

The Elements of a True Priestly Vocation

The following is the sermon preached by Bishop Fulton J. Sheen at St. Bernard's Seminary Thursday evening, Sept. 19, opening the academic year.

Each of you is here because you believe you have a vocation to be a priest. But what is a vocation?

Sociologically, the vocation is defined by the responses given to a questionnaire, for example, 42% of seminarians stated it was because they wanted to work in the Inner City. Psychologically, the vocation is defined as a vague desire to fill up emptiness and avoid frustration.

Neither of these views takes account of God Who gives the vocation. Let us then go to Scriptures (Isaiah 6/1) to discover why you are in a seminary.

1. To know that God is holy
2. To know that you are unholy
3. To change your unholliness to holiness
4. Through love of Christ Crucified

A young man, Isaiah, in the midst of an economic and political crisis of his nation, enters the Temple. The King Uzziah had reigned for fifty-two years, during which time the people were prosperous and victorious. The son, Jonathan, who was only 25, ascended the throne when the war clouds were gathering.

The very day Uzziah died of leprosy, Isaiah, a solitary young figure in the midst of the trouble of the times, lingered in the Temple absorbed in prayer. He could not be blind to the social problems of our times. But how would they be solved? Should he dedicate himself to the regeneration of his people? Was he sufficiently pure to direct people when the glory of political peace had vanished?

Isaiah sees the Lord sitting on the throne, high and lifted up; above it stood the Seraphim or the burning ones, each with six wings; two wings covered the face, so as not to see; a man brought out of darkness into blazing light is blinded.

Two wings covered the feet, so as not to be seen in their creatureliness. The closer we get to God the more imperfect we feel; we hide that which signifies so much our earthliness.

And finally there were two wings for flight or service. To divide profound reverence and self-effacement from service is to court disaster. As though on mission to do God's Will, the Seraphim cried out to one another: "Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God of Hosts!"

Our modern world which has become so much concerned with "involvement", "commitment", "identity" and "the secular city" has forgotten holiness. Its dedication is toward the practical, the inner city, catechetical, and pastoral activity, but all these can be vain unless it is preceded by a deep and profound sense of being holy.

It is true that there is no love of God without the world being included. But the love of the world without the love of God soon vanished into a kind of a brotherhood without tears.

Vocation begins with a sense of the Holiness of God — it begins with the Holy Trinity, not with the unholy "I". But what is holiness? Negatively, it is a separation, a being "called out" from the world, a "coming" to Christ before "going" to the world.

A vessel was holy if it was set apart for Divine service; a sheep or bullock offered to God was holy if it was without blemish (Deut. 17/1). The mark of the holy is distinctiveness in purpose. Moses



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saw many bushes, but only one was blazing. The incense of Moses was the same chemically as that of Korah, Dathan and Abiram; but only that of Moses was acceptable. The ark of God was ordinary wood and the stones of the temple were quarried from the same stones that were laid in the streets, but the vocation of some was different.

In outward appearance, you too are like other young men. But you are called to be Holy, Holy, Holy God; and any of us who serve in God's Temple as did the merchants and traffickers, will be driven out by the scourges of Christ Himself. You are like other youths as Christ was like other men, but you are unlike them because you are called to be a Priest-Victim as Christ the Priest offered himself.

Holiness also means "whole", or integral or total. There is no keeping back something as did Adam; there are no reservations or conditions, such as the three would-be followers offered to Our Lord.

What health is to the body, that holiness is to the soul. Unless a healthy sap circulates in a tree, it will not bear fruit, so only a holy priest can produce spiritual fruit. Yes, you will be sent to work in the world, but only after you are anointed with the oil of ordination. Oil, in Scripture, is the symbol of holiness. Oil will not mix with anything not akin to itself. Its presence may calm troubled waters, heal wounds and beautify wood, but it will not mix with them.

So the spirit of holiness is not the spirit of the world; the Spirit of Christ is not the Spirit of anti-Christ. Holiness is life gradually detaching itself from things. Heaven, indeed, showed its love by keeping in touch with the earth, but the human, to perfect itself, must keep in touch with heaven.

The manhood of Christ is your model! Draw near to His Presence.

A man may be born in Borneo with the genius of a Giotto, but unless he is exposed to great teachers and masters of painting, he will never rise about the level of a sign painter. Unless you plunge into every detail of His life, recognize His accessibility to you in the Tabernacle, and have a passion to conform to Him, you will have no greater stability than a Demas, "who goes back to the world".

But if you have a sense of the holy, you will be like Aaron who went into the Holy of Holies wearing a breastplate of jewels representing the Twelve Tribes upon it. You will go before the presence of God with all of the worries, the sorrows,

his shoes from his feet and hid his face.

At Sinai, people trembled and said, "Let not God speak with us lest we die." When the glorious vision of the Living Christ came to John at Patmos, he said, "I fell at His feet, as dead." And Peter said to the Lord after a display of His power, "Depart from me, O Lord, for I am a sinful man".

Live away from God and then sin, egotism and selfishness will lie lightly as gossamer upon conscience. But draw near to God, and you will feel humility and weakness. Catch the awesomeness of His real presence, and you will see yourself. You will never see how underserving you are until you see how lovely He is.

The contrast is terrible. You will no longer leap up with joy at a sense of your unworthiness, but rather beat your breast, saying, "Woe is me". But this will also be a sign that your vocation is not from yourself but from the Holiness of God.

But as Isaiah did not find himself driven from God on account of his sinfulness, so neither must you. The same vision which intensified his consciousness of sin, now assures him of its removal, and this brings us to the third step in the life of a seminarian.

Purification and Self-Discipline
One of the Seraphim goes to the altar which stood in front of the porch of the Temple, and taking off the altar a glowing coal of fire, continued its flight across the court of the Temple to where Isaiah stood, then touched his unclean lips, purging them with fire and making them clean. It was because of the recognition of unworthiness that the Angel took the cleansing fire to his lips.

He who is satisfied with himself never sees the need of change. Repentance is born of our former unlikeness to the holy, and a resolve to turn back on the very things that block out that likeness.

Self-denial, mortification, the daily carrying of the cross, the burning of the purgatory of sins and our habits, are the necessary condition of preparation for the priesthood. "Do penance or you shall all likewise perish."

The light which illumines hurts, but it brings into contrast our customary moods and surroundings with the dignity of our calling. "Who feels the pain and squalor and the world's ugliness? The man who has stood before the dream of beauty." Who is shocked by dirt, except the one who is clean; whose ears rebel at discord except the master of harmony?

You are deluding yourselves if you believe that you can readily accept the highest when you see it. While the Holiness of God pulls you heavenward, your human condition pulls you earthward. The tendency of things is towards the path of least resistance. White fences become black fences; the Twelve become Eleven.

Sometimes when you catch a vision of what you are called to be, you may wish almost, because of the renunciation and the burning demands. Every vocation lures, and yet it tortures. That is

why you have to be of stronger stuff than other men.

You have no vocation if you think its purpose is to make you think about God, while forgetting to discover what God thinks of you. Your concern in the seminary is not to discover self-identity, but Christ-identity.

There are two faculties in which you must be assaulted: one is your mind and your "battleground" is to bring down every deceptive fantasy and every imposing defense that man erect against the true knowledge of God. To capture every thought until it acknowledges the authority of Christ. (2 Cor. 10/5) The other is your will, the seat of your affections. Give your heart to heavenly things, not to the passing things of earth". (Col. 3/2).

This is why you are here: to know that God is holy, to know that you are unholy and to make yourselves holy by love of the Cross.

The Final Mission

When you have learned these three lessons you will hear, as did Isaiah, the words: "Whom shall I send? Who will go for us?"

When Joshua, the High Priest, stands before the Lord, "clothed with filthy garments", the word of grace which comes forth concerning him is, "Take away the filthy garments from him". Your mandate here is to change your lives, to deny yourself not that you may be cut off, but that you may abound; to so empty yourself of self that you have hardly a life of your own: "I died on the Cross with Christ, and my present life is not the old I" but the living Christ within me" (Gal. 2/20)

"Whom shall I send?" is a proclamation from the Commander's tent, to a storming party of volunteers to mount the breach. Who will expose and denounce wickedness in high places? Who will proclaim the insincerity of priests? Who will go to the market places and declare the dishonesty of traffic? Who is willing to speak without convincing, to sow without a harvest, to endure and to fall?

Notice the particular kind of men for whom this voice is seeking: men who are serious, men under impulse, men under authority. What a strange linking of necessity and freedom; of willing, and yet having a power over us.

Did not Samuel himself reply: "Here I am, for though I didn't call me." This is a full grown answer to the Voice of the Eternal. There are no conditions, no reservations, no searching for loopholes. There is only the call in God's own way, and for God's own mission.

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Is this call, irresistible? It is not, even when it comes from above, for God accepts no forced service. With Isaiah, then, in answer to the call, you say: "send me", meaning that we let human love out, the love of Christ in. Then rejoice in the call.

It is like a covenant, a bond is formed which cannot be easily broken. You will be a human life consciously offered to the Divine Person and in such a covenant there is a peace, the like of which the world cannot understand.

The vessel may be wrecked and the sailors perishing; souls may be clinging to the rigging of Peter's bark, some may be washed off one by one, and yet there are lifeboats to be launched. Man the boats, there are ears that have to be lifted: Who will leap in and take the oar for the love of Christ and for dying men? There is no such thing as, "I will go if..." Loins have to be girded.

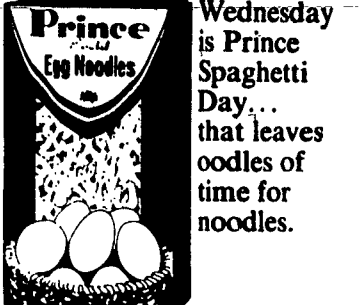
How many of you will ever get so far as to say: "send me", we do not know. Presently, you are like the thirty thousand soldiers of Gideon. God said the army was too great: "Call the cowards to leave". Two-thirds of them were cowards. God sent the ten thousand left to the river bank to watch them drink, some leis-

urely threw themselves prone upon the bank to drink from the water. Three hundred of them ran along the river's edge and lapped up the water. God said to Gideon: "This is your army".

We invite the cowards and all who are given to the supremacy of the ego, to the walking around the Cross and to conditional service, to leave.

We invite, on the other hand, all who have heard the Voice of God, who are conscious of their own sinfulness and who want to be Christ-like—we invite them to stay saying: "In the agony, in the face of the terrible token of the world's dire need, and in the agony of Christian love, here I am, dear Lord, send me".

Hey, Mrs. McGee



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