His seed (Lk. 8,5) of the priestly vocation in the hearts of many

¹ Paulus VI, Epist. Apost. "SUMMI DEI VERBUM", 4 Nov. '63: ap. As., 55, p. 986.

² St. Thom. Aqu. *Summe Theol.*, Supplem., ap. 36, a. 4, ad 1".

boys and young men; but, due to the conditions of our modern society and also to our own carelessness and neglect, many of these seeds "are trodden under foot, and the birds fly down and eat them; others wither as soon as they are up, because they have no moisture; others grow up among briars that smother them" (cf. Lk. 8,5-7), and even the seeds that fell on good soil, due to lack of generous human correspondence, yield only a thirtyfold harvest instead of a hundredfold as could have been expected (cf. Mt. 13,8).

This is precisely one of the main aims of this National Convention: to forestall, as far as we can, this lack of necessary cooperation with God's work in the promotion of priestly vocations; to counteract the harmful influences of contemporary society, and to wake up from our carelessness and neglect in the great cause that we have in our hands.

We should remember here the words of Pope Paul VI: "In order that esteem and holy enthusiasm for the priestly life may take root and develop in the hearts of boys and young men, it is necessary to create a suitable atmosphere *in the family and in the school*. While modern civilization has spread among Christian people an esteem and greed for the good of this world, it *has lessened* in many hearts the *appreciation of supernatural and eternal things*. That is why as soon as boys and young men manifest clear signs of *aspiring* to the priesthood, and *fitness* for this state of life, they should be placed in a *Seminary* where the *seed* of the divine call may be properly safeguarded from the corruption of the world, and suitably cultivated from the earliest years that, as time goes by, there may appear and become firmly rooted in them other qualities which are to be considered as essential to a solid and complete moral formation of candidates to the priesthood."²

The Vicar of Christ points out lucidly the momentous importance of truly *Christian families and homes*, as well as authentic *Catholic schools and education*; the ravaging influence of contemporary materialistic and hedonistic outlook of life in *modern society*; and the absolute *need*, even in spite of all odds and at the cost of most demanding sacrifices, to maintain *true Seminaries* worthy of that name where vocations may be *property safeguarded*, and *suitably cultivated* until they become *firmly rooted and completely mature*. These are guidelines for your deliberations.

² Paulus VI, op. cit

Coming back now to our definition of a "priestly vocation" as the *manifestation of God's Will*, the obvious question comes at once: "And how is that will of God *manifested*?" Pius XI in "that most important pronouncement" of his pontificate⁴ and in the Encyclical on the Catholic Priesthood⁵ gives us a clear answer: "A true priestly vocation, he says, is not established so much by some inner feeling or devout attraction, which may sometimes be absent or hardly perceptible; but rather by a *right intention* in the aspirant, together with a combination of *physical, intellectual and moral qualities* which make him fitted for such a state of life. He must look to the priesthood solely from the noble *motive of consecrating himself to the service of God and salvation of souls*; he must likewise have, or at least strive earnestly to acquire, urged on, perhaps by ill-advised parents, looks to this state as a means to temporal or earthly gains which he imagines and desires in the priesthood; *whoever intractable, unruly or undisciplined, has small taste for piety, is not industrious, and shows little zeal for souls; whoever has special tendency to sensuality, and after long trial has not proved he can conquer it; whoever has no aptitude for study and who will be unable to follow the prescribed courses with due satisfaction: all such cases show that they are not intended for the priesthood.* By letting them go on almost to the threshold of the sanctuary, superiors make it only more difficult for them to draw back; and, perhaps even cause them to accept ordination through human respect, *without vocation and without the priestly spirit.* Let superiors of seminaries, together with the spiritual directors and confessors, reflect how weighty a responsibility they assume before God, before the Church, and before the youths themselves, if they do not take all means at their disposal to avoid a false step." . . . The chief responsibility, however, rests with the Bishop, who according to the severe law of the Church, should not confer holy orders on anyone, unless from positive signs he is morally certain of canonical fitness . . . !"⁶ "It is not enough," says the holy Bishop and Doctor, St. Alphonsus de Liguori, "that the Bishop know nothing evil of the ordained; he must have positive evidence of his uprightness."⁷

⁴ Pius XI, Apost. Letter (posthumous), 18 Jan. 1939, to the Philippine Episcopate; ap. AAS, 34, 1942, pp. 252-264.

⁵ Pius XI, Encycl. "AD CATHOLICI SACERDOTI" 20 Dec. 1935; ap. AAS 28, 1936, pp. 5-53.

⁶ C.I.C., can. 973, 3.

⁷ S. Alph. Lig., *Theol. Mor. de Sacram. Ordination* 803.

From this clear explanation of how the "manifestation of God's Will electing someone for the priesthood" is achieved, we can say, borrowing the words of Pius XII, that this *divine vocation*" is made up of a twofold *quasi-essential element*"⁸ or by two integral elements, one *immediately divine*, which consists in the right intention of the candidate together with his *fitness*, and the other *ecclesiastical* or *mediately divine*, which consists in the canonical call of the ecclesiastical superiors freely accepted by the candidate. These two mutually completing elements do not bring out the priestly vocation all at once, in a moment from the beginning of its manifestation; rather, as Paul VI explains⁹, the vocation is a *gradual* and ordinarily long process, from the first initial sign of the boys or young men admitted in the Seminary to the final judgement of the Bishop, rightfully and freely accepted by the candidates at Ordination. It is a slow and gradual development from the "seeds" or initial signs of a *possible* or *probable* vocation to the "full maturity"¹⁰ or final blossoming of a *certain* finally *complete* and *definitively approved* and *effective* before the Church, as well as before God according to the sentence of the Catechism of the Council of Trent: "Those are said to be chosen by God who are lawfully called by the Church, legitimate ministers"¹¹.

It is important to recall this doctrine in order to correct the widely spread error of those who think that admission or stay in a seminary is a sign of a sure and certain vocation. If that were the real case, then no Bishop would have the right to refuse or reject the ordination of any seminarian asking for it. St. Pius X has positively taught that "no one has any right for ordination previous to the free election of the Bishop"¹²; and Paul VI has recently declared again that "the dreadful and most serious duty of taking the *final judgement* on the *signs of divine* election belongs to the Bishops, as well as the right to *call* the candidate for Priesthood, thus rendering their priestly *divine vocation* approved and effective before the Church"¹³. Consequently, any social pressure on the seminarians or seminary-authorities that may affect or influence the

⁸ Pius XII, Const. Apost. "SEDES SAPIENTIAE", 31 Maii 1956; ap. ASS n8, 1956, p. 357.

⁹ Paulus VI, op. cit., p. 988.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 984.

¹¹ Catech. Conc. Trid., p. III, de Ordine. 3.

¹² Cf. AAS. 15 Lulii 1912, p. 48.

¹³ Paulus VI, op. cit., p. 988.

necessary freedom they should have in giving up in due time or desisting from that way of life as soon as they find out prudently that they are not called or fitted for it, is not only unfair and unjust and extremely damaging to the Church, but also a crime of fatal consequences for the youth themselves and for countless souls, in this life and perhaps even to the next.

The history of a vocation is like this. It starts when a boy or a young man begins to show some *signs of aptitude* for the priestly office; and this increases when he openly signifies and shows that he desires the priesthood, although such desire may not spontaneously arise from himself, but from the care and work of parents, teachers, parish priests, confessor, etc. Until here, the vocation or "manifestation of God's Will" is only partial since there is only one of its *two integral* or complete elements:¹⁴ namely, the *immediately divine* factor which consists in graces, natural and supernatural gifts given by God to the soul and body of the one chosen. When, however, the youth finally enters the seminary, he is admitted by the Bishop, at least indirectly, through the superiors of the seminary, and thus the *ecclesiastical* or *mediately divine* element, that is, the canonical call begins to be present, and we can speak already of a *vocation*, but only for a *possible* or at most, *probable* vocation which must be carefully *tested* in the course of time. This is the meaning of a candidate's entrance in the Seminary.

Since the priestly vocation is so high and sublime as to demand exceptionally sterling natural and supernatural qualities, and inasmuch as the training and education of *early adolescence*, pursued until the attainment of manhood, is admittedly according to psychopedagogy, of lasting effects in any human life, the Church has insisted for long centuries, at least from Trent down to our post-Vatican II days, upon the importance of Minor Seminaries. The scientific findings of modern Adolescent Psychology have just confirmed the profound insights of the decrees on Seminaries issued by the Councils of Toledo in the 6th and 7th centuries, by the Council of Trent in the 16th century, and by Paul VI in our own days when he said "*as soon as boys and young men manifest clear signs of aspiring to the priesthood and fitness for this state of life, they should be placed in a Seminary*". At the age of 20, the adolescent has already become a man, with his own personality

¹⁴ Oscar A. Aquino, I.C.D., *Vocation & Admission to Orders*, Roma, Cath. Book Agency, 1967, pp. 64-81.

which cannot be "remanded or refashioned anymore in later years"¹⁵. What has not been done at that age, during the Minor Seminary, can hardly be repaired or supplied later in the Major Seminary. After the High School, in the College Seminary and still more in the Theology department, generally, it is *too late* — mark well the word, *too late*, as a rule — to try to correct wrong habits or dispositions previously acquired, or to eradicate a deep-seated worldly mentality that has not been duly counteracted in the early adolescence,¹⁶ especially in our contemporary "permissive" society, and in our schools where injudicious coeducation and sex instruction prevail.

I make these remarks to warn this National Convention against the trend prevailing in many sectors today of suppressing Minor Seminaries, and working only for vocations in the College or University levels. These vocations may be indeed more promising; the rate of perseverance, *at least until Ordination* is much more encouraging than that of high school boys (although perhaps we could not say the same on the perseverance of such vocations, years after Ordination). But however the case may be, the fact is that such College or University vocations, even with the best promotion works, will always be and remain to be *an exception*, rather than *the rule*. And although it is imperative that we should pay special attention to them, as Paul VI has recently recommended¹⁷, it should never be to the neglect or detriment of Minor Seminaries, or just as *a subterfuge for dodging the issue*" of their relevance. "For the Church maintains — as it is apparent from her doctrines, experience, and practice — that certain signs of a divine vocation can be discerned *right from boyhood*, which demand careful and specialized attention."¹⁸

When a Seminarian enters the Theological department or Major Seminary, his vocation should have reached a stage of maturity as to render it, not only possible or probable, but *almost certain or practically, though not yet definitively sure*. A doubtful or still *wavering vocation* at such an advanced stage

¹⁵ Andrea Maggiali, *Psicopedagogia dei candidati al sacerdozio*, Mila, no. 1965, p. 60.

¹⁶ Jesus Ma. Cavanna, CM., *Importance of Minor Seminaries — Their Case in the Philippines*: ms. Manila, 1971, pp. 48-49.

¹⁷ Paul VI to the IV International Congress for Promotion of ecclesiastical vocations, Rome, 10-14 May, 1971; ap. *Vida Religiosa* revista C.M.F., Madrid, 15 Oct 1971, pp. 258-259.

¹⁸ S.C. for Catholic Education, "RATIO FUNDAMENTALIS INSTITUTIONIS SACERDOTALIS", n. 11, footnote 60.

should be discouraged to continue or remain in the Seminary. During all the Seminary years, the *right intention* and *fitness* of the candidate should *more and more* clearly manifest, as time goes on, the Will of God electing him for the Priesthood; and this manifestation should appear gradually more evident, not only to the candidate himself but also to his superiors (Rector, Prefects, Professors, Spiritual Director and regular Confessor) qualified for their respective offices and approved by the Bishop to represent him for such delicate task of discerning and fostering the genuine priestly vocation of the seminarians. Hence, if at any time, either the candidate himself with the advice of the superiors, or the superiors through their own prudent judgment come to the conclusion that a vocation does not exist that is, that the "manifestation of God's Will" apparently shows that God calls the candidate for another way of life, then there should be no hesitation, as Pius XI says, to diminish to unsuited and unworthy, without any regard to human considerations, of their obligation to retire while yet there is time. Bishops and religious superiors should not be deterred from this needful severity by fear of diminishing the number of priests for the diocese or institute. The Angelic Doctor, St. Thomas, long ago proposed this difficulty, and answers it with his usual lucidity and wisdom: "God never abandons His Church; and so the number of priests will always be sufficient for the needs of the faithful, provided the worthy are advanced and the unworthy sent away." The Doctor and Saint, basing himself upon the severe words of the Fourth Ecumenical Council of the Lateran,¹⁹ observes: "Should it ever become impossible to maintain the present number, it is better to have a few good priests than a multitude of bad ones. One well-trained priest is worth more than many trained badly or scarcely at all; for such would be not merely unreliable but a likely source of sorrow to the Church."²⁰

At the time of the reception of Sacred Orders, the divine vocation must finally be completed. The candidate, having obtained the approval of all his superiors in the external and internal forum, *freely* and *spontaneously* presents his petition for admission to the Sacred Orders, swearing under oath, and fully aware of all its implications, that "he experiences and feels that he is truly called by God".²¹ The Bishop then at the

¹⁹ Conc. Lat. IV ann 1215, can. 22.

²⁰ Pius XI, op. cit.

²¹ Cf. AAS, XXXII, 1931, p. 127.

Ordination invites him to make a final decision for life. If the candidate then freely and conscientiously accepts this final invitation of the Church, then the Priestly Vocation is at last *fully achieved*, finally complete, and *absolutely certain*. The candidate's *free acceptance* of the *invitatory call* made lawfully by the *legitimate* ministers of the Church is the ultimate *manifestation of the Divine Will* electing him to the *priesthood*. Such is the history of my authentic priestly Vocation.

Now that we understand a little more the wonderful and mysterious days of God in "calling those whom it pleased Him to call" (cf. Mk. 3, 13; Jn. 15, 16), let us strive to study and look for means to let His Voice be heard amidst the mad bustle and din of our modern world, so as "to increase the ranks of strong and zealous workers in the vineyard of the Lord"; the more so, as the moral need of society are growing greater instead of less. Of all the means to this noble end, the easiest and most effective is prayer. This, moreover, is a means within the power of everyone. It should be assiduously used by all, as it was enjoined by Jesus Christ Himself: "The harvest indeed is abundant but the laborers are few. Pray therefore the Lord of the Harvest to send forth laborers into his harvest" (Mt. 9, 37, 38). "Ask and it shall be given you" (Mt. 7, 7); ask for good and holy priests and Our Lord will not refuse to send them to His Church, as ever He has done throughout the centuries."²²

²² Pius XI, *op. cit.*

"It is the bishop's duty to make his people active in promoting vocations and see to it that all vocational resources and activities are closely coordinated. As a father he should make every sacrifice to help those whom he judges to be called to the Lord's service." (Decree on Priestly Formation, no. 2)