



Third Sunday in Ordinary Time January 23, 2011 A

HEARING & RESPONDING TO THE CALL TO PRIESTHOOD—MY STORY

In this Sunday's Gospel, Jesus calls his first disciples who are destined to become some of the twelve chosen apostles. These men are also his first priests and bishops even though we can be fairly sure that they never saw themselves as priests and bishops. They would have regarded themselves as leaders and shepherds in the first Christian communities.

Ever since Jesus called Peter, Andrew, James and John, he has been calling men to the priesthood, and of course he has been calling women to the religious life; married and single men to the permanent diaconate; and the lay faithful to a variety of ministries in the Church. This weekend, our focus is on the call to the ordained priesthood.

Every call a mystery

I believe every call to the priesthood is a mystery. Perhaps I should say every call to any ministry has a mystery element to it, since it involves God's interaction with us. Regarding the priesthood (and other ministries), we might ask:

- Why did God call me and not others in my high school graduating class?
- How did I know that God was calling me?
- Could I have thought he was calling me when in fact he was not?
- If I were graduating from high school in Ireland today, do I think I would be a priest? Probably not. As you shall see, the environment in Ireland during the mid-60's is very different from today.
- Are there some men called to the priesthood (and other ministries) who, for one reason or another, do not hear or respond to God's call?
- What factors help and hinder us from hearing God's call?

These are only a few of the questions one can ask about God's call.

My own call

I wish for the sake of a good story that my call had a lot more drama to it. I had absolutely no lighting rod experience. Looking back, I would say that the *seeds of a vocation first stirred in me* when I read religious magazines that my parents used to receive at home. As I read the stories of missionaries going to foreign countries to serve Christ, I was attracted or drawn to that way of life. Also, when I was about ten years old, I had a kind of a cute "prophetic experience."

In the 50's in Ireland, many children walked across the fields to school. One day, when my siblings and other kids were walking, we met a farmer named Danny Dwyer. Danny wanted to make sure we didn't mess with any of his gates which would allow sheep and cattle to go where they shouldn't. Danny was standing on a ditch looking down at us. Somewhere in the middle of the conversation, he looked at me and said, "Someday, young Tobin, they will put the collar on you." I cannot remember the impact the story had on me. But it does underline something I read a few years ago—that the one way a community could foster vocations is by walking up to certain young men and women and asking them: "Have you ever considered being a priest or sister? I think you would make a great priest or sister."

High school—a breeding ground for priestly vocations

In 1960, I went to St. Kierans High School. Because of the lack of school transportation, most of the students in this all-boys school were boarders. Attached to the high school was a diocesan major seminary. The neighboring four counties also had major seminaries. Dublin had two other diocesan seminaries: one serving the Dublin archdiocese and the other supporting the needs of dioceses outside of Ireland. All of these seminaries had between 100-150 seminarians at any one time. There were other seminaries that trained men to serve in places like the Philippines and South America. In addition, religious orders had their own houses of formation. The above gives some sense of the plenitude of seminarians we had in Ireland in the 40's, 50's, 60's, and 70's. I would say that over three quarters of all the priests ordained in Ireland each year left the country to serve the Church in England, USA, Africa, the Philippines, Australia and other places. In those days, if someone

asked the question: What is Ireland's biggest export? The fun answer was priests and nuns. In our diocese, I am, at 63, the youngest of that flow of priests from Ireland. Today in Ireland, only one of the above-mentioned seminaries is opened. In God's good timing, we hope and pray the tide will rise again.

Getting back to my high school, why did I say it was a breeding ground for vocations to the priesthood? Each year, we would see from the graduating class some of the brightest, most popular, and often some of the best athletes, go to the "other side" (the phrase we used for the major seminary located on the other side of the campus). The senior seminarians were in charge of us in the study halls, dormitories and playgrounds. This gave us close contact with these young aspiring priests. Also, each June we would see a dozen or more seminarians ordained to the priesthood. Sunday afternoon, on Ordination Day, large crowds would come to the seminary grounds to receive a first blessing from the newly ordained. All of this was very attractive to any young lad wondering how he might spend the rest of his life.

During my years in high school, I often thought of the priesthood. I never thought seriously of doing anything else with my life. Also, we had priests and seminarians we could talk with anytime about our feelings of being called to the priesthood. There was not a single moment when I felt "this is it, I want to be a priest." It was a gradual process for me. It is not unlike the story of many Catholics who say they can't jot down a particular day of time when they felt "saved" or "have accepted Jesus as their Lord and Savior."

Where to serve?

When a freshman class started the seminary in September, everyone had to have signed up for a diocese by December of that year. Throughout the fall season, the undecideds listened to a sales pitch by a vocations director from some diocese in England or America. One priest from New Jersey tried to convince us that New Jersey was just like Ireland with its rolling hills, and where everyone ate corned beef and cabbage. (Of course, none of us had ever heard of corned beef.)

Close to December when a decision needed to be made, an Irish priest came from Florida. (In those days, nearly half the priests in Florida came from Ireland.) Interestingly enough, he presented Florida as a challenging place to serve because of the intense heat, not to mention the large parishes. As far as I remember, he didn't say anything about the gorgeous beaches and beautiful creatures that inhabited them. Three of us

signed up for the diocese of St. Augustine, and a fourth signed up for Miami. The dioceses of Orlando and St. Petersburg had not been created at that time.

When I see on television the horridly cold weather up north, I thank God that I didn't sign up for Rhode Island or New Jersey where many of the guys went.

1972—Arrival in Florida

I was ordained in 1972 with eleven classmates. Four remained at home, four went to England and four came to the States. My first assignment was St. James Cathedral in Orlando. My pastor and one of two other associate pastors were Irish. This helped a lot as I tried to adjust to a culture very different from the one I was raised in. In the early 70's, the charismatic renewal, marriage encounter, and Cursillo (a weekend similar to CRHP) were starting to take hold in our diocese. I participated in all of them and felt very blessed by renewal movements in our Church. The people involved in those movements were very alive in the Catholic faith. It was wonderful to fellowship and minister with such faith-filled people. Those early experiences helped to get my priesthood off to a good start. Ascension is the sixth parish in the diocese that I have served in. I continue to love being a priest. Daily it gives me opportunities to bless and be blessed.

Have a blessed week,

