

Our Vocation Is Hardly a Vacation

When I was young, I figured I would someday meet and marry Mr. Perfect, and we would have 2.3 kids and live in a big, beautiful home happily ever after. Somehow God had other things in store for me, except for the Mr. Perfect part. He gave me that.

I left the Catholic faith during my college years. Fortunately, I still had friends who were good Christians, and I was challenged to develop a love for Christ and the Scriptures. By the end of my senior year, I was troubled that I had not received logical answers to my faith questions, and my search for truth continued. I had remained close to Our Blessed Mother, and by the grace of God I met an elderly priest who was able to provide fundamental, Catholic answers and ultimately bring me back into the fullness of my Catholic faith.

After graduating from college, I moved back to my hometown and tried to make new friends. It was difficult because all of my Catholic buddies were either not Catholic anymore, living out of town, or really party animals. A few weeks went by and an old acquaintance from my parish was in need. Kathy called me and asked if I would drive her to a Catholic Bible study. She was unable to drive, but she really wanted to go. She knew that I was back in town and would probably be willing and able to give her a ride. The only hitch was that the study was hosted by the Catholic young adult group. I had attempted to go to once before, but when it turned out to be similar to the Catholic Dating Game, I went home. I seriously considered telling her “no,” but decided to give her a chance to get out and socialize.

When we arrived, the place was packed. There were about fifty young adults gathered in the living room. It didn't look like there was room for the two of us, but before we could shrink away, people made room and welcomed us in. This was not the same crowd of swinging singles that I met before. These were Catholics who loved the Bible the way I had come to love it—Catholics who knew what a personal relationship with Christ was like. I was in awe. And Curtis, the leader of this study, was a young man, dressed in business clothes and speaking very eloquently. I sat there and soaked up God's words and this great group of people. After the study, I spoke with many of the people and felt a kindred spirit with them. Many had floundered in their faith as I had, and they were so friendly and welcoming. Curtis and I spoke about Our Lady of Fatima and her involvement in our returning to the Catholic faith, and we became instant friends. He was discerning a vocation to the priesthood, and I was thinking that I was going to be a teaching sister. We were so comfortable together. Neither of us were looking to date, which made our spending time together very rewarding and fun.

It didn't take long before I was very involved in the Bible study and various social activities with this new group of friends. We would have game nights, basketball games, barbecues, breakfast after morning Mass—you name it, we were together a lot. It was a great summer. I was growing in my faith and making lasting friendships.

When September rolled around, I entered graduate school and proceeded with a new confidence and zeal for my revived faith. I would look for every opportunity to go home to be with my new friends, and Curtis made valiant efforts to visit me and support me in my studies. As you may suspect, we were falling in love. I couldn't believe that God would bring a man like this into my life and then say, "Sorry, he's not for you." I now see that I was putting God's wishes for my life in

second place and giving priority to thoughts of Curtis and my desires to be with him.

Luckily, Curtis was strong, and he kept his word to go and spend some time in an Oratory discerning his vocation. So he left in March. We said our good-byes and he was off. I completed my studies and began student teaching, thinking that he would return at any time and marry me. Well, one month turned into two, then three, and at six months I had to do some real soul-searching. I never expected that he would be gone that long. I was devastated, and at that point I realized what I had done for the past nine months. I had allowed thoughts of Curtis to overshadow everything in my life. I was no longer asking for God's will, but asking that *my* will be done.

Roses in August

By this time it was late August. Being very humbled by the possibility that this guy was not coming back, I decided to really pray. I signed up for a silent retreat and considered that vocation question again. At the same time, I was making a novena to Saint Thérèse. A novena is a nine-day prayer asking for specific intercession, in imitation of Mary and the apostles in the upper room who prayed for nine days before the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.

My history of novenas to Saint Thérèse was tried and true. My mom had always had a strong devotion to Saint Thérèse and we grew up praying for her intercession. Saint Thérèse is remembered as saying that she would shower the earth with heavenly roses. I always remember receiving roses, too. Sometimes they were in the mailbox, others were presented by strangers, or maybe a new bud would appear on our bushes.

So I went with great confidence to Saint Thérèse with my vocation question. I asked her for a white rose if I was called to be a teaching sister, and a red rose if I was going to marry Curtis. Meanwhile, I had a wonderful retreat and, by the end, I

was asking God to manifest *His* will for my life. I truly wanted whatever He wanted. I wasn't afraid of being single, consecrated, or married, because I knew with great confidence that I would have an easier time loving Christ if I chose the vocation that God had willed for me when He created me.

This assurance filled my mind as I approached the end of the retreat. It was the last day of the retreat and of my novena to Saint Thérèse. I was walking the retreat grounds and praying the Rosary. Everything was either dead or very brown, for it had been a very hot and dry summer that year. There were several ponds on the grounds, and in one there was an island and a bridge to cross over to it. In the midst of praying, my eyes caught a glimpse of something on the island. I slowly walked over to it, and on the island there was this very dead-looking rose bush with two very vibrant and alive red roses budding from one stem. I was shocked by the deepness of the color, and I ran to my spiritual director to tell him about this and to ask his advice.

He was so great. He told me that I had been given a great grace in knowing my vocation and that Our Lord had allowed Saint Thérèse to shower her roses on me once again. He told me not to say anything to Curtis because he needed to come to this on his own in order to lead our relationship. Finally, he told me to go into the chapel and spend some time with Christ thanking Him for this peace and knowledge of what God was asking of me. All week long the chapel had been free from flowers, but when I walked in, there were two beautiful red roses, one on each side of the tabernacle. The most wonderful revelation of all was that both roses curved inward, as if facing Our Lord in the Blessed Sacrament. I felt God speaking to me loud and clear. "I will give you what you want. Just remember to always keep me at the center of your love and relationship."

It wasn't much later that my mom came to pick me up. When she asked me about the retreat, I just said it was great and that I had peace of mind. Luckily she didn't pursue that line of questioning and it wasn't long before we were home. The amazing thing was that within an hour of my return, Curtis called me to tell me he was coming back to Ventura and that we were supposed to be married. In shock I screamed: "I KNOW!" We later exchanged our stories, and it was wonderful to see how God had prepared both of us for the wonderful Sacrament of Marriage. I can't help but think that if I had been more docile to God's will from the beginning—instead of getting caught up in the emotion of the relationship—that He would have shown me His will sooner, six months sooner!

Through this experience, I learned to keep my focus on what God wants and not so much on what I want in this world. I remember all too well those lonely six months wanting to be with Curtis and not having him near. And when I get tired or worn down by the difficulties of married life or family life, I recall those golden memories and they help give me a boost and help me regain some perspective.

I wanted to give a bit of my history so that the rest of this book will make better sense. I struggled with being captivated by the things of this world, as I think many women do. As a modern, educated woman, I wanted all of the things that the world said I should want—independence, money, prestige, and a career. I wasn't planning on getting married and having children. Staying at home to raise children was not even an option when I entered college. But miracles do happen! When I came back to Christ in 1988, I made a decision, like Mary Magdalene, to allow Christ to transform everything about my life—including my views on living well in this world.

Wedding Bells in November

Before we ever spoke of marriage, Curtis would ask me where I saw myself in five and ten years. What could I see myself doing for God? Was I open to having a family? Was I willing to be heroic like Mary Magdalene? He challenged me on issues such as being open to life and using my talents and strengths in our own family. I read what the Church taught on these issues and I found this teaching exciting at times, but also difficult. Needless to say, I have found happiness beyond my wildest dreams. I never would have expected to find happiness in marriage and family life had I not been open to God's speaking to me through the Scriptures and the documents of the Church.

I have discovered that from the beginning God has endowed women with a great dignity. We are at our greatest when we realize this full potential. God made us equal in dignity to men, and yet very different from them. We are the helpmates designed to complement men (cf. Gen. 2:18-20). Therefore, our strengths are much different from theirs.

I want not only to affirm women in their God-given dignity, but encourage them to be heroic and try to develop their talents and gifts to the fullest. In the vocation of marriage that means we are called to be wives and mothers. Our path to holiness is to sanctify family life—to challenge our husbands to headship in our homes and to be the heart of compassion and charity in the home. We also need to be open to life, which is especially difficult because we live in a “culture of death.” Abortion has claimed millions of lives and euthanasia is gaining support. It is difficult to be the light in the lampstand, but that is what God is asking of heroic women.

My hope is that every woman who has an opportunity to read this study will find strength and encouragement to take the high road and serve God. It is tough to swim against the tide, but more than ever I feel that is exactly what we as Christians are called to do.

Just what does the Bible say about happy marriages? The following passages shed some light on traits that we might want to consider during this study. I invite you to read the following passages and questions, and write down the qualities, virtues, and traits that we need to cultivate in order to have a happy marriage.

1. 1 Corinthians 13:4-7: Although this may be a familiar passage to you, what specific character traits does Saint Paul say we need in order to really love?

2. Mark 10:6-9: Christ has always taught that marriage was for life. How do you feel about knowing that you and your spouse are going to grow old together? How can you be his means to holiness, and he yours?

3. Ephesians 4:25-29: What does Saint Paul say about communicating righteously? How might you apply this to your marriage?

4. 1 Corinthians 3:11: How can neglecting the spiritual aspect of our being body and soul contribute to marital problems?

Let's read Ephesians 5:21-33. This passage is packed full of meaning, but we will take it apart piece by piece until the true beauty of God's plan for marriage emerges. First, we need to see that God is asking both spouses to "[b]e subject to one another out of reverence for Christ" (5:21). This implies a mutual give-and-take—not an order-barking submission, but a kind and respectful dialogue that ends in a humble bowing to the desires of the other. It is an attitude of respect and honor that both hold for the other in Christ.

Verses 22-24 tell us that we are to give honor to our husbands "as to the Lord." The image of the husband's being the head of the family is likened to Christ's being the head of the Church.

It is beneficial to note that we as women have a natural gift to love with a mother's heart. Many popes have affirmed the fact that women take primacy in the "order of love." Pope Pius XI wrote:

For if the man is the head, the woman is the heart, and as he occupies the chief place in ruling, so she may and ought to claim for herself the chief place in love.¹

5. What happens to the body when the heart stops functioning correctly?

¹ Pope Pius XI, Encyclical Letter On Chaste Wedlock *Casti Connubii* (1930), no. 27.

6. What happens to the body when the head is not functioning correctly?

7. This is the reality of how much a husband and a wife complement one another and how it is all ordained by God. Are both important? The heart is vital to the body's life. How does that make you feel about your role as the "heart" of your home?

8. Read Romans 13:1. To whom are you really submitting when you bow to your husband's decisions or preferences?

Husbands are instructed how to behave in verses 25-31. Ultimately they have a greater responsibility, because they are called to love us to the point of being willing to lay down their lives for us. That is the intensity of their vocation. Is that dishonoring to women? I don't think so. A man's vocation is further defined in his duty to bring us to holiness. That means that we should be better women by being married to our husbands. Do you see an area in your life where you could grow in holiness? How can your spouse help you with this? Maybe it would be fruitful to read these passages together and discuss how each of you might better serve the other in your walk to sanctity.

These truly beautiful images that Saint Paul shares with us reminds us that we really are members of the Mystical Body of Christ. He is our Head, our Savior, and each of us has a role in God's divine plan for the world.

The Church has always taught that sacraments are channels of grace. In the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* we are told about receiving grace. Let's look at a couple of statements on grace to get a better understanding of this great gift that God offers to us.

Grace is a *favor*, the *free and undeserved help* that God gives us to respond to his call to become children of God, adoptive sons [and daughters], partakers of the divine nature and of eternal life (Catechism, no. 1996, original emphasis).

But grace also includes the gifts that the Spirit grants us to associate us with his work, to enable us to collaborate in the salvation of others and in the growth of the Body of Christ, the Church. There are *sacramental graces*, gifts proper to the different sacraments (Catechism, no. 2003, original emphasis).

9. When have we received grace?

10. What should our main focus or attention be on while living in our married state?

11. In Romans 12:1-3 and Colossians 1:9-14, we are given the vision that God has for our lives. In your own words, write down what these verses say. Take courage, because you and your husband are working together toward holiness.

12. Now read Galatians 3:28, Romans 8:28-30, and Ecclesiastes 4:9-12. Do you see that you have a role in the big Family of God? Are you going to work alone or as a “team player” for the kingdom of God?

Read Catechism, no. 1694, on our vocation as Christians.

13. Now that we have a sense of the big picture of our vocational demands, we can take courage in living our lives well. We can look to Jesus and Mary for hope. In Mark 10:45 and Luke 1:38, what virtues do they exemplify?

14. How can we as modern-day women imitate Mary’s willingness to serve God?

15. How can we live true humility?

² *Mulieris Dignitatem*, no. 5, original emphasis.

Pope John Paul II wrote:

Christ, the “Servant of the Lord” will show all people the royal dignity of service, the dignity which is joined in the closest possible way to the vocation of every person. . . . The dignity of every human being and the vocation corresponding to that dignity find their definitive measure in *union with God*.²

16. How are we to find union with God?

17. In your own words, summarize what you have learned about your vocation, the sacramental grace offered to you in marriage, and areas that you think you might need to work on in order to improve your marriage.
