

April 22, 2018 Forth Sunday of Easter

I was at my great nieces Confirmation in Oregon. When I went into the sacristy, the Bishop saw my mustache. He didn't comment about it during Mass, but at the end of the confirmation, he told the pastor and the associate pastor (both from East India), "You should grow a mustache like Father Branson." They were in shock, because these guys from the third world think that whatever the bishop says, must be obeyed. It will be interesting to see if my brother's pastor does exactly that.

We have two titles for today's Sunday. We have "Good Shepard Sunday" and we have "Vocation Awareness Day of Prayer for Priestly Vocations." Now, the world has a different definition of vocation than the church. The world says, it's a strong feeling for a career or occupation. Or even, if you say my vocation is a carpenter, that's the career itself. But the church says, it's a distinctive call from God in which a person can reach holiness in this life and the next. It's about something you will take into the next life. If you're a carpenter or a doctor, you're not taking that into the next life. But if you're a priest, a mother, a father, a sister, a brother, whatever, you're going to take that into the next life. We have a different definition of vocation, *a call from God*.

There are four kinds of vocations in the Catholic Church. The first, and we always think about clergy; priests, deacons, bishops, but mostly priests. We have a lot of deacons in this diocese, more deacons, permanent deacons, than priests. There's always too many bishops, as far as we're concerned. But there's never enough priests. So we have that vocation.

Another one is marriage. Marriage is a vocation, yet it has lost that dimension. It's also lost the dimension of *being a sacrament*. Marriages are down almost 90% across the board in the Catholic Church. The secular world has gotten into young couples, and they don't think they need to get married. They see no reason for it because of the high divorce rate, among regular people and Catholics, it's even. If they do come to me to prepare for marriage, there are four steps they have to go through in six months. They are like, "What! I can't just get married?" We say, "Well, you have to know about the sacrament is, know what a Christian marriage is." "But on the Hallmark Channel they do this...and on the other channel they do this... and I saw this on the other channel, why can't we do that?" And then they'll say things like, "My cousin, she got married on the top of a mountain and everybody was naked at the ceremony." Or, "You know my friend, her and her fiancé jumped out of an airplane and the minister did too, and he performed the ceremony as they were free falling to the earth." Yes, till death do us part. But, they have these unrealistic expectations about what marriages is because they're listening to the culture. So, there's a crisis in marriage vocations.

There is a vocation of religious; brothers, sisters, and religious priests. These are the ones who wear habits sometimes, the nuns you see them. I just bought my Mom the dvd of the Flying Nun with Sally Field, from way back when. The religious take vows of poverty, chastity, obedience, and some of them, stability. "I will not leave this monastery or this convent for the rest of my life, this is where I will live." We have a crisis there too.

And the other one that most people don't think about, is the vocation to be single. In our sex crazed society, in our media driven situation, everyone thinks you have to have someone to be happy. When I

get one half of a married couple alone, I will say, "Does it take two to be happy?" And most of the time they will tell me the truth. Most married couples realize that if you're not happy by yourself, you can't be happy with someone else. There is a vocation to be single. Some people are called not to get married, not to be priests, not to be religious. They're called to live their life, going to work and being spiritual and prayerful in their daily life. This is the one that doesn't get enough attention.

But today, we talk about the vocation of priesthood. The word pastor means shepherd. You are the flock. Three televangelists were talking and they said, "These are the rules for being an evangelist: we tell them the word of God, we tell them how to live it, and then we fleece the flock." The word pastor means shepherd and so we are to lead and guide the flock. We are to try to get to know everybody individually. As the parishes grow it becomes more and more difficult, but that's what we are called to do. And yet, in the priesthood there is two crises. First, there is a crisis of numbers. You know... priests are weird, different creatures. Everybody watches every move we make because they can't figure us out. Even we can't figure us out. I went down to the penance service in Apache Junction before Easter. We had some of the Phoenix priests, Tucson priests, and we're all hearing confessions and we went out to dinner. It used to be, about six years ago, the Phoenix priests were on this end of the table, Tucson was on this end of the table, and there was a big gap in the middle. Over the last six years we started talking to each other and eating together. A priest was sitting next to me and he's watching all the priests and the things they are doing and saying and he looks at me and says, "Why are we so weird?" I said, "The only reason I can figure is because the apostles had to be weird." And I said, "You know what people tell me, some people that know me really well tell me, "You know Father, you didn't get married because God saved some poor woman from you." So I told him that. He said, "Yes, that kind of makes sense too." We're very strange creatures.

There were these two priests, and they decided to go on vacation and go where no one would know them. They didn't take their blacks, their clericals, they just on vacation, they went to Hawaii. They bought surfer shorts, tank tops, and sandals and thought, okay, we'll go to the beach and no one will know us; it would be great. So they're walking along the beach and this beautiful, gorgeous blond walks by in a bikini and she says, "Good morning Fathers." "What! How did she know we were priests?" So they went back to the clothing store and they buy tie died shirts, really short shorts, big glasses, and nice floppy hats, and they go back to the beach. Here comes this beautiful, gorgeous blond again in a string bikini. "Good morning Fathers." They are just stunned; "Wait a minute young lady, we are proud of being priests, but how do you know we're priests?" She said, "Don't you recognize me? I'm Sister Catherine from the convent." Sisters don't like to be recognized on vacation either.

There are two crises, crisis of numbers and crisis of perseverance. The first with numbers. We have a priest in the diocese of Tucson that has a parish and three missions and he drives two hundred miles a weekend, to say four masses. I drive .9 miles, round trip for each Mass, that's pretty good. I know another guy in a West Texas diocese. The priest there is assigned five parishes for a period of six years. Each weekend, in a twenty-four-hour period, he travels five hundred miles, to say five Masses. The bishops know they can only do that for six years or else the guys go crazy and leave the priesthood. You just can't live that lifestyle. So there's a crisis of numbers. So, yes, we should pray for an increase in priestly vocation. But there is another crisis as well, and this is in the seminary system itself and seminarians. A young man who wants to be a priest, because remember it is a call from God, it's also

encouragement from family and the community, he goes to see a diocesan vocation director. If this diocesan vocation director is okay, he will let the holy spirit and the seminary decide if he should go on and become a priest. If he's not okay, he will look at the kid and say, "He doesn't look like he is going to be a priest so I'm going to turn him down." So, you've got that hurdle to get through. Once you get a yes from the vocation director, you have to take psychological evaluations, psychiatric evaluations, and all kinds of other evaluations. You make it through there, now you are staring, if you came out of high school, at eight to ten years before you become ordained. This is a long time to an eighteen-year-old. This is almost half his life, sometimes more. It's because the bishops in the United States, have decided we want to be accredited like all the other universities, so we get federal funding and federal student loans. It costs twenty thousand dollars a year per seminarian, to education them. You can imagine the drain on diocese. Because of that, a young man out of high school; eight to ten. I already had a decree so it was four to five. In Europe, it's five years and that's it. Over here, it's a prison sentence; eight to ten. So he goes through the seminary, if he makes it, and there is formation faculty, regular faculty, academic faculty, and they're all watching. And there's spies in your class that report behavior to the different groups. It's everybody against you. It's not a place to become holy. It's a place to survive, to get to ordination, and then try and become holy. The odds are stacked against these guys. So much so that there is almost a 90% drop out rate. Nine of out ten guys go into the seminary will drop out. Why? Because it's too long. Because something else happens. What happens? I talk to these young guys that are coming out, that come home for the summer, after nine months of no positive reinforcement or hardly any, and this beautiful young girl in the parish smiles at them or winks at them; "I'm not going back, my vocation is over for the priesthood." I can't get them to go back and check it out again to be sure. "No, I'm going to get married." End of story. It happens in the priesthood too. This one priest was in a very cold parish, and he wasn't getting hardly any feedback, or positivity. One day this lady said, "Father, I just want you to know that I appreciate you." And she hugged him. He married her. I won't do that, I promise. But that's how the crisis is. People think priests don't have feelings or things like that. But in seminary, it's even bigger, because you can't see the end of the tunnel; no way with eight to ten years. And so you just keep plodding and plodding. Everything is almost against you to becoming a priest at the end. So we not only need to pray for numbers, we need to pray for perseverance. That these young men will persevere, that they will realize that what they're going for is a good thing. If they're not supposed to be there, that's fine too. Here's the thing about that twenty thousand a year student loan. If you don't get ordained, you have to pay it off. How are you going to pay off all the money with a degree in philosophy or theology? In Oregon, you'd be pumping gas. We don't do that because we don't have full service here. So these kids are like, "Oh, I'm under this weight." So, they will go all the way to ordination to get it paid off, and then they'll leave the priesthood. We had two guys do that, right before I was ordained. They were ordained two years and said, "Adios, the only reason I was ordained was to pay off the student loan." We need to pray for perseverance, not only for seminarians, but for priests themselves. We need to pray that they have a good prayer life, that they do get together with other priests once in a while. Because when priests get together, what do we do? We laugh, we joke, we complain. Priests can only complain to each other because we know what we're talking about and if a lay person heard us they'd be like, "What? Father, how could you say that?" I'm not going to tell you everything we talk about.

So we pray for perseverance; pray for numbers but pray for perseverance that the guys that are called, make it to the end. Then also, as a p.s., pray for vocation to marriage. Because where do seminarians

come from? They come from stable marriage families. They don't come from families that are dysfunctional, way out dysfunctional. A little dysfunctional because we're weird, but way out dysfunctional, no. We pray for marriages so we can have vocations to all the things in the church. Today, is Good Shepherd Sunday, we need good shepherds for the sacraments, to pray for the salvation of souls during Mass, to be available when people need them. So we pray for those two things. Numbers of priests to increase, by persevering in the seminary.

God bless you.