

My friends in Christ, in today's Scripture text from the Prophet Ezekiel, we observe that the Lord is sending forth the Prophet to the people Israel in order to remind them that God *still* is God, and in order to chastise them for their sinful ways...because they are "hard of face and obstinate of heart," because they "have rebelled against" the Lord's ways, and because "they and their ancestors have revolted against" the Lord Himself. "For they are a rebellious house."

Oh yeah! God is sending the Prophet Ezekiel out there to preach some good old-fashioned fire and brimstone!

But notice that there necessarily must be something *prior* to the Prophet being *sent forth*...and what comes prior is *this*: that he must be *called* first. "The Lord *spoke* to me," the Prophet says, "and I heard the One Who was *speaking*...to me."

Jesus famously called each of the Twelve Apostles, and the New Testament reports many of the more personal and powerful encounters that the Apostles had with Him in the beginning. They were all of them *called*...and they were *sent*.... But they had to be *called* first.

The Latin word for the verb "to call" (or "to summon" if you will) is *vocare*...from which we derive our English words "voice," and "vocal," and "vocation."

Now, I mentioned last weekend that we have just hosted this year's *Quo Vadis Days* summer retreat camp for high school boys; and *normally*, that would have been the same time of the summer for the summer camp for high school girls, *Vocare* (which, God willing, will return next year). Both of these camps are opportunities that the Diocese programs in order to help our youth discern that which might very well be their *calling* in life...that *Vocation* to which God calls them.

And so, discernment and vocation is the hot-topic right now throughout the Diocese...and we reflect upon vocation today.

Now, there are three tiers, so to speak, of our understanding of vocation. I shall distinguish the *top* tier by naming it the "all-caps" VOCATION...and the *second* tier is what I name the "capital-

V” Vocation...and the *third* tier is what I dub the “lowercase-v” vocation. Now, what do I *mean* by these three ways of understanding vocation?

All-caps VOCATION is this: what the Second Vatican Council proclaims is the “universal call to holiness.” All of us...*each* of us...*regardless* of our “capital-V” Vocation...*regardless* of our job, our “lowercase-v” vocation...*each* of us is called by God to be *holy*. God commands us in the Book of Leviticus, “Be holy, for I, the Lord your God, am holy.” And Jesus says in the Gospel narrative of Saint Matthew, “Be *perfect*, just as your heavenly Father is perfect.”

Be *holy*...be *perfect*...and *always* strive (and *never* give up), in cooperation with God’s grace, in our own faithful and noble efforts toward nothing less than sainthood *itself*, to attain to that perfect holiness to which *each* of us is called – and this is the “universal call to holiness.” And *that* is what I mean by all-caps VOCATION.

Now, consider the *third* tier of vocation: the lowercase-v vocation. This is vocation as it is most commonly understood out there in the world: job. Vocational training: to be trained with a specific skill or set of skills in order to perform a job *well*. To be a carpenter by trade, for example: *that* is what I mean by *third*-tier, lowercase-v vocation.

Okay, so we turn now to that which we, the Church, most commonly mean when we speak of vocations: the *second* tier...the capital-V Vocation. Five such Vocations are what seem to be the usual suspects in this second-tier category: marriage; consecrated single life; the sisterhood (sisters and nuns and the like); the brotherhood (friars and monks and the like); and priesthood. And for our purposes today, I will focus on the priesthood, though much of what I will offer here for our reflections certainly can apply to *all* of these Vocations.

Why do I focus on the priesthood? One, because I am a priest; I can speak most clearly and confidently about the priesthood, therefore, than I can about any of the other Vocations. And there is another important reason why I focus on the priesthood: more than any *other* Vocation right now

in our Diocese, the priesthood is *most* urgently needed because it is by *far* in the *shortest* supply. How do I know that? Just consider the numbers, the ratio; our Diocese has some one hundred thousand Catholics residing here...and only forty active priests to serve the sacramental and ministerial needs of *all* of them (another fifteen retired priests, if *that* many, helping out as well). As I think about the many needs of this Diocese, I figure that we actually require one hundred active priests, that we can staff every institutional position (parishes, schools, hospitals, and so forth) and therefore address all needs of all people with sufficient efficacy and pastoral presence. We *need* one hundred...but at the present time, we *have* forty.... Would anyone care to argue that priests are *not* what is most urgently needed right now?

Let us continue.... Whenever I talk to youth and young men about whether they have ever discerned the possibility that God might be calling them to the priesthood, I get *this* a lot. “Well, I think that I *might* want to be a priest...but what I *really* want is to be an architect, or a doctor, or an engineer, or a professional athlete, or a writer, or a [name your career].” But they are confusing the capital-V Vocation with the lowercase-v vocation; they are confusing God’s *calling* to a specific way of life for serving the Lord and the Church here on Earth...with a mere *job*. And I, for one, know *many* priests who *are* architects, and doctors, and engineers, and professional athletes, and writers.

To be a *priest*...or to be a basketball player. As if you have to choose one or the other! But substitute *priest* for *husband* and see how *that* plays out. “I *would* like to be married and have a family, but I would rather play basketball *instead*.” Huh! I guess John Stockton never got that memo! And so, this “either-or” argument really just holds no water and makes no sense; it is a *non*-argument.

What are some *other* excuses that young men have given me for not even *trying* to discern the matter or discuss the matter with God in prayer?

Too young. Hey, let me tell you: most boys begin discovering girls, so to speak, in the fifth or sixth grade...sometimes even younger. (I myself was flirting with girls as young as Kindergarten;

and my nephew – God bless him! – has been flirting with waitresses at restaurants while still having to sit in high chairs! Atta boy!) Therefore, if a boy is not too young to discover girls, then he is not too young to discover the priesthood, either.

Another excuse: the priesthood is lonely. My response to *that*: ha! I *beg* God for a night to myself every now and again, but I rarely get it! Ha! Laughable, man!

My favorite excuse (as in, my favorite excuse to *laugh* at): priests are unhappy. False. Every priest I know ranks among the *happiest* and *most* fulfilled people I know. And I, *too*, am happy. I am happy, darn it! And this is not merely some biased claim of one individual. In fact, the simple truth *that* priests *are* happy actually has been scientifically proven. About fifteen years ago, a psychological researcher, a priest of the Diocese of Syracuse in New York, Monsignor Stephen Rossetti, compiled and published the results of a decade-long project demonstrating not only *that* priests are happy, but also *why*. You can read all about it in his book (appropriately titled), *Why Priests Are Happy*. So...we priests *are* happy, and science *proves* it. So *there!*

Maybe the biggest, most common excuse of all is: “I am not worthy.” And my response to *that* is, *again*, a resounding guffaw. Get in line, pal! Because let tell you, ain’t *none* of us worthy! But thanks be to God, Jesus does not call the worthy; rather, He *makes* worthy those whom He calls.

And this alleged requirement that we be worthy certainly seems to be something with which even the great Saint Paul struggled. In our Scripture text from his Second Letter to the Corinthians, he reports that “a thorn in the flesh was given to” him. What *was* this “thorn in the flesh” of which he speaks? A physical ailment of some kind? A difficult person in his life of ministry? A persistent weakness with regard to some quote-unquote *favorite* sin? I, for one, think that the thorn in his flesh was that third thing: a persistent sin. And Saint Paul wonders *why* God would allow this...to which God answers, “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.” And to that,

Saint Paul concludes, “When I am weak, then I am strong.” He recognized that he *is* not worth of the Vocation to which God called him...but that God *made* him worthy.

Last thing. And this is for you parents of young men. I am *confident* that all of us recognize our desperate need for more priests. I have said it many times before, and I say it again here: even though we sort of laugh at the idea, nevertheless, I fear that it is a very distinct possibility that I will get the call from the bishop one day, and he will tell me that he needs me not only to remain as the pastor of Saint Mary...but *also* to be the pastor of Saint Joseph *and* Saint John Vianney, as well; for thus is how *quickly* we are headed precisely in that direction. Now think about it: it was only three years ago that you all had two full-time priests assigned here to this parish...and *two* years ago, you had me and one other priest (but you had *him* only part-time)...and *now*...you have only me and a part-time *retired* priest living in residence.... See how quickly the situation is devolving!

So yes, we *certainly* recognize the dire situation before us. We *certainly* recognize that we need more priests...and that right soon. But here is my message for you parents: the temptation for you is to say, “Yes, true, we need priests...as long as it is the son of *that* family, over *there*, on *that* side of the church! But leave *my* son *alone!*” No. No! And a third time: NO! We *cannot* think like that; we simply *must* be open to the distinct possibility that it is *your* son – and not *that* son of *that* family over *there* on *that* side of the church...but *your* son, of *your* family, sitting *here* beside you on *this* side of the church – *he* might very well be the next one whom God is calling to be a priest.

So...pray for Vocations. And pray *especially* right *now*, in this time of a most desperate need, for more *priests*. And in any event, for you parents, pray *for* your children and *with* your children, to help them to listen for God’s call, so to help them to discern their Vocation. And may the Lord in His infinite love and mercy for us – manifested most especially in the gift of His very Self given to us in the Eucharist – hear and answer our prayers according to His most holy will.