

Easter 4A
(Vocations Sunday)

A mother became over anxious because her daughter could not find a man to marry. One day she mentioned to her mother that a certain man had eyes for her. The mother asked: "what religion is he?" The daughter replied "None". The mother said "it would be difficult for you to be married to a man with no religion. Why don't you teach him about our faith?" The daughter agreed and started teaching him about the Catholic Faith. Finally, when it seemed they were becoming a serious item, the girl came home with a worried look on her face and the mother asked if she was ok. She replied "I think I taught him too much - he now wants to become a priest".

I know in times past, especially in Ireland, a lot of young men were leaned on a bit to join the priesthood. One priest, who later left the ministry, told me that his mother should have been ordained, not him. However, we can't blame people too much in those far off days - the catholic faith was 'in their bones' and a priest in the family was considered a great blessing. They used to say, 'with a priest in the family and a pump in the yard, you had it made'.

Today it's a bit different. The message of the gospel which we preach will often go against the grain. Last year Archbishop Nichols cautioned priests in their preaching not to skim over the difficult parts of the gospel and church teaching to suit themselves. In cherry-picking parts of the gospel and church teaching, it goes to show that priests too have got 'feet of clay'.

That being said, I would say there's never been a better time to be a priest. Then, why the shortage of vocations? Like many mistakenly think, celibacy is hardly the cause of the vocation shortage. The cause is far more likely to do with the repression of our innate desire for God endorsed by our post- modern culture. Repression has negative connotations. Over a century ago Sigmund Freud reminded

us of that. But today we have repressed the sense of God and of the transcendent. By and large people with an exclusively secular mind-set have taken control of the higher levels of government, academia and the media. "We don't do God", one politician famously said. Perhaps the present pandemic might make him have second thoughts. Ten years ago Pope Benedict said: "Faith in God, the domain of spirituality, is banished from everyday life or marginalised. Our whole spiritual side has been repressed. This is the new neurosis of our time – this is our deep wound" Benedict said. The neurosis of our times is our silence regarding God". According to the retired Pope, 'the crisis of vocations is basically a crisis of faith'.

Vocation shortage, marriage shortage, children shortage has a lot to do with the repression of our religious sense. I notice from our baptism register that in 1958 there were over 100 baptisms at St Vincent's. In 2020, over sixty years later, it was only in the teens. St John Paul 11 saw this anti-life drift as a sign of 'the absence of God in people's hearts'. One of the 'ripple effects' of this is a downturn in religious vocations which affects us all.

But for anyone who responds generously to the call to priesthood or consecrated life and lives up to it, Jesus promises a hundredfold in this life and happiness in the next. The call of the Good Shepherd does not disappoint. Surely the present pandemic involving the closure of churches and social isolation should make us all sit up and think more deeply about the deeper questions of life and faith. The recovery of vocations will depend upon it.