

Must Show Youth: Priesthood Is Worthy

Last of a two-part series
By William J. O'Malley, SJ

Because of its presuppositions, the "world" treats all human mysteries as problems, and the solutions it now offers for the most basic human cravings are thin fare, but like popcorn, they are temporarily quite filling. For loneliness and self-distaste and alienation, there are TV, pills, video games, casual sex, and an increasing number of other forms of slow and palliative suicide. For the need to be somebody, to be important, to count, there are the bank balance, the extra car, the raise, the house at the lake; even ulcers can be worn as a badge of success. For the need to belong to something bigger than oneself, there is the country club, Hell's Angels, or the Myth of Progress. For the need for permanence, there are the facelift, the weight-reducing gimmick, the Cadillac hearse to the watertight burial vault.

What is being tranquilized with placebos is the human spirit, which yearns for something more than temporary fulfillment of those needs. And in becoming dispirited, we have become dehumanized. And the dehumanizing pacifiers are as pervasive and subtle as poisoned gas, everywhere but unrecognizable. What makes man human is being slowly sucked out of him. For reasons he cannot even fathom, he is being bribed to surrender whatever powers within him that made him more than a beast, and without which he becomes a beast: his self, his soul.

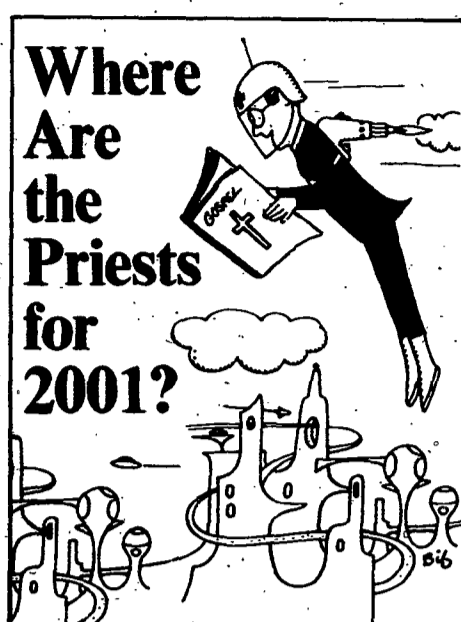
In such an atmosphere, do not be surprised that so few young men want to give up their lives for the gospel. Be surprised that so few have given up on the Church entirely. The gospel, after all, goes against the grain of the secularist value system now engendered in a boy since birth by the multimedia. The cult of competition has also infected him perhaps more than he realizes: report cards, athletics, family rivalries, college boards, parents' expectations, and so on. The world cheers: "We're Number One! We're Number One!" But Christ says, "If you want the first place, take the last place." Difficult — to say the least — to harmonize those two diametrically opposite outlooks.

Nowhere does uncritical tolerance of today's secularism create more confusion than in the area of sex, which is a very recent and very volcanic discovery of each young man within himself. In my era, the onslaught of puberty was exactly the same; it was then, and is now — no matter how many new school courses — a battle for understanding which one fights alone. Today, however, the world in which that sexual maturity comes of age is far different from what it was when vocations were plentiful. When I was in eighth grade one had to sneak into the library's art books to see what a naked woman looked like, or hope that this month The National Geographic would take one more jaunt to mysterious Africa. Today, any neighborhood drugstore has a whole cornucopia of lust sufficient to satiate the demands of all but the most salacious. The young man who decides to become a celibate today must have a stronger conviction that I did, coming as he may from a co-ed dorm where some of his fellow students' roommates wear pantyhose.

Why should a man embrace celibacy when there are so many other more immediately satisfying realities he can now safely embrace? Why should he deny himself a part of life that most men take for granted and some believe essential for total fulfillment as a human being and as a man? Why, indeed? Unless he believes there is something even more essential.

College, itself, ironically, is another deterrent to vocation. There is, to be sure, the wise choice of going to college at least for a while before considering a vocation, in order to achieve a fuller maturity, a clearer realization of the options, a more certain possession of oneself as a person. If one is to "lose his life for the Kingdom," he must certainly be in possession of a self to lose, and he must see the Kingdom as a value worth that sacrifice.

But there is, even toward the end of college, for some reason, the real desire to "keep one's options open." Why commit yourself to one choice when suddenly another one might appear that is better? For more than a few, it is easier to live



together than to commit oneself to marriage, easier to change majors or go on for an advanced degree than to commit oneself to a particular career right now, easier to say I want to give "life" a try before committing myself to a vocation. All well and good unless one delays and delays until circumstances take away one's freedom and dictate a choice. Something — and I don't know what it is — has convinced our young that, if you just play your cards right, you can have it all: fabulous wealth and selfless generosity, epic sex and one loving wife, human fulfillment without risk or commitment, God and Mammon. As Charlie Brown says, "Good luck."

The greatest enemy of vocations today is, I think, the hope that one can remain an innocent bystander. If one of the battle-cries is, "Don't get involved," don't expect a new wave of priestlings. Without comprehending, many parents fuel this desire for the safe-but-profitable lane. In the first place, the problems of the world and the Church are just too overwhelmingly numerous and varied to cope with without risking your own sanity and happiness. Best you stay within your own hedges, and, like Candide, tend your own garden. Nor can we disclaim that in our concrete decisions materialism has not encroached on our Christian altruism. One senior told me he went home one evening and told his father, a daily communicant, that he'd decided he wanted to be a teacher, to help young kids to come alive. And without missing a beat, the father replied, "Come on! How much can you make doing that?"

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Except for Catholics in positions of power in government and communications, there are few of us who can have any major effect on these secularist influences which seduce young men from even remotely considering priestly vocations. All we can do is our fumbling best to offer them reasonable and appealing alternatives: awareness of others, generosity, service — Christ.

And yet since the days of Christ himself, the Church has battled the worldly values. Judas, his friend, betrayed him for about half the price of the ointment with which the woman had bathed Jesus' feet. One instant before the Ascension, the first 11 specially trained priests were asking Jesus if he was finally going to give them those big golden thrones. Ananias was torn between the Church and security. But the Church and its priesthood not only survived but flourished. If we can do nothing really significant about the world which entices young men, we can surely do something about the Church which, demonstrably, does not entice them.

In the first place, what looks to some like a healthy diversity in the "new" Church looks painfully like total disharmony, confusion, and even anarchy to others. As we have seen, in the old days we were all lined up together against "them." Now, it seems not only that there is no "them" to be against, but also that we are spending a great deal of our time and creative energies on in-house squabbles. The Letters section of any diocesan paper gives the young some indication of the matters vocal Catholics think important. Who wants to give the one life he has to a group that at least seems to be headed in all directions at once, including backwards?

What's more, all the visible props, the concrete symbols that sustained vocations in my day are pretty much gone: the sodality, first Fridays, novenas, rosaries, medals, May devotions, etc. Much of it, I admit, was uncritical piety, and I myself would probably wince with embarrassment to listen to a high school senior by a statue of Our Lady at lunch hour extolling "The Tower of Ivory." (If that's an "in" joke, it shows how far we have come.) But very little in the way of new symbols has come to take the place of those external signs which gave us a sense of identity. No one would underestimate the cohesive value to a school, for example, of letter sweaters, the head of a knight painted in the jump circle, the awards enshrined in our trophy cases — in fortifying our sense of being a living and organic community. But what symbol-supports does the Church have today which strengthen a young man's sense of community with it?

Absolutely crucially, albeit briefly, when will we face the fact that, once the Mass stops being boring, the priesthood will begin to become attractive?

At ground zero, I believe, the greatest obstacle to priestly vocation within the Church today is the joylessness of the Church and its folk.

One day in an elevator in Toronto, a priest happened to realize that the man with whom he shared the elevator was Groucho Marx. With a little throat clearing, he overcame his timidity and said to Groucho, "Mr. Marx, I don't mean to intrude, but I want to thank you for all the joy you've given us." Groucho flipped his cigar and said, "I wish I could say the same for you fellas."

When Claire Booth Luce was thinking of becoming a Catholic, she said she found herself looking at men in Roman collars and saying to them inside herself, "You say you have the truth. Well, the truth should set you free, bring you alive, give you joy. Can I see your joy?"

"Why do you want to be a priest?" When I answered that question on my application to the Society of Jesus 30 years ago, I put down "to save my soul and the souls of others." I suppose somebody told me to write that, or I thought it would impress the daylighters out of the provincial. Every other applicant probably wrote the same thing. I really entered with a goal far simpler and more concrete than that. I realize now. I wanted to be like the Jesuits I knew — whatever that meant.

Father William J. O'Malley teaches at McQuaid Jesuit High School and is an occasional contributor to the Courier-Journal.

It was the infectiousness of those men's lives which seduced me away from my fears about my unworthiness, from my hesitations to give up my home, my future career, my wife and children. Their visible joy and enthusiasm about their work together in the Church made me — for reasons I wouldn't possibly have fathomed then — want to surrender anything in order to have that pearl of great price.

But today, we seem to play things much closer to the vest. When I ask each of my seniors to ask their parents what they feel about God, at least a third of the 2,000 I've taught preferred to guess because, as they put it, "we don't talk about those things," or "my parents believe that's too personal," or some such. At least in those cases, our feelings about God are as secret from kids as our salaries and our sins. That uptightness spills over into our community declaration of faith and solidarity. Unlike rock concerts, our liturgies are sedate, ordered, uninspired and therefore uninspiring. Is it any wonder more young men aspire to be rock musicians than aspire to be priests?

There is hope, however. Beneath all the fears, young men today are still quite like young men 30 years ago. I'm constantly amused by the fact that the boys I teach still empathize so strongly with Holden Caulfield, the hero of J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*. They resonate with his thwarted idealism, his constant focus on his own shortcomings, his misery in the face of the whole phony adult world — with its pseudo-sophistication, its consumerism, its negation of innocence. It gives me a kick to remind my students that Holden Caulfield and I celebrated our 50th birthdays this year, that Salinger wrote *Catcher* about my generation.

Under the veneer of 1984 problems, there is a perennial young man: hopeful, generous, altruistic, willing to devote his one life to a worthy cause — if only, in today's welter of siren songs, he could find one truly worth his life. All we need to do is show him — all of us — that the priesthood is a worthy, fulfilling, joyful cause and, like the fearful young Isaiah, he will come forward and say, "Here I am. Send me."

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