

Review: Vocation, Fulfillment, and Grace

As almost all of you are aware, we have come to the end of a five-part homily series on vocation. In the context of this entire year, we have been focusing on the universal call to holiness, which means, again, that each and every one of the baptized is capable, by God's grace, of becoming a great saint in this life.

So, just to review where we've been talking about vocation: in the first week, Father Val and I emphasized that a vocation is a divine calling, meaning it is something that God does. It's not something we make up or create on our own. It's all about God's initiative. Anything in the realm of grace, or anything that is of the Lord, is really on His initiative. We don't make this up. We discover what He has for us.

I mentioned in that homily, given in the first week, that our fulfillment is very much linked to our vocation. It is not entirely linked to it, but our fulfillment is very much, and largely, linked to our vocation. But that fulfillment is not about having our needs met. That's not where true fulfillment actually comes from. Rather, fulfillment comes from being a blessing to others. That's how we actually find fulfillment in this life—lasting fulfillment.

In the second week, then, we emphasized that a vocation is inherently relational. A vocation is for others. It's not really for me. It's an extension of the fact that it's not really about having my needs met. I emphasized in that homily especially that we need to really guard against our vocations becoming transactional, whether in terms of your marriage, parenting, or priesthood. It's all about relationship and communion: communion between husband and wife, communion with the larger circle of the family, and also communion at this altar.

All vocations are also pointed at the Church. We're called to be a blessing to others in the midst of this communion. And as Catholics, we are called not to let this become transactional: "It's all about me and Jesus. I need to come in, receive the Eucharist, and then I'm out of here." No, that's not really living in communion.

In the third week, we focused on the fact that vocations are based upon commitment, and in that commitment we find stability. Husband and wife have the stability of that promise, which is indissoluble; there is a security in that. In the commitment of parenthood, children feel secure in their parents' love. That's very important, because that commitment and stability leads to what we call security.

I mean security primarily in the emotional sense, though there are other facets of it spiritually as well. Emotional security is what gives us the ability, within stable, loving relationship with the Lord and with others, to develop maturity. So: security to maturity.

Maturity, then, is working on virtue. Maturity is being called out of ourselves to live into a greater sense of excellence—excellence in terms of our vocation and in every facet of our life.

If you're insecure emotionally, you will never be mature emotionally or spiritually. This thing builds on itself. Within maturity, as we develop virtue—as imperfectly as we do, but hopefully on an ongoing basis—that leads to purity.

What is purity? It's perfect self-giving love that is not self-referential or about what I get out of it. That's what purity is. That's probably the best analogy to holiness. "Blessed are the pure of heart, for they shall see God."

Then last week—and this is the last review, because this is week five—I focused on grace, and the grace that is proper to the Sacrament of Matrimony and the Sacrament of Holy Orders. That grace is a special gift or ability, through the sacrament, to love your spouse with that type of love. That's the grace proper to each sacrament: the grace to be able to love your spouse and your family, or the flock, with that type of pure, self-giving love.

We access that grace through the ordinary means of sacrament, this communion, and daily prayer. That's where we tap into the grace given us to live our vocation well.

I mentioned last week in my homily, at least, that I believe the reason Holy Orders and Matrimony—these jobs, though they're not really jobs—were raised to the level of sacrament is because in these two vocations uniquely, you become responsible for the eternal life of other people. I, as pastor, to the flock; you, to your spouse and your kids. You become responsible on some level. Not fully responsible, because people are free, but we become responsible, in a sense, as advocates for the eternal life of other people.

That's why it's so important, and why the Lord raised these to the level of sacrament. The horizon here is eternity. That's what we're looking at. We're not just looking at today. We should always keep a foot in today and a foot in eternity. This is all about eternal life, the salvation Jesus won for us, and His desire that we live into it—and hopefully live into it with the intensity of saintliness or holiness.

The Cross as the Means of Freedom

To get to part five, and the main part for today, I'm just going to remind you of something I said two weeks ago here. My thesis for that homily on commitment and stability was that marriage limits your freedom, but marriage also deepens your freedom. I'll say that again. Marriage does limit your freedom, but it also deepens your freedom in the truest sense.

Likewise, having kids limits your freedom. Parents, do you agree? But lived well, being a parent deepens your freedom.

Now we get to the main point of today. Part five, and the focus of today, is the cross. Every vocation contains within it the cross. The cross, in fact, is the means by which we ordinarily develop freedom.

Why do we need the cross? We have this thing called original sin. Although the guilt of original sin is dealt with in Baptism, the effects of original sin don't go away when we're baptized. What remains is what the Church calls concupiscence. Essentially, in lay terms, what that means is that we are hardwired to be narcissists. I'll say that again. Original sin essentially means that we are hardwired to be narcissists: everything is self-referential, the world revolves around me, my needs need to be met, and so on.

The cross is the most efficient means for us to overcome narcissism. We're called to holiness, and someone who is narcissistic can't become holy. I don't mean this in the psychological sense of a narcissistic disorder. I'm talking about the ordinary sense in which everything is self-referential and everything revolves around me. We're hardwired that way. To get out of that default factory setting, we need a solution, and it's the cross.

But as I say this, it's important to emphasize that Jesus is on that cross. There is always grace there. It's not, "Hey, you're a narcissist. Get over it." No. Jesus has compassion on us. He understands our hardwiring. Paul says He understands our weakness because He has been like us in every way but sin. He didn't have original sin, don't get me wrong.

Let me also say this clearly, because sometimes people think of the cross and they think only of physical suffering. That is one aspect of the cross that we experience; even really terrible physical suffering can happen. But the cross in the ordinary day-to-day is simply dying to oneself. It's getting out of that narcissism and choosing not the way that's most comfortable and easiest, but choosing the way that leads to excellence.

So sacrifice for us within our vocations is the normal mode of building virtue over comfort. That's what the cross is about. It's the normal mode of building virtue over comfort.

Again, it's important to say that we don't deal with the challenges we have, the failures we have, the setbacks, or even our own sinfulness alone. With Christ, all of those—even sinfulness—can be a place of grace, because God's grace works most effectively through weakness. Grace is made perfect in weakness. So we come to the Lord recognizing these places of challenge or sinfulness, and God's greater grace can work through that, even through our failures and sinfulness.

Sacrifice, Suffering, and the Blessing of Vocation

A quick differentiation is important. A sacrifice is something that is chosen, or it is something that is circumstantial. That latter one is more like suffering.

In the former case, the chosen one, a really ordinary circumstance: how many of you who have had kids, when they were infants and it was the third time they woke up crying, got up and said, “Yay, another chance to feed the baby”? That’s not how it usually works. But even that choice to get up—even though it’s an obligation—the obligations of parenthood can build virtue. Doing what you’re required to do by virtue of your vocation is, in fact, meritorious, no matter how you feel about it. We don’t usually feel good about sacrifices. Jesus didn’t feel good about this.

The other challenge of the cross is circumstantial. These are things we can’t control and do not choose. These are things like the unique challenges of personality, even between husband and wife. It’s the challenge of mental or physical illness. It’s the challenge of having a child with developmental disabilities or other really difficult challenges. It’s the challenge of the eventual death of a spouse.

I was talking to someone about celibacy recently, and I had to remark to them that actually more than 50% of everyone will be celibate. Those who choose not to marry, and those who lose their spouse, will experience celibacy.

On this note, Archbishop said something in a talk very soon after he arrived. It was at a vocation event, and it resonated with me. I think he’s probably right about it. He was talking about the two vocations and said that most people going into marriage go into marriage with all this excitement and looking at all the stuff they get by being married. Then, once they’re in marriage, they start to see all the crosses within it.

Whereas often, going into priesthood or religious life, a man or woman will look at everything they have to give up. But then, once they’re inside the vocation, they see just the immense blessings that are in it. There are blessings in both, of course, but I think Archbishop is right about that.

So to wrap it up: there are a myriad of challenges in marriage, in parenthood, and also in priesthood. But there are a myriad of blessings in all of them as well. What we are called to do is choose daily to be a blessing to others, to deny ourselves, to be non-transactional, to be grounded in prayer and sacrament, and to expect challenges—but to expect that with those challenges, a greater grace comes with it from the Lord.

We have to expect challenges and not be surprised by them, or by setbacks, but also know that we have access to grace within those challenges to surmount and even be

transformed through them. All of that will equal, the more we work at it, fulfillment, personal sanctification, and influence on others making it to heaven.

So that's the end of the catechesis.

I'm happy to announce that we are not leaving you couples with nothing to do with this moving forward. We have a next step for you. The last weekend of May this year—there are five weekends in May, so it's actually the weekend after Memorial Day, the 30th and the 31st—we'll be having what I think will be a very large marriage retreat here at Holy Family over the weekend. Look out for parish media for opportunities to register in the coming weeks. That will be a really good opportunity for couples to build on the foundation and work on those essentials that really lead to a thriving marriage.

If you're single, don't worry. We're not leaving you out of this thing. We'll also be putting in parish media very soon a Eucharistic Congress that is taking place in May at the Meydenbauer Center, and we have some national speakers, including Chris Stefanick, coming. That should be a really good opportunity. So if you're single, don't feel like you're being left out. There's also a conference for you coming here to Bellevue that we're co-sponsoring in May.

Final point: your homework. Lent is coming on Wednesday, as most of you know. The homework is to consider—if you're a married couple or a married person—a resolution that is connected to your vocation. You may have other things already decided for Lent, but maybe think about something even small that you might choose as a Lenten resolution connected to your marriage. You can do this individually or together as a couple. You don't have to both decide the same thing. Even if your spouse isn't participating, you can choose something in terms of your approach to that sacrament.

Single people, your homework is almost the same. Your homework is to consider a resolution connected to your Lent that is directly connected to being a blessing to others.

So dear friends in Christ, as we conclude this homily series and as we prepare to enter the holy season of Lent, let us ask the Lord to give us the humility to seek grace and the knowledge of His love, so that we may live in that love and be a blessing to others. Praise be Jesus Christ.