

Dating is to Marriage What Seminary is to Priesthood

by Rev. Brian G. Bashista

Our ultimate goal in life is to get to heaven, to become a saint. This call or invitation by God to be united with Him and one another forever in paradise is a universal call. However the way we live out this universal call is not universal. It varies according to the specific purpose or mission for which God has created each of us. This mission, simply put, is our vocation. Often youth have never heard the word vocation or if they have they are confused or fearful of it. What's important to teach is that each person has been called to a special and unique mission by God. Therefore the purpose of any vocation, married life, priesthood, consecrated life, permanent diaconate or a dedicated or consecrated single life, is to assist us on our journey to heaven, as well as enable us to be instruments of God's grace leading others there as well. Youth ministers that work with young people on a regular basis are often those instruments of God's grace, those who will journey with teens and help them to unfold and understand their mission; their vocation in life.

As the diocesan director of the Office of Vocations, many young people will ask me, "Does God really have a personal, specific vocation in life for me?" St. Paul gives us the answer in his letter to the Ephesians, "[E]ven as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before Him. He destined us in love to be His sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of His will, to the praise of His glorious grace which He freely bestowed on us in the Beloved." (Eph 1:4-6).

Christ has called us all by name, our first name in fact, at our baptism to share His life, to share His mission of salvation. Therefore we all have a vocation. We are all called in some way to play a role in salvation history for love of Christ and His people. All vocations are therefore rooted in love because they are rooted in Christ. This is the essential first truth to be taught to young people when speaking about vocations. This love is sacrificial and selfless, in other words, it is Christ-like and other-directed. Pope St. John Paul the Great, once wrote, "Love is not a feeling, it is an act of the will that consists, of preferring in a constant manner, the good of others to the good of oneself." Young people today constantly see the contradiction in our society of self-love; therefore, it can never be expressed enough that love is not a feeling but rather it is a self-less act for the good of another.

The Life He has Chosen for Us

A vocation is a life of love in a concrete and particular form because authentic love is always concrete and particular. It is never sentimental or nebulous. A vocation begins with Christ's total gift of Himself to us and is then realized in our response to His gift, namely our total gift of ourselves to Him for the sake of others. A vocation is the concrete life He has chosen for us and for which He has specifically created us. Therefore we cannot choose our vocation but rather, we discover it. "You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit" (Jn 15:16). Love is not chosen; it is discovered and responded to. Young people desire to know that they have something specific to offer so when speaking about vocations with young people it is important to emphasize the uniqueness of the gift of vocation each person is called to. It is also important to discuss how one discovers a vocation and the necessary openness required to accept God's will in their lives. Properly speaking, someone does not choose another to marry but discovers, with the other, a mutually shared Christ-centered love that eventually leads to an invitation to enter sacramental marital love. The same is true for priesthood — one does not choose to become a priest, he discovers with and through the Church, Christ's invitation to be one of His priests. The freedom that is absolutely necessary to enter a vocation is not rooted in a choice, but in a response, a response to an invitation. We can choose an occupation or a career, but a vocation is

not an occupation or a career. Young people often do not understand this distinction right away. A good example to use when explaining the difference is that a priest or sister does not live out his or her vocation from 9 to 5 anymore than a husband or wife or mother or father lives theirs 9 to 5. They all do so 24/7, always and everywhere. A career is primarily “what I do”; a vocation is “who I am” in Christ in relation to the “other” I am called to love.

All vocations involve some form of being “wedded” to another. This union involves the offering of mutual love and support, which then is open to bringing forth new life. You can share with young people that for most men this wedded life will be freely entered into with a wife through the beautiful sacrament of marriage and the openness to father children through the order of nature. For other men, those who are called to be priests, this wedded life will be freely entered into with a “Supernatural Wife,” the Church — his Spiritual Bride with whom he will father new sacramental life or supernatural children through the order of grace. It is vital that we discover our vocations. Our fulfillment, our blessedness, our salvation and more importantly the salvation of others depend upon our acceptance of the mission, the vocation that Christ invites us to embrace.

Discovering a Vocation

As youth ministers, the question for those in our ministry is how do you help young people to discover their vocation? The first step is to encourage them to talk to the One who created us. The first step is for them to pray, to talk and more importantly, to listen to God. The second, like the first, is for them to talk to others. Youth ministers can foster this communication by bringing in representatives of all vocations to talk and share with their teens. Those called to the married life will talk to others, so too do those called to the priesthood. This is one of the major reasons why my office exists — to talk and to listen. If fear is keeping a young person from talking to a priest when they feel God is calling them to the priesthood, perhaps the following could be shared with them. Many men who meet with me never take the step to enter the seminary. For some, this is a realization they come to, for others it is the Church’s realization. The seminary application process is much more rigorous than many realize. Our diocesan application itself is 28 pages long. It includes a physical examination and psychological evaluation, as well as a criminal history and sex offender record check. We ask for eight letters of reference, including one from their pastor, professor, friend, sibling and parents. The applicants must write a 10-plus page autobiography and essays answering two questions: “What does the priesthood mean to me?” and “Why I think the Lord is calling me to the priesthood?” School transcripts and sacramental records are additional required documentation.

Praying, talking and listening to God and others are essential to discover a vocation; however, if someone simply does these alone they will never ultimately come to realize their true calling. They must act. Once someone has sensed that God might be calling them to this vocation or the other, they must act upon these inspirations. Rather than resist the promptings, they should move toward and act upon them. They should place these thoughts before the “other” to see if they are mutually shared. Youth ministers, again, can be instrumental at building confidence and offering support to a young person who may need a little push in taking a step forward in discernment. Someone who feels called to marriage can pray and talk about this all they want, but never come close to getting married. They must act upon the promptings they received in prayer and as a result of conversations. They must date and get to know the other, and the other must get to know them. This is also true for someone who feels prompted to explore the possibility of a call to the priesthood. He can pray and have numerous conversations with others but never come close to taking the first step to act upon these promptings by applying to enter the seminary. In fact a man who enters the seminary has no firm idea that he is called the priesthood, just that he senses that he

might be. On the flip side, he is not being accepted by the bishop to enter the seminary to definitively become a priest, just that the bishop senses that he might be.

It is as unrealistic for someone to be certain they will marry someone before they date them as it is for someone to be certain they are called to the priesthood before they enter the seminary.

Dating is to marriage what seminary is to priesthood. Both are a type of courtship that leads to the discovery of where someone is truly called, or not called. People who are called to marriage typically date several people before they discover the one to whom they are called to marry. So too, some men date and then enter the seminary only to discover after some time that they are not called by God to be a priest. After leaving the seminary they may again date and ultimately get married. It is essential that youth ministers communicate to young people that this discovery or discernment is a process of getting to know the other and responding positively to the love Christ is calling them to share. For the future priest, this “spiritual courtship,” while in seminary, takes a minimum of six years after an undergraduate college degree. This is much longer than most experience in a dating relationship that can ultimately lead to the discovery of a vocation to marriage. In conclusion, all youth ministry leaders play a critical role in developing and fostering an atmosphere for youth that teaches them to pray, listen, be confident, to act upon what they hear, and desire God’s will for their lives.

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