

WHAT CAN I DO TO BECOME CLEARER ABOUT MY VOCATION?

By Father Stephen Wang, Diocese of Westminster

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 follows another article, also available on this website, called 'How do I know if God is calling me to be a priest?'

WHAT CAN I DO?

In the first article I talked about how we can know if God might be calling us to be a priest: What are the signs that we should look out for? It may be that the signs are becoming quite clear for you, and you have talked to the Vocations Director and are trying to take things forward. But if you are not clear, and you are not yet ready to make a decision, what can you do in the meantime?

Let's say you are working or studying - how can you make the most of this time? What is the best way to live your life, in such a way that you can be more and more open to your vocation (whatever it is)? How can you listen more and let God work in your life more? Obviously, we cannot force things; and we should be patient. Perhaps the Lord does not want to give us an answer now, and we just need to live our ordinary lives as faithfully as we can. He will make things clear in his own good time, and we can trust him, without getting all worried. But if we are serious about discerning our vocation, then there are certain things we can 'do'. Here are some tips - they are in order of priority. There are no magic answers; but if you really serious about discerning, these things will help. I'm sure you doing many already, maybe all of them - this is just in case!

THINGS YOU CAN DO THAT WILL GRADUALLY HELP YOU TO DISCERN YOUR VOCATION

1. **Give your life to God!** Give it completely. I am not talking about vocation here, but a deeper act of faith. Just say to him, 'I am completely yours, I give you everything; I will do whatever you ask of me, I let go of all my fears and doubts. Show me your will, and I will follow it. I am yours'. Say that as a prayer, and really mean it; and outside your prayer time have that attitude, that feeling with you in everything you do. This is the only way we find true freedom; and only if we are free can he call us. He will not let you down; he won't ask you to do something that is wrong for you, or that you are unable to fulfil - all he wants is your willingness and openness. This is the first and most fundamental part of being a Christian; and it's the first and most basic part of discovering our vocation. If we can't say it, we will always be fighting or missing something. So: give your life completely to God; tell him you are doing this, tell him you trust him, and mean it. This is no more than the words of the 'Our Father' - but often we say this prayer without meaning it personally.
2. **Deepen your prayer life.** Don't go mad, as if you can force God to give you an answer by praying all the time. But *deepen* your prayer life: have a routine, set

aside some time each day, which includes at least some time each morning and evening; have at least some quiet time to reflect and listen; some time to read the scriptures, especially the gospels, prayerfully - notice what attracts you, what speaks to you; have some time just to talk to the Lord, to ask for his help - talk to him with complete honesty; pray to Our Lady, maybe the rosary, maybe just a decade, whatever short prayer it is - entrust your life and your vocation to her; pray to saints, especially to the holy priests who understand what you are going through - St John Vianney, St Peter, St Dominic, St John Fisher, St Ignatius, St Padre Pio... At the end of each day look back on what happened, thank God for the good things that have happened, and say sorry for any sins you have committed.

3. **Deepen your love for the Mass.** Don't rush it or waste it. On Sunday, go a few minutes early to church to calm down; and stay a few minutes after Mass to pray, to say 'thanks', even if the church is noisy. Really listen to the prayers said during Mass - the ones you say and the ones the priest says on our behalf; really listen to the readings; really pray - don't just daydream through the Mass. Appreciate receiving holy communion more. Try and go to weekday Mass at least once a week as well as on Sunday, maybe more often if it is easy.
4. **Be really honest with yourself about your faults and sins.** First of all, admit them to yourself, then admit them to God in prayer, and then admit them in confession. Be really determined to live a life of holiness - this doesn't mean living in a boring, stuck up way, but simply living life as a good man, a just man, like St Joseph. If there are habits of sin in your life, face up to them, make a decision to begin anew; with big things, or small things, don't kid yourself and pretend they don't matter. If there is something in your way of life that is making it difficult to live good life, be honest about that, and make some changes - be realistic. We called to be saints, to find deep happiness in a life of goodness and holiness, and we can't find it if we are clinging to some sin. Often the Lord can't speak to us, or we can't hear him, if we are not living a Christian life. I am not saying that we have to be perfect before we can discover our vocation, or that we can conquer all sin suddenly just by making a decision - I am saying that we have to make the fundamental decision to want to give up sin; to try, with God's help; to do his will in all things. Of course we struggle with some things again and again, but at least we have begun to try and change our lives, with Christ's help. And if we don't know how to move forward, then we should ask for help, and talk to someone we trust. As for confession - this is not a rule I would give to everyone, but if you are committed to your faith and discerning seriously, I'd recommend that you go to confession every month, and stick at it - even if you feel you have nothing to say. The more we open our hearts with this kind of honesty, the more we will discover we need to confess. There are plenty of churches where we can go in Westminster Diocese.
5. **Live a life of service.** This is not just a boring cliché, but it should be part of your discernment; really make a decision to love and serve others. First of all, in your ordinary life, especially at your work, in your family, and for people you live with. Don't separate your Christian faith from your ordinary life - your work, with people you have not chosen to be with maybe, is a place to be helpful, to be generous, to do jobs others do not want to do, to bring joy, to

bring friendship to strangers and to the strange people. I'm sure you try and do this anyway, but this extra desire to be kind and generous will actually help your discernment, and perhaps will help your vocation grow; because it is part of the way Christ makes us more like him, the way he expands our hearts. Our hearts have to grow into priesthood, grow into that priestly love; and one way he starts that, and tests and confirms it, is by growing in dedication to service and sacrifice for others; and then discovering that we find satisfaction and a deeper meaning in that. So daily life is most important; but also perhaps think of doing something extra that is an act of service; voluntary work; help the poor somehow, not with money but practical help; ask your parish priest if there is some way you can help in the parish; youth work or visiting or something. There is no need to do everything, but try and have one thing that takes out of your normal life and allows you to give and be stretched.

6. **Find some good spiritual reading.** Have a book that you can dip into every day or two; something that inspires you about Christian faith or prayer or the bible; something about the priesthood; the lives of the saints; what the Church believes; how to pray. Read a little bit every day, and at least something every week. Don't force yourself to read something that you don't like - if a book isn't helping and inspiring you, then move on and find something else. And of course this applies to tapes and websites and podcasts and TV stations. Just make sure, as much as possible, that it is spiritually nourishing for you, and that it is faithful, Catholic food. See the list of 'Recommended reading' about priesthood and vocations that can be found on this website.
7. **Talk honestly with someone you trust.** At some stage you need to talk about your sense of vocation and not just keep it to yourself. You might not find the ideal 'guru', but just try and think of someone who is wise and has a deep faith. It might be your parish priest, or another priest you know; it might be a wise layperson in the parish or somewhere else. You might call them your 'spiritual director', but the title is not important. It is good to have one-off conversations; but it is also good to have someone you can talk over time, coming back to things; who can give advice and give an outside opinion; and can help you see some patterns in your faith and vocation that emerge over a period of time.
8. **Join a Catholic group.** It doesn't matter if it is a vocations discernment group, or a parish prayer group, or a bible study group, or a young-adult socialising group. The main thing is to make sure that you are not living your faith alone, and that you have other people around to encourage you, and to help you see that you are not the only person exploring your direction in life. There is a great list of Young Adult groups on the Westminster Diocese website: See <http://www.rcdow.org.uk/> and then follow Youth/Young Adults, and then Movements and Organisations.

So there is list! It is not an assault course! These are ordinary things that help, that can be part of your lives, without as it were changing the structure of your life very much. If you are doing all this, almost certainly, things will become clearer, gradually. The list of 'signs' I gave earlier should become clearer, because your life is becoming more open to God, and you are giving him more space so he can speak

to you. You should find that the sense of vocation grows and deepens, or fades and becomes less important. Gradually, more and more things in your life will seem to point to the priesthood, fit in, and you will be getting to the stage where you want to take the next step, whatever that is. *Or* it will all become less loud and less urgent; or something else will happen that will become more important, perhaps something that will take you by surprise; and you will find yourself drawn in other directions.

There is no need to be paralysed or stuck. If you discerning, that's fine - be patient; live the kind of life I have been suggesting - things will become clearer. If you are really confused and stuck, not sure which way to go, with contradicting signs and signals - then talk to someone, a spiritual director, the vocations director of the Diocese. Get advice, get an outside opinion; don't get stuck in a rut. If they advise you to move forward, then be open, trust God through them, and take the next step; if they think not, then accept this for a while, let go of the idea for a while, and see if it goes away. If you are really serious about vocation, and many things in what I have written speak to you, but you just don't know how to move forward, maybe a bit of you is unsure, a bit afraid, then perhaps it's time to take the next step and see what happens. Be brave; take a risk. Above all: Don't be afraid. It's God who is leading you forward; he has plans for you, whatever they are; you can't go wrong if you are trying to do his will and listening and doing all you can. He won't let you down.

See the list of 'Recommended Reading' about priesthood and vocation that can be found on this website.