

Priestly Vocations Discernment Retreat

Introduction

I'm happy to have this opportunity to take part in this priestly vocations discernment retreat and hope that all of you are experiencing the nearness of God and the joy of opening your minds and hearts to his will.

In the midst of our time together, we once again meet John the Baptist. He keeps popping up during Advent and throughout the Christmas season and tomorrow we will celebrate the day when he baptized Jesus. In today's Gospel, however, John is being asked about his relationship to Jesus. John renews his testimony that he is not the Christ, the anointed of God, that he is not the bridegroom of God's people but the friend, and that Jesus must increase while he, John, must decrease. Once again John fulfills his vocation as the immediate forerunner of Christ. That was his vocation, his unique calling in salvation history.

John's "Discernment"

And we may think that John the Baptist had it easy, not in the way he lived, which was very austere and not in the way he died which was a martyr's death, but rather in discerning his vocation.

We imagine it wouldn't be too difficult to discern our true vocation if the Blessed Mother was our relative and an angel told her that we'd be miraculously conceived. And how hard could it be to know our vocation if an angel had announced our birth and our mission to our father or if our father prophesied about us as we were coming into the world: "You, my child shall be the prophet of the Most High; you shall go before the Lord to prepare the way ... "

There were many signs pointing to John's unique vocation as Christ's forerunner. Nonetheless, John the Baptist had to open his heart to God's call and answer it. He had to take the necessary steps to set himself apart, to live a life of penance in the desert, and to run the risk of beginning a ministry that was likely to be misunderstood. He persisted in helping people of every walk of life prepare their

hearts for Christ and when the Lord appeared on the banks of the Jordan River, he had to be ready to step out of the way...to yield to Jesus. "He must increase, I must decrease."

John the Baptist had a following. People came from everywhere to be baptized. He had credibility. He was regarded not only as a prophet but indeed as the Messiah. But his greatness was in staying true to his vocation. Had John chosen to compete with Jesus or to supplant him, he would be only a footnote in history, one of many messianic wannabe's. His greatness lies in his choice to decrease so that Christ could increase. This is why we remember John; this is why we revere him; this is why we celebrate not only his birth but indeed his martyrdom. He prepared the way for the coming of the Savior.

Your Discernment

I don't know in any detail the circumstances of your birth but I'm going to guess they were not as dramatic as those of John the Baptist's birth. Nonetheless, our lives are not lacking in signs of God's Providence and in indicators of his holy will. Perhaps an angel did not appear to tell Mary of your birth but it may well be that it's occurred to family members, friends, and colleagues that you have a priestly vocation. And perhaps your father did not prophecy about your future when you were born but maybe along the way a priest or teacher or friend told you that you ought to seriously consider a priestly vocation, that you have the aptitude, so to speak, to be a priest.

And like St. John the Baptist, positive indicators or signs of your vocation may be piling up but indicators alone won't enable you to answer the call God has in mind for you. Like St. John the Baptist, you have to go to the desert; I don't mean the desert of Judea where John fasted, prayed, and preached, but rather a place of quiet and solitude where God's voice can echo in your hearts. It is in the desert of quietness, far from the madding crowd, far from distractions, that you can say to the Lord, "Speak, your servant is listening ... "

Also like St. John the Baptist, you may well have to take some steps that will be misunderstood, especially in our times. I don't mean wearing camel hair or eating locusts and honey, but rather taking the step of giving a possible priestly vocation a

chance to flourish... going to Mass daily; receiving the Sacrament of Penance frequently; choosing a good priest as your spiritual director; praying quietly and reading Scripture; looking into the possibility of applying for the seminary, filling out an application. Don't let me get too far ahead; I can get carried away! What I mean is that, like John the Baptist, it isn't what others think that finally counts; those are indicators and to a point they are very helpful. At some point we have to be willing to actively discern a possible priestly vocation and to give that potential vocation every chance to grow and take root in us. If we really want to find what will bring us joy, holiness, and greatness of spirit, then like John the Baptist we have to say to Jesus, "you must increase, I must decrease."

While you are here, I'd ask you to meditate on the very wise words of Pope Benedict XVI; this what he said: "Are we not perhaps all afraid in some way? If we let Christ enter fully into our lives, if we open ourselves totally to him, are we not afraid He might take something away from us? Something significant, something unique, something that makes life so beautiful? Do we not then risk ending up diminished and deprived of our freedom? No! If we let Christ into our lives, we lose nothing, nothing, absolutely nothing of what life free, beautiful and great. And so today, with great strength and great conviction ... I say to you: Do not be afraid of Christ. He takes nothing away, and he gives you everything. When we give ourselves to him, we receive a hundredfold in return. Yes, open wide the doors to Christ—and you will find true life. Amen."

May God bless you, dear brothers, and guide the course of your lives according to His holy and life-giving will. Mary, Mother of God and Mother of the Church, pray for us!