



## INFORMATION

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# Alternatives to Efficiency and Competition in Vocation Ministry

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PEOPLE ARE WARNED about vocation ministry. I was told the burnout rate is high and that it is not uncommon for vocation directors to end up leaving their congregation. After a few years of experience in vocation work, I am beginning to see and understand some of the reasons why. This is one of the most humbling ministries I have ever had. Relentless possible rejection with every communication, and an apparent lack of expected results after one pours themselves into this ministry has been a real test of pride. Of course, constant "rejection" and apparent lack of huge numbers of vocations are only one way to interpret an experience of vocation ministry, but at a gut level, this is how it seems. Gary Riebe-Estrella, S.V.D., encourages us to "look beyond" the data of our experiences and to anchor ourselves in God in order to interpret properly the meaning of that data.<sup>1</sup> This anchoring in God can open the hearts of vocation directors and formators<sup>2</sup> to alternative values in the Reign of God other than efficiency and competition. This process can eventually lead one to experience hope and humility rather than burnout.

In North American culture, the values of efficiency and competition consume much of our energy and provide focus to our work. Indeed these two values can often be seen in a positive light and have led to many good outcomes for humanity. Efficiency and competition can also be helpful in vocation work, but I propose that they tend to be given too much emphasis and can at times even conflict with the message and method of the Gospel. When one thinks of efficiency and reflects upon the Gospel, one might wonder why God chose to begin the Reign of God in a manner that seems less than efficient. For example, Jesus as a political king could have enacted many helpful measures. Also, with regards to competition, one does not hear a lot about it as constitutive element of the Gospel. So, if competition and efficiency are allowed to decrease, what is it that increases? My proposal is that for a vocation director to stay healthy and to serve the Church well, some of the alternative values to nourish

include focusing on persons rather than numbers, working at God's pace, collaboration, non-possessiveness, humility, and maturity. These could serve as guideposts for vocation ministers working in the context of the Reign of God.

First of all, we must deal with the question that all vocation directors are constantly asked, "How many do you have?" Much of this essay stems from a personal reflection after a question by a fellow friar about one and a half years ago. After visiting two new discerners, I was staying as an overnight guest at one of our friaries. One friar asked, "How did it go?" referring to the meetings with the new discerners. My immediate response was, "We'll see." Later that night as I reflected on my response, I realized that my evaluation on how well the meetings went depended upon if the discerner was leaning toward joining our congregation. I began to realize how deeply ingrained was the correlation between vocation numbers and "success." After that, rather than defining "success" with a discerner's movement toward joining our congregation, I more or less slowly tried to become aware of "success" as depending upon how justly, lovingly, and professionally I accompanied the discerner during the meeting. This sounds simple, but a vocation director can feel very alone when the rest of the Church is constantly talking "numbers." Some, whether this is God's intention or not, even judge a religious congregation's favor from God based on their vocation "numbers."

Names are important in Christian tradition. The Catechism of the Catholic Church states, "God calls each one by name. Everyone's name is sacred. The name is the icon of the person. It demands respect as a sign of the dignity of the one who bears it."<sup>3</sup> If vocation directors and formation directors worry more about having large classes of people in formation than treating each as a unique individual then all sorts of problems can present themselves. In a worst case scenario, a vocation director's goal becomes getting the person into her/his congregation rather than help the person discern the will of God. In this case, the vocation

director loses integrity because he or she assumes to know the will of God and takes the responsibility of discernment away from the discerner.

Br. Mauro Jöhri, the General Minister of the Capuchin Order, released a circular letter to all the friars in 2008. One of the components of the letter stressed “Personalized Accompaniment.”<sup>4</sup> Personalized accompaniment does not mean that each person in formation has their own personalized formation program; it simply means that the formators have regular meetings with those in formation and attend carefully to their individual needs. Br. Mauro is not so much worried about formators whose only goal is to keep large classes; rather, he is concerned about a person in formation getting lost in the crowd. Br. Mauro wants formators to understand the unique gifts and challenges of each person in formation and either challenge or support them accordingly. The task for the formator, he says, is to “promote the human and spiritual growth of the young man in his care.”<sup>5</sup> This stresses knowing the “name” of the person in formation (or the person discerning religious life).

Br. Mauro also views personalized accompaniment as a way to help a person in formation to understand themselves better. This enhances their ability to listen to the needs around them and to thereby take a more proactive and creative form of obedience.<sup>6</sup> In a large group, without personalized accompaniment, Br. Mauro fears that those in formation might possibly neglect the heart and comply only externally to impositions from the outside. Clearly also this has implications for vocation directors who seek to help discerners interiorize how God might be calling them. Worrying about “numbers” lends itself to external pressures on the discerner. Honoring a person’s “name” helps focus the ministry on how God is mysteriously active in her/his heart and walking with the person during that sacred time.

Because we seek to treat discerners as a person with a name instead of a number, we find that the process will be less efficient than we might want. Obviously there are discerners who are unfit for religious life. But for the others, I have been truly amazed at the diversity of people who feel a deep calling from God to discern religious life. The danger is that through the help of past experience I might have a very early hunch on which discerners might be a good fit for our community and which ones might not. If the discerner’s fit for the community seems questionable, it might be “efficient” to say “goodbye” to the discerner very early in the process. However, because this is only a hunch, I could be wrong. The discerner might need more time to gather more information and to pray. The vocation director might need more time to gather more information

about the discerner and to pray. Perhaps God is not yet ready to reveal the person’s path. A vocation colleague of mine, Celeste Cotter, CSJ, says, “Sometimes we don’t have the wisdom. This is God’s process. We have to be guided in prayer and this takes time. Vocation directors have to discern as well.” This process entails more planning of visits and experiences which requires a lot more time and energy. Most of the time, the discerner’s path eventually does not work out with our religious community. Because of the energy spent, one can easily see this as a “waste” of time. However, a spiritual director helped me to see that when dealing with human beings in a just way, one finds that the process is often inefficient, but not a waste. The process may have been very helpful to the discerner. The process itself may have been the will of God.

Vocation directors can use efficient methods such as website inquiry forms, databases, good recordkeeping, and collaboration with other members of the religious community, but we cannot make the discernment process more efficient by pretending to foresee the future of the decisions of discerners at a very early stage. When making tough decisions in vocation ministry, I often ask myself two questions: “Am I making this decision because it is simply the most efficient and painless decision?” and “Am I making this decision because I am competing with some other religious congregation?”

Collaboration, in contrast to competition, is another one of those values mentioned that can lead a vocation minister to hope and humility rather than burnout. Part of the mission statement of the National Religious Vocation Conference states, “...In an inclusive and collaborative style, we present religious life as a viable option in today’s Church.”<sup>7</sup> I believe the “style” here is extremely important. The “way” we do things as Christians set us apart. I see this as a “way” of humility and a “way” of collaboration. It is easy to slip into a competition mode when congregations are in urgent need of vocations. This competition can get even more heated if a congregation sees high numbers of vocations as God’s blessing upon their particular ecclesiology. I do not believe this type of competition is the “way” of the Gospel, especially if it leads to members of congregations saying negative things about other congregations. To move to a collaborative model that respects the diversity of charisms and spiritualities of various congregations helps the discerner to take responsibility for their own discernment rather than being told by someone else which congregation is the best.

A discerner once described the various religious orders as a straight line from conservative to liberal. I am sometimes asked by discerners to describe congregations using the cate-

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*...If vocation directors do not model collaboration for discerners, why should we expect women and men in formation to value collaboration?...*

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gories of conservative and liberal. I try to present a different, nonlinear model that shows the sometimes overlapping circles of the various spiritualities, charisms, and emphases of the congregations. I worry that the overcategorization of religious congregations, or trying to always find what makes one congregation distinct from another, can be to the detriment of our common call as baptized adults. Regarding this concern, Michael Marigliano, OFM Cap., pointed to 1Cor 1:12,13,22-24: “I mean that each of you is saying, “I belong to Paul,” or “I belong to Apollos,” or I belong to Cephas,” or “I belong to Christ.” Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?...For Jews demand signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are called, Jews and Greeks alike, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.” Are vocation directors and formators sometimes divisive or saying negative things about other congregations in the presence of their discerners or newer members? Negative talk about other congregations because of a sense of competition sounds easy to overcome, but when some congregations are perceived to enjoy more ecclesiastical or popular support, this can get very difficult. That some groups seem to enjoy more support can even seem unfair! Here is where humility and maturity come into play. The sense of “fairness” in the Gospels is very interesting. This is where Professor Gary Riebel-Estrella says we must be “anchored in the Creator.”<sup>8</sup> For example, in Matt 20:15 we hear the story of the laborers in the vineyard the laborers who grumbled against the landowner because they didn’t think their pay was fair. The landowner responds, “Am I not free to do as I wish with my own money? Are you jealous because I am generous?” My point is not that some congregations work harder than others. My point is that sometimes it might be the case that God deals generously with some congregations in terms of vocations and we might be called to give God that freedom. We are called to be mature disciples to continue to do God’s work and will through these periods.

It is tempting for vocation ministers to look for results that represent their work. Jim Kent OFM Conv., in his article, “Hope from the Trenches,” states, “Vocation work is a most unusual ministry. Unique, fickle and seemingly—unfairly—measurable.”<sup>9</sup> The story of the two brothers in Luke 15:11-32 gives us another example of a biblical notion of fairness. The younger brother is given the fattened calf while the older brother was never even given a young goat. As a vocation director, the lesson here for myself is to not get excessively caught up in results in my ministry, but to rather continue my mature, professional, prayerful, and faithful work as a dignified child of God. I find this to be very difficult because I grew up thinking that if you worked hard, you would normally get “results.” Furthermore, like the older sibling from the story in Luke just mentioned, I must show maturity without jealousy by constantly trying to recognize other religious congregations as my sisters and brothers. All vocation directors must look at the results of their work and do intelligent strategic planning, but the emphasis is that just and healthy relationships with discerners and other congregations are more important than paying excessive attention to who gets what number of vocations. Humility,

...  
*...the “way” we go about doing  
 vocation ministry reflects what we  
 believe about the Reign of God...*  
 ...

faithfulness in doing God’s work despite an apparent lack of results, and attempting to recognize everyone as my brother or sister despite my sometimes flawed notions of fairness or feelings of failure; this is what I call maturity.

It is interesting how the vows themselves can prepare a person for vocation ministry. I believe that non-possessiveness is one of the keys to all the vows. In other words, vocation work is a good challenge to *being-with* rather than *possessing or controlling*. Each discerner comes and goes. Some stay. For the time that God has asked me to walk with that person, I will give them every ounce of care, creativity, and professionalism that I have. Unfortunately I have a loyal streak that makes me think that people should stick around, if I am consistent with them. Vocation ministry does not work that way. When a discerner moves on to another direction, it is easy to take this personally. I try to think, “Well, I was only with this person for a period of time, hopefully this helped him/her gain some clarity and direction in life.” For vocation directors, probably 95% of their dealings with discerners end in this way. The vows are much like this, especially poverty and celibacy; we see a beautiful depth and we honor its richness without a need to possess. We serve in this way knowing God is moving in a way that is beyond our own needs for “success” and reinforcement of our ministerial viability.

The emphasis in this essay on the sacredness of each person, the amount of inefficiency involved in finding only a few vocations to enter each year, giving God freedom to work with discerners, not working out of a competitive mindset, and not overanalyzing the results of so much work reflects that these are issues with which I struggle. This is not to say that there isn’t a place for intelligent strategic planning, analyzing patterns, looking at what is or isn’t working, and listening to what young people have to say. It is possible to use our intellect to find ways to promote vocations and ministerial effectiveness without compromising Gospel values.

In 2001, authors Dean Hoge, William Dinges, Mary Johnson and Juan Gonzales in their book, *Young Adult Catholics: Religion in the Culture of Choice*, synthesize results from research on the young Catholic population in order to make suggestions for church leadership regarding how to support and challenge young adult Catholics.<sup>10</sup> The authors point out that there are losses in “institutional affiliation,” Catholic identity, and that being Catholic is not near the center of an individual’s identity.<sup>11</sup> In their conclusions and recommendations, they believe it is possible to have a strong Catholic identity while at the same time valuing the efforts at inculturation and ecumenism.

Another way to listen to the needs of young adults is by studying the 2009 NRVC/CARA Study on Recent Vocations to Religious Life. Here one can find best practices in vocation promotion and a comprehensive view of a wide diversity of women and men entering religious life. One can clearly see what motivates young adults today may be very different than what motivated young adults twenty or thirty years ago. Studies such as this give vocation directors some of the intellectual tools that will help in this type of work.

In conclusion, Jesus probably did not look “successful” to many people around him. His work probably looked inefficient and seemed to come to naught with the crucifixion. Yet, he held to his roots, the sacredness of each relationship, and to a strong prayer life anchored in God. This should give us hope. Vocation directors, in my opinion, are in reality early formation directors. If everything we do is out of a sense of competition then the persons that eventually join our congregation will possibly be formed in this polarizing mentality. Competition is not all bad, but in religious ministry it can easily undermine the sense of collaboration in the effort of advancing the Reign of God. We can do our best to learn about how to be more efficient in those tasks that can be streamlined, but we should not tie the hands of God by rushing the discernment process. We can do our best to learn about young adults and best practices in vocation ministry, but our anchor is in our faith and our faith is reflected in our practice. Some of these practices are working at God’s pace, collaboration, non-possessiveness, humility, maturity, listening well to young adults and using strategic planning tools such as the NRVC/CARA study.

If we accept the challenges of focusing on “names” rather than numbers, then, instead of burnout, we might find this period of vocation/formation ministry to be an exciting experience of humility and hope.

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In this essay, I will use “vocation directors” and “formators” interchangeably. I believe the jobs are similar and the tasks of nurturing the spiritual and psychological welfare of the person in discernment or formation are similar.

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