

The Path to a Vocation

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Br Paul Rowse on discernment.

On my way to work as a migrants' English teacher in East Sydney before joining the Dominican Order, I'd make a short visit to Our Lady's chapel in the Cathedral each day and ask her, "take my vocation under your mantle, and nurture it for me." By that time, I'd finished a theology degree to help with making a commitment to pursuing the priesthood, concluded a pre-seminary formation programme with my home diocese and had been involved with a lady on and off. When I was clothed with the habit, it had been five years or more that I had spent in serious discernment. There were many times when I was very confused as to where I should hang my vocational hat.

I've already mentioned the vocations dilemma I had. While I knew from an early age that the priesthood was to be my vocation, I experienced times of great confusion about which expression of the priestly vocation was to be mine — diocesan or religious, and among religious, Augustinian, Dominican, or Passionist. Those five years of discernment were tortuous at times; my enthusiasm and excitement for each group almost-predictably climbing and plummeting. Once I had settled on the Dominican friars, all things vocation became easier. For example, going to Mass was more about being with God and his people than it was about seeking the unique favour of discernment and guidance. It is only now with hindsight that I can see Wisdom in those years of waiting and discernment. What made me finally settle with the Dominican friars and not any other group of religious or the diocese was the charism of preaching. Speaking the Word to children about to be baptised, extending the Consoler's mercy to those in need of healing, and having him work in and with me in the other sacraments was certainly important to me for my future priestly life. Emphasis on the communication of that Word by fervent prayer and fruitful community, an enriching liturgical life and diligent life-long study and meditation was something we, the friars and I, had in common. The friars have all the things I needed and, to a certain limited extent, already had in my own life. For me, religious life did not so much make me a new kind of person, but offers me a new way of living the call to holiness. My discernment settled me into the realisation that once through the door to this new way of living I would continue and deepen the Christian vocation begun in baptism. I've been led to believe through my own experience that entry into religious or seminary life is a public commitment before God in the Church to what has already been stirring within much earlier than on the first day. Time spent in vocations discernment is valuable, though it may seem like nothing is "happening". It is true that the wait itself can be confusing, and at times perhaps tedious and frustrating. But we must accept that, like Israel's forty years in the desert and the Lord's forty days in solitude, our period of seeming-barrenness in the vocations wilderness is ultimately purifying, an experience of distilment, steeling our resolve to seek and serve God even in long periods of dryness. The time I had spent just plodding along in prayer and preparation led me to a strong devotion to the Blessed Virgin, the Seat of Wisdom, who has been of special assistance and consolation ever since. In my own vocation, I could not have foreseen the role her intercession before God would play; and it is only with hindsight that I can see her mantle clothing my religious life and preparing me for a share in her Son's ministerial priesthood. Seeking the help and witness of the saints is an indispensable part of vocations discernment because it's an indispensable part of the Christian life. We need lights to point our way, and the saints shine with God's light. Devotion to the Mother of God has always been commended by the Church for her help and witness in discipleship to Christ. Her words "Let it be done to me according to your word" and "Do whatever he tells you" show us her trusting generosity and faithfulness to the God who revealed his plan for the world to her, and the specific role he was inviting her to play in it. Among the forms of prayer that inspire and express devotion to Mary is her Rosary. A number of recent popes have described the Rosary as a compendium of the Gospel, suggesting thereby that in the Rosary we meet him who is the Gospel, who is himself Good News. The Rosary schools us in discipleship and is a catechesis for the whole person beginning with the fingers. Happily, it's a fundamental part of my day, and reminds me of the maternal role Mary has and continues to play. Prayer is vital to vocations discernment. The longer we are given to discern, the more time there is to pray. To underscore the importance of prayer in the life of someone who serves God's mission for his people, it ought not to be forgotten that it was while the Lord was praying that he heard the Father's words, "You are my beloved, in you I am well pleased." I've already mentioned the Rosary, but other forms of private prayer are of use too. *Lectio Divina* (which means "holy reading" or "inspired reading") is a prayerful reading of the scriptures for an encounter with him who is the Word of God made flesh. Regular Mass, even daily, is also of the greatest importance, not least of all because it's a part of religious and seminarians' daily prayer. Increasing our hunger for communion with God is Eucharistic Adoration, which presents us with but does not include our reception of the Body of Christ, and so makes our desire for the Lord of the Eucharist grow over time. In my own life, I have been pleasantly surprised about my hunger for the Blessed Sacrament brought on through Adoration, coming to know and love God as a Person with whom I can speak and in whom I can confide. But in discerning and praying, routine is key. Regularity in prayer will set the tone for the rest of our lives. Religious and seminarians pray not less but more as they profess vows and move towards ordination, so we should not be afraid to dedicate some part of our day to communicate with the Lord who so dearly loves us. Once we are on the road in discernment, it can be frustrating not knowing for certain where we are to present ourselves. Of course, there is no way we can divine the vocations, as if it were as simple as tapping something out on a calculator or consulting the right friend or book. But faithfulness to God in prayer and sustained personal witness, which is required of everyone, puts us in the right disposition to hear the still small voice of God. Very few priests or religious indeed have received a definitive sign from God giving them their vocation; however, all of them have made of themselves an offering to God, like Christ did, in whom the Father is well pleased.

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