

Lend Your Own Voice to Christ

“Lend Your Own Voice to Christ” is a deeply inspiring booklet written by Fr. Tom Richter in 2010. The thesis is simple: parish priests are the single most effective vocation promoters, and their efforts do not need to be “programmatically” in order to be effective. In fact, it is part of their core duty as “shepherds of souls” to recognize and call forth the vocations of their parishioners.

Seven profound lessons in this 22-page booklet will empower priests to be enthusiastic in their promotion of vocations. [Read excerpts and order online here.](#)

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It’s Time to Try Again! Or The Vocation Invitation Conversation

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A number of years ago, I heard a true story about a newly-appointed bishop to a Midwestern diocese. In one of his first decisions, the bishop announced that when he would arrive at a parish for the Sacrament of Confirmation, after having supper with the deanery priests, he wanted the pastor to have five young men, of high school or college age, in the parlor waiting for him. He wanted to personally invite five young men from every parish in the diocese to consider becoming a priest. His request was well-received by pastors for the first month or so, and then one evening the bishop arrived at a small country parish. After a very nice supper and conversation, the bishop said to the pastor, “Okay, where shall I meet with the five young men from your parish? I only need about fifteen minutes.” The pastor said, “I’m sorry, bishop, but we don’t have any young men in this parish who want to be priests.” The bishop gently reminded the pastor that the young men need not want to be priests. They need only be young, healthy Catholic men from the parish. But the pastor, clearly annoyed, said, “Well I’m sorry. But we

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don't have anyone tonight." The bishop came right back at him, "Well I'm sorry too, because we are not going to have a Confirmation until you get me five young men from this parish to speak with for fifteen minutes! That is not too much to ask." The pastor griped and groaned but he went to his office quickly and made three phone calls. Within thirty minutes, there were five young Catholic men sitting in the parlor. The truth was, before making those calls, the pastor had not even tried! The bishop spoke to the five men and then he went over to the church and celebrated Confirmation. The bishop eventually ordained three of those five men priests for the diocese!

Why are many priests so reluctant to talk about their vocation to priesthood and to invite young men in their parishes to consider it? I always pose that question when I give priests' retreats. Usually, the priests will admit that they do not encourage priestly vocations—and that they are not sure why. One priest told me, "Well, I have not really thought about it that much, but I do not feel comfortable doing that." Fr. Thomas Richter, Vocation Director for the Diocese of Bismarck, has written an excellent 22-page booklet entitled "Lend Your Own Voice to Christ; A Helpful Guide for Priests To Call Forth Men to the Priesthood." In this booklet, he mentions three indisputable facts that surveys confirm again and again. Fact #1: The main reason many young people do not consider the priesthood is because they have never been personally asked. Fact #2: Many men first consider the priesthood precisely because a priest encouraged them to consider it. Year after year, in surveys of classes of ordination, more than 80% of the newly ordained priests report that it was a priest who first invited them to consider the priesthood. Jesus often calls men to the seminary and priesthood through a priest's personal invitation. Fact #3: The great majority of priests in the U.S. today do not encourage men to consider a vocation to the priesthood. Surveys consistently show that only about 30% of priests actively invite men to consider the priesthood. ("Lend Your Own Voice to Christ" page 4).

I suspect that many priests are not aware of these facts, even though they have been corroborated again and again. But the point is very clear: it is essential for every parish priest to become the primary inviter in his local

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parish. Not to do so, as one vocation director I know puts it, is shooting oneself in the foot; not doing something which is essential to provide the priestly life needed for the nourishment of the Church.

Why are 70% of priests so reluctant to invite? Why is it so difficult to say to a young man after Mass, a senior in high school, for example: "You are a fine altar server and you have an exceptional faith. Maybe God is calling you to the priesthood. Will you pray and ask God if he wants you to be a priest?" Some priests have told me that they felt unduly pressured when they were in Catholic school, and consequently, they don't want to put pressure on the boys in their parish. Others have told me that they have a fear of rejection: "If I ask a young man to think about it and he says no, I will take it personally, and I don't need any more discouragement right now." Other reasons cited are embarrassment because of the abuse scandal or fear of what the young man's parents might say. Some priests will say that they just don't have the gift of relating to young people; they simply don't know how to initiate what I call "the vocation invitation conversation." And yet, despite all the aforementioned reasons, the statistics and surveys indicate that no one else in the Church can successfully invite young men to priesthood as effectively as the local priest.

It's important not to relegate the job of harvesting priestly vocations to the vocation director alone. Of course, he is very important later on in the process, especially in the formal evaluation of candidates. But the inescapable truth is that the vocation director usually does not personally know the men in your parish and they do not know him. It is the local priest who has that perspective.

Some priests invite every boy who walks into the church to be a priest. This can be too much. I call this the scatter gun approach. Just start shooting and maybe, eventually, you will hit the target with a golden BB! On the other hand, every Catholic boy should be keenly aware of his vocational options. So in a general sense, yes, every Catholic boy should be taught in every Catholic School and Religious Education class about the possibility of priesthood. And it is important to keep priestly vocations in front of the people in the parish on a regular basis, from the pulpit, in the intercessions, etc. I know one priest who prays every

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Sunday that God will raise up two priests and two sisters from the parish and he constantly reminds the parish of this when praying for vocations. Then, occasionally, when greeting a young man who shows particular promise, he will say, “John, you are a fine Catholic man and I see something in you that shows a deep faith. Perhaps you are called to be one of the two priests we are praying for? What do you think?” It is this two-fold approach that works best: wide-spread vocations awareness and then personal, one-on-one invitation from the parish priest.

These are the priests who often invite with humor and good natured teasing: “When you become a priest, you will preach much better homilies than me and everyone will become a saint! But I still have sinners in my parish.” Fr. Richter writes: “Too often, we have, with good intentions, invited men to consider the priesthood in a silly manner, making a joke of it.” He encourages every priest to make this vocation invitation to a young man a sacred act, “at an appropriate time, with an appropriate level of seriousness.” Sure, occasionally there could be a lighthearted moment in the sacristy. I know a priest who will sometimes put his stole and chasuble on one of the altar boys before Mass and say, “Now look in the mirror—and get used to it!” I have seen the Holy Spirit work to call young men to priesthood from these informal invitations. But Fr. Richter urges a more formal, serious, prayer-covered invitation of a young man to priesthood, like the bishop in that story. His point is well-made; this is a serious call. We cannot always mask such an invitation with lighthearted jest. Before a priest invites a young man, he should pray for him and pray about him. Then, if the Holy Spirit continues to nudge that priest, he should call the man in and have an appropriately serious conversation about considering priesthood.

Here is a very practical recommendation. Pick out two college-aged men in your parish whom you have noticed and wondered about. As Fr. Richter says in his booklet, you can feel it in your gut that this young man really could be called. You know the feeling I am talking about, don't you? We have all noticed certain young men who seem to have an especially deep faith and interest in the Church. Write down the names of these two young men on a card, put it into your breviary and pray for them by name every day. After a month, make an individual

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appointment with each of them to give them the good news! What good news? “The Good News is that Jesus Christ has risen from the dead and that he is calling some men to be priests. It is Good News that you have a strong faith and love for the Lord and his Church, stronger than most of your peers. I want to commend you for that love and devotion. I have been praying for you by name every day for the last 30 days that you will know your vocation and generously say yes to Jesus. I want to ask you to consider becoming a priest.” This conversation will be an unforgettable experience for that young man, especially compared to the humorous approach!

There are two final things to consider. Once the “vocation invitation conversation” has concluded, give the man good information about priesthood. You can give him a copy of my book, [To Save a Thousand Souls: A Guide for Discerning a Vocation to Diocesan Priesthood](#) or some other information provided by your vocation office. (If you will use it in this way, I will send a copy of my book to you at no charge, postage included. E-mail me at Brannen@msmary.edu.) But don’t let him leave your office without good information! Most young men today simply do not have the information they need to adequately discern priesthood. After such a serious, formal invitation by his pastor, that young man is highly likely to read the information you give him. Finally, encourage the man to get a spiritual director as soon as possible to keep discussing this possibility. You can offer your services in this regard or, if you are not comfortable in that role, offer to find him a good spiritual director from among your brother priests.

Now let’s not be too hard on that country pastor in the opening story. Perhaps he had tried inviting young men many times in his life before and not one went to the seminary. Maybe he was blasted after Mass one Sunday by a young man’s mother because he encouraged her only son to be a priest. There could be many reasons for his reluctance to invite. But this is a different season and the New Springtime of Christianity is upon us. This is a new generation of young people and I think you will find a real openness to what you have to say. It’s time to try again! There are many things we priests are asked to do that make us feel a little uncomfortable but I cannot think of a single one that will bear more

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fruit than this one. The expression goes “If you are not part of the solution, then you are part of the problem.”

My brothers, we’re not getting any younger! Many of us are tired. We need young men to follow in our footsteps. But could it really be this simple? Only 30% of priests actively invite. If 75% of the 40,000 priests in this country made an effort to have the vocation-invitation-conversation with just two men in their parish this year, I really believe we would see a miraculous turn around. The bishop in the opening story ordained three of the five men priests for the diocese! All he did was to give them a personal, serious invitation.

The facts are indisputable. It’s time to try again!

For a more thorough treatment of this issue, read “Lend Your Own Voice to Christ; A Helpful Guide for Priests To Call Forth Men to the Priesthood.” Fr. Thomas J. Richter; 2010 National Conference of Diocesan Vocation Directors. For more information on To Save a Thousand Souls: A Guide for Discerning a Vocation to Diocesan Priesthood, go to www.vianneyvocations.com.