

“Take Up Your Cross and Follow Me”

A Reflection on Vocations



Eighth Festival Letter of

✦ Most Reverend Daniel R. Jenky, C.S.C.
BISHOP OF PEORIA

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The Idea of Vocation

When you think about it, the very first sin, the fall of Adam and Eve, our original sin was a human assertion of unqualified, selfish personal autonomy. It was a conscious rejection of communion with God and responsibility for one another. Sin is always an attempt to build one's existence solely on the basis of disconnected desire. Those who reject God also reject his will, even though Divine Providence is never in competition with our humanity. The Living God does not obliterate our identity but rather reveals what makes a man or a woman truly human, namely sharing love with God and neighbor. The heart and core of Divine Revelation is the surprising fact that God really does love us and only desires our good.

So the most important thing for any believer to discover is the will of God. In a culture that universally and persistently insists everyone to “do their own thing,” Christianity asks that we “do God's thing.” Our faith calls us to courageously embrace what God lovingly inspires. Our role as disciples is to reflect the Savior's own good example. He came into this world to do the Father's will. Jesus emptied himself for our sake. His obedient love brought him to death, *even death on the cross*, but that *kenosis*, his self-emptying empowers life without end for all those who follow in his footsteps

The Spirit of love, which forever unites the Father to the Son, is also freely poured out for us to guide our discernment and strengthen our choices. Jesus taught by example that without any loss of freedom, human goodness comes from self-giving. *For it is by giving that we receive and by dying we are born to everlasting life.* Unlike the slavery of self-absorption the liberty of loving God and neighbor brings abundant blessing in this world and endless beatitude in the world that is to come.

There is a wonderful story in the Book of Samuel about God's call to a young man trying to discover his vocation. The boy Samuel was a kind of acolyte to the priest Eli, serving in the Tabernacle. At night, Samuel normally slept before the very Ark of the Covenant, but as the scripture explains: *Samuel did not yet know the Lord, and the word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him.* (Samuel 3:7) Three times the Lord called Samuel by name, and three times Samuel thought it was only Eli calling to him in the night. Finally it was the elderly priest who at last perceived that it was the voice of God that was calling out to the lad. So he told Samuel to return to his place of rest, but that the next time he should give an answer to the Lord. Once again the Lord called Samuel by name, but this time the boy answered: *“Speak Lord, for your servant is listening.”*

Then the Lord said to Samuel, "See, I am about to do something in Israel that will make both ears of anyone who hears of it tingle." (Samuel 3:10-11) Hearing God is a life long process, and Samuel did learn to hear God's voice, and he found his vocation as a priest, a prophet, and a judge of Israel.

As the sacred text makes clear, it is immensely significant that God called Samuel *by name*. God chose him as an individual. God gave him special capabilities and particular gifts. God understood him better than he understood himself. God knew what was good for him and what was to be his life's work. Samuel for his part responded in faith to God's personal invitation. This ancient biblical story has become a perennial paradigm for the story of every vocation. The English word vocation comes from the Latin word *vocare* or *to call*. A vocation is something God calls us individually to live. Every believer needs to first learn how to hear the voice of God in their life and then learn how to obey God's word. Each one of us will only begin to know ourselves and to discover personal peace, if we chose to do whatever God asks.

Christian Marriage

It is obviously true that most believers are called by God to live their lives in the sacramental covenant of marriage. The human genders are complementary, and both men and women find their spiritual and physical wholeness if nurtured in the union of married love. To *Increase and multiply* (Genesis 1:28) is a Divine commandment. Marriage was the one blessing given by God to Adam and Eve that continued after their expulsion from Eden. For Noah, his wife, their three sons and their wives, that same blessing of marriage survived even the devastating flood. The ancient patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were given wives of enormous courage and determination from whom came the children of God's promise. The Law and the Prophets further governed and sanctified marriage, as God was revealed as the loving spouse to his bride Israel. The Book of Exodus commanded: *You shall not commit adultery*. The prophet Malachi taught: *Your wife is your partner by covenant. Did not God make you one being in flesh and spirit?* (Malachi 2:15) So for Israel, marriage was a Divine institution in which men and women were given their vocation by God to serve God through their loving fidelity to one another.

Jesus perfectly fulfilled the Law and the Prophets, and so he gives us an even richer teaching about the holiness and permanence of the marriage covenant. He amazed the Pharisees and even some of his own disciples by standing against divorce. At the time of Christ, there were at least two schools of thought regarding the grounds for divorce. One was very liberal and also radically in favor of the man. A husband was able to divorce his wife for just about any reason at all. He could send the wife back to her parents if she became a little crabby or even if she just burned the dinner. The more conservative view was that a husband could only divorce his wife if she were guilty of adultery or some other grave violation of the Law. But both of these interpretations favored the man and were neglectful of the rights and feelings of the woman.

The words of Christ are as dramatically counter cultural today as they were in his own era. Jesus taught that Moses had only allowed divorce because of the hardness of human hearts, but that it was not so in the beginning. The subjection of women was the result of sin, and like suffering and death, was never intended by God. It was instead the sad consequence of sinful human choice. Quoting from the Book of Genesis, Jesus declared that in the beginning:

“God made them male and female. For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.” So they are no longer two but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, no human being must separate (Mark 10:6-9). The marriage covenant for Disciples of Christ was to be modeled after the unbreakable covenant between God and his people. In Jesus, all things were being made new, and both men and women were now equally gifted by salvation and bound by the same law of love.

In the Sacrament of Matrimony a man and woman become a living sign of God’s wonderful and transforming love. Christian marriage stands out from the superficiality of unencumbered romance as promoted by an increasingly pagan culture. It is really just as easy to fall out of love as it is to fall into love, so those called to marriage will always need to be open to the will of God and to be prayerful and prudent when choosing a life long spouse. The vocation of marriage is a personal call from the Lord to a life of conversion, holiness, generosity, and most especially love.

Couples should look for perfection in God alone and not in one another, and so they will always need the Lord in order to grow through the challenges and changes of living together. A willingness to ask for and to give forgiveness is a grace that brings peace and happiness into any relationship. This rich spiritual teaching establishes marriage as a Sacrament, a public sign that makes God’s mercy visible in this world through tangible works of love. Grounded in prayer and strengthened by grace, ordinary men and women can be faithful to the promises they have made to God and to one another.

So when Christians marry, they must marry intentionally in Christ. They are called to become one in flesh and spirit, just as Jesus became one with us through his birth in the flesh, his life, his death, and his resurrection. Husbands and wives imitate the good Lord’s love when they prefer one another, defer to one another, and become one another’s best friend. Men and women also directly cooperate with God the Creator by their openness to the gift of life. True love is hope filled, generative, and unselfish. Bringing children into this world is an act of faith that brings abundant blessing to any family and even to the whole world. Parents are their children’s first teachers in the faith, and passing on Catholic life and practice must be considered one of their greatest responsibilities. In the marriage ceremony, the Church prays *May you live to see your children’s children*. This invocation of biblical beatitude from God brings enormous consolation into the lives of married couples, especially as they begin to grow older.

The Divorced

In this era that almost seems to encourage immaturity and infidelity, the institution of marriage is under enormous stress. In our families and in our circle of friends most of us know of marriages that have ended in divorce. Perhaps a couple was simply uncommitted and not unwilling to grow through those times of testing and trial. Promiscuity, addiction, and violence may have also been involved. Sometimes one partner is simply abandoned. Perhaps children were put in danger, or a spouse was abused or so grossly offended that separation and even legal divorce became a necessity. Do these folks, both the innocent and the guilty, still have a vocation in the Church?

The simple answer is yes! Jesus Christ always wants to heal us from our sin, our

brokenness, our pain, and our weakness. The Lord persistently calls us to his forgiveness and his great love. The miracle of amazing grace can change our lives if we are willing to answer an invitation from God. The experience of redemption is basic to any Christian experience. A sinner may return to faith, grow in charity, become more faithful to personal obligations, and even in the case of divorce and remarriage, continue to hope and pray for final salvation.

An innocent party through the tremendous grace of God may also be delivered from the truly awful pain of marital infidelity or rejection. Suffering is never a good in itself, but it can actually become a means of grace. Our human pain may make us more attentive to the Lord, more compassionate with one another, and perhaps even set free to embrace new opportunities in life. The Church needs always to welcome and give loving support to those who are injured by divorce. The prayers of our Blessed Mother and all the saints, the prayers of the faithful, and for those in the state of grace, the incomparable consolation of the Most Holy Eucharist would certainly assist the process of healing and transformation following a divorce.

The annulment process is often poorly explained and is just as easily misunderstood. It is basically a declaration by the Church that from the beginning something was defective in the bond of a particular marriage. In most instances a diocesan tribunal prayerfully discerns in accord with the teaching of Christ and the discipline of his Church that a Sacramental marriage never took place. A few complicated cases may require the participation of the Apostolic See of Rome. Annulments are not automatic but neither are they as complicated and protracted as some folks seem to presume. Once again, hearing God's call, walking by faith, and a readiness for healing may strengthen a believer's resolve to initiate a conversation with their parish priest or an auditor from the diocesan tribunal.

The Widowed and Bereaved

Jesus himself cried out in terrible anguish when he heard of the death of his friend Lazarus. Our Lady is rightly called the Mother of Sorrows because she knew the searing anguish of watching her son die on the cross. So as believers we need never feel ashamed of our tears or a deep sense of loss when someone we love has died. Widows and widowers often experience a grief that may last for years. There is the pain of separation. There is the loss of friendship, companionship, and love. There is the social dislocation that comes from no longer being part of a couple. As the scriptures teach, however, we should not mourn like those who have no faith. Christians know the Lord, they can hear his consoling word, and they can look forward to an eternal world that is to come.

In ancient days, when human life was nearly always brief and perilous for everyone, widows were actually recognized as an established order in the Church. They were revered for their holiness, their fidelity to worship, and their generous service in the community. Even today, widowhood can be experienced as a true vocation from God. With thankfulness for the time shared together, with longing for eternal fellowship in the Kingdom of Heaven, a surviving spouse may hear God's voice in a new way and accept God's will with even deeper faith. Widows may powerfully witness for the entire Church our shared conviction that *Christ is the resurrection and the life, and that whoever believes in him will never really die!*

The Single Life

Not everyone is called to marriage, the religious life, or ordained ministry. We all know good and even exemplary Christians who never marry, but who live and work in the world. True wholeness and personal fulfillment always comes from following the Lord. Jesus walks in friendship and love with single men and women who serve him in business, public service, and the professions. Being alone is not the same thing as loneliness. The single life can make space in the lives of individuals for richer friendship and creativity. The world is sanctified by faithful witness to the truth of the Gospel and the power of grace. The single life is a true vocation from God with its own special blessings, gifts, and dignity.

The Consecrated Religious Life

From the earliest days of the Church, God has inspired some disciples to leave everything and follow the Lord in evangelical poverty, chastity, and obedience. In the Catholic Church there are many different religious communities with diverse purposes and traditions, but all strive to hear the Lord's invitation to a deeper life of union with him. Religious men and women own nothing, but as their only portion is the Lord, they are rich beyond compare. They have no exclusive love except for God, but in knowing the goodness of the Lord's spousal love, their own charity is increased for everyone. They are called to faith filled obedience, but their lives are set entirely free.

Monastic and contemplative communities, according to their particular charism, may give a greater portion of their lives over to worship and meditation. The Church is powerfully inspired and greatly sustained by their constant intercession. Other orders and congregations were founded primarily to serve actively as priests, teachers, nurses, missionaries, evangelizers, scholars, and in a variety of other ministries. All religious priests, brothers, and sisters are sustained by a common life of shared work, prayer, and table. Their radical witness to the Gospel gives evidence to the *End of the Ages* and to the fact that in Jesus Christ the *Reign of God* has broken into this passing world. Sustained by their vows, consecrated religious try to live entirely for the Lord who lived entirely for our salvation; the Lord himself has promised them *a hundred fold in this life and in the world to come*.

Permanent Deacons

Deacons are called by God through the invitation of the bishop to build up the Church through the works of service. In many significant ways, deacons are the *Hands of the bishop*, feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, comforting the afflicted, and teaching the faith. Their ordination calls these men to be unifiers in the Diocese and in their local parish communities. Their absolute loyalty to the bishop and to the priesthood is an essential aspect of their charism in the Church. Deacons are also called to the ministry of Word and Sacrament in the sacred liturgy, but what is signified at the altar must always be lived out in their lives through their essential ministries of charity. Permanent deacons are most often married men who bring the graces of Christian marriage to all they do for the glory of God and the service of their neighbor. The loving support of their wives and families is an essential aspect of this vocation.

The Priesthood

In this year, which Our Holy Father the Pope has designated as the *Year of the Priest*, it is good to remember that it is an awesome privilege to serve the Lord Jesus Christ as a Catholic priest. Through the Sacrament of Holy Orders, a priest is configured to Christ in such a way that God uses him as a minister of his own incomparable holiness and goodness. Priests of the New Testament are ordained to preach the Gospel, celebrate the Sacraments, and shepherd the flock entrusted to their care. Through the *laying on of hands* and an anointing of the Holy Spirit, priests are empowered to act *in the person of Christ the Head*. Jesus is the true minister of all the Sacraments, and so a priest may only serve on the Lord's behalf through the grace of the Holy Spirit. Those in the ministerial priesthood are always called to imitate the self-emptying of Jesus in caring for the needs of others. By *serving rather than being served*, priests may experience on a daily basis all the rich blessing promised by Jesus for those who imitate his love and generosity.

A priest is therefore challenged to become a kind of icon of the Lord's spousal love for his Church. Love is at the very heart of Christianity, and finally it is only love that gives meaning and conviction to the Catholic priesthood. Those who hear the invitation of Christ in their lives, those who test their vocation in the seminary, those who are celibate *for the sake of the Kingdom*, those called to Holy Orders, those who remain faithful in service until death are the ones who have known the Lord's own great love in their lives and have poured out their love in return. Day after day, night after night, year after year, a priest must strive to offer up his heart, strength, mind, and soul to the God who has called him by name.

The *Servant of God*, Fulton J. Sheen once observed that no life is more adventurous than serving as a priest, "for every moment, like a trapeze artist, he is swinging between time and eternity." By every test and survey, and despite what has now become decades of intense cultural hostility, nearly all priests absolutely love their vocation. The priesthood is certainly never a place to hide. Priests need to be "high octane men," willing to be challenged, steadfast, and courageous. Christ commanded his Church to change the world, and his priests, under the leadership of the Pope and the bishops are called upon "to stand out rather than to blend in." Priests must always fight boldly for what is right and true and be ready to struggle heroically on behalf of all *God's little ones*, especially the poor and the defenseless.

God hears and answers the prayers of those who believe in him, and so all Catholics should pray daily for an increase in vocations to the priesthood, the diaconate, and the religious life. The Diocese of Peoria is greatly blessed with a very strong culture of vocation. In this local church, priests and religious do not hesitate to invite others to test their vocation for apostolic service in the Church. Vocational discernment must, however, become an even more visible aspect of every parish, school, program, and ministry of our Diocese. God often speaks to us through the witness and the invitation of others. Parents and grandparents, Confirmation sponsors, Catholic coaches, teachers, neighbors and friends all have a responsibility before God to encourage the young to cooperate with grace. If a moment or a given occasion seems right, every believer should be willing to invite others to hear God's voice, be strong in their faith, and then to answer God's call.

In 1997 when I was called by the Vicar of Christ to serve as a bishop, I chose as my

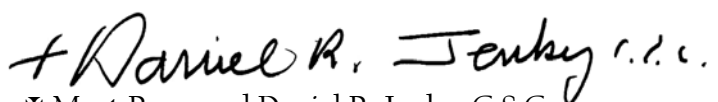
Episcopal motto: “His will is our peace.” These words, taken from Dante’s *Purgatorio*, were inspired by similar words that can be found in the Psalms. The phrase asserts that the will of God is always for our good, and that only by obeying God will we know wholeness and peace of heart. It is only when we seek the Lord that we will finally find ourselves through an obedient relationship with him.

In my own life, however, I must honestly admit that the meaning of this motto has at times been more of an aspiration than a constant spiritual practice. Sometimes I think it might have been more honest for me to adopt the words of that distraught father in the Gospel who once answered Jesus’s question about his faith: *I believe, only help my unbelief* (Mark 9:24). My doubts have absolutely nothing to do with the dogmas of our religion, which I hold with complete certainty, both because of their profound coherence and most especially because they have been revealed by God. In fact, my personal insecurities have everything to do with myself and not with the Lord Jesus Christ or with his One True Holy Roman Catholic and Apostolic Church.

It is simply true, however, that perhaps like some of you, even at my age I still sometimes struggle like the boy Samuel trying to recognize the voice of God in his life and then to faithfully do whatever God asks. I can also still get scared and confused perhaps like couples considering marriage. I can get shaken like the widowed and divorced, and occasionally I may feel alone like those who live the single life. I can certainly still be tempted and distracted perhaps like those first considering a vocation to the priesthood or the religious life. Like our hard working deacons, I can sometimes grow tired of serving the poor and doing the corporal works of mercy.

So I must say to myself as I would always want to preach to you, my fellow believers in this local church entrusted to my care: *If today you hear his voice, harden not your hearts.* It is absolutely true and the greatest possible Good News that we were created and redeemed to live in the bliss of communion with God. Through persistent prayer, spiritual discernment, and the support and encouragement of one another, we are all graced to finally discover what God wants of us. May we put our faith in our Good God and then come to know his lasting peace. May we generously answer his call with a whole hearted surrender of our will to his will. And all our lives long, may we trust not so much in ourselves as in God’s steadfast love and abundant mercy.

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Solemnity of the Epiphany


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