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Faith Today

THE PRIEST



By Katharine Bird
NC News Service

"There are as many stories about vocations as people to tell them," says Father Robert Sherry, a priest of the Diocese of Rockford, Ill.

He is director of the U.S. bishops' Committee on Priestly Formation.

"The young often wait for a visible, tangible sign of what God wants" of them, he said. But, in Father Sherry's 14 years experience in vocations work, this seldom happens. In fact, he is skeptical of people who come to him with accounts of a sudden call from God. "Too often it's an isolated religious experience with no past and usually no future," he said.

More frequently, Father Sherry continued, uncovering a vocation is a slow, gradual process played out with little fanfare or drama.

He says a "sense that God was calling me" to the priesthood began in his early youth. The feeling persisted, nourished by encouragement from happy priests and support from family and peers. He was ordained in 1966.

Father John Castelot, a priest of the Archdiocese of Detroit, began to think about becoming a priest after watching his boyhood pastor in action. "Everyone loved him. I wanted to be like him and made him the model for my own ministry," the biblical scholar said.

Father Castelot was ordained 43 years ago and teaches at St. John's Seminary in Plymouth, Mich.

Father Castelot has helped out in the same parish for 15 years. "I

Vocations

A special rapport can develop between a priest and a congregation at Mass. "It tells me we're all on a journey together, we're taking time to recognize what it is and to reach out to God together," comments one priest.

know the people and they know me," he said. "There's a wonderful sense of belonging" that comes from worshiping with the same people week after week.

The first part of the Mass, with its scripture reading and homily, especially interests him. Homilies give me a chance "to translate the abstract truths of Christianity into the concerns of daily life — to make them real for people," Father Castelot explained.

The strong bond with people that is experienced during worship was also singled out by Father Sherry. Sometimes a special "rapport is set up between me and the congregation," he explained. "It tells me we're all on a journey together, we are taking time to recognize what that journey is and to reach out to God together."

When this happens, "it's a beautiful realization that I'm doing what I want to do — being an effective leader of prayer."

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Belonging to a support group of priests that meets regularly is im-

portant to Father Sherry. "Talking over life's affairs, its burdens and problems and joys, and praying together with people I trust" is very beneficial, he said.

Just knowing that the group exists, that he can share his feelings with understanding friends, helps Father Sherry deal with the exhaustion he sometimes encounters in trying to be "available to people," he said.

He noted that Father Vincent Dwyer developed a model of life-sharing groups that many priests find useful. A Trappist, Father Dwyer has done pioneering work on what priests need in "an age of transition," Father Sherry said. "There's no growth without relationship" in this view.

What qualities does a vocation director look for in prospective candidates to the priesthood? Father Sherry said that in the initial exploratory interview the top quality on his list is "some involvement in a service-related responsibility."

He pointed to an estimate by sociologists that only 10 percent of the population possess this

kind of service orientation. Since service is an important dimension of the priest's role, a person with a history of service establishes a basis for his interest in the priesthood, Father Sherry thinks. It indicates a person "is willing to give himself to others."

He added that the type of service varies considerably. It might be teaching religious education classes, volunteering at an alcohol or drug abuse center, or simply liking to help people and choosing a field of study — like law — that furthers this interest.

Other qualities that the priest looks for include a willingness to learn and to work with others, and some experience in leadership positions.

Father Sherry also asks prospective candidates to talk about their vision of the church and the role of a priest today. This can be quite illuminating, he said. Having people "formulate their dream" helps him assess how realistic an individual's thinking about the priesthood is, he said.

Father Sherry said he hopes to see prospective seminarians focus on the qualities and skills they will need to be priests.

He likes to see a "real connection" between the talents an individual possesses and the values he wants to live by. Ideally, Father Sherry concluded, the individual will talk about continuing his service orientation and adding a "priestly dimension" — as a leader of prayer, in the search for justice or in caring for the needs of families, youths or adults.

(Ms. Bird is associate editor of Faith Today.)