

Offering counsel and direction draws people to Christ

In his 1986 address at the Papal Seminary in Pune, India, Pope St. John Paul II identified a unifying theme for men and women who seek and discern vocations to the priesthood, religious life and diaconate:

“In the hidden recesses of the human heart the grace of a vocation takes the form of a dialogue. It is a dialogue between Christ and an individual, in which a personal invitation is given. Christ calls the person by name and says: ‘Come, follow me’. This call, this mysterious inner voice of Christ, is heard most clearly in silence and prayer. Its acceptance is an act of faith. A vocation is both a sign of love and an invitation to love.”

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Reaching out to ask those who serve the Church and her people in active ministry roles how they heard their calling offers unique insights into this “invitation to love.” For as varied and diverse their answers may be, each points to God working within them to help the faithful draw more closely into a relationship with Jesus Christ and one another.

Sources of inspiration



Father Hidalgo

For Father Goyo Hidalgo, associate pastor at St. Philomena Parish in Carson, California, God's call came after having abandoned the Church completely for a decade.

"I had a massive reconversion when watching the funeral of St. John Paul II," said Father Hidalgo. "The words 'Do not be afraid' woke the Prodigal Son in me. My deep desire to tell everyone how much love I found in God's forgiveness for what I thought were unforgivable sins provoked in me a deeper call: to preach about God. One day, during Mass, I had this incredible desire to go up to the ambo and ask the priest to let me preach that day. The seed for priesthood started at that moment."

Others note a seed of inspiration that carried through their earliest memories, as did Sister Julia Walsh, a Franciscan Sister of Perpetual Adoration. A childhood love for God sparked her interest, even though Sister Julia did not personally know any nuns or sisters. Although her teen and young adult years complicated this calling, ultimately she discovered a path to more fully become the person she felt God calling her to be.

"By the time I was 20 I knew I wanted to live simply, in community, with my life centered around prayer, advocating for peace and justice and companioning others," said Sister Julia. "Being a sister seemed like a suitable way to do that, and it certainly has proven to be."

Many who serve in religious life experience a “call within a call,” moving into evolving relationships in their communities and the Church. Brother Silas Henderson, a member of the Society of the Divine Savior (“Salvatorians”) who is also an ordained deacon in the Diocese of Tucson, Arizona, vocational discernment in high school took an unexpected turn.

“I discovered that my vocational path was leading me to religious life, and not as a priest, but as a religious brother,” said Brother Silas. “Over the years, my understanding of my vocation has continued to evolve and grow, and that has come to include ministry as a deacon, allowing me to live out my commitment as a religious brother in broader ways, especially connecting my ministry of presence and service – being a ‘brother’ to those I meet – with the deacon’s ministry of the Word and the liturgy.”

Offering counsel and direction



Deacon Hart

Deacon Ernest F. Hart serves as a deacon assigned to the parish of St. Mary Magdalene in Springfield Gardens in Queens and is additionally a deputy commissioner with the New York City Police Department. For Deacon Hart, his vocational calling to provide help and good counsel happens both in his small parish and in his everyday work. In his parish duties, Deacon Hart provides pre-cana or “post-cana” counselling, preparation for baptism, helps the faithful with legal or

family problems, and generally seeks to make the Gospel more meaningful to everyday life through Christian witness. Informally, he carries this ministry to his job.

“In my present secular position, I serve as Deputy Police Commissioner for the New York City Police Department where I am also known as a Catholic deacon,” Deacon Hart said. “Although I do not seek it, I am sought out by people of all faiths for counselling and advice, thereby, exposing the Gospel to all no matter their faith. Also, as modern policing seeks stronger relationships with clergy and community leaders, I am in a unique position to help.”

Priests, religious and deacons offer counsel to the faithful in many ways, often guided by their own gifts and charisms. Deacon Harold Burke-Sivers has served his congregation at Immaculate Heart of Mary Catholic Church in the Archdiocese of Portland, Oregon, for 18 years. But his work extends far beyond the pews at Immaculate Heart through his work as an author and speaker.

“Marriage preparation, vocational discernment, troubled marriages, and crises of faith are all areas where I have provided advice, counsel, and direction,” Deacon Burke-Siver said.

Sister Julia, who serves as a certified spiritual director, sheds light on what is becoming an increasingly popular prayer path for laity.

“The title ‘spiritual director’ is misunderstood,” explained Sister Walsh, “because a spiritual director actually isn’t the director; the Spirit is. If I am properly serving someone as a spiritual director, then I shouldn’t be advising, counseling or fixing anything in their life. When I sit with someone, I aim to be free of judgement and agendas. Instead, I hope that I am serving as a mirror reflecting back to them what I am hearing and helping them to explore what’s underneath what

they are sharing. In this way, I may enable them to discover what's stirring in their heart so that they can gain the awareness needed to follow where the Spirit is directing them."

For Father Hidalgo, offering homilies is one of the forms of counseling that he most enjoys.

"To open the Word of God is a good way to counsel those who are thirsty for God," he said. But impacted by his own accompaniment of his parents as they were dying, the priest also loves ministering to the sick and dying as well as to their loved ones. He sees his role as supporting and bringing the sacraments to the physically infirm, but additionally to their families and caregivers.

Growing closer to Jesus in a confusing world

While society does its best to lure families toward worldly choices and away from the Faith, those who have said "yes" to vocations often find themselves offering a light in the darkness.

"The culture says that the Church's commandments and rules make us slaves, but, in fact, just the opposite is true," Deacon Burke-Sivers said. "The subjective truth and moral relativism of the culture makes us slaves to our sinful desires that separate us from God's love. The teachings of the Church free us to use our gifts and talents to their full potential so that we become a blessing in the lives of others and honor God in the process."



Sister Julia

Sister Julia continues to employ both the charisms of her community and evolving technology to counter societal influences that draw people away from Jesus.

“The vows of poverty, celibacy and obedience that I have professed for the sake of Christ’s kingdom are public vows because they are for the greater Church and the people of God,” said Sister Walsh. “In other words, there’s an element of witness and evangelization that is naturally part of the vocation of sisters. In the past I aimed to proclaim the Gospel and offer suggestions to seekers as a high school theology teacher and parish catechist. Now, I offer this type of guidance through my website MessyJesusBusiness.com, podcasting, plus other writing and retreat facilitation. I also have assisted with jail ministry and am eager to return to this ministry once I receive the COVID vaccine.”

It’s clear that those who serve as priests, religious and deacons offer their services regardless of where they are, and often to those outside the Church.

“My diaconal ministry is never far from my thoughts, no matter the situation,” said Deacon Hart. “If the situation calls for it, I tell people I will pray for them no matter their religious beliefs. I remind people that prayer works. When in ecumenical situations, I am careful to be as inclusive as possible. For example, I often talk of the God of Abraham as the Father of Islam, Judaism and Christianity. While I try not

to suggest what actual decisions others should make, I do try to give them the spiritual, theological and moral tools to make good choices, although they may not know the basis for my guidance. In parish life, the sacraments are the primary source of strength and identity of us as Catholic Christians. Through my homilies and other parish activities, I remind the faithful of that as much as possible in word and deed.”

For Brother Silas, who serves as director of the Jordan Ministry Team, the ability to walk alongside the faithful in their own “Aha!” moments as they gain new insights into how God is at work in their lives is an ongoing blessing. Brother Silas continually points others to new opportunities to draw closer to Jesus Christ.

“Because of my own formation, education, and spirituality, I think that the celebration of the liturgy is an essential means for growing in our relationship with the Lord,” Brother Silas said. “Even as we continue to navigate the realities and limitations of the coronavirus pandemic, the Church continues to celebrate the Eucharist, the daily round of the Liturgy of the Hours and the other sacraments, all within the cycles and season of the Church Year. Being attentive to the prayer of the Church helps to bring us out of ourselves and brings us into contact with the various facets of the mystery of God we celebrate throughout the year. With that, of course, we also have the words of Sacred Scripture to guide and inform our prayer and reflection. Finally, I am a huge advocate of *lectio divina*, which has been a mainstay of my own spirituality for many years. Regardless of what form our prayers and devotions might take, I always encourage those I journey with to be attentive to the ways the Lord speaks to us in the words of Scripture, to the prayer of the Church, and to be sure to make time to listen to the countless ways the Spirit calls out to us, day in and day out.”

Lisa Hendey writes from California.