

POST #7 - CONTINUAL DISCERNMENT

SEMINARY SPIRITUAL DIRECTION

MSGR DANIEL TRAPP



Sustained Discernment about the Call to the Celibate Priesthood

Among the points about which a seminarian should regularly be praying is confirmation or further discernment of his perceived call to the celibate, ordained priesthood. The seminarian can arrive at a certainty of faith about this call, based on his committed discernment. A man who will not deal with doubts is a man who is setting himself up for a future crisis.

This discernment works out most clearly if a seminarian uses the exercises and wisdom of St. Ignatius,¹ that is, he is aware of the times or states of his soul as being in peace, in spiritual consolation, or in spiritual desolation. In those times, he asks the Lord whether he is being called to celibacy and to priesthood.²

In my experience, such discernment is made more focused when we physically “seek the Lord” by going on retreats and pilgrimages. It is in those times that seminarians seem more likely to experience spiritual consolation. However, in my experience, most people who have a certainty of faith in their vocations have had some moments when they experience the love of God calling forth from them the deep desire for a celibate response and for the response of a life dedicated in the priesthood. Those experiences are had in times of spiritual consolation.

Is confirmation of a vocation during times of spiritual consolation necessary? I have come to think that the answer to that question depends on how one understands spiritual consolation. Spiritual consolation comes in many sizes and packages, and we need to be attentive to all of them.

On the one hand, given the current enthusiasm for and appreciation of witness stories, some men worry that if they do not have a peak spiritual consolation experience leading to unmistakable clarity, they are missing something. They need to be assured that such experiences are often a blessing, but not a necessity.

On the other hand, a man who experiences no lifting of the heart at all has something blocking his spiritual life. The director should ask the seminarian if the seminarian has ever experienced a lifting of his spiritual mood. Are there moments of quiet light leading to greater faith, hope, and love? Recognizing the gentle, as well as the revolutionary, moments of grace does lead to a more sure discernment.

At times in vocational literature, one will find stirring claims that one must fall in love with God. Such language is evocative and moving. It is very helpful for many personality types, including my own. However, I have known men called to the priesthood, men of mature affectivity, who recognize no such charged experiences in their lives. Their spiritual consolations are more subtle. One might say that they fall in love very quietly. Most often, in times of peace, they have come to believe that they can live the life of a celibate for God and that they can live the life of a priest for God. They feel no compulsion to do so. They feel no

¹ I use *spiritual senses* here as they are understood by the ancient authors in *The Philokalia*. The spiritual senses pertain to the intellect rather than to the imagination.

² In the time of spiritual desolation, he will refrain from discernment, other than noting where the deceptions came in.

great desires to do so; but they see the Church needs priests, and their peaceful discernment allows them to see that they can so serve the Church.

That said, in my experience of directing seminarians, God most often gives them moments that they describe as falling in love with God, falling in love with the Church, having a great desire to give themselves and all they have to God through celibacy and the priesthood. These moments, in spiritual consolation, do not last, but the conviction of the veracity of the call does last.

Times of Peace

It seems to me that most seminarians spend most of their time, perhaps 80 percent, in spiritual peace and that, correspondingly, the way of discernment is through the gift of their reason. The men go through times of emotional consolation or desolation; but spiritually, they are at peace, and God speaks to them through their intellects.³

In such times, things are “good” but not “great.” We may not be particularly passionate or moved by prayer. Some younger men, who have read more than they have prayed, may still equate passion with value, but attention to God in their prayer helps form them. Spiritual enthusiasts are much assisted by directors who can help them appreciate the beauty of this time of peace. God help us.

During times of peace, the Lord often leads the men to greater self-knowledge through reflection. That self-knowledge is essential to discerning the call to the priesthood. Further, that self-knowledge often begins with perceptions of the men’s own unfitness for the priesthood.

I know many good and holy priests; I do not know any priest whose character is completely attuned to the service of the priesthood. The experience of our limitations is given to us so that we may convert to grace and virtue. We serve as priests not because we have attained perfection, but because we have been given grace. We serve as priests, always needing to strive for greater virtue. The calm acceptance of the need for grace and the need to strive for virtue is necessary for our discernment in times of peace.

It can be helpful to suggest during a spiritual direction session that a seminarian do a specific exercise of self-knowledge. This exercise involves a man prayerfully identifying: 1) his gifts, 2) his created weaknesses, and 3.) his areas of concupiscence. The seminarians should work on these lists and discuss them at a later spiritual direction meeting.

Gifts

By temperament, some men shy away from acknowledging their gifts. Encourage your men to glorify God by acknowledging their gifts. For those tempted to self-condemnation, such acknowledgement helps give balance and adds truth to their self-understanding. For men who know their gifts well, acknowledging that those gifts are from God and are not of their own creation is important. When we acknowledge our gifts and thank God for them, we less easily fall into false judgment of others who do not possess the same gifts. Lack

³ Again, in the Platonic sense of the direct experience or intuition, that capacity we have to know God because we are created in the Divine image and likeness.

of reflection on our gifts can breed a low level contempt of others who do not have the same spirit, abilities, talents, or habits of mind.

At some point, it is good to introduce the men to the gifts of the Holy Spirit. Explain how these gifts, unless we put obstacles to them, are given by the Holy Spirit so that we can live out the virtues and the beatitudes. These gifts, which are not attained, but given, help us to live in the economy of grace that God gives in the Kingdom of God. What does the man perceive the Holy Spirit has given? In what might he be lacking? By acknowledging our needs and blessings, we are able to receive more from the Holy Spirit.

Created Weaknesses

To help the man to more quickly engage in discernment, it is helpful for him to know what is weak in him through being a limited, created being. We are not created to be self-sufficient and autonomous. We need relationships. We need sleep. We need food and recreation. Some of the men have health conditions that they have to accept. Some of the men have ADHD. Some are limited in intellectual capacity; some are less athletically or musically gifted. These weaknesses, which come from being an individual human, when accepted, allow us to look to God for assistance in virtue and for the gifts of the Spirit which are beyond virtue.