

What frames the call?

Bishop Timothy L. Doherty

November 7, 2019

Those following the call to priesthood follow different paths. Or do we? I know that my call did not come all at once. Today, it is more important that I know why I remain glad to be a priest. It remains a deliberate, daily choice, with God's grace, or by God's leave!

Several things frame my vocational response from the beginning until now. As a child, I would look back and forth between the Cross and twentieth century suffering. Between our risen and sacramentally present Savior, and people who were signs of hope. Between human lives that had beginnings and endings, and the sacraments that enhanced the meaning of life in its stages.

As a boy, I was an altar server at quite a few funeral Masses. These were more somber and briefer than today because the customary visitation, committal and lunch provided an extended integrated event. It's hard to explain in a few words, but these things provided me schooling about the value of human life, the dearness of relationships, and the expectation of eternal life.

I won't say that Catholics are fascinated by mortality, but it shapes the way we perceive our life. Psalm 39 reminds me of God's vastness and my smallness. Too much of our present stress is the result of a spiritual protest against our limits. I read somewhere that most of the violence in the world is caused by people who are 90 percent happy but trying to get the other 10 percent. And so I ask myself if one lifetime of whatever duration is sufficient. It is with this limited life that I give myself to God (he gave it first), and God provides a sufficiency.

A second thing that frames my vocational response is that our Catholic tradition sees no contradiction between scientific facts and our religious doctrine. We are neither biblical fundamentalists nor material idealists. If anything, our faith requires an endless curiosity about creation. A sense of wonder sustains me.

Third, a strength for finding a home in the priesthood, is our Christian anthropology. In both faith and philosophy, what we call natural law, the dignity of individuals and of the social common good form a necessary and reciprocal relationship. Many of today's social and environmental issues stem from people wanting to take more from our resources than we contribute. Twentieth and twenty-first century popes write about this imbalance which shows itself in environmental degradation and a growing disparity of wealth. You will remember a US president who said, "ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country." This is a concise expression of how we should view our place in society and in the Church.

When Church teaching favors education, respect for human labor, democratic governance, and religious liberty, it does so that individuals may be free to participate in, to build their communities. We encourage freedom as the ability to do what needs to be done. This contrasts with a toxic view of liberty: the right to be left alone.

So I see my priesthood as part of a religious mission, to be sure. And part of this is to spotlight the human dignity in sharing talent and gifts. In the Incarnation of Jesus, God trusted that human nature is capable of wonderful, even salvific activity. Our lives are better when we behave as if that trust is

not misplaced, and we expect to find men and women that can make God smile. Let's not just look for them, let's be them.