

INTRODUCTION

In speaking to a group of priests, a wise bishop shared that a survey concerning religious vocations had recently been conducted at the Catholic university in his diocese. One of the questions on the survey asked college students to offer their reasons for not considering a vocation to the priesthood or religious life. With a bit of surprise and excitement, the bishop told the priests that the most common response reported from the students to that question was that they had never been invited to consider it; their greatest reason for not considering a religious vocation was that they had never been asked! The group of priests was pleased to see the bishop's excitement, but they were actually not surprised at all by what the bishop had discovered; the priests were vocation directors.

Vocation directors know what surveys tell us again and again.

- **Fact #1:** The main reason young people do not consider the priesthood is because they have never been personally asked.
- **Fact #2:** Men first consider the priesthood because a priest encouraged them to consider it. Year after year, in surveys of classes of ordination, 80 percent-88 percent of the men consistently report that it was a priest who invited them to consider the priesthood. Jesus calls men to the seminary and priesthood through a priest's personal invitation encouraging them to consider it.
- **Fact #3:** The great majority of priests do not encourage men to consider a vocation to the priesthood. Surveys consistently show that only about 30 percent of priests actively invite men to consider the priesthood.

Considering these facts, one can draw a clear conclusion: one of the significant reasons for the priestly vocation shortage is that priests are not inviting enough men to consider the priesthood. Imagine if just two out of three priests personally invited men to consider the priesthood, the number of men in seminary formation would significantly increase. Jesus calls men to the priesthood through priests. As St. John Chrysostom said about the apostles, the first priests, "To so great a promise they trusted, and believed that they should catch others by those same words by which they themselves had been caught." Jesus needs priests to lend him their voice, and sometimes they need to be assisted in knowing how to effectively do that.

Thus, the reason for this booklet. It was written for priests. It was written to help priests effectively identify chosen men and to effectively call them. It was written to illustrate to priests how they interiorly and practically lend their voice to Jesus, so that he can call forth his chosen men to the priesthood through them. In other words, it was written to increase priests' confidence in their knowledge and ability to be fishers of men.

There are many reasons given by priests for not inviting men to consider the priesthood: the fear of rejection, the lack of confidence, a lack of practical



Dyck, Sir Anthony van
Crucifixion

knowledge of how to effectively call men forth, insecurity due to the abuse scandal and many other things. Helping priests move beyond these obstacles is the hope behind this booklet.

The booklet begins with two true stories¹ of young men being called by Jesus: one was called through his biological father, the other through his pastor. While this booklet was written for priests to embrace and live Christ's mission to call forth men, the story of the young man who was called by his biological father was included for three reasons: first, it illustrates well the lessons for being an effective fisher of men; second, it shows the great role that a parent could play in his son's priestly call; third, in the case that laymen may read this booklet, it offers a personal connection to them.

But this booklet is for priests. It was written for priests to help priests carry out Jesus' mission to priests. There

was a time when it was common for religious sisters teaching in Catholic schools to invite young men to consider the priesthood; there was a time when fathers, like the one in the story below, invited their sons to consider the priesthood. Those times are all but over. If priests do not lend their voice to Christ to call forth men to the priesthood, then, in many cases, it will not happen. Furthermore, experience shows that Jesus' authority and power to call forth men to the priesthood reside most effectively in his priests.

After the introductory stories, the booklet offers seven lessons illustrating how a priest can effectively identify chosen men and lend his voice to Jesus, so that Jesus can call forth a man in a way the man can hear and respond. Each lesson ends with reflection questions, a word of encouragement and a passage from Scripture. The endings were done with the hope that the booklet could be read prayerfully. So, I recommend that you read it with the approach of *lectio divina*, paying attention to where you experience resistance or consolation, relating all of it to the Lord, allowing him to encourage you. I pray that you will find it helpful.

May this booklet help us heed the words of Pope John Paul II from his address for the World Day of Prayer for Vocations in 1993: "I turn, finally, to you who are already consecrated to the Lord and, in a special way, to you priests: you have already heard and recognized the call of the Good Shepherd; *lend your own voice to him* who today still calls many to follow him. Speak to your young people, letting them hear about the beauty of following the Lord, and accompany them along the paths of life, which at times can be full of difficulties. Above all, witness with your life to the joy of being in the Lord's service."

“I see in you...”

John is in his senior year of college; he is an engineering student. The thought of the priesthood has been on his mind, almost daily, for a few years. Because the thoughts cause fear and confusion, his response is to run from them, to distract himself from them.

Watching John read at Mass and knowing his interest in the faith, John’s father has felt for some time that his son would be a good candidate for the seminary. John returns home from college for the spring semester break. On that Sunday, the family drives nine miles to their small country parish to attend Mass. Due to the size of the family, they must go in two cars. After Mass, while John remains in church, his father sends the rest of the family home in one car, so that he and John can ride home together in the other. When John exits the church, he is surprised to see only his father waiting in the car for him. He concludes that his father has arranged this. Although he does not know the reason, he knows that it must be for something important.

As they make the return trip to their farm, they make small talk about the weather and the neighbors. When they are within a mile of home, his father drives more slowly, he looks John in the eye and, with a voice filled with heartfelt care, says these simple words, “Son, the qualities I admire in priests, I see in you. And I want you to know that I would be honored, if God would choose one of my sons to be a priest.” He said nothing more than that; he did not need to. His father’s words claimed the attention of John’s heart and confirmed the thoughts in his mind.

His father’s words caused him to consider with a heightened seriousness the possibility that the thoughts in his mind were not being made up by him, but were from God. Over the next few months, when the thoughts came to him, they had a greater credibility than before. Eventually, he began to speak to God about his desires. He began to tell God what he was thinking and feeling and wanting. Then, on one particular night, as he anxiously laid in bed reading, filled again with these thoughts of the seminary and priesthood, a consoling thought came to his mind, “God would not want something for me unless it was good for me.” So, he made an act of trust in the goodness of God for him. His mind became still and his inside became quiet.

A couple of months later, John called the vocation director and began applying for the seminary. He is now a priest.



Juanes, Juan de
The Last Supper

“I have noticed that you have a real love for the Eucharist...”

Felipe was a practicing Catholic and enjoyed helping out at his local parish. He even spent a few years doing missionary work. It never, however, occurred to him that he might be called to the priesthood. He was simply moving through life, looking for a place that fit.

After moving to a new city and establishing himself, he got involved at his parish and began helping with various ministries and activities. One activity stood out from all the others: helping organize and run a weekly event of Mass and adoration. It began on Friday at 7 p.m. with Mass and continued for a few hours with adoration. It concluded with Saturday Mass at midnight. Father Rossi came each week, offered Mass, began adoration, heard confessions and celebrated Mass again at midnight. Father was not the vocation director, just a simple priest who loved to bring Jesus to others and others to Jesus. He appreciated Felipe’s help in organizing and running the event. The more he got to know Felipe, the more Father Rossi began to think Felipe might have a vocation to the priesthood. He saw the movement of the Holy Spirit in his life and the beginnings of a priestly heart. So, he prayed for him, offering Felipe to the Lord during adoration.

After months of having this weekly event, Father Rossi began thinking that he ought to mention something to Felipe. So, one Friday evening he took Felipe aside and simply said, “I have noticed that you have a real love for the Eucharist.” “Of course, Father!” Felipe said, rather surprised, “the Eucharist is the most important gift we have.”

“That is true, Felipe. But not many men, not even faith-filled Catholic men, see that truth as clearly and appreciate that gift as dearly as you do. Perhaps, you ought to consider that you have been chosen to be a priest,” said Father Rossi.

That simple and direct invitation changed things for Felipe. His mind began to be filled with thoughts about becoming a priest. Just two weeks later, in the silence of daily prayer, Felipe experienced the Lord calling him in a consoling, personal and clear way. Jesus was inviting Felipe to discern a vocation to the priesthood. After a couple months, Felipe called the vocation director. Within a short time, he applied for the seminary. He is now a vocation director in an archdiocese.

The simple invitation by Father Rossi opened up Felipe’s imagination, mind and heart, enabling him, for the first time, to consider and receive Jesus’ invitation to be a priest. And Jesus rushed through that opening. For Felipe, Father Rossi’s simple and gentle invitation was a prophetic and powerful voice, which prepared the way for Lord.

How did Jesus call you to the seminary? Who was the person(s) who offered their voice to Christ to call you forth to the priesthood?

I encourage you to reflect on the beauty of Jesus’ mysterious call to you through them.

²“The word of the Lord came to me thus: Before I formed you in the womb I knew you; before you were born I dedicated you, a prophet to the nations I appointed you. ‘Ah, Lord God!’ I said, ‘I know not how to speak; I am too young.’

But the Lord answered me, say not, ‘I am too young.’ To whomever I send you, you shall go; whatever I command you, you shall speak. Have no fear before them, because I am with you to deliver you, says the Lord.

Then the Lord extended his hand and touched my mouth, saying, ‘See, I place my words in your mouth!’” (Jeremiah 1:4-9)