

Lend your voice to Christ

They had been married for many years. The husband was now dying, and the wife was wondering what to do with the rest of her life. Working with a spiritual director, she discerned that God might be calling her to life as a religious. Her spiritual director suggested that she might want to tell her husband of her future plans.

So one day she sat at his bedside and said: "Honey, I've been thinking that God is calling me to a religious vocation. After you die, I'm going to apply to a religious order. I'm thinking of becoming a nun!"

From his sickbed the husband spoke only one sentence: "God help the Catholic Church!"

In the many years she has been a religious since that date, God has indeed helped the church through her.

I tell that story at this time before Christmas because God may be calling many people to be religious and priests, but God's voice is not always heard. I'm going to suggest that, in the many family gatherings that will happen during this holy season that you might, in the words of one priest: "Lend your own voice to Christ."

Survey after survey shows two things. First, priests identify themselves as 90 percent satisfied with their vocations. Second, when other men were asked why they never thought of being a priest, the most frequent response was "Nobody ever asked me."

I'm suggesting that you might look around your family and friends and consider who might make a good priest or religious. No, don't embarrass them in front of everyone by shouting: "Have you ever thought about being a priest?" Find a quiet moment and a quiet place. You may not have to say a lot. One father simply said to his son one day: "Many of the qualities I admire in priests, I see in you. Have you ever thought about being a priest?" Two sentences! Shortly afterwards, the young man applied to the seminary and is a priest today. That father lent his voice to Christ.

People often don't consider asking friends and relatives about being priests because they presume from the media that priests are unhappy and unfulfilled. As I said, 90 percent of priests say that are satisfied with their lives and fulfilled in their work.

Sadly, 50 percent of marriages fail, and those who stay married don't come out to a 90 percent satisfaction rate. Marriage is no guarantor of happiness.

When they survey people in similar helping professions - medical personnel, teachers, social workers, and the like - only about 50 percent claim satisfaction in their work.

Life is easy for no one. Not all priests and religious are happy, and no one claims to be happy all the time. But, despite the decline in vocations and dark nights of the souls, there does seem to be a profound sense of fulfillment among the church ministers - including its many, many lay ministers.

Shortly after I was ordained, I had just anointed a man in a hospital. Looking up from his death bed he said, "Father Joe, it's a wonderful thing you're doing with your life." I never forgot that moment or those words.

I saw a humorous Christmas card, which read on the front: "I'm Going Home For Christmas." Inside it read: "Please Pray For Me."

Suppose, in all seriousness, that we all did pray for all of us this Christmas - especially for wisdom to discern God's call in our lives. Think of the liturgies that might be celebrated, the confessions heard, anointings given, counseling offered and sermons preached, all because you dared to ask someone if they thought God was calling them. And it's impossible to name any helping area that religious women are not involved: teaching, counseling, human rights, spiritual direction, prayer, and on and on.

Lend your voice to Christ this Christmas. There may be someone who, in the midst of all the noise of the world, will hear the voice of God speaking through you.