

Reflections



DIOCESE OF HAMILTON

A Newsletter from the Vocation Office

February 2003

Looking at Discernment

"Listen to the voice of Jesus in the depths of your hearts!"

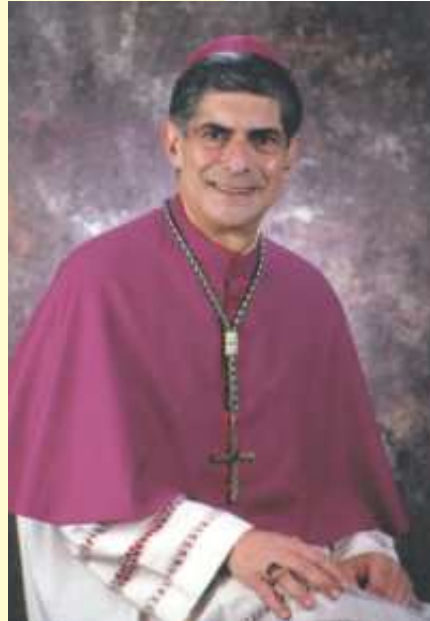
These words from Pope John Paul II during World Youth Day 2002 capture the great challenge of discernment in the life of each Christian. The spirit of Jesus leads us to our true selves and to the full meaning of our lives. Discernment is that act of exploring – of living in dialogue with God so that we can follow the path to freedom, to fullness of life, and become instruments of God's peace and presence in our world.

The fact is that the way we live and the decisions we make in our lives matter. We need to ask ourselves, "Who is better off because I am on this planet? In what way can I be an instrument of God in our world?" Although discernment is a very personal thing, we also rely on the support and wisdom of the larger faith community in following the way of Jesus. Family, friends, our parish community, pastors and chaplains, as well as the wisdom in good books and the tradition of our Church can all help us in exploring our life direction.

Each person who is considering a call to the priesthood or religious life is required to engage in a process of discernment that involves being open and trusting in listening to the voice of God in his or her life. But many people are not sure how to begin a discernment process, or what to look and listen for. This edition of our newsletter is aimed at providing a basic introduction to the process of discernment both for those who are looking for direction, and for those who may be called upon to assist in the process.

Discerning God's plan for our life is not an easy task and it requires a time of deep reflection that seems to stand in direct counter-point to the fast-paced world in which we live. As our vocation awareness posters say, "It's a noisy world out there – you've got to listen to hear the call."

Fr. Mark Gatto
Vocation Director,
Diocese of Hamilton



Bishop Anthony Tonnos

Question and Answer

with Bishop Tonnos

Bishop Anthony Tonnos was installed as Bishop of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Hamilton in 1984. He was ordained as a priest in May, 1961. *Reflections* asked Bishop Tonnos for his thoughts on discernment.

Q. When did you first begin to feel a call to the priesthood?

A. I first began to feel a call to the priesthood when I was a young boy serving Mass at St. Patrick's Church in Port Colborne. The thought remained with me throughout my elementary and high school years.

Q. Were there particular persons and/or events that influenced you?

A. I believe the person who first influenced me toward the priesthood, and was the strongest influence, was the newly ordained curate in our parish, Father Pearce Lacey, who later became an auxiliary bishop in Toronto. My parents were also very strong influences on me, by the example of their good lives. My paternal grandfather lived with us and he and my father attended Mass every morning. Their example was very strong in my life. Once when I was scheduled to serve morning Mass I slept in. The next day I apologized to the priest for missing the day before. Father Lacey said, "That is all right, your grandfather served mass for me"

Q. How did you discern your call?

A. The principal way in which I discerned my call was through prayer. Every day during my prayers before bed I asked God to allow me to be a

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What is Discernment?

Discernment is a prayerful process through which we try to discover God's desire for us in the circumstances of our lives. It is a way of listening to the voice of God in our experiences, in scripture and in the Church. Vocational discernment is a mutual process done in dialogue with others.

What is Formation?

Formation is a process of educational, spiritual, and human development that takes place during the early years of joining a religious community or during the seminary years for those entering the diocesan priesthood. Formation continues throughout the life of the ordained minister or those called to apostolic or consecrated life.

Four Steps to Discernment

Discerning a call to the priesthood or religious life doesn't happen overnight. It's not an "ah hah!" moment, but rather a reflective process that takes time and concentration, as described here:

1 Know yourself.

Understand your likes and dislikes, motivations, interests, limitations, fears and dreams. How do you handle stress? What kind of leadership inspires you? What kind of structure do you like to have in your life? How do you work with others? Keep a journal to record your thoughts and feelings over a period of time, and re-visit the entries on a regular basis to identify any recurring themes. Establishing a spiritual director (e.g., priest, chaplain, or another experienced and trusted person of faith) can also help the voyage of self-discovery.

2 Know God.

Develop a life of regular prayer (see "Prayer is Key to Discernment" in this newsletter). Your relationship with God should be two-way – you talk to God and you listen to God. Not everyone prays the same way. Develop a form of prayer that works for you.

3 Make the decision.

As you get more in touch with yourself, and with God, think about the decision you need to make. Think about the alternatives and the pros and cons of each. Think about yourself in the future and imagine living your life based on one choice or another. Pay attention to your feelings as you go through this part of the process when you imagine yourself as a priest or religious, what emotions are generated? Gather information about the options available and see how priests or religious live. Trust your feelings and choose what appears to be best for you and what appears to be God's will.

4 Confirm your decision.

Spend time in prayer to see if the decision continues to feel right. You should feel peaceful and happy, not anxious and worried. Give yourself time to 're-test' your decision over a period of several weeks. Share your decision with your spiritual director or a mentor who has guided you through the discernment process.

Prayer is Key to Discernment

*Speak, Lord. Your
servant is listening.*

1 SAMUEL 3:9

Personal prayer is a necessary element in all discernment. There are many different ways to pray within the Catholic spiritual tradition, but prayer with scripture can be especially enlightening. Below is a simple approach to praying with scripture and a sample one-week, at-home retreat for someone discerning a vocation.

Some thoughts on reading the Bible

- Read the Bible in a spirit of prayer.
- The Bible is to be read as a love letter from God, which has the power to transform our minds, our hearts and our lives.
- Establish a designated place and a time each day or week for prayerful reading of the Bible.
- Check out this Internet resource: www.cbac.org (Catholic Biblical Association of Canada) for additional guidance on scripture study.

How to pray with scripture

- Pick a short passage to pray with.
- Find a comfortable posture and be ready to peacefully listen.
- Take a few minutes to relax and settle down. Relax your limbs and muscles. Give all your cares and concerns to the Lord and let the Lord hold them for you while you pray.
- Be aware that God fills you with God's presence of unconditional love and is always with you.
- Slowly read the scripture passage. Believe that the words are God's own words and meant for you.
- Find one or more resting place in the passage. Linger on them. Savour them. Repeat them. Reflect on them in silence. Stay with the same passage during the whole prayer period and repeat it as often as you like.
- Be content to be like a child who climbs into a parent's lap and listens to his or her words and story. (see Psalm 132) Carry on a conversation with the Lord about what you hear.

At-home scripture retreat

If you're in a discernment process, try this one-week scripture retreat at home. Find a time and place to spend at least 15 minutes each day, quietly praying with the passage listed, and imagine yourself discussing the passage with Jesus

Day one: Matthew 19:16-26 The Rich Young Man. What am I clinging to and afraid to let go?

Day two: Jeremiah 1:4-9 Call of Jeremiah. In what ways have I experienced God calling me in my life?

Day three: Psalm 139:1-18 God's Searching For Us. In what ways has God "found" me?

Day four: John 15:8-16 Called and Chosen. What has brought me joy in the past? What brings me true joy today?

Day five: Luke 5:1-11 Call of First Disciples. In what ways am I being called to trust in God?

Day six: Luke 1:26-38 Annunciation of Mary. When have I been called to say 'yes' in my life to a call?

Day seven: John 21:15-19 Call of Peter. Who is God calling me to love and care for?

"I don't know Who – or What – put the question; I don't know when it was put; I don't even remember answering, but at some moment, I did answer Yes to Someone – or Something – and from that hour I was certain that existence is meaningful and that my life, in self-surrender, had a goal."

Dag Hammarskjöld, 1905-1961, Swedish diplomat, former Secretary General to the United Nations



Sister Mary McIntyre CSJ

Women's Discernment Weekend

A Time of Sharing and Reflection

By Sister Mary McIntyre CSJ

The angel of the Lord said to Elijah "Go out and stand on the mountain before the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by." Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire and after the fire a sound of sheer silence. When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance to the cave. (1Kings 19:11-13)

Many people in this day and age seek to discern the presence of God in their lives, just as when God taught Elijah how to discern God's presence amidst the other distracting and forceful movements he encountered.

In February of 2002, five young women gathered in Elmira at the country house of the School Sisters of Notre Dame to discuss discernment.

Sister Martha Fauteux SSND and I facilitated the gathering. Our time was spent discussing discernment but also provided opportunities for both personal prayer and group sharing.

A discernment process requires one to have a personal sense of what it means to recognize God's presence within. The women reflected on times when they had felt God's presence and consolation within themselves.

Through their sharing they came to see that God's presence is communicated in different ways. Sometimes it's a gentle stillness in the midst of great noise, as was Elijah's experience. For others, God's presence is experienced as a deep sense of peace or harmony. At other times, there is a bittersweet consolation that although we are experiencing suffering, it is a suffering that includes a sense of intimacy with the suffering Christ and we know we are not alone. And at other times God's presence is manifested in recognition of God's delight in oneself.

This attentiveness to the movement of God within can help us in our decision-making process. As we make our choices we can recognize with a greater clarity whether these choices move us towards God or away from God.

Initially, the women who attended met as strangers to one another. At the end of the weekend they had shared prayer, laughter, meals and long walks. They deepened their understanding of discernment and felt more grounded in their relationship with God, and in their desire to serve.

If you are interested in learning about discernment or are seeking assistance in discerning a call to religious life, please contact:

Sister Martha Fauteux SSND, 905-689-6344 ext. 609, email: mjfauteux@yahoo.ca or Sister Mary McIntyre CSJ, 905-528-0138 ext. 257, email: vocation@csjhamilton.org

Thoughts on Discernment from Seminarians

As part of the vocation awareness campaign launched by the Diocese of Hamilton in 2001, focus groups were conducted with seminarians at St. Peter's Seminary in London. Following are some thoughts from seminarians about their own discernment processes:

"At first I wanted to run away from my feelings but later I grew to accept them. I asked myself, 'What is life about? What am I called to do?' I felt a calling."

"You can hear the call from different people."

"It's an interior process. The call is in you. Someone or something else brings it out."

"It grows slowly – little things building on each other. You have an inkling that this is your direction."

"The call is so hard to put into words it's such an internal thing. How do you explain it? It's a desire – an idea – not a certainty. The only certainty is that you know you're thinking about it. You want anonymity and privacy – you don't want to expose yourself to comment or ridicule or pressure. Each call is unique."

"There's something out there you want to find out more about. To hear the call you have to listen. There's a lot of noise out there in our society – TV, music – you have to listen and be quiet. It takes time and it takes silence to hear it."



Am I a Candidate for the Priesthood or Religious Life?

The Diocese of Hamilton is looking for people with:

- **Faith and integrity**
- **Normal, healthy relationships with peers and others**
- **Commitment**
- **Leadership**
- **Positive self-image**
- **Sense of humour**
- **A desire to do some good**

Candidates should also be:

- **Prayerful**
- **Searching for meaning in life**

On the Calendar

May 3, 2003 • Ordination

The ordination to the priesthood of **Robert Love** is tentatively scheduled to take place at 11 a.m. at Cathedral of Christ the King, Hamilton. Everyone is welcome.

May 11, 2003 • World Day of Prayer for Vocations

Each year, the World Day of Prayer for Vocations is held the fourth Sunday of Easter. It's a day to remember and pray for those who have already responded to God's call to priesthood, religious and consecrated life, and to encourage and pray for those whom God may be calling to service as priests, sisters, brothers, deacons or lay ministers.

Early May, 2003 • The next issue of *Reflections* will be published.

Question and Answer with Bishop Tonnos

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priest and to be a good one. I also spoke with teachers and the principal of our high school, as well as the pastor of our parish. During my early high school years one of my cousins, Albert Williams of Leamington, Ontario, went to St. Peter's Seminary to study for the Diocese of London. I had many opportunities to speak with him and certainly benefited from his good example. He was ordained for the Diocese of London in 1955.

Q. Were there any struggles or doubts that you experienced during your discernment process?

A. The struggles or doubts that I experienced were not overly serious. During high school one becomes distracted with very many things – social relationships and dating. However, despite these, I knew that I at least wanted to go to the seminary to test my vocation.

Q. What advice would you give to someone who is contemplating a call to the priesthood or religious life?

A. The best advice that I can give is to pray regularly about the call and to discuss it with a priest or religious sister who one likes and trusts. I would encourage such a person not to be in any way intimidated or afraid of the demands which are placed upon a person in such a calling because of the great assistance and strength which is given by God through His grace.

Q. As a bishop, in what ways do you still need to engage in discernment?

A. The ultimate sign that one has a vocation to the priesthood is the call from his bishop or his religious ordinary to be ordained. The bishop must continually discern the qualifications of candidates for the priesthood and try to determine what the needs of the Church of today are and how well they may be met by this or that particular candidate for priesthood.

An excerpt from the Homily of Pope John Paul II 17th World Youth Day Sunday, July 28, 2002

"Listen to the voice of Jesus in the depths of your hearts! His words tell you who you are as Christians... But Jesus offers one thing, and the 'spirit of the world' offers another... The 'spirit of the world' offers many false illusions and parodies of happiness... The greatest deception, and the deepest source of unhappiness, is the illusion of finding life by excluding God, of finding freedom by excluding moral truths and personal responsibility...

The world you are inheriting... is a world that needs to be touched and healed by the beauty and richness of God's love. It needs witnesses to that love... With your faith, hope and love, with your intelligence, courage and perseverance, you have to humanize the world we live in... Even a tiny flame lifts the heavy lid of night. How much more light will you make, all together, if you bond as one in the communion of the Church!

If you love Jesus, love the Church! Do not be discouraged by the sins and failings of some of her members... And if, in the depths of your hearts, you feel the same call to the priesthood or consecrated life, do not be afraid to follow Christ on the royal road of the cross! At difficult moments in the Church's life, the pursuit of holiness becomes even more urgent. And holiness is not a question of age; it is a matter of living in the Holy Spirit... We are not the sum of our weaknesses and failures; we are the sum of the Father's love for us and our real capacity to become the image of his Son."

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