

## **Review: Vocation, Fulfillment, and Stability**

As most of you are aware, we're in week four of five in the middle of a homily series. This year, we've been focusing on the universal call to holiness; in this homily series, on vocation.

So just a quick reminder of where we've been. In the first week, Father Val and I emphasized that the first thing about a calling is just that: it is a calling. It's from God. It's not something we create or make up or try to figure out. It is something that comes on God's initiative. That's the main thing about vocation. It's not simply a job. It's God's calling upon my life.

In that same homily, I emphasized—and then hit in review two weeks ago here—that our fulfillment in this life is very much connected with our vocation. Our fulfillment is absolutely connected with our vocation. Our fulfillment, however, is not based upon having my needs met. That's not what gives fulfillment. Rather, fulfillment comes within our vocation by being a blessing to others. That's the key. That's how we actually experience fulfillment in this life: when our life is a blessing for other people.

In the second week, then, Father Val and I emphasized the communal nature of this: vocations are highly relational. That sounds really obvious, but it's important to get it, because a lot of times even our vocation-things can begin to feel kind of transactional. Instead of gift of self, it's more like, "You do this, I do that." No one knowingly goes into their vocation that way, but it can end that way. We emphasized that this communion of husband and wife especially, this communion of family life especially, connects with this communion—meaning this Holy Communion. Each family in a given parish community is a blessing to others within their vocation and everyone here. It all connects together in the celebration of the Eucharist.

Last week, we talked about the importance of commitment within vocation, whether priesthood or marriage: that commitment leads to stability, and that stability is very important. If I'm confident that just when things are bad, you're not going to leave; if you're confident that your spouse isn't going to leave; if your kids are confident in your love for them being mostly unconditional—being, hopefully, unconditional—then that provides stability.

That stability is really important. It is not an end in itself. I emphasized last week, and so I'll bring it up here whether or not you were here or there last week: the wisdom of this is that stability leads to security. We mean that in the very emotional sense of feeling secure. Security then can lead to maturity, and that is the cultivation of virtue. If you're insecure, you're never going to become advanced in maturity—emotionally or spiritually mature. It

doesn't happen. That insecurity absolutely causes a basis of immaturity in a lot of different ways.

So, one more time: security leads to maturity, and maturity is the basis of purity. Purity is disinterested love. That's pure love. Jesus got nothing back in the Crucifixion, giving His life for us. There was nothing self-focused in His love. So purity—pure love—is that ability to love as Jesus loves. It's a synonym for holiness: "Blessed are the pure of heart, for they will see God." So that's the review, because holiness is what we're going for.

### **Sacramental Grace and the Eternal Life of Others**

The theme for this fourth of five weeks in our vocation series has to do with grace: the particular way that God works through these sacraments.

To get at this, I want to say that I think the primary reason Jesus made both Holy Orders and Matrimony two of the seven sacraments, and why they are so important, is because in both of these vocations the commitment made connects you with the eternal life of other people. I'll say that again: these vocations are so important that they warrant being raised to the level of sacraments because both of them directly connect a person to the eternal life of other people.

As a priest, you belong to me, and I have a role in getting you to eternal life. In the vocation of marriage, your principal aim as a spouse is to get both yourself and your spouse to eternal life. In the case of children, you have a very particular role, especially in the formation of your children, so that they are put on the road to eternal life. That's why these are raised to the level of sacraments: because it's so important. It's not just about your eternal life. It is connected with the salvation of other people. And of course, in parenting you do the best you can, hopefully, and then kids go off and are free. But the foundational role that you did is still worthy of the sacrament.

Now, the grace of marriage, as we call it, is a particular grace you receive within marriage in which Christ gives you the capacity—and I say capacity because this doesn't happen automatically. Grace requires cooperation. God doesn't force Himself on us. He is simply a giver of good gifts, and then we are free to do what we want.

Marriage gives a capacity, in a particular way, to love your spouse and your children with Christlike love. Those Catholics who skip the Sacrament of Matrimony do not get this. They literally do not receive the grace to be able to love their spouse as Christ loves them, because it comes through the sacrament. It's a particular grace to love one's spouse with a supernatural love and to love one's children with supernatural love. But we have to cooperate with that grace for it to work.

That supernatural love ends up having supernatural effects as well—effects you will never see, the beautiful multiplier that the Lord puts in there for you. It also enables just the day-to-day stuff you do in marriage, the day-to-day duties.

All the way back to Genesis, God blessed marriage. “It is not good for man to be alone.” Adam says, “At last, this one is bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh.” God already made it sacred by blessing it and telling Adam and Eve to be fruitful and multiply. God blessed marriage from the very beginning, but then it was raised up into a sacrament once Christ came. That means that the day-to-day interactions you do as a spouse and as a parent, especially when you’re not being transactional, have supernatural effects. That’s the logic here.

### **Heroic Love in Marriage and Holy Orders**

I was going to give two examples, both of marriage and orders, but I realized that it was going to be too long. So one example of how this works heroically: Servant of God Élisabeth Leseur lived around the turn of the last century, the end of the 1800s and beginning of the 1900s. She came from a very wealthy family, was well educated, and she and her husband moved in the highest circles of society. Her husband, Félix, although he was a baptized Catholic, was an avowed atheist when they met.

Although Félix promised to respect Élisabeth’s religious practice, he really didn’t. He didn’t prevent her from going to church, but he made fun of her and even mocked her. He was part of a high society in Paris, kind of an intellectual elite, where they were all professed atheists. They got together and tried to figure out how to do away with the influence of the Church. So he was really that far out.

Élisabeth’s life, when she was a teenager and earlier in marriage: she loved the Lord. God was number one for her. But there wasn’t anything, let’s say, really special about her at this point. But as she continued in her marriage, think about it this way in terms of the sacrament really quick before we go any further. Because they were both baptized, it was a sacrament. They made consent, but Élisabeth was the only one benefiting from the sacrament. Her husband almost undoubtedly was in mortal sin, and so the sacrament didn’t function from his side. But the sacrament doesn’t function as though the other spouse has to be in lockstep. No, the sacrament was active and working on Élisabeth’s side of it.

That’s important to be said for those of you who are maybe unequally yoked, or if you have a spouse who is really non-religious. The sacrament still works from your side.

Élisabeth, in all of this, continued to try to love him well and to bear wrongs patiently. She was very involved in the St. Vincent de Paul Society and other things like that. As she got a little bit older in her marriage, the Lord really started doing deeper things and calling her to much deeper conversion. In her sickness—she became sick in her late thirties—the Lord really began to bring her to a high level of perfection. She loved her husband really well in spite of everything. The sacrament was working from her side. We see that in her writings.

Now, the amazing thing about this—nothing is amazing for God—is that Félix remained very much an atheist at the time of her death. But he found her diary after her death, and in reading her writings in terms of her faith life, he was massively converted back to the faith. In fact, he discerned a call to the priesthood and ended up becoming a Dominican father. That is the power of the sacrament working from only one side.

We are called to heroism, and that is capable only because of grace. Grace requires cooperation. Élisabeth's marriage is no different than the sacrament you have received if you're sacramentally married.

Briefly on Holy Orders: the grace proper to Holy Orders, the principal grace given, is called pastoral charity. Pastoral charity gives an ordained priest the ability—again, the ability, not necessarily the actuality, because grace requires cooperation on this end too—to love his people with Christlike love. So it's very similar to Matrimony: to love your spouse and your kids with heroic love through the sacrament. Holy Orders gives the ability to love one's flock through the heart of the Shepherd.

From your end, you may not experience this much because a lot of stuff unfortunately kind of is transactional. That's why I said I hate it when people say, "Thank you for your priesthood," when they just mean, "Thank you for giving me the sacraments." But Holy Orders gives the priest the ability to love his people with a sacrificial love like Christ loves. From your end, what this looks like is that you have access, through the priest, to the Shepherd's heart, specifically in the sacraments of Eucharist and Confession. You have access to the Shepherd's heart through your priest: to receive absolution in Reconciliation and to receive Him in Holy Communion.

From the priest's end, what this looks like—and I can tell you priests will tell you this in better moments—is a sense of participation in Christ's love. I can say that because there are definitely times where I feel a very fierce and tender love which is not my love. It is, in fact, the Lord giving me just a little insight into what His love is for this person in front of me, even if I don't really know them. It's actually a beautiful experience. So the ability to love with Christlike love is very similar.

What does that look like in an individual? It wasn't hard for me to pick who I was going to talk about to demonstrate it: St. John Vianney. As you probably know, St. John Vianney was sent to the town of Ars after he was newly ordained. As Father John went into this town of Ars, he found that people were extremely far away from the faith. He experienced isolation. He experienced mockery. He experienced resistance. He was accused of fanaticism. In all of that, in all the interior trials that he experienced as well, by virtue of the sacrament, he was able to love even the people who hated him. That type of love is supernatural. And it is through that supernatural love that St. John Vianney converted the town and brought people back to the faith, because he lived his vocation so well. He lived his sacrament so well that he was incredibly fruitful.

The most important thing here is that just as vocations are God's initiative, so too everything in terms of our vocation and the day-to-day working is also God's initiative. God is the one doing the work, but we have to cooperate.

Dear friends in Christ, we should want this. We should want to be able to love with heroic love. And through the sacrament, and through cooperation with it, it is possible by His grace.

So, time for your homework. The most important Church documents that have talked about marriage have also talked about the importance of the Sacrament of Penance and the Eucharist. You're here for Eucharist. Great. You need the Sacrament of Penance as well if you're going to grow in your vocation of marriage. I can tell you that. But then it's daily prayer. That's where the perseverance is needed. If we're not staying connected to the Lord on a daily basis through prayer, this won't work very well.

Your homework this week, whether you're married or not, is this: whatever prayer time you spend, increase it by 20% this week, to give the Lord a little bit more time. And it needs to be said again that prayer is way more than just praying for things. It's spending time with the Lord in silence and especially in Scripture. So your encouragement is: whatever prayer time you give on a daily basis, increase it by 20%. The exception is if you're praying less than five minutes a day, then you need to increase it by at least a minute—and maybe be bolder and increase it to five minutes.

Dear friends in Christ, as we celebrate the Eucharist, in which we are united to the Lord and receive graces that continue to enable us to live our sacrament, let us ask the Lord to continue to conform us to His heart so we may love the people He has placed in our life with Christ's love. Praise be Jesus Christ.