

## Pray for a Rich Harvest of Souls

By Bishop Victor Galeone

*"Bishop, I have a question. We hear a lot of talk these days about the priest shortage in our country. I'd like to know what our diocese is doing about vocations - especially to the priesthood."*

At almost all of the town hall meetings conducted during my pastoral visitations, I've had to respond to similar inquiries. My response has invariably been the same. Vocations - whether to the priesthood or the religious life - depend on four key factors: solid family life, good role models, invitation and prayer. Let's examine each one.

With few exceptions the Lord extends the call to serve as a priest or religious to those who have a solid family background. There are exceptions, like St. Augustine and St. Paul, who both had conversion experiences prior to their call to service. But normally vocations are nourished in homes where parents deeply love each other and their children. In such homes, family prayer is the norm, whether at meals or the recitation of the rosary or scripture reading.

Prospective candidates to the priesthood and religious life respond to good role models who exude joy. These role models exemplify in their lives the fact that there is no high like the high of falling in love with Jesus and sharing that love with others. Young people today crave to be challenged. If there's a happy priest or sister in their parish with whom they can relate, they instinctively ask themselves, "I wonder if I could be like Father Tom or Sister Jean."

An invitation is the third component in fostering vocations. In the Gospels Jesus always took the initiative in calling the disciples. How important it is for a priest or sister or even a parishioner to suggest to a younger member, "I've been noticing you lately. Have you thought about serving the Lord as priest?" Or perhaps, "Do you think the Lord might be calling you to be a sister? I think you'd make a great one."

The fourth and most important means of resolving the vocations was just that - prayer! "The harvest is great but the laborers are few. So pray that the Lord of the harvest will send laborers out to his harvest." (Lk 10:2) Let's take the Lord at his word. Let's remember this intention every day in prayer, "Lord, bless us with good priests, brothers and sisters to help bring the harvest of souls into your Kingdom."

In stark contrast to the Lord's solution to the vocation shortage, at times we adopt a radically different approach. I recall reading about the vocation director of the Pallotine Fathers, who back in the 60s placed an ad in Playboy magazine. It generated national press coverage. Questioned about the ad, the vocation director explained without apology: "Well, Jesus mixed in with publicans and sinners, didn't he? Besides, St. Paul, St. Augustine and even Francis of Assisi are among our greatest saints - yet prior to their conversion they were sinners."

St. Ignatius of Loyola falls into the latter category. While recovering from a leg wound received in battle, he passed the time reading frivolous and suggestive novels. One day on finishing a novel, he asked his attendant to fetch him another, only to be told that all that was left were a life of Christ and some lives of the saints. Disappointed, he began reading these. He felt inspired to imitate Jesus and the saints, reasoning with himself: "What if I could do what St. Francis or St. Dominic did?" Then worldly thoughts from the risqu  novels would return - which initially gave him great pleasure, only to leave him later feeling weary and depressed. Not so with the lives of the saints. He not only experienced great pleasure when he thought about living the rigorous sort of life they had lived; but even after he had stopped thinking about them, he still felt great joy. He surrendered his heart to the Lord and became the leader of a spiritual army, launching the counter-reformation.

I close with three requests. For those discerning their call in life, pray this prayer every day: "Lord, let me know what you want me to do with my life." For parents and grandparents, instead of an iPod or video game, make that birthday gift for your son, daughter or grandchild the life of one of the saints, like Blessed Miguel Pro or St. Katherine Drexel. And for all of us, do not let a single day go by that we don't ask the Lord to send solid workers to help bring in a rich harvest of souls.