

Current Topics

Concerning Vocations

The recent ordination to the priesthood of students from Meeanee and Mosgiel has no doubt made many young men think seriously of their future, and of the possibility of their being called to serve God in the ecclesiastical state. But the subject of vocation is a difficult one, and it is not always easy to know whether one is called by God or not. It may be useful, therefore, to explain what is meant by a vocation, and to point out the signs by which it may be known. A vocation has been defined to be 'neither a miraculous interference of Providence nor a mere persuasion of pious fancy, but the Will of God manifested beforehand, indicating the state of life that one should choose.' When our Lord passed along the shores of the Sea of Galilee and said to Simon and Andrew, who were there mending their fishing nets, 'Come after Me and I shall make you fishers of men'—He called them in a very plain way: that was the Will of God manifested beforehand. But, as a rule, the invitation is not so pointed; no express messenger comes from heaven; God's Will has to be inferred from certain signs. These signs may be more strongly marked in some, less strongly in others; but in all these are sufficiently strong to justify one in going to an ecclesiastical college in order to find out whether God is calling one to the priesthood or to the life of a good layman in the world.

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What are these signs? In ordinary cases, they come to fitness for the work and a genuine desire to undertake the work. When God wishes a man to serve Him in a particular state, He may be trusted to give that man an inclination thereto and the necessary qualifications. If the inclination and qualifications are present, it may be safely inferred that God is calling one to the priesthood; if these are not present, it may be just as safely inferred that there is no vocation. To make the matter still clearer, we venture to quote the explanation given by Father O'Reilly, S.J. This learned and pious Jesuit was Professor of Theology in Maynooth College from 1838 to 1851, and was spoken of by Cardinal Newman in his famous *Letter to the Duke of Norfolk* as 'a great authority' and 'one of the first theologians of the day.' In his explanation, Father O'Reilly speaks of the religious state, but his remarks hold good for a vocation to the priesthood. (1) 'Vocation to the religious state seems to consist practically in complete or quite sufficient fitness for the state, without any extrinsic obstacle, either in the shape of impossibility or in that of some obligation inconsistent with the state. This is a *sufficient* vocation, taking into account the intrinsic excellence and preferableness of the religious state. It is the best state for any whom it really answers; and it really answers those in whom the conditions above stated are found. (2) A vocation may be rendered more than sufficient either by a strong *impulse of grace towards the religious state* or by the spiritual necessity a person is under of taking refuge in it from dangers to his salvation. The impulse of grace towards the religious state may be sensible [that is to say, accompanied by a natural feeling or inclination for the religious state] or it may be merely rational and dry [that is, a person feels persuaded he *ought* to serve God in that way]. Frequent importunate thoughts of the religious state as desirable may be and are, at least very often, effects and signs of such an impulse of grace, or more properly the impulse itself. (3) There may be a vocation more than sufficient without a sensible attraction and even with a good deal of sensible repugnance, especially occasional repugnance. (4) When it is prudently judged on mature reflection that there is a decided impulse of grace towards the religious state, though no obvious necessity on the score of avoiding dangers, it is dangerous not to follow the call, considering that it is a call of God, on obedience to which the abundance of graces important for salvation may depend.'

Father O'Reilly then goes on to give answers to certain particular cases. Here are two of the cases and answers:—(1) The case of one who would gladly become a priest or enter a religious Order, if *God wished it*, and would as gladly remain in the world if *God wished it*, but cannot feel sure which He does wish. His answer to this case is as follows:—'Such a person, if perfectly fit and not having any obstacle of much account—looking at the matter spiritually—would seem to have a sufficient vocation. There may indeed be some reason to doubt the person's fitness on account of the being undecided; but this reason may not, all things considered, be of much weight. In some such cases, the person would do well to make a jump on the side of religion, without waiting to be more decidedly led into it by one's own reason and feelings. Such persons should often pray for a vocation.' (2) The case of one who at times prefers the life of the priest or the life of religion, and at times the life, honorable and God-fearing, of an ordinary Christian in the world, but then by and by would sooner forego all and be devoted to God—and yet won't decide. His answer to this second case is as follows:—'These attractions of the world are merely human reasons, and therefore should not be taken into account in weighing the reasons for and against entering religion. The only danger in such a case is that the person may be unfit for the religious life because he is undecided—but this danger is not considerable. Sometimes, too, these same worldly attractions may be a very good reason for embracing the religious state—because, though they are lawful for others, they are just the thing that is keeping this particular person back from serving God as He wishes.'

Three Factors in a Vocation

Apart from the signs of vocation, there are three important factors that lead up to or decide a vocation: (a) A call from God. Speaking of the office of a priest, the inspired writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews says: 'Neither doth any man take the honor to himself, but he that is called by God, as Aaron was. So Christ also did not glorify Himself, that He might be made a high-priest; but He that said unto Him: 'Thou art My Son, this day have I begotten thee'; as He saith also in another place: 'Thou art a priest for ever, according to the order of Melchisedech.' (5, 4, 5). Our Lord, too, reminded His first priests—'You have not chosen Me, but I have chosen you'; and He spoke of them as the gift of His Father: 'I have manifested Thy name to those whom Thou hast given Me out of the world. Thine they were and to Me Thou gavest them. . . . Holy Father, keep them in Thy name whom Thou hast given Me.' It is, then, God's prerogative to call to the priesthood or the religious state; no man may lawfully enter the ministry of the Church unless in obedience to a divine vocation. (b) Obedience to the call. At some period or other of life, a decision has to be made. Whatever the decision be, it is of supreme importance that it should be a right one. In practice, the course to be followed is, first, to pray, and to consider the purpose of human life; secondly, to write down and consider carefully the reasons on the one side and the other; thirdly, to come to some decision, at least provisionally; and, finally, to ask advice. The matter one way or the other is a serious one, and a decision should be come to only when reason, illumined by faith and helped by prayer and advice, has done its work. (c) The influence of the mother. There is an influence in the home, a gracious presence making itself felt all the day and everywhere, that should silently raise the souls of the children to nobler thoughts—and that is the influence and the presence of the mother. There is a beautiful illustration of this power for good in the case of Mrs. Vaughan, the mother of Herbert Vaughan, Cardinal-Archbishop of Westminster (1892-1903), Roger, Archbishop of Sydney (1873-1884), John, at present Bishop of Salford, and Father Bernard Vaughan, the distinguished Jesuit. The biographer of Cardinal Vaughan writes thus of this saintly woman:—'Beautiful, as her portraits remain to testify, Mrs.