

What People Fear Most in a Vocation Decision

by Rev. Dan Guenther

Lately I've been visiting with a number of people about priesthood or religious life, and I have been encountering a common dilemma. I'm hearing people express interest, but because of many fears they have, they don't come forth.

Their fears about a church vocation hold them back from joining a vocation discernment program or entering a seminary or house of religious formation. Their fears are very real. Some are based on legitimate concerns, and some, quite frankly, are not. Before I name and respond to some of the common fears, however, two things need to be said:

First: All people are fearful in the early stages of vocation discernment. This is a natural, very typical response. I'm more concerned about those who claim to have no fears. I think they are denying them.

Second: Fears will continue to plague those in vocation discernment -- even manipulate them -- unless they address them head on. It may take an assertive boost, but the fears can subside whether or not one is ordained or professed.

Fear of disappointing others

Many worry they will disappoint parents, family and friends should they not become ordained or professed. In this case, people really have to listen to the Spirit within and try to do what they truly believe they should be doing. If they try formation and discern it's really not for them, that's okay.

People who fear their vocation decision will disappoint others need open, honest dialogue with family and friends about their vocation quest. Like the one in discernment, family and friends have been in a questioning state of mind. Thus, they, too, may gain peace of mind if the vocation is at least tested.

This is an important point. Rather than being disappointed, if the loved one doesn't continue, family and friends may be put at ease knowing a serious question has been explored and answered. Never exploring the vocation question would probably be more disappointing.

Fear of uncertainty

Often people are not 100 percent sure of a vocation decision, so they can't act on it. But no one has to be completely sure just to investigate a church vocation. If the priesthood or religious life has been a gut question over a period of time, it's worth exploring.

If others have agreed that a church vocation seems fitting -- or worth investigating all the more reason to step forth. By entering a seminary or formation program, people commit to a particular time of exploration, not to the end result of priesthood or religious life. The degree of certainty becomes more important as people move through and near the end of formation. It is less important in the beginning.

Fear of loneliness

One of the most common fears concerns loneliness and family matters in regard to celibacy. First, it is important to realize that loneliness touches everyone and every lifestyle. It is not necessarily true that single or celibate people suffer more. There are many lonely couples and many lonely families. Loneliness results more from internal circumstances than from the external. If people are insecure, they will be lonely regardless of how many people may be around them.

In terms of having or being part of a family: as a priest I have often found myself being more of a parent or sibling to someone than their own actual parents or siblings. Priests and religious, if they allow themselves to be, are often invited into intimate family situations and gatherings within their parish or area of ministry.

Many times, this can provide a sense of belonging that people look for and long for in having their own family. Finally, many priests and religious belong to support groups that gather regularly for prayer, discussion and encouragement.

Fear of insufficient funds

Formation for priesthood and religious life requires considerable funds and resources. At times, I hear interested candidates saying they don't want to cost the diocese or religious community the expenses involved unless they are 100 percent sure of their choice.

However, formation money has been given for the purpose of helping people decide and process a vocation. Many generous people have admitted that they can't help those in discernment by listening, visiting or discussing the vocation with them. What they could do, however, is share the financial blessings God has given them.

At the discretion of the bishop and the vocation office, this money is made available to those discerning. Even those who decide against a religious vocation are usually involved in some form of ministry within the church. The financial help is never "wasted."

Fear of being tied down

Some fear that they will be too tied down in life. They assume that they wouldn't have the chance to travel, gain further education, change work, etc. This is far from the truth! Lay people, especially parents of young children, are just as tied down, if not more so, than those committed to a church vocation.

For continuing education, priests and religious have excellent opportunities. Every summer, many priests and religious are involved in summer school; study through the school year at home or overseas is very possible, too.

It is common for priests and sisters to change their type of ministry and work location. Priests and religious are allowed vacation time each year and regular days off each week. Travel is very possible, too. A few years ago, I had the opportunity to travel around the world!

Fear of academic study

Sometimes candidates worry about whether they can handle the studies involved in a vocation. My response to them is that it may not be difficult as it appears. With average or better intelligence -- and a willingness to work people can master the studies.

Also, unlike a secular graduate program, a seminary or religious formation program looks not only at academic ability, but at spirituality, relational skills, emotional and psychological development, and more. Academic ability is only one of many facets reviewed in formation.

Fear for the future of ordained and religious life

A very practical fear is: With declining numbers of priests and sisters, will those still active in future years be worked to death? The answer is yes, if you allow it -- if you refuse increasing lay involvement and ownership. Priests and religious don't have to do it all!

Some of this letting go is difficult. However, with more lay people being professionally trained for ministry and

more moving into the field, it's becoming easier to share ministry with them. Sacrifices will have to be made with the number of liturgies offered. But creative and collaborative ministry programs can allow future priests and sisters to have healthy, exciting lives.

Some potential candidates, looking at the changing picture of ministry, fear whether they can adapt. In those cases, people must look at their own flexibility. Are they secure only with the known, or can they live with mystery? People may want to look even deeper at their own security and trust in God.

Insecure people don't deal well with change. It will take true trust and faith in the Lord to flow with a changing future.

Fear of living without possessions

"Can I live without some of the wealth and material possessions I could have from a secular job?" Selfish sounding or not, this fear is often stated.

Potential candidates should know there are no truly poor priests or sisters in this country. We may not own much, but our basic needs are always provided for. Parishioners can be very generous to us through the year, too.

Besides, wealth can be measured in more ways than by a bank account or material possessions. I personally don't have the money and possessions my peers with comparable education and experience have. I consider myself wealthy, however, measured by the ministerial experiences, friendships and occasions for growth I've had as a priest.

Fear of unhappiness

"Will I be happy?" is a key question for many contemplating a church vocation. In response, people must look at how they've achieved happiness in the past, since this will indicate future

happiness. If people need a lot of external rewards to be happy, they may not be satisfied in a church vocation. People who want their needs fulfilled first before others probably won't be happy in a church vocation, either.

If helping others -- especially helping others in their faith life -- is rewarding, a religious vocation will bring happiness. Other qualities that indicate a person can be happy in a church vocation are: an ability to live with mystery, openness to change, sensitivity to the needs of others, love for the Lord and for the church, and a willingness to trust in the Lord over and above the ways of the world.

Do I have what it takes?

Many potential candidates wonder if they have the gifts and qualities needed for church ministry. I ask them to think over what they like seeing in people who minister to them. The people around a person in discernment can often give insights about whether the person seems suited to ministry.

Many vocation offices have vocation aptitude tests and programs that help people determine whether they have the skills necessary for a church vocation.

Finally, some people fear all they would be "giving up" in following a church vocation. I ask them not to focus only on the negative -- what they will give up --but on the positive as well: that which they will gain in a religious vocation.

All major choices in life involve both giving up and taking on. I personally believe there are many wonderful gifts and opportunities to be gained in a church vocation!