

VOCATIONAL DISCERNMENT

Optional *Lectio Divina* Prayer

1. Read Psalm 37: 3-7.
2. Meditate on the words.
3. Speak to Christ about this passage.
4. Rest and listen in God's presence.
5. Discuss together.

The adventure of vocational discernment is a core element in the life of every disciple.

Discerning well has major ramifications for our happiness because God made us with a specific dream in mind for our lives: “For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future” (Jeremiah 29:11).

This article is meant to get us started on the journey. More will be necessary to carry us through to a destination. At the end of this article, we recommend several resources that explore different vocations more in depth.

With that in mind, a helpful starting point is to consider the beauty of each vocation. An appreciation for all of them is essential, for “esteem of virginity for the sake of the kingdom and the Christian understanding of marriage are inseparable” (CCC 1620).

Consecrated and Religious Life: Religious Life is characterized by “the public profession of the evangelical counsels of poverty, chastity, and obedience, in a stable state of life recognized by the Church.” (CCC 944) Of all the vocations, it most powerfully mirrors the life of heaven on earth and serves as a particular witness to Christian perfection as.¹

Diocesan Priesthood (for men): Priests lay down their lives for the Church. “They are consecrated in order to preach the Gospel and shepherd the faithful as well as celebrate divine worship as true priests of the New Testament.” (CCC 1564) Priesthood “confers a sacred power for the service of the faithful,” (CCC 1592) through their teaching, governing, and offering of the sacraments.

Marriage: Those in Catholic marriages give themselves over to their spouses, forsaking all others, for better or for worse, for “the good of the couple, as well as [the] generation and education of children.” (CCC 1660) Mirroring the Trinity, in which the love between two



persons becomes a third, they cooperate with God in bringing new souls into existence.

DISCUSS

Do you have a familiarity with each of the different vocations within the life of the Church? What do you admire about each?

DISCERNING WELL

To discern well, we need to place our vocation in the proper context. Especially when young, it is easy to see a vocation as an end in itself. Those called to marriage, for example, may feel that their wedding date is the finish line in their race to personal fulfillment. But our vocation is not our purpose. Our purpose is to “praise, reverence and serve God our Lord, and by this means save [our] soul.”² Our vocation is merely a powerful means to this final end, both for ourselves and others. Many Saints, such as St. Carlo Acutis and St. Giuseppe Moscati, attained heaven without entering a particular vocation.

Because our vocation is ordered towards salvation and holiness, discerning well is primarily done by growing in holiness - imitating Christ through the biblical habits of discipleship (prayer, fellowship, sacraments, learning the teachings of the Church).³ As we do so, we will notice various aspects of Christ’s life that particularly attract us

(i.e., is it Christ's poverty? His life of celibacy? His love of children? His devotion to prayer? His role as a teacher?). Through these attractions, our own callings often begin to take shape.

As we notice these desires, those that inspire us to sacrifice are of particular value. Part of the joy of a vocation is imitating the sacrificial love of Christ, who suffered and died for His friends. While avoiding a fixation on the negative or difficult aspects of a vocation, these desires can be helpful for consideration. For example, when discerning between priesthood and married life one might ask, "How do I sense God calling me to be more generous? Does waking up at 2:00 am to comfort a crying infant or administer Last Rights to a dying parishioner inspire greater generosity in me."

DISCUSS

Are you actively growing in the four habits of a disciple of Christ (teaching of the apostles, fellowship, sacraments, and prayer) so as to be able to better discern your vocation? To what elements of sacrificial love are you most drawn in the various vocations? ?

OBSTACLES AND MISCONCEPTIONS

As we discern, a few common obstacles merit consideration.

The first obstacle is defaulting to marriage without serious discernment. Most people naturally desire marriage because "the vocation of marriage is written on the nature of man and woman as they come forth from their creator." (CCC 1603) Because of this, it can be tempting to skip over the possibility of a celibate (unmarried) vocation. One might think "since I desire marriage, I must not be called to celibacy," but discernment of celibate vocations is not so much about desiring marriage, but whether God has given us the grace to renounce it for something greater. Christ challenges his friends to consider this great gift of celibacy for the Kingdom, saying,

“He who is able to receive this, let him receive it” (Matthew 19:12).

A second common obstacle is a “double dipping” of sorts where we attempt to discern multiple vocations at once. This would occur, for example, when a man attempts to discern priesthood while at the same time dating a woman. But in the same way that a man cannot simultaneously pursue two women without being unfair to both, he cannot seriously discern the priesthood and a woman at the same time without being unfair both to her and to God.

A third obstacle is simple impatience. It can be tempting to put discernment on our own timeline. We “check all the boxes”—praying, reading, being attentive to our desires, etc.—in hopes that we can force God’s hand, so to speak, into allowing us to enter our vocation according to our own timing. It’s even possible to obsess over our vocation in an unhealthy way, praying and talking more about it than we do about our relationship with God. But vocations are always a gift; they cannot be earned. The right vocation, much like good ripe fruit, will pick easily when the time is right, and forcing it will only damage the tree. God is the giver of vocations. All we can do is pray, grow in our basic habits of discipleship, and remain open to God’s call when it comes, confident that He knows what is best for us and will reveal our vocation at the right time.

Finally, vocational discernment can be prone to inaction. With such large decisions, it can be tempting to endlessly keep “praying about it” or, even worse, ignoring it, instead of taking reasonable steps



forward. While prayer and prudence are essential to discernment, God cannot drive a parked car. We need to act courageously. Actions such as calling the vocations director, attending a discernment retreat, or asking someone on a date can often provide us with freedom and clarity, and God often reveals His will to us, at least in part, through these concrete steps.

DISCUSS

Which of these common obstacles or misconceptions have you experienced in your discernment? How might you overcome those struggles?

TAKE ACTION

Good vocational discernment requires action and may also benefit from further resources. Below are some recommendations for next steps and further study:

Consecrated/Religious Life

- **Actions**

- Research various communities and their particular ways of life
- Contact the vocation director of Orders that interest you
- Commit to a dating fast (6 months at least)
- Go on discernment retreats
- Participate in the Order's ministries
- Speak to the vocation director about next steps (applying, entering the novitiate, etc.)

- **Resources**
 - CCC 914-933: The Consecrated Life
 - Vita Consecrata by St. Pope John Paul II
 - And You Are Christ's: The Charism of Virginity and the Celibate Life by Thomas Dubay
 - Discerning Religious Life by Sr. Claire Matthias, CFR

Priesthood

- **Actions**
 - Contact the diocesan vocation director and set up a meeting
 - Commit to a dating fast (6 months at least)
 - Attend diocesan discernment retreats or events
 - Apply for seminary
- **Resources**
 - CCC 1536-1600: The Sacrament of Holy Orders
 - D180 by Father Greg Gerhart
 - To Save a Thousand Souls by Father Brett Brannen
 - The Priest is Not His Own by Fulton Sheen

Marriage

- **Actions**
 - Spending time with good Catholic families in one's parish community
 - Go on dates and discuss important topics concerning the Catholic vision for marriage and parenthood with our potential spouses
 - Discuss engagement

- **Resources**

- CCC 897-913: The Lay Faithful
- CCC 1601-1666: The Sacrament of Matrimony
- Men, Women, and the Mystery of Love by Dr. Edward Sri
- Dating Detox by Kevin and Lisa Cotter
- Three to Get Married by Fulton Sheen