5 Reasons Why NOT to Discern a Religious Vocation

By Ronny O’Dwyer, SJ

Allow me to tell a common American story. Imagine the life of a normal guy who eats, sleeps, goes to school, hangs out with friends. Perhaps he has a job. He texts and keeps up with people on Facebook. He may at times think about God and the meaning of life. Occasionally, he ponders becoming a priest or a brother, but then convinces himself otherwise. As a young man who recently decided to vow my life to the Lord and the Church in the Society of Jesus, here are some honest reflections on our contemporary story.

Let’s ask an honest question: What are the best reasons not to discern a vocation to the religious life or priesthood? The pay isn’t good. The hours are long. The education process can be grueling. Maybe the possibility of being missioned anywhere in the world is a bit extreme. For some, the priesthood seems too isolating. For others it is too public. Many contend that the thought of the administrative responsibilities is overwhelming, while for others these responsibilities do not seem challenging enough.

Think about culture. Western culture is plagued by the temptation for “extended adolescence” where some young men (take Europe for example) live a kind of bachelor existence until age 40. Their life is equipped with all the amenities of continuing to live with mom: laundry, house cleaning, and a bag lunch as you walk out the door in the morning. In the U.S., I see this phenomenon embodied as some of my peers seem unable to make decisions, teeter with commitment, and continually strive to play it safe. Keeping one’s “options open” often results in doing nothing.

Then there is the whole “celibacy thing.” At present, the positive public image of the priest has been destroyed by the sexual abuse crisis. Priests are constantly viewed with suspicion. The public stature of the priesthood has been eroded. Further, said crisis has many wondering if it is even possible for a man to live a happy, healthy, celibate life. These are all reason not to discern. But, they are not the best ones. Really... who wants to live at home when they are 40? Or be caught in a web of meaningless casual sexual relationships? Or be that guy who after a long day making lots of money comes home to play Wii or Guitar Hero? Everyone knows that for those who really love their job, pay does not matter. Think about it.

Grant this conclusion for a moment, and allow me to present what I think are the 5 best reasons not to discern priesthood or religious life. A young man should not discern priesthood or religious life if:
• You do not believe that God has an ultimate plan for your life. A young man discerning a vocation must believe that from the beginning of time, God has a plan for each of us that he does not have for another. In short, discerning a vocation is about choice because the human person is endowed with intellect and will at the service of listening to and actively embracing God’s unique will for each individual.

• You do not believe in the power of love: the power of God’s love to transform, to forgive, and to cover a multitude of sin. Discernment involves the knowledge that it’s not about our own holiness or ability to do it on our own. It’s the work of Grace that overcomes our human limitations.

• You do not believe that your life can make a difference. Our time in history is starving for heroes. In all our prosperity, we’ve become complacent and we’ve lost sight of greatness. In our lifetime, leadership and prophetic witness will be thrust upon the priest and religious. A man discerning must desire to see himself within a tradition of the saints. He should have the deep desire for the world to become a better, more just, more loving place.

• You do not love the Church. The reality is that priesthood and religious life exist for and within institutional Church at the service of the people of God. Jesuit Superior General Fr. Arrupe, said it best: We need men who love the Church like a mother, not like a stepmother.

• You do not want to lay down your life for your friends. Priesthood and religious life is all about imitating Jesus, living like he lived. Ironically, this commitment is always fruitful. At the heart, it is the call to be a spiritual father, with spiritual children.

Here’s the catch. If the above 5 sentiments describe your beliefs it follows that you should cut off all friendships, stop working toward your dreams, extinguish all hope for the future, stop believing that you are unique, give up on others, stop forgiving (and asking for forgiveness), hold off on dating, become a nihilist. Forget the idea of marriage because life has no purpose!

What is the purpose of life for the young Christian man? As the above five sentiments show, being a Christian man means believing in God’s plan for your life, means considering your own unique call to discipleship, means
embracing the transformative power of God's love, means putting this love into action ultimately through a sincere and unique gift of self. It’s not about sex, money, or Wii. It’s definitely not about playing it safe. There are only a few good reasons for a man not to discern a religious vocation. Their consequences are disastrous.