

[Readings: Acts 2:14a, 36-41; Psalm 23; 1 Peter 2:20b-25; John 10:1-10]

Some of the following stories you may have heard before, especially if you are part of our Daily Mass crew. I offer these reflections especially for our First Communicants and for our FAM youth members. I first thought about diocesan priesthood when I was in the second grade, and then more seriously in high school.

Picture it. 1968. The K-Mart store on Sherwood and Outer Drive in Detroit. I am about fourteen years old. I am in one aisle. My mom is shopping in another aisle. All of a sudden, there is a crash and a boom. My mom cries out, "Nicholas?!" I shout back, "It wasn't me, Mom!" Now we fast forward forty years to the year 2008. This time I am at the K-Mart on Gratiot near 23 Mile Road. I am investigating some of the stock. As I hold the item which is not at all heart smart in my hand, I hear my Mom's voice: "Nicholas, put that down right now!" I comply immediately and put it down. I don't want a spanking. Then I realize. Mom has been dead for nine years, and I'm 54 years old! Whose voice was it? I turned the corner of the next aisle and discovered that it was the voice of a young mom running after her toddler son named Nicholas. Some things never change!

Have you been in a public place where you swear you hear someone calling out your name? You even recognize the voice as someone familiar. Then as you look up or look around, you realize one of three things:

- 1) No one was calling out your name at all; you were hearing things.
- 2) They were calling out your name, but not calling out to you; they were calling out to someone else who shares your name.
- 3) They thought you were someone else, and, once realizing their mistake, looking embarrassed, they keep walking!

Today is the World Day of Prayer for Vocations. Vocations to the ordained ministry. Vocations to the consecrated life. Vocations to sacramental marriage, vocations to an authentic life as a single person in service to the church. Today, I would like to focus on vocations to the consecrated and ordained ministry. Each one of us has received a calling from God. What is God calling YOU to be? Who is God calling you to be? You have to hear, recognize and follow the voice of Jesus.

Jesus often uses shepherd and sheep imagery to refer to you and to me. A bad shepherd is one who is only in it for what profits him personally. If any danger or risk arises, he runs away from the sheep he is hired to protect, exposing the sheep to the danger of attack by wild animals or the risk of being stolen by other humans.

Jesus as the Good Shepherd will never let that happen to us. He is the “gate.” In the time of Jesus, sheep were herded into a pen or cave at night for safety. Most pens or caves had no door to open and close, so the shepherd slept across the opening. If any sheep wandered over his body, he could move it back. If a thief or animal came near, the Good Shepherd would drive them away.

A third aspect of the shepherd/sheep relationship is that sheep, although easily led and misled, usually only move when they hear, recognize and follow the voice of the shepherd assigned to them. When a large group of shepherds gather together while the sheep graze indiscriminately in the field, the sheep mix and mingle with each other. When it is time to leave, all the shepherd has to do is cry out. The sheep that are his instinctively follow his voice and none other. The sheep split into their respective groups and follow only their shepherd. Now THAT is “voice recognition!”

How did I hear the voice of the Lord calling me? When I was about 18 years old and a member of Sweetest Heart of Mary Church in Detroit, the Sisters there – Sisters of St. Joseph, Third Order of St. Francis -- encouraged me to serve as an altar server and a lector at Sunday Mass. Then they thought I might have a vocation to the priesthood and that I should visit the Vocations Director for the Archdiocese of Detroit. I met him downtown at the chancery. He gave me some brochures to look at. I took them with me the next time I went to church.

It was the Feast of Our Lady’s Assumption – August 15, 1975. All the lights of the church had been turned off when Mass was over. I read one of the pamphlets that said, “The Lord speaks sometimes very quietly through a pamphlet or a gentle word, and sometimes the Lord speaks very loudly. So don’t expect to be knocked down like St. Paul.” I was kneeling in a pew as I read this.

What followed could be chalked up to my vivid imagination, a hallucination, or an actual bona fide mystical experience. I looked up at the tabernacle on the main altar and asked, “Well Lord, do you want me?” Just then, all the lights on the main altar went

on. The 840 tracery lightbulbs in the ceiling went on. The side altar lights went on. The Stations of the Cross lights went on. The lights at the top of the pillars went on. I literally jumped up in my pew and scraped my knees on the pew in front of me before landing. I asked, "Is that a maybe?"

Now, most things called "miracles" can be explained. It turns out that one of the SSJ sisters had an out-of-town friend visiting Detroit. She wanted to show her visitor what the church looked like with all the lights on! It was no mere coincidence... I believe it was Divine Providence!

The other mystical experience happened at the other end of my discernment process was when my seminary formation was coming to an end. I and my classmates gathered in a pilgrim prayer circle in the seminary conference room before the start of what would be our last Mass together as we all would go our separate ways to our dioceses and to priesthood ordination. The head priest of the seminary, the rector, warned us not to expect too much on the day of our ordination to the priesthood. He said, "Nothing out of the ordinary will probably happen. It might be a routine Mass, but the Holy Spirit will still be there, even in the calm. Don't anticipate anything spectacular."

That was my attitude as I and Fr. Joe Esper lined up in the back of the Cathedral of the Most Blessed Sacrament on Sunday, May 1, 1982 at 11:00 AM. There were just the two of us to be ordained because we were ordained out of sequence from the class one year ahead of us and the class one year behind us. Cardinal John Dearden, who dedicated this church in February of 1968, ordained me and Fr. Joe. The new Archbishop of Detroit, Edmund Szoka, had taken ill and could not officiate. According to my calculations, I was the last man to be ordained to the diocesan priesthood for Detroit by Cardinal Dearden.

As the assembly stood for the opening hymn, I took a deep breath and looked around me and above me. As the orchestra and choir began the opening hymn, I looked up and saw the ceiling of the cathedral open up from the center. Like two doors on a wooden chest. I saw angels floating in the cloudless sky, singing with the choir.

After the Liturgy of the Word came the Rite of Priesthood Ordination. Fr. Joe and I sat on separate chairs near the end of the sanctuary floor, and Cardinal Dearden sat in

front of the Altar of Sacrifice. Although the light in the cathedral was very bright, when Cardinal Dearden began to read his instruction/homily, all the lights went black. There were only three spotlights that appeared, shining on the Cardinal, on Joe and on me.

The third mystical experience happened when I went up and knelt before the cardinal to receive the chalice and paten. The English words translate as “imitate these.” The original Latin words were much more profound: “Become these.” May your priestly life become like bread that is broken in sacrifice and like wine that is outpoured in service.” I heard the voice of the Lord that day! I recognized the voice of the Good Shepherd calling me to diocesan priesthood!

Some of my friends in the priesthood and the religious life have shared that they have had no similar experiences as dramatic as mine. My response is that sometimes the Lord needs to kick someone from behind with more force to get their attention!

Every religious vocation – including yours – needs to be discovered, uncovered and open to growth and change. The early Church learned that and continues to learn. And so do we. Ask the Lord. Ask our Blessed Mother. “What do YOU want me to be?” “Who do YOU want me to be?” Listen. They will tell you! ALLELUIA AND AMEN!