

INTRODUCTION

Does God want me to become a priest? How can I be sure?

How do I know if I have the gifts and abilities to be a priest?

How do I know if I am holy enough?

How do I know that I will be happy and fulfilled?

If you are asking yourself these questions, this book was written for you.

I love being a priest. I have always loved it. I particularly enjoyed the thirteen years I served as a parish priest in my home diocese of Savannah, Georgia. It is hard to imagine a better job in today's Church than being a parish priest.

But becoming a priest—and even discovering whether God wants you to pursue priesthood—can be a very difficult and uncomfortable process, even excruciating at times. As the vice-rector of Mount St. Mary's Seminary, I have witnessed hundreds of men make great progress through years of intensive seminary training and finally be ordained priests. Before coming to work in the seminary, I was the vocation director of my diocese for ten years, and worked closely with men of different backgrounds who were discerning priesthood. I have been privileged to guide these good men as they made the most important decisions of their lives.

Over these past fifteen years, I have read many pamphlets and articles about priesthood, but I always desired a *single resource* I could give to a man who was discerning. I eventually saw that Jesus was calling me to write such a book. I began writing in September 2008, endeavoring to write one chapter per month, and so I was thrilled in early 2009 when Pope Benedict XVI proclaimed the Year for Priests. I saw this as a strong confirmation of God's will. The volume you are holding is my attempt to compile everything I have learned—everything I would tell a man who is considering the priesthood.

Celibacy is always a top concern for men like you. Perhaps you wonder if you're holy enough to be a priest. You may be terrified of preaching in front of a congregation. Maybe you're afraid of what your parents and friends will think about you considering priesthood. You may not know how to get to seminary, or what to expect once you get there. These concerns—and hundreds more—are covered at length in the following pages. This book is simply written and includes many true stories about men just like you.

While my primary audience is men discerning their vocations, this book may also be useful for vocation directors. Hundreds of vocation directors around the world are working extremely hard to raise up new priests for the Church, and I hope they will distribute this book to potential candidates. However, if your vocation director does in fact give you this volume, please understand that your personal relationship with him is critical; no book is a substitute for that relationship. You cannot discern diocesan priesthood without the Church.

An important caveat: this is a book about discerning *diocesan* priesthood. It is not about discerning priesthood in a religious order. Though there are many similarities between these vocations, this is a guidebook for discerning whether God wants you to become an ordinary parish priest. However, this book may be able to help you *exclude* diocesan priesthood, freeing you to continue your discernment with a particular religious order.

Please keep in mind that this is a handbook, which means that some topics will already be familiar to you. For instance, if you have already been accepted as a seminarian, some chapters will be in your past history. Feel free to skip to the chapters applicable to your current situation, keeping in mind that the chapters are arranged more-or-less chronologically, taking a man through the discernment process from beginning to end. You may also find useful the index of questions at the back of the book.

To Save a Thousand Souls. Why did I choose this title? Only Jesus Christ can save souls. Only God has the power to bring

people to heaven. But there is an old expression in the Catholic Church: “He who saves a priest saves a thousand souls.” It means that if a priest is in danger of leaving his vocation, and someone steps in to help restore his confidence in his priestly ministry, a thousand souls will be saved. Actually, it is a great understatement. The ministry of a single priest affects *many* thousands of people during the course of his lifetime. God uses the vocation of priesthood very powerfully to bring people to Jesus and Jesus to people.

I pray that the Holy Spirit will use this book to inspire more priestly vocations in our country and in our world. I am thrilled that it is being published in the Year for Priests, and I offer it as a gift to the Catholic Church, the Bride of Christ. I love being a priest and I love the Church! May the Lord use this gift as he wills.

As I always said to the young men arriving at my vocation retreats, “I’m glad that you’re here. I’m glad that you have come. But now it’s time to listen to Jesus. Please check your plans at the door... and let’s begin.”

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