

The following retreat meditation was delivered to a group of school boys:

VOCATION TO THE PRIESTHOOD

By Ronald Knox

God knows what you are going to do. But is the thing which God foresees that you are going to do the thing which God wants you to do? Alas, not necessarily. It is God's will, yes, I grant you that, in the sense that he allows it to happen; if he did not allow it to happen, it wouldn't. But is the thing that each man does the thing that God really meant him to do, really wanted him to do? You can see for yourself that it is not.

Our Lord chose twelve apostles, and one of those, Judas Iscariot, turned out a traitor and a suicide. Our Lord knew, all the time, how it was going to end; all the time that Judas was stealing money from the petty-cash account, our Lord knew about it, and knew more than that, knew all about what it was going to lead to – the thirty pieces of silver, and the rope's end – and yet he chose Judas. He did not choose Judas to be a traitor; he had a vocation for him to be a saintly apostle, if he would; to carry his name before the Gentiles, to confess him before kings and rulers, to win the crown of martyrdom, if he would. There is, for each of us, a plan marked out in God's mind, so to speak, of our life as it actually will be lived; but side by side with it a plan is marked out of that same life as God wants it to be lived; and how far those two plans correspond depends on the care we take to find out what God's will is for us and the faithfulness with which we do his will when he makes it plain to us.

Of course, when I say that, you will immediately assume that I am going to talk about a vocation to the priesthood. You are perfectly right; I am. Not indeed, that I regard myself, or would have you regard me, as a particularly competent authority in such matters, as a particularly skilled discerner of spirits. I remember a boy coming to me who had quite made up his mind to become a priest, but was not quite certain whether he ought to be a Benedictine or a secular priest. I told him that he ought to be a Benedictine, and I thought that was rather nice of me, because we secular priests have our pride too. Well, he went into the novitiate and stuck that for two days; and then he went straight off to a diocesan seminary and has been perfectly happy there ever since; I suppose he will be getting the subdiaconate this summer. That is just to show you that I am not really an authority on the subject of vocations. Anybody else could tell you far more about it than I can. But I do just want to put one or two quite commonplace points of view before you.

In the first place, whatever else you make of it, I hope you will agree with me that the question "Ought I to be a priest?" is one that stands all by itself. It must not be one of a series of questions under the general title "What to Do with Our Sons". I have seen such a series running, not very long ago, in one of the more fatuous monthly magazines, and I am sorry to say that a bishop of another church contributed Number Three of the series, and his article was headed something like "Holy Orders as a Career"; nor was the body of the article much less painful than the title of it.

The question "Ought I to be a priest?" admits of only one alternative; the question in its full form runs: "Am I to be a priest or a layman?" You cannot lump it with the rest and ask: "Am I to be a tinker, tailor, soldier, sailor, rich man, poor man, beggarman, thief or a priest?" Whatever be the right way of looking at it, that is certainly the wrong way of looking at it. If for no other reason, for this – that the career of a priest does not call for any particular set of natural gifts which mark a man out as suitable for it. The natural gifts which can be employed in it are very various; but it does not demand any specialized capacities. You do not need to be a heaven-sent classical scholar, for example, or a heaven-sent mathematician; you need enough Latin to say your office, and enough mathematics to count the collection; not necessarily more. It is impossible, therefore, for a person of ordinary intelligence to say, "I cannot be a priest; I have not got the natural gifts which such a career demands."

And the same principle works in the opposite direction; you cannot say, on the ground of any natural gifts, “So and so is just the kind of person who ought to be a priest.” There is no kind of person who ought to be a priest; no one kind more than another.

Well, when we have got that much clear, we try to solve the question from the other end. We think to ourselves that perhaps the only people who are meant to be priests are the people who are very much holier and much more self-sacrificing and devout than their neighbors; really half way to being saints already. And that seems to be a complete solution of the problem for you; because you feel certain that you are not any better than your neighbors in ways like these. And if you read spiritual books that are meant for priests, like Bishop Hedley’s Retreat, you will probably get that same sort of impression that all priests live on a plane of spirituality which would be quite impossible for an ordinary person like you.

And then perhaps you think of some priests you know, and the retreat fathers you have seen, and you say to yourself, “Well, dash it all!” I cannot remember which school it was the story came from about the boy who was asked to give a list of the corporal works of mercy; and he said the first was to give food to the hungry, and the second was to give drink to the clergy. That shows, doesn’t it, a quite different estimate of the clerical vocation. So that this test does not do either; priests, we hope, are all aiming at their own sanctification; but they do so from very different levels; they do not start, at any rate, by being half saints already, and if the bishops did not accept anybody for ordination unless he was half a saint already, you and I would have a precious long distance to go on Sunday if we wanted to hear Mass.

And so we get driven back on the bare doctrine of vocation; the doctrine, I mean, that God does want some people to serve him as priests, and wants other people to serve him as laymen. Neither extraordinary natural gifts nor extraordinary supernatural gifts will mark the difference. And it is not always his best friends that he calls to serve him in the priesthood; St. Thomas More, for example, tried his vocation as a Carthusian and found he had no vocation; yet he was saintly, I think, in his life as well as in his death. The question, therefore, becomes a personal one for you. You have not to ask, “Does God want all his friends to become priests?” – you have to ask, “Does God want this particular friend of his, me, to become a priest?”

Now, I think this is a perfectly fair thing to expect, though it is ordinarily a presumptuous thing to expect this or that of God. I think it is fair to expect that, provided you do your best to cultivate his friendship and to be worthy of his friendship, God will let you know if he does want you to become a priest. He will give you some indication of it, some drawing towards himself. When I say that, you must not expect too much; you must not expect a kind of supernatural revelation, visions or ecstasies or anything of that sort. No, but the idea will come to take shape in your mind, at first perhaps only as a vague and distant possibility, then more clearly as time goes on; your friendship for God will make you want to do something for him, and your desire to do something for him will take this form.

Such inspirations come easily, where true friendship subsists. The idea may come simply from within or it may come by some warning from outside which is apparently accidental; from some alteration of circumstances in your life, or from something you have read in a book, or from something you have heard in a sermon – it may even come to you from what I am saying now; God is not particular always about the instruments which he uses, and he sent a warning to the prophet Balaam, you will remember, from the mouth of a donkey.

If you do find yourself wanting, with God’s will, to be a priest, commit your aspiration to God with full confidence. If he means you to be a priest, you will be one; there is no need at present to worry about family difficulties or things of that sort. Go on quietly asking him to make you less unworthy than you are of such a vocation. At the same time, remember that the choice in the last resort is not yours; “It is not you that have chosen me, it is I that have chosen you”, our Lord says to his apostles. No harm, then, in having a second string in your bow; in thinking out beforehand, if you are already old enough for plan-making, what you are going to do if it proves that God doesn’t mean you to be a priest.

I say that because I think there is sometimes a certain temptation for people who are aspiring to the priesthood to go rather easy over their school work, on the ground that after all you don't need much education in order to be a priest. That is not, perhaps, a great compliment to the priests you have met; but I daresay we deserve it. Only, as I say, it isn't certain that you are destined to be a priest; and it is a pity, when you make that discovery, to find that you have really no sort of aptitude for any other job in life. Don't neglect mathematics or chemistry or whatever it may be that you happen to be good at, on the ground that it can't ever help you towards achieving your main ambition in life. Any kind of knowledge can be useful to a priest; and really educated tastes can make him, I won't say a better priest, but a more useful priest; in fact, some people think it is a pity that we haven't more of that kind. God bless you and grant you your heart's desire.

Retreat in Slow Motion, Sheed & Ward, 1960