

Easter 4B **(Vocations Sunday)**

Today is designated as 'good shepherd' Sunday so we naturally home in on vocations to the priestly ministry and consecrated life.

Today, in the Western world, there is a shortage of vocations. Not so in other parts of the world. When I was in Poland recently, the seminary near where we were staying was full. It is mainly in the Western World where the situation is worrying.

Today, the idea of a life long commitment to any way of life, let alone priesthood or consecrated life, is 'out of kilter' with present day thinking. For many it seems quite unrealistic. That, combined with smaller families, has a bearing on vocation shortage.

I would say that the vocations drain has mostly to do with pushing God and the things of God to the sidelines of our present-day secular culture. Sigmund Freud, the founder of psychoanalysis a hundred years ago, enlightened us about certain unhealthy forms of repression which he believed cast a shadow over people's lives. Today we have repressed the sense of God and of the transcendent.

Those with a purely secularist agenda often hold sway over government policy and also exert a big influence over the media and education in general. Pope emeritus Benedict said: "Faith in God, the domain of spirituality, is banished from everyday life or marginalised. Our spiritual side has been repressed. This is the new neurosis of our time – this is our deep wound. The neurosis of our times is our silence regarding God", the retired Pope said.

Vocations also tend to dry up in more affluent societies. So many superficial attractions for youth in our modern world only

serve to distract the attention away from the spiritual. Church vocations don't come out of a vacuum. We haven't enough stillness and quiet in our lives. We can only hear the 'call' of God if the spiritual dimension of our lives has been nurtured. So the crisis of vocations in the West is basically a crisis of belief.

Contrary to what a large number of people think, the rule of celibacy has very little to do with the vocations shortage. If catholic priests were allowed to marry I believe their ministry would come across more as a job or a career choice than a vocation and they would be far less effective. Like the Good Shepherd, the good priest 'lays down His life for His sheep'. Married people are expected to lay down their lives for each other and their family. By so doing they will share in life eternal.

St Paul has told us that you cannot combine spiritual fatherhood of the family of God with fatherhood of a natural family. And, of course, if there were married priests there would be no shortage of divorced priests as well. That in itself would undermine the catholic priesthood, just like it does marriage.

I also believe we, priests, are not entirely blameless for the present shortage among our ranks. We have sometimes come across as being rather apologetic about our ministry and thereby done ourselves no favours.

When it comes to vocations we all need to examine our consciences so that nothing in our way of life or conduct dull the sense of religious vocation among the young. The voice of the Good Shepherd deserves to be heard.