

CONTINUED...

Waters

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The notion of vocation today has a broader meaning than the traditional one that, in the popular mind, limited vocations to the priesthood or religious life, according to Marvin Mich, a professor of theology at St. Bernard's Institute.

"To look at vocations today is to look at everyone's calling to a baptismal commitment," Mich noted. "I think that's what Vatican II helped to focus on."

The gathered bishops at the Second Vatican Council wrote that all people are called to share in the mission of the church.

"Christ the Lord, high priest taken from among men, has made this new people a kingdom of priests to God, his Father. The baptized by regeneration and the anointing of the Holy Spirit, are consecrated to be a spiritual house and a holy priesthood." ("Dogmatic Constitution on the Church.")

Mich said the council emphasized baptism rather than holy orders as the key sacrament in the church.

"The root sacrament is baptism," he explained. "We are all called to live out that faith, but some have a special calling to live out that faith as ordained."

Through baptism, Mich continued, "there is a universal sense of vocation. There's one Christian vocation, but a diversity of gifts."

Pope John Paul II, during this year's Chrism Mass April 4 at St. Peter Basilica, stated the same basic idea.

"In his anointing, Christ gathers together all who participate in his consecration: the baptized, the confirmed, the ordained," he said. "Every baptized person, then, shares in the royal and prophetic priesthood of Christ to offer spiritual sacrifices pleasing to God."

"All of us are called," acknowledged Sister Jane Schur, vocation director for the Sisters of Mercy of Rochester. "Christians in general all have that call to spread the kingdom. It isn't a hierarchy. It's one different than the other."

Still, as a result of this broadened understanding of the Christian vocation, Mich observed, "the term 'vocation' is not used as much as 'ministry.' Ministry has subsumed what was meant by vocation in the past."

Even in the past, however, some confusion existed over how broad the term 'vocation' was.

Although vocation was often limited in people's minds to the priesthood and religious life, Father Paul D. Holland, SJ,

noted in the *New Dictionary of Theology* (1987) that the four traditional vocations cited by church authorities for years — even before Vatican II — have been the priesthood, religious life, marriage and the single state.

Beyond these four 'vocations,' Catholics have begun applying the term to other aspects of the faith. In particular, Mich noted, the words 'ministry' and 'vocation' have been used in terms of service in the church. Thus in recent years lay people have taken on added duties as lectors, eucharistic ministers, church personnel and so on.

But Mich noted that the notions of vocation and ministry really involve more than such direct service to the church.

"Some people want to limit ministry to ecclesial ministry," Mich remarked. "In fact, most ministry is not ecclesial. It is in the world. If the church really helped parents to be good parents and people to do their jobs effectively, that's ministry."

Gregory Pierce has examined the work-world aspects of vocation. He was spurred to undertake this study through reading the documents of Vatican II as they were being released.

"I just remember reading (them) when I was in the seminary, and it really struck me that everyone had a vocation," he said.

Pierce later left the seminary and married, and became co-publisher of ACTA Publications in Chicago. He and William Droel published *Confident and Competent: A Challenge for the Lay Church* in 1987.

Pierce prefers to avoid the terms 'vocation' or 'ministry.'

"The phrase that I like to use and seems to cover everything is the 'spirituality of work,'" Pierce said. "It is the search for the meaningful, the holy, the divine."

"I think the first issue is, 'Can you find God in the midst of what you're doing?'" Pierce continued. "Then it becomes an issue of touching the transcendent. Then it becomes a vocation."

But Sister Marilyn Pray, novitiate program coordinator for the Sisters of St. Joseph of Rochester, is not comfortable with that broad concept of vocation.

"The idea of vocation takes on more than, 'Right now I'm happy in this job



and I find God in it," Sister Pray commented.

Her own sense of vocation as a religious, she said, is "much more at the core of my identity. There's something more ontological about your vocation. I've done many professional things in my life as a religious."

Pierce contends that vocation does not necessarily mean a calling to a particular state of

life or occupation.

"Does God sit up there and say you ought to be a priest, you ought to be a publisher, you ought to be a parent?" he said. "I don't think so."

Sister Schur, however, is a firm believer in the idea of a specific call.

"It is a call by God," Sister Schur said of religious life. Such a call, she added, "is a mystery."

In her work, she sees women discerning their call years after ignoring it — often because of pressure by society or family, or because they mistakenly thought that as lay involvement increased, traditional vocational paths were becoming outdated.

"We're seeing now some of the women who missed out on it because of the bad rap it had in the 1960s and 1970s," Sister Schur said.

Likewise, Father DeSocio is seeing more men like himself who are exploring the priesthood after having tried secular life.

"They have followed that route, but they sense that there's a call to the priesthood," he said. "There's something missing in their lives."

He said that one point he tries to make with these men, however, is that vocation is not simply a choice, that, once made, completes a point in their lives.

"We have to get away from the notion that they choose and they do it," he added. "They are doing it, and it is unfolding to them."

Pope John Paul II, in a letter to priests for Holy Thursday, cited this notion of vocation unfolding in terms of the priesthood.

The road does not end with ordination, Pope John Paul said. That is just the beginning "of a journey which continues until death."

"Our priestly life, like every authentic

form of Christian existence, is a succession of responses to God who calls," the pope said.

Father DeSocio said that some individuals have avoided their sense of calling out of fear of long-term commitments or sacrifices — giving up marriage, as priests and religious do, or giving up some freedom, as married people seem to.

"This notion of giving up things — it's not really that," Father DeSocio contended. "It's sort of moving toward something."

For example, Sister Schur said, women who respond to the call to be religious discover community and opportunities for corporate prayer that married couples or single people might not find as readily. And the vows that religious make "enable us to do more work."

Sister Pray said that when people discern — and thus move beyond the fears — they discover the call that is within them.

"You know that you are called to this way of life," she said. "There is not a lot of rationality to it. How do you explain who you fell in love with? You don't. It makes no sense unless there was a spiritual calling from God."

Moreover, even if men come to him to explore the priesthood, and decide that it is not the right path for them, there is no sense of blame, Father DeSocio noted.

"When that doesn't lead to the ordained priesthood, we don't look at that as failure, or they didn't make it," the priest said. "I don't deal with people who are 'preordained.'"

"There's no lesser or better vocation," the priest continued. "It's the discerning of where things are leading you."

Sister Pray is even optimistic about the fact that fewer people are responding to the traditional callings of priesthood and religious life at this time.

"I think the decline in vocations has to do with trying to birth new ways of religious life that we don't even know yet," she observed.

"What it really comes down to is the question of mission instead of ministry," Pierce suggested. "Does the church have a mission? What is the mission? And if it has a mission, who are the missionaries? If the mission of the church is to transform the world, then we are all missionaries."

Mich acknowledged that the church is in transition in terms of people's understanding of vocation and ministry.

Ultimately, he said, the central question that needs to be asked is simply: "How can the church achieve its mission, and who can accomplish this?"

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