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Vocations are vital for the life of the church

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The theme of this month's New Earth is vocations to the priesthood, diaconate and consecrated life as distinct from the also important vocation of marriage. These vocations are vital for the life of the Church and must be encouraged and promoted by all of the faithful. Let us first turn to the Gospel and see how our Lord called his first apostles and disciples.

In the Gospel of Mark we read, "Passing alongside the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and Andrew the brother of Simon casting a net into the sea, for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, 'Follow me, and I will make you become fishers of men.' And immediately they left their nets and followed him. And going on a little farther, he saw James the son of Zebedee and John his brother, who were in their boat mending the nets. And immediately he called them, and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired servants and followed him" (Mark 1:16-20).

First, important to note is that a vocation is the initiative of Jesus. Jesus is the one who does the calling, the inviting. We are told in Luke's Gospel that he spent the night in prayer with the Father before he called the 12 apostles. The word vocation comes from the Latin, *vocare*, "to call." Today, the same Lord calls young men to serve as priests and permanent deacons and women and men to serve in the consecrated life.

A second point that we can observe is that the future apostles leave everything, even their father and livelihood, and follow Jesus. They do not fully understand the call which is given, yet they respond in obedience to the call. They are called to leave mother and father, brother and sister, and follow the Lord in obedience and surrender to his will. One can see how radical the Lord's call is in the Gospels in the call to put Jesus first before all else (Luke 14:26-27).

Every baptized person must ask the question, "What is God's will for my life?" for his will must always come first. God has a unique plan for every human being conceived in his mother's womb (Psalms 139). His will is not burdensome, but what is best for us - "my yoke is easy and my burden light," Jesus tells us (Matthew 11:30).

In teaching us the prayer of the "Our Father," Jesus made clear that the Father's will is to be first within our lives. With Jesus, each of us is called to pray, ". . . not my will, but your will be done" (Mark 14: 36). To merely follow one's own dreams limits us to our short-sighted selves, while placing oneself vulnerably before the will of the Father opens up for us the beauty of our own vocation, because God loves us more than we love ourselves. Go beyond your own dreams to discover the Father's desire for your vocation in life, plans for love, goodness, happiness and peace.

Our young people need to be taught to be open and receptive to the call the Lord is giving to them. They must be taught to listen attentively to the voice of God, rather than to the voices of the world. The only place a human being will find true happiness is when he listens to God.

Also, the prime environment of listening and receiving God's voice takes place in the real committed time of everyday prayer. Please take time to teach our young people how to pray, how to freely receive in the silence of their minds and hearts, the grace, life, love and personal vocation the Holy Spirit has for them.

As parents and grandparents, as friends and relatives, we are called to be supportive of the call the Lord is giving to them. When a son or daughter, a brother or sister, a friend or cousin, a grandchild, nephew or niece informs us that they think God may be calling them to a particular vocation within the Church, we are called to give them support and encouragement in exploring the Father's will for their life.

In today's world, this can be a challenge. Yet our young people, saying "yes" to the call from Jesus, are the future of the Church and the ones who will lead the Church in the years ahead. The Father never abandons us, but rather generously calls young people to serve. If we fail to encourage vocations we are the ones who abandon the Father. The reason for the lack of vocations today is not that the Father isn't calling young men and women, but rather that we fail to listen and to support vocations.

Pope Benedict XVI in his 2011 message for Vocations Sunday reminded us, "It is essential that every local Church become more sensitive and attentive to the pastoral care of vocations, helping children and young people in particular at every level of family, parish and associations - as Jesus did with his disciples - to grow into a genuine and affectionate friendship with the Lord, cultivated through personal and liturgical prayer; to grow in familiarity with the sacred Scriptures and thus to listen attentively and fruitfully to the word of God; to understand that entering into God's will does not crush or destroy a person, but instead leads to the discovery of the deepest truth about ourselves; and finally to be generous and fraternal in relationships with others, since it is only in being open to the love of God that we discover true joy and the fulfillment of our aspirations" (Message of the Holy Father for the XLVIII World Day of Prayer for Vocations, Feb. 10, 2011).

Each one of us must reflect on how supportive we are in encouraging and supporting authentic vocations today. Do we truly believe that a vocation is the initiative of God, and one which the person who is called is to respond to, if he or she truly seeks the will of the Father? Do we ask for the faith to believe that God's call is what is best for us?

In today's secular world, it is very easy to become deaf to the voice of the Father, thinking that it is fine if it is someone else's child who is called as long as it is not mine, or seeing a vocation as a waste of a person's life and talents, or even going so far as to discourage a young person from considering a vocation. This type of movement is not of the Holy Spirit but rather of the evil one. Be not afraid to place your faith in Jesus, who calls out of love.

We also are called to pray fervently for vocations. Jesus teaches us in the Gospel, "When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, 'The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest'" (Matthew 9:36-38).

This prayer is the responsibility of every member of the Church. We can specifically pray to the Father for the Diocese of Fargo in our homes, our Catholic schools, during adoration before the Eucharist, and at our Masses each day. Our priests can offer a votive Mass each month for vocations.

Never tire of praying for vocations! Pray for the laborers needed for the diocese each day!
Don't be afraid to teach your parishioners, children and grandchildren how to pray!

As you read through this issue of New Earth, may your hearts be filled with a renewed zeal to pray for vocations to the priesthood, permanent diaconate and consecrated life.

May we support and encourage vocations and heed our Lord's call to pray for laborers to be sent out into his harvest (Luke 10:2). A very blessed New Year to you!