

HOW DO I KNOW IF GOD IS CALLING ME TO BE A PRIEST?

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This article is based on a talk given at a Vocations Weekend to help men think about vocation to the Catholic priesthood. The weekend took place at Allen Hall, the Westminster Diocesan Seminary, in November 2005. This article goes together with a second article, also available on this website, called 'What can I do to become clearer about my vocation?'

THINKING ABOUT OUR VOCATION

Coming to know our Christian vocation is a wonderful adventure. It is part of growing closer to God; part of becoming the person he has created us to be. It's not the only way that we follow the Lord: Hopefully, at every moment we are trying to do God's will, and follow Christ more closely, and let our lives be guided by the Holy Spirit. Each day we are trying to know his love and respond to that love more faithfully. But in a special way, when we try and discover our deepest vocation in life, we are responding to his call.

But the road is not always clear, and we are full of questions. What is my vocation? What is God calling me to do in my life? It is exciting 'discerning', but it is also hard. We want to do the right thing, to do what God wants, to do what will give true meaning and purpose to our lives. But when things are not clear we can get frustrated; perhaps we have been journeying a long time, and we are not sure what to do. Sometimes we want God to speak to us directly. 'It would be so easy, if only I *knew*. If only he would send me an angel; or speak to me in a dream. If only a message would pop up on my blank computer screen like at the beginning of the film *The Matrix*... If only God would send me a sign'.

SHOULD WE LOOK FOR SIGNS?

The Lord does send signs, but we have to be careful! When we use the word 'sign' it may make us think of visions and voices, of writing appearing magically on the wall. It is true that sometimes something clear and dramatic helps us, but **usually God speaks to us in ordinary ways**. He is guiding us through the ordinary events and experiences of our daily lives; through the 'ordinary' experience of our Christian faith (which of course is not at all ordinary). Usually, we don't really need *more* signs, we just need to look and listen more carefully, more sensitively; to get advice from other people; and see where he is already guiding us. Deep down, it is not about signs, but about a personal relationship with the Lord - his love and care for me, his call, what he has created me for; and how I respond to that with the gift of my whole life. But he uses certain signs to call out to us, just as we use words and gestures when we communicate with other people.

Below is a list of some of the ways that God can call men to priesthood. This is just my list - others might emphasize different things. *These are just some different things to look out for in your life. None of them, on its own, is final. Many of them also apply to lay people and to people in religious communities.* It's the overall

pattern that is important. If you keep coming back to a number of these things in the list below, then perhaps there is something there for you.

LISTENING TO THE CHURCH

These are just *initial signs*, things that we might notice about ourselves; we can call them *subjective or personal signs*. Later on we will have to pay more attention to the more '*objective or public signs from the Church*': for example, whether our Vocations Director encourages us or not; what the Diocesan Selection Conference discerns about us; what the Bishop decides is right for us at this time; and then (if we begin seminary), whether we continue to feel this is the right path for us, with the advice of the seminary staff. All of these objective responses are 'signs'; they are ways that the Lord helps us and guides us; and ultimately we should listen to them as much as to the subjective things we notice. It is when our personal sense of calling comes together with the objective responses of the Church that we can be confident it is the right time to try and move forward.

A LIST OF SOME INITIAL SIGNS THAT GOD MAY BE CALLING YOU TO BECOME A PRIEST:

1. **Desire to be a priest.** Perhaps you can't explain why, but you feel you would love to do this or that thing that a priest does: You wish you could celebrate Mass, or preach, or baptise, or visit the sick. Or maybe you can't explain why you have this desire. You don't want to 'do' anything priestly, but you just know that you want to be a priest - it's a part of you, like falling in love. You just know that this is what seems right, this is what you feel. You imagine yourself as a priest and it seems to fit, even if it makes you afraid or you think it would be impossible. And this desire is different from just an ambition. We *can* be ambitious for the priesthood - we can turn it into a possession or an achievement; 'wouldn't it be great if...' But this is not the same as a vocation. Ambition in this sense turns the priesthood into an external possession; but a vocation is more like a deep personal desire to become what you feel you should be. There is a joy and excitement when you think about it, a sense that this is the right path, and it will lead to the place you are meant to be.

2. **The desire may be long-term or gradual or recent.** There are different kinds of desire - let me list four: (i) Some people have *always wanted to be a priest*: they cannot remember a time when they did not have this desire; they pretended to be priests when they were kids; it seems to be a part of them. (ii) Some people have *gradually wanted to be priests*: it has grown over time, perhaps as their faith has grown; or it has come and gone, but now seems to be a bit stronger and a bit more enduring. (iii) Some people have *always wanted NOT to be a priest*: this might sound strange, but there are people who have always been fighting it, resisting, walking away, giving excuses why not; and this is because deep down they have always known it is a part of them; and at some point they realise that, in fact, people without vocations do not normally go around thinking about why they don't have a vocation! (iv) And some people *suddenly want to be priests*: they have gone through a life changing spiritual experience; it has never occurred to them before but now it does; the priesthood is something new and sudden and

unexpected, but very real and almost overpowering. This can happen, but these people need to be very cautious, because after a big adult conversion experience it is easy to confuse a desire to live a radical new Christian life (which is important for all people) with a desire to be a priest (which is only one way of responding to this new life, and perhaps not the right one). This is why the Church asks new converts to have time to settle into their new Catholic life for a few years before seeking ordination.

3. The idea of priesthood keeps coming back. In your prayer, your daydreaming, your imagination; in your reading of the gospels - you find yourself coming back to ideas about the priesthood. Some scripture passage seems to be directed at you - about the priesthood, or the call of the disciples, or service. These passages seem to stand out for you and have a kind of clarity. You hear a sermon about the priesthood, or read something, and it seems personal; as if a light comes on, or it warms your heart; or as if someone is pointing at you.

4. Admiration for priests you know. You admire certain priests you have met and know. You sense a goodness and holiness in their lives. You have an attraction to something they have or something they represent; even if you can't imagine being one. They seem to be living a life worth living, in a way that speaks to you. You are drawn to them.

5. Sense of being pulled or pushed toward priesthood. This can be true even if you do not seem to have any real personal desire. In fact it might seem like something you *don't* want to do, something you are fighting against. It is a nagging feeling that you should or could become a priest, that seems to come from nowhere, uninvited; an idea you can't get out of your mind. It might leave you cold, or even repel you - in the sense that your instincts and gut fight against it. You may find yourself making excuses to yourself (and even to others) about why you *shouldn't* become a priest, raising a list of objections, making clear all the signs that show you *couldn't possibly* become a priest. Perhaps you couldn't! But it is strange that you keep fighting and resisting it (when other men just don't bother thinking about it). It's as if part of you knows you should; there is an inner sense of duty, or call - even if it is reluctant.

6. Attraction to things associated with priesthood. Perhaps you do not have any explicit desires to be a priest, but you are attracted to many of the things that are involved in the life of a priest. You have a desire to serve people in different ways, or to pass on the faith, or to pray with and for others. Maybe you find less satisfaction in your work, not because it is wrong, but you feel it is not enough. You find yourself becoming more involved in the life of the parish as a reader or Eucharistic minister or catechist, etc. You are giving your life in service more, in the SVP, or helping the poor or the young. Lay people and religious also feel these pulls, but perhaps for you they are pulls to something priestly.

7. Inner desire to pray more; to take the faith more seriously. You just find that you want to pray more and to learn more about your Catholic faith. You have a new attraction to the Mass (or you have always been attracted to the Mass; and drawn to go to Mass during the week). The Mass seems to mean more to you. You have become more honest about your faults and failings, and desire to go to confession more often than in the past. You are reading more about the faith, or

the priesthood - it inspires you; your interest grows. Your love for Christ is growing, and your love for the Church.

8. Basic desire to give your life to God completely. Of course this is true for many holy lay-people! But it can often be the beginning of a priestly vocation, even when there is no idea of the priesthood at the beginning. You are not sure why, but you have a feeling that you can't hold anything back. It is not enough for you just to work and plod along and say a few prayers and be nice to people - you want to give your whole heart, and you are not sure how or why. For some people the idea of celibacy comes to mind even before the explicit idea of priesthood, and before the Church explains how important it is - not because they dislike marriage, but because they feel called to give their life wholeheartedly to serve God and others, in a way that would be difficult within the commitments of marriage and family life. There can be a feeling that *for me* I couldn't be free to serve the Lord if I were married with children.

9. Other people affirm your vocation. When you talk to people about the possibility of priesthood, especially committed Catholics, they don't look as if you are mad. They affirm it, and say 'of course, I could have told you that years ago'. They encourage you. In other words, from the outside, this vocation also seems to make sense - it is not just a subjective sign for you, but it is beginning to be a more objective sign to others too. Perhaps you talk honestly about your feelings to a priest, and he encourages you too. Perhaps people who don't know you even come up and suggest the priesthood to you, out of the blue! The simple fact that someone unexpectedly suggests it to you, or jokes about it with you, may be the first sign of a call. They may see something you can't see, or something you are not prepared to admit that you see. Sometimes it is as if they are offering you an objective call from outside, like Christ calling his first disciples. This doesn't mean you become a priest because Mrs Smith on the back row at Mass pushed you into it - but Mrs Smith may help you to see or appreciate something that had remained obscure until then.

10. Support from your 'spiritual director'. You may not have a formal spiritual director, but perhaps there is someone wise and trustworthy that you have chatted to about your vocation over a period of time; you have talked things through with them and they know you quite well. If they affirm what you have said, and it seems to them that you may have a vocation, then this is another more public sign that it may be true. At least it is a sign to take things further forward.

11. A feeling that you are not up to being a priest, that you are not worthy to be a priest. This might seem like a paradox, but it can be true. Sometimes, of course, the priesthood is not right for someone, and they know this, and accept it happily. But at other times, someone may have a deep feeling that the priesthood is too much of an ideal for them, that they are not worthy, or not good enough (morally), or not capable enough. These feelings can be a sign of humility, an indication that someone has a healthy sense of their own limitations, and a high sense of the dignity of the priesthood. The feeling of unworthiness may, strangely, be a sign that someone has a true appreciation for the priesthood, and that they will be open to asking for God's help and the help of the Church. It would be worrying if someone thought the priesthood (or any kind of Christian commitment) was easy; or if they thought they could achieve it through their own efforts.

12. Certain essential things. There are certain basics that we normally ‘need’ if God is really calling us, and if these are lacking then a priestly vocation is probably *not for us at this time in our lives* - although it may show itself later on. I am just explaining some of them informally here in my own language, but you would need to talk to the vocations director to be clear about the official requirements of the Church for priesthood. It is really important to talk to someone about these things (your parish priest; the vocations director; your spiritual director). If something concerns you here, do not just panic and rule yourself out, as we often judge our situation too quickly or too harshly, and there may be other factors which are greatly in your favour. But the basic things that we ‘need’ include:

- a commitment to one’s Catholic faith - a love for Christ, for the Sacraments, for the People of God (even if we are aware of our weakness and failings)
- a love and respect for the Catholic Church and for her teachings, and a desire to share that faith with others (even if we find some things more difficult to believe than others)
- a commitment to the commandments and to living a moral life (even if we are weak and still struggle); you are trying to live a chaste life
- basic physical and mental health (serious medical conditions will make it difficult for us to live and work as a priest)
- a reasonable academic ability (we may not have many qualifications, but we need to have a basic ability to study)
- a personal and emotional maturity (it will be very difficult for us to live in seminary, and to engage in pastoral work, if we have some deep and unresolved psychological issues; if we can’t get on comfortably with different people; if we are really struggling with some kind of addiction or anything else that is dominating our life at this moment)
- you have not been married; you do not have any big responsibilities that would take away your freedom to become a priest (children; huge debts; etc.)

HOW TO ‘INTERPRET THE SIGNS’

On their own, these signs listed here are not a guarantee of a vocation; they are different hints, small signs that the Lord may be speaking to us and calling us to priesthood. Like any language, they need interpreting, and we need help to interpret them. If it seems to you that some of these signs are very clear and strong, or if many of them seem to come together and add up and begin to form a pattern, then this can be the clearest sign that the Lord *is* calling you *at least to investigate and humbly take the next step*. And if these signs are missing, or they are very weak in our lives, then the Lord is probably not calling us, at least not yet.

The overarching sign of a vocation will be an enduring attraction to the idea of priesthood, that is accompanied by a deep sense of peace and joy in reflecting on this attraction. As I have said, this does not mean the attraction will be without fears and anxieties (of course we are a bit anxious!). But if the idea of priesthood

itself comes with a deep sense of panic or fear or anxiety (this is different from the natural humility and reluctance we feel) it may mean it is not right for us, and we would be much happier somewhere else! Usually, God gives us enough to go on - he does not play games with us. If we listen and look carefully, over a period of time, patiently, then usually a pattern will form, and things will become clearer or less clear. In this sense we do not need to ask for supernatural signs, visions, dreams, angels. We should certainly pray for help and guidance, but usually God will guide us in these ordinary ways.

WHAT TO DO NEXT

If these signs grow stronger and come together, *then we should take the next step* - talk to someone we trust; talk to our parish priest; talk to the vocations director of the Diocese. We move to a new stage in our discernment, which is trusting in the discernment of the Church, which is more objective and 'public' - it involves other people and ultimately the Bishop, who is the one with the final responsibility of calling people to the priesthood on behalf of Christ. It is hard to take this step and approach the Church and involve others; but it will also give us great peace - because it is no longer just us trying to find what is right, we have the support and advice of others.

At the end of the day, we can trust the Church to help us discern. If the Vocations Director encourages us to apply to the Diocese; and then if the Selection Conference supports us and our bishop accepts us, then this is the surest sign possible that the Lord is inviting us at least to take the next step into seminary. It still leaves 6 years to discern and become sure - but we can have the assurance that we are doing the right thing for the moment. If the Vocations Director suggests we hold back for a bit, or if the Bishop decides not to accept us for priesthood at this point, this is not a rejection or a negative thing - it is the way that God is leading us to something else, something that is more right for us, a different way of life where we can be holy and live out a different vocation. It may be that we come back to priesthood later; it may be that we become clearer about another direction.

For more practical tips about how to discern a vocation, see another article, also available on this website, called 'What can I do to become clearer about my vocation'; and see the list of 'Recommended reading' about priesthood and vocation.