

Homily based on the readings from January 14, 2024 (1 Samuel 3.3b-10, 19; 1 Corinthians 6.13c-15a, 17-20; John 1.35-42)

It is no secret that the Diocese of Norwich does not have enough men right now preparing for the priesthood. There are three exemplary transitional deacons who, God willing, will be ordained as priests sometime later this year – and another man from our own tri-parish community who could possibly be ordained six years after that. Besides those four individuals, there is currently no one else in the pipeline.

From a purely demographic perspective, this situation seems alarmingly grim. There is no way these newly ordained priests – no matter how pious, humble, and diligent they are – will be able to offset the retirements of the clergy who have been serving our diocese for the past several decades.

It is common, at least in this part of the United States, to speak about a “vocations crisis” in reference to the priesthood. In a sense, that description is accurate – but perhaps not in *exactly* the manner it is

typically understood. Despite what some people would have us believe – despite what some people have publicly declared – there is not an absence, or even a shortage, of priestly vocations. The problem is not that God has stopped *calling* men to serve as priests. The problem is entirely on our end, with the individuals who are intended to receive that call and with *all* of us whose job it is to support them.

The root of the problem, to a large degree, has nothing to do *specifically* with the priesthood. The fact is that every single Christian – every baptized person across the globe – has a personal vocation, a sacred calling, that comes directly from God. There is a fundamental principle of Christian life, which was particularly emphasized at the Second Vatican Council, known as the *universal call to holiness*. In other words, every single one of us – young or old, rich or poor, weak or strong, ignorant or learned – has a *duty* to live out the Gospel in whatever state of life God has assigned to us. As Pope Francis remarked in 2018:

To be holy does not require being a bishop, a priest, or a religious. We are frequently tempted to think that holiness is only for those who can withdraw from ordinary affairs to spend much time in prayer. That is not the case. We are all called to be holy by living our lives with love and by bearing witness in everything we do, wherever we find ourselves. Are you called to the consecrated life? Be holy by living out your commitment with joy. Are you married? Be holy by loving and caring for your husband or wife, as Christ does for the Church. Do you work for a living? Be holy by laboring with integrity and skill in the service of your brothers and sisters. Are you a parent or grandparent? Be holy by patiently teaching the little ones how to follow Jesus. Are you in a position of authority? Be holy by working for the common good and renouncing personal gain. (*Gaudete et exsultate* 14)

The challenge we face today is not limited to priestly vocations, but extends throughout all facets of society. In particular, the vocations crisis is just as severe among married couples as it is among men

considering the priesthood. With regard to marriage, the problem is not so much that fewer people are getting married – although that is an issue – but that so many married couples seem to be entirely unaware of their sacramental obligations.

What many people, unfortunately, fail to realize is that marriage is itself a form of ministerial service – parallel and complementary to that of ordained ministry. The Church describes Holy Orders and Matrimony, in fact, as the two *Sacraments of Service*. As the Catechism reminds us, both sacraments:

... are directed towards the salvation of others; if they contribute as well to personal salvation, it is through service to others that they do so. They confer a particular mission in the Church and serve to build up the People of God. ... Those who receive the sacrament of Holy Orders are *consecrated* in Christ's name "to feed the Church by the word and grace of God." On their part, "Christian

spouses are fortified and, as it were, *consecrated* for the duties and dignity of their state by [their] special sacrament.” (1534-35)

It does not take a great deal of insight to recognize the connection between these two aspects of the current crisis. Potential priests do not emerge spontaneously from some sort of mythical “vocationland,” but grow up – as all of us do – within a human family. The vocations director from another diocese recently explained to me that the greatest challenge he faces in forming new priests has nothing to do with finding enough willing volunteers – but with the fact that so many young men today grow up in families without fathers.

So, where does that leave us? From a purely human perspective, there does not seem to be much cause for optimism. The point, though, is that the *human* perspective is not what actually matters. God continues to call out to his children – just as he did to the Prophet Samuel, just as he did to Saint Peter. Our task is to be open to that call.

Not only are we responsible for hearing the voice of God in our own lives, but we *may* also be entrusted with assisting others in identifying their vocations – just as Eli helped the child Samuel to recognize God’s words, just as Saint Andrew brought his brother Simon Peter into the presence of Jesus. I suspect most people here have been to a Mass recently that was celebrated by Father Roland. Remember what he always says before the final blessing. First of all: *if you want more Masses – you need more priests*; but more to the point: *encourage the young men you know, in your family and in your community, to consider the possibility that God is calling them to serve the Church as priests.* God speaks to people directly in their hearts, but he can also choose to speak through any one of us.

In the end, though, the responsibility for answering God’s call lies with the individual to whom God is speaking. Whatever our situation, whatever our state in life, we must always have the courage to echo the response that Eli commended to Samuel over three thousand years ago: *Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.*