Pastor's Pen: A Matter of Survival: Vocations

The second of the three things I wish for us to work on this year is the idea of vocations. Vocation, from a spiritual standpoint, in the manner in which each of us is called by God to serve the Body of Christ. For the overwhelming number of Catholics, that will be as those who are married. For small groups it will be as priests or consecrated religious members. All start as single, some stay there. All four are important to the life of the Church and the life of our parishes. I find that when treading into the issue of vocations, I have to dispel myths and misunderstandings.

First misunderstanding is vocations solely mean priesthood and the professed religious life. In my first paragraph, I wrote that the dominant vocation is marriage and family life. Matrimony is a vocation and a sacrament. A good marriage points to the union between Christ and His Church. Like that union, it bears fruit. That fruit is not merely children, but how that couple helps in the mission of the Church to bring souls to Christ. It is not a de facto vocation. It is not the vocation one is called to unless an angelic choir or divine vision points otherwise. It is a vocation that the Church has always held in high esteem. It is a vocation the Church has always been protective of in her theology. The family is the most essential building block of every entity it belongs to. Marriage is not divorced from the mission of the Church and is the primary incubator of the faith. Marriage is not a matter of convenience between two people, but a sacred bond.

All of this said, marriage has been redefined in our society to mean something quite different. We have done a poor job of maintaining the dignity and integrity of marriage. That needs to change. Before someone thinks that means going after the other definitions of marriage, I think it well to concentrate within our own what Christ intends for marriage and how that is lived out. It is hypocritical to judge how others treat marriage if we do not respect the sacrament ourselves. I would rather we go the positive way in bolstering in our families the dignity of marriage and family life. Part of what our vocation team will be working on this year is ways of bolstering positively by marriage and its role within the parish and the Body of Christ.

The second misunderstanding is that vocations limit us in what we can do. A vocation is meant to focus us on what can be done. A vocation is our living God's will in such a way and giving true witness to the power of Christ and His Gospel. Let's be honest, more often than not when a vocation is seen as limiting us, it is the terms of human sexuality and family. Marriage 'limits' us to one spouse, which the world in its perversion sees as oppressive. Priesthood and professed religious life is seen as even more constraining as our physical sexual abilities are altogether restrained as a sign of the absolute union of heaven, a place that tells us people are not married nor given in marriage; celibacy is an outward sign of hope in what lies ahead. The witness of celibacy is seen as unnecessary in modern society and its hyper-sexualization of the human person as if the human person is just another animal with no manner of self-control. Both marriage and priesthood/ professed religious lives utilize the virtue of chastity in a way proper to their state as a way of sacramentally pointing in hope to what lies ahead.

The next myth is the purpose of seminary and the preliminary steps of religious life. It flows from our misconceived and detrimental understanding that education's sole purpose is to get a job. Formation is convents, monasteries, and seminaries is more of the classical understanding of the purpose of education and formation. I have come across this stumbling block more times than I can count. Young people believe erroneously that they must be convinced that God is calling them to priesthood or religious life before they approach a priest, diocese, or religious order. One of the purposes of a seminary or convent/monastery is to help the individual discern if indeed God is calling them to such a state in life. Many tell me that this approach can be a waste of time if the person isn't called. How short sighted and foolish. How is trying to find one's vocational call a waste of time?

Our mistaken ideas of what we mean by vocation and allowing the worldly definition that regulates a vocation to a role or job. A vocation is not a career or job. I , for example, do not get paid for being a priest, I get paid for being a pastor. The two roles are not synonymous. A married person isn't paid for being a husband or wife, a mom or a dad, but has a job that pays. Recapturing what is truly meant by vocation is necessary for our long term survival. Healthy and Godly marriages and families are absolutely critical for our parishes. We need priests, deacons, and professed religious in fully living out what we are and what we can do as a parish.

To that end, our joint parochial vocation team will look at ways we can help foster this understanding. We will build on what we already do. Since I have been pastor, at all weekend Masses we have prayed for vocation to the priesthood and religious life AND for those called to marriage or who are married. Starting in January, we will bring back the blessing of married couples on the second weekend of the month. Our parishes have adopted two of our current seminarians (IC has Bryce Smith and St Mary has Luke Dalton) and we will highlight praying for them and other ways of support. I am asking our vocation team to find one thing additional to do to raise awareness for both priesthood/diaconate/ religious life and for marriage. There is much to be done.

We must stop allowing the world to define what we should believe. As followers of Jesus Christ, we follow His teachings. Allowing the world to define our vocations has caused grave damage. Yes, we have had many scandals in our Church. Those scandals were instigated by decade upon decade of a total misunderstanding of the role of the vocations. Seminaries, monasteries, and convents were never meant to be the island of misfit toys where we dumped the oddballs (and I am not saying all who went were). Marriage was never meant to be a rite of passage and adulthood. It was never meant to be a right that afforded a person to have sex without shame. The vocation is so much deeper.

Let us spend part of this Jubilee Year of Hope allowing what vocations truly mean and to be lived as ways that point to Christ. Let us root out the myths and misunderstandings so that we and our children may more easily pursue and live whatever vocation God has planned for them.