

Priests Don't Grow on Trees

A bishop once related this true story. There was a certain diocese in the Midwest which received its new bishop. The first thing he did was to make this rule: "Every time I arrive in a parish to do a Confirmation, I would like for the pastor to have five young men, high school aged or older, to visit with me for ten minutes after supper (and before the Mass). As the chief shepherd of this diocese, I will simply invite them to consider becoming a priest. I will not do the Confirmation until after I speak with these men."

One evening, the bishop arrived in a very small country parish and he was warmly welcomed by the priest. After supper, the bishop asked, "Now, where are the five young men?" The pastor replied, "Oh, I'm sorry bishop. We don't have any young men in this parish who want to be priests." The bishop replied, "I believe that I made a rule that, before I would do the Confirmation, I wanted to speak to five young men from the parish." The pastor said, "I know it bishop, but we don't have anyone in this parish." The bishop said, "Then we won't have a Confirmation. Cancel it."

The pastor became very upset. "Bishop, what am I going to do? These young people have been preparing all these months for their Confirmation." And the bishop said, "I will tell you what you are going to do. You are going to get on the phone and get five young men to come in and speak with their bishop!" So the pastor got on the phone and after only two calls, he had five young men on the way.

The truth was that the pastor had not even tried. These five were not especially pious young men and none of them had ever expressed an interest in priesthood before. They were just normal, healthy high school-aged men who played sports, had girlfriends, came to Mass on Sunday ... and they loved Jesus. The bishop spoke to the five young men for about 10 minutes and then went over to do the Confirmation.

The bishop eventually ordained three of those five young men priests for his diocese!

Priests don't grow on trees. Vocations to priesthood are a gift from God to the church but they are gifts that God gives, I believe, when the people of God do their part to request them. Every vocation is about 99.9 percent God's grace and .1

percent our human effort, but that .1 percent for us is an enormous effort and it must be exerted. Every vocation is a miracle, but someone must provide the five loaves and two fish.

St. Augustine wrote, "God who created us without us will not save us without us," and I think the same can be said of vocations to priesthood. It is not that God can't raise up priests without our help; it is that he usually won't. Blessed Hannibal DiFrancia said it best: "Jesus wanted to teach us that vocations in the church do not come by chance, neither by themselves, nor can we make them out of human efforts only. They come to us from the mercy of God. If we do not pray to obtain them, they will not be given us."

When I was vocation director in Savannah, Ga., I used to have as one of our yearly goals the following (double negative for the sake of effect): *that no man in this diocese would not go to the seminary this year because no one asked him to consider it*. As this Year for Priests is coming to an end, perhaps we can all mobilize to do our part in this miraculous process better by our prayers and by personally inviting men to consider the priesthood. It is not just the job of the archbishop and the vocation director. The entire Body of Christ must work together!

As Pope Benedict XVI said: "Nothing can replace the ministry of priests at the heart of the Church." Have you ever invited a young man to consider becoming a priest? Priests don't grow on trees.

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