



*Lumen Gentium reminds us that, “in the Church, everyone whether belonging to the hierarchy, or being cared for by it, is called to holiness” (LG, 39).*

As Catholics, when we think of “vocations” we tend to think immediately of vocations to the priesthood and religious life, which is understandable, but short-sighted according to the vision of the Second Vatican Council. For *Lumen Gentium* reminds us that, “in the Church, everyone whether belonging to the hierarchy, or being cared for by it, is called to holiness” (LG, 39). In fact, most vocations to the priesthood and religious life flow out of the vocation of holy matrimony, which is evidence that vocations beget vocations. It is, therefore, imperative to keep this universal call to holiness in mind when considering the synodal report’s findings in the arena of vocations.

The most common theme expressed in this section of the synodal report is the declining number of priests. Because we are a sacramental Church and because our priests bring the sacraments to the People of God, the declining number of priests is certainly a serious concern, but as Bishop Malesic has often said, so too is the declining number of people in the pews. In other words, the declining number of vocations to the priesthood is consistent with the declining number of practicing lay faithful, which indicates that any “vocation crisis” is a crisis for all vocations, and that the remedy to this crisis is a return to the universal call to communion, conversion, holiness and mission of all the baptized.

In my own work with young people, I have found that when one leads with an invitation to basic Christian discipleship by way of the kerygma – and not with a vocation talk, one has better success in developing and fostering Christian vocations – all of them. The work of the missionary disciple is to make other missionary disciples. Introducing people to Jesus Christ and His Church and then accompanying them in their walk of faith as a parish family inevitably helps them to “leave their nets” (Mt. 4:20) and follow Jesus. There are a handful of parishes in our diocese that do this sort of ministry very well, and it is not surprising that these parishes are also the biggest feeders to Borromeo Seminary and St. Mary Seminary, respectively.

Synod participants recognized a lack of diversity within priestly vocations in our diocese.

To date, we do not have any home-grown African American or Hispanic diocesan priests serving in the Diocese of Cleveland, although we do have cultural diversity within our presbyterate thanks to religious communities who serve here. And although many of our historically prominent religious communities are aging and declining in numbers, there are other religious communities within our diocese that are growing and thriving with young and culturally diverse vocations.

It will prove helpful to be more intentional as a diocese in recognizing the vocation of marriage as a Christian vocation and speak of it as such. A greater emphasis on remote and proximate marriage preparation from the Marriage and Family Office, from parishes, from our Catholic schools, and in our Catholic households will prove helpful in forming a new generation of missionary disciples who answer the vocation to holy matrimony and raise other missionary disciples. Pope Francis' recent call for a year-long "catechumenate" for marriage preparation offers sufficient evidence that the need for this vocational formation is real and urgent.

Perhaps one of the greatest take-aways from the synodal process is the desire of the participants for more opportunities for education and formation from our seminaries located at the Center for Pastoral Leadership. Establishing an institute for missionary discipleship and an institute for leadership training (especially for new pastors, parish administrators, and parish life coordinators) would be of great benefit to our diocese. Potentially, we have the space and the professors and instructors to staff such institutes to serve those who desire more adult faith formation and leadership training, but this potential needs to be actualized.

Moving forward, the Diocese of Cleveland must keep the universal call to communion, conversion, holiness and mission in mind whenever considering the topic of vocations. We must remember that by our baptism, all of us are called to be missionary disciples, and when we take that call seriously, we will have enough good and holy missionary disciples, good and holy marriages, good and holy religious, good and holy priests and deacons to keep our diocese healthy and flourishing.

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