

My Vocation – How It Began

Mark 1:21-28

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4th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year B

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*The people were astonished at his teaching,
for he taught them as one having authority.*
[Mark 1:22]

Teenagers: from time to time, a teen will ask about what led me to be a priest. So, on that topic ...

A story. A true story. My story.

Last year, I once spoke in passing of when I was in the Air Force out of high school. I spoke of my experience at an orphanage in Germany as influencing me to be a priest. While preparing this homily, I thought back to one particular moment of grace as capturing that influence.

When I left high school, I had no idea I'd end up being a priest. At the time, I thought I might be a chef. However, I first spent three and a half years in the Air Force. When I was in Germany, my teenager's faith grew into a more adult faith, a more committed and confident faith.

In Germany, I spent much of my free time at a children's home (a *kinderheim*, a type of orphanage), where I got to know the sisters who took care of the children. I saw their strong Catholic faith and their commitment to serve Jesus Christ by serving others.

The children's home didn't begin as an orphanage. After World War II, it was a relocation center for Polish survivors of the hellish Nazi forced labor camps. With their families killed during the war, many of the survivors had nothing in Poland to return to. When the relocation center became a home for abandoned children, some stayed on to take care of the buildings and grounds and to help the sisters take care of the children. Thirty years after World War II, I was often there on my day off, helping the sisters and observing the Polish workers who survived the slave labor camps. For this middle-class kid from Sunnyvale, the memories don't go away.

I saw in the sisters a compassion rooted in their faith in Jesus Christ. I saw in the sisters a committed faith, an unconditional love that drew me into a deeper relationship with Jesus. And yet, I remember how it began in a particular moment during my first visit to the children's home (the *kinderheim*). It's a moment that captures what it all meant to me, and what it still means to me today.

One day, other men of the Catholic parish on the air base invite me to visit the children's home with them. I think: GI's overseas, visiting nuns at an orphanage – sounds like something in a Hollywood movie. I'm only twenty years old without anything better to do, so I say, "Sure," although I don't know what to expect. When we pull up to the *kinderheim* and get out of the car, children are coming out of the building and running up to greet us. Again, it was like a Hollywood movie.

Then, one little girl (six or seven years old) stops in front of me, looks up, and says perhaps the only English words she knows, "Pick me up. Hold me." For this twenty-year-old GI, this isn't a Hollywood movie. This is now real life.

Today, I look back and see it clearly as a moment of grace. Or, rather, it's a moment in which I'm ambushed by grace. I see in that moment that Jesus reaches out to me, teaching me something about love and that it's okay to give myself away. This young GI keeps going back to the children's home, and, eight years later, this GI decides to study to be a priest. This young GI remains grateful for what Jesus taught him through a child.

Today's Gospel proclamation has Jesus gathering with others, teaching with authority, and healing a man who's life is broken. God is love, and Jesus is the fullest expression of God's love. And yet, the One-who-is-love isn't encountered only in the Scriptures, but also in the events and people who come into our lives.

I'm grateful that I can be a priest. I'm grateful that I can encounter the One-who-is-love in you and in the life of a child long ago. I ask you to invite a young man to consider this life for himself.

Let's back up for a moment to my homily of last Sunday. I invited you to consider what you might say to someone who asks you about your Catholic, Christian faith. I asked you to think of it as your *elevator speech* and to write it out. To help you with it, we included a simple worksheet in the Sunday bulletin. In case you've misplaced it, I've left extra copies of it at our doors today. When you write yours, send it to me, and I'll be happy to read it.

I've shared with you my memory of a graced moment that led to me being a priest. So, I conclude by sharing with you, once again, my *Catholic elevator speech* from last week:

I am Christian, Catholic, and a Catholic priest, because I can't imagine myself doing anything more meaningful with my life. My Christian faith – my Catholic faith – is rooted in the dying and rising of Jesus Christ. This faith is rooted in the Scriptures and nearly 2,000 years of Church teachings. We recognize that all good things in life are a gift from God intended to be put to the service of the Gospel, and we gather every Sunday simply to say we are grateful for what God has given us in life.

I like being with people who want to be grateful, and I like seeing their goodness and concern for others. We are not perfect at living up to the teachings of Jesus,

so we seek his help – his grace – that we might become more loving, more compassionate toward the people we meet each day.

Jesus makes it possible for us to have an eternal relationship with God. As a Catholic priest, I hope I can be an example and guide for anyone who wants to have a deeper relationship with God through Jesus Christ.