

Homily - The Feast of the Baptism of the Lord A (Vocation Weekend)

Beloved, today we celebrate the Feast of the Baptism of the Lord Jesus. Within the event, we unite with the Church in America to mark the National Vocation Awareness Week. *I received some homily notes credited to Rev. Thomas J. Richter (Vocation Director, Diocese of Bismarck, North Dakota).* In today's homily, I shall attempt to 'marry' the homily notes with the reflection on the Baptism of Jesus published in our bulletin.

Jesus accepted the baptism of John, though John tried to decline. Simply paraphrased, John said, "Jesus you don't need baptism, why do you come to me?" Jesus replied, "Allow it now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness." In essence, Jesus truly did not need it but yielded in order to be of service to God's people. It was not about Him; He did it for us. The priestly or religious calling is like that; a young boy or girl may not need it, but yields to it for service to God's people. Thus, Jesus was baptized in order to open a new chapter for us. John's baptism was only a ritual purification; a sign of "repentance". But Christ had no sins to repent. His baptism anticipated His death and resurrection to save us: as He submerged, "He died and descended into the dead"; and coming out from the water, "He rose and reopened the door" for a new relationship with God (cf. Rom 6:3-5).

Certainly, we know that Jesus Christ is the Son of God from all eternity. Nevertheless, in time, as is evident in our Gospel passage (Mt 3:13-17), the occasion of His baptism was the first public attestation of Jesus as the Son of God: "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased." Beloved, the priestly or religious calling is not simply an earthly event. God who is not confined to space and time may have chosen you. Remember Jeremiah: "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations" (Jer 1:5). Also, Isaiah: "The LORD called me from the womb; from the body of my mother he named my name" (Isa 49:1). Thus, both were called before they were born but they grew up, discerned the call in their spiritual life, and submitted generously: "Here am I! Send me" (Isa 6:8). Young people, are you willing to consider taking a closer look at your life events to discern if God might be calling you too? Prayerfully ask, "Lord, are you calling me? Give me the grace to discern your call and to be able to say, 'Yes'".

God does not want us to reject His call. Rev. Thomas J. Richter shared the following story: "*A priest went over to the home of parishioners for dinner. The junior high-aged daughter met him at the door with a freshly baked apple pie. She told him, 'This is the first pie I ever baked, just for the occasion!' He congratulated her on the accomplishment. Eventually they all sat down to eat. When it came time for dessert, the daughter pushed the pie over in front of him; in fact, it was so close that the pie pan was touching his plate. Then, with an innocent look on her face, she asked, 'Father, what would you like for dessert?' The daughter made it clear what she wanted to give him for dessert and thus what she wanted him to choose. She quietly begged the priest to ask her for a piece of apple pie! He did choose the apple pie.*" Parents and grandparents, this story shows that God would like our children or grandchildren to choose the apple pie of the priesthood or the religious life which He readily presents before them. What a privilege to be called by God! What an inestimable blessing and favor!

One may be single and never married, healthy, smart, have the requisite qualities, but may feel "not holy enough" to become a priest, brother or a nun. Please, in truth, no one is "personally" qualified or worthy. But if God qualifies you, then you are qualified indeed. In the Eucharistic Prayer II, the Church prays to God, "We thank You for counting us worthy to stand in Your presence and serve You." No priest or brother or nun ever claims to be qualified. You often hear the Bishop while celebrating Mass say, "Remember Benedict, our pope,

me, your unworthy servant... etc". In the Rite of Priestly Ordination, the candidate is never asked directly, "Are you worthy?" Not at all! The Vocations Director after presenting the Candidates is asked by the Bishop, "Do you judge them to be worthy?" He responds on their behalf and on behalf of God's people, "... I testify that they have been found worthy." The Bishop concludes, "We rely on the help of God and we choose these men, our brothers, for service as priests". All respond, "Thanks be to God!"

Priests (and all religious) are made, not born. It is God that makes them through His grace: "Those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified" (Rom 8:30). It is God who calls and justifies those called by equipping them with what it takes to be in the ministry. This is in line with Isaiah's prophesy in the First Reading (Is 42:1-4, 6-7): "Thus says the LORD: Here is my servant whom I uphold, my chosen one with whom I am pleased, upon whom I have put my spirit; He shall bring forth justice to the nations." At a priestly ordination or religious profession, God endows His chosen with grace to "go and bear fruit" (John 15:16). The apostles were ordinary people like any of us. They had their weaknesses and limitations. Christ called them, "Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men" (Matt 4:19). They simply submitted generously and were made apostles. They were not born apostles nor did they think themselves worthy to be apostles.

You may feel you do not like the priesthood or the religious life; that you do not need to become one. Nevertheless, it is not about "you"; it is about what God wants. It is about service. It is about, as it were, "fulfilling all righteousness." God has promised His people, "I will give you shepherds after my own heart, who will feed you with knowledge and understanding" (Jer 3:15). Young people, these shepherds will not be angels; they have to be human beings. God, so to speak, may "need" you to fulfill His promise to His people. He will say to you, "Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men." Are you going to decline or are you going to respond generously like the prophets, like Mary, the apostles, and even others who answered the call? Rev. Thomas also shared this story: "*Shortly after he was named the Archbishop of New York, he [the late John Cardinal O'Connor] asked Mother Teresa for advice as he began his work as the Archbishop of New York. She said only three words, "Give God permission."* Our young people, please, do not be afraid to "Give God permission."

Parents generally desire their children's happiness in life. It is common knowledge that suicide rate among priests and religious is almost non-existent. It means that priests and religious are definitely happy with the vocation. Rev. Thomas presented some surveys to buttress this: "*In USA Today, a survey by the University of Chicago found clergy as the top job for satisfaction among American workers: 87% of clergy reported being satisfied.... The Los Angeles Times, 91%... and a survey performed by Fr Stephen Rosetti, the Director of St. Luke's Institute 92%". Is this not terrific?*

Finally, in this era of job loss, the priesthood and the religious life offer job security. What an exciting "apple pie!" There is always vacancy because Jesus is the Employer and in his "Father's house are many rooms" (John 14:2). In fact, "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few" (Matt 9:37; Luke 10:2). Perhaps, through the "signs of the times", God is calling and presenting the "apple pie"; prayerfully discern this vocation and may God grant you the grace to say "Yes!" May He help us to cherish our baptismal privileged status: a people cleansed from Original sin, endowed with sanctifying grace, made children of God, members of the Church and heirs with Christ to the Kingdom of God. And may these privileged entitlements help us to foster vocations in our families through Christ our Lord.