

This Sunday is 'Vocations Sunday', when we pray in particular for vocations to the priesthood and the religious life. This, I'm sure, is quite right; on the other hand, without the People of God – without the *people* – priesthood would be meaningless. They are two aspects of the same whole. They are bound together like blood and veins, breath and lungs, soil and seed. You can't separate them. The call of the priest is not loftier, higher, more spiritual – to think that is the route to the worst kind of clericalism. It's different, not higher. And if the priest's parents had not been called to the sanctity of married life, he wouldn't even exist. We pray for vocations.

The word 'vocation' comes from the Latin, 'to call' – and it has, it seems to me, three dimensions. The first *outward*; it is the work that we do and the life-situation we find ourselves in: chef or waitress, priest or religious, husband or wife, mother or father, doctor or nurse, lorry driver or policeman, office worker or road digger. I think this dimension is most often a matter of temperament, opportunity, circumstance or serendipity. If this wasn't the case – if we were called specifically and particularly to be a chef or a policeman – then we would have to say that a child gets called to be blown up in Ukraine and a priest, hung with gold and lace, to celebrate Mass in a great cathedral. This cannot be so.

The second dimension to vocation is *inward*; It has to do with everything that goes on *beneath* our daily work, what happens between souls in a hidden way: how we influence people and how they influence us. Most often, we are

unaware of it. It is the good that we do without realizing or knowing it. It is the encounter, the exchange, the meetings between persons that God arranges for his own purposes. St John Henry Newman expressed this dimension perfectly in his prayer: 'God Has Created Me For Some Definite Purpose' – and it goes like this.

God knows me and calls me by my name....  
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 never may know it in this life,  
but I shall be told it in the next.

Somehow I am necessary for His purposes...  
I have a part in this great work;  
I am a link in a chain, a bond of connection  
between persons.  
He has not created me for naught. I shall do good,  
I shall do His work;  
I shall be an angel of peace, a preacher of truth  
in my own place, while not intending it,  
if I do but keep His commandments  
and serve Him in my calling.

Therefore I will trust Him.  
Whatever, wherever I am,  
I can never be thrown away.  
If I am in sickness, my sickness may serve Him;

In perplexity, my perplexity may serve Him;  
If I am in sorrow, my sorrow may serve Him.  
My sickness, or perplexity, or sorrow may be  
necessary causes of some great end,  
which is quite beyond us.  
He does nothing in vain; He may prolong my life,  
He may shorten it;  
He knows what He is about.  
He may take away my friends,  
He may throw me among strangers,  
He may make me feel desolate,  
make my spirits sink, hide the future from me—  
still He knows what He is about....  
Let me be Thy blind instrument. I ask not to see—  
I ask not to know—I ask simply to be used.

The third dimension to vocation is spiritual, metaphysical, universal. It is the call to eternal joy with God, whatever the circumstances of our lives. Every life is a reflection, a mirror-image of that call; it is God's intention that each and every creature should be united with him in a union of everlasting love. I say every *creature*, because Eucharistic Prayer IV of the Mass says exactly that: "Then, in your kingdom, freed from the corruption of sin and death, we shall sing your glory with every *creature* through Christ our Lord..." To teach that creatures other than ourselves cannot share in that love is depressingly short-sighted. As far as

animals are concerned, the Church has always suffered from theological myopia.

Without this sense of vocation, of being called by God to union with him, life would be drab, grey, unimaginative, uninspiring, monotonous, and pretty much without any point. It doesn't matter how we imagine God to be – we will all have our own different images and ideas because we are different as people; it doesn't matter how many times we look around at the world, see what a state it's in and wonder what God thinks he's doing; it doesn't matter that we can't fathom why some people seem to float through life on a silver-lined cloud and others have to struggle and suffer so terribly. None of this matters because we have no answer to any of it. What matters is that deep in our heart – not despite everything but *because* of everything – love, in the end, bids us welcome, enfolds and envelops us forever. Otherwise everything is senseless. Only the universal call to love makes sense of it. Secular priests take promises of celibacy and obedience to the bishop; religious priests and religious take vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. The only promise and vow each one of us needs to take in our hearts, is to love.