

## Letter to a youth who is thinking about the priesthood.

I'm writing these lines with urgency for your case, since, according to what we spoke about, you will soon make your vocational decision. Of course, you count on my redoubled prayer in this time, and in passing, I leave you a few thoughts, a few criteria, that might help you.

I imagine that during these days you will be asking yourself, "Is Jesus calling me to follow him as one of his apostles?" And even more importantly, "Do I want to follow that call? Do I have the strength? Will I be happy in that path?" Or maybe: "How can I know if there really is a call, or if it is just an idea of my own, an obsession, or maybe just the power of example?" And probably a thousand more questions.

Let's go in order.

How is the priestly vocation awaked in the first place?

Some time ago, Fr. Lucas wrote: *"The call to consecrate oneself to God and to fulfill a mission is perceived in the context of a specific Christian community, in which one has deepened in the faith, has experienced the transforming power of grace, and has adopted a new lifestyle. The vocation isn't an undefined a priori aspiration, already based in the person; it is more precisely a grace that is awaked and matures thanks to the encounter with concrete persons, to the interaction with others who have similar aspirations, to the motivation given by living examples, to shared prayer and apostolate. The vocation is fruit of the encounter with an interior aspiration that comes from on high with the providential signs that are given in the Church and in history. These act as events that summon the liberty of the person, question the person and motivate him to a radical self-giving for the Kingdom of Heaven. In these signs the candidate recognizes the possibility of realizing his deepest aspirations, as if he had been born for this. The fact of being summoned from outside, nevertheless, is shown more in keeping with the nature of the Christian vocation, in which God always takes the initiative. The vocation is not so much the fruit of subjective desires, but rather more a response to an objective need, perceived in faith: the need for others to encounter Jesus and so discover the fullness of life that He came to bring."* This paragraph summarizes almost all of the elements of a vocation: it comes from Christ (it is He who calls), but is it awakened in interactions with a concrete group of people; it has a 'history' which is a manifestation of the Providence of the Father. It responds to a real need for workers in the harvest (and only the one who has a vocation is truly summoned by that!); one perceives that in this work I can offer the best of myself. There is fear, but also trust—it is Jesus who is calling.

If these elements are present, the question arises spontaneously, or a times arrives as a proposal from a missionary, or a priest, or from another who is in the same, but a step ahead.<sup>1</sup> Beware of the mentality that says that the vocation should arrive directly from heaven, and could only be expressed through your own conscience, as if excluding the possibility that another person might intervene in this. About this I copy for you here some phrases from John Paul II:

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<sup>1</sup> "He first found his own brother Simon and told him, 'We have found the Messiah' (which is translated Anointed). Then he brought him to Jesus. Jesus looked at him and said, 'You are Simon the son of John; you will be called Cephas' (which is translated Peter)." Jn. 1:41-42

*“God calls who he wants through the free initiative of his love. But he wants to call by means of other persons . . . There should not be any fear to say propose directly to a young person, or less young, the call of the Lord.”<sup>2</sup> And another: “The Lord is always the one who calls, but it is necessary to foster listening to his call and to **encourage the generosity of the response.**”<sup>3</sup> (I hope with this letter to encourage the generosity of your response!). And finally: “Christ habitually calls through us and through our words. Therefore, do not be afraid to call. Present yourselves among the youth. Go personally to their encounter and call them.”<sup>4</sup>*

From the time the vocational question arises until one has made a decision, typically one passes through a time of what is commonly called “discernment,” a time for seeing the best one can the authenticity of the calling. But we can’t ask for absolute certainties! Because following Christ means following along the way, that is to say, the way is made by walking it . . . Before beginning one sees signals, directional signs, but only after beginning along the way, when seeing the landscape that opens up, the towns that one passes, can one know if he is in the right path (certainly you have gotten lost on the freeway at some point!). It is, even if it sounds a bit cheesy, rather like dating. One begins an adventure, with a certain security of wanting to begin, but not with the certainty of getting married.

Right now you are ending your “discernment,” and you experience that this “time before” has a limit, that it can’t be stretched out too long, because one begins to lose enthusiasm, the joy of the call, and that you turn everything over and over, looking for certainties that do not appear, and you don’t grown in any direction. So you set a date, a specific day for making a decision . . . how important! In view of this occasion, I am leaving you some criteria that will help you; they are some signs indicating an authentic vocation. They can be present without necessarily signifying a vocation; but if they are all there, there can be a serious assumption of the calling. I am going to enumerate them like this: a youth who has a vocation should have:

### **1) Love for Christ, and desire to love him more.**

He should love Jesus, love his Person, desire the encounter with Him, love prayer as an encounter with Him (even though at times it may be difficult). Love his message of salvation, love his Word. And desire to love it more. The perspective of living His life of having his same loves, of sharing with Him his preoccupations and interests, of reaching the end of life as traveling companions should be an attractive perspective. A Holy Father said: *“We should represent the person of Christ . . . and as loving or not loving the same thing constitutes a solid friendship, we feel ourselves driven to have the same feelings as Christ Jesus...”<sup>5</sup>*

### **2) Perceiving the need for workers in the harvest, to feel oneself convoked.**

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<sup>2</sup> JP II, Mensaje en la XX Jornada Mundial de Oración por las Vocaciones.

<sup>3</sup> JP II Homilía en una parroquia de Roma.

<sup>4</sup> JP II Mensaje para la Jornada Mundial de Oración por las Vocaciones.

<sup>5</sup> San Pío X, “Haerent Animo”, sobre la santidad sacerdotal.

That is to say, upon seeing the multitude, feeling the desire to announce Christ and his message of salvation. And experiencing the plea of Jesus in your own flesh: *“The harvest is abundant but the laborers are few, so ask the master of the harvest to send out laborers for his harvest.” Mt 9:37.* Many youth don’t “see” the necessity, and they don’t feel themselves called, but others do and they ask themselves, “Why not me?”

### **3) Desire to do apostolate**

With everyone: with the poor and with students, with youth and with children, with men and with women, and to the edge of the earth! Having a missionary heart. Seeing the transforming power of grace in the life of persons, and desiring to consecrate all of one’s energies to this fundamental task.

### **4) Self-giving, love for Christ on the cross:**

That is to say, no one who has a vocation embraces it to begin a more comfortable life, a more affluent life, with more world or more human possibilities . . . or to travel, know places, or to have a title, or to be someone. Nor to have money, sleep well, or take vacations on the beach (even though he might enjoy these things!); if someone is going to say “Yes” to Christ it is in order to follow Him, and to give oneself.

And speaking of you: the perspective of a life given over, crucified with Christ, free from yourself and at the service of the evangelization, that is what I can offer you in this Society; and it is what Christ offered to his disciples. *“Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me. For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it” Mt. 16:24.* And St. Paul said: *I have been crucified with Christ; yet I live, no longer I, but Christ lives in me; insofar as I now live in the flesh, I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself up for me” Gal. 2:19.* A priest offer Christ each day in the mass, for the salvation of the multitude, yet he doesn’t only offer Christ, but he also offer himself: take and eat . . . take and drink . . . also his own life, which is intermingled with the life of Christ.

And the compensation of self-giving? Joy. I promise you the cross, but also a profound joy, as a constant in your soul. *“I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and your joy may be complete” Jn. 15:11.* It is the joy of the cross, which is *“a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to the gentiles, but to those who are called, Jews and Greeks alike, the power of God and the wisdom of God” 1 Cor. 1:23.*

Note: if the perspective of self-giving frightens a youth instead of inflaming him, he probably doesn’t have a vocation.

### **5) Capacity for living chastity:**

This capacity is a gift from God. I know some who people who have all the other requirements, but they cannot live priestly chastity, following the example of Christ. They cannot, for a thousand reasons. Being able to, in contrast, is a sign of the grace, is a gift, a charism. It signifies that a person can offer his being man in following Christ as He lived, and so be able to enlarge his heart to the limits of Christ. It isn’t about

being a bachelor, but rather a father, brother, friend, pastor, guide, counselor, bridge, intercessor. I'll say with Jesus, he who "can understand, let him understand" Mt. 19:12.

**Finally:**

Recognizing these criteria doesn't mean that the prospect of a lay life isn't attractive for you. Quite the opposite! St. Ignatius said, and we agree, that he who "he who is not fit for the world is not fit for the Company," because there is a requirement that I didn't state, for being obvious: being normal. A normal guy, who has the same desires as any other normal guy: friends, girlfriend, career, money, success, travels. And I am speaking of healthy things. Good vocations have to be fought for, combatted . . . because the youth perceives that there is a lot to offer, and that living out this self-offering will cost him (sometimes a lot!); but if he has a vocation and if he has a generous heart, the call will be even stronger.

One more thing!

In this Society, we are many friends in Jesus. We have perceived a Word that has called us. You are not alone! Rather, you unite yourself to a body, to a group of friends who one day decided to give everything and follow Him.

*"I no longer call you slaves, because a slave does not know what his master is doing. I have called you friends, because I have told you everything I have heard from my Father. It was not you who chose me, but I who chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit that will remain." Jn. 15:15ff.*

In Christ,

Father Iván