

*Here I am, Lord, Send Me:
On Discerning a Call to the Holy Priesthood*

Fr John Parker
Dean, St Tikhon's Orthodox Theological Seminary

“Great art Thou, O Lord, and marvelous are Thy works; and there is no word which sufficeth to hymn Thy wonders!” Thus sings the priest three times as he begins the light-filled prayers of the Great Blessing of Waters. Great, indeed, is the Lord, and indeed there is no word sufficient to express our gratitude and amazement at that to which He calls us.

The greatest glory in all of mankind is the unmerited honor—unmeritable, I should add—to serve as a Priest. As St John the Golden-mouthed himself reminds us, the Priest accomplishes by God's grace what even the Angels cannot do: to call down the Holy Spirit upon the gifts that they may truly become the Body and Blood of Christ, for the nourishment of the faithful.

The Priest, says Archbishop John Shahovskoy in his timeless work, *The Orthodox Pastor*, is preacher, pastor, steward, comforter. St John Chrysostom tells us the Priest is also a spiritual surgeon, whose skill in cautery must be perfected so as not to burn or destroy the patient. He must know to cut deeply enough to remove spiritual cancer, but not so deeply that the patient dies on the table. Chrysostom adds that he must also have a thousand eyes, so that he can observe each person and each pastoral situation from every conceivable angle, in order to propose just the right cure.

In our day, the Priest must also be accountant, fundraiser, long-term planner. He must be evangelist, apologist, teacher, confessor. He must be ecclesiastical entrepreneur, church planter, even marketer—for *how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard* (cf Romans 10:14)?

In a single day he may need to rejoice with those baptizing a child and to weep with those burying one. Though a sabbath's rest is vital to his spiritual health, the sun doesn't set on his daily ministry. Strengthened by the Grace of God, he presses on with the Psalms on his lips, *Thine is the day; Thine also is the night...* (Psalm 74:16).

The Priest is intercessor, praying for the flock entrusted to him, and for those who are straying—and those who have not yet come into the fold. He is reconciler, making every attempt to restore broken relationships, especially rocky marriages and broken families, though oftentimes he is the last to learn of the difficulties.

All of this he aims to be, and if married, by the strength and intercessions of his devoted and beloved bride. In fact, the married Priest can do none of the above—none—if first he is not nurturing his first earthly love—the *wife of his youth* (Proverbs 5:18)—who comes second in his devotion only to the Lord himself.

All this being true, it is no wonder that in his *Six Books on the Priesthood*, St John Chrysostom and his dear friend Basil wished to refuse the honor, one even fleeing secretly from it beforehand.

And yet, the Lord still summons certain qualified men to serve Him in these ways, as an offering, in imitation of Christ, to His flock. Knowing our weakness, the Bishop prays that the Lord will “complete that which is lacking” in every man as he is ordained.

I am frequently asked, “How does one discern a vocation to the Priesthood?” Here are a few thoughts to begin an answer to this vital inquiry. St John Chrysostom reminds us that the Priest is one called from among only a small pool of human beings. Taking the words of St Paul to heart, this is especially true concerning the qualifications to be a pastor: husband of one wife, no lover of money, not subject to drunkenness, a faithful manager of his own household, not a scandal to others, etc. (1 Timothy 3:2ff). We must also remember that it’s the Church that calls men to the Priesthood, and thus it falls to the Bishop to ordain—or not. “Going to Seminary” is never a guarantee of any ecclesiastical role.

First, one called to the Priesthood must love the Lord with all of his heart, soul, strength, and mind. He is constantly praying, “How can I serve You more faithfully, O Lord?” The Priesthood is a vocation—a life—not a job. The Priesthood is not something a man “tests to see if he likes it.” Nor is the Priesthood a last resort: “I can’t do anything else, so I’ll be a priest.” However, one called to the Priesthood does say to himself, “What else could I possibly do?” For even though he may have the skills to run or rule the world, he cannot imagine serving the Lord in a different way.

Second, he must love the liturgical services. A man who is able, but only goes to some of the services available to him or constantly arrives late, does not have a vocation to the Priesthood. Each Priest is assigned to an altar, and that altar is his love. He leads the services and is also enriched by them. He attempts at all times “to truly reverence divine things.”

Loving the services implies “servant.” One called to the Priesthood must wish at all times to deepen his vocation as a servant of Jesus Christ. This he can do in various ways, ecclesiastical and practical. He can serve in the altar, or read the Psalms and lessons; he can clean the restrooms at church, mow the lawn, mop the floors, take out the trash. None of these is beneath him; Servanthood is the foundation of the Priesthood. Just as Jesus Christ *came not to be served, but to serve, and give his life as a ransom for many* (Matthew 20:28), the servant-heart must be established and well-practiced in advance.

He must also be stable. He should complete what he begins. He must not move around a lot. He must not switch from parish to parish, or from jurisdiction to jurisdiction. He should remember, and live by, St Anthony’s answer to the question, “What must one do in order to please God?”

The old man replied, “Pay attention to what I tell you: whoever you may be, always have God before your eyes; whatever you do, do it according to the testimony of the holy Scriptures; in whatever place you live, do not easily leave it. Keep these three precepts and you will be saved.”

Stability is the firm foundation upon which the Priest must stand.

He must be sober. Sobriety doesn't mean only “not drunk.” It means he must have a singular vision and an honest striving to keep the commandments. If he drinks, it must be within moderation. A man with an active addiction of any sort must first find healing and sobriety in order to discern if the Lord is calling him to the Priesthood. He must be free from pornography and related matters.

He must be sober in sexual matters, as Protopresbyter Thomas Hopko taught us: if married, having no sexual relations with anyone except his own wife, within the bounds of the Gospel, and if single, with no one, including himself. If he has homosexual inclinations, he must practice, like all unmarried men, strict chastity in the form of abstinence. If one with homosexual desires does have this passion under control, and yet he teaches or intends to teach that the Church much accept homosexual desire as good, right, and true, he must first submit to the Tradition of the Church in order to discern a call to the Priesthood.

One called to the Priesthood must be humble. Seminary is a crucible of theological learning and spiritual formation. Many students have very limited experience with the bona-fide breadth of the Orthodox world, liturgical and theological. While there are indeed clear boundaries—moral, theological, and liturgical—in the Orthodox life, many seminarians have had little exposure to legitimate variety. So, he must constantly ask himself, “Am I willing to learn? To listen? To take in?” If he doesn't have a teachable spirit, how will he become a teacher?

For those who are married, discernment takes a slightly more complex tack, since a calling to the Priesthood is discerned within the common union of matrimony. Care must be taken for husband and wife to be on the same page. This is true as much for marital harmony and oneness of mind as it is related to the necessity of co-laboring—if only in spirit—in the life of the Church. While “no” may be “not now” in a marriage, “not now” is a time for the couple to continue to grow in love and faith together, *submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ* (Ephesians 5:21).

Ideally, one's wife will wholeheartedly support one's heart's desires toward the Priesthood; in any case, “not opposed” allows enough room for “God to work” in a discernment process together. There are many stories which begin with a wife willingly going to seminary —though proverbially kicking and screaming—whose tears and kicking and screaming resumed at the end of seminary, but for the opposite reason: the Lord softened hearts and caused them to blossom in vocation.

While it is indeed the husband who would be ordained and serve as a Priest, the husband and wife *are a team*, and the Lord first called them together *in marriage*. If a single man is pursuing engagement and marriage to a woman, and believes he may be called to the Priesthood, he must

be honest and upfront with her ahead of time, in order that they may discern together. For once married, the husband must honor his wife, and in no way attempt to coerce her into agreement.

In practice, a call to the Priesthood is not the idyllic life often painted in one's mind. Our adversary, the divider, is always on the prowl, seeking whom to devour. In few places is this as true as at a seminary, where men and their families are offering exactly what the Devil opposes: a whole life devoted to a ministry to which not even the angels—including and especially the Devil—have access. For this reason alone, a call to the Priesthood is undertaken in community. Not only for discernment purposes, but for undergirding with prayer.

Asking the question, "How do I know if the Lord is calling me?" is not complete without this vital foundation of prayer—in tandem with one's wife, if married—and in concert with an ongoing and honest conversation with one's parish priest and spiritual father. A call to the Priesthood is sung in the soul as a harmonized chord, involving the voices of the Lord, the Bishop, one's confessor, one's wife, and one's own soul. And it should be confirmed by a multitude of witnesses in the parish—one's Christian family—who have seen this calling in action in their ministries together in the parish.

We also have come to a time to ask an important question, adapted for the Church, raised by John F Kennedy, in his 1961 Inaugural Address. His words made an indelible mark on the American mind: "My fellow Americans: ask not what your country can do for you — ask what you can do for your country." Perhaps a few will also remember that he followed this urging with a similar word to the world: "My fellow citizens of the world: ask not what America will do for you, but what together we can do for the freedom of man."

It is also time, in the Orthodox Churches of North America, for us to encourage qualified men:

Ask not what your Lord can do for you, but how you can serve the Lord in His Holy Church.

And further: Ask not what the Holy Church can do for you, but what you can do, in offering yourself as a living sacrifice to the Lord, to serve as a priest, and to preach Christ crucified and raised from the dead, declaring to all who will listen the true freedom of man, in Christ.

To answer these questions, The first step is a willing heart, in concert with one's wife, if married. The second step is a conversation with one's priest. The next step is a visit to St Tikhon's. Once you've taken the first steps, wait no longer—come and see!