

4th Sunday of Easter - A
Acts 2:14a, 36-41;
I Peter 2:20b-25;
John 10:1-10
Little Flower - 5/7/17

My Brothers and Sisters,

The Fourth Sunday of Easter is often called Good Shepherd Sunday. Today is also the World Day of Prayer for Vocations to consecrated life, priesthood, and the permanent diaconate. Today, then, I would like to reflect on vocations to priesthood.

We often talk about a decline in the number of vocations to the priesthood and religious life. The Church, however, would argue that the number of vocations has not declined. The Church believes that God continues to call men and women to priesthood and/or religious life, but for various reasons the call is not being heard or not being answered.

The numbers of priests in the United States peaked in the mid-twentieth century. There was even a time in our Archdiocese when some very small parishes sometimes had an associate pastor. When I started Latin School, Little Flower had 24 seminarians! Church historians, however, tell us that the high number of priests in the 20th century was an historical anomaly. Therefore, we should not expect to have the numbers of priests we had in the 1950's and 1960's.

As the number of priests declined, members of the Church started playing the blame game. Parents blamed priests for not doing more to encourage vocations; priests blamed parents for not doing more to encourage vocations; bishops blamed secularization. However, in an article in *Newsweek* about 20 years ago, researcher Father Francis Kelly Scheets made the statement that what the Church had not done was a thorough in-depth study of the reasons young men are not choosing priesthood.

For many years I have thought that the Second Vatican Council contributed to the decline of young men choosing to become priests, not because of negative outcomes of the Council but because of positive outcomes of the Council. I would suggest three.

Prior to Vatican II, if a young man felt called to serve in the Church, the only way to exercise real leadership in the Church was through priesthood or religious life. The Second Vatican Council rediscovered the common priesthood of all the baptized and the vocation of the laity. Second, prior to Vatican II, celibacy or virginity was considered a higher calling than marriage. The Second Vatican Council rediscovered the sacramentality of marriage. Third, prior to Vatican II, Catholics generally had a more negative view of sex and sexuality. The Second Vatican Council rediscovered that as much as they may be misused, sex and sexuality were among the original blessings of creation.

Although the blame game does not help, I do think we all could do more to encourage vocations to the priesthood and religious life. When I was growing up, vocations to priesthood and religious life were kept in front of us as much as other vocations by our families and by our school. As small children, we thought of becoming priests as much as we thought of becoming policemen, firemen, etc. When we were in the upper grades of grade school, there was a vocation presentation almost every First Friday afternoon. The Archdiocese hosted a vocation fair every other year at Seccina. In other words, priesthood and religious life were talked about.

Also, parents and relatives as well as priests and sisters encouraged young men and women in whom they saw a potential vocation to consider becoming priests, brothers, or sisters. I am not naive enough to think that we can return to the 1950's or 1960's. However, we can talk about vocations to our young people, and we can invite young people to listen for God's call in their lives.

My brothers and sisters, today's Gospel ends with some of the most powerful words of Jesus: "*I came so that they might have life and have it more abundantly.*" God is calling all of us to become the-best-version-of-ourselves. We can only become the-best-version-of-ourselves if we are listening for God's call in our lives every day and are responding to that call every day.