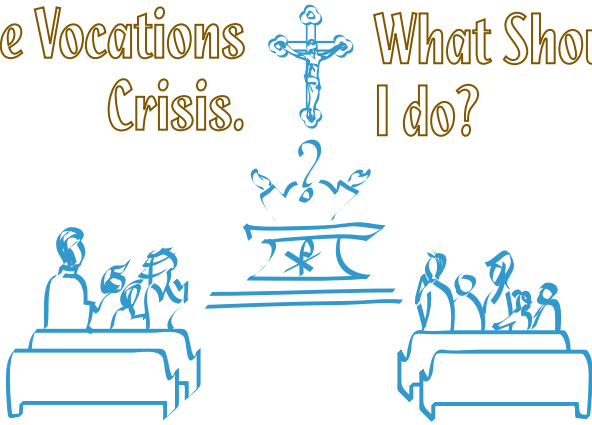


The Vocations Crisis. What Should I do?



The Council is fully aware that the desired renewal of the whole Church depends *in great part* upon a priestly ministry animated by the spirit of Christ. —From the introductory paragraph to *Optatum totius*, the Second Vatican Council's decree on the training of priests. (All quotes in bold are from O.T. and *Presbyterorum ordinis*, the Council's decree on the ministry and life of priests.)

Thus the Council Fathers emphatically state what we all know, in a general way, to be true: we need priests! But where are they? Everywhere, it seems, there is a shortage of priests. Parishes are closed and combined, various priest-sharing plans are implemented but many of the faithful are simply hard hit by what has become known as the “vocation crisis.” What's to be done?

Some say the priesthood itself should be changed to accommodate modern society, that all priests should be free to marry, that other disciplines be relaxed, even that we should have Catholic priestesses. Those suggesting such strategies often say that desperate times call for desperate measures and that all else has been tried, and nothing worked. But has it? Has *all else* been tried? What did the Second Vatican Council teach about fostering priestly vocations?

Well, first of all, that it is up to *each one of us*. It's not a problem just for the priests themselves to solve, or for the Bishops, the Cardinals or even the Holy Father himself! As the Council Fathers put it “...*the whole Christian* people ought to be made aware that it is *their duty* to cooperate in their various ways, both by earnest prayer and by other means available to them, to ensure that the Church will always have those priests who are needed for the fulfillment of her divine mission.”

The Council Fathers have specific instructions for the members of the hierarchy, but what about the rest of us? It's clear that we're to pray, but what else? What else should we be doing to ensure that the Church will always have the priests she needs? What can we do to be part of this “divine mission?” Will these be difficult things, extraordinary things, things

out of our reach? Did the Second Vatican Council ask us to think up “new ways to image the priesthood” or ask us to make suggestions on how its disciplines should be arranged? Hardly! Let's hear the Council Fathers again.

“The duty of fostering vocations falls on the whole Christian community, and they should discharge it *principally by living full Christian lives*...The Council, first of all, recommends the traditional aids toward this general cooperation, such as: *unceasing prayer*, *Christian penance* and progressively more advanced instruction for the faithful, wherein the necessity, nature and excellence of the priestly vocation will be set forth by preaching, catechetics and the various means of social communication...”

Have we all done that to the best of our ability—led full Christian lives, prayed, done penance and learned what the Church has to teach about the “necessity, nature and excellence of the priestly vocation?” It might make a good examination of conscience. But is that all? Can there be *more*? What part of living a full Christian life would make the *most* difference?

“The greatest contribution is made *by families which are animated by a spirit of faith, charity and piety and which provide, as it were, a first seminary, and by parishes in whose abundant life the young people themselves take an active part.*”

How encouraging and inspiring! Think how much most of us can do for the priesthood simply by, with God's help, faithfully fulfilling our normal, everyday duties—in our families and parishes. Another powerful reason to strive for personal holiness! Some of us, educators, have an additional contribution to make. “Parents, teachers, and all who are in any way concerned in the education of boys and young men...,” *listen up!* “...ought to train them in such a way that they will know the solicitude of the Lord for his flock and be alive to the needs of the Church. In this way they will be prepared when the Lord calls to answer generously with the prophet: “Here am I! Send me” (Is. 6:8).”

We need to know our faith, live it and teach it, simply put. Not out of our reach. Nothing fancy. In this New Year Let's wholeheartedly cooperate with grace in encouraging priestly vocations—just as the Second Vatican Council asked us to do.

“Bless your Church, O Lord, with holy priests! They will spread your faith around the world. They will show your love to all mankind. Bless your Church, Oh Lord, with holy priests.”

—Hymn from the Maronite liturgy.