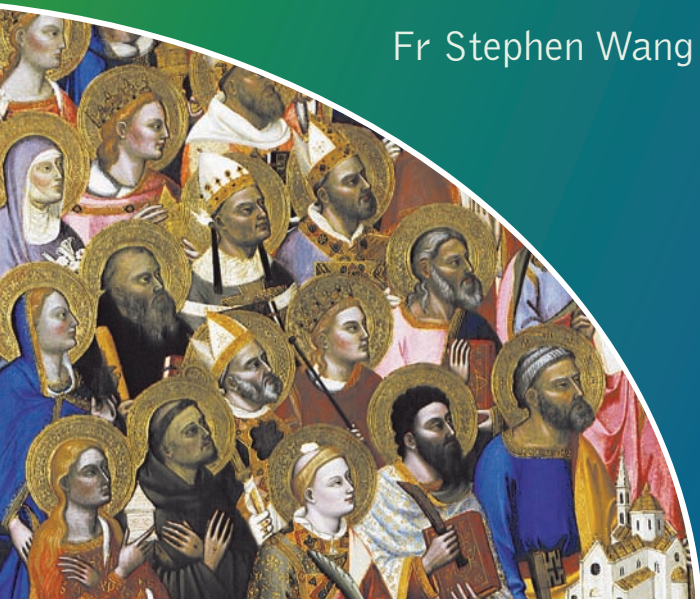


How to Discover your Vocation

Marriage, Priesthood,
Consecrated Life,
Permanent Diaconate, Single Life

Fr Stephen Wang



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generous support of the members of the
Catholic Truth Society*



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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 begin to understand 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 to seek God's will and to be open to his plans. But there is a danger of becoming so anxious about your vocation, so caught up in a future that does not yet exist, that you 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.

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Fr Stephen Wang

I. 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 'consecrated life'. This is the way of life embraced by all those who dedicate themselves to the Lord by making these lifelong vows 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 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 in some way 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 very humble in his faith. I knew that I needed to 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 else 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 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 Siena*)

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 of 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 very 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 change. 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 Nôtre Dame de Vie Secular Institute:

“In my story it seems to me that it was God who was looking out 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 to him 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 was, 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 or another. 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, “Have you 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 of Loyola*)

If you are not clear about your vocation, 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 your 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 go 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 prayers you are attracted to – 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 it, 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, you should also 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 you are, 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 looking 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.”
(Fr 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.

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