

Vocations and what to do with them:

Discerning Priestly and Religious Vocations

By Christopher Chatteris S.J.

Preview Version

A Jesuit Institute E-Book



Preview

This is a handbook for vocations directors and those who assist them. Its aim is very practical – to help the person who accompanies those trying to discover whether God is calling them to the priesthood and/or religious life.

The word 'test' features strongly in the contents table below. These 'tests' are the kinds of qualities, attitudes and modes of behaviour we are looking for in young people aspiring to our ways of life. They are not new in themselves, but the way I have expressed them will hopefully help the reader recognise them more easily.

Chapters end with questions which the vocations director can put to the candidate or to him or herself about the candidate.

There are also some suggestions about the practical organisation of a programme for candidates.

To get a taste of the book I have included a chapter below.

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Fr Chris Chatteris SJ

Table of Contents

Table of Contents.....	i
Introduction	1
Chapter 1 Demography and Grace.....	3
Chapter 2 'Recruitment'	8
Chapter 3 The Discernment of a Vocation	13
Chapter 4 The Trust and Freedom Test.....	18
Chapter 5 The Self-Starting Test.....	22
Chapter 6 The Pearl of Great Price Test.....	26
Chapter 7 The Community Test.....	31
Chapter 8 The Love of God Test.....	39
Chapter 9 The Apostolic Zeal Test.....	44
Chapter 10 The Attractiveness Test	49
Chapter 11 The Timing Test	53
Chapter 12 Family and Parenthood.....	57
Chapter 13 The Candidacy Process	60
Chapter 14 Physical and Mental Health Testing.....	65
Chapter 15 Vocations in an Era of Sexual Abuse	73
Chapter 16 Discipleship as an Art	81
Afterword.....	86
Bibliography.....	90

Chapter 9

The Apostolic Zeal Test

'Apostolic zeal' is an expression which is perhaps rather out of vogue. It is obviously a certain enthusiasm for the spreading of the Good News. Like so many of these things that we struggle to define, we recognise it immediately when we see the genuine article. A candidate comes to see the vocations director and talks animatedly about the work going on in his or her parish – the youth group, the choir, the social outreach group and the last parish or mission. It transpires that our candidate is a key organiser in these groups and their events and the conversation shows clearly that these activities give our young person go and mileage. There is a strong, consistent and burning desire to pass on to others the Word of life.

It should not be really necessary to pose the following question to a candidate for the priesthood and/or religious life: 'what have you already done in your Christian life to suggest that you might have a religious or priestly vocation?' Evidence of what the person has already engaged in should come out naturally as we get to know our candidate and ask about life in his or her Christian community. If the candidate seems not to be involved in anything extra, seems only to do the basics, such as going to Church on Sunday and occasionally attending an extra service, then it would be very appropriate to pose the question. One may of course be dealing with someone of unusual modesty who has decided not to speak about his or her efforts for the spreading of the Kingdom of God unless asked directly. But normally, if the candidate is making efforts at working for the spread of the Gospel, we will become aware of them in some way or another, often in several ways including through contact with the parish.

If, because there seems to be a gap here, it should be necessary to question the candidate and it turns out that such activity is not going on in the person's life, I would be inclined to put the candidate off for a year or two, perhaps with some suggestions about practical apostolic work, to see if anything develops. If it does, then we can take up the discernment work again; if not we would be well advised to let the person go because it seems that he or she is aiming at a kind of lowest common denominator way of living the Christian life which shows little promise for a life of full time ministry.

This is not just a test of enthusiasm but also one of our earlier theme of initiative. I do not think we are looking for candidates who can only do something if they are specifically instructed to do so, like the Spanish monk who said that he thought he was guaranteed Heaven because he had never done anything which he had not been ordered to do by his superiors! We want people who can take initiatives to work for the Gospel without having to be instructed to do so.

Speaking of monks might prompt us to digress slightly in order to ask whether there is any distinction here between the cloistered and 'market place' vocations. Should a candidate for the monastic life and a candidate for a missionary congregation have different levels of apostolic zeal? It has often been pointed out that all our greatest cloistered men and women had a very active and apostolic side to them, and that all our missionaries were men and women of deep prayer. Obviously a Cistercian cannot dream of living like a missionary of Africa and vice versa. However genuine candidates for either congregation will surely display a desire for the spreading of the Kingdom but in different ways and these different ways might already be visible in what kind of works the candidate has already done – the prayer group might be the preference of the one seeking the monastic

path, while the social action group might naturally appeal to the one hoping to work in a missionary land. Whatever its manifestation, that some evidence of apostolic zeal should be concretely present in the candidate's life before they come to explore the possibility of a vocation, seems to me to be an important bottom line. If a candidate comes to us who has never done anything except the basics of Catholic life and if it never occurred to them that something more was an appropriate sign of a vocation, then we either have someone who at best lacks initiative and at worst has missed the point of the priesthood and religious life completely.

There is perhaps another caution to be sounded here and it concerns the contemporary fashion for fundamentalism. Fundamentalism among young people often seems to be the current vehicle for youthful revolt. It clearly also has economic and social underpinnings and this is true in the wider world, not just among Christians. Qualified but unemployed young men in the Middle East, who are unable to marry because they cannot make it as breadwinners, sometimes turn to religious fundamentalism as a solace and solution to their problems, much to the despair of their elders.

The problem here for us Christians is that some form of rejection of the the 'world' is traditionally seen as part of a vocation to the priesthood and religious life, and many religious founders took this turning away to extremes. One thinks of St Francis of Assisi as a paradigm and historians have argued that the very origins of desert monastic religious life are steeped in a contempt for the rather decadent and worldly life that the early monks saw around them in the cities of the Mediterranean world in the early Christian era.

For wise and discerning religious founders the motives for the dispossession of riches and the embracing of poverty always needed

some purification and maturation. St Ignatius of Loyola started out in what he thought true Franciscan style by exchanging his clothes for those of a beggar. This had the unintended effect of having the beggar arrested on suspicion of stealing a nobleman's clothes. It also had the effect of making himself an embarrassment to his family and repulsive to people he met on the road. The fact that he grew his hair and neglected to cut his fingernails did not help. This naïve and rather self-serving approach had to give way to something more sophisticated and something more pastoral. He eventually realised that his repulsive practices of poverty and asceticism were cutting him off from the people that God wanted him to work with and so, while eating, dressing and living a life of poverty and asceticism that we today would consider severe, he made all this far more interior and invisible for the dual sakes of approachability and humility.

Of course the challenge to give up one's riches and give them to the poor is undeniably there in the Gospel. The important thing to note is the accent on the positive side of this renunciation, despite the perennial temptation to use it as a fist to shake at the worldly weakness and sinfulness we see around us. Jesus does not say: 'Make a statement: sell what you own and give it to the poor'. He invites us to sell all and follow him. This is an invitation to come and follow him. Sometimes an invitation is just an invitation. Here it is the invitation to free oneself and become a disciple.

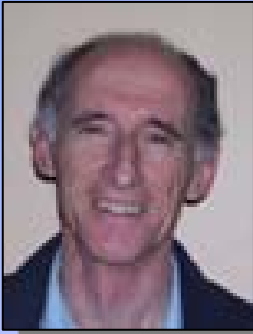
The practical application of this small digression is a certain wariness against, for want of a better word, zealotry. We seek zeal, but not zealotry, enthusiasm but not fanaticism. If the candidate's work for the Gospel has a fundamentally angry or obsessive tenor about it, this seems to me to be a warning sign. Does he or she sound as if on crusade in the blinkered, bigoted sense of the word? Is there too much of a tone of denunciatory moralising about contemporary society,

rather than compassion for sheep without a shepherd? And does the desire to go out and save the world include the idea that this is done not so much as a single, shining crusader, but as a group, in the company of Jesus and other disciples?

Therefore apostolic zeal is of fundamental importance but so is the question of where the fire is coming from. Whose needs are being met – those of the individual or those of the Church? Those of the Lord and his Kingdom or those of the candidate?

Useful Questions to ask:

- 'What have you already done in your Christian life to suggest that you might have a religious or priestly vocation?'
- (Oneself) 'Is this candidate a crusader or a shepherd?'



Fr Chris Chatteris SJ was born in 1950 in Ndola, Zambia (then Northern Rhodesia). He was brought up there, in Zimbabwe and the UK. He joined the Jesuits in 1968 in Scotland and did a degree in French and a postgraduate certificate in education, as well as the usual philosophical and theological courses. At the age of 50 he

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