

Homily
Serra Convention
Saturday, August 29, 2009

As we look at the landscape where vocations are currently coming from – it is not surprising that we see them arising from situations where the voice of God can be heard. The vocation fields that are productive have developed a culture that is imbued with the Spirit of love of God.

Examples abound. There are charismatic communities and parishes where the desire to give one's life in service of the Lord is widespread. These are found in Ann Arbor, Michigan and Wichita, Kansas. Among home schooled individuals there is growing receptivity to God's invitation. Movements which have become prominent since the 2nd Vatican Council such as Communion and Liberation, Neocatechumenal Way, the Focolore have seen significant numbers of their young choose a vocational commitment that is definitive and sacrificial.

Engaging young people at significant decision times in their lives are different educational settings as Franciscan University in Steubenville, Benedictine College in Atchison, Kansas, or the Catholic Studies Program at the University of St. Thomas in St. Paul, and Newman Centers like Texas A & M or the University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana. The culture in these places allows God's presence, challenge and Spirit to be in touch with the enthusiasm and openness of youth.

The youth then step forward and respond at a first level in discipleship outreach as provided for by organizations as National Evangelization Teams (NET) or Fellowship of Catholic University Students (FOCUS) or St. Paul Outreach (SPO). Youth also are enabled to join with their peers at massive events similar to National Catholic Youth Conference and World Youth Day in which faith stirs their religious passion. What characterizes these young people is that in their families, in their churches and schools, in their associations on college campuses they have been Evangelized. They have come to recognize Jesus and are able to repeat the witness of Peter in response to the question of Jesus to them - but you, "who do you say that I am?" Replying, our youth proclaim "You are the Son of the Living God, You have the Words of Life."

Once this recognition occurs and is articulated, discipleship of Jesus follows leading to ongoing conversion, to transformation and as was the case with the close associates of Jesus to intimacy of life with him. In this context – authentic vocations emerge whether it be married life, the single state, or a calling to priesthood or the consecrated life. What is clear, from such a culture is that God's voice and God's invitation penetrate. Not only do they penetrate but they elicit a generous response.

Now, how do we respond to the perennial questions, what is the role of Serra? What should we as Serrans be doing in all of this? Surely, what enters into this consideration is Serra's role of support and promotion of religious vocations in a spirit of service. Our

priests, religious and seminarians are grateful for the expression of encouragement through dinners, and recognition gatherings. A card or a letter with a check makes the day of a seminarian.

Serra is also active in promotion of vocations through the media, information gatherings and the organization of parish vocation committees. These activities along with a commitment to prayer keep the issue of vocations prominent in the eyes of our communities. In all these varied projects Serra has influence. Such involvement is encouraged in Pastores Dabo Vobis: “with regard to diocesan and parish communities, special appreciation and encouragement should be given to groups which promote vocations, whose members make an important contribution by prayer and sufferings, offered up for priestly and religious vocations, as well as by moral and material support,” (N.41).

But in drilling deeper, it becomes ever more clear, that religious vocations are developed in a culture that activates faith-through Evangelization – making Jesus Christ known and loved. This faith is strengthened and developed in community where discipleship of Jesus is prized. The influence becomes pervasive when the culture is allowed to germinate among peers who share compatibility, enthusiasm and become mutually accountable and supportive. Like the early Christian communities “They are of one mind and one heart.”

Serra and individual Serrans, then, in the midst of a very secular and materialistic society might embrace this vision that is committed to renewal in our core identity – and an unwavering belief in Jesus as the Son of God and the consequences of that affirmation in the way we live – in what we do and how we do it. As the different ecclesial movements of our time so clearly demonstrate – such a culture gives birth to authentic vocations to priesthood and consecrated life. Remarkably, such cultures put us in greater touch with our own vocations, our particular role in the family of faith. It is at this moment the promotion of vocations and the fulfilling and growing of one’s own call merge and become one.

We come then to the messages from today’s scripture readings that fortify us in our ongoing role of evangelization and witnessing to Jesus. Through us His Kingdom is born as we point to Him. John the Baptist recognized this and boldly introduced and identified Jesus: “Behold the Lamb of God, Behold him who takes away the Sin of the World.”

The announcement and coming of the Kingdom confronts sin and in so doing produces a struggle that each Christian is called to engage in both personally and as a community. The struggle comes, oftentimes, at a price. This was fulfilled in the dramatic outcome of John the Baptist and his beheading. As occurred with John this witness is always to be exercised in a Spirit of Love as Pope Benedict regularly reminds us. Paradoxically, however, this shedding of blood or great personal suffering does not exterminate God’s presence but unveils faith’s truth conveyed in unwavering conviction and courage.

Secondly as we take on the role of witnessing to God's Word and the identity of Jesus, we might naturally be filled with some hesitation and reluctance. Like the prophet Jeremiah we know that what we witness to in the midst of a pluralistic society – might not be welcomed. It might be ridiculed and rejected. We wilt as we envision our personal reputation subjected to such a possibility.

In the face of such hesitation, God's assurance to Ezekiel is a source of strength for us – “they will fight against you but will but not prevail over you, for I am with you to deliver you, says the Lord.” (Jeremiah 1, 19).

Vocations to the priesthood and consecrated life are being discovered and acted upon in our time by significant numbers of young men and women who are immersed in a culture which activates their faith and allows them to hear God's voice and invitation to leave all things and follow Jesus. A particularly effective way for Serra to fulfill its important mission in the Church is to enter deeply into this culture and cultivate it assiduously so that it flourishes.