

I was ordained to the priesthood almost 12 years ago now, and I remember very well that part of the ritual in which those who are to be ordained lay prostrate on the floor of the church while the Litany of the Saints was being sung. Not very comfortable, of course, but you deal with it. And lying there on the floor of the church while the litany was going on and on, my head on my folded arms, I started to cry and then I started to laugh.

I was crying because I was moved beyond words that I was being given this opportunity to serve God in this way and I was laughing because if you would have asked me 10 years before then that I would be lying on the floor in a Franciscan church waiting to be ordained a priest, I would have thought you were crazy. Back then, I was convinced that I would one day become a humble Trappist lay brother and that I would never become a Franciscan or a priest, and now that I am a Franciscan priest just proves that I know what it means to be open to where the Spirit is guiding me, even against my stubborn resistance.

And twenty-odd years before that, that wasn't even a question. For a good part of my adolescence and during all of my twenties, I wasn't religious at all, and God had no place at all in my life. I had given up my Catholic faith after high school, when I didn't have to go to Mass anymore and I had no faith at all. Even worse, I didn't care that I had no faith. I was lost- nothing could satisfy me and I kept searching for some meaning, some purpose in my life. I was no great sinner, believe me, but I was no great saint either. And then I had a conversion.

One day, very much out of the blue, I had an experience of God. An experience of God as I was walking down 23rd Street in Manhattan during rush hour, people all around me and the noise of the city blasting all around me- an experience of God in which I sensed that everything and every person in the universe was connected to one another and that we all lived in God and we all participated in the beauty, the goodness, and the being of God.

It was truly earth-shattering for me because it forced me to re-consider my life- it forced me to consider who I was and who I was in relation to God and to the world. Because of all this, I made a decision that I wasn't going to live for myself alone anymore.

I wasn't going to live for myself alone anymore. That sounds quite dramatic, doesn't it, but I don't mean it to come across that way. When I say that, all I mean is that I got sick and tired of just living to satisfy my own wants and my own needs and to just get by in life. I had a great job and I was making a very nice amount of money and I had friends and I traveled to Europe every year, but it just wasn't enough. I wanted to give myself to the world in whatever way I could, and I wanted to make a difference in the world. I wanted to bring the love and the compassion that I had received from God to a world so much in need of it.

Which we are all called to do. Today the Church celebrates the World Day of Prayer for Vocations, focusing particularly on the vocations to the religious life and to the diaconate and to the ordained priesthood. Not that these are any better or any worse than any other calling- it's just that in this society and in this culture, being a priest or a deacon or a religious is countercultural and those who are trying to figure out if they are called to these states of life need all the help they can get.

Every Christian person is called to live in poverty, chastity, and obedience, according to the state of life they are in. And every Christian person is a member of the royal priesthood of Christ through their baptism. But religious and ordained priests choose to live these roles in a particular way, a way that publicly proclaims to the world that God still matters and that living a Gospel life still makes sense even if the culture we live in doesn't even want to understand it. The religious and the priest aim to sanctify not only themselves but also every person they minister to and every person they encounter in their lives. And each one is called to be a

contemplative- to be a person who is lovingly aware of the presence of God in every part of the world and in every part of life and therefore one who is committed to doing whatever they can to make God's presence more clearly seen when it is obscured by ignorance, poverty, or injustice.

The vows that the religious and the priest take are meant to help them actually live out that mission. The vows can easily seem to restrict what you can and can't do, but what they really are for is to do away with whatever keeps you from being the person God wants me to be- in other words, they set you free. Because you are not bound by personal financial concerns or by exclusive relationships, and you are willing to work with your superiors to figure out what is best for you and the Church, you can be available to all people and you can offer your life for others. And that's what it's all about.

If you think you have a vocation to the religious life or the diaconate or the priesthood, I encourage you to explore that attraction to these ways of serving God. Find out about the many expressions of these forms of Gospel life and ask as many questions as you need to and most importantly to not be afraid. God is with you every step of the way and every moment of your life and you can trust that God does not give a vocation without the ability to carry it out.

And if you know someone who you think would be a good candidate to the religious life or priesthood, don't be afraid to let them know that. They may just be waiting for someone to give them the idea or to give them the encouragement to do so. I wouldn't be standing here, believe me, unless someone I knew gave me the encouragement to think about it. So please pray for increased vocations to the religious life and the diaconate and to the ministerial priesthood and let's also pray that God will inspire each one of us to respond to our own unique call to be a witness of God's love for us- to actually become the love and compassion that God has for the world.