

HEARING THE CALL

A Resource for Those Discerning
a Vocation to Holy Orders



THE EPISCOPAL DIOCESE OF DALLAS

On the cover: *Ordination of a Deacon*. From a printed pontifical, A.D. 1520.

Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of working, but it is the same God who inspires them all in every one. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the ability to distinguish between spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. All these are inspired by one and the same Spirit, who apportions to each one individually as he wills...

1 Corinthians 12:4-11

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Dear Discerner,

The discernment of one's vocation is a high-stakes affair: the consequences will reverberate throughout your lifetime. Therefore, it's a good idea to seek out guidance and direction as you seek to find your calling in Christ. You don't need to do this alone! You ought not do this alone.

At the beginning it is helpful to have an idea of what the work of "discernment" entails, and what it is we are attempting to discern, that is, a vocation to diaconate and the priesthood. This little guide is an attempt to provide some initial answers to these questions. I hope you find it helpful.

The following reflections aren't exactly light reading, but it's important that we learn to think about these things in a serious and meaningful way. As you begin this journey, please read these materials closely. Set aside time to reflect and pray. Serve actively in your parish; recite the Daily Office faithfully; strive to live in charity with all as you embrace the Cross of our Lord. And know that as you discern, you are not alone. Your parish and your diocese are ready to go down this pathway with you, and what's more, the whole host of heaven, including Christ himself, will accompany you on your way.

With every best wish for your ongoing discernment, I remain faithfully yours
in Christ Jesus,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Fr. Jeremy +". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a small cross at the end.

Rev. Canon Jeremy W. Bergstrom, PhD
Canon for Vocations
The Episcopal Diocese of Dallas

On Christian Discernment

“You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide...”
Jn 15:16

“We have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit which is from God, that we might understand the gifts bestowed on us by God... The unspiritual man does not receive the gifts of the Spirit of God because they are spiritually discerned.”
1 Cor 2:12-14

“For by the grace given to me I bid every one among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith which God has assigned him. For as in one body we have many members, and all the members do not have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them...”
Romans 12:3-6

How do I know what God wants me to do? What is God’s will for my life?
Where do I fit in the life of the church?

It seems few people sit down long enough to ponder the big questions; even fewer have the courage and presence of mind to seek the answers. The fact that you’re reading this suggests you’re one of those few.

The work of discernment takes many forms, and features in every facet of life: what to have for breakfast; what to say or do at any particular moment; whether or not to marry, and if so, whom; whether or not to enter into a

deeper awareness of who you are in Christ, and what he would have you do in service to him.

The bigger questions are harder to answer because discernment is far more than just gaining enough information to be able to make a sensible decision. The work of discernment, especially the journey of discerning one's calling, or vocation, is not at all straightforward due to the effects of sin; we see "through a glass, darkly" (1 Cor 13:12). Christian discernment is as much if not more a matter of the heart than the head. Remember our Lord's Sermon on the Mount, especially Mt 5:8: "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God." Authentic discernment begins through the Holy Spirit guiding us to an awareness of the truth through faith: the truth about God, the world, and the truth about oneself in Christ, as a member of his Body.

True Christian discernment involves 1) making a reasonable judgment on what is true in the light of faith, and 2) coming to an awareness of the inclinations or desires within us, and their relationship to that truth. If we're to find our calling, our hopes and desires have to line up with what is true about us, and again, our tradition confesses this to be seen only through faith. True discernment cannot happen apart from humility, constant prayer, deep reflection, and close consultation with other discerning Christians who know us well. Only a clear mind aided by a loving heart can discern the love of God our Creator, and his loving intentions for us.

So Christian discernment begins in, is motivated by, and ends in love: in the love of God, in love for Christ and his Church, and in love of self, finding one's place as a member of Christ's body as one part grafted into the whole. This makes the search for one's Christian vocation less an awareness of possible courses of action and identity, and more a search for the life God intends for us; our search is not simply for a life we think seems like a good idea at the time, but the *right* life. Christian freedom is not the ability to become whatever one wishes to become, to decide whether or not one wishes to be celibate or married, a deacon or a priest, or even 'safely' to remain a member of the laity; rather, Christian freedom is found in becoming who and what God created us to be, embracing the way in which he intended our lives to unfold in order to share in and testify to his saving purposes in

the world through Christ. The Church cannot compel any individual person to any particular vocation; but a failure to discern and then embrace one's vocation, whatever it might be, is a failure to embrace one's well-being in Christ.

Different people begin to discern God calling them to Holy Orders in different ways. Some feel drawn to pastoral ministry from a very young age, others wake up to the idea at a more mature age, often when they're well into a secular career. Some respond immediately to the call, some put it off for a few years, even decades, sometimes it goes an entire lifetime without action. Sometimes a parent or a spouse will begin to suspect their loved one might have a clerical vocation well before the one being called. A growing awareness of a vocation to ordained ministry can feel terrifying or invigorating, burdensome or like the sudden lifting of a weight. The reactions of family members and friends typically range anywhere from enthusiastic support to bitter opposition and everything in between.

Regardless of the variety of experiences we have due to our varied personalities and backgrounds, if you are indeed called to Holy Orders, there is nothing quite like moving towards the unity found in sharing a common identity with one's ministerial colleagues and, ultimately, with Christ himself.

If you think your well-being in Christ might involve ordination as a Deacon or Priest, then you have a duty and a responsibility to Christ, the Church, and yourself to enter into a period of discernment with the Church. This process begins by talking with those closest to you, and eventually by having a conversation with your priest, who will guide you in any further steps, if any. Taking this first formal step requires courage; but if you're becoming aware of a greater sense of calling to Christian service and ministry, there's really no other way to find peace apart from entering a period of discernment with the Church. This discernment process might end in you being ordained; it might end in you finding a wonderful and engaging ministry as a member of the laity. Both are good. What matters is that you gain more clarity about who and what Christ has made you to be.

On the Diaconate

“...those who serve well as deacons gain a good standing for themselves and also great confidence in the faith which is in Christ Jesus.” 1 Timothy 3:13

“TAKE heed that the persons, whom ye present unto us, be apt and meet, for their learning and godly conversation, to exercise their ministry duly, to the honour of God, and the edifying of his Church...”

(from the Bishop’s Exhortation in “The Form and Manner of Making Deacons”, BCP 1662)

In discerning any vocation, the place to start is always with the Gospel - the saving work of Jesus Christ at work in the church through the Holy Spirit. The bishop is a sign of that same work faithfully communicated across time and space in spite of all obstacles, and the priest is the sign that this power is conveyed gratuitously through Word and Sacrament. The deacon reminds us of the grace of Jesus himself, that he is humble, cruciform, and in solidarity with human need, ever-present in the midst of our suffering and difficulty.

A diaconal ministry symbolically demonstrates Christ’s presence in the midst of and in solidarity with human need and poverty, and helps to ‘take the Church there’, going to those places the rest of Christ’s body might not think, or might not initially be inclined, to go. The deacon ministers to the sick, the mentally ill, the dying, the imprisoned, the disabled, and the disadvantaged in a serious and tangible way, bringing the light and love of Christ into the darkest and most desperate of places, proclaiming the Gospel in word and through works of loving service.

The liturgical role of deacons is an important expression of these various aspects of the diaconal ministry, expressed in the proclamation of the Gospel and service at the altar. The presence of a deacon in the liturgy is a tangible

reminder of those dark and desperate places of human need and suffering, not only drawing the hearts and minds of the faithful to “the least of these my brethren” (Mt 25.40), but also seeking to lead the lost out of the darkness and into the glorious light of Christ’s love and mercy and healing. Likewise, this symbolic role also informs the deacon’s parish ministry: informing the congregation of the needs within their community, and exhorting them to live out their own diaconal vocation in service to others, embracing the call our Lord gives to all the baptized.

Finally, in our church we give deacons an equal share with priests in the councils of the Church. For this reason their educational preparation must be comparable to that of priests. This means that anyone preparing for diaconal ordination will be required to study at a seminary for a period of time, which can be done via distance education.

For further understanding of the diaconate, read the various relevant materials in the bibliography provided at the end of this booklet, especially Rosalind Brown’s *Being a Deacon Today*.

On the Priesthood

“We exhort you, in the Name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you have in remembrance, into how high a Dignity, and to how weighty an Office and Charge which ye are called: that is to say, to be Messengers, Watchmen, and Stewards of the Lord; to teach, and to premonish, to feed and provide for the Lord’s family; to seek for Christ’s sheep that are dispersed abroad, and for his children who are in the midst of this naughty world, that they may be saved through Christ for ever.”

(from the Bishop’s Exhortation in “The Ordering of Priests”, BCP 1662)

GOD, who dost ever hallow and protect thy Church; Raise up therein, through thy Spirit, good and faithful stewards of the mysteries of Christ, that by their ministry and example thy people may abide in thy favour and be guided in the way of truth; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who liveth and reigneth with thee in the unity of the same Spirit ever, one God, world without end. *Amen.*

(from “The Litany for Ordinations”, BCP 1928 PECUSA)

There is of course only one priest, one mediator between God and humanity, our Lord Jesus Christ (1 Tim 2:5, Heb 3-10). As the Epistle to the Hebrews declares, our high priest continues forever, and is “holy, blameless, unstained, separated from sinners, exalted above the heavens,” and has “once for all” offered himself on the Cross as the sacrifice for our sins; and now “is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven, a minister in the sanctuary and the true tent which is set up not by man but by the Lord” (Heb 7:23-8:7). Thomas Cranmer draws deeply on these Scriptures in the Prayer Book Order for Holy Communion when he declares that when Christ suffered “death upon the Cross for our redemption,” he made there “a full,

perfect, and sufficient sacrifice, oblation and satisfaction, for the sins of the whole world.”

Even though the Anglican tradition is clear that it is Christ alone who has made the sacrifice, and that “we are unworthy to offer any sacrifice,” Cranmer’s prayer of consecration nevertheless clearly indicates the entire congregation is to participate in Christ’s sacrifice by offering up “our selves, our souls, and our bodies, to be a reasonable, holy, and living sacrifice” unto the Father, thus transforming our entire being into a “sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving.” So the priesthood of Christ has been given as the common, spiritual vocation of every member of his Body (Ex 19:5-6; 1 Peter 2:5).

Given the priesthood of Christ, and by extension the priesthood of all believers who are called by Christ to participate in the offering of himself “once for all”, what then is the role of the person standing at the altar, who looks and acts priestly, who does seemingly priestly things, all the while uttering prayers that proclaim the priesthood of Christ and of all the faithful in him? Inasmuch as the liturgy denies that it is a sacrifice by pointing to the real sacrifice, the priest too embraces the fact that he or she is in fact not a priest in a special or elitist sense, but is an enduring and fitting symbol of the priesthood to which Christ calls all the faithful. The ordained priest provides the form of that which is signified, all the while denying his or her own individualistic claims to that priesthood. As Bishop Sumner writes, “All this is done to the service of the One who is the real and only Priest, who redefines, fulfills, and ends all priesthood in himself. The minister at the table is a counter-sign that works by its own displacement, by becoming a great finger stretched away from oneself and toward the dying Jesus at the center of the Church’s life” (*Being Salt*, 25).

Bishop Sumner further develops this understanding of the symbolic role of the priest in the midst of the congregation by drawing our attention to Christ’s words in the Sermon on the Mount: “You are the salt of the earth” (Mt 5.13). Here Christ clearly means the church as a whole is to *preserve* the words and will of Christ, and it thereby *possesses a distinct zest or flavor* in comparison with the outside world, making the church noticeable and attractive. But as Bishop Sumner explains, at their ordination priests take up

the identity they already possess as Christians, and become “salt” in a new, indelibly symbolic way. As our bishop writes,

Saltiness as Jesus commands it defies the contrast between being and function. It is clearly something they are to *be*, and yet to be salt inherently implies rendering certain services for another... salt does these by what it is for them. The metaphor and the dominical saying on which it is founded seem well to suit the concept of being a “sign for,” which takes into itself both sides of the being/doing dichotomy. (*Being Salt*, 101)

Hearing and being obedient to our Lord’s call to “be salt” as a priest implies that one is a priest *of* Christ; “being salt” in turn implies that the priest is salt *for* the Church, and by extension, the world. This involves renouncing our own personal claims to represent the Church to itself, and finding that those of us who have been ordained are only able to be ourselves inasmuch as our entire being points to Christ. Through their symbolic life, then, priests are used by Christ to maintain the ‘saline levels’ of his body, the Church.

So what do priests *do*? One commonly hears ordained ministry described as leadership in the church and it most certainly is that. But it is also much more than that, as we have just seen. The vocation to the priesthood is a distinct and narrow calling which participates in the ministry of the Apostles, inasmuch as they themselves share in the ministry of Christ. Perhaps the pithiest summation of the Apostolic ministry is Paul’s explanation to the Corinthians, which contains a rich discussion of the nature of true apostolic leadership in the life of the Body. He says of their ministry, “This is how one should regard us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God” (1 Cor 4:1). Paul goes to great pains to point out that his ministry originated with God and not any human being; and that it is Christ he preaches, not himself. Those sharing in Paul’s apostolic ministry as ordained presbyters serve Christ their master, and they are stewards, i.e. preservers and dispensers, of the Word of God and the Sacraments. So in addition to identifying with the priestly identity of Christ, any genuine priestly vocation

will express itself primarily in terms of service to Christ through proclamation of the Gospel and in the administration of the sacraments.

Maintaining this vocation over the course of a lifetime is difficult. The life of a priest is both glorious and humbling: one minute the priest is being used by God to transform someone's life; the next, he finds himself unable to resolve a dispute amongst the members of his vestry over the parish landscaping. One minute she's immersed in the glories of Scripture and theological reflection; the next, she's working in the rain to help fix a leak in the church roof late on a Saturday night. Common stressors of priestly ministry usually involve time, money, and conflicts over influence in the parish. All these kinds of challenges can be addressed through common-sense solutions and prudent self-care; but true and profound priestly burnout tends to come from a sense of meaninglessness, a loss of purpose. We prevent this only through a return to a more thorough understanding of what the priesthood is, to recapture the essence of the vocation. It is thus vitally important that the process of discernment be incisive and careful, and that priestly formation be both rigorous and heart-felt. To this end we require serious study of the priesthood at the start, so that everyone is clear on just what it is we're discerning together. Take to heart all we've said here, and read several of the resources laid out in the following bibliography, beginning of course with those texts labeled "Essential Reading." If the right foundations are laid, the likelihood of a rewarding and successful lifelong ministry increases dramatically.

Bibliography

The following is hardly a complete list, and not all the resources listed below are of equal worth; but these titles have been compiled so that you might have a sound understanding of what it is you're seeking to discern, and be able to compare and contrast the Anglican understanding of Holy Orders with those of the Roman and Eastern traditions.

ESSENTIAL READING ON HOLY ORDERS

Rosalind Brown, *Being a Deacon Today: Exploring a Distinctive Ministry in the Church and in the World* (Morehouse, 2005)

Michael Ramsey, *The Christian Priest Today* (SPCK, 2009; first published 1972)

George Sumner, *Being Salt: A Theology of an Ordered Church* (Wipf & Stock, 2007)

THE PRAYER BOOK TRADITION

TEC BCP 1979: <http://www.bcponline.org/>. Look under “Episcopal Services” in the directory.

PECUSA BCP 1928:
<http://justus.anglican.org/resources/bcp/1928/Ordinal.htm>

Church of England BCP 1662:
<https://www.churchofengland.org/prayer-worship/worship/book-of-common-prayer/the-form-and-manner-of-making,-ordaining-and-consecrating-of-bishops,-priests-and-deacons.aspx>

FURTHER READING

The Diaconate in Anglicanism:

- James Barnett, *The Diaconate: A Full and Equal Order*, rev ed. (Trinity, 1995)
- John Booty, *The Servant Church: Diaconal Ministry and the Episcopal Church* (Morehouse, 1982)
- John Collins, *Deacons and the Church: Making Connections Between Old and New* (Morehouse, 2002)
- Ormonde Plater, *Deacons in the Liturgy*, 2nd ed. (Church Publishing, 2009)
- Ormonde Plater, *Many Servants: An Introduction to Deacons* (Cowley, 2004)

The Priesthood in Anglicanism:

- Rosalind Brown and Christopher Cocksworth, *On Being a Priest Today* (Cowley, 2004)
- Leander Harding, *To Persevere in Love: Meditations on the Ministerial Priesthood from an Anglican Perspective* (Wipf & Stock, 2013)
- John Webster, "Ministry and Priesthood," in *The Study of Anglicanism*, Sykes et al, eds. 2nd ed. (SPCK, 1998): 321-333

The Church Fathers on the Priesthood and Ministry:

- St. Gregory of Nazianzus, *Or 2, In Defense of His Flight to Pontus*
- St. Ambrose of Milan, *On the Duties of the Clergy (De officiis)*
- St. John Chrysostom, *On the Priesthood* (6 treatises)
- St. Augustine, *On Catechizing the Uninstructed (De catechizandis rudibus)*
- St. Gregory the Great, *The Pastoral Rule*

Books on Discernment:

- Gordon T. Smith, *Consider Your Calling: Six Questions for Discerning Your Vocation* (IVP, 2016)
- Gordon T. Smith, *The Voice of Jesus: Discernment, Prayer and the Witness of the Spirit* (IVP, 2003)

JI Packer, *Finding God's Will* (Intervarsity, 1985)

Andrew Louth, *Discerning the Mystery: An Essay on the Nature of Theology* (Oxford, 1990)

Mark A. McIntosh, *Discernment and Truth: The Spirituality and Theology of Knowledge* (Crossroad, 2004)

Useful Historical Studies:

Matthew Levering, *On the Priesthood: Classic and Contemporary Texts* (Sheed & Ward, 2003)

William Harmless, *Augustine and the Catechumenate*, rev. ed. (Pueblo, 2014)

Andrew Purvis, *Pastoral Theology in the Classical Tradition* (Westminster John Knox, 2001)

Craig Satterlee, *Ambrose of Milan's Method of Mystagogical Preaching* (Pueblo, 2002)

OTHER CATHOLIC CHRISTIAN TRADITIONS

The Priesthood in Roman Catholicism:

Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission (ARCIC) Agreed Statement, "Ministry and Ordination",
https://iarccum.org/archive/ARCIC/1973_ministry_and_ordination.pdf.

Timothy Cardinal Dolan, *Priests for the Third Millennium* (Our Sunday Visitor, 2009)

Avery Cardinal Dulles, *The Priestly Office: A Theological Reflection* (Paulist Press, 1997)

Mark O'Keefe, *In Persona Christi: Reflections on Priestly Identity and Holiness* (St. Meinrad, 2008)

Aidan Nichols, *Holy Order: Apostolic Priesthood from the New Testament to the Second Vatican Council* (Wipf & Stock, 2011)

Karl Rahner, *Servants of the Lord* (Herder & Herder, 1968)

The Priesthood in Eastern Orthodoxy:

Joseph Allen, *Vested in Grace: Marriage and Priesthood in the Christian East* (Holy Cross, 2001)

Joseph Allen, *The Ministry of the Church* (St. Vladimir's, 1986)

Aleksandr Elchaninov, *Diary of a Russian Priest* (St. Vladimir's, 1997)

St. John of Kronstadt, *Counsels on the Christian Priesthood* (St. Vladimir's, 1967)

John Peck, *Discerning Your Vocation to the Priesthood: A Guide to Discerning Vocation to Holy Orders in the Orthodox Church* (Preacher's Institute, 2016)

Alexander Schmemmann, *Journals of Fr. Alexander Schmemmann* (St. Vladimir's, 2000)

John Shahovsky, *The Orthodox Pastor: A Guide to Pastoral Theology*, 2nd ed. (St. Vladimir's, 2008)

