

A Family Guide to Vocational Choices

Holy Family Parish
Guiding Families to Pursue the Truth and Live It!

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I would just like to thank God, because it is only through His grace that any of this can make any sense. If it is helpful praise God, if it is defective, it is solely the result of my lack of response to the gifts that God has given me.

My parents gave me a wonderful example of married love, even though my father died when I was 16, both he and my mother infused in me a sense to think of others before myself. It was their example and commitment that laid any worthwhile foundation I have.

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Introduction

I felt compelled to write this very brief reflection on vocational choices for my parish in light of a growing hostility towards religious liberty and the confusion that seems to have been unleashed regarding the Synod on the Family in October of 2014.

Pope Francis has gotten a lot of people to pay at least a little bit of attention to the Church. It beckons back to John XXIII much purported cry: let us open the windows of the Church. Sadly many seized upon the Church's openness to drive agendas that seemed quite counter to the Gospel values that are summarized most succinctly by our Lord Himself: Love God and Love your neighbor as yourself. Saint John Paul II has that beautiful phrase and recognizes, "The future of humanity passes by way of the family"¹.

I, like Pope Francis, am a sinner. I am certainly very aware of my own need for God and His mercy and His grace. I marvel at the fact that I am a priest or from the biblical language, more technically a presbyter. I had a Masters Degree in Mechanical Engineering from Purdue and was dating a wonderful devout Catholic woman and it sure seemed like life was set up to be a "normal" course. When I was young, a priest simply encouraged me to do what God wanted me to do and to pray after communion a little prayer, "God, let me know whatever you want me to do!" So ultimately when it came to the vocational choice I was compelled to ask the question, "God, do you want me to marry this person?" A wise priest gave me sage advice, he said something to the effect, "Does this woman somehow seem to complete who you are? Can you imagine that you would be happy if she were not at your side? If the answers to those questions are respectively no and yes, then maybe, and just maybe, God might be inviting you to be a priest." I felt I needed to enter the seminary to discern the vocational question more fully.

A Little Story

As you know, I became a priest. As I reflect back on my early years as a priest, I can remember an encounter I had with one of my old friends. Originally I intended to work as an engineer.

¹*Familiaris Consortio*, John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation, November 22, 1981, n. 86.

Two friends and I had tentatively planned to get some engineering jobs for a few years and then start our own consulting firm. One of those friends now works for Hewlett Packard, and the other has a PhD and is an adjunct engineering faculty member at Montana State University.

After I had been a priest for a few years, one of my old friends came to visit me in my rectory. He had married and was amazed at his young children. Watching them learn and grow was such a blessing to him. He seemed very puzzled and wondered how I could choose priesthood, giving up a family of my own and all the beauty which that entails. As I recall he seemed to suggest that I would never experience the joy of seeing a child learn to crawl or walk. In fact he related the story of one of his children learning to crawl. A ball had been placed immediately in front of the child. My friend could tell the child wanted the ball and related that each time the child reached for the ball the child moved in the opposite direction. Sometime the little limbs giving out and the child would fall to the ground. He desperately wanted to help the child, but sadly, he did not speak baby talk, and the child did not yet comprehend adult language. The child continued to struggle and only through experience did the child finally gain mastery over the art of crawling.

He was right in that I never will personally experience a biological child of mine learning, but as a priest there is the profound privilege of seeing one's spiritual children, that I am called to shepherd, begin to crawl towards Christ and walk as a child of the light. Often times the Church's children do not know "church speak", and sometimes the church's language, often buried in Church documents, is not all that comprehensible to her children. This little reflection is just my attempt to make "Church speak" a little more accessible to the Church's offspring.

Like any good parent the Church attempts to guide her children. I have no biological children of my own, but I did come

from a family of three brothers and four sisters, which has yielded 24 nieces and nephews, and at the time of this writing I think 12 great-nieces and nephews. It is clear that we can learn from other people's experiences and benefit from the wisdom of others. Our own personal experience can be a wonderful teacher if we take the time to deeply reflect on its implications.

If a parent tells a child to eat their vegetables, even though the child does not understand why it is important, is the parent cruel or unloving? When a parent tries to guide their children to choose virtuous friends as opposed to vicious (vice filled) ones, is the parent cruel or somehow not respecting a child's freedom? If a child is a diabetic, should the parent offer them a steady diet of jelly filled donuts? Good parenting is accomplished by telling the truth and guiding children to the truth. Ah, but do we find ourselves uttering Pilate's perennial question, "Truth, what does that mean?" The Church believes in truth, and truth does not depend on some evolutionary understanding. (One can be a good Catholic and believe that evolution was God's mechanism to bring forth humanity.) It is true that we can only partially understand the fullness of truth, but we really can understand some things.

Truth, What is the Truth?

The Church's respect for truth has led to the scientific method and a profound respect for the laws of nature. Science attempts to answer the question, "How?" while "true philosophy and True Religion attempt to answer the question "Why?" The Church believes that God created the world, rather than the human person imagining some kind of god that explains the world. The first Vatican Council states that sound reasoning strengthens the faith and will never contradict the faith.² Faith can take us beyond reason, but will never contradict it.

²<http://www.catholicplanet.org/councils/20-Dei-Filius.htm>

Faith

Normal people operate on faith all the time, but it may be a more or less unconscious faith. Most people don't worry about turning on a light switch or getting into a car or an airplane before scrupulously analyzing the threat. They have faith that they will not be electrocuted, or die in a crash. Religious people put their faith in God, a God who can provide more than the world has to offer. Some seem to be driven by fear, or hope in eternal life, or just a reasonable conclusion that faith is more rational than not believing. To me it seems a bit ironic but modern physics takes its first law from Greek Mythology: namely that matter is eternal, and thus cannot be created nor destroyed. Thus, modern physics takes its fundamental assumption from Greek myth.

For what it is worth, I argue that there is only one thing that takes more faith than believing in God, and that would be simply not believing. I have the 2nd Law of Thermodynamics to bolster my case, namely the Law of Entropy - in other words, "things tend to get mixed up". Take a ten piece puzzle, throw it up in the air a thousand times, how many times will it land in perfect order? Not gonna happen! We are infinitely more complex than a ten piece puzzle! To think we are an accident of nature or that we fall into place without some external force is unscientific and irrational. To think that natural selection somehow improves or becomes some higher order without some principle guiding it, seems unreasonable and is not faithful to sound scientific principles. I understand that if a bunny rabbit happens to have thicker fur and tends not to freeze to death in a cold climate, it makes sense that thick furred bunnies would thrive in one region over another. However for a bunny rabbit to change into a kangaroo is another thing! If the atheist insists on rejecting sound science and chooses to embrace such a blind faith, he or she is free to do so. Hopefully one day he or she will be humble enough to accept sound reason and a more scientific approach and abandon

the logical fallacy.

Reason

The Catholic Church is a religion that has both faith and reason as handmaids working together. Saint John Paul II's encyclical, *Fides et Ratio (Faith and Reason)*³ is a great reflection on the complementarity of faith and reason. Catholicism is a “Both” and “And” kind of religion: Both faith and reason, both faith and works (or fruits). God would never give us a brain that would lead us away from Him when it is functioning well.

Pope Benedict used the phrase, the Dictatorship of Relativism, and it is the dominant paradigm in the minds of most today. Everybody is quick to claim, “There are no absolutes!” (except for the obvious absolute that there are no absolutes!) Irrationality reigns! Charles Rice, a Law professor at Notre Dame put it very well by saying something to the effect, “Our country has not only lost its faith, but has lost its mind!”⁴

Saint John Paul II noted that the things that separate us from the beasts are our capacities to think and to feel. We believe that Jesus is God in the flesh, not some metaphor or archetype: He is simply God in the flesh. That has implications and affects how we should treat each other, namely, with profound love and respect.

Love is indeed the key, but love itself is often misunderstood to be merely a feeling rather than a decision. True love always leads to selflessness, thinking of the other before oneself. Any good parent knows how difficult it can be to love and to guide their children when often times they don't want to be guided. This seems to be most prevalent in the teenage years. Often times the children rebel and fail to grasp the wisdom of their

³*Fides et Ratio*, John Paul II, Sept. 14, 1998.

⁴Contraception and Persecution, Charles Rice, Augustine Press, 2014.

parents. The Church has the same role as a good parent. My hope is that the following reflections on some of the hot button issues in our society can serve to make our parishioners an “expert” on the family. That we will be equipped as St. Peter enjoins:

*Always be ready to give an explanation to anyone who asks you for a reason for your hope, but do it with gentleness and reverence, keeping your conscience clear, so that, when you are maligned, those who defame your good conduct in Christ may themselves be put to shame.*⁵

When we defend the right of an unborn child or oppose the euthanasia, we will be maligned, and mocked. That is okay; we still must strive to help others recognize human dignity and its infinite value. Only God has the right and sovereignty over life. As Christians we must remember that we have been called to be disciples (students), and in turn to “go make disciples”. This was Christ’s last instruction:

*Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age.”*⁶

Jesus wants us to know His joy, and we will know His joy if we embrace His truth and love. My hope is that we can be His instruments in this endeavor. When we encounter truth, we experience joy! If you have ever struggled with a math problem

⁵1 Peter 3:15, New American Bible.

⁶ Matthew 28:19-20, New American Bible

and finally figured it out and get the correct answer, normally one is very happy. An encounter with truth leads to such things!

Hopefully the following reflections may help all of us to guide families to pursue the truth and live it!

A Family Guide to Vocational Choices

We all have a vocation and it is intended to further Christ's mission. We believe that Jesus is indeed God in the flesh and so it is important that we do our best to deepen our understanding of God. Theology is the fancy word for the "Study of God". We believe that God revealed Himself most fully in Jesus Christ. Jesus in turn formed His Apostles and sent them (Apostle means "those who are sent") to proclaim the Gospel (literally the Good News) of our deliverance from sin and death. This Good News is that Jesus has made it possible for our salvation. He paid the price for the sin of Adam and all the sin that would follow. For our part we must acknowledge Him and our need for His mercy. Many today seem to think that there is no need for mercy, but mercy is the heart of the law⁷. We only hope to understand this mercy if we become disciples, from the Latin the word "disciple" means student.

The word "catholic" comes from two Greek words, "kata" and "holic". Kata (κατα) means "according to" and holic (ὅλον) means "the whole". The word is first used about 100 AD by Ignatius of Antioch, (a pious legend suggests that Ignatius was a child held in the arms of Jesus). Ignatius used the phrase in the context of helping the early Christians understand that we must embrace the teaching of Christ "according to the whole" teaching of the apostles and not just pick and choose what seems most convenient. St. Paul fights to keep the early Christians together and tried to keep them from breaking into factions.

Now I mean this, that each one of you is saying, "I am of Paul," and "I of Apollos," and "I of Cephas," and "I of Christ." Has Christ been divided? Paul was not crucified for you, was he? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul? 1 Cor 1:12-

⁷ Matthew 12:7 cf.

13 (Just by way of note, “Cephas” is the Aramaic for Peter, literally the name meaning large stone or boulder, e.g. “rock”.)

Jesus’ final prayer was calling us to unity, to be one as He and the Father are One.

I do not ask on behalf of these alone, but for those also who believe in Me through their word; that they may all be one; even as You, Father, are in Me and I in You, that they also may be in Us, so that the world may believe that You sent Me. (John 17:20-21)

Truth is that uniting force, but unfortunately truth these days is not so easy to come by, or in some places it is denied that it exists in any meaningful way. I think all of us, if we take a moment to pause, can come to realize that there is right and wrong, it is better to have virtuous friends than vicious ones. It is interesting to realize that those who practice virtue are virtue filled or “virtuous”, while those who practice vice are vice filled or “vicious”.

As Catholics we understand the Bible to be the Soul of our sacred theology and so it is essential that we do our best to know the Bible and the Catechism. St. Jerome, the person responsible for making the Bible more accessible in the Latin speaking world at the time said, “Ignorance of Scripture is Ignorance of Christ”.

The early Christians summarized their faith by the Apostles Creed, it is worth prayerfully reflecting on this profound summary of our faith.

Following the Creed will be a brief reflection on vocations and the demands that each entail in the Christian life. There seem to me to be four basic vocations: the dedicated single life, the dedicated married life, the consecrated religious life and the

priesthood. This little guide provides a brief reflection on how we are called to live out our respective vocations. Also there will be a brief discussion on funeral rites and how to do our best to honor our deceased loved ones with reverence and respect.

The main difference between the Christian faith and all other world religions is simply, we do not follow a dead guy! Jesus rose and He lives, He invites us to live the truth and He is the way, the Truth and the Life. Our faith is summarized as follows.

The text of the Apostles Creed:

**I believe in God,
the Father almighty,
Creator of heaven and earth,
and in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord,
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,
born of the Virgin Mary,
suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, died and was buried;
he descended into hell;
on the third day he rose again from the dead;
he ascended into heaven,
and is seated at the right hand of God the Father almighty;
from there he will come to judge the living and the dead.
I believe in the Holy Spirit,
the holy catholic Church,
the communion of saints,
the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body,
and life everlasting. Amen**

The prayer begins "I believe" or one might even say "I have faith" in the following tenants of what has been revealed. The

scriptures relate what is essential and testifies that such faith is not in isolation of our actions. Faith will lead to a response; Catholics generally call this response their "works". I believe the Baptist tradition may call them "fruits", but I think it safe to say that the Christian response to their faith reflects the depth and the veracity of such faith. James says it well:

You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by the works. Thus the scripture was fulfilled that says, "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness," and he was called "the friend of God." See how a person is justified by works and not by faith alone.⁸

Our vocation demonstrates how we are called to live out our friendship with God. Friends walk in the same direction, their focus is on the same goal. The friends of God walk with God and indeed work towards the same goal, bringing all together in fellowship and in unity with Jesus.

St. John Paul II began his pontificate with a reflection on the Theology of the Body. For 129 Wednesday audiences he had shared his reflections which I will attempt to summarize simply as follows. As humans we all want three things: pleasure, possessions (stuff) and power (control). We have a choice to be either a person pure of heart, or the person of lust. The person of lust seeks pleasure, possessions and power as objects to be consumed for oneself. The person who is pure of heart would want pleasure for their spouse, possessions to share with others, and power so that their decisions benefit those subject to their authority.

The Christian life is epitomized by the pure of heart. All of

⁸James 2:22-24, New American Bible

us will grow closer to God as we grow in our purity of heart. This journey entails four basic paths lived out in the context of the vocation we ultimately live out in our daily lives: the dedicated single life, the dedicated married life, consecrated religious life and the priesthood. Below is my attempt to summarize these vocational choices.

The Dedicated Single Life

As humans we find ourselves all living this vocation at one time in our life, for many it is not the final destination, but we are all invited to live this life for a time. The single life is not the natural end for the human person. God did not design us to be alone, however some people feel called to this state, so that God may be glorified by their life.⁹ Others find themselves in this state contrary to what they seem to truly desire. It is important for such persons in this situation to know that God is always walking with us if we put our trust and our faith in Him. The scriptures recognize the value of this way of life, but by no means mandate this vocation for everyone.

I should like you to be free of anxieties. An unmarried man is anxious about the things of the Lord, how he may please the Lord. But a married man is anxious about the things of the world, how he may please his wife, and he is divided. An unmarried woman or a virgin is anxious about the things of the Lord, so that she may be holy in both body and spirit. A married woman, on the other hand, is anxious about the things of the world, how she may please her husband. I am telling you this for your own benefit, not to impose a restraint upon

⁹See Matthew 19

*you, but for the sake of propriety and adherence to the Lord without distraction.*¹⁰

The single life is for those who may feel called to it, or as I previously mentioned, those who find themselves living in this state of life. All serious Christians would understand marriage to be a beautiful thing, but some may choose to forgo marriage because of the dedication they feel towards their work in the kingdom; the work God has inspired them to do for the kingdom - whatever that profession may be - medicine, law, plumbing, truck driving, or whatever morally upright career they choose. It is possible to focus their energies in the pursuit of their respective work for the glory of God. These are essential things for society to function well.

Purity of heart is manifested in this vocation by being so self-possessed that their work will be the source of joy or pleasure and one chooses to see his or her work in terms of service for those whom one interacts with on a daily basis. One's respective gifts are in turn always ordered towards service of their brothers and sisters. One is mindful of the living presence of Christ in the people one meets each day.

Pope Benedict in his book, Jesus of Nazareth, talks about how the Kingdom of God is made present by those Christians who live the life of faith. If we forgive those who show no remorse, or are kind to the jerks of the world, the Christian has given such persons an encounter with the Kingdom of God. It will often go unnoticed, but one must never lose heart. The religious leaders of Jesus' day were staring God in the face and they failed to grasp the reality.

The dedicated single person is not only called to be a friend of Jesus, but also called to be a friend to those around them,

¹⁰1 Cor 7:32-35

encouraging them to walk with him or her towards the light of Christ.

The dedicated Single life is a profound and holy vocation for those who feel called to live it. At its heart is celibate chastity.

The Dedicated Married Life

This is the natural state and vocation for the human person. God ordered man and woman to share a relationship of love and stability that is the ideal setting to bring new humans into the world. Parents are called to be the first teachers of their children in the ways of the faith and accomplish this through a faithful commitment to each other.

A Sacramental marriage exists when a baptized man and a baptized woman, freely and without force of any kind, consent on their wedding day to live a life for the other in marriage. This love shared between a baptized man and a baptized woman reflects God's own love for His people Israel, and Christ's own love for the Church. Also this family that is formed in a profound way also is an image of the very nature of God as a Trinity of persons, three Divine Persons, while being of one Nature. God is a community of persons, the Father loves the Son, while the Son loves the Father, and the means in which this love is communicated is through the Holy Spirit.¹¹

The New Testament reveals how the early Christians understood this relationship profoundly different from the pagans and the ancient people:

Be subordinate to one another out of reverence for Christ. Wives should be subordinate to their husbands as to the Lord. For the husband is head of his wife just as Christ is head of the church, he

¹¹This understanding of the Trinity is related in Walter Kasper's Doctrine of God.

himself the savior of the body. As the church is subordinate to Christ, so wives should be subordinate to their husbands in everything. Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ loved the church and handed himself over for her to sanctify her, cleansing her by the bath of water with the word, that he might present to himself the church in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. So (also) husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no one hates his own flesh but rather nourishes and cherishes it, even as Christ does the church, because we are members of his body. "For this reason a man shall leave (his) father and (his) mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh." This is a great mystery, but I speak in reference to Christ and the church. In any case, each one of you should love his wife as himself, and the wife should respect her husband.¹²

Notice how the “subordination” is mutual. The translation relates to the idea of service not domination.

Our society is greatly confused over the significance and the nature of marriage. Many seem to think that marriage is two individuals who desire to be the means of sexual gratification for the other apart from any other purpose. The secular world sees no intrinsic connection between the fruit of love, (children, or at least an openness to them) and sexual expression between married persons.

Many Catholics through presumably no serious fault of

¹²Ephesians 5:21-33

their own have not been taught the significance and beauty of the Church's profound understanding of this beautiful Sacrament.

Deep within the human heart is a desire to be needed and to be loved and to love. God has placed this within the nature of the human person that this love is so profound that when it is shared in sexual union sometimes this love explodes into new life. The Church understands this expression can only take on its full meaning when there are no walls, no barriers, either chemical or physical, between the spouses.

When I prepare couples for marriage and attempt to explain the teaching opposing artificial contraception I use the following example from my own family.

My father died of a heart attack when he was 49, he had his first heart attack at 39. His father died at 42, while he also has another brother that died at 49. Since my personal genetics may not be all that favorable, I go on to say that if technology comes to the point they could give me an artificial heart, (should I need one) the Church would say, "go for it". That artificial intervention was intended to make something function correctly.

However would it make sense to go to a doctor and say, "Doc, could you give me a pill that would make my heart skip a beat, make me use the restroom a 100 times a day, and if it could increase my risk for cancer, that would be a real bonus!" That would be crazy! If we really trust God who knows what is best for us, why would we ever do something that causes a normally functioning organ in our bodies to malfunction? Sometimes women have problems with their period and may be administered hormone therapy that can put them into a more normal circumstance. This is medicine, not contraception.

The contraceptive pill attempts to suppress ovulation. If that fails it makes it more difficult for the ovum to be fertilized, but if that fails it introduces a hormonal imbalance that would prevent the Zygote (the genetically complete human being) from attaching

to the uterine wall, thus causing a spontaneous abortion.

Because so many in the Church (priests and catechetical leaders) have failed to present the teaching of the church in positive terms, many people who had used contraceptives in their lives will discover many children that they had conceived and inadvertently aborted when they arrive in heaven.

Humanae Vitae is an incredible document that predicted the breakdown of the family as a result of the wide use of contraceptives. The Document explains responsible parenthood. If a couple lives in an area where it is hard to support life because of local population densities, families would be free to try and avoid having children through natural means. (e.g. regions of China or India), or if there is some serious health risk for the child or mother, or it is difficult for the family to provide the basic material needs of the child, or finally the couple seems ill equipped to take on the psychological stress of another child at the time, the family would have recourse to natural family planning.

NFP or Natural Family Planning is safe and effective. It takes deep and intimate conversation; it is open to life and has no physical side effects. Unlike artificial contraception which often tends to reduce people to objects merely to experience sexual gratification, natural family planning fosters healthy relationships. The facts support that couples who practice NFP experience divorce rates of only 6% as opposed to the national average around 50%.

Marriage is the natural vocation and is a great gift. One could argue that a good marriage is the greatest possible gift this side of heaven. St. John Paul II recognized this and had profound reflections on the merits of being so self-possessed for the very purpose of making a more complete gift of oneself to the other person.

Self-mastery when it comes to the passions prepares a person to be a much better lover. One's restraint and control puts

them in a place to bring greater joy and pleasure to their partner. If one fails in such mastery there is a great temptation to see the other as a means for personal gratification rather than the means of mutual self-gift to the other.

It may not be obvious, but couples who open themselves to Church teaching often find their relationship profoundly deepened and their sexual relationship greatly enhanced. Should we be surprised when St. Paul writes:

The husband should fulfill his duty toward his wife, and likewise the wife toward her husband. A wife does not have authority over her own body, but rather her husband, and similarly a husband does not have authority over his own body, but rather his wife. Do not deprive each other, except perhaps by mutual consent for a time, to be free for prayer, but then return to one another, so that Satan may not tempt you through your lack of self-control.¹³

Marriage is a life's journey. It has its ups and downs and its challenges. Most people begin the path with great joy and expectation, but it sometimes becomes incredibly difficult. God will never abandon us and marriage is understood to be indissoluble. The bond cannot be broken.

We live in a broken world wounded by sin. Original sin brought disorder and disease, both physical and mental. Sometimes people wounded by sin make it necessary for people to separate because of the safety of the children or the spouse. Addictions can take control of a person making life dangerous for the other spouse or the children. Abuse decimates families, and infidelity opens the non-offending spouse to disease and

¹³1 Cor 7:3-5

destruction. Sometimes it is morally necessary to separate to protect persons.

A marriage is valid if both parties were baptized and at the time of the wedding freely, without reservation gave themselves to each other until death. Even though one party may not have been baptized the marriage bond is still assumed to be valid bond, though not Sacramental. Some people do not have that kind of freedom on the day of their wedding. Some people can be “forced” into the wedding for a host of reasons. It is for this reason that people who find themselves separated and civilly divorced may approach the Tribunal asking for an investigation as to whether a marriage which may have seemed valid was actually invalid.

If the Church judges that a valid marriage never actually existed, the person would be free to enter subsequently into marriage. If that cannot be determined, the Catholic party would be called to live chastely in their current circumstance. It is always possible that the person who makes the separation possible may experience conversion and seek mercy and reconciliation, and if it is demonstrated that there is moral certitude that the person is no longer a threat, the relationship could be healed.

A great biblical reference in situations of marked infidelity is the book of Hosea. He was commanded by God to marry a prostitute. She soon returned to her infidelity and he divorced her in accord with Mosaic Law. God told him to take her back. Then God explained that he was being an example for the people of Israel who had prostituted themselves with other gods, but God will always take them back.

The indissolubility of marriage reflects God’s unyielding commitment to His people Israel and Jesus’ own love for the Church. Sacramental marriages are called to demonstrate this reality.

Sometimes people find themselves in what John Paul II

called “irregular” situations. It could be in one’s heart of hearts that they truly believe that a new relationship, outside of the Church, is what their conscience dictates. Only God can judge our hearts, so we must not judge the person before God. Only God can read hearts.

The Church has a responsibility to help people be in full communion. If a person makes a public act, such as a marriage outside of the Church or chooses to live together as spouses, they should not approach the altar for communion. I would recommend that they continue to pray to be open to the perfect will of God in their life. They hopefully will be able to try and “regularize” their situation by pursuing the annulment process. Through consultation with their pastor they may choose to live as brother and sister, but should be extremely careful not to cause others to think that their marriage outside the church is somehow acceptable. If people are living chastely it would be unknown to others and so it would be following St. Paul’s caution not to do something that others may misunderstand.¹⁴

I personally am deeply moved by those persons who truly strive to live this difficult teaching when they have suffered through a divorce. I believe divorce in many ways is more painful than death. Often times one of the parties truly seems to be a victim of an unjust situation. In these circumstances they are invited to unite their sufferings with Jesus who also suffered as the result of betrayal and injustice.

John Paul II’s document on the family is profoundly helpful in exploring the richness of the Church’s teaching in these matters.

Hopefully most can truly rejoice in the gift of marriage as God intends it to be. Hopefully they live the supernatural life where they strive to put the other first and live out their lives in

¹⁴1 Cor 10:28

purity of heart!

Religious Life

Some people feel called to consecrate their lives to the service of God and neighbor. All vocations involve service to God and neighbor, but it would be the ordering of those relationships that are marked by respective vocations. The religious strives to love their neighbor through their love of God. The life is marked by the prayer of the Church and a commitment to their respective communities.

The person is usually drawn to the respective charism or gift of the founder. Francis had a love for poverty, Dominic felt called to teach and preach, and Mother Theresa a love for the poorest of the poor.

There are basically two types of religious life, contemplative and apostolic. The contemplatives are usually technically “monks” and “nuns”. Their lives are usually in a cloister or enclosure and they pray for the world as their primary duty. They also do something so as to support themselves in the community so as to not burden others. Those in apostolic work often live in smaller groups in their community and work in the world in some professional capacity as a teacher, nurse, doctor or some other secular field as their apostolic work.

There is typically a long process of formation so that the decision can be discerned carefully. There may be steps such as postulant, novice and professed - both temporary and permanent.

Religious also normally take vows of Chastity, Poverty and Obedience. Generally they give up their personal possessions and rely on their religious community to provide for the necessities of life.

Their primary community is the religious community in which they belong.

The Priesthood

The ministerial priesthood is fundamentally about providing the Sacraments and proclaiming the Word of God for God's people. Sometimes men in religious orders feel called to the priesthood and feel called to serve their community in that capacity. The diocesan priesthood, sometimes known as secular priests, are called to serve their local community under the authority of the diocesan bishop. All Christians through their baptism share in the one priesthood of Christ. We are all priest, prophet and king through our unity with the Mystical Body of Christ.

The ordained priest is called to be a spiritual father to his parish family. Through baptism we all share the one priesthood of Christ, Henri de Lubac beautifully reflects on this distinction by recognizing that the priest manifests this reality of the priesthood in a more external way, while all the baptized reflect this in a more internally.

In the Roman Catholic Tradition, the ministry is reserved for men. This by no means is an attempt to somehow discriminate against women. The way I have made sense of this in my own mind truly revolves around fatherhood. When a little girl asks me, "Why can't girls be priests? I respond with a question, "Can I be a mommy?" She laughs and says no. Priesthood is not about power, but service. We are called to imitate Jesus in a life of sacrifice and service. Jesus was the male lamb who was slain. Priests are called to sacramentally make present Jesus in His sacrifice.

When I was discerning my call, I felt as though God was inviting me to be with the people in the neighborhoods and towns. I felt as though my community was to be my parish family. From a young age I was encouraged to pray after receiving Jesus in Holy Communion, "Lord let me do whatever you want me to do!"

If we are open to God's will and strive to follow it, we will

be happy. Doing God's will is minimally trying to avoid sin, and more positively helping others experience the kingdom of God. The more perfectly we do God's will the more perfectly happy we will be. God invites us to go beyond the minimum and strive to know His more perfect will. I firmly believe that if we accept that challenge, we will simply be more perfectly happy.

The Vocational Choice

We all are called to live a life of profound stewardship. Whatever our vocation we are called to see in our work a building up of the kingdom of God. Our resources are to be used not only prudently for our own security, but are to be shared to the extent possible to help others. Tithing is being intentional with the gifts and resources that we have been entrusted. God created time and has given us all talents and likely some material resources or treasure. Ideally we should try to use 10% of our resources for the service of God and neighbor. If one has a couple hours of leisure time, 120 minutes, it would be important to try to find 12 minutes to pray. In two hours of television, I suspect there is at least 12 minutes of commercials. Little decisions such as this mark the dedicated single life. One recognizes that God has a plan for him or her.

It is not just about directing 10 percent to charity, but does the other 90% of our time, talent and treasure not serve counter-productive causes directed against Gospel values? A person may give 10%, but if they are deceived and use resources to support bad things, this would be against our Christian call. Does a person subscribe to less than edifying channels in their cable or satellite TV package? Do they knowingly support causes that are against the culture of life? Is their speech less than edifying? Are they just "one of the boys" when it comes to jokes or the types of conversations that come up in their daily life?

I mentioned above how I prayed that I might do whatever

God wanted, but now I pray that God will help me to remain faithful in my vocational choice. I think this is a great prayer for all of us to pray. God wants us to be happy and we will be happy in direct proportion to our conformity to His will. God is not an angry God waiting for us to make a mistake, but a loving God who longs for us to know His joy and peace.

Like anything worthwhile it takes some effort. The world wants one to believe that happiness is found in pleasure and its pursuit. This is a lie. Joy is found when we pursue the truth and live it!

Some Afterthoughts

Our culture seems to often make judgments from a certain sentimentality. It is good to be mindful of other's feelings, but by the same token sometimes feelings can mislead us. The vocational choices are always ordered towards the service of others. We are all sinners and have inclinations that are harmful to oneself and certainly others. Our particular vocation will serve to help us feel comfortable in our own skin.

We all have various desires and these desires can guide us to the most appropriate vocational choice. Those who may not have a strong desire to be a parent, or those who feel comfortable working alone or are not distressed by working alone, or those who are strongly sexually attracted to the same sex and have no sexual attraction to the opposite sex are most likely called the dedicated single life, certainly there may be exceptions. We all need friends. In fact friendship is probably the most effective way to share the Gospel. We all have different passions, and all our desires can serve to instruct us about God and what opportunity He affords us. Mastering our desires positions us to be a virtuous person and therefore champion Gospel values.

There is much confusion in our world, even though many claim the Church is obsessed with sex, it is the world that seems

drawn to this obsession. Humans are not defined by their sexual attractions. The sexual desire in the human person is ordered towards an intense desire for unity as well as survival of the human person. Unlike animals, sex is not merely the result of instinct. It is a deliberate choice between a married man and a woman, who desire not only closeness, but also value life and share this act of love with a profound openness to life. All people are infinitely valuable and have gifts that can be shared to build up the human family. Sexual relations between a man and a woman clearly point to the design of the human person. Man and woman are ordered towards each other and they fit.

In homosexual relations physical damage is done to the human person. It is important to note that homosexual relations seem to be more hazardous than heavy smoking according to sound medical research. The seminal fluids are not designed to go down or up the digestive tract. They weaken the immune system and therefore are deleterious to human health. This is one of the reasons why those who are sexually attracted to the same sex would be called to live chaste and celibate lives. Many people have various crosses to carry. Same-sex attracting is a particularly challenging cross to carry, but God gives us all the grace we need to follow His ways. God really does have our best interest at heart. There is an excellent video that shares the stories of three individuals that have responded to God's invitation to strive to live his will in this very challenging culture.¹⁵

God always wants the best for us, when we open ourselves to the will of God and do it, we will find the greatest joy possible for us on earth. If we do His will we will be happy, if we do His more perfect will, we will simply be more perfectly happy!

It is very possible that two individuals of the same sex who are sexually attracted to each other can become the best of friends

¹⁵ <https://everlastinghills.org/>

and have the moral fortitude to live chastely. It is possible they would like to support each other and help each other through a profound and pure and chaste friendship. The real love that they are experiencing towards the other is a brotherly or sisterly love, but it is not spousal love or nuptial love. In fact they may be so drawn as to formalize the familial relationship. This could seemingly be licitly done in the Church through a mutual adoption. They could formally and legally become brothers or sisters. Their real and genuine fraternal love for the other would never want to do anything to the other that could jeopardize their health. This could alleviate the legal problem of sharing benefits that are appropriate to one's family, but this could never be considered marriage.

Hopefully personally as well as institutionally Catholics can come together and support marriage and not encourage the support spousal benefits to an active homosexual relationship. This may seem politically correct, but it demonstrates a real lack of charity towards the person, not only their own physical health, but more importantly their spiritual health. It would be passively contributing to an incorrect understanding of the human person and properly ordered sexual relations between a man and a woman in a married relationship. God wants the best for us, if we trust Him we will thrive, if we reject Him we will bring much suffering to ourselves and others.

Catholic Funerals

Our vocational choice will ultimately culminate on this side of heaven. In my pastoral experience there has been more and more confusion surrounding appropriate burial practices. As we have reflected on some life choices, it may be fruitful to reflect briefly on how we can appropriately understand the importance of the service at the end of a Christian's earthly life.

It is becoming more and more common for people to forego the mass and have a simple ceremony at the funeral home or even

the cemetery. Also more and more people are opting for cremation. Cremation is permitted by the Church but not encouraged. Catholics are also not to scatter the cremated remains, but rather inter them in a sacred place.

Even if cremation is chosen, the Church would still prefer to have the body at the funeral before the cremation takes place. The idea stems from honoring the “temple” that truly carried the presence of Christ while on earth.

When the Casket enters the Church it is sprinkled with Holy Water and then covered with the funeral pall. The pall is also the name of the little square that covers the chalice at Mass. It protects the Body of Christ. There is a certain dignity that is manifest when praying while the body or earthly remains are in the Church.

The traditional funeral shows a certain respect for the earthly remains. Sometime financial issues drive people to consider cremation, and that is understandable, but if possible the Church still prefers to avoid cremation.

Conclusion

My hope is that these reflections have been helpful. My hope was to express the great love God has for us and how we might truly be that effective instrument in guiding families to pursue the truth and live it.

Some Helpful Websites and resources:

The Holy See	www.vatican.va
Annulments?	http://www.diocesefwsb.org/Tribunal
Catholic Encyclopedia	www.newadvent.org
Catholic News	http://www.zenit.org/en
EWTN	http://www.ewtn.com
Catholic Radio	In South Bend 95.7
Ewtn Radio	Sirius 130
Natural Family Planning	http://www.ccli.org
Same-Sex Attraction:	https://everlastinghills.org/