

# Fostering Your Child's Vocation

By Carson Weber



Christian parents, you've received a mandate from the Church to foster vocations among your children. Immediately, I'm sure that numerous questions may arise such as "What exactly is a vocation?", "Does every Christian have a vocation?", "What is our role as parents with regard to our child's particular vocation?", and "What practical steps should we take today in order to foster the vocations of our children?" This online article is designed to answer these and other questions every parent faces in the sublime task of raising their children in the Catholic faith, so relax, sit back, grab a cup of coffee, and let's get started!

## What is a Vocation?

First thing's first. If you're still unsure about what exactly a vocation is, the Catechism of the Catholic Church gives us a very clear definition. Its glossary defines a vocation as "the calling or destiny we have in this life and hereafter. God has created the human person to love and serve him; the fulfillment of this vocation is eternal happiness. Christ calls the faithful to the perfection of holiness."

"The vocation of the laity consists in seeking the Kingdom of God by engaging in temporal affairs and directing them according to God's will. Priestly and religious vocations are dedicated to the service of the Church as the universal sacrament of salvation."

Immediately, we notice that there are two particular types of vocations: **secular** and **religious**. A secular layperson may be either single or married and lives out their vocation through ordering their secular work in the everyday world to the will of God. On the other hand, a religious brother or sister (both of whom are laypersons) or priest would live out their vocation through direct service within the Church.

God calls each and every one of us individually to a special vocation. In fact, that's what "vocation" means.. "to be called!" Whether it be to the single life as a secular layperson, the religious life as a lay brother or sister, marriage through the sacrament of Holy Matrimony, or to the priesthood through the sacrament of Holy Orders, each and every Christian has a vocation by virtue of their baptism. No one is excluded because everyone, *both clergy and laity*, are called to a life of holiness through different paths.

## The Baptismal Liturgy



When your child was baptized (or if you plan on having one of your children baptized in the future), the priest or deacon addressed you with these words: "You have asked to have your child baptized. In doing so you are accepting the responsibility of training him/her in the practice of the faith. It will be your duty to bring him/her up to keep God's commandments as Christ taught us, by loving God and our neighbor." And then he asked you, "Do you clearly understand what you are undertaking?"

By responding with, "We do", you embraced the monumental task of training your child in the practice of the Catholic faith.

A crucial aspect of this religious training is the fostering of your child's particular vocation in life since that is the path they will follow in living out the will of God in their lives, which gives glory to God and brings them to the perfection of holiness. By receiving the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit at baptism, your child began his or her journey towards attaining perfect holiness through this same Spirit's power, and God has a plan for your child that they will discover only through (1) proper education, (2) careful guidance, and (3) constant prayer.

## The Domestic Church



In the Second Vatican Council's Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, we read, "From the marriage of Christians there comes the family in which new citizens of human society are born and, by the grace of the Holy Spirit in Baptism, those are made children of God so that the People of God may be perpetuated throughout the centuries. In what might be regarded as the domestic church, the parents by word and example, are the first

heralds of the faith with regard to their children. They must foster the vocation which is proper to each child, and this with special care if it be to religion" (*Lumen Gentium*, §11).

As a Christian family, you have been entrusted with the exalted responsibility of living as **the Domestic Church**. You have been entrusted with the task of evangelizing your children, leading them to the sacraments, and instructing them in regards to the faith. Vatican II reiterated the truth that parents are "*the primary and principal educators*" of their children in its Declaration on Christian Education. As parents, you have undertaken the role of serving as the first and foremost educator of your child. You are the ones who must facilitate a family environment animated by love and respect for God and man in which the education of your children is fostered.

It is in the Christian family, the first school, that children should be taught to have a knowledge of God according to the faith received in Baptism, to worship him, and to love their neighbor. This does not preclude help from the whole community, but rather orders education properly with the primary focus upon parents as the primary and principle educators of their children.

Now that we've established the family's role as Domestic Church and the parents' roles as primary educators, let us continue in our exploration of fostering vocations.

## Vocations Crisis?



You may be hearing much today of a lack of vocations in the Church. While marriage is a vocation like the priesthood or the religious life, it is in these two latter areas where we witness fewer individuals today answering the call of God. What is lacking is not the amount of people God is calling, but rather the lack of fostering the listening capacity of those who are called. God never stopped asking Christians to commit their lives to him in complete service as a religious sister, brother, or priest. Rather, we've only muddled our line of communication with him, and when we begin to reopen that line of communication, we'll witness an explosion in vocations to the religious life and the ministerial priesthood!

John Paul II reminds us "that if parents do not live the values of the Gospel, the young man or woman will find it very difficult to discern the calling, to understand the need for the sacrifices which must be faced and to appreciate the beauty of the goal to be achieved. For it is in the family that young people have their first experience of Gospel values and of the love which gives itself to God and to others. They also need to be trained in the responsible use of their own freedom so that they will be prepared to live, as their vocation demands, in accordance with the loftiest spiritual realities" (*Vita Consecrata*, §107).

The experience of the Church's life tells us that religious vocations spring primarily from Christian families that are committed to living the Gospel in every day life. What does this mean exactly? Well, first and foremost, it means living a life of prayer.

## Family Prayer



You may have heard it said that the family that prays together, stays together. Another wonderful fruit of family prayer is the fostering of vocations among the children. Since a vocation is a gift from God, only through prayer - which is our way of communicating with God daily - can a vocation be heard by both the parents and the children.

There are two forms of prayer that I would like to address here. First, there is the communal prayer of the entire family. Through gathering daily to listen to a passage of Scripture (e.g. the readings selected for each day by the Church to be read in that day's Mass) and reflecting on what has been read, the power of God's inspired and written word will speak to your family. Take time to gather in the evenings, perhaps after dinner, and read a passage from the Bible *before* praying about what you have just read.

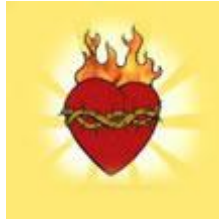
By praying the Rosary together as family, you will open the heavenly floodgates of grace, which will empower the family to live out the tremendous task of Gospel morality. If you aren't sure how to pray the rosary, you can download a guide at [NewAdvent.org](http://NewAdvent.org). By invoking the intercession of our Blessed Mother Mary, she will help you in your daily struggles as a family seeking holiness.

A third suggestion would be to read from the lives of the saints and ask for the intercession of a saint after you have explored his or her life with your children. Many excellent books and multimedia videos are available today that describe the transforming power of God in the lives of Christians throughout the centuries. Take advantage of this! In the way of resources, try out Ignatius Press ([Ignatius.com](http://Ignatius.com)). By reflecting upon the powerful example of those who have gone before us, we will find inspiration to emulate their lives. The eleventh chapter of Hebrews (an epistle in the New Testament) describes the faith of many Saints in the Old Testament in order to encourage those Christians to whom Hebrews is addressed, and that includes us!

On the other hand, there is your own personal, private prayer. Take the time to pray for your children and to offer up your daily struggles and sacrifices for your children. Because of our union with Jesus in our baptism, God takes our suffering and unites it to his own suffering on the cross, and by doing so, transforms our spiritual sacrifice into a redemptive power that is life-changing! When we offer our daily pains and struggles,

united with Christ Jesus, to the Father, we are doing an immense good for our children. As well, make sure that you pray with your spouse. Fostering the work of grace in the life of your child is a shared work between husband and wife.

## Family Charity



Hand in glove, living out the Gospel includes living a virtuous life alongside your constant prayer life. By educating your children in the Christian virtues, you will be providing your children with an invaluable service in their Christian formation. Children need living examples of Jesus Christ so that they can learn practically what it means to follow in the path of Jesus Christ, who is our supreme model of holiness.

When we speak of having Christian charity, we're not talking about sending off a check to a philanthropic organization that refers to itself as a "charity". We're speaking of loving others as Christ has loved us. It is through love that we fulfill God's purpose in creating us, and we see this love manifested most perfectly in Jesus. When we love, we emulate and share in the love of Jesus Christ who first loved us by suffering and dying for us.

As families, we need to form our children in charity by finding conversion in ourselves first of all, which is where our personal prayer is absolutely essential. Through continual self-conversion, we will be able to allow the charity of God to work through us as we submit daily to his loving will. Through continual exposure to the charity manifested in your life, your children will learn first hand the joy of Gospel morality, which is an essential component in guiding them towards their ultimate vocation through which they, in turn, will continue to live out the Christian life of charity.

## Frequent the Sacraments



Frequent reception of the Sacraments of Penance and Eucharist is foundational to the formation of your children in the Christian faith and likewise, drawing them closer to Christ as they pursue their Christian vocation in this life. You should be helping your children to receive each sacrament with awareness of what they are partaking in, guiding them by your own example. If your child has yet to receive his First Penance or First Communion, then you will be able to stress their importance for the daily Christian life, thus increasing the hunger and thirst in your children for these wellsprings of grace.

If possible, make sure to always attend the Sunday Liturgy as a family. And, when you're there, don't be afraid to point to the Eucharist on the altar in the middle of Mass and say to your toddler, "Look, that's Jesus!" or to explain parts of the liturgy to your children. It's fundamental that your children understand the importance of receiving the sacraments worthily with a prayerful and reverent heart so that God's very own life - his grace - will be able to transform your children as they open their souls to his gentle nudging with docility.

One very good suggestion is to take your family to the sacrament of penance at least once a month. This will instill the habit of a regular examination of conscience among your children, and the sacramental graces received in this powerful act of forgiveness will enable them to live out the Christian virtues you daily instruct them in. In this way, the holiness communicated in the sacraments will pass into daily life. Remember, the sacrament of penance is not only for those who have committed grave sins. There is a special grace that comes along with this sacrament that helps us to overcome the even the venial - yet still sinful - sins we have yet to purify ourselves of.

## The Religious Life



Religious profession is a special and fruitful deepening of the consecration every Christian receives in Baptism. It is a special means by which the close union with Christ already begun in Baptism develops in the gift of a fuller, more explicit and authentic configuration to him through the profession of **the evangelical counsels**.

The Second Vatican Council's Pastoral Constitution On the Church in the Modern World teaches us that "Christ, the final Adam, by the revelation of the mystery of the Father and His love, fully reveals man to man himself and makes his supreme calling clear ... By suffering for us He not only provided us with an example for our imitation, He blazed a trail, and if we follow it, life and death are made holy and take on a new meaning" (*Gaudium et Spes*, §22). By focusing on the life of Christ, we are able to discern our own supreme calling, and each evangelical counsel focuses upon a particular aspect of Christ's earthly life. They are aimed at foregoing the principal goods of this world (riches, pleasures of the flesh, and positions of authority) for the sake of Christ, and in order to be freer to serve him.

In a sense, everyone is called to live out the evangelical counsels. By now, you might be asking what these counsels are. All those reborn in Christ through Baptism are called to live out (1) the chastity appropriate to their state of life, (2) obedience to God and to the

Church, and (3) a reasonable detachment from material possessions because all Christians are called to holiness, which consists in the perfection of love.

However, baptism in itself does not include the call to (1) celibacy or virginity, (2) the renunciation of possessions, or (3) obedience to a superior, which are more radical ways of following Christ. These are the evangelical counsels. The profession of these three counsels presupposes a particular gift of God not given to everyone. By professing them, the Christian goes beyond dying to sin and renounces the world so that he may live for God alone, dedicating his entire life to the radical service of God. This radical love of God both excites and energizes that love of one's neighbor which contributes to the salvation of the world and the building up of the Church, the Kingdom of God.

## Celibacy or Virginity



The first of the three evangelical counsels is celibacy or virginity. This is also referred to as “chastity for the sake of the kingdom of heaven”, which frees the heart of man in a unique way so that it may be more inflamed with love for God and all men. In this way, religious are able to dedicate themselves, just like Jesus who himself renounced marriage, with undivided heart to the service of God and the works of the apostolate.

In heaven, all Christians will be like the angels where people do not marry nor are given in marriage (See Matthew 22:30). So, living out this form of chastity symbolizes and reminds us of our heavenly state wherein the Church takes Christ as its only spouse. Those who embrace the religious life forsake the earthly good of marriage, which itself is a wondrous sacrament and vocation, for greater, heavenly goods. What a deal!

This brings to mind an essential truth Pope John Paul II wrote in his Apostolic Exhortation on the Role of the Christian Family in the Modern World, “When marriage is not esteemed, neither can consecrated virginity or celibacy exist; when human sexuality is not regarded as a great value given by the Creator, the renunciation of it for the sake of the kingdom of heaven loses its meaning” (Familiaris Consortio, 16). Here, Pope John Paul II echoes the words of one of the early Church's greatest preachers: Saint John Chrysostom.

Our Holy Father also writes in his Apostolic Letter on the Dignity and Vocation of Women, “Virginity according to the Gospel means renouncing marriage and thus physical motherhood. Nevertheless, the renunciation of this kind of motherhood, a renunciation that can involve great sacrifice for a woman, makes possible a different kind of motherhood: motherhood ‘according to the Spirit’ (Rom 8:4)” (*Mulieris Dignitatem*,

§21). In other words, this spiritual motherhood of women religious finds itself expressed as concern for people, especially the most needy in society. Consecrated women discover their Spouse in each and every person. According to the words of Jesus, *“Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me”* (Matthew 25:40).

The key to educating children in marriage and religious chastity is to emphasize the goal of each path: to make a self-gift of yourself! These paths will become desirable to your children only when you are able to display the joy and fulfillment found in the total gift of self. This is the point Jesus makes when he says, *“Whoever seeks to gain his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life will preserve it”* (Luke 17:33). Man cannot fully find himself except through a sincere gift of himself. What a beautiful truth!

## The Renunciation of Possessions



The second evangelical counsel is a form of voluntary poverty, which is highly esteemed as an expression of the following of Christ. Paul tells us, *“For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich”* (2 Corinthians 8:9). The evangelical counsels are ways in which to follow the path of Jesus Christ ever more closely, and we can see how renouncing possessions is a form of imitating the poverty God undertook in the Incarnation and especially, in the Passion.

Jesus himself instructs us not to *“lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven”* (Matthew 6:19). Like in religious celibacy, embracing voluntary poverty is a way of forsaking the lesser goods of this life for the great goods of eternal life. As well, this allows the Christian to entrust himself to the provident care of the Father in heaven.

## Obedience to a Superior



The third evangelical counsel entails giving the voluntary assent of obedience to a superior. In closely following the path of Jesus Christ, we recognize that the Son of God came to accomplish the divine will of his heavenly Father. In his own words, Jesus said, *“I seek not my own will but the will of him who sent me”* (John 5:30). He *“emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men”* (Philippians 2:7) and *“learned obedience through what he suffered”* (Hebrews 5:8).

By embracing this third evangelical counsel, Christians subject themselves in faith to their superiors who hold the place of God. Under the guidance of their superiors, they serve all their brothers in as Christ, in obedience to the Father, served his brethren and laid down *“his life as a ransom for many”* (Mat 20:28). In a spirit of faith and love for the divine will, religious humbly obey their superiors who themselves exercise their authority in a spirit of service and love.

## Encourage, Don't Push



In fostering your child's particular vocation, it's always important to respect and appreciate the freedom of each of your children, encouraging their personal vocation without trying to impose a pre-determined vocation on them. In many instances, our own desires from our limited perspective are not the desires of God, who has an eternal, infinite perspective and knows the awesome purpose he has for each of us.

At the Wedding at Cana, Mary told the servants, “*Do whatever he tells you*” (John 2:5). In the same way, parents, you should repeat these same words to your children. Give them the courage to be docile to the voice of the Spirit. Allow for the great expectations of the Church to resound in the depths of their hearts. Invite them to open their minds to Christ the Lord who is calling them to follow him in a unique way. Encourage them to enthusiastically embrace the call of Jesus when he calls your children to follow him without reserve.

## Final Encouragement



In closing, I would like to present you with a final word of encouragement from Pope John Paul II, which he gives to us in his Apostolic Exhortation on the Formation of Priests and in his Apostolic Letter on The Consecrated Life:

“I appeal especially to families. May parents, mothers in particular, be generous in giving their sons to the Lord, when he calls them to the priesthood. May they cooperate joyfully in their vocational journey, realizing that in this way they will be increasing and deepening their Christian fruitfulness in the Church and that, in a sense, they will experience the blessedness of Mary, the Virgin Mother: “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb!” (Lk 1:42)” (*Pastores Dabo Vobis*, §82).

“I address you, Christian families. Parents, give thanks to the Lord if he has called one of your children to the consecrated life. It is to be considered a great honor—as it always has been—that the Lord should look upon a family and choose to invite one of its members to set out on the path of the evangelical counsels! Cherish the desire to give the Lord one of your children so that God’s love can spread in the world. What fruit of conjugal love could be more beautiful than this?” (*Vita Consecrata*, §107).

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