

Thomas Aquinas and Vocational Discernment  
Vocation Weekend (14-16 November 2014)  
Dominican House of Studies / Washington, D.C.  
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1. Vocations in the Church

I express my gratitude to Father Benedict Croell for the invitation to address you on the question of what “vocational discernment” according to the mind of Saint Thomas Aquinas would look like. This topic raises several issues of practical importance for those men who seek to embrace the vocation that God has ordained for them. Because the majority of you have been drawn to inquire about the sacrament of Holy Orders, I will frame my remarks mainly around the priesthood. However, what follows below can also be said of the vocation to Consecrated Life, specifically, the religious life that Dominican Cooperator Brothers espouse. I should like to recall by way of preamble that the Church recognizes only three ecclesial vocations whereby baptized men and women can sanctify themselves: Marriage, Consecrated life, and Priesthood. Each of these vocations enjoys its own objective or mission in the world and in the Church, its own form of consecration, and its own dwelling place: Married persons dwell of course in the Family; Consecrated persons occupy some form of fraternal life in communion; Bishops and priests—diocesan priests—live within their respective diocesan presbyterates.<sup>1</sup>

The existence within the Church of several forms of personal consecration, Matrimony, evangelical vows, and Holy Orders, raises the question of what today is known, almost universally in English, as “vocational discernment.” In other words, how do I know what God wants me to do? How do I discover God’s plan for my life? How do I learn the ways by which God will make me a saint? Because of the natural attractions that draw men and women together,

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<sup>1</sup> For a brief discussion, see Romanus Cessario, O.P., “Vocation, a Grace from God,” *National Catholic Register*, 10-16 January 1999 and the account of my talk given at Christendom College in 2001 at <http://www.christendom.edu/news/2001/cessario.php> (Accessed 9 November 2014).

discernment is not ordinarily applied to those who aspire to marriage. Instead, one finds the right spouse. It is difficult to imagine a proper courtship where, after a period of successful dating, one of the partners would turn to the other and say, “Honey, I think I’ll step back a bit and discern whether you are the right person for me.” Such a proposal would run counter to the normal development of the affective bonds of friendship that proper courting is designed to foster between a future bride and groom. Priesthood and Consecrated Life, however, enjoy no such natural pull or attraction. Why? Priesthood and Consecrated Life exist because of the Incarnation. Only Christ the High Priest gives legitimacy to a celibate priesthood and makes becoming a priest a justifiable option for a young Christian man. There is no such thing as a natural inclination or yearning toward remaining celibate. The divine command given to men and women, “Be fertile and multiply” (Gen 1:28), applies to every person on the planet. Those who *cannot* fulfill this command are called eunuchs (see Mt 19:12). Likewise, only the example of the virginal Christ allows men and women to imitate him by committing themselves to a life of consecrated virginity or chastity. The Sacred Scriptures in fact treat barrenness as a disgrace or reproach (see Lk 1:25).

Nothing draws a young man toward the priesthood that resembles the sense attractions that bring a young man and woman together. In the right order of things, these sexual attractions lead naturally, if you will, to the consummation of a marriage. Furthermore, the natural inclination toward sexual congress between a man and a woman proceeds without its depending too much on special tutelage. If God had made having intercourse as difficult as doing advanced calculus, the human race would have died out long ago. A vocation to the priesthood proceeds differently.

The “supernatural character” of the priestly vocation draws men according to its own dynamics.<sup>2</sup> One has to learn about the priesthood, about a religious order, in order to embrace these vocations within the Church. Faith-knowledge is required to learn fully about the priesthood. The eyes of faith however, as Saint Paul reminds us, see things “indistinctly, as in a

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<sup>2</sup> The general principle is set down in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC)*, no. 1722.

mirror” (see 1 Cor. 13: 12). Because we must learn about the “supernatural character” of a priestly vocation, many people within the Church propose “discernment” as a way for a man to discover whether or not he should aspire to Holy Orders. Discernment, it is thought, should make indistinctness clear.

The same logic is applied to the vocation to Consecrated Life. For example, in the Archdiocese of Boston we have what is called “The Samuel Circle,” a program which presents itself as sponsoring evening gatherings for single men *discerning* religious life.<sup>3</sup> Again, since no natural inclinations, especially in the state of fallen nature, would lead a person to profess the evangelical vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience, “discerning,” as used in this context, proposes to clarify the indistinct. Note well that the supernaturally bestowed movement toward professing the evangelical counsels should not be confused with the temperamental preference that a person may possess to live a simple life, or even to remain a bachelor, or to settle for being a follower instead of a leader. The call to Consecrated Life, as to the priesthood, comes about only as a special gift of grace, one recognized, that is, through a glass, darkly.<sup>4</sup>

## 2. The Word, “Discernment.”

In order to acquire a right understanding of vocational discernment, we need to take a few steps back. Truth to tell, the contemporary deployment of the term, such as we find in the above-mentioned phrase a “discernment group for single men,” may lead today’s aspirants for Dominican life to develop slightly skewed notions about how God draws men to priesthood and religious life. For Dominicans and for the whole Church, no better resource exists for getting to the truth of a theological matter than heeding what is taught by our Dominican brother, Saint Thomas Aquinas, and by the living commentatorial tradition that develops his thought. Let me alert you from the start that Aquinas, whose lifetime spans the second and third quarters of the

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<sup>3</sup> For information, see <http://www.bostoncatholic.org/DelegateForReligious.aspx> (Accessed 9 November 2014).

<sup>4</sup> See 1 Corinthians 13:12 as rendered in the King James Version: “For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known.”

thirteenth century, approaches the question of choosing a priestly vocation from an angle that much contemporary discernment talk ignores. He considers a clerical and religious vocation to constitute a state of excellence to which young men should aspire in order to adorn the Church with the good deeds that she needs to accomplish her mission.<sup>5</sup> Aquinas did not think of these vocations as lifestyle choices.

Before turning to see how Aquinas illumines one's approaching a priestly vocation, we may usefully consider the several meanings of the English word "discernment." What definitions of the noun "discernment," one may ask, are current in today's vocabulary? For its first meaning, the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines the noun "discernment" as follows: "The action or faculty of perceiving or noting a distinction between things; discrimination, differentiation."<sup>6</sup> The nonpareil record of the English language goes on to observe that this meaning of the noun, "discernment," is often accompanied by the prepositions "between" or "of." Thus, one may rightly observe that, for example, a vocation to Dominican life requires clear discernment between diocesan priesthood and consecrated life. Or, living out a Dominican vocation requires of the Dominican the willingness to make a discernment of truth from falsehood. Secondly, the *OED* tells us that "discernment" may also denote "the action of discerning or perceiving by means of the sense, esp., by sight."<sup>7</sup> For instance, "Light is required for the discernment of colors." Thirdly, discernment carries the meaning of intellectual perception or apprehension: "the action or process of discerning or perceiving by means of the intellect."<sup>8</sup> When this discernment involves good judgment about created things, it suggests, nowadays at least, refinement or good taste. For example, "Men and women of taste and discernment who know a good thing when they see it."<sup>9</sup> When the discerning by the intellect involves religion, then the action takes on the

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<sup>5</sup> See *Summa theologiae* IIa-IIae q. 185, art. 1: "Whether it is lawful to desire the episcopate?" What Aquinas allows for the Bishop may be applied also to lower clerics and religious, namely, it is lawful to desire these states of life for the good works that they accomplish.

<sup>6</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. "Discernment," 1.

<sup>7</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. "Discernment," 2.

<sup>8</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. "Discernment," 3, a.

<sup>9</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. "Discernment," 3, b.

character of a spiritual discernment, that is, the ability to make sound judgments in spiritual matters. The first instance given in the *OED* of this latter usage—one should note with care—dates from 1678.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, the phrase spiritual discernment appears first in English around the time of John Milton’s *Paradise Lost* (the second edition), that is, during the period known as Early Modern English.<sup>11</sup> In other words, the English expression, “spiritual discernment” comes into currency during the late seventeenth century. Talk, then, about spiritual discernment in English develops about 140 years after the establishment of the Jesuits (1540).

Seventeenth-century translations into English of books that explained the *Exercises* of Saint Ignatius contributed to making spiritual discernment a familiar phrase.<sup>12</sup> In the next century, translations of the works of the Jesuit spiritual author, Giovanni Battista Scaramelli (1687–1752), especially, his little treatise on the discernment of spirits, may have contributed toward expanding the frequency of usage in English.<sup>13</sup>

It should come then as no surprise to discover that Saint Thomas Aquinas did not use the expression “spiritual discernment” in a way that corresponds to today’s accepted English usage.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “Discernment,” 3, c.

<sup>11</sup> “A second edition followed in 1674, arranged into twelve books (in the manner of Virgil’s *Aeneid*) with minor revisions throughout and a note on the versification.” See [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paradise\\_Lost](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paradise_Lost). (Accessed 8 November 2014)

<sup>12</sup> For example, see the 1686 English translation of D. Bouhours *Life of St. Ignatius of Loyola*, vol. I, p. 46: “The Exercises which Ignatius compos’d at Manreza..adding to them divers Rules concerning Catholick Faith, Prayer, Alms deeds, Temperance, Scruples, and Discernment of spirits [Fr. *le discernement des esprits*].” This book by Dominique Bouhours (1628-1702), a Jesuit, is listed in the Boston College catalogue with the following notation: “John Dryden 1631-1700; Henry Hills -1689? printer.; Louis XIII, King of France, 1601-1643; Boston College High School, former owner,; Louis XIII, King of France, 1601-1643; Written in French by Dominick Bouhours of the same Society / Translated into English by a person of quality Published by His Majesty s command / London: Printed by Henry Hills, printer to the King’s most excellent Majesty, for his houshold and chappel 1686.”

<sup>13</sup> See Giovanni Battista Scaramelli, “Discernimento de’spiriti per il retto regolamento delle azione proprie ed altrui. Operetta utile specialmente ai Direttori delle anime,” first published at Venice in 1753.

<sup>14</sup> One standard authority acknowledges that the modern meaning of spiritual discernment is not found in Aquinas. See the article in *The New Catholic Encyclopedia*, Vol. 4. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Detroit: Gale, 2003): 765-767. For further information, see Joseph Pegon, “Discernement des

In the about 300 times that Aquinas employs some form of the Latin verb “discernere,” he uses it to signify either sense discernment or, more frequently, the act of intellectual grasping. For instance, in his teaching about the difference between self-defense and capital punishment, Aquinas says, “A sinner is a man and as such is not by nature different from a just man, and this is why some public judgment is necessary to “discern” whether he is to be killed in the public interest.”<sup>15</sup> True enough, Aquinas cites the Latin Vulgate of Saint Jerome when he discusses the text of 1 Corinthians, chapter 12, verse 10, “to another the ability to distinguish between spirits.” The Latin Vulgate reads “discretio spirituum,” or the discretion of spirits. However, even in this context, Aquinas refers to a grace-bestowed intellectual capacity given to the saints that allows them to grasp the secrets of human hearts.<sup>16</sup> He does not entertain the view that this special endowment from the Holy Spirit that, in principle, only some Christians enjoy becomes the prerogative of all Christians so that they can discover their proper calling in life. Aquinas, as I have already said, approached the question of vocational selection from an entirely different starting point. For Aquinas, vocation arises as a matter of graced desire to pursue the excellent.

### 3. Aquinas on “Vocation”

We can explore what principles Aquinas draws on to guide young men to a priestly or religious vocation within the Church by turning our attention to his treatment of what the medieval authors considered special callings in the Church. This discussion may be found conveniently at the end of the second part of the second part of Aquinas’s comprehensive *Summa theologiae*.<sup>17</sup> [What in Dominican Latin shorthand, we call the *secunda-secundae*.] For Aquinas,

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esprits. IV. Période moderne.” in *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité* III (Paris: Beauchesne, 1957), cols. 1266-1281.

<sup>15</sup> *Summa Theologiae* II-II, q. 64 a. 3 ad 2: “Sed homo peccator non est naturaliter distinctus ab hominibus iustis. Et ideo indiget publico iudicio, ut discernatur an sit occidendus propter communem salutem.” The Blackfriars edition of the *Summa* (New York, 1975) translates the verb “discernatur” as “to decide.”

<sup>16</sup> See *Summa theologiae* Ia-IIae q. 111, art. 4: “et etiam occulta cordium, et quantum ad hoc ponitur *discretio spirituum*.”

<sup>17</sup> Aquinas also wrote three special treatises on religious life and those who may enter it. *An Apology for the Religious Orders, The Religious State, the Episcopate, the Priestly Office,*

both Bishop and consecrated religious find themselves constituted in special “states of life” within the Church.<sup>18</sup> In the language of his day, and the language that was common within the Church until the Second Vatican Council, the special state that belongs to Bishops and religious is called “the state of perfection.”<sup>19</sup> And although one sometimes hears that after the Second Vatican Council, the universal call to holiness makes each of the three ecclesial vocations equal in excellence, the Church still teaches explicitly that the consecrated state, that is, for Dominicans, religious life, enjoys an objective superiority among the other “states” or vocations within the Church.<sup>20</sup>

Although no such explicit claim is made by contemporary Church documents for the priestly office, the fact remains that the priesthood enjoys its own priority over the other vocations.<sup>21</sup> One need only make the most modest of theological arguments to realize that the priestly office holds a higher place within the Church than does marriage.<sup>22</sup> In its normative form, marriage brings forth children destined to ensure the survival of the human race, new human beings who are called to share in the gift of everlasting life. Without the distinctive activities of the priest, however, no one gets easily, that is, ordinarily, to heaven. Only the priest

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and *An Apology for Religious Orders* were each translated into English by J. Procter and published in London at the start of the twentieth century (1902).

<sup>18</sup> John Paul II, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, “Consecrated Life” (*Vita Consecrata*), 1996, no. 32, refers to the “fundamental states of life,” priests, consecrated, and lay.

<sup>19</sup> See *Summa theologiae* IIa-IIae q. 184: “De statu perfectionis in communi.”

<sup>20</sup> *Vita Consecrata*, no. 32: “As a way of showing forth the Church’s holiness, *it is to be recognized that the consecrated life*, which mirrors Christ’s own way of life, *has an objective superiority.*”

<sup>21</sup> Aquinas explicitly teaches that the priesthood considered in itself exceeds in dignity (*ad dignitatem*) the life of a non-ordained religious, e.g., the cooperator brother (an example that Aquinas himself uses). The reason that Aquinas gives to support his view applies as well to ranking Holy Orders above the laity: “through sacred orders one is committed to most worthy ministries in which one serves Christ himself in the sacrament of the altar [the Eucharist].” See *Summa theologiae* IIa-IIae q. 184, art. 8.

<sup>22</sup> For further information, see Romanus Cessario, OP, *Theology and Sanctity*, ed. Cajetan Cuddy, OP (Ave Maria, FL: Sapientia Press, 2014), chap. 7, “Aquinas on the Priest: Sacramental Realism and the Indispensable and Irreplaceable Vocation of the Priest,” pp. 133ff. Originally published in *Nova et Vetera*, English Edition, 8 (2010): 1–15.

administers the sacraments of salvation to both married people and non-ordained consecrated persons.

The teaching on “vocation” that Aquinas and the theologians of the Middle Ages and of the modern period, that is, after the Council of Trent, set forth has not been superseded by a new form of ecclesial egalitarianism as certain commentators are sometimes heard to assert.<sup>23</sup> The best way to describe the emphasis of the Second Vatican Council on the importance of Christian marriage requires a deepening of our understanding about the vocation to married life that Saint John Paul II did so much to explicate. He made this contribution, however, without diminishing the importance that priests hold within the Church nor the perfection of charity that consecrated persons propose both to embody and enact.

What the Church holds about the objective superiority of consecrated life and what she teaches about the indispensability and irreplaceability of the priest follows, in substance, what Saint Thomas Aquinas set down in his *Summa theologiae*. For the purposes of our present discussion, that is, how do I know that God calls me to the priesthood, we need to consider only one text. In *Summa theologiae* IIa-IIae, q. 184, art. 1, Aquinas asks “whether perfection is measured by charity.” His answer is brief and one that should be familiar to all Catholics. Here is what Aquinas says in his own syllogistic formulation: “Anything is said to be perfect so far as it attains its proper end, which is ultimate perfection. But it is charity that unites us to God, who is the ultimate end of the human soul, since, as St John says, ‘He that abideth in charity, abideth in God, and God in him (1Jn 4:16).’ Therefore the perfection of the Christian life consists principally in charity.”<sup>24</sup>

The one who seeks entrance to the Dominican Order both desires and seeks to grow perfect in charity. Aquinas goes on to point out that religious take their name from the moral virtue of religion, the virtue whereby man offers something for the service and worship of God. Personal consecration to God makes of those who profess vows a living sacrifice, as the Third

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<sup>23</sup> See the 1997 Interdicasterial Instruction “On Certain Questions Regarding the Collaboration of the Non-Ordained Faithful in the Sacred Ministry of Priest,” especially “Theological Principles.”

<sup>24</sup> *Summa theologiae* IIa-IIae q. 184, art. 1 (Blackfriars edition, 1973).



Eucharistic Prayer beseeches for all the members of the Church: “May he make of us an eternal offering to you, so that we may obtain an inheritance with your elect.”<sup>25</sup> Dominicans, however, make of themselves a special kind of offering or sacrifice. They, as Aquinas points out, following the teaching of Pope St Gregory the Great, “consecrate themselves totally to divine service, offering themselves as a holocaust to God.”<sup>26</sup> The Christian tradition esteems holocausts above sacrifices. Sacrifices are partial in nature, whereas a holocaust is the offering to God of all that one possesses. The religious state with its vows of poverty and chastity and obedience offers to God the triplex set of goods that, as Aristotle taught, are required by the human creature: external goods, the goods of body, and the goods of the soul.<sup>27</sup> So the perfection of charity achieves its highest realization in the religious state, as the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *Vita Consecrata*, nicely confirms.<sup>28</sup> Something analogical may be asserted for the diocesan priest who promises evangelical simplicity of life, celibate chastity, and obedience to his Bishop in order to practice pastoral charity and to serve the Eucharist.

#### 4. A Graced Approach to the Embrace of a Vocation

Aquinas does not encourage a man to practice a “discernment” of Dominican life in order to distinguish it from other possible vocations in the Church. The reason is simple. Growth in charity results only from a divine gift given. We call this gift, the gift of grace. Strictly speaking however, no one can discern a grace, no one may discover by human means whether or not he possesses sanctifying grace. The Church in fact disallows a direct knowledge of the presence of habitual grace in a given individual: “Since it belongs to the supernatural order, grace escapes our experience and cannot be known except by faith.”<sup>29</sup> Aquinas reasons as follows: God is the principle and source of all graces given. God, however, remains “beyond the reach of our

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<sup>25</sup> “Ipse nos tibi perficiat munus aeternum / ut cum electis tuis hereditatem consequi valeamus.” *Roman Missal*, Third Eucharistic Prayer.

<sup>26</sup> *Summa theologiae* IIa-IIae q. 186, art. 1.

<sup>27</sup> See *Summa theologiae* IIa-IIae q. 186, art. 7.

<sup>28</sup> See above, note 20; *Vita Consecrata*, no. 32.

<sup>29</sup> See CCC no. 2005.

knowledge on account of his sublimity.”<sup>30</sup> So no man can discern with certainty, that is, grasp, perceive, apprehend, or judge, that he possesses the gift of divine grace. Aquinas, however, does allow that someone may come to an inferential knowledge of his state before God. He makes the point simply: “Something may be known inferentially by perceptible signs. In this sense someone can know that he has grace, for example by perceiving that he takes delight in God and despises worldly things, and by not being conscious of any mortal sin in himself.”<sup>31</sup> If you reflect on this form of faith-knowledge, you will realize that it does not take extended periods of introspection to acquire it. One may describe the knowledge as quasi-experiential. In a word, you love God and the things of God and you keep yourself free of grave sin. Otherwise put, you desire by a divinely motivated desire to accomplish the good works that God makes possible in the world. No one who finds himself drawn to consider entrance into religious life, especially Dominican life, should fail to recognize these desires in himself. If you are drawn to love and to serve God and if you take delight in the things of God, then you are being drawn to make of yourself a holocaust. You aspire to accomplish a noble deed. There are many young men of your age who are not considering entrance into religious life or the pursuance of a priestly vocation. They may be thought to comprise two groups: first, those upright young men who want to get married. These follow the natural rhythms that lead to the coupling of male and female, etc. And, second, those who do not delight in God and desire inordinately worldly things. These do not entertain holy desires and lack mature spiritual sensitivity. What matters most for those of you who are present at a vocation weekend? You know inferentially that you have received a grace from God and that this grace has moved you to come to a vocation weekend. To borrow the expression of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, you are being moved toward receiving the “graces of state” that pertain to the priestly office.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> See *Summa theologiae* Ia-IIae q. 112, art. 5. Aquinas does allow a special revelation from God to an individual; however, he envisages this as an exceptional case, e.g., what is said of St. Paul in 1 Corinthians 4:3 f.

<sup>31</sup> See *Summa theologiae* Ia-IIae q. 112, art. 5. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* repeats this teaching; see no. 2005.

<sup>32</sup> See *CCC* nos. 2004 and 1585.

Let me make two important qualifications in order to avoid misunderstandings. First, that you are here because of a grace given does not mean that your life is now once and for all determined. The Church wisely provides for a period of preparation before a man definitively commits himself to a form of life such as that of a Dominican priest. In a word, the experience of grace that I have described above as quasi-experiential requires assessment. During the period of preparation, which lasts until solemn profession, the candidate or the Brother does what he can to increase the delight that he finds in God and godly things, while at the same time, he takes care to grow in virtue, which is the surest way to avoid committing a mortal sin. Second, the candidate in whom the grace to follow Saint Dominic is developing must take advantage of the means that the Church and the Order supply to grow in virtue. So he must frequent the Sacrament of Reconciliation, receive sound counsel about how to live his life, and practice those mortifications that suit his stage of preparation. Once professed, the Dominican in simple vows gives himself over to the honest practice of the religious discipline that the Order imposes on him. The Order wisely confides those in formation to the care of a Novice and Student Master. These priests help the young Dominican to embrace the form of life that, as Aquinas teaches, enables a man to become accustomed to making of himself a living holocaust. Religious consecration, to return to a theme discussed above, does not come naturally. Dominican life begins as a grace given and, as I am in some position—thanks be to God—to testify, remains a grace given and, please God, Dominican life will end as a grace given. Anyone who thinks that he will become accustomed to the rhythms of religious life by thinking about the life, by thinking about how it might suit him, by thinking even about whether or not God wants this life for him, indulges in a dangerous pastime. Why? No amount of thinking or discerning will produce a cognitive certitude that one should enter religious life. Entrance into religious life comes only as a grace freely given just as one's persevering in religious life results from a grace freely given and embraced. From start to finish, the divine propulsion that pushes a man toward the priesthood produces holy desires. Even though for both priesthood and religious life, the Church and the Order establish structures to ensure that the authenticity of a man's desires is recognized

not only by himself but by others. Ordinaries call to Holy Orders.<sup>33</sup> Provincials admit to a profession.

#### 5. What Steps to Take to Embrace the Grace of a Priestly Vocation.

The question that remains is, “What next?” What should a man do in order to make progress in the grace that has been given to him? He should not discern. Discernment places the vocation in the future. The one discerning gives himself over to wondering whether priesthood may find a place in his future. A question arises inevitably. When does discernment come to its completion, when does one no longer require discernment? Some answers to this question do not satisfy. For example, when a student leaves the seminary, there often appears a note that says in effect, “After some discernment, I’m leaving, Jack.” This reveals discernment gone awry. Again, there are unfortunate instances of ordained priests who announce that they have discerned their way out of the priesthood. However, the Church allows no such discernment. This amounts to discernment put at the service of betrayal. Whatever legitimate deployment of the discernment of spirits there may be, turning discernment into a calculated prognostication about how well I am going to handle a future vocation is not one of them. Once a man recognizes within himself a delight in serving God and the Church, a desire to grow in holiness of life, an excitement even about the adventure of the priesthood, he should *not* try to figure out how he is going to handle these movements. Rather, the first thing that such a man should do is pray.

The proper response to the realization that you are being drawn toward the priesthood is *not* to go to your room and begin a processes of self-reflection. The proper response brings you before the Blessed Sacrament where you say, “Thank you, Jesus.” Thank Jesus for the holy delight that you take in so great a gift and mystery as his priesthood. To make a prayer of gratitude does not require that you stop all further inquiry. You express gratitude to God for the grace to want to inquire further into the concrete realization of your desires. Not every man in this room will eventually receive the habit of Saint Dominic. Still, every man in this room must

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<sup>33</sup> See CCC no. 1578: a man “must humbly submit his *desire* to the authority of the Church” (emphasis added).

thank God for giving him the grace to desire to embrace a life of perfection. When you thank God for the grace that you have received, then you will discover the freedom to ponder what to do next. At this point, each of the three recognized ecclesial options remains open. And among vocations to consecrated life, there exist many options, which are not limited to the well-known religious families. After gratitude then, comes pondering.

Pondering is not another word for discerning. Pondering requires that a man consider something present to him. Discernment, as I said above, implies an exercise for deciding on a course of action to take in the future. For those who find this weekend an encouraging experience, you should undertake a further investigation into the nature of Dominican life. You need to become familiar with the grace that Saint Dominic introduces into the world. You need to discover what the *Constitutions* of the Order stipulate about our consecrated life. You need to take the steps necessary to discover the genius of Dominican life. Visiting Dominican communities usually falls among these steps; you come to see what Dominicans do. However, caution is required. The exercise of getting to know about Dominican life cannot be reduced to a sociological survey. The legislation that once governed the Order warned young Dominicans about making judgments on how Dominican life is lived out here or there. Instead, in very typical Dominican fashion, the admonition was given to follow the *Constitutions, ut littera sonat*, as the letter of these texts sounds. Likewise doing web searches for Dominican.com worldwide may or may not deepen your conviction about whether God has put the Order of Preachers in your future. Instead, revert to an old practice, read a book. A good way to ponder your Dominican vocation is to read a biography of Saint Dominic or to read accounts of the lives of Dominican saints. While you are inquiring into the spiritual character of the Dominicans, you also need to start practicing the virtues of a Dominican. No one can ponder sacred things and at the same time give himself over to carnal preoccupations. You can't get drunk while reading a life of Saint Dominic and expect to profit from the reading. You can't find inspiration in the heroic deeds of the Dominican saints and at the same time make not the slightest effort to reform your own life. While pondering, one must undertake a conversion of manners or mores.

*Conversio morum* is a monastic expression which includes poverty, chastity, and obedience, and more. In order to profit from your inquiry into Dominican life, you need to put your moral life in order—ordinarily with the help of a spiritual director. This admonition is not peculiar to Dominicans. Saint Paul counsels that the carnal man does not give himself over as easily to spiritual things as does the man who removes himself from even legitimate carnal pleasures (see 1 Cor. 7:32,33). Much of what is entailed in a reformation of life or conversion of life requires only common sense to discover. So I will limit myself to some obvious examples. If you are drawn to embrace holy poverty as a way of life, then you cannot immerse yourself in the enthusiasms of the consumer society. Your beguilement with the latest styles of clothing, the fastest cars, the best gadgets, including computer games, must diminish. The virtue that governs Dominican poverty is detachment. A Dominican uses things to complete the good works which he aspires to accomplish. However, these external things cannot become the center of his affective life.

If you are drawn to espouse the Truth, and to live chastely in order to do the good things that Dominicans do, especially to preach the Gospel, then you cannot follow the patterns of life that popular culture magnifies. Hooking up does not prepare one for the cloister. Growth in chastity requires guidance in most cases. Still, some general principles can be set forth that guide the man who aspires to Dominican life. First, autosexual pleasuring, such as masturbation, prepares a man for no known vocation in the Church. Satisfying the concupiscence of the eyes by viewing pornography thwarts the relational love in which the Dominican should delight. A man must prepare to contemplate, that is, to establish a loving relationship with God, and he must prepare to practice pastoral charity, the virtue of the priest, that is, to love the sheep of the sheepfold. These sanctifying activities are eminently relational. The man who has become accustomed to self-gratification, inevitably, depreciates his capacity for relational activities. Moral theologians rightly call the exercise of autosexuality oxymoronic. Sexual pleasure is made to knit together two people in a friendship called marriage. *A fortiori*, all forms of illicit relational sexual experiences impede a man from developing an appreciation for Dominican life.

The Dominican must accustom himself to moments of affective solitude, as does any priest, and one does not prepare for this discipline by engaging sexually with women.

Before one receives the habit of Saint Dominic, he asks for God's mercy and that of the Order. He does so lying prostrate before the Provincial. Prostration symbolizes religious submission. Modern culture tends not to celebrate hierarchical ordering. The best way to prepare for obedience is to repose confidence in the people that the Order asks to guide you toward final profession. Confessors and Masters alike. Pray, ponder, prepare. The man who aspires to join the Order of Preachers should undertake these steps. The Vocation Director will give other instructions. Prepare for obedience by following what he says.

In conclusion, I should like to draw to your attention an advantage of following the program that I have described. Each step described above draws you out of yourself. Self-preoccupation thwarts a man's ability to live according to the designs of divine providence. Truth to tell, the key to reaching heaven lies in the abandonment to divine providence that the saints practice heroically. In the discussion that occupies the final questions of the *secunda pars* of his *Summa*, Aquinas mentions the word "providence" only once. It occurs when he is talking about the necessity of poverty for "religious perfection." One objection says that poverty exposes one both to so many temptations, for instance, to steal, and dangers, for example, physical deprivations, that it could never contribute to living a perfect life. To which Aquinas replies that those who give up everything to follow Christ also "entrust themselves to divine providence." Such as these need never fear that any harm will befall them. If there be a discernment to make—in the first definition of the English word—the discernment is whether I want either to follow my own designs or to commit myself to God's providence. The whole Christian tradition replies to this Either/Or with a response in accord with that of Jesus himself: "Seek first the kingdom [of God] and his righteousness, and all these things will be given you besides" (Mt 6: 33).

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