

**HOW TO DISCOVER YOUR VOCATION:
Marriage, Priesthood, Consecrated Life, Permanent
Diaconate, Single Life**

Fr Stephen Wang

INTRODUCTION

Many Catholics are wondering what direction their life is going in and what plans God has for them. This booklet will help you to think and pray about your vocation, and become clearer about where God is leading you in your life. It gives practical answers to questions such as: How does God guide us and speak to us? How do we discover our vocation? How do we make decisions? There are sections about marriage, priesthood, consecrated life, the permanent diaconate, and the single life; together with personal stories from ordinary people who have discovered their own vocation. There are chapters on 'How can I find a good husband or wife?' and 'How can I explore the priesthood or consecrated life?'

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This text is available as a small booklet published by the Catholic Truth Society. It can be ordered from the CTS website at: www.cts-online.org.uk

The text is also viewable online at: www.catholicideas.com

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HOW TO USE THIS BOOKLET

This booklet is written for Catholics who are trying to discover what direction their life is going in and what plans God has for them. It will help you to think and pray about your vocation and become clearer about where God is leading you in your life. Don't feel you have to read the whole booklet through from start to finish. You can look at the table of contents and dip into whichever sections seem relevant to your life.

At the beginning of each chapter there is a prayer or meditation. You could use these in your own prayer time. At the end of each chapter one or two people explain something about how they discovered their own vocation. These testimonies are included to show the many different ways that God is at work in our lives. Take a look at them even if you are not reading that particular chapter.

It's important that you are seeking God's will and open to his plans. But there is a danger that you will become so anxious about your vocation, so caught up in a future that does not yet exist, that you will forget about living the life God has already given you. So yes, do put some time and effort into considering your vocation – be open, be generous, be brave. It is a wonderful adventure! But at the same time be grateful for the person you are now, and for the work God has given you to do today.

I am very grateful to the following people who have read all or parts of this text and made invaluable suggestions about how it could be improved: Andrew Gallagher, Joanna Gilbert, Andrzej Jaxa-Chamiec, Fr Luke Jolly OSB, Sr Cathy Jones RA, Brian O'Mahony, Rev James Richards, Hannah Vaughan-Spruce, Elizabeth Wang, Mary Wang, and Clare Watkins. Various friends wrote the story of their vocation for me. I have given them some anonymity by just using their first names. I am enormously grateful to them for their honest and thoughtful responses.

The quotation from Joanna Gilbert at the end of chapter 7 is from chapter 1 of *Touched by God*, Ed. Laurentia Johns (London: Burns & Oates, 2008), pp. 4 and 27. The other quotations are, as far as I know, in the public domain, or given to me by friends.

Fr Stephen Wang

PART ONE: Vocation and Discernment

1. DO I HAVE A VOCATION?

“God calls all the souls he has created to love him with their whole being, here and thereafter, which means that he calls all of them to holiness, to perfection, to a close following of him and obedience to his will. But he does not ask all souls to show their love by the same works, to climb to heaven by the same ladder, to achieve goodness in the same way. What sort of work, then, must I do? Which is *my* road to heaven? In what kind of life am *I to sanctify myself?*”

Blessed Charles de Foucauld

Created to share God’s love. The fundamental vocation of every human being is to love. This is not obvious to everyone today. Many people believe that human life is just an accident, a chance product of evolution, a meaningless event in a vast mechanical universe. It is certainly true that our lives have been shaped by many different forces, but there is a much deeper truth that we can discover through faith: *Every single human being has been created by God out of love.* He made us so that we could know his love, and share that love with others, and delight in that love forever in the glory of heaven. So whatever you feel about your own worth – *never doubt that your life has a meaning.* God loves you and cares for you. You are precious to him and he has a purpose for your life, even if that does not seem very clear to you.

What is a vocation? The word ‘vocation’ comes from the Latin word that means ‘calling’. For the Christian a vocation is not just something that God calls us to do, it is also the person God calls us to be. When Jesus called his first disciples by the Lake of Galilee it wasn’t just so that they could help him in his work, it was so that their lives could be transformed through his friendship and love. We have been called to follow Christ, the Son of God, the eternal Word of the Father, who came to save us and to lead us back to heaven with him. He has sent his Holy Spirit so that we can share in his divine life even now, and express that life by trying to love him and to love our neighbour. The Christian vocation is a call to share in the life of the Most Holy Trinity.

Vocation as a call to holiness. One way of expressing this is to say that the fundamental human vocation is the call to holiness, the call to be a saint. The saints are not just heroic people who live in history books. They are ordinary Christians who have tried to live their faith without holding anything back – to love God with their whole hearts, to love those around them without counting the cost, to work at what is worthwhile with dedication and purpose, to be people of joy and kindness and prayerfulness. *All of us are called to be saints* – however weak or sinful we feel. This is not so much a command as a promise that God makes: he promises us, by giving us his Holy Spirit, that he will help us to find our true happiness in following him, and that he will give us whatever we need for the journey.

You already have a vocation. This vocation to holiness is already a part of your life, given to you at your baptism, and it is so important to remember that. Whatever situation you are in now, however unsatisfactory it seems, you already have a vocation. You might be working, studying, travelling, unemployed, or caring for someone at home; you might be very content, or utterly miserable; full of hope, or close to despair. Whatever your situation, you can trust that God is with you, and that he calls you to be holy in this very situation. Things may well change – and perhaps they need to. But at this moment you must have the confidence to believe that *even now there is a meaning and a purpose to your life*; and that you can begin to fulfil that by everyday acts of love and kindness and patience.

Living well in the present. This call to live well in the present is *the ‘Little Way’ recommended by St Thérèse of Lisieux* – the importance of simply doing your duty, saying your prayers, loving your neighbour, bearing your sufferings; and doing all this with a generous and loving heart. It is not very dramatic, but it is the secret of holiness, and it reminds us that *your first and fundamental vocation is not something to be discovered in the future – it is living the Christian life in the here and now*. Perhaps this is all God wants of you for the moment. You must avoid the temptation of thinking that your Christian life can only properly begin in the future, when everything is crystal clear. And if you do not discover a more concrete vocation, or if you are to die young, then you should not feel that you have wasted your life, or that your life is unfinished or unfulfilled.

Vocation as a call to a concrete ‘state of life’. Christ has always called some people to follow him in concrete ways, by giving them a more specific vocation. In previous generations, the word ‘vocation’ would only have been used to describe the lives of priests and religious – because these people had in some sense been called ‘away’ from an ordinary life to a life of celibacy and service in the Church. But today the word ‘vocation’ is rightly used also of marriage, permanent diaconate, consecrated life, and some forms of single life – because each of these is a wholehearted commitment that we make in response to an invitation from the Lord. These concrete vocations are also known as ‘states of life’, because we make a lifelong commitment to living our Christian faith in a particular context. *This lifelong commitment becomes the place in which we live out our fundamental vocation to holiness*. God calls us all to be saints; and sometimes he calls us to be saints in a particular way – as husbands or wives, as priests or deacons or consecrated persons.

Vocation as a call to be the unique person you are made to be. There is yet another level to ‘vocation’. Each saint is unique, and you are called to be holy not just in a general way, but in the particular way that God has made you to be. *God created you as a unique individual, and calls you by a name that no-one else has been given. You reflect Christ’s love and show something of his face in a way that no-one else can*. This is your ‘personal’ vocation – *the call to be the person you are meant to be*. The more you discover who you are, and the more you discover what lies deepest in your heart, the more you will be able to discern what God’s will is for you and what direction he wants you to take in life. Your lifelong vocational commitments and the particular path of holiness that you are called to follow will inevitably grow out of the person God created you to be.

Sally, member of a Focolare community:

“Discovering my vocation was part of a life changing experience. I am from Northern Ireland and growing up in Belfast I was no stranger to the harsher side of life. Having seen injustice and cruelty on all sides in that senseless conflict, at the age of 17, I decided that not only politicians but even God had forsaken Belfast. What changed everything for me was when, through my contact with the Focolare Movement, I saw Christians who were united. They not only spoke about the revolutionary power of the Gospel to change people and situations but they made it the foundation of their everyday life. That in turn gave me the strength to change my life and to begin to make a difference to the situation around me. I realised that when I was with them I was at home. I felt a deep peace. I was completely free. When I was with them, I was the best of myself. I knew then I wanted to live like this 24/7. It is a choice I have never regretted.”

Fr Digby, Diocesan priest:

“Somehow I just knew what I had to do to be true to myself. And the strong pull within me was to apply for the priesthood. I can resonate strongly with both why the word ‘vocation’ is used in this way and also with how those in the scriptures who were called by God also had a certain fear about saying yes – the ‘Hound of heaven’ experience perhaps. Looking back to my teens when this experience was first felt, I feel blessed that there was this clarity - it’s never left me in 45 years. The challenge has been to live it out in a way that is alive and authentic, starting afresh every day. Sometimes I say to people who are considering major life decisions “I made the ‘mistake’ of continuing to pray – that way I kept hearing the call !” If I hadn’t kept up the prayer maybe I would have blocked out what the Lord really wanted, but I can’t see how I’d have been happy. There is a phrase you hear: ‘In Your will is our peace’.”

2. WHAT ARE THE DIFFERENT CHRISTIAN VOCATIONS?

“Love makes us seek what is good; love makes us better persons. It is love that prompts men and women to marry and form a family, to have children. It is love that prompts others to embrace the religious life or become priests. Love makes you reach out to others in need, whoever they are, wherever they are. Every genuine human love is a reflection of the Love that is God himself.”

Pope John Paul II

A variety of gifts and callings. Every person is different. We have different natural gifts; and we have different spiritual gifts. And for his own mysterious reasons, God calls some people to one way of life, and some to another; sometimes by planting a deep desire in their hearts, or sometimes by pulling them in a new and unexpected direction. Here are the different ‘states of life’ that God can call us to.

Marriage. *Through marriage a husband and wife give themselves to each other without reservation, promising to love each other faithfully for the rest of their lives, sharing their joys and sufferings in whatever circumstances life brings them. They express their love through their sexual union, which brings them together in the closest intimacy and opens them to the gift of new life. They build not just a relationship but a home and a family and a place of welcome for others too. You do not need to be a Christian, of course, to get married. But for Christians the natural union of marriage is transformed into a sacrament. For a Christian couple the call to love each other in this way becomes at the same time an invitation to follow Christ and to give their lives wholeheartedly to him in love and service.* The love shown between a Christian husband and wife becomes a sign of the radical love shown by Christ in his life, death and resurrection. Christian marriage is not just an expression of human affection, it is a sacrament of the love of Christ, a way for husband and wife to minister to each other and to their children. And in this way the Christian family becomes a place where others can see the beauty and power of Christ’s redeeming love, a love that is often obscured in our fallen world. This is why marriage is a Christian vocation.

Consecrated life. Catholics often use the term ‘religious’ to describe those who have taken vows of poverty, chastity (or more precisely: lifelong celibacy) and obedience. The most helpful phrase to use is the term ‘consecrated life’. This is the way of life embraced by all those who dedicate themselves to the Lord by making lifelong vows of poverty, celibacy, and obedience, when they are recognised and accepted by the Church. These vows are sometimes called the ‘evangelical counsels’. Every Christian, of course, is dedicated to the Lord, and has promised through baptism to give his or her life to him. Every Christian longs to live a life of holiness. But those who consecrate themselves in this way are responding to a call *to live as Christ lived, and to model their lives more directly on his own way of life – poor, chaste, and obedient – making their hearts more free for prayer and service.* They show us more clearly something about the concrete reality of Christ’s love. They also give us a glimpse of the purity of the love we all hope to share in heaven, when our lives will be uncluttered by possessions or family responsibilities, and our hearts will be solely centred on God. The consecrated life includes monks and nuns in enclosed communities, religious brothers and sisters

in active communities, and also many others who live alone or who live and work ‘in the world’ who have taken the three vows.

The single life. There are also many people who have made a personal commitment to the single life even though they have not taken formal vows. The commitment might have been a personal choice, to give them the freedom to serve the Lord in a particular way or follow a particular path; or it might have been a process of willingly coming to accept the single way of life, through force of circumstances or other decisions. These people, as long as that commitment remains, are equally called to show the love of Christ through their lives, and to *put their freedom at the service of others in their work and prayer*. In this sense the committed single life is rightly considered a vocation.

Priesthood. All Christians are called to live a ‘priestly’ life, which means they offer their whole lives in prayer and service to God in union with the offering of Jesus the High Priest. This is our ‘baptismal’ priesthood. The ‘ministerial’ priest, however, through the sacrament of ordination, shares in the priesthood of Christ in a special way. His very being is transfigured in this sacrament, so that *he can represent Christ the Good Shepherd for us, Christ as the Head of the Church*. He not only offers his own life to the Father in sacrifice, as all Christians do, but he also stands before the Church and *ministers to us as Christ ‘in person’*. When he teaches with the authority of the Church then Christ teaches; when he forgives sins in the sacrament of Penance then Christ forgives; when he offers the Sacrifice of the Mass then Christ offers that Sacrifice; when he loves and supports and cares for his people then Christ is present with his people. Because of the wishes of Jesus himself, confirmed by the tradition of the Church throughout the centuries, the ministerial priesthood is reserved for men (see chapter 10 for further thoughts about women and the priesthood). In the Western Church the priesthood is also reserved, ordinarily, for single men who are willing to make a lifelong commitment to celibacy, for in this way they can give their whole hearts and minds to the service of the Lord and to the love of his people.

The permanent diaconate. The diaconate is also a sacrament of ordination. The permanent deacon, who may be single or married, *dedicates his life to serving others*. His ministry of service focuses on three areas: assisting at the altar in the celebration of the sacraments; preaching the Word of God and leading people in prayer; and reaching out in loving service to the practical and spiritual needs of others, especially of the poor and those outside the normal confines of the Church. Traditionally the permanent deacon works closely with his diocesan bishop. Most permanent deacons, in practice, serve the greater part of their time within their home parish. But there are many who work as chaplains in schools, prisons, hospitals, etc. Others are in full-time employment where their work is itself ‘diaconal’: teachers, social workers, nurses, doctors, etc. *Their ordination brings a specific grace that allows their life of service to be consecrated in a special way*.

Each vocation is a call to follow Christ. The lifestyle and demands of each particular vocation are very different, but there are some common threads. *Each vocation is a commitment to love in a certain way*, and to draw closer to others – whether that closeness is through marriage or service or prayer. Each vocation challenges us to live our faith more deeply and to follow Christ more closely. Each vocation, if it is lived generously, will involve times of deep happiness and joy. Each vocation, if it is lived

faithfully, will almost inevitably involve moments of great suffering and sacrifice. We should not think that one vocation is easier than another. Genuine love always costs a great deal, and brings great rewards. In one sense, to make a commitment to lifelong celibacy as a priest or consecrated person seems like a more radical choice, because it pulls us away from the natural joys of family life. But to live an authentic Christian marriage today, and to uphold Christian values in family life, requires enormous courage and commitment – it ‘costs’ as much, if not more, than celibacy. The important point is not to compare the value of different vocations, but to appreciate the value of each one, and to discover which one is right for you.

Silvia, wife and mother:

“I thought I always wanted to get married. What little girl doesn’t play house and dream of growing up, getting married to a wonderful man and raising their children? But I had been thinking about being a nun too. Soon after entering the University, I met a really nice guy who was also a good Catholic. We prayed together and talked about marriage, but the idea of religious life still lingered. I thought if God wanted it to happen, he’d let me know somehow or other. After three or so years, many of which were spent apart from each other, we got to know each other very well. I’m sure by then we knew what we wanted, and we were at peace that it was God’s will. It all just seemed to fall into place. I know it isn’t so easy for everyone. So, we were married a little more than four years after we met. Even then, at 22 and 24, we were very young! Now, nine children later, I am so thankful for our marriage and family. God is so good.”

Mike, husband and father:

“A defining point in my faith was meeting a priest at Lourdes who was so humble in his faith. I knew that I needed start thinking seriously about putting God at the centre of my life. I had a real fear that the only way that I could serve God fully was to become a priest and I was not sure if I could do it. Then someone told me that becoming a priest was not the only way to serve God. I knew this already, but having someone say it opened me up to other possibilities. As so often happens with God, it was at the time I was finally becoming comfortable with my faith and practising my Catholic faith that I met my future wife Sophie. We started our relationship with our faith in common and this was a great foundation to start from. There have been no “Road to Emmaus” moments in my life, but I have always had a strong sense that God has been with me on my journey. Getting married was a wonderful experience, being able to make a commitment to my wife with friends, family and God present. I am not a priest, but the more I find out about my faith and the more I live out my vocation of marriage, the more I realise it is a call to serve and to make myself a gift to my wife, and now that my wife is pregnant, to make myself a gift to my expanding family.”

3. WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE SINGLE?

“If you are who you are meant to be, you will set the world on fire.”

St Catherine of Sienna

The single life. People are single for many different reasons. If you are single at this moment, whatever the reason, you can believe that your life right now has immense value. *Every person is called to a life of holiness, and in this sense every person who is single is called to live out their Christian vocation, wherever it might be leading them in the future.* Your work, your study, your friendships, your care for your family, your service to others – these are all areas of life in which you are meeting Christ and bringing his love to others. Give thanks to God for your life and for the opportunities presented to you.

It would not be quite right to say that every single person has a vocation to be single, in the sense of a lifelong commitment – and we must be careful in the way we talk about the single vocation. It would be best, perhaps, to say that the single life is a concrete vocation only when it has been chosen as a response to a sense of calling; or at least when it has been willingly accepted as a long-term way of life in response to circumstances. This chapter lists some of the situations that single people find themselves in, and gives one or two thoughts about how to approach them.

Just getting on with life. Many people are single and happy about that and just getting on with life. You might be doing some fulfilling and worthwhile work. You might be hard at your studies. You might be involved in some all consuming project. You might be too young or busy or distracted or happy to be thinking big thoughts about future commitments. That’s fine! Be happy and be holy. *Just make sure that now and then you stop to think about your vocation as a Christian, and to ask the Lord in prayer if he has any other plans for you.* You have every right to make the most of this situation, without undue anxiety – as long as you are open to other possibilities as well.

Those who are searching. Many single people are hoping to discover a more particular vocation and to make a lifelong commitment to marriage or priesthood or the consecrated life, but they are unsure about which one. Or they are clear about wanting to get married, but still looking for a husband or wife. Or they are dating and wondering if this is the right person. If this is the case, you can follow all the suggestions in this booklet about how to discern your vocation and how, at the right time, to come to a decision. *Remember that your happiness does not just lie in the future.* God wants you to find peace and to live a life of holiness in this present moment, even if your future is unclear. He wants you to trust him: to do everything you can, but to be patient as well.

Those who are struggling. *Some people are single not through choice but through circumstances.* They wish they were not single, but they cannot see any way out. Perhaps you are not drawn to marriage, or unable to find a husband or wife. Perhaps you want to be a priest or live a consecrated life, but you have been ‘turned down’ by the diocese or religious order. Perhaps you are caring for a sick relative or a child and

you are not able to take on any other commitments. Perhaps you are sick yourself. There may be other difficulties in your life that make you feel you cannot pursue the vocation you would like to. Or perhaps you have a valid marriage, but are now separated from your husband or wife, without any apparent hope of reconciliation or of being granted an annulment; so that your day-to-day life is like that of a single person, only without the possibility of entering into a new marriage. *In all these situations it is so important to trust in God and to believe that he knows what he is doing with your life.* There may be very real suffering and disappointment involved, and you can certainly hope and pray that the situation will improve. But you also need to accept that this is God's will for you in this present moment, *to carry this cross with as much humility and love as is possible.* Don't give in to despair or self-pity. Live your Catholic faith, and trust that this is happening for a reason. *Your vocation right now, without a doubt, is to show the love of Christ in these difficult circumstances.* And through that love, if it is his will, he will lead you to a new stage, or help you to find new meaning in this present situation.

Committed to the single life. Some people have in effect made a personal commitment to lifelong celibacy, even without taking any formal vows. Some choose celibacy because they wish to give their lives in service to others, or because it allows them to follow a particular path in life. Some recognise that they are unlikely to get married, for all sorts of different reasons, and they willingly accept this and commit their lives to following Christ and living their faith as single people. *Those who accept the single life in this way, for whatever reason, can rightly think of this as their vocation – a call from God to live a life of holiness in this context, which will bear great fruit and will be richly rewarded.* But perhaps we should not necessarily think of this form of celibacy as a lifelong vocation, because the circumstances might change. If you are single, and at peace about being single, but then something unexpected comes up, and you feel pulled towards another vocation – then you are perfectly free to look into that!

Consecrated single life. Some people do take lifelong vows of poverty, celibacy and obedience, but continue to live and work in the world. Their vows mean that, in the language of the Church, they are living a consecrated life. *Those who are consecrated have the assurance of God and of the Church that this is indeed a lifelong commitment and vocation.*

Odile, consecrated single person in the Notre Dame de Vie Secular Institute:

“In my story it seems to me that it was God who was looking for me more than myself and my vocation came in a way as a surprise. I wanted to get married and have children (eight of them) and at the same time, I could feel that God was calling me very gently but persistently. It was a struggle for me to accept this calling and paradoxically I was feeling very much free to choose, free to accept this or not. I knew that whatever my choice of vocation would be and even if I didn't answer this calling, God would still love me very much and this reality wouldn't change. It was a bit like having two doors open in front of me, each one opening to a path as luminous as the other and I had to choose one. I remember it vividly as I was in the kitchen and my mum was asking me if it was worth writing a cheque to continue my studies or not. I had a few seconds to choose and it seemed to me that I would be slightly happier in

the consecrated life, so I stopped my studies and joined NDV. It is just looking back now that I realise it was the right choice.”

4. HOW DOES GOD GUIDE US AND HELP US DISCERN?

“Nothing is more practical than finding God, that is, than falling in love in a quite absolute, final way. What you are in love with, what seizes your imagination, will affect everything. It will decide what will get you out of bed in the morning, what you will do with your evenings, how you spend your weekends, what you read, who you know, what breaks your heart, and what amazes you with joy and gratitude. Fall in love, stay in love, and it will decide everything.”

Fr Pedro Arrupe SJ

The word ‘discernment’ is used to describe the whole process by which we listen to God and listen to our own hearts; gradually coming to know who God is calling us to be and where he is leading us. It is not something we just decide to do one afternoon, like baking a cake or watching a film. It is a journey that involves patience, honesty, perseverance, generosity, courage, and a sense of humour! It is a personal journey that will also involve trusted friends and the Christian community. Within all our discerning we are trying *to hear the invitation of Christ to follow him in a particular way and to become the person he wants us to be.*

Christians talk about how God ‘calls’ us to do something, and perhaps we think this means that one day we will literally hear a voice telling us what to do. Sometimes God does speak to us in clear and dramatic ways, but more often he ‘speaks’ to us in ordinary ways. He guides us *through the deepest desires of our hearts* (calling us ‘from within’) and *the events and circumstances of our lives* (calling us ‘from without’). Later on in part 2 of this booklet there are sections about the particular signs that might point you to one vocation. This section, however, is simply a list of some of the many ways that God can guide you and pull you in a certain direction – whether it concerns a small choice, a medium sized career move, or a lifelong commitment. Beneath everything, you are trying to know God’s will for you, to listen to the stirrings of the Holy Spirit deep in your heart, and trying to respond generously. It is about a personal relationship with the Lord.

You don’t need to over-analyse your life, looking for conclusive signs in every mood or event. This can become an obsession, and even a superstition, like reading the tea leaves or the horoscopes. The ‘signs’ listed here simply point to some areas of life that you can pay attention to, ‘listening’ to what they mean. *When you stand back and take a look at the big picture, perhaps a pattern emerges, and you sense that you are being drawn in a particular direction.* Usually, you don’t really need *more* signs, you just need to look and listen more carefully.

Desire and attraction. *What do you care about? What do you love? What do you feel passionate about? What would you love to commit yourself to? What do you feel pulled towards – even if you can’t explain why?*

Admiration. *Which people do you admire the most? Is it because of who they are or what they stand for or what they do? What is it about them or their vocation that you have*

been attracted to? What does it stir up in your own heart? Which person, alive now, would you most like to be? Which saints, from the past, inspire you most? Why?

Enjoyment. What do you like doing? Not just for leisure or fun – but what kind of work and activities do you enjoy most? Which bring the best out of you and gives you satisfaction at the end of a hard day?

Skills. What are you good at? What are your gifts and skills and aptitudes? Not just your qualifications (although these are often relevant) but your gifts of character and personality too. *How could you best use all that God has given you and make a difference?*

Value. Of the many projects and careers you are interested in, which of them are really worthwhile? Which allow you to contribute to something that is not just a waste of time? What do you actually believe in and want to promote? This doesn't mean you have to choose a 'religious' or 'charitable' work – as if all the ordinary jobs people do in the world are a second-best option for Christians. But *you have to have some sense that you believe in what you are doing.* Put it the other way round, you should avoid any choices that take you into an area that is corrupt or immoral, and above all avoid any wrongdoing yourself.

Events and circumstances. Sometimes an opportunity opens up unexpectedly and you want to make the most of it. It wasn't planned, and you are not quite sure how it fits into the rest of your life, but you feel an instinctive enthusiasm, and you want to 'seize the day'. Or you are waiting for an event to unfold that is now beyond your control: exam results, feedback from a job interview, a medical report. You may have a passionate desire to follow one path, but circumstances make it impossible. The Lord opens doors, and closes them, through the ordinary events of your life, through the decisions that others make, and through the concrete situation you are in. *You can trust that God is guiding all these circumstances and leading you to where you are meant to be.* He is more powerful than all the other forces that seem to be shaping your life.

Other people. If people encourage you in a particular decision or way of life, if they 'believe in you', this can be a sign that you are going in the right direction. *Sometimes other people can see your own potential more clearly than you can yourself.* You might be afraid or lacking confidence, but they can see the possibilities, and encourage you to go in one direction, or perhaps discourage you from going in another direction. It's good to talk to people that know you well, people you trust – friends, family, teachers, priests – and see what they think about your ideas for the future. They might have another perspective that helps you. But other people can also get things wrong, and become over-enthusiastic about your vocation, or project their own ideals onto your life – so you need to be cautious and not follow the advice someone else gives you uncritically.

Inner conviction. You might have *a clear, inner conviction that something is right for you;* almost like an unshakeable knowledge of who you are and what is important for you. More than just a desire or an attraction – it is like a sense of inevitability, part of your identity. It might have been a part of you for as long as you can remember; or it might have dawned slowly; or it might come upon you like a moment of inspiration. This inner conviction is not an infallible sign of your vocation – it might need interpreting or purifying – but it is certainly something that you should listen to carefully.

Ordinary prayer. When you are praying (talking to God, asking his help, or just sitting in silence) – do certain ideas keep coming back to you? When you let go of your distractions for a moment, and open your heart to God in prayer, it can allow your deepest concerns to come to the surface, and allow the Lord to ‘speak’ to you. *Sometimes an idea comes to mind in prayer, or a memory, or a concern, or a task. It nags. It seems important, it seems especially meaningful.* And when you reflect on it later on, it still seems important for you. This might be an ‘inspiration’ from the Holy Spirit – not in the sense of an infallible divine command, but a nudge in your heart or mind to look into something more deeply.

Holy Scripture. In a similar way, when you are reading the bible alone, or listening to the scripture readings at Mass, *a phrase can strike you with unexpected force.* A passage that you have heard many times before can suddenly seem clear and powerful. It moves you or challenges you or almost impels you to do something. You feel as though God is speaking to you personally and directly through the words of the Bible, or through a sermon or talk. This is another way that the Holy Spirit can inspire and guide you – pointing you, through these words and the response they evoke, to something that is important for you.

Extraordinary experiences. Not often, but sometimes, *God steps into our life in a quite extraordinary and unexpected way.* You ‘hear’ a voice in prayer, or ‘see’ a vision, or witness a miracle – and you are quite convinced that this is God’s direct work, and that he is speaking to you personally in this way, and guiding you in a certain direction or requesting something of you. You have to be very careful here: You can deceive yourself, and harmful spiritual forces can trick you into believing what is not true. You should never just trust these experiences uncritically – you should talk about them with a wise priest, and try to make sense of them in the light of all the other ways that God is guiding you. Many people do not have such experiences. We should not expect them, and there is no need to ask or pray for them. God usually prefers to guide us in ordinary ways. But sometimes it does happen!

Realism. Finally, you have to be realistic. You may have many desires and dreams, but they must grow out of who you are and what is possible for you at this time. This doesn’t mean you should lack ambition and settle for second-best. It does mean, however, that *your thoughts about the future should be rooted in the reality of your life and of your situation.* You don’t need to be defined by your weaknesses; but you do need to have the humility to accept your limitations, and a sincere gratitude for the person that God has created you to be.

Summary. God ‘speaks’ to us in all these different ways. Life is not like a crossword or a Sudoku puzzle, where we have to analyse every clue and complete every answer in order to come to the end and reach a tidy conclusion. We simply get on with life, doing the best we can – ‘listening’ to God, paying attention to all these different areas listed above, seeing if there is a pattern, stopping to think when something strikes us with a new force or clarity. *Usually, gradually, we find that we are being pulled in a certain direction,* or we have enough to help us make a decision. And then we take the next step.

Fr Mark, Diocesan priest:

“My vocation story included the discernment of becoming a Catholic as well as the discernment of a priestly vocation. For me, the two went together. Since about the age of twelve I had people asking me whether I was considering Ordination in the Church of England. For whatever reason, and it may be that I was not listening sufficiently carefully to what God was asking, the answer was “No.” The real catalyst was my parish priest posing the question, “Had I thought about priesthood?” and suggesting that I should – quite seriously. The greatest aids to discernment were his priestly example and advice, prayer and the sacraments, and seeing a spiritual director. I was so shocked by the initial approach from the priest, that I chose not to talk to others about the possibility for the next few months. I was surprised, therefore, to be asked on numerous occasions during that time by people from all areas of my life whether I was thinking of priesthood. Perhaps there was something to be investigated after all.”

Elizabeth, wife and mother:

“When I was a bored teenager, we moved next door to a sick woman who was glad to let me take her babies for walks. There was a feeling inside me that I was meant to be a mother, in marriage. No other life occurred to me. I was not Catholic, and had never met a nun. Later on, I moved to London, and met my husband through work, at a social event. We were both Christian, and both musical. When we eventually married, life was all joy. Within a few months I discovered the Catholic Church, and knew that God was calling me to enter. There were some tensions about that, but we loved one another deeply, and we both loved children. It seems like a miracle, to us, that we have produced three beloved children, despite three early miscarriages. In difficult times, it was daily prayer, and the sacraments, that kept me going. My husband is now a Catholic. Through God’s kindness we have a peaceful home for our children, grandchildren, neighbours and friends.”

5. WHAT CAN I DO TO BE MORE OPEN TO MY VOCATION?

“Take, O Lord, and receive: all my liberty, my memory, my understanding, and my entire will. All I have and all I possess are yours, Lord. You have given it all to me. Now I return it to you. Dispose of it according to your will. Give me only your love and your grace, for this is enough for me”.

St Ignatius Loyola

If you are not clear about your vocation, then what can you do? Let's say you are working or studying – how can you make the most of this time? How can you listen more and let God work in your life more? You cannot force things; and you should be patient. Perhaps the Lord does not want to give you an answer now, and you just need to live your ordinary life as faithfully as you can. But if you are serious about discerning your vocation, then there are certain things you can do. Here are some tips.

Give your life to God. Just say to him, perhaps in your own words, *‘I am completely yours, I give you everything. I will do whatever you ask of me. I give you all my fears and doubts. Show me your will, and I will follow it. I am yours’*. Say this as a prayer, and really mean it. This is the only way you will find true freedom; and only if you are free can he call you. He will not let you down; he won't ask you to do something that is wrong for you, or that you are unable to fulfil. *All he wants is your willingness and openness*. This is the first and most fundamental part of being a Christian; and it's the first and most basic part of discovering your vocation. If you can't say it, you will always be fighting or missing something. This is simply the prayer of the Our Father: *‘Thy will be done’*. We just need to mean it when we say it.

Live you Catholic Faith. Make sure you are living the basics that any Catholic should be living: *Going to Mass each Sunday; praying each day; trying to keep the commandments; going to confession regularly; loving your neighbour as best you can*. Now and then you may be able to get to Mass during the week as well as Sunday; or visit a Catholic Church and pray in front of the Blessed Sacrament.

Deepen your prayer life. Don't go mad, as if you can force God to give you an answer by praying all the time. But deepen your prayer life and develop a routine. *Set aside some time each day, perhaps just five or ten minutes. Have at least some quiet time to reflect and listen*. Read the scriptures, especially the Gospels, prayerfully - notice what attracts you, what speaks to you. Have some time just to talk to the Lord, to ask for his help – talk to him with complete honesty. Pray to Our Lady, maybe the rosary, maybe just a decade, or whatever prayer appeals to you – entrust your life and your vocation to her. Pray to the saints, especially those who have lived the vocation you are thinking about. At the end of each day look back on what has happened, thank God for the good things that have happened, and say sorry for any sins you have committed. *It is good to make one specific prayer each day for the intention that God will help you to discover your vocation*. It can be a set prayer *about* vocation; or it can simply be to pray the Our Father or Hail Mary for that intention.

Create some space in your life for silence. You don't need to go off and live in a monastery for a year, but you do need to have at least some silence and quiet time in your week – *to let go of all the activity, to get some perspective on life, and to listen to your own heart.* It might be a few moments in your room at the end of the day, or popping into a church during the week, or simply going for a walk in the park.

Grow in holiness. Be really honest with yourself about your faults and sins. Be really determined to live a life of holiness. If there are habits of sin in your life, face up to them, make a decision to begin anew. If there is something in your way of life that is making it difficult to live a good life, be honest about that, and make some changes. You are called to be a saint, to find happiness in a life of goodness and holiness, and you can't find it if you are clinging to some sin or unhealthy lifestyle. *Often the Lord can't speak to you, or you can't hear him, if you are not sincerely trying to live a Christian life.* If you are committed to your faith and discerning seriously, then try to go to confession regularly, e.g. every month.

Live a life of service. Part of your discernment can be making a decision to love and serve others in your ordinary life at work or college or wherever, and perhaps to take on some commitment to serve others in your free time, some voluntary work or work in the parish. *This desire to be kind and generous will actually help your discernment and deepen your vocation.* It is part of the way Christ makes us more like him, the way he expands our hearts. Every vocation is a call to love, so the more you can grow in an active love for your neighbour, the more you can be prepared for your vocation – whatever it is. Your experience of service will also help you to discover the best side of yourself, and will open up the deepest desires that God has planted in your heart, below the superficial worries and attractions. And if you are discerning your vocation you can easily become obsessed with yourself, so it is good just to look outwards towards others and forget yourself for a while.

Live a life of chastity. To make a proper decision about vocation you need to have a free and generous heart, and one of the struggles that can ensnare our hearts in a particular way is the struggle with chastity. Chastity is not just about avoiding immoral behaviour - it is far more about learning to love in a way that will bring you true happiness; it is about living your relationships and sexuality in a way that respects the deepest meaning of love. *It will keep your love pure, unpossessive and free.* So in your personal life, try to have a pure heart and a pure mind; and be modest and chaste in your relationships. Above all, remember that sexual intimacy and sex itself are meant to be an expression of the complete love between a husband and wife, and outside of marriage they can only distort and even damage love – and make true friendship and discernment much harder.

Find some good spiritual reading. Have a book that you can dip into every day or two: *find something that inspires you* about the Christian faith or prayer or the Bible; something about the vocation you are considering. Read about the lives of the saints; about what the Church believes; about how to pray. Read a little bit every day, and at least something every week. Don't force yourself to read something that you don't like – if a book isn't helping and inspiring you, then move on and find something else. Just *make sure that it is spiritually nourishing for you.*

Join a Catholic group. Any good group! It doesn't matter whether it is a vocations discernment group, or a parish prayer group, or a bible study group, or a young-adult socialising group. The main thing is to make sure that you are *not living your faith alone*, and that you have other people around to encourage you, to help you see that you are not the only person living your faith and exploring your direction in life.

Talk honestly with someone you trust. *At some stage you need to talk about your sense of vocation and not just keep it to yourself.* You might not find the perfect guide, but just try and think of someone who is wise and prayerful and faithful to the Church. It might be your parish priest, or another priest you know; it might be a wise layperson in the parish or somewhere else. You might call them your 'spiritual director', but the title is not important. It is good to have one-off conversations; but it is also good to have someone you can talk with over time, coming back to things; who can give advice and give an outside opinion; and can help you see some patterns in your faith and vocation that emerge over a period of time.

Fr Matthew, Jesuit priest:

"A crucial part of my own vocation story was to have powerful experiences of Christian community at a time when I was wondering what God was calling me to. Three in particular stand out: spending a week in the summer, over a period of four years, working with friends to look after disabled and socially disadvantaged children – we had Mass everyday and prayed together in the evening. Then there were two Holy Weeks when I walked from Chichester to Worth Abbey over the South Downs, carrying a cross. Finally, I remember with gratitude a week spent at Taizé. I often hear people saying that to discover your vocation you need to uncover your deepest desires. And I tend to agree. But there are many things we desire in life, there are many things that cry out to us 'choose me'. What I found in the experiences mentioned above was a slow growing into freedom brought about by the love and support of others, a love and support that made it possible for me to be more open to look beneath and beyond my neediness and to hear more clearly the Lord's invitation to follow him."

Sr Cathy, Religious of the Assumption:

"Between the ages of 16 to 25 I often wondered whether God was calling me to religious life. During this time I was studying theology, and an answer to my vocational questioning came unexpectedly, as I read a rather dull commentary on the Canon Law of the Church. The description of religious life spoke powerfully to me and from that moment on, I was clear about my call to religious life. The next step was to find which order to join. I was particularly attracted by Franciscan simplicity, so 'decided' that I would become a Franciscan. However, God had other plans. As I visited various Franciscan orders I kept thinking of the Religious of the Assumption whom I had worked with for a few years, during my studies. I'd been a care-assistant looking after the very elderly sisters, in particular one saintly sister, who had severe dementia, but who radiated the love of God. At the time I hadn't thought of joining the sisters as they were all quite old. But God slowly broke down my resistances, mainly through the powerful memories of this very frail sister.

Eight years later I am very thankful to God for having led me here, and I hope that one day, I too will be a saintly old sister.”

6. HOW DO I MAKE A DECISION?

“Above all trust in the slow work of God. We are, quite naturally, impatient in everything to reach the end without delay. We should like to skip the intermediate stages. We are impatient of being on the way to something unknown, something new. And yet it is the law of all progress that it is made by passing through some stages of instability— and that it may take a very long time.

And so I think it is with you. Your ideas mature gradually - let them grow, let them shape themselves, without undue haste. Don't try to force them on, as though you could be today what time (that is to say, grace and circumstances acting on your good will) will make you tomorrow.

Only God could say what this new spirit gradually forming within you will be. Give our Lord the benefit of believing that his hand is leading you, and accept the anxiety of feeling yourself in suspense and incomplete.”

Pierre Teilhard de Chardin SJ

Usually our vocation becomes clearer over time. If you are living your Catholic faith, and being open to the Lord and to all that is happening in your life, you should gradually feel a pull in one direction, a growing conviction that one way of life is right for you. This process of discernment takes time, and it is much more than simply trying to make practical decisions.

Yet there are two reasons why you might come to a time in your life when you need to make a decision of some kind. First, *because things have become clearer*, and you feel you are ready to take a step in a certain direction. Second, *because things are not at all clear*, and you have been going round in circles about your vocation for a long time, and you don't seem to be getting anywhere. In this case it can be helpful, with the support of a wise person you trust, to try and make some kind of provisional decision about where you are going. There is a risk that you could drift through life without making any decisions; always looking for signs that will tell you what to do, without actively taking responsibility for your own choices. You could become a 'serial discerner' and fall prey to 'paralysis through analysis'.

Sometimes God lays before us different possibilities, and wants us thoughtfully and prayerfully to come to a decision about what seems best. It is not a *final* decision (we don't make a final decision until the day of our marriage or ordination or solemn profession), it is simply a decision to test the water instead of hovering at the edge, to start down one particular path instead of standing at the crossroads. *We shouldn't be surprised that God sometimes invites us to make a choice*. Sometimes, but not always, we learn more about God and about ourselves by acting than by waiting. We are often looking for certainty, for objective signs. *But one of the 'signs' of a vocation can be our willingness to try a particular path and see where it leads*. He leads us partly through our choices. You don't have to be certain about the choice, you just have to make the best choice that you can. If you wait for 100% certainty you will be waiting forever.

Here are some tips about how to make a decision when the time comes. You don't need to use them all, like a checklist – they are simply ideas in case you are stuck.

Wait. God's call usually becomes clearer over time. Often we just need to wait patiently – living our Catholic faith, doing all we can to be open to God's will, praying for his help and guidance. Don't force the issue. Something will happen – in your own heart, or in the circumstances of your life. But if it doesn't happen then...

Weigh up the pros and cons. Take some extra time to reflect on your life and on all the factors that seem significant in this choice. What are the options before you? Write down the pros and cons of each option. Think about them. Weigh them up. Put the list away and come back to it a few days later. *What seems to be most important for you? What seems best?*

Imagine you have made a decision. It can sometimes help to imagine that we have made one particular choice (and then to imagine that we have made an alternative choice). Be very concrete. *Imagine telling your friends and family; imagine taking the next step.* Imagine changing your life accordingly. Imagine where you will be in a few weeks, a few months. *What feelings does this stir up? What hopes and fears? Excitement? Relief? Despondency? Regret?* These feelings can sometimes reveal what is deep in our heart. Another idea is to imagine you are at the very end of your life, looking back on all that might have happened as you followed this path. Can you be proud of such a life and pleased to offer it to God? Or would you be disappointed or sad?

Talk to someone. Not just anyone, not just a friend who will say what you want to hear. It should be someone you trust, a committed Catholic, who is wise, and who will be honest with you. It might be a friend or relation or a priest you know; or someone you don't know who has been recommended by, for example, your parish priest. They might give you some good advice and encouragement. But even if they don't say much *it is enormously valuable to talk about our hopes and fears in this way.* It forces us to put into words the vague thoughts and feelings we have; and it gives us new courage and clarity simply because we have been brave enough to open our heart to another person – our hopes and worries about vocation are no longer just a 'secret', they become more real, more urgent.

Pray. Pray to God for guidance and help. Pray especially to the Holy Spirit for wisdom. *Make a particular prayer each day for help as you make this decision.* If you are about to make a big decision, *ask a priest to offer Mass for your own personal intentions* (which are that you will make a good decision – you don't have to explain all this to him). To offer Mass for an intention in this way brings great graces to any situation. *But don't pray too much!* Sometimes, especially if you are feeling desperate, you might think that you have to pray more and more, as if you are forcing God's hand. It can become a kind of superstition, and you half-worry that God will not help you unless you pray for hours every day and turn your life upside down with devotions. This is simply not true. God loves you and cares for you and wants the best for you. He certainly wants you to pray, but in whatever way is right for you as a layperson studying or working in the world.

Listen to your heart. Sometimes, when we make time to think about one course of action or one possibility, it brings with it *a deep sense of peace and joy*; not just a passing mood or emotion, but *an inner feeling that something is right, a contentment and quiet excitement, a sense of reassurance and freedom, of being on the right track*. At other times, when we stop to reflect in this way, an idea brings with it feelings of fear and panic and worry and insecurity; a sense of heaviness and imposition and unnecessary obligation. *The spiritual peace (or 'consolation') can be a sign that one path is right for us, a sign that it fits with who we are and who God calls us to be*. The fear and panic (or 'desolation') can be a sign that one path is not right for us, that it is pulling us away from who we are and who God calls us to be. But some fears and doubts (see the chapter 7 below), natural fears that we are bound to face when we make big decisions, are not signs of anything deep – and they simply need to be faced and overcome.

Take a single step. If you are still unsure what to do and feel paralysed and unable to make a *big* decision, it can help to make a *small* decision instead. *Decide to take just one step down a certain path, the next step – so that you can see how it feels and how it turns out*. You don't need to find certainty that this is the final step for you; you simply need to have some confidence that it is a good and worthwhile step in itself at this moment. For example: If you have never talked to anyone about your dilemmas, then decide to talk to someone. If you are unsure about a vocation to the priesthood, then at least go and speak to your vocations director. If you are fond of someone but unsure about marriage, then at least try to get to know them better. If you would love to be a nun, but feel pulled in different directions, then make a decision to visit a convent and even arrange to stay for a few days. If you are seriously considering a vocation to the priesthood or the religious life, but still unsure of how to find certainty – then why not consider making an application and see how you feel? You can always change your mind in the next few weeks. Or you can leave after the first few months. Often simply making one decision helps us to see that it is the wrong decision – and nothing is lost, but great clarity is gained. Or perhaps you won't be accepted, and that will certainly be a sign that this is not for you.

Make a decision. The English language is instructive. We don't *find* a decision – we *make* one. Sometimes we imagine that a vocation is something we have to *find*: if I can only find the answer, read the signs, discover the path – then I will happily walk along it. There is some truth to this, and the title of this booklet is all about 'discovering' your vocation. But as well as this, *a vocation is also something you have to choose*. With all the signs in front of you, with all that lies in your own heart, there is a moment when you will need to weigh everything up and simply make a decision. Not a final decision you are certain about, but the best decision possible at this time – a 'provisional' decision. Looking for infallible signs can paradoxically be a way of avoiding the responsibility and risk of making a decision.

There are not many moments of decision like this, but there are some. *You can trust that God will help you to make a wise decision now; and above all that his plan for your life will unfold through the consequences of your prayerful decision*. If it is the 'wrong' provisional decision, and you are meant to be somewhere else – he will make that clear before too long. If it is the 'right' provisional decision, and you are meant to continue along this road – he will confirm that for you and make it clearer and clearer. Only when you are at the stage of making lifelong promises or vows will he ask you to make an

irrevocable decision – and by that stage you will have had many reassurances that this is the right path for you.

Trust in Providence. Above all, you can trust in God’s Providence. If you are not yet at the point of making decisions, then trust that God will guide and enlighten you. If you are about to make an important decision, trust that God will help you to make a wise one. If you have made a decision, trust that God will lead you to know if it is indeed the right one. He loves you more than you love yourself. He cares for you with an unbounded tenderness and affection. His power is greater than any other force in creation, and his Providence is guiding everything and will put right even the mistakes you may make. So be at peace. Do all that you can; but trust in the Lord.

Fr Simon, Jesuit priest:

“I first thought of becoming a priest when I was thirteen years old. A Jesuit priest had invited me and six other friends to start a prayer group, going through the Gospel of St Mark week by week. It was as if the light bulb inside me was suddenly turned on. That experience of following Jesus, of seeing how he lived and prayed, of how he loved across boundaries, physical, cultural, moral, spiritual, made me say, “I want to live my life like that.” I then spent the next twelve years trying to run away from this desire: “This is mad”; “This is impossible”; “I can’t do it”. I found myself arguing with God: “Can’t I get married, create a family, and be a good, faithful Catholic.” It took some time, with the help of daily prayer, regular spiritual direction and a couple of retreats to realise that I was, in fact, pushing against an open door. God did not mind if I chose to be married or to remain single or to become a religious and/or a priest, what He wanted was for me to be His, to live my life with Him, whatever way I lived that out. That was the first and most important vocation. I was still not 100% sure and a wise Jesuit said to me: “It seems you have done all that you can reasonably do: you have been praying daily, you have been meeting a spiritual director regularly, you have made a couple of retreats, you have met different priests and religious congregations and it seems to you that you are being led in a particular direction. What I suggest for your prayer is that, instead of continuing to wonder endlessly what you should do, say to the Lord: ‘Lord, it seems to me, after all my praying, discussing, meeting and discerning, you are calling me in this direction. That’s the direction I’m going to take, so if it’s *not* the correct road, you’re going to have to torpedo me!’” So I remember saying to myself, ‘This may not be for me, but I’ll give it a go, and if it’s not right, I’m sure that will become obvious, to me and to the others in the community, and then I can leave happily, knowing that it’s not for me.’ I was so surprised, then, walking into my small, bare room in the Jesuit novitiate that I had this overwhelming sense of peace, of joy and of freedom – I had come home! This is where not only God wanted me to be, but where I, too, wanted to be. God didn’t torpedo me!”

7. WHAT CAN GET IN THE WAY?

“My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so.

But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you and I hope that I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this, you will lead me by the right road, though I may know nothing about it.

Therefore will I trust you always though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for you are ever with me and you will never leave me to face my struggles alone.”

Thomas Merton

Many factors can get in the way of our vocation; they can make it difficult to discern or difficult to make a commitment once we have discerned. There is no space here to look carefully at all these difficulties. Sometimes it is enough just to flag them up, so that if they are present in your life you can notice them more easily and face them more honestly. Here are some of the common difficulties that arise when people are discerning their vocation, together with a single thought about each one to encourage you or help you. If you meet a real difficulty, pray about it, and talk to someone about it, so it does not become an insurmountable obstacle.

Worry, anxiety. Try not to worry. Be at peace. *Trust that God is more powerful than all your worries.* Tell him your honest anxieties, and put them in his loving hands.

Lack of trust. You may have a distorted image of God. You may think he is like an absent parent who doesn't love you, or a kind uncle who will never make any demands on you, or a vengeful tyrant who is punishing you for something, or an unpredictable boss who wants to force you into a vocation that will not be right for you. Instead, *trust him. He is a tender Father who is both loving and demanding.* He cares for you more than you care for yourself. Sometimes he might challenge you and call you to something unexpected - but it will always be for your ultimate good and happiness.

Noise, busyness, overwork. Perhaps you can't hear God's call because you never make any space to listen to him. Every hour is full up, and your mind is constantly cluttered with work, noise, music, and other distractions. *Make space for God and for at least some moments of silence in each day.*

Not praying, not living your faith. You will never know yourself properly or know the call of the Lord if you are not making some space for prayer each day and trying to live your Catholic faith.

Sin, worldliness. If you are trapped in some habitual sin or caught up in a completely worldly lifestyle, it may be impossible to listen to your own heart or to God. *Be honest with yourself*; go to confession; try to make a new start even if you are still struggling.

Addictive behaviours. Alcohol, drugs, pornography, sex, gambling; even activities that are harmless in themselves like work, sport, texting, the internet, gaming, Facebook – they can become like addictions that cover up our deepest needs and cut us off from true selves. *Try and break any addictive patterns of behaviour you are trapped in.* And if you can't – then get help.

Avoiding the question of vocation. If the question of vocation is nagging at you, don't just run away from it. It will come back whether you like it or not! And in the meantime you will make yourself more and more unhappy. *So face it honestly*, in prayer and in conversations with someone you trust.

Fear of commitment. We rightly value freedom, but in the Western world we confuse freedom with being able to choose from an endless variety of options. Commitment to anything, let alone for life, seems like a limitation, even a loss of oneself. *But to have a series of endless options is actually to have no options* – because you never embrace any one of them with your whole heart. *God may be inviting you to make a lifelong commitment, to put down roots so that you can truly flourish*, to build one concrete life rather than to fantasise about innumerable possible lives, to take responsibility for your own life. It is sometimes better to do one thing with your unreserved commitment than to drift through life without any firm sense of purpose.

Desire for certainty. It's unlikely that you will ever be 100% certain about any significant choice – of course there are doubts and questions. But *you can be sure enough that this is a reasonable step to take*, when things come together and the time is right. Yes, it's a risk. But it's also a risk not to make a choice. Life is full of risks. God is always with us, supporting and guiding us – even if we make a decision in good faith and things seem to go wrong.

Fear of your own inadequacy. Perhaps you fear you are not the right person for this vocation, even though you feel attracted to it. You worry that you are not holy enough, not intelligent enough, not qualified enough, not loving enough, too shy, too sociable... Perhaps you are right. *But perhaps you are underestimating yourself or underestimating God. He chooses the weak and makes them strong.* Sometimes he invites us to do what seems impossible, and only later on gives us the strength to do it. Why not take a step anyway – and let God decide further down the line if it is really not for you.

Attachment to personal ambition or lifestyle. Any lifelong commitment will involve some sacrifice and cost, giving up something you are attached to now (lifestyle, habits, income, pleasures, people), letting go of what could have been (freedom, dreams, ambitions). Sometimes we have to move on – it's inevitable. *Trust that if this is really your vocation, it will be a treasure that will be worth any sacrifice*, and that God will 'reimburse' you in other unexpected ways. Remember that our minds usually exaggerate the difficulties; and God will help you to deal with the ones that remain. And be honest if the real reason you are reluctant to follow your vocation is simply selfishness.

Fear of failure. If this is the right step for you, then God will sustain you. If he wants you to flourish and find happiness here, then you will. If he is actually leading you somewhere else, and it seems like you have failed in your provisional decision to try a vocation – then trust that this will be part of his loving plan. He writes straight with crooked lines. *What matters is not success or failure, but whether you have tried to be faithful to his call at each moment.*

Conflicting desires. You are trying to listen to your heart, but you find that there are many conflicting desires there, and not one of them seems to be more important than the others. Then follow the advice in chapter 6 above: Pray, wait for as long as you need to, and if everything is still unclear, then take a step in one direction just to test the water. The Lord will gradually show you whether this is the right step or whether you should go back and try another.

Desire for perfection. Perhaps you want to be a religious brother or sister but you can't find an order that is good enough for you; you want to be a Diocesan priest but don't like the bishop in your Diocese; you want to be married but no-one matches up to your standards. It may be that you haven't found the right person or diocese or congregation yet; but *it may be that you need to settle for what is 'good enough'*. No person or congregation is perfect, and if you are looking for perfection you will never find it. *The search for perfection might strangely be a way of avoiding a vocation.* Try the 80% rule: If 80% of what you are looking at is good – then that's pretty good! Perhaps you can live with the other 20%, or see it in a new light, or change it.

Age. You fear you are too old to get married or become a priest or consecrated person. You fear you have missed the boat. But the Lord wants you to accept that this is the age that you are. Give thanks to God for who you are and where you are, instead of regretting what has not happened in the past. *If you are pulled towards a certain vocation, whatever your age, then take a step and test that vocation. If God wants you to follow it, he will make things possible.*

Opposition from people you love. Your family or friends are against you taking this step. It may be true that they have some insight that you don't have, and you should certainly listen to them respectfully. But it may be that they are unable to support you in your vocation because of their own lack of faith or personal fears. *Sometimes you need to be strong and do what you feel is right, even in the face of opposition or misunderstanding.* If you have carefully discerned that this is the right step, then explain it as best you can to those you love, and take it courageously – trusting that God will help them to understand or at least to accept it some time in the future.

Opposition from the culture and society. Some vocational choices, even Christian marriage, will sometimes be misunderstood or mocked by contemporary society, and perhaps by friends or colleagues. Recognise that *to be a Christian will involve some misunderstanding and even persecution*, especially if you make a lifelong vocational commitment. Be as loving and kind as you can, and explain your choices gently to people if they ask. *Don't stir up opposition and seek controversy. But if it comes, don't be deterred.*

A long-term relationship that is drifting. If you have been dating someone for a long time, and the relationship is not deepening and drawing you in the direction of marriage, and if you are in effect going out with someone simply for the sake of it – then this can make your own discernment of vocation very difficult. The relationship is taking up your time and emotional energy and taking away your freedom to discern properly. You can't be properly open to other vocations; you can't even be open to meeting other people. Even though there may be a real love and commitment between you both, if you are drifting, then it is usually better to *make a proper decision about marriage, or draw things to an end* – so that each of you can be free to discover what is God's plan for you.

Fear of not having a family. If you are considering priesthood or consecrated life then you may well be anxious about the idea of not having a husband or wife and a family. This is quite understandable. And perhaps you should indeed get married! But this anxiety might stem partly from the fear that a celibate life will be a life without love. You need to believe two things. First, *the celibate life is a life full of love* – of the intimate love of Christ, and the love of all those you will meet and work with and live with. And you will, God willing, discover an aspect of 'spiritual fatherhood' or 'spiritual motherhood' in your vocation – loving and nurturing those in your care – that will be deeply fulfilling. But second, *there are certainly sacrifices made in a life of celibacy*, not least in letting go of the possibility of the love of marriage and family. But *there are also huge sacrifices made in marriage*, and sometimes much loneliness. The cost of loving is high in any Christian vocation. *What matters is that you find what is right for you – and trust that God will give you all the love you need, through prayer and through others, to sustain you in this vocation.*

Jo, a young woman still discerning:

"Vocation is deeply mysterious. To discover and embrace God's call is to take a step each day into the unknown, carving out the path to God that is uniquely mine. The invitation has been to patience and trust, struggling to reach a point where I can say 'one step enough for me' - not in control of the future, nor with inside knowledge as to where God may be leading, but simply open and listening, trying to say with as much of me as will consent at any time, 'Here I am Lord. I'm coming to obey your will.' My journey continues. I am tentatively feeling a way forward in the dark. Over the last five years, I've strained quite a lot for certainty about my future, to know the way ahead. But I've learned it doesn't work like that. We don't know the particulars of where we will be led if we say 'yes' to Christ. He invites us to say 'I will follow you' before we know where he is heading."

Rod, husband and father:

"For me the big struggle was to wade through the layers of fear, insecurity and ambivalence about both priesthood and marriage until I had reached a certain freedom to hear God's invitation. I spent ages looking for my vocation and ages praying about it, but I think I only began to discover it when I started to really look for God instead. Jean Vanier helped me a lot simply by saying, "Rod, I think the question is not so much priesthood or marriage or single life, but 'Do you really want to follow Jesus?'" I was irritated at the time. I thought, 'Of course I do. I've become a Catholic haven't I?' But he was spot on. I was

partly afraid of God and partly afraid of myself. And asking Ann Marie to marry me was all about feeling the fear and knowing that I could offer my life to God and to her anyway. It wasn't easy. It felt a bit like stepping off the edge of a cliff. But at the same time, there was a sense of peace that came as soon as I had made the decision. Of course, it helped that she said 'Yes' when I asked her!"

PART TWO: Signs of a Particular Vocation

8. WHAT ARE THE SIGNS THAT GOD MIGHT BE CALLING ME TO MARRIAGE?

“If we let Christ enter fully into our lives, if we open ourselves totally to him, are we not afraid that He might take something away from us? Are we not perhaps afraid to give up something significant, something unique, something that makes life so beautiful? Do we not then risk ending up diminished and deprived of our freedom? Pope John Paul said: No! If we let Christ into our lives, we lose nothing, nothing, absolutely nothing of what makes life free, beautiful and great. No! Only in this friendship are the doors of life opened wide. Only in this friendship is the great potential of human existence truly revealed. Only in this friendship do we experience beauty and liberation. And so, today, with great strength and great conviction, on the basis of long personal experience of life, I say to you, dear young people: Do not be afraid of Christ! He takes nothing away, and he gives you everything. When we give ourselves to him, we receive a hundredfold in return. Yes, open, open wide the doors to Christ – and you will find true life.”

Pope Benedict XVI

Marriage could be called a ‘natural’ vocation. God, who is love, has created us in his own image and likeness, and planted in our hearts a longing to love and be loved. And it is perfectly natural that as men and women we should want this love to be fulfilled in the love of marriage – a love that is without reservation, faithful, lifelong, and open to new life. When this marriage is between two Christians it is transformed into a sacrament, and the natural and God-given call to marriage becomes something far, far deeper – a joyful and costly call to follow Christ and to give one’s life in love, in the context of marriage and family.

Not everyone wants to get married, and not everyone who hopes to marry does actually get married. But if someone freely chooses to get married it does not usually need a lot of explaining. *The reasons are straightforward: a desire for love and family and children that grows out of who we are as human beings, as men and women.* For Christians who are discerning marriage there will be deeper vocational questions: listening to Christ, listening to the deepest desires of your heart, reflecting on the unique person you are called to be and on the particular ways you hope to give your life in love and service. *Christian marriage is a sacrament, a vocation, and if you choose to be married it will be a sign of your love for Christ as much as of your love for another person.* But it is not the kind of call that pulls you away from your natural hopes and expectations. Marriage is not easier to live than other vocations, but it is easier to explain. If you long to be married, and there are no other big pulls in your life, then you should be at peace about seeking a husband or wife.

Here are some signs that might show you are called to be married. As with any signs, they need to be interpreted carefully, and understood in the context of your whole life and all that is happening to you. This is not a checklist of essential requirements, it is simply an indication of some of the ways that God might be guiding you in your life. The overall pattern and the deepest pulls will show you which direction is right for you.

A desire to be married. Perhaps you have always wanted to be married. The desire was there when you were a child, and it has never left you. Or as you have grown older, and thought more about vocation and the future, *you realise that above all else you would love to be married.* You imagine yourself as a husband or wife and it brings you great peace and joy. You long to love someone and to be loved by them, and to make that love the centre of your life and vocation.

A desire to have children. *You would love to have a family, to have children of your own.* Despite all the difficulties and sacrifices of raising children, the desire is there deep in your heart. You can imagine yourself being a father or mother, taking on that role in different ways, relating to your children in all their different stages of life. When you think of yourself as a parent, even if there is some trepidation, it comes with a sense of peace and excitement. But you also have to remember that children are a gift to a couple, and there is no guarantee that you will have children even if you get married. What matters is that you are open to this gift: open in your heart before you get married, and open to new life in your sexual union after you get married.

An admiration for husbands or wives and fathers or mothers that you know. You admire others who are married. Not necessarily everyone, but there are some husbands or wives, fathers or mothers, that have made a real impression on you. They seem happy and fulfilled, despite the struggles. *They seem to have discovered a love that you wish you had, and a way of living their Christian faith that inspires you.* They seem to be living a life that is worthwhile. You can see yourself being happy in their shoes.

Other people encourage you towards marriage. When you chat with people you trust, people who know you well, it seems perfectly natural to them that you might get married. If the subject comes up, even if half-jokingly, they encourage you, and say that you would be a good husband or wife, a good father or mother. *They think you could be happy in this life;* and there are no warning bells ringing for them suggesting that you should be doing something else instead. Other people are not infallible – but they might have a good sense of what is right for you.

You meet someone you want to marry. Often the call to marriage is not a ‘theory’, an abstract desire, it is a concrete person. Perhaps you didn’t have a strong desire to get married, and there wasn’t a general longing for children, but *you meet someone and fall in love and everything changes. The abstract idea of marriage suddenly becomes very real.* You love someone and through the strength of that love realise that you want to be *with them* for the rest of your life, to share your life *with them* completely, and to have children *with them*. The love of a real person helps you discern your Christian vocation. Love in itself, love alone, despite what many think, is not a good enough reason to get married. There are many other factors that need weighing up, not least whether a couple have the same understanding of marriage, and whether they are

really suitable for each other. *But meeting the right person can sometimes be the catalyst that helps you to understand what your deepest desire is and what God is calling you to.*

There are no other big pulls in your life. On its own, of course, the absence of another vocation is not a reason to get married. But if there are no signs of a vocation to the priesthood or the consecrated life then this sets us free, as it were, to look into marriage and to believe that it might be the right vocation for us.

Sophie, wife and mother:

“I was lucky to always have had quite an open mind about my future. I had had positive experiences of both married life and religious or consecrated life and I could see the benefits of both. When it came to my personal life journey, I think my chosen vocation (to be married) was something that came out of waiting patiently to hear what God was saying to me and also being ready to respond once the right person came along. So waiting, discerning and responding I would say are the key elements. Before getting engaged and then married, I had never had a serious boyfriend or anything like that, but I think many years of single life and years of deepening my own relationship with God contributed to my understanding of the importance of a relationship once it happened. I mean to say that I didn’t spend years of my life planning out what kind of person I would marry, but I think unconsciously, I knew what I wanted...and what I didn’t want, based on indirect experiences of others and also a deepening of my own faith! I knew that the most important thing for me was to find someone I could trust in and who loved me for who I am and someone that I could love whole-heartedly, but also someone who had the same thirst of God in their lives. Finally I would say vocation is about making a decision. A decision based, in part, on common sense and an informed understanding, but also one made in faith.”

9. HOW CAN I FIND A GOOD HUSBAND OR WIFE?

“Lord, may I grow in consideration towards others, honesty with myself, and faithfulness to you. Make me generous enough to want sincerely to do your will whatever it may be. Help me to find my true vocation in life, and grant that through it I may find happiness myself and bring happiness to others. Grant, Lord, that those whom you call to a particular vocation may have the generosity to answer your call, so that those who need your help may always find it. We ask this through Christ our Lord.” *Author unknown; adapted.*

Most young people hope to get married and have children one day. *The clearest sign that marriage is for you is simply that you have a desire to get married and have a family, and you do not have a sense of being pulled towards another vocation.* If this is the case then it is perfectly reasonable to hope that you will be married, and to pray that God will help you to find a good husband or wife.

There are many happy and holy marriages between Catholics and non-Catholics, but if you are a Catholic *it is a real blessing if you can find a husband or wife who shares your faith.* This means that you will have the same Catholic values and the same understanding of the deepest meaning of marriage; that you can support each other in the practice of your own faith; and that you can have a shared understanding of how to bring up your children in the Catholic faith. Here are some tips on finding such a husband or wife. It is not wrong or unreasonable to consider marrying someone who is not Catholic; but it is certainly worth hoping and praying that you will meet someone who is a committed Catholic.

Pray every day that God will lead you to a good husband or wife. Just say a short, simple prayer for that intention every day; use your own words, or say a ‘formal’ prayer for this intention such as the Our Father or Hail Mary. You can even do this if you are young and not thinking about marriage yet. And pray to the Virgin Mary and to St Joseph for this intention.

Find out more about the Catholic vision of marriage. Our ideas about marriage are formed by so many different influences: by our family background, by friends, by the media, etc. Some of our ideas will be good and healthy, but some of them might be distorted or wrong. It will be a great help if you can *find out more about the true Catholic vision of marriage* – above all by reading. This vision will inspire you to seek a good Catholic husband or wife; it will help you to look for the right things in a relationship; and it will prepare you in a realistic way for the great challenge of married life.

Be a good person yourself. The best way to meet a good person, a person of faith, is to be a good person yourself, to be a person of faith. *‘Like attracts like’.* That person is looking for someone full of love and goodness too. So live your faith. Live a life of prayer and love. *Be the best person you can be. And this will help you to meet the right person and to build the best relationship you can.*

Socialise with other Catholics. You don’t have to socialise *only* with other Catholics. *But if you want to meet a Catholic husband or wife, make sure you are actually meeting some*

other Catholics. Go to Catholic youth events, prayer groups, retreats, pilgrimages – anything at all! Use Facebook and other social networking websites to hook into Catholic groups and events in your area. If you feel comfortable with it, perhaps use a Catholic online dating website. You have to be cautious meeting people online, but it might be that you can discover a wider range of practicing Catholics on a Catholic website than you can in your ordinary social life.

Don't date just for the sake of it. There is often a lot of pressure on people to be in a relationship. It can come from your peer group, or from society, and it makes you feel that life is empty and meaningless if you are not dating someone. This is not at all true! You certainly need love and friendship – but these can be found in many different relationships. Dating can be a chance to know someone better, to spend more time with them, to share their life – to see if you are right for each other. But it can also make a relationship narrow and even selfish; it can bind your hearts in a way that might not be good for you now; and cut you off from other friendships. *So don't assume that you have to be dating all the time, or that there is something wrong with you if you are single.* If you are still young, or if you are not seriously considering marriage at this moment, then it is often better to stay single and put your time and emotional energy into strengthening friendships and getting to know new people. This gives your heart a kind of inner freedom to get stuck into other things; and it also means you have a bigger chance of meeting the right person when he or she comes along!

But don't put it off too long. There is a risk that people drift through their twenties, thinking about studies and qualifications and careers, and only begin to consider marriage seriously when they are well into their thirties. There are two drawbacks with this approach. First, it makes marriage seem like a 'second career', something that you do when you have done everything else you want to, something you enter into only when you have given the best of your time and energy to more demanding or worthwhile activities. Instead, *marriage, like every vocation, is something that you should want to give your best to.* This doesn't mean you have to marry young – the timing will depend on so many factors, not least on meeting the right person. But it does mean you should not put off the idea unnecessarily.

The other drawback with waiting too long is, putting it bluntly, that it gets harder to find someone. You shouldn't get in an unnecessary panic about this, and you can trust that God is guiding you whatever the circumstances of your lives. But it is often easier to meet different people when you are younger. People are more open to meeting others, more open to new friendships, less stuck in their ways. And it is more likely that a couple will be able to have children if they marry younger, without the struggles and anxieties of trying to conceive later on. *If you are older and looking for a husband or wife, do not lose hope. But if you are younger, then do be open to meeting others, and don't get so absorbed in your work and activities that marriage becomes an afterthought.*

The importance of friendship in dating. If you are dating, then of course you want to get to know the other person well and share your life with them. But a couple can get so involved with each other and their relationship and their feelings, that they never see the other person in a bigger context: with other people, with other friends, with their own family members. *You know someone partly through their relationships and their personal interests.* And if they have no other interests than you, then perhaps they are not very interesting! *Friendship is the most important part of dating: Can you talk with each*

other, trust each other, forgive each other? Do you have things in common? Can you share your joys and sorrows, your strengths and weaknesses, your dreams and fears? Do you like who they are and what they care about? Do you respect and admire their principles, the way they treat people? Can you share what is closest to your heart – your hopes, your values, your faith? Ultimately, if you are considering marriage, the deepest question is not just: Do I love this person and do they love me? It is also: Are they a good person, a person of faith, who would be kind and loving and faithful – as a husband and father, as a wife and mother?

Keep your relationship chaste while you are dating. *A chaste relationship when you are dating is one of the clearest signs that a marriage will be happy and faithful.* If you are having sex before marriage, or if you are getting sexually involved in a way that is too intimate before marriage, not only is this sinful, but it actually damages your relationship. It makes it harder for you to understand and trust each other as boyfriend and girlfriend. Dating, and then engagement, are about growing in love and friendship, so that you are ready to make the commitment of marriage. The paradox is that people are less ready for marriage if they are already sexually involved.

Living together, cohabitation, is not a good preparation for marriage, despite what many people think. It takes away your freedom to make a proper decision about the future, and it stops you being able to view the relationship in an objective way. It is no surprise that you are more likely to separate after marriage if you lived together before marriage. A couple is so involved, literally ‘attached’, that it becomes extra hard for them to see each other with clear eyes and a pure heart, and extra hard for them to step back and work out whether this is a truly good relationship. And if your boyfriend or girlfriend does not share your Catholic views about chastity before marriage, then he or she will probably not share your Catholic views about the true meaning of marriage itself.

There is much more to chastity than just abstinence. But *the decision not to have sex before marriage is a fundamental one that will bring you an inner peace.* It is a way of being faithful to your future husband or wife (because you are refusing to give your life in sexual love before marriage); it is a way of loving your present boyfriend or girlfriend and growing closer to them (because you are respecting the true nature of your relationship, which is one of friendship and affection); and it is a way of protecting your own purity of heart and freedom.

If you are still struggling to find a husband or wife. It is a source of great sadness and heartache to many people that they are finding it hard to meet someone. Perhaps you believe that marriage is the right vocation for you, and you have been looking for someone for a long time, and praying hard to find someone – but it hasn’t happened yet. There are two pieces of advice here, and they may seem contradictory, but they are not. First, *don’t lose hope.* Keep doing all the normal things that might help you to meet someone, keep praying (but don’t become obsessive and pray too much), keep trying. Trust that God will lead you to someone if this is truly his plan for you. *Be patient and don’t lose heart.* But at the same time, be at peace, and entrust your whole life and all your future to the Lord. Tell him that you accept his will in your life whatever that may be. *Don’t cling to the idea of a future marriage in a way that makes it impossible for you to live and love in the present.* For any human being this kind of desperation can really damage our hearts. And for a Christian it can be a sign that we are clinging to our own plans and not trusting in the Lord and in his goodness. So you

need to be hopeful and positive; but you also need to leave the results in God's hands let him do what is best. In a strange way it is necessary to hold onto the idea of marriage and to let go of it at the same time.

James, husband and father:

"I've always felt the pull of married life and always hoped I'd one day have some children to look after. Even at 17 years old I used to drift off and imagine being married with kids. I met Citra when I was in my early twenties when we both worked for the same Catholic newspaper – evidence of God's mysterious ways, as I was a non-Catholic at the time and didn't expect to meet my future wife, let alone contemplate, at length, the merits of Catholicism. A decade and four children later and I'm still as much in love with her as I was when I first clapped eyes on her. Of course, it's been extremely challenging, and without a strong faith I couldn't say we'd be where we are now. If you build and feed a marriage on prayer and commitment the good times drown the bad and you learn to live and love whatever the circumstances."

Citra, wife and mother:

"I was always certain I would become a nun and often daydreamed about how I was going to change the world single-handedly. I prayed constantly about finding the right religious order to be exactly where I believed God wanted me. Marriage was definitely out. Then I met James. I tried to explain to him on many occasions that despite the fact that I liked him very much, I was definitely being called to higher things. But he wasn't put off and ten years and four beautiful children later, we are still very much in love. Furthermore, James converted to Catholicism some time ago and that ability we have to share our faith and apply it to our vocation has been a tremendous grace. It's true that "man proposes and God disposes." What God wanted for me really was what I had wanted all along, but hadn't discovered yet. Through prayer and an open heart, God always hears and answers, although, frustratingly, in His own time. Discerning our vocation often seems to be more a feat in patience and endurance than anything else. But perhaps that's the point. We need to get to that point of total surrender before He can work in our life. Then, no matter how far our will starts from God's will for us, the two will always finally meet."

10. WHAT ARE THE SIGNS THAT GOD MIGHT BE CALLING ME TO THE PRIESTHOOD OR THE CONSECRATED LIFE?

“Once you have renounced everything, really everything, then any bold enterprise becomes the simplest and most natural thing in all the world.”

Blessed Pope John XXIII

Consecrated life, as we saw in chapter 2, is the way of life embraced by those who dedicate themselves to the Lord by making lifelong vows of poverty, celibacy, and obedience that are recognised and accepted by the Church. So this includes monks and nuns in enclosed monasteries and convents; religious brothers and sisters living in community who serve others through their apostolic work; and many other forms of consecrated life. The call to priesthood and the call to the consecrated life are different calls, so in one sense it is not fair to lump them together in this chapter. The life of a missionary sister, a Carthusian hermit, an enclosed nun, a parish priest, or a teaching friar are vastly different, and the particular pull towards each way of life will be very different. But the way God stirs up these vocations in our hearts can be quite similar. Here are some common signs and common ways of discerning a vocation to the priesthood or consecrated life. You don't need to tick every box here, but just pay attention to some of these areas and see if there are some recurring themes.

A desire to be a priest or consecrated person. Maybe you can't explain why you have this desire, *it's a part of you*, like falling in love. *You just know that this is what seems right.* You imagine yourself as a priest or consecrated person and it seems to fit, even if it makes you afraid or you think it would be impossible. *There is a joy and excitement when you think about it, a sense that this is the right path.* The idea keeps coming back – in your prayer, your daydreaming, your imagination. Some scripture passage or sermon seems to be directed at you – about the priesthood, or the call of the disciples, or service. These passages seem to stand out for you and have a kind of clarity; as if a light comes on; or it warms your heart; or it feels as if someone is pointing at you.

The desire may be long-term or gradual or recent. There are different kinds of desire. (i) *Some people have always wanted to be a priest or consecrated person:* they cannot remember a time when they did not have this desire; they pretended to be priests or consecrated persons when they were kids; it seems to be a part of them. (ii) *Some people have gradually wanted to be priests or consecrated persons:* it has grown over time; or it has come and gone; but now seems to be a bit stronger and a bit more enduring. (iii) *Some people have always wanted NOT to be a priest or consecrated person.* This might sound strange, but there are people who have always been fighting it, resisting, walking away, giving excuses why not; and this is because deep down they have always known it is a part of them; and at some point they realise that, in fact, people without vocations do not normally go around thinking about why they don't have a vocation! (iv) *And some people suddenly want to be priests or consecrated persons:* they have gone through a life changing spiritual experience; it has never occurred to them before but now it does; the priesthood or consecrated life is something new and sudden and unexpected, but very real and almost overpowering. This can happen, but these people need to be very cautious, because after a big adult conversion experience it is

easy to confuse a desire to live a radical new Christian life (which is important for all people) with a desire to be a priest or consecrated person (which is only one way of responding to this new life, and perhaps not the right one). This is why the Church asks new converts to have time to settle into their new Catholic life for a few years before seeking ordination or consecrated life.

An admiration for priests or consecrated people you know. You sense a goodness and holiness in their lives. *You have an attraction to something they have or something they represent; even if you can't imagine being one. They seem to be living a life worth living, in a way that speaks to you. You are drawn to them.* Or perhaps you do not have any explicit desires to be a priest or consecrated person, but you are attracted to many of the things that are involved in their lives. You have a desire to serve people in different ways, or to pass on the faith, or to pray with and for others. Maybe you find less satisfaction in your work, not because it is wrong, but you feel it is not enough.

Sense of being pulled or pushed toward priesthood or consecrated life. This can be true even if you do not seem to have any real personal desire. In fact *it might seem like something you don't want to do, something you are fighting against.* The will of God and not your own will. It is *a nagging feeling that you should or could become a priest or consecrated person, that seems to come from nowhere, uninvited;* an idea you can't get out of your mind. It might leave you cold, or even repel you – in the sense that your instincts and gut fight against it. You may find yourself making excuses to yourself (and even to others) about why you shouldn't follow it, raising a list of objections, making clear all the signs that show you couldn't possibly do this. Perhaps you couldn't! But it is strange that you keep fighting and resisting it (when other people just don't bother thinking about it). It's as if part of you knows you should; there is an inner sense of duty, or call – even if it is reluctant.

An inner desire to pray more and to take the faith more seriously. You just find that you want to pray more and to deepen your faith. *Your love for Christ is growing, and your love for the Church. More and more you desire to give your life to God completely.* Of course this is true for many holy lay-people! But it can often be the beginning of a vocation to priesthood or consecrated life. You are not sure why, but you have a feeling that you can't hold anything back. For some people *the idea of celibacy comes to mean more and more* – not because they dislike marriage, but because they feel called to give their life wholeheartedly to serve God and others, in a way that would be difficult within the commitments of marriage and family life.

Other people affirm your vocation. When you talk to people about the possibility of priesthood or consecrated life, especially committed Catholics, they don't look as if you are mad. They affirm it, and say 'Of course, I could have told you that years ago'. *They encourage you.* In other words, from the outside, this vocation also seems to make sense – it is not just a subjective sign for you, but it is beginning to be a more objective sign to others too. *Perhaps people who don't know you even come up and suggest the priesthood or consecrated life to you, out of the blue!* The simple fact that someone unexpectedly suggests it to you, or jokes about it with you, may be the first sign of a call. They may see something you can't see, or something you are not prepared to admit that you see. You shouldn't assume that every person speaking to you is a messenger from God, and other people can sometimes get things wrong – but the suggestions others make might sometimes help you to reflect in a more open way.

Support from a wise person who knows you well. You may not have a formal ‘spiritual director’ (someone you speak to regularly about your faith), but perhaps there is someone wise and trustworthy that you have chatted to about your vocation over a period of time; you have talked things through with them and they know you quite well. *If they affirm what you have said*, and it seems to them that you may have a vocation, then this is another more public sign that it may be true. It could be a sign to take things further forward.

A feeling that you are not worthy to be a priest or consecrated person. This might seem like a paradox, but it can be true. Sometimes someone may have a *deep feeling that the priesthood or consecrated life is too much of an ideal for them, that they are not worthy, or not good enough, or not capable enough*. These feelings can be a sign of humility, an indication that someone has a healthy sense of their own limitations, and a high sense of the dignity of this calling. *The feeling of unworthiness may, strangely, be a sign that someone has a true appreciation for what this vocation means*, and that they will be open to asking for God’s help and the help of the Church. It would be worrying if someone thought any kind of Christian commitment was easy; or if they thought they could achieve it through their own efforts.

An attraction to marriage and family life. This might seem a strange point. Obviously, an attraction to marriage and family life is not a sign that you should become a priest or consecrated person. But it is true that *someone with a deep and strong pull towards marriage can be called by the Lord to become a priest or consecrated person*. God is not playing games and asking you to do what is impossible – to be married and not married at the same time. Rather, you may have a very natural desire for marriage and family, it’s part of who you are as a man or woman, but the Lord might be calling you to let go of that so that you can discover another way of giving your life in love – as a priest or consecrated person. You need to look at all the other signs above; but this section is just to show you that an attraction to marriage does not necessarily mean you should rule out another vocation.

Women and the priesthood. The priesthood is a sacrament that can only be conferred on men. This is not just a Catholic rule that might be changed in a few years, it is Christ’s own wish for the Church that has been confirmed by two thousand years of unbroken tradition. If you are a woman and you feel that there are strong signs of an attraction to the ministerial priesthood, these signs may indeed be God’s way of calling you to a radical life of service and mission and responsibility, in the Church or in the world – but not as an ordained priest. *The Lord may be calling you to another vocation, that you can discover elsewhere in the Church, a place where you can live out your baptismal priesthood fully, and fulfil these deepest desires*. He may even be calling you to a form of life and service that has not been lived before in the Church, something new for our times, a role for you personally or for women more generally that is yet to be discovered. Be brave, be adventurous, don’t lose heart. Be wise in your discerning. Follow the deepest calls in your heart, but be patient and humble too. Don’t be tempted to give in to anger or despair. A vocation is always an inner movement of the heart that is confirmed by an outer confirmation from the Church. So if that confirmation is not there, then there will be another meaning to that inner call. Trust the Church when she says that the ministerial priesthood will not be an authentic

answer to your call, and *pray that you will find another way of living this inner call fruitfully*, which may not yet be clear to you or to the wider Church.

Gerard, seminarian, preparing for Diocesan priesthood:

“One November evening I sensed God wanted me to consider becoming a priest. This call was a complete surprise to me. I had been working in the public sector for 20 years. I had not considered the priesthood. I responded because God was persistent. There was one thing I was certain about – the world needs God. People need to know and experience that there is a God who loves them. People so often seem burdened. I used to struggle with how I might be able to help. How could I provide real assistance and not just lip service? I remember going to Mass and reflecting that the sacrifice of the Mass is being offered up at every hour of every day somewhere in the world. For Catholics that Mass is our nourishment, our lifeline. It was at this point that I realised the world needs the Eucharist and so the world needs priests. I was then able to say ‘yes’ to God’s call. I am an ordinary man from an ordinary family. I do not have all the answers. But I am convinced that God exists and that he can provide the answers we all need. We have to be humble enough to seek his help.”

Sr Clare, Poor Clare nun:

“My decision to become a nun was about falling in love with Jesus and wanting to give my life to Him. This journey began through an encounter with a Franciscan Missionary sister I met at a ‘Life in the Spirit’ Seminar, and it took me five years to discern properly with my Spiritual Director before I was able to take the plunge and respond to the Lord’s invitation to join Religious life. So what does being a Poor Clare mean for me? It means that God is fulfilling my deepest desires, for that which I desire most is also God’s desire for me. When I say I am happy I am saying I feel fulfilled and alive in this life, it brings me true joy and peace at a deeper level. This is not a happiness without struggles, pain and constant challenges etc., but a deep felt happiness at the very centre of my being regardless of what life is throwing at me daily. Choosing to be a Poor Clare means I am able to give myself totally to Jesus in a way that I feel I cannot in any other vocation than as a nun.”

11. HOW DO I PURSUE A VOCATION TO PRIESTHOOD OR CONSECRATED LIFE?

Father, I abandon myself into your hands;
do with me what you will.
Whatever you may do, I thank you.
I am ready for all, I accept all.
Let only your will be done in me,
and in all your creatures;
I wish no more than this, O Lord.

Into your hands I commend my soul;
I offer it to you with all the love of my heart,
for I love you Lord,
and so need to give myself,
to surrender myself into your hands,
without reserve,
and with boundless confidence;
for you are my Father.

Blessed Charles de Foucauld

Interpreting the signs. On their own, these signs listed in chapter 10 above are not a guarantee of a vocation to priesthood or consecrated life; they are different hints, small signs that the Lord may be speaking to you and calling you to priesthood or consecrated life. Like any language, they need interpreting, and you need help to interpret them. If it seems to you that some of these signs are very clear and strong, or if many of them seem to come together and add up and begin to form a pattern, then this can be the clearest sign that the Lord is calling you at least to investigate and humbly take the next step. And if these signs are missing, or they are very weak in your life, then the Lord is probably not calling you, at least not yet.

The overarching sign of a vocation will be *an enduring pull towards to the idea of priesthood or consecrated life, that is accompanied by a sense of peace and joy as you reflect on this attraction*. This does not mean the attraction will be without fears and anxieties and struggles (of course you are a bit anxious!). But if the idea of priesthood or consecrated life itself comes with a deep sense of panic or fear or anxiety (this is different from the natural humility and reluctance we feel) it may mean it is not right for you, and you would be much happier somewhere else! Usually, God gives us enough to go on – he does not play games with us.

Trying to move forward. There is no need to be paralysed or stuck. If you are discerning, that's fine. Follow the advice in chapter 5 above about how to be open to your vocation. Be patient – things will become clearer. If you are really confused and stuck, and not sure which way to go, with contradicting signs and signals – then follow the advice in chapter 6 above, and try to make some kind of provisional decision.

Taking the next step. If these signs grow stronger and come together, then you should take the next step. It might be to talk to your parish priest, or the vocations director of the diocese, or the novice master or mistress of the congregation you are interested in. You move to a new stage in your discernment, which is trusting in the discernment of the Church. This discernment is more objective and ‘public’. It involves other people, and ultimately it involves the Bishop or superior of the congregation. It can be difficult and humbling, because in some sense you are putting your future in the hands of others. *These are the people who have the final responsibility of calling people on behalf of Christ.* It is no longer just you trying to find what is right for yourself. If you eventually make an application to join, then you are trusting in the wisdom of those who assess your application. If you are accepted and begin formation, then you are trusting in the formation programme and the ongoing assessment process involved. All of these public responses are ‘signs’; they are ways that the Lord helps you and guides you; and ultimately you should listen to them as much as to the personal signs of vocation you have discovered in your own life. *It is when your personal sense of calling comes together with the public response of the Church that you can be confident it is the right time to try and move forward.*

Trusting the Church. At the end of the day, *you can trust the Church to help you discern.* If the diocese or congregation encourages you and then formally accepts you, then this is a reasonable sign that the Lord is inviting you at least to take the next step into formation. It still leaves many years to discern and become sure – but you can have the assurance that you are doing the right thing for the moment. If the diocese or congregation holds you back or says no, then this is a reasonable sign that God is leading you to something else, something that is right for you, a different kind of vocation. Deep down, despite some possible disappointment, you can be grateful for the clarity this decision brings. And if the attraction doesn’t go away, and other wise people encourage you, you can try again in different circumstances.

Certain essential requirements. There are certain basic requirements that you normally need if God is really calling you to the priesthood or consecrated life, and if these are lacking then this path is probably *not for you at this time in your life* – although it may show itself later on. This is just an informal explanation of some of these requirements - *you will need to talk to the vocations director or religious congregation to be clear about the official requirements.* It is really important to talk to someone about these areas (the vocations director; the novice master or mistress; your spiritual director). If something concerns you here, do not just panic and rule yourself out, as we often judge our situation too quickly or too harshly, and there may be other factors which are greatly in your favour.

The basic requirements that you need usually include: *A commitment to your Catholic faith* – a love for Christ, for the Sacraments, for the Church (even if you are aware of your weakness and failings). *A commitment to the commandments and to living a moral life* (even if you are weak and still struggle); you are trying to live a chaste life. *Basic physical and mental health* (serious medical conditions will make it difficult for you to live and work as a priest or consecrated person). *A personal and emotional maturity* (it will be very difficult for you to live in seminary or community, and to engage in pastoral work or a routine of prayer, if you have some deep and unresolved psychological issues; if you can’t get on comfortably with different people; if you are really struggling with some kind of addiction or anything else that is dominating your

life at this moment). *You are not married; you do not have any big responsibilities that would take away your freedom to become a priest or consecrated person (e.g., children; huge debts; etc.).*

Which religious order or consecrated community? A simple answer: *The one you are attracted to; the one you like; the one you feel at home in; the one whose ideals inspire you and whose members you admire.* All the normal signs of discernment listed above, all the ways that God ‘speaks’ to you, are true for discovering the order or community that is right for you. If you feel a calling to consecrated life but have not found the right place, then make sure you have a good look at what is out there. Read about the different forms of consecrated life. Read the lives of the saints to discover which kinds of life inspire you. Talk to a wise priest or consecrated person who can advise you about which orders or communities might suit you. And when your interest is stirred up, *go and visit some – sharing their life, talking to the members.* You don’t have to visit every order or community to make a decision, but you have to make an effort and look into things. Trust that through your ‘research’ and prayer God will guide you to the right place.

Fr Anthony, priest, Canon Regular of the Lateran:

“I grew up in a time when a vocation to the priesthood was greatly esteemed and held in awe. It was something people prayed for. It was part of the Catholic ethos. It manifested itself in people’s attitude to the Mass and reverence for priests. My earliest memory is of standing with my parents at the top of the road waiting for a lift to Mass. We lived in a remote part of Cornwall and depended on the goodness of priests to help us. Every effort had to be made to get to Mass, even in war time, and even though the Mass station was several miles away. The care of the priest was appreciated and his visit to the home welcomed. In London they came round after an air-raid. In the country they did everything to provide Mass in remote centres and tried to see that the children received instruction. And so when the priest on visiting our house remarked to my Mother, ‘That boy should be a priest’, that was all I needed to get things going.”

Przemek, considering a vocation to a Benedictine monastery:

“I have been struggling to reconcile my faith with everyday life in some meaningful and personal way pretty much my entire adult life, and I am twenty-nine now. Intuitions about becoming a religious were a big part of that struggle, but I had always thought that I either was not good enough or that this was my mind trying to escape from ‘reality’. So I continued with my double life. In 2004 I came to England to study. The chaplain at my university suggested I go on a retreat in Pluscarden Abbey. I went there in the summer of 2005 and quickly found out that life of a monk is not an escape from life, anything but in fact. Surprisingly, this “discovery” only increased my longing for religious life, but it took me another two years to consciously admit that and prepare myself to take things forward. Then I went through a phase of enthusiasm for every possible form of religious life, thankfully it is gone too. What is left is this initial attraction and longing that has always been with me, and which increased when I visited Pluscarden Abbey and whenever we joined the Worth community for prayer. In other words, I think that God calls me to

be a monk. I may still be wrong, but I am at peace with that possibility too. After all, the desire to please God does in fact please Him, as Thomas Merton put it, probably paraphrasing my favourite Saint Augustine.”

12. WHAT ARE THE SIGNS THAT GOD MIGHT BE CALLING ME TO THE PERMANENT DIACONATE?

“God has created me to do Him some definite service; He has committed some work to me which He has not committed to another. I have my mission - I may never know it in this life, but I shall be told it in the next. I am a link in a chain, a bond of connection between persons.

He has not created me for naught. I shall do good, I shall do His work; I shall be a preacher of truth in my own place, while not intending it, if I do but keep His commandments and serve Him in my calling.

Therefore, my God, I will put myself without reserve into your hands. What have I in heaven, and apart from you what do I want upon earth? My flesh and my heart fail, but God is the God of my heart, and my portion forever.”

Cardinal John Henry Newman

The permanent diaconate is open to both single and married men. *If a married man is thinking about the permanent diaconate it is essential that he discerns this vocation with his wife, so that it is a decision made within the unity of one's marriage.* For the married man ordination to the diaconate is meant to grow out of and complement his marriage. These are just some signs that God might be calling you to the permanent diaconate, some of the ways that God might be guiding you in your life. It is the overall pattern that is important. The paragraphs about marriage obviously apply only to those who are married. If you are interested in finding out more about the permanent diaconate then talk to your parish priest or get in touch with the Director for Permanent Deacons in your home diocese.

A stable and supportive marriage. No marriage is perfect, but you and your wife must have a solid and supportive relationship. There are no major issues in your marriage that make it hard for you to communicate with each other or live your Catholic faith with integrity. *You are able to make this decision about ordination together in a mature way.* You both believe that the commitment to the diaconate, in the time of formation and in the ministry itself, *will not be an unnecessary burden for your marriage and family, but rather an enrichment.*

A commitment to your Catholic faith and to your prayer life. *You love your faith and it has been an important part of your life for a long time.* You treasure it for yourself, you have made time to grow in your understanding of the faith, and you long to share it with others. You try to pray within the circumstances of your working life. You value prayer. You appreciate in a personal way the importance of the sacraments, especially of the Mass.

A commitment to family and work. *You love and care for your wife and family, despite the inevitable struggles.* You are faithful to your responsibilities at work and you are able to give generously of your time and yourself whenever there is need.

A desire to serve. You have already shown a commitment to serve others in different ways, in the parish or in other voluntary situations. You have the time and energy and proven capacity to work for others and to work willingly. *You have a desire to serve others more wholeheartedly, as a vocation. You are drawn especially to the service you see in the lives of deacons:* assisting at the altar in the sacramental celebrations, preaching and teaching God's Word, leading people in prayer, and serving others in the ministry of charity. This will extend especially to the poor and the marginalized; and one of your particular responsibilities as a deacon will be to bring their needs to the notice of your parish and the wider church.

Human qualities. You have all the human qualities that will allow you to be a worthy minister in God's Church. *You have the emotional and psychological maturity to take on a new and demanding role.* You are able to take the lead, and you have experience in different leadership roles. You can work well with others and win their respect.

The encouragement of others. *Other people in the parish encourage you to think about the diaconate,* or support you when you discuss the idea. They can see you in this ministry; they can imagine that you would do it well and that you would find happiness in it.

The encouragement of your parish priest. *A key person in your discernment and in supporting you will be your parish priest.* If he believes that you are being called to the permanent diaconate, and if he supports you in your application, then this is a very positive sign.

The place of celibacy. *A single man commits himself to lifelong celibacy* from the moment of his ordination as a permanent deacon. *A married man does not - he continues to live the fullness of his marriage - but he makes a promise that if his wife dies before him he will remain celibate and will not remarry.* This is a very serious commitment, especially if there are young children in the family and there is an anxiety about how they might be brought up or cared for should their mother die.

Rev James, husband, father, and grandfather; permanent deacon:

"It started when my Parish Priest said to me: "Is there any reason why I should not put your name forward for consideration to become a permanent deacon?" My reaction was one of total confusion and a walk home to think more and to discuss everything with Diane, my wife. A few days later and with a mixture of confusion with a determination to see this to some sort of conclusion, I returned to my parish priest and said I was willing to go through the selection process. Four years later I was ordained and in the process experienced something as life-changing as marriage and becoming a father. Those two life events are also vocations with the diaconate joining them and the Church firmly stating that my vocation of marriage must not suffer because of my ordination. As someone who was baptised and entered the Church aged 39 it was not, in itself, strange to experience yet another radical step in my faith journey."

Rev Charlie, husband and father; permanent deacon:

“I first thought of becoming a permanent deacon when I was on a retreat about five years ago. It was like a whisper in my heart - sometimes there, sometimes not. I had always thought that the diaconate was for older, retired men; however, my brother encouraged me to respond and suggested that I get in touch with the diocesan vocations director. I did this and before very long I started the four year process of formation and preparation. It was during this time that gradually I became more sure that the Lord was leading me on this path - my studies went well, the formation staff were happy with my progress, and my wife was supportive, in fact we used to go to the study days together. Gradually the whisper became more of a certainty; and for me, a week’s retreat in Assisi about a month before my ordination was most significant - there I experienced a sense of completeness. I was ordained in May 2008 - it was a most memorable day, full of grace.”

CONCLUSION

“Make sure that you let God’s grace work in your souls by accepting whatever he gives you, and giving him whatever he takes from you. True holiness consists in doing God’s will with a smile. Give yourself fully to God. He will use you to accomplish great things on the condition that you believe much more in his love than in your own weakness.”

Blessed Mother Teresa of Calcutta

As you discern your vocation and think about God’s plan for your life: Be at peace! Or as Padre Pio often used to say: “*Pray, hope, and don’t worry!*” The Lord loves you and cares for you. He is guiding you along every step of your journey. Do all you can to live your faith with integrity and joy. Do all you can to discern your vocation. *Do all you can to follow God’s will, as far as you know it. And leave the rest to him. He won’t let you down!*

And put everything, especially your vocation, into the hands of the Blessed Virgin Mary. She is a spiritual mother to every Christian. She cares for you personally; she prays for you by name; and she longs to see you happy and fulfilled in your Christian life. All the gifts and guidance that God the Father gives you, all the graces of the Holy Spirit, come through the intercession of Jesus Christ our High Priest, and through the prayers of the Blessed Virgin. So entrust your concerns about your vocation to her, and make a point of saying a prayer to her every day for help and guidance. If you are not sure what prayer to say, simply pray the Hail Mary each evening for this intention. She never leaves anyone forsaken.

Mary, wife and mother:

“My soul glorifies the Lord, my spirit rejoices in God, my Saviour. He looks on his servant in her lowliness; henceforth all ages will call me blessed. The Almighty works marvels for me. Holy his name! His mercy is from age to age, on those who fear him. He puts forth his arm in strength and scatters the proud-hearted. He casts the mighty from their thrones and raises the lowly. He fills the starving with good things, sends the rich away empty. He protects Israel, his servant, remembering his mercy, the mercy promised to our fathers, to Abraham and his sons for ever.”

FURTHER INFORMATION

There are many books and websites about the different vocations – too many to list here. If you are looking for information and advice about vocation, but not sure where to turn, here are just one or two suggestions.

The different vocations: The National Office for Vocation has some information and links concerning all the vocations: <http://www.ukvocation.org/> See especially the section ‘Callings’.

Discerning: There are many groups in the Church set up to help people discern their vocation. One such is Compass, which has an excellent website: <http://www.compass-points.org.uk> with prayers and links to various religious orders.

Marriage: If as a couple you are thinking of getting married, the first port of call for advice and marriage preparation will always be your parish priest.

Priesthood: An official website for Diocesan Priesthood is: <http://www.ukpriest.org/> If you are considering the Diocesan priesthood, then contact the Vocations Director in your home diocese. If you are not sure of his details, ask your parish priest, or search online for your diocesan website.

Consecrated life: If you are considering consecrated life, then do get in touch with any congregations or associations you have heard of or been attracted to. If you don't know where to start, there are links to the websites of various congregations at: <http://www.corew.org/members.htm> The National Conference of Secular Institutes also has a website: <http://www.secularinstitutes.co.uk/>

Permanent Diaconate: If you are considering the Permanent Diaconate, then talk to your parish priest, or contact the Director for Permanent Deacons in your diocese. If you are not sure of his details, ask your parish priest, or search online for your diocesan website.

Living your faith: The booklet *A Way of Life for Young Catholics*, by Fr Stephen Wang (also published by the Catholic Truth Society) is full of practical advice about how to live your Catholic faith and be more open to the Lord. It also lists many good books and websites about the Catholic faith, and suggests various communities and movements within the Church that might help you in your journey of faith.