

Keynote Address

USA Council of Serra International Region 9 Convention

October 2, 2010

Dubuque, Iowa

By Bishop Richard Pates

Blessed John Henry Cardinal Newman in his writings noted:

God has created me
to do him some definite service
he has committed some work to me
which he has not committed to another

I have my mission
I may never know what it is in this life
But I shall be told in the next.

I am a link in a chain
A bond of connection between persons
He has not created me for nothing
I shall do good work
I shall do his work

He may take me away from my friends
He may throw me among strangers
He may make me feel desolate
Make my spirits sink
Hide my future from me –
Still he knows what He is about

Cardinal Newman who was beatified in Birmingham, England on Sunday, September 19th points out three dimensions of vocation that have universal application.

The first is that each of us has a unique vocation which no other human has been called to exercise. God has a particular purpose for each of us within the context of Providence. Each of us is a part of the body of Christ – essential to the full expression of that Body in our time.

The second is that we have to be attuned to the divine presence so that we can be receptive to God's voice. We struggle to overcome the impediments, the static and distractions which muffle or extinguish the communication emanating from God.

The third characteristic is an ongoing relationship with God which reveals the unfolding of a particular vocation within a vocation. The unique vocation each of us has is ultimately constituted by many callings. Inevitably attached to the experiences of an

unfolding vocation is commitment that leads to perseverance and great discipline so that we are blessed with an identification and participation in the life of the Lord Jesus.

This classical vocation dynamic is evident in the lives of three luminaries in the Church's history:

- Mary, the Mother of God, who developed an openness so that God's particular invitation to her could penetrate her soul to which she responded: "Fiat voluntas tua; thy will be done." Thereafter, she was a companion of Jesus in his earthly mission which entailed much pain and sacrifice. Her vocation eventually embraced the apostolic work of the Church a relationship which continues to this day.
- St. Paul, who in his mind was the last and most unworthy of the Apostles. His heart was sufficiently open to the powerful contact with Jesus that totally changed his life. He allowed Jesus to enter fully into his being which led to shipwreck, jail, sleepless nights and hungry days . . . and the painful compromise and infidelity of the communities he evangelized. He came to judge all that is considered important in life rubbish in light of the Lord Jesus and the intimate relationship that he had forged with Him.
- Finally, of course, Blessed John Cardinal Henry Newman followed similar patterns. Through his Anglican years he had developed a relationship and prayer life that fashioned an openness to God's will. His studies of the early Church fathers and their teachings enabled him to see how the Catholic Church most faithfully preserved the original core of Christian identity. This realization gave urgency to his conversion and incorporation into the Church of Rome. But he was set adrift in this decision being isolated emotionally and psychologically both from the Anglican friends of old and the Catholics whom he joined who withheld trust and regarded him with suspicion.

This pattern of vocation is applicable to all ages and is indeed relevant to our times. But especially critical is that there be a "culture" a way of life that enables the individual vocation to be identified, experienced and responded to.

This culture is founded on the basic tenet of Cardinal Newman that each of us has a unique vocation from God entrusted to no one else. There is the further realization that happiness and fulfillment come to the individual when he or she embraces God's particular calling.

Serious roadblocks or bottlenecks to the realization of one's vocation in our time are deeply rooted elements of contemporary secular culture. The list of "isms" is extensive but those particularly virulent in vocational choice are materialism, hedonism and relativism.

Materialism concentrates on the tangible that which is of immediate experience to the exclusion of the spiritual. Happiness and status are to be achieved in the accumulation of material objects. Hedonism advocates that as long as no third parties are negatively

affected, any type of sexuality and bodily experience of pleasure is acceptable. Relativism asserts there are no absolutes. Thus, natural law, the 10 commandments, the teachings of Jesus are reduced to personal interpretation and application.

On the other hand, the culture of vocation incorporates the living presence of God so that His voice, his call, his word to each of us mediated through millennia of revelation can be heard through all of the static and distraction of the wandering nature of secular culture which is typically impervious to this Voice.

Elements of this culture of vocation which give rise to harmony within God's providence include:

The Domestic Church which was promoted by the Second Vatican Council and recognizes the unfolding of the vocation of husband and wife as found in the transmission of human and spiritual/divine life. Their mutual love and faith give way to an openness to the transcendent. Their children realize their own personal inherent value within the ups and downs of daily life. Over time, they come to understand God is calling them to a particular role in his plan. Such is possible because God's presence built into the home culture is openly encouraged.

These nuclear families, the domestic church, associate in community as Church in which the Holy Spirit is alive and active among us believers. The Body of Christ is constituted to make Christ and his revelation present throughout the human family. The living organism of Church establishes relationships among members which forges one heart and one mind and a dynamic of service and selflessness. Central to the mission of these families fashioned into church is the task of Evangelization – making Jesus Christ known and loved in our times by choosing to live on the basis of the Gospel at every moment.

Our young people are further introduced into this expanding culture through our schools, our religious education programs, our youth ministry, home school programs and especially through the sacramental life of the Church.

The particular mission of Serra in this culture, in this world of Church life is to promote and support vocations to consecrated religious life and priesthood. These individual vocations are heard, in those situations where God's voice is able to be identified and discerned and thus Serra seeks to strengthen Church culture as part of its service.

As we view the landscape where religious vocations are coming from today, we see strong and dedicated marriages which are at the base of flourishing domestic churches. These families gather together in parish communities of faith which are particularly attentive to fulfilling God's will.

I am tremendously encouraged by the young families I have come to know in Des Moines. So many are truly alive with God's spirit and in fulfillment of their vocations, encourage their sons and daughters to be in tune with God's wishes for them. And the parishes too are highly supportive. Illustrating this is the fact that every time I introduce

a person pursuing the path of priesthood or religious life, spontaneous applause arises from the congregation.

The Diocese of Des Moines is not alone with such families and parish communities so very alive to God's presence in our day. They are present throughout the mid-west and heartland states. Our mission in Serra is to hold them up, support them, allow them to thrive. They are critical to our future religious vocations.

As our youth part from their families and nurturing faith communities and enter into young adulthood and take ownership for their faith and seek to activate and commit to God's call in their lives, many supportive institutions in the Church are there for them.

Educational institutions are committed to their Catholic identity and strive to fulfill their mission to the formation of the total person in synchronization with the Gospel. We are blessed in Iowa with nearby Loras College, St. Ambrose University, and in Kansas with Benedictine College among others. Also, the Newman Centers at Drake University, Iowa State, University of Northern Iowa, University of Iowa, University of Nebraska at Lincoln stand out in their programs to assimilate and allow adult faith to emerge in order that their members might pinpoint the particular vocation God is calling each to which he entrusts to no other.

Subsequent engagement in Church service is undertaken by the young adults in programs of missionary/evangelization outreach such as FOCUS, Friends of Catholic University Students, St. Paul Outreach, World Youth Day, National Evangelization Teams (NET), NCYC, National Catholic Youth Conference. Enormous energy is being expended from many sectors in service of the Church which is resulting in more solid marriages and a definitive growth in numbers in vocations to the priesthood and religious life.

An influence which has been especially providential as a counter force to materialism and hedonism is the teaching of Pope John Paul II which has come to be known as *Theology of the Body*. It is a wholistic approach to issues of sexuality and the understanding of the identity of each human person as a sexual being constituted by body and soul.

This understanding is rooted in the realization that each of us is made in the image and likeness of God and the body shares in the profound expression of that truth. Each of us has dignity as a son and daughter of God. The body participates in this dignity through the expression of love in the committed relationship of husband and wife as has been the case since the creation of man and woman.

The body can also be dedicated as Jesus witnessed and chosen by persons in commitment to the ministry of the Church through a celibate life style. This lifestyle is undertaken for the benefit of others in a spirit of love and is a calling from God to be partners in this unique way with him in the proclamation of the Kingdom.

I was reminded of this recently by a young third grade girl who asked to examine my Episcopal ring. After a close look, she smiled and looked up to me and said, “this ring means you are married to the Church.”

While we have to be cognizant of the powerful impact of secular culture in our midst, we must also have abiding confidence in the presence and powerful spirit animating the body of Christ today.

Evidence of this presence is apparent in the generous response to God’s call in loving marriages and especially from the perspective of Serrans in those joining consecrated life and seminaries.

Well educated, service oriented and talented women are joining in numbers communities such as the Nashville Dominicans, The Dominicans in Adrian, Michigan, the Missionaries Sisters of the Poor, started by Mother Theresa and many other women’s religious communities. Other lay and clerical groups spawned by the Second Vatican Council are exemplified by Communion and Liberation, Neocatechumenal Way, and the Focolore and other movements which call us to a classical witness to faith in contemporary dress.

We have also witnessed a surge in interest in the priesthood. The diocese of Des Moines went from 10 to 16 seminarians in the past year a 60% increase. Archbishop Hanus has commented on the increase in seminarians at St. Pius X Seminary Loras College. “We are nearly out of room and will have to convert some offices to accommodate the growing numbers.”

The St. Paul Seminary is full for the first time in decades with 92 students and its companion college seminary on the University Campus of St. Thomas in St. Paul has 140 students making their combined enrollment of 232 the largest number of seminarians on one campus in the United States.

As Serrans who invest so much energy in prayer and projects in support of the vocation apostolate, I believe you can take consolation and have strong hope in the emerging state of vocations in the Church. Your unceasing prayer is being heard and responded to. Your particular programs carefully targeted to be of assistance in enabling young people to hear God’s voice within a supportive culture are growing in effectiveness.

Moreover, I believe it is a blessing to engage the broad vision of the Church and exercise with confidence your instrumental role which is truly a vocation within a vocation. You are effective in cultivating and making grow a culture of vocations in our time where the voice of God can touch each heart with the life giving invitation to a particular role which Blessed John Henry Newman wisely asserts is given to no other in fulfillment of God’s plan. We in the whole Church rejoice in your motivation and activity which springs from deep love of Jesus and His Church.