



The Executive Summary  
of the Pastoral Plan for  
**The Third Continental  
Congress on Vocations  
to the Ordained Ministry  
and Consecrated Life  
in North America**

SUMMARY OF THE FINAL  
DOCUMENT FOR THE  
THIRD CONTINENTAL CONGRESS ON VOCATIONS  
TO THE ORDAINED MINISTRY  
AND CONSECRATED LIFE IN NORTH AMERICA

18-21 APRIL 2002  
MONTREAL, QUÉBEC, CANADA  
“VOCACIÓN, DON DE DIEU, GIVEN FOR GOD’S PEOPLE”

At the close of the Continental Congress on Vocations in April 2002, each of the 1136 delegates was commissioned to return to home and office, family and parish, diocese and community to construct a vocation culture in the Catholic Church in North America. The working out of particular pragmatic details was left to every faith community, and considerable progress has already been made. Before the Third Continental Congress (the first was in Latin America in 1994; the second in Europe in 1997), more than 10,000 Catholics from all walks of life in Canada and the United States participated in Diocesan/Regional Vocation Congresses; the results of these mini-congresses informed the work of the delegates at the Continental Congress. Now all parishes, dioceses, congregations, organizations, and conferences are asked to construct an action plan that will be sent to the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, so that the work planned and begun will be reflected in a Pastoral Plan for Vocations for the United States. This summary of the final document from the Congress is designed to inspire more prayer, more thought, and more action in all sectors of Catholic life in the United States.

At the Congress itself, delegates heard from five distinguished speakers. Leaders of sixteen workshops, too, generously shared the fruits of their research and theological reflection, and their summaries are also available online. The major presentations addressed key questions in looking at vocations to ordained ministry and consecrated life:

1. What are the biblical and theological foundations of Church vocations?  
(Rev. Donald Senior, CP)
2. What factors in the Church and society today affect vocation ministry?  
(Rev. Ronald Rolheiser, OMI)
3. How does the multi-cultural reality both enrich and challenge the vocation scene?  
(Sr. Marie Chin, RSM)
4. What are the values and beliefs of young people whom we would like to consider ordained ministry and consecrated life?  
(Sr. Mary Johnson, SNDdN)
5. How can reflection on the mission of the Church in the present context of North American society assist our attempts to renew vocation ministry?  
(Rev. Gilles Routhier)



Formal response to leading questions at 120 round tables, informal discussions at meals and on the way to and from moving liturgies in the cathedral and two basilicas in Montréal, and a prevailing spirit of prayer attuned all present to hear the voice of the Spirit as to what should be done and what could be done at every level of Catholic life to address the vocation crisis in the Church of North America. This document summarizes the results of an encounter with the living God at this extraordinary meeting called by His Holiness John Paul II in collaboration with the Congregation for Catholic Education and the Pontifical Work for Ecclesiastical Vocations in Rome. It was attended by bishops, priests, deacons, sisters, brothers, consecrated seculars, married and single Catholic lay people, Serrans, Knights of Columbus, and young adults from Canada and the United States. The young adults, though distributed among the discussion tables, issued a moving statement as to what they ask of the Church, and that document became a particular blessing in preparing the Final Document and determining the next steps in guiding the Church in its commitment to nurture vocations to ordained ministry and consecrated life. No one in attendance left untouched by this event, and no sector of the Catholic faithful will remain untouched by its hopeful deliberations.

Every Christian has a vocation, and the call to holiness is required of all. As the Congress theme of the Sower and the seed suggests (Mt.13:1-9; 18-23), God is the first Sower, constantly calling, though the Word falls too often on rocky ground, among thorns, or on the path. As Pope John Paul II put it in his message to the Congress, the voice of God is often smothered not only by other calls but also by false ideas of ordained ministry and consecrated life. "Promoting conditions that are adapted toward a positive welcoming of a call to the priesthood becomes an urgent duty for all the People of God," the Pope continues, adding to say that the realization and development of all other vocations depends upon the priesthood. Those living consecrated lives are witnesses and models of a life that has deeply succeeded in being consecrated to God; they are signs of the holiness of Church. Catholics in all states of life are, by their baptismal call, God's messengers planting in hope the seeds of God's word.

It is the Risen Christ who calls us all: to life, to witness, to discipleship, and to ministry. All of life is essentially vocational. The call to service is God-given, "Don de Dieu," for the mission of the Church. Vocation directors for dioceses, religious communities, and secular institutes know all too well that some Catholics have forgotten that the responsibility of encouraging others to consider vocations in and for the Church rests with all God's people. Creating a vocation culture requires fidelity to a continuing process in the life of every individual and every faith community.



## PASTORAL PRIORITIES

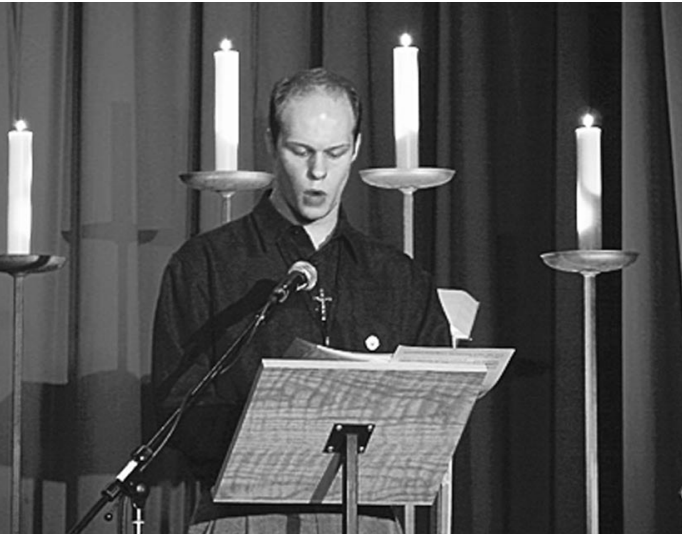
Many ideas and spiritual insights were voiced at the Congress, and most fall under one or more of the following five actions practiced both individually and communally:

- † To Pray
- † To Evangelize
- † To Experience
- † To Mentor
- † To Invite



## TO PRAY: TO BE HOLY, TO BE CONVERTED, TO WORSHIP

To hear and respond to God's love presupposes a living relationship with the One who calls our name unceasingly. Prayer and a vibrant sacramental life – in the individual who is being called and in the community through which the Lord calls – are fundamental elements of a vocation culture. Specific prayer for vocations asks “the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest” (Mt. 9:38). Prayer takes many forms: by the whole congregation at Sunday Eucharist, at holy hours and Eucharistic adoration, during Marian devotions and other spiritual practices, and in various forms of personal and family prayer.



Church.” The Church needs models of holiness “who can give their whole lives over in such a way that they have the power and the permission and the right to ask other people to give their lives over” (Fr. Ron Rolheiser).

The essential dimension of any Christian vocation is the desire to grow in holiness, in deeper union with God in Jesus Christ. The first priority of vocation efforts must be to help all, especially the young, to develop a life of prayer and contemplation: in silence, in meditation upon the Scriptures, in frequent participation in the sacraments of Eucharist and Reconciliation, and in the practices of the Church's devotional and spiritual heritage.

The Congress called for a “preferential option for the young” that invites mature adults of faith to ask themselves these and other questions:

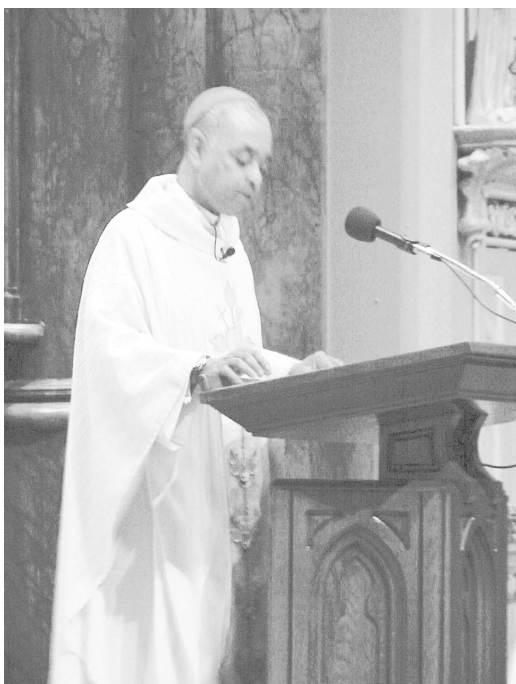
- † Do young people see us praying? What form does that prayer take?
- † Do we explicitly pray – at home, in school, in the parish – for a flowering of all Christian vocations, including those of ordained ministry and consecrated life?
- † To what extent is our home and family life fulfilling the challenge of becoming a true “house of prayer”? Is prayer before meals, at bedtime, and during key liturgical seasons, part of our daily life as a family? Is shared participation in the Eucharist an essential element of our family Sunday?
- † Do ordained ministers and consecrated persons speak directly about their prayer life, simply yet profoundly, in homilies, in teaching moments, in private conversations?
- † How can we better teach young people to reflect prayerfully on the events of their daily lives and to discern how God is calling them to respond to the challenges they face?
- † Are we willing to open our homes – convents, rectories, seminaries, houses of formation – to young adults who want to pray? Are they made welcome at our liturgies? Do we make ourselves available to those who seek spiritual direction and guidance?
- † How can we better collaborate with religious congregations, dioceses, and institutes



of consecrated life, so that times of prayer and retreat experiences for youth and young adults are more available, more accessible, and more affordable?

- † In what way do homilies, especially those connected to a vocation theme, speak of the primary call to a life of union with God, and to discerning the will of God as a response to God's love?
- † How can we allow young people to experience some of the rich spiritual traditions that have shaped Catholicism (Ignatian, Benedictine, Franciscan, Dominican, Carmelite, Teresian, Sulpician, centering prayer, etc.) as well as newly – emerging forms? How can we make them more accessible and relevant to young people who seek structure and focus in their prayer?
- † How are we – as individuals and as members of a community, parish, religious or secular institute, or a diocese – true models of prayer and holiness for those to whom we minister? For the young people with whom we come into contact?

### **TO EVANGELIZE: TO TEACH, TO FORM, TO CATECHIZE**



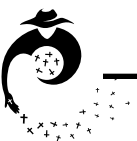
Young adult delegates to the Congress specifically asked that we “enrich their Catholic identity by providing them with opportunities for meaningful catechesis, ongoing formation and education.” This request echoes the findings in research about Catholic young adults who want more Scripture study, sound Vatican II theology, and thorough understanding of the Church's social teachings. Education needs to be experienced in action.

Vocation awareness needs to be a fundamental component of catechesis and faith formation at every stage of development. We must teach and live a theology of vocation that forms each Catholic in the understanding of his or her own life as a personal response to God's call to love, holiness, and service. We must also foster among all Catholics a knowledge and appreciation of the different vocations in the Church. On this foundation, each individual's unique call can then be discerned and given a full response.

- † First and foremost, parishes and local Christian communities need to become places of strong faith formation and fervent evangelization. Homilies and other forms of liturgical preaching need to communicate the dynamism of the Scriptures and the Catholic tradition.
- † The increasingly multicultural character of the Church in North America requires vocation awareness and discernment materials that reflect linguistic and cultural diversity.
- † The Sunday liturgy, however important, should not be expected to carry the entire burden of faith formation. Regular participation in high – quality programs for theological and spiritual renewal, offered at convenient times and in suitable formats, needs to become a parish priority. Since even a permanent vocation is always being deepened and needing to be “re-chosen,” ongoing support and enrichment for married couples, parents, singles, the widowed, and divorced are necessary.



- † Faith formation begins at Baptism. It begins with parents, to whom are entrusted the primary responsibility for teaching children the ways of faith. Baptismal preparation should highlight explicitly the vocational dimension of marriage and parenthood as a God-given call, as a privileged share in God's creative and life-giving power.
- † Baptism also incorporates the child into a larger family. Baptism is a profoundly vocational sacrament in which we are called by the Father to life in His image and likeness, to love as the fundamental and innate vocation of every human being, to membership in the Body of Christ and, thereby, to a share in the Church's holiness and mission.
- † Awareness of the diversity of vocations, and the way in which each vocation contributes to the Church's growth in holiness and the service of its mission, should be part of the basic religious instruction in Catholic schools, parish-based and home-based programs. In religious education, curriculum reform, specific and age-appropriate materials on vocation awareness and discernment should be a top priority.
- † Preparation of children and adolescents for the sacraments of initiation should underline their profoundly vocational dimension. Preparation for Eucharist can focus on what it means to become a friend and follower of Jesus, to be part of his community of disciples; Reconciliation can focus on what it means to live Christ's example of love, forgiveness, healing, and commitment. In preparation for Confirmation, the challenge of discerning and giving an affirmative response to the Spirit's call to witness can be highlighted vocationally in single life, marriage, consecrated life, ordained ministry – through which that call is lived out.
- † Late adolescence and early adulthood are key years during which young people consolidate their faith-stance and make life decisions for education, career, and relationships. The Church needs to be innovative in finding new ways to reach out to young Catholics during this important period of their lives. Possible initiatives include: "Catholic updates" in various settings, "theology on tap" programs for students and young working Catholics, credit courses in Catholic colleges, theological reflection on various elements of contemporary pop culture, and social action groups in which outreach is combined with personal and theological reflection.
- † Vocation awareness in religious education needs, therefore, to be complemented by creative and effective use of modern media and communications technology. Without sacrificing depth or integrity, vocation materials should be contemporary, visually appealing, inclusive, interactive, and personally engaging. Regularly monitored and updated websites, vocation chat rooms, FAQs (frequently asked questions) about vocations, e-mail contacts for further information, are all useful tools.
- † Marriage preparation is an often untapped opportunity for vocational reflection. Ministry to couples and families can stress the profound responsibility of parents, living faithfully their own vocations, to create a home in which all vocations are honored and specific vocations of service in the Church are openly discussed and encouraged. Ministry to single adults, to the widowed and divorced, to the elderly, and even to the sick and dying, should encourage individuals to claim positively the reality they are living, and assist them in living it in union with Christ.



## **TO EXPERIENCE: WORSHIP, COMMUNITY, SERVICE, WITNESS**

In ways appropriate to age, temperament, and particular situation, young people should be gradually initiated into the fundamental expressions of the mission of the Church, in very concrete and hands-on ways:

- † prayer and worship (leiturgia)
- † ecclesial communion (koinonia)
- † service and charity (diakonia)
- † witness and proclamation (martyria/kerygma).

These four necessary and complementary realities are drawn from the earliest descriptions of the Christian community in the Acts of the Apostles: “They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. . . . And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved” (Acts 2:42,47). Although the diversity of vocational itineraries in the Church gives witness to these four realities in different ways, with correspondingly different emphases, every vocational path should include some basic formation in each of them. When any one of them is missing, the life and mission of the Church are incomplete.

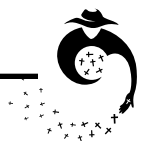
**“They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship...”**

It is entirely normal that potential candidates will feel particularly drawn to one or another dimension of the Church’s mission. One person will prefer volunteer work with the needy; another, singing or giving witness at a prayer meeting; a third will more readily choose quiet time in

the presence of the Eucharist; yet another, building bonds of friendship or assuming leadership within a small group.

All of these are good things that contribute to the building up of the Church. But the formation of a healthy vocation requires more than respect for a potential candidate’s personal preferences. It should also test her or his readiness to be stretched, to be part of a larger picture. It should challenge the young person to be more ready to incorporate her or his particular gifts within the broader context of the entire Church. It should lead candidates to understand that a Church vocation is not only a personal response to a personal call, but a fundamentally communitarian orientation ordered to building up the Body of Christ. Vocations to ordained ministry and consecrated life are always mediated through the Church in and for which they exist.

“To experience” is not a matter of suggesting that young people should indiscriminately accumulate life “experiences,” spiritual or otherwise. Equally important is their growing capacity to reflect on these experiences in a church setting. Do their experiences become “data for discernment,” leading to an inquiry into their deeper meaning, into what they reveal about the unique path on which God is leading them and about the life to which God calls them? Since young people need to know the Church’s mission through concrete experiences of sharing in it, what might some of their “experiential paths” look like?



### Liturgy and prayer (leiturgia)

- † Vibrant, joyful, prayerful liturgies should be a priority in all parishes, but most especially where young people gather: in Catholic schools, on university campuses, and other groups ministering to teens and young adults.
- † Recent World Youth Days reveal that young people are more than ready to avail themselves of sacramental Reconciliation, especially when they are received by priests who minister the Lord's mercy and forgiveness with a patient and listening heart.
- † In a busy and distracting world, retreats satisfy the hunger for silence, but often the young and not-so-young do not know where to find silence, or how to still the distractions and noises within. The rhythm of the Divine Office, the experience of *lectio divina*, the liberating structure of a balanced commitment to work, prayer and community life, are spiritual disciplines to which young people can profitably be exposed.
- † Prayer needs to be integrated with the tasks, responsibilities, and relationships of daily life. The young should be welcomed occasionally to share in the life of prayer of rectories and religious communities. Those who seek individual guidance in prayer should be encouraged and connected with men and women qualified to walk the spiritual journey with them.
- † All young people, and particularly those disposed to consider a call to consecrated life or ordained ministry, should be encouraged to meditate daily on the Scriptures, to participate in the sacraments of Eucharist and Reconciliation regularly, to appreciate the Church's rich devotional heritage, to learn the value of silent listening in God's presence, and to nourish an authentic and deep personal relationship with the Lord.

### Ecclesial communion (koinonia)

- † The communal nature of the Church needs far more emphasis; specific attention and energy should be invested in making parishes and other Church gatherings more inviting and welcoming. Regular participation in Sunday Eucharist should be stressed as the way in which Christians are strengthened in their faith life and, in turn, support and strengthen one another.
- † Young people expect community to be welcoming and inclusive. Efforts should be made to ensure that discrimination and exclusion based on gender, race, socioeconomic status, nationality, ethnic origin, or any other minority status is avoided, whether such exclusion is explicit or implicit. Positive steps need to be taken to ensure that local Christian communities are truly places of dialogue, healing, and reconciliation.
- † Bible study groups, faith-sharing communities, and action-based projects specifically geared toward youth and young adults should be promoted. At the same time, the youth and young adults should be integrated into other groupings and ministries. Community is an intrinsic dimension of Catholic identity.
- † Specific religious houses or rectories should be set aside as "communities of welcome" where those positively discerning a call to religious life or diocesan priesthood can not only "come and see," but "come and live" an experience of community life.





## Service and charity (diakonia)

Throughout catechesis and faith formation, all Church vocations – to consecrated life, ordained ministry, lay ecclesial ministry, marriage or single life in the world – should be related to the larger mission of the Church, and to the model of the Church as “servant of humanity.”

- † Sacramental preparation – especially for Confirmation – should incorporate elements of direct service to the needy. Young people should be encouraged to see these activities not as “charity” in any superior or superficial sense, but in their full theological density: “whenever you did it to the least of these brothers or sisters of mine, you did it for me” (Mt 25:40).
- † The young should be invited to become involved through visits to the sick, elderly, and prisoners; outreach to street kids and the homeless; volunteer work at soup kitchens, food banks, refugee centers, hospitals, and shelters for abused women and children. Repairing community makes one part of it.
- † Opportunities for direct service should be complemented by activities that reflect on the root causes of the imbalances these projects address. It should be made clear that Christian mission is informed by Catholic social teaching and by critical social analysis.
- † All religious live under vows of poverty, and most consecrated persons and diocesan priests are generally expected to live simply and share generously. This needs to be visible, through a willingness to stand with the materially poor, and through a lifestyle that reflects poverty and service, rather than privilege and being served.
- † Some young adults are willing to become involved in short-term and even long-term volunteer ministry opportunities. More such projects need to be made available and affordable, so that it becomes possible for young people to give a year of their life to a missionary or service project.
- † In both long-term and short-term service projects, sufficient time and energy should be allotted to individual reflection, group sharing, and spiritual integration of the service experience. These projects should be seen as a privileged place of God’s self-revelation, in which God is encountered in those served, for God’s will and plan are revealed and realized in service. Even if their involvement were not motivated by a specific discernment of priesthood or religious life, young men and women who commit themselves to these kinds of projects should be seriously encouraged to reflect on the possibility that they may be called to these vocations in the Church.

## Witness and proclamation (martyria, kerygma)

- † Without undermining ecumenical or interfaith dialogue, the clear articulation of a Catholic identity should be a central catechetical goal. It is possible to celebrate unapologetically one’s Catholic identity, and to adhere to Christ as Friend, Lord, and Savior, while remaining respectful of other paths and traditions.
- † Confirmation is deeply connected with an affirmative answer to the Spirit’s call to witness and proclaim the Gospel. Personal testimonies (even of *confirmandi*) that speak of the gift of faith received at Baptism and of responding to it to the best of one’s ability lead to more witness to Christ in thought, word, and deed.
- † Witnessing on retreats for youth and young adults should include a strong vocational component. Whether the focus is marriage, priesthood, or consecrated life,



young people want to hear not only information about these vocations, but the vocation story of those who bear witness to Christ.

- † Effective youth ministry seeks not only to do things “for” young people, but also works with them and trains them to assume appropriate leadership in their own right.
- † As some young people are ready for a deeper commitment to service, others are called to do so in a movement of evangelization. Personal and financial support should be available to young adults who want to develop leadership skills, to become involved in youth ministry, or who would like to give a year of their life to forms of missionary experience.

### **TO MENTOR: TO ACCOMPANY, TO GUIDE, TO MODEL, TO WITNESS**

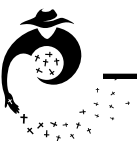


Models and mentors, spiritual guides and wisdom figures are absolutely necessary to sustain a vocation culture. When asked about the inspiration behind their vocation, virtually every priest or consecrated person is able to name those key individuals in whom they saw something that spoke deeply and directly to their heart, that attracted them to the possibility of giving their life to Christ as a priest, a sister, a brother, a consecrated secular.

A call does not necessarily have to come through a priest or consecrated person; it often originates from a parent or grandparent, a teacher, a youth minister, even a friend or peer. To embrace and grow into a full life commitment, however, mentors and

models who have walked a particular path, who know its joys and pitfalls, are extremely important.

- † The most effective way to promote ordained ministry and consecrated life as viable and attractive ways of life is still to put forward happy, healthy, holy, Spirit-filled witnesses to these vocations whose very existence bears testimony to the beauty of a life lived well, as something beautiful for God.
- † Dioceses and institutes of consecrated life should encourage their best priests and members to “tithe” 10-20% of their time to ministry to and presence with young adults. They should also consider investing a similar proportion of their human and financial resources – including some of their best and most effective members – to youth ministry and to vocation ministry.
- † Parents, teachers, lay spiritual directors, and youth ministers often exercise a positive and lasting influence on those who come under their sphere of influence. They, too, need to be trained as mentors and as spiritual guides, and taught the skills of discernment, so that they can communicate these in turn to those who depend on their spiritual guidance and pastoral leadership.
- † Creative ways should be found to foster connections between older witnesses and the young in positive mentoring.



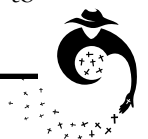
- † Qualified spiritual guides – lay, ordained, or consecrated – should be secure enough in their own vocation to bear joyful and appropriate witness to it, and at the same time to provide full freedom in the discernment of God’s will for those being guided.
- † Even in situations where one individual bears primary responsibility for vocation ministry in a diocese or institute of consecrated life, it is recommended that this ministry be shared by a team, so that the work of accompanying and mentoring individual candidates through the discernment process is not the exclusive responsibility of a single person.
- † Prayer companioning, spiritual direction, peer mentoring, “upper room experiences” in which the spirit of God is keenly felt, and “shadowing opportunities” during which potential candidates pattern, as closely as possible, their life upon the “typical day” of a priest or sister or brother, are all relevant to the ongoing discernment of a vocation to ordained and consecrated life.
- † Although there is usually a formal element to spiritual direction, with a clear pattern of relations and regular meetings, mentoring relationships are typically freer and less structured. They stress the formation of character and the sense of growing into a role or identity with a certain comfort.
- † Bishops, priests, deacons, and religious should make themselves available for conversations and informal gatherings in a variety of settings: parishes, convents, college campuses, ministry sites, and retreats. Priests should specifically make themselves available to celebrate Reconciliation with young people, and properly trained spiritual directors should work closely with young adults, in parishes, on college campuses, and in other places where young adults congregate and form communities of belonging.

### **TO INVITE: TO DISCERN, TO CHOOSE, TO COMMIT**

Although vocation ministry begins with the more generic notion of the call to life and love, and gradually expands to include an explicit claiming of a call to holiness and a share in the mission of the Church, eventually it converges on a question that is specific: Am I called to serve as a priest or deacon in this diocese? to life as a priest, brother, sister or consecrated secular in this particular congregation or institute? to be the husband or wife of this particular person? to live a single life in this time and place, exercising this profession?

Because the call always comes from God, Jesus remains the model for all involved in the pastoral care of vocations; Jesus is the “vocational formator and mediator par excellence.” Jesus’ own methodology points to five distinct facts:

- † Jesus sows the good seed of vocation in each human heart.
- † As with the disciples on the road to Emmaus, Jesus draws near to us, walks beside us, accompanies us on our journey of faith.
- † Jesus educates us, drawing out those truths about ourselves that we ourselves did not yet know.
- † Jesus forms us along the way, teaching us to recognize Him as we reflect on our experience with Him on the road.
- † Finally, in the light of what has been revealed in this discernment, Jesus calls to an explicit and effective choice, and sends us on a mission.



These five facts of faith describe the work specifically given to vocation directors. Those women and men-ordained, consecrated, lay – place their gifts at the service of the diocesan church, of individual religious congregations, and increasingly in collaborative teams working together to promote priestly and religious vocations. In some local churches, without omitting the specific promotion of ordained ministry and consecrated life, the focus of these teams is to promote a culture of discernment, and to help the young (and not-so-young) seekers to identify their unique calling in life, whatever that might be.

The ministry performed by diocesan and religious vocation directors is vital and necessary for the life of the Church. Their generosity, courage, and especially their perseverance need to be highlighted. They deserve our prayers, our support, and our cooperation. They also need to know they do not carry this great responsibility alone, and that if they have special responsibility for these last stages of mentoring and inviting, they depend on the rest of the Church for the solid foundation of prayer, catechesis, evangelization, and Christian experience.

The dimensions of the task of inviting potential candidates into the specific discernment of any Church vocation lead to the following recommendations:

### “To sow”

- † “Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly” (2 Cor. 9:6). We must be willing to sow the good seed of vocation abundantly, everywhere, in the heart of everyone, avoiding any premature judgments based on appearance, formal religiosity, or perceived ideological stance.
- † The timing of vocational sowing is crucial. Although it is during the young adult years that the decision to embrace a particular vocation is often acted upon, its first manifestation can usually be traced back to adolescence or even childhood. Confirmation or graduation from elementary school, high school, and college are key moments for young people to think about the future; they can be appropriate moments for parents, teachers, parish priests, and relatives to introduce the question of vocation.
- † Christian vocation is always a dialogue between two liberties: that of God who calls, and of the human person who responds. A vocation should be seen as the supreme fulfillment of the exercise of freedom properly understood. No semblance of pressure, whether overt or subtle, should ever be used in proposing a vocation to ordained ministry or consecrated life.
- † Conversely, no pressure should be exerted on young people in order to prevent them from considering a call to a particular vocation. One of the most disturbing realizations of recent years has been the widespread extent of active parental and peer discouragement of priestly and religious vocations.
- † Young people need to be informed about all their options. They need to see marriage and single life as respected and necessary vocations. They need to know it is possible to serve the Church in lay ministry. But they need also to know about priesthood and diaconate, and about the diverse expressions of consecrated life.

### “To accompany”

- † Although their primary task is to accompany the specifically vocational discernment of candidates, vocation ministers should also be mindful of a candidate’s



overall journey towards maturity in faith. Even where candidates are still young and growing into the responsible exercise of their freedom, the task of the vocation minister is to help them grow into that freedom.

- † Like all those who guide others spiritually, vocation ministers should themselves be accompanied by a spiritual director and/or confessor, whom they meet on a regular basis.
- † In a process of spiritual or vocational accompaniment, openness, trust, and a certain bonding are necessary. At the same time, the true “leader” is the Spirit of God, and the bond ultimately being fostered is that between the potential candidate and Christ. The focus should always lead back to God’s movements and action in the heart of the candidate.
- † In the mentoring dimension of accompaniment, the concrete sharing of one’s own vocation story often frees the potential candidate to speak his or her own story. Appropriate opportunities should be given for priests, religious, and consecrated seculars to tell their vocation story – in one-on-one contact, in homilies or other teaching moments, and on retreats.

### “To educate”

- † Vocational “education” should develop, without encouraging an excessive or unhealthy introspection, the candidate’s capacity for healthy self-knowledge. Vocation ministers should help candidates see the profound link between increased self-knowledge and the revelation of God’s unique plan and call in their lives.
- † This task requires of vocation ministers a well-developed sense of self with spiritual and psychological acumen. They should be trained to develop these specific skills and attitudes.
- † Vocation ministers need consciously to lead candidates to develop the kind of relationship with the Lord in which Jesus is encountered as a real and heartfelt presence.
- † Candidates should be helped to search for the Lord’s presence not only in the Scriptures, but also in the silences and gaps of their lives, so that their response is given truly to the God who calls in the depths of their heart. The Ignatian practice of the consciousness examen should be taught, as well as other spiritual disciplines that develop one’s capacity to examine one’s life prayerfully, identifying therein the traces of God’s presence and invitation.

### “To form”

- † In the process of vocation discernment, there are invariably “peak experiences,” key moments in which the Lord’s presence is recognized in a particularly strong and unequivocal manner. These are often the moments in which a vocation takes shape and form. Vocation ministers need to be highly attuned to such experiences and help potential candidates plumb their depths, helping them discover the truth God is seeking to reveal to them.
- † While always honoring a candidate’s freedom, these are often the moments in which the candidate is most open to a call to go beyond his or her limits, to commit to a project that previously seemed impossible, and to experience in a deep personal way the truth of Christ’s statement that “whoever loses his life for my sake and that of the gospel will save it” (Mark 8:35).



- † Vocation ministers should not be afraid to challenge generous young people to the ultimate gift: the gift of oneself to God. If the form most adequate for living out this call should be ordained ministry or consecrated life, and if candidates demonstrate the necessary talents and dispositions, they should be positively assisted to act on this choice. The same assistance should be forthcoming, obviously, if they are called to express this self-gift in another vocation.

### “To discern” (to choose)

- † In a world where permanent and definitive commitments seem rare, candidates need assistance and guidance in understanding the value of making such commitments.
- † Young people need to be prepared progressively to make definite commitments: to be entrusted with tasks appropriate to their ability and age, formed in the small, everyday choices around values (honesty, constancy, moderation, compassion) which form their character. They should also be consoled by the thought that a life-long vocation goes through its own internal development: it is “grown into,” and needs constantly to be re-chosen.
- † Although discernment is an ongoing and, indeed, a lifelong process, there are times in life in which one is called to commit one’s freedom through an effective and definite choice. Obstacles may be many: cultural, familial, social, psychological, or spiritual. In any case, the focus should not be so much on the possible objections, but on the joyful and single necessity of responding to God’s call, which is always to abundant life.
- † The paradigm of personal discernment of the Lord’s plan needs to complemented by the understanding that God’s call is not heard in a vacuum, but is mediated through the Church as the Body of Christ.
- † Concretely, this means that vocation ministers have a dual responsibility: to the candidate who has come to them for guidance and direction, but even more importantly, to the Church which through the legitimate authority of the diocese or the religious community, has commissioned them to a task of religious discernment.
- † Vocation directors are entrusted with the serious responsibility of ensuring that potential candidates demonstrate that they possess or can develop the skills and dispositions necessary for community life and for the mission to which they may eventually be called.

### **CONCLUSION: VOCATIONS AND THE CHURCH’S MISSION**

In the emerging vocation culture of the Church in North America, “discernment” and “mission” are the determining paradigms. Such a model has the advantage of placing the focus on God and on God’s unique call in the heart of the young person and the needs of the world. The focus on discernment needs to be made clear, without denying the real and pressing need for new priests, deacons, and consecrated men and women to respond to the sacramental and pastoral needs of the Church in North America.

One way of doing this task is to stress the dimensions of formation in prayer, of spiritual guidance, of mentoring and discernment. It means trusting that young Catholics will resonate to the current generation of priests, deacons, and consecrated persons, when



they see and experience them as caring and committed ministers who want what is best for them, who will teach them the habits of prayer and the discernment skills needed to discover and to respond to the Word of God, and who witness joy and passion and holiness.

We must connect the whole process of vocation discernment and invitation more directly with concrete service projects, which incarnate here and now the mission of the Church, and which respond to real and pressing needs in the world. Young people should be invited to share in this mission, whether or not they have expressed formal interest in ordained ministry or consecrated life. In this way, the missionary project itself becomes the primary locus for vocational awakening and discernment, rather than the individual's predispositions. This entails a shift from a "candidacy" model in which the primary focus is the individual's desire to become a priest or religious, to one in which shared involvement in the concrete work of the Church leads others to identify in a potential candidate the gifts and passion that suggest God might be calling her or him to a more definitive and permanent commitment in the Church.

Such a model also has an impact on the way we understand the whole process of seminary and religious formation, as well as the period of vocational discernment. It would imply "apprenticeship" in which candidates (both for priesthood and consecrated life) would live for a year or two the life and mission of the diocese/community, and on the basis of their experience, be called to enter a more intense spiritual and theological formation to prepare for a long-term commitment.

To fulfill this task of creating a "Vocation Culture," the whole Church must work together in unity. It also requires that, as different constituencies and groups in the Church, we ask ourselves some serious questions about how we currently incorporate the pastoral priorities outlined in this plan into our own lives and ministries.

### **QUESTIONS LEADING TO AN ACTION PLAN**

Our deepest desire is voiced in the words of the Emmaus travelers when they invited Jesus to stay with them, for the day was drawing to a close (Mk. 24:29). In attempting to create a vocation culture, by faith we identify and respond to the movement of the Spirit in and among us. God still invites women and men to consecrated life and ordained ministry. It is the responsibility of all the people of God to be a voice and witness in extending an invitation to the young and not-so-young who are open to exploring ordained ministry and consecrated life as possible options for their future.

The Congress was not designed to obtain all the answers but to lead to the next step. The following questions can be modified to apply to every individual as well as to every faith community in the Church in North America: young adults, parents, pastors, deacons, educators, youth and campus ministers, theologians, bishops, major superiors, individual religious and consecrated seculars, associates, vocation directors, formators, lay vocation associations, and most crucially, faithful Catholics from virtually every diocese and eparchy in North America. Each member in each local Church or community faces his or her unique set of concerns, and each sector of the Church faces communal concerns. The following questions are models for others that provoke concrete reflection on how each individual and group is already responding – and is being called to respond further – to create a vocation culture. On the one hand, the general call to conversion, discernment, and mission, and to a preferential option for the young, is addressed to all sectors of our



Church. On the other hand, certain groups within the Church are more directly focused on prayer, or faith education, or pastoral experience, or spiritual accompaniment, or specific vocational invitation. What should emerge in the end is the same spirit that animated the Congress: that the “raising up” and fostering of all vocations (single, married, lay, consecrated, and ordained) is the privilege and responsibility of all Catholics.

### **SUGGESTED QUESTIONS FOR THE CHURCH IN NORTH AMERICA**

1. Do I believe in the call God has given me through my Baptism? How do I seek opportunities to discover what this call is for me? Do I live my own vocation in a way that encourages others to listen to the Holy Spirit in discerning their own call? In what ways do I offer authentic joyful witness to my way of life, thus sharing my excitement and deep love of Christ and the Church?
2. Do I pray for vocations? Does my parish or faith community pray for vocations together?
3. How do I strive for holiness and purity of heart, learn more about the essential truths and history of my faith, and share what I know with those seeking more? What conversion and education are called for in me?
4. What programs of mission, mentoring, and vocation discernment are available in my parish or (arch)diocese? How can I better support vocation ministers and religious education teachers?
5. What are my plans and those of my faith community for explicitly implementing the preferential option for the young called for by the Congress?
6. Can it be said that my parish, faith community, or (arch)diocese promotes a “Vocation Culture”? How can it be further developed? What more can I do to help create a “Vocation Culture” in my local church? How can I better support the local, regional, and national efforts of organizations dedicated to vocation work?
7. Do members of my community pray specifically for a response to the Holy Spirit among those who are being called to priesthood or consecrated life? In what ways do members of my parish or community reach out in witness and assistance to the young?
8. What do I do to help young people discern the specific call that God has for each of them as a result of their Baptism? What efforts do I make to promote ordained ministry (both priesthood and diaconate) and consecrated life (sisters, brothers, consecrated seculars)?
9. Pope John Paul II convoked The Third Continental Congress on Vocations for all the people of Canada and the United States. How do I plan to follow-up on the Congress on Vocations in my faith community and in collaboration with others?





10. What am I doing or planning to do to create and maintain a “Vocation Culture” for my local Church? What more can I do to help create a “Vocation Culture” in my parish or diocese?
11. What can I do to encourage parents, friends, and colleagues to teach their children about ordained ministry and consecrated life? Do I provide opportunities for them to obtain information about discerning God’s call to specific vocations? How do I assist them in rejoicing if one of their children is called to ordained ministry or consecrated life?
12. Do I tithe my time to encouraging vocations in general and certain vocations in particular?
13. How do I stay alert to the various means of vocation discernment? Do I know to whom to direct or refer those discerning a commitment to ordained ministry or consecrated life?
14. Does my parish and diocese promote ordained ministry and the many forms of consecrated life in its programs and practices? Can we do more?
15. Is our religious education – for children, teenagers, and adults – as fine as it ought to be? How successfully does it integrate the theology of God’s universal call to holiness and mission? Does it clearly present ordained ministry, consecrated life, marriage, and single life as worthy and necessary vocations in the Church?
16. Do we encourage those who seek to respond to God’s will to make retreats, visit seminaries or religious houses, spend time with consecrated men or women? How could we help finance such activities?
17. Do I encourage and talk with young adults and express a willingness to help them to find their place in the Church?
18. Am I personally (and are we communally) responsive to the young (and not-so-young) who are actively discerning God’s call to a Church vocation? How can we become more responsive?
19. Does our parish have a vocation committee? If so, what is its mandate? Which vocations in the Church are promoted and prayed for in our parish?
20. Does the diocese have a Vocation Committee or an active Diocesan Vocation Director or a Vicar for Religious? How can I help vocation ministers materially and spiritually?



# PRAYER GUIDE FOR PARISHES, DEANERIES, DIOCESES, EPARCHIES, COMMUNITIES, NATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS AND REGIONS

in response to

The Third Continental Congress on Vocations to the Ordained Ministry and  
Consecrated Life in North America

## CALL TO PRAYER

Leader: Let us praise God, who plants the seeds and reaps the harvest.

Blessed be God forever.

All: Blessed be God forever.

## OPENING PRAYER

Loving Father, source of life and goodness, we rejoice in the gift of your Son, who dwells constantly in our midst, revealing to us the splendor of your love. We pray that you will call to your service faithful followers of Jesus, who will offer themselves to the ordained ministry and the consecrated life. Imbued with your love and mercy, may they offer their lives generously to the Church as living witnesses of your love for all people.

Lord Jesus Christ, Master of the Harvest, the true light come into the world, grant a fruitful outcome to our work with this pastoral plan. Help us to create concrete ways to put it into action so that workers for your harvest may increase. We ask for grace to preach the Gospel and live the Gospel that brings hope of eternal life to every human being.

Holy Spirit, you open the heart and the mind to the divine call; you make effective every impetus toward good, toward truth, toward charity. Bless our implementation of the Pastoral Plan, and inspire the faithful of North America with zeal and generosity to encourage and to support those whom you call to the ordained ministry and consecrated life, especially those who are friends or family members.

O Virgin Mary, Mother of the Church, help those whom the Master invites to the service of the Gospel to echo your own trusting “yes” that the work of evangelization may inspire every tongue to confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God. Amen.

## **Reading from the Gospel of Luke (24:13-35)**

That very same day, two of the disciples were on their way to a village called Emmaus, seven miles from Jerusalem, and they were talking together about all that had happened. As they talked this over, Jesus Himself came up and walked by their side; but something prevented them from recognizing Him. He said to them, “what matters are you discussing as you walk along?” They stopped short, their faces downcast.

Then one of them, called Cleopas, answered Him, “You must be the only person staying in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have been happening there these last few days.” “What things?” he asked “All about Jesus of Nazareth,” they answered “who proved he was a great prophet by the things he said and did in the sight of God and of the whole people; and how our chief priests and our leaders handed Him over to be sentenced to death, and had Him crucified. Our own hope had been that He would be the one to set Israel free. And this is not all: two whole days have gone by since it all happened; and some women from our group have astounded us: they went to the tomb



in the early morning, and when they did not find the body, they came back to tell us they had seen a vision of angels who declared He was alive. Some of our friends went to the tomb and found everything exactly as the women had reported, but of Him they saw nothing.”

Then He said to them, “You foolish men! So slow to believe the full message of the prophets! Was it not ordained that the Christ should suffer and so enter into His glory?” Then, starting with Moses and going through all the prophets He explained to them the passages throughout the scriptures that were about Himself.

When they drew near to the cottage to which they were going, He made as if to go on; but they pressed Him to stay with them. “It is nearly evening” they said “and the day is almost over.” So He went in to stay with them. Now while He was with them at table, He took the bread and said the blessing; then He broke it and handed it to them. And their eyes were opened and they recognized Him; but He had vanished from their sight. Then they said to each other, “Did not our hearts burn within us as He talked to us on the road and explained the scriptures to us?”

They set out that instant and returned to Jerusalem. There they found the Eleven assembled together with their companions, who said to them, “Yes, it is true. The Lord has risen and has appeared to Simon!” Then they told their story of what had happened on the road and how they recognized Him at the breaking of bread.

## QUIET REFLECTION

### CONGRESS SONG: “ON A MISSION”

#### CHORUS:

I am called, I am called  
I am called on a mission  
To love and serve the Lord.  
I am called, I am called  
I am called on a mission.

Jesus is my Teacher – the Mentor of my life  
He calls me to the altar – the gentle Sacrifice  
He beckons me, I answer, though at times I run and hide  
But hearing Him my heart is open wide.

Jesus is my shepherd – He leads me on my way  
And I in turn must lead those – who may have gone astray  
I feel His call to follow, He wants me to explore  
And follow in His footsteps, and love Him evermore.

He sends us on a mission we may not understand.  
If we had His vision, we’d all rise and take a stand.  
When I put my trust in Him, He cradles me with love  
Bringing me His peace from up above.

Oh Jesus is my Savior, He gives me every day  
The gift of my vocation, I’ll never throw away.  
So here I stand before Him – and offer Him my vow  
He calls me on a mission to reach out – reach out.

Lyrics by:  
Julie Lafontaine

Music by:  
Julie Lafontaine  
and Bernie Cossentino

(He is called. She is called.)  
We are called on a mission.  
(She is called. He is called.)  
We are called on a mission.

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## ACTION PLAN WORKSHEET

In light of your experience and what you know about the Congress itself, how will your faith community (parish, congregation, organization) create a culture for vocations? While keeping the “preferential option for the young” in mind, the Congress invites the Church in North America to adopt a five-fold approach to creating a true “Vocation Culture”: to pray, to evangelize, to experience, to mentor, and to invite.

### THEN FOR EACH OF THE FIVE APPROACHES ASK:

- † What are the concrete suggestions that our particular group/organization can respond to?
- † What will we need to do to make it happen?
- † What will be our obstacles and how might we work with and through these obstacles?

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Name of group: \_\_\_\_\_

Description of Action Plan: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Target Group: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Implementation: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Next steps: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Time Line: \_\_\_\_\_

Cost (may or may not apply): \_\_\_\_\_

Evaluation of plan: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Submit the Action Plan to: Reverend Edward J. Burns  
Secretariat on Vocations  
U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops  
3211 Fourth Street, N.E.  
Washington, DC 20017-1194

←  
Tear along the  
Perforation and Send

