

Vocation: Revealed and Given

A Year-Long Focus: Vocation within the Universal Call to Holiness

Beginning this week, Father Val and I are preaching a five-part homily series in line with our parish family's theme for the year: the universal call to holiness. The universal call to holiness means that every person is called to sanctity—to be a saint. By God's grace, in this life we are capable of becoming great saints; no one is excluded.

Holiness looks like what John the Baptist does in today's first reading: our life points to Jesus in all aspects. The fundamental attitude is that my life is not about me; it is about the Lord. That is where holiness starts.

In this series we are focusing on vocation as a primary way we live out the universal call to holiness. How many of you have a vocation? Every one of us does. A vocation is a calling from God. It does not mean only priesthood or even necessarily marriage. Every person—including those single for their entire life—has a vocation, a particular way of being “wired” through which God brings about holiness and good for the whole Body, the Church.

Our first reading speaks of being formed as a servant from the womb, and our psalm gives the right response: “Here I am, Lord; I come to do your will.” This series will primarily address marriage—not discerning whom to marry if you are already married, but how to live that vocation. The same principles apply to priests, deacons, students, youth, and widows; you can translate the applications to your own state of life even if many examples are marriage-heavy.

Why address this now? As I noted in my last pastor's column, there has been a precipitous decline in the number of Catholics seeking sacramental marriage. It is a real crisis. In Western Washington, even among those raised in the Church—Sunday Mass, Confirmation, First Communion, years of Catholic education—many are not seeking Catholic marriage. There is a disconnect around vocation. Also, our parish family (Holy Family and St. John Vianney—patron of priests) can be said, more than most, to be a patron parish family of vocations. We will not analyze all the sociological causes for the current situation. Rather, we will teach into vocation itself and how, as individuals and as a community, we can live our vocations with understanding—and become attractive witnesses to sacramental vocations.

One cultural disconnect we must name is this false proposition: happiness can be had on my terms, without self-control, without generosity, through self-centered living, and without God and the sacraments. That is a lie. By contrast, a vocation is God's calling.

Revealed and Given: What Vocation Is (and Isn't)

A vocation is revealed and given. It is not self-created or earned. It is God’s initiative and a gift, discovered by us. Where this meets daily life is that God sanctifies people through the holy commitments they have made—commitments He blesses, and in the case of marriage, has sacramentally sealed.

This also applies to “lowercase-v” vocations: student, widow, nurse, teacher—any helping profession. God sanctifies you through the holy commitment you have made to serve His people. We will focus chiefly on marriage, but God is intimately involved in every true vocation for our sanctification.

Across the next four weeks we will look at marriage, especially the many ways a vocation is about self-gift. For now, the key point is that vocation is not something I invent; it is God’s initiative that I discover.

Vocation is connected to a holy desire placed in the heart—often present from the age of reason. That holy desire can be masked by surface-level realities: felt needs, counterfeit aspirations, and disordered desires. These sit on top of the deeper desire. By way of example, when God called me to the priesthood (June 30, 2003, around 11:00 a.m.), I was not thinking of priesthood. The call caught me off guard and conflicted with my plans. At first there was turmoil because my felt needs, counterfeit aspirations, and disordered desires covered the true desire. When I finally said yes—even hesitantly and a bit begrudgingly—everything shifted. Joy came, together with an expectation of fulfillment. The holy desire had been there from the beginning; my “other stuff” had been sitting on top of it. In marriage, too, aiming at true fulfillment unlocks joy.

Within marriage, the covenant leads to your fulfillment. (The same holds in priesthood.) But fulfillment is not the same as having my felt needs met. Your spouse does not principally exist to fulfill your needs. Fulfillment comes in learning to give oneself in love. “It is in giving that we receive.” In Christ, self-gift becomes the sacramental instrument of holiness—not just for you, but for your spouse. Fulfillment comes by participating in His self-gift so that both spouses grow in holiness.

Practical Application: This Week’s Homework

Vocation is dynamic, not static. The question is not “Whom should I have married?” but “What is God’s initiative in our marriage right now?” There is always a new initiative by which He grows us in holiness. Seek it daily.

Homework for married couples this week: pray together and ask, “Lord, what are You calling us to as a couple regarding more intentional quality time—weekly or monthly?” Not

“What do I want?” but “What do You want?” If you are not married, ask, “Lord, what are You inviting me to with You—daily or weekly—to spend more quality time together?”

As we continue this Eucharist and baptize these four beautiful babies today, let us ask for grace to live our universal call to holiness in the vocation He gives.

Praise be Jesus Christ.