

HOMILY ~ SECOND SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME JANUARY 13/14, 2024

I would like to ask all of the single males in the congregation to stand. Take a look around. These are the potential future priests that we have with us today. I want to talk about vocations to the Diocesan Priesthood today. The age where most men enter the seminary is mid-twenties to mid-thirties. Younger it is too young to make that kind of a commitment because you are either all in, living at the seminary, cannot work, cannot date, or all out. If you are a lot older, you may have already settled into a career and are not willing to spend six to eight years in seminary. Notice that there are not many single men in that age group at Mass. I do not think you would go from not attending Mass regularly to the seminary.

In the First Reading, we encounter Eli, a priest, and Samuel, a young boy, both living at the temple. Samuel's mother, Hannah, had no children. She prayed that if God allowed her to have a child, she would dedicate him to the Lord. She did have a child, and that is what she did. That is why Samuel is living at the temple. Many years ago, couples had a large number of children; and they really encouraged one of their children to become a priest or a nun. This is no longer true. Many couples have two children, and they do not want them to become priests or nuns. They tell me they want them to get married and to give them grandchildren. Parents have a tremendous influence over their children in choosing a career or vocation. Parents, in general, are not guiding their children to even consider the priesthood; and in fact, they may be discouraging them. In our culture, there is tremendous pressure for our young people to marry and have children. If you are 30 or older and are not married, people treat you as though there were something wrong with you ... you cannot commit, no one wants you, you cannot develop a relationship. That is not true. Some people are just not meant to be married. I am one of them. I have lived alone almost my entire life, and I am very happy doing that. Many people have told me after their divorce that they never should have been married, or their ex-spouse never should have been married. That is not the best time to discover you are called to the single life. There are also people who should not be parents. Being a parent is really hard, takes a great deal of sacrifice and involves a whole lifetime of work. I think we need to stop pressuring our young people to get married and have children.

Some are called to the priesthood more directly by God, as Samuel was called to be a prophet. Some are called primarily through other people, as Simon Peter was called by his brother, Andrew, in the Gospel Reading. I think it is a combination of both. I think my call to the priesthood was primarily from God initially. I was in my early 40's. I was already established in my second career as an attorney, and I had three advanced degrees. When I first thought about it, I thought I was just too old. When I told my mother that I was going to seminary, she said that she thought I might be a priest when I was a kid; but she thought that time was long past. Some of my friends thought I had lost my mind and wanted to do an intervention. Someone told me to do a cost benefit analysis looking at my earning potential, and I decide that it was not worth spending six years in seminary getting two more degrees. I was very active in Church as a child, but never seriously considered being a priest until I was in my 40s.

I love being a priest, and I am very thankful that I had the courage to make this change in my life when I did. In studies of job satisfaction, Catholic priests come out on top on satisfaction. Some have told me that they think the life of a priest is a lonely life. I am probably less lonely than many married people. I am generally with people all day; and when I go home at night, I am glad to be alone. I have no children, but I have thousands of people who call me father. I have never regretted not being married and not having children. The spirituality of a diocesan priest is very close to lay spirituality. We are not monastic. My social life is very much like yours. The majority of my close friends are lay people, not priests or religious. I never travel with priests, and I do the same things you do on vacation. I do not stay at a rectory and celebrate Mass every day when I am on vacation. I do not think there is a particular "priest type." You would have to like organized religion, and you would have to have a strong faith; but aside from that, priests come from many different backgrounds with many different charisms. Priests use their charisms and find other people to help them in areas where they may not excel.

If the priest shortage does not turn around, the Church will look very different in the future; but this is something that has been evolving for a long time. Most of what is not done by paid staff and volunteers was done by priests and nuns 60 or 70 years ago. That will probably continue.

Love & Peace,

Fr. Jim