

“Contrasts and Commonalities in God’s Call to His Servants”

Homily – Mass of Ordination to the Priesthood

June 4, 2016, St. Mary’s Cathedral of the Assumption

(Readings: Jeremiah 1:4-9; 1 Tim 4:12-16; John 10:11-16)

Introduction

How is it that a young man senses a call to the Priesthood? No two stories are alike! Just ask any priest or seminarian (you all probably already have). For one, he may have known since childhood that this is what he was meant to do with his life and so pursued it with gusto, never wavering. For another, to say that he first sensed a call to the Priesthood as a “young” man would be a stretch!

What can be said of the uniqueness of God’s call of an individual to the Priesthood also applies to the call of God’s prophets of old.

God’s Call: Contrasts and Commonalities

We can begin by examining the call of the prophet Jeremiah, about which we just heard in our first reading. Apparently, he was resistant, and kept trying to come up with excuses to get out of it: he was not articulate, he was too young and inexperienced. You get the picture. Compare that with the call of the prophet Isaiah: praying in the Temple, he has a vision of the heavenly worship, and hears the voice of God calling out, “Whom shall I send? Who will go for us?” His immediate response? “Here I am, send me!” In Isaiah’s case, his response was instantaneous, marked by great alacrity.

As for Jeremiah, he had to fight the temptation to abandon his call his entire life. It’s not really difficult to understand why, given all that he had to put up with when we think about the state of God’s people at the time: practices of syncretism had crept in and taken a strong hold on them; the people of Israel were mixing pagan worship practices with their own cult, worshipping the false gods of their more powerful pagan neighbors, and hoping by that to get into their good graces and share in their power. Jeremiah’s vocation was to call them back to pure worship of the true God who had made a covenant with them. He even at one point, in a famous lament, accuses God of having duped him into being His prophet; yet, the call was too strong and he could not resist. Who knows – perhaps he somehow had a premonition of all this, and that was why he tried to find a way to get out of his call to be God’s prophet! He did remain faithful to the end, but it came at a great cost.

While we see contrasts in the way individuals respond to God’s call in their life, there are also certain commonalities to all. And what we see in the life of Jeremiah is one: that is, to persevere will always require some sort of an inner struggle, it will necessitate constantly learning and relearning the lessons of generosity and selflessness, because God’s call for everyone is always, in some form or another, the call to love. For the one called to God’s service, this inner struggle will somehow

involve suffering for truth, the death to self required to be an agent of God's mercy and goodness, to be a sign, example and animator of His call to holiness for all people.

Responding to God's Call: Mentors Along the Way

This points to another common factor in everyone's response to God's call: key people in the individual's life who have had a significant influence on them.

For the one called to Priesthood, there is always the priest he looks up to and wants to emulate, usually who inspired his vocation, as well as others who have served as mentors during his years of formation. Certainly one such priest who has played this role not only for Andrew but many others in our Archdiocese is the beloved Father Kevin Gaffey, may he rest in peace. Now, as I think about him, I think that if he were still physically present to us he would probably take issue with me in what I just said about perseverance in responding to God's call involving an inner struggle and sacrifice. This is because he loved to talk about how much he loved being a priest; he would often tell me how great his life was, and it almost seemed as if he kind of felt guilty about it. He would repeat to me, "I've had charmed existence." Of course, he was usually saying this right at the point that he was beginning to sip his daily Manhattan! I would also like to take this occasion to thank the faculty of Saint Patrick's Seminary and University, represented here by the rector, Father Bud Stevens and other faculty members, and all of the staff at our Seminary, especially the Oblate Sisters of Jesus the Priest who are present with us today. I thank as well all of the priests who have accompanied Andrew and so many others in our Archdiocese on their journey to the Priesthood.

Being such an effective and inspiring mentor of others is how the priest bears the fruit of generativity in his priestly vocation. It comes from living that vocation well, helping others to discover their vocation – especially those with a vocation to the Priesthood – and assisting them in developing the virtues necessary to respond to God's call in their life and persevere to the end. The reason some people experience ease in living out their vocation is that they have acquired such virtues in their own life, especially those who have done so early in life; they have attained a certain level of self-mastery. Such self-mastery does always require some sort of sacrifice, a renunciation of self, but spiritual maturity lightens the burden, and for the truly spiritually advanced, it becomes effortless. At this stage, one has learned the lesson of how God has created us to be happy, and this bears the fruit of generativity, always, of course, in accordance with one's proper vocation.

The priest who has attained this level of spiritual maturity is the one who truly understands that his call is a *vocation*, and not a job. If the priest were to see his call as simply a job, his Priesthood would be sterile. This is the hired hand our Lord speaks of in the Gospel: he is in it for himself, whatever he does is at his own convenience, his decisions are guided by what is most profitable for him and are motivated by his own self-interest. The good shepherd, on the other hand, is the one who serves the good of his flock no matter what; he knows his sheep, he is pastorally present to them, he cares for them and he protects them from the wolves who try to catch them and eat them up.

And there are, indeed, plenty of such spiritual wolves around, and the good shepherd protects his sheep from them, even if the sheep don't realize how harmful they are.

The story of God's call in an individual's life, though, begins much earlier than this. Clearly, there can be no greater influence on one's discernment of what they are called to do with their life than one's family of origin. Andrew has been blessed in this regard, too. A young person's response to a religious vocation is a sign that something has gone *right* in one's family life. This is something we need to always remember and be thankful for; even as we are alarmed at the crisis point that family life has reached in our age, we have to take note of these positive signs, and notice the beauty of family life that is still all around us.

Our Lady and Her Immaculate Heart

One last influence to note, especially an influence on the call of the priest and to which today's feast day in the universal calendar of the Church draws our attention, is the special role that our Lady, the Blessed Virgin Mary and the Mother of all priests, has on the life and spirituality of the priest. She is the Mother of our Great High Priest, Jesus Christ. Her whole life was oriented to bringing God's Son, her Son, into the world and making him known to all, and so she continues to do so for us from heaven. Her life was perfectly conformed to the life of her Son; their two hearts were united, a mystery of supernatural maternal and filial love that the Church celebrates with these two feast days: the Sacred Heart of Jesus (yesterday) and the Immaculate Heart of Mary (today). And her maternal protection extends to all of her sons who are ordained to share her divine Son's Priesthood for the sanctification of his people.

All priests need to look to Mary for the example, guidance and intercession necessary to attain that self-mastery in their own life that will help them to acquire the virtues of the good shepherd, guiding God's people to the green pastures of His mercy, love and truth. That great apostle of the devotion to the Immaculate Heart of Mary, Saint Anthony Mary Claret, speaks of this in one of his spiritual writings:

For myself, I say this to you: The man who burns with the fire of divine love is a son of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, and wherever he goes, he enkindles that flame; he desires and works with all his strength to inflame all men with the fire of God's love. Nothing deters him: he rejoices in poverty; he labors strenuously; he welcomes hardships; he laughs off false accusations; he rejoices in anguish. He thinks only of how he might follow Jesus Christ and imitate him by his prayers, his labors, his sufferings, and by caring always and only for the glory of God and the salvation of souls [from the Office of Readings for the Memorial of St. Anthony Mary Claret (October 24)].

Andrew: you a true "son of the Immaculate Heart of Mary," and in more ways than one, given the significant influence that the parish under her patronage has had in

your priestly formation! Look to her to guide you every step of the way, as you now embark upon sharing the Priesthood of her Son, Jesus Christ.

Conclusion

The question, though, still remains: why pursue the call of God in one's life, especially for those for whom, like Jeremiah, it comes at such great personal cost? The answer is simple: because the call comes from God! That is to say, because it is one's vocation: to deny it would be to deny oneself. This is ultimately what Jeremiah himself came to realize, as was evident at the beginning. Notice what the Lord says to him: "Before you were in the womb I knew you."

So it is for everyone; this is how one's vocation works. The story of one's response to God's call begins, in the final analysis, from the first moment of one's existence. God plants one's vocation in one's heart; it's as much a part of who one is as the person's DNA. Our part is to discern it, to choose it, and to pursue it – which only successfully happens with spiritually mature mentors in one's life. For them we give thanks today.

We respond to God's call no matter what, then, because it is the path to authenticity, the only way to become the person God made you to be, for the sake of His glory and, in the life of the priest, the salvation of souls. This is the good shepherd, who gives his life completely for his sheep, that they might hear the voice of the Lord, the one, true God, and follow Him and worship Him alone, and so be joined with Him forever in the New Covenant sealed in the blood of His Son.