

DELNECA: A RETREAT FOR VOCATION DISCERNMENT, particularly to the priesthood, but it can be adapted to be more inclusive of vocations to the consecrated life. This retreat was developed and submitted by Father Peter Puntal, Ph.L; S.Th.L., M.A.

DELNECA: A SCRIPTURES BASED RETREAT FOR VOCATION DISCERNMENT

I. BACKGROUND

DELNECA is an acronym. It's from the major terms of Luke Chapter 5:4 on the call of Simon the fisherman: "Go into the *DE*ep, Lower your *NE*t for a *CA*tch."

A. DEEP. The term brings to mind a variety of images: dark, mysterious, uncontrollable, profound, challenging yet hopeful. In fishing, people are more comfortable in the shallows. Peter and the other apostles labored all night and caught nothing because they were in the shallows relying on their own resources. Jesus appeared and told them to go to the deep.

Fishermen feel more secure and in control when the ocean bed is visible. The shallows are brighter and predictable but there are really no big fish there. If they're in for the big thrill, they've got to head to the deep.

In the Scriptures, "deep" is synonymous with "dark", the dark cloud (*nubes tenebrosa* - the symbol of the Father's presence – Sinai, Baptism of the Lord in the Jordan, Mt. Tabor). The profound knowledge of God not through human reason but faith is echoed in

John of the Cross' "Dark Night of the Soul" and Thomas Merton's "The Cloud of Unknowing.

Ultimately, faith will open our eyes to our true identity: that we are children of God through adoption, eloquently proclaimed by Paul in the Letter to the Romans (5:14-15): "For those who are led by the Spirit are children of God. For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you received a spirit of adoption through which we cry, *ABBA*, Father."

B. LOWER. The term pictures a number of things: a fisherman casting his net or a man lowering a bucket in the well to draw water. It also brings our attention to the Latin word *humus* (soil), the etymology of the word "humility". "Lower" also implies "surrender", "exchange" - thus leading us to the concept of prayer and "sacrifice". We go to Scriptures and "sacrifice" will bring us back to Abel, Melchizedek, Abraham, the brazen serpent, the prayer of Solomon at Gibeon and Calvary.

In sacrifice, God and man establish an alliance, a covenant. Terms are laid out, sanctions are clearly set and benefits are provided.

The Mass which is based on Jesus redemptive work in Calvary is the perfect sacrifice. God and man meet and exchange gifts. "I in you and you in me" which happens in communion is the perfect form of intimacy.

Sacrifice cements the alliance between God and man. Man needs to create space and time to maintain the relationship. Dedicating time and space for the beloved is the essence of worship. How can anyone say that he cares if he has no time and space for the person he claims

to love. Meaningful and constant encounter with God is essential in making the relationship work.

The Mass has three aspects: First, it the celebration of the PRESENCE OF THE FATHER, THE SON AND THE HOLY SPIRIT. The Spirit draws us together.

DABAR ELOHIM (WORD OF THE LORD) is not just a simple reading of the past deeds of God. It is the proclamation of the ACTION OF GOD (who has no beginning and end) throughout history. Right there in our midst, God is actually doing what He did before and will do it again in the future. The WORD (Hebrew “DABAR”) is the solemn celebration of God’s presence. Therefore, God deserves to be heard.

There are many ways by which something can be present: through the internal sense in the brain called memory; through images, pictures, statues and symbols. But Jesus’ presence in the Eucharist is REAL. He is with us “in the flesh” (the Greek *sarx*). This is what the Hebrews meant by MEMORIAL (*ZIKARON*, the participle form of the verb *ZEKER*), making something present, not just remembering something.

Secondly, the Mass is the celebration of the COMMUNITY. Everybody is celebrating. The priest presides. Effective catechesis is needed to form and inform the congregation that they are really celebrating the highest form of worship. The Mass is the same everywhere but its flavor, tone and color are tempered by the community where it is celebrated.

Thirdly, the Mass is an OFFERING. It is making present Jesus redemptive work: passion, death and resurrection. Jesus offered

himself for our salvation. We, his disciples JOIN him by offering who we are and what we have to God.

The last part of the Mass is mission: "Go in peace to love and serve the Lord and one another."

C. NET. The term has a number of meanings. Generally, it refers to an openwork fabric made of threads or cords that are woven or knotted together. It is also described as something that entraps; a snare. As a verb, it means "to gain possession of, especially after a struggle or chase."

In DELNECA retreat, NET refers to cares, responsibilities, pressures and stress even vulnerabilities and brokenness that weigh us down. It is important that we are aware of these dimmer spots. We should allow these things to surface in order to engage and manage them.

"Net" also applies to the way we handle our failures and vulnerabilities. We recall the Little Prince who said that the good thing about the desert is that somewhere it hides a well.

Paul honestly confessed that in weakness, there is strength. The poverty of spirit opens the soul to receive the infused virtues of faith, hope and charity. Essential to the discipline of ordained and consecrated life, the theological virtues can be closely related to the evangelical vows of poverty, chastity and obedience.

In our course "Good Shepherds, Good Leaders," the first module is about "knowing thyself". Self-knowledge opens our eyes not only to our strengths but also our weaknesses and limitations.

Our weaknesses and limitations are not obstacles to discipleship. They should never discourage us in answering God's call. St. Augustine boldly declares that grace is given to us not on the basis of merit but on the intensity of our longing. We have to intensify our longing and enlarge our capacity to receive. Remember the parable of the Pharisee and the publican? What did Bartimaeus, Zachaeus, Matthew, the woman caught in the act of adultery or the widow of Naim merit? Nothing. But their longing for redemption was so intense that Jesus could not resist the urge to answer their plea. God wants to give His graces but only to those who have the capacity to receive. The Pharisee's prayer was not answered. How can God fill him with grace when he is already full of himself.

People say that the devil is in the details. Yes, but God is in the mess! When something is not right in our body, we feel terrible pain. We go to the doctor who asks; "Where does it hurt?" The cure is at hand. By conquering our vulnerabilities, we develop strength. Holding on firm and strong in the midst of brokenness is the birth of virtue.

We need to identify the "net" in our lives to develop virtue. When the pain is so unbearable, we question our true identity: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Then Jesus said, "*consumatum est.*" This is the point when God takes over. Jesus is done with his work, the rest is now left to the Father.

The Net can lead us to God.

D. CATCH. The different connotations of this term help the retreat attain its goal which is helping candidates discern what God is trying to tell them.

1. To discover or come upon suddenly

- 2. To take hold of; to grasp**
- 3. To reach just in time**
- 4. To cause to become suddenly hooked, or fastened**
- 5. To become affected or infused with**
- 6. To hear or listen to**
- 7. To grasp mentally; to apprehend**
- 8. To attract and fix**
- 9. To charm; captivate**

Three elements are necessary in the discernment process: silence; awareness of one's longing; identifying and celebrating moments of grace.

- 1. Silence is essential in contemplation. Experts say 95% of communication is non-verbal. The discernment process requires a lot of listening.**
- 2. The fact that a person signed up for vocation discernment retreat is enough proof that he /she is struggling with a longing. He is seeking guidance.**
- 3. God grants his graces to whomever he chooses. Celebrating God's grace is the CATCH.**

II. THE GOAL OF THE RETREAT

When a person signs up for a vocation discernment retreat, it is clear that he is seeking guidance to know what God is trying to tell him. He wants to know what the call is all about, whether for priesthood or religious life.

DELNECA is a guided retreat that provides the appropriate conditions to help the participant attain his goal. The following are the conditions and materials needed:

- 1. A conducive place and location with a chapel or designated worship space with Blessed Sacrament**
- 2. Ample silence. No TV, cell phones or internet access.**
- 3. Sufficient time: The ideal is one week. Retreat starts Sunday evening after dinner.**

Monday and Tuesday – DEEP

Wednesday – LOWER

Thursday – NET

Friday – CATCH

The retreat ends Saturday morning after Mass.

- 4. Participants. The retreat can be tailored to suit the needs of the group of participants: persons applying to enter the seminary, seminarians, aspirants, postulants and novices, professed religious, deacons, priests. In my 27 years as priest, I was able to conduct DELNECA to all of these participants.**

- 5. Depending on the circumstances, the ideal number of participants is 25.**
- 6. Prior to the retreat, it is necessary that the retreat master meet with the superior or person in charge of the participants to obtain some background.**
- 7. Bibles, notes and pens**
- 8. Writing Board, (Screens/projectors)**

III. THE FOUR STEPS

- 1. Each session should be preceded by a conducive prayer related to the topic. It should set the spiritual tone. The retreat master could utilize the various styles of prayer: vocal, Scriptural, musical, or contemplative.**
- 2. The session is limited to an hour. Questions are optional at the end. The retreat master can use screens, laptops, projectors and power points.**
- 3. After each session, the participants should given sufficient time to process the points that captured their attention. Forty-five minutes of individual silence will be helpful.**
- 4. Depending on the schedule, after the silent reflection, the participants will be divided into groups of five to share comments, insights, experience and new discoveries. The sharing will cement personal experience and give it a communal perspective. The participants would be amazed to see how the Spirit works.**

IV. THE SESSIONS

GO!

Sunday After Dinner Session (One Hour):

Explain the purpose of the retreat.

Briefly introduce the DELNECA.

Session 1. God calls. Divine Revelation. When two persons communicate, the superior initiates the connection. The common elements of the Call. God initiates a relationship. He invites. The Call of Abraham, Moses, David, Prayer of Solomon (1Kings Chapter 3). The call of the apostles.

Reaction of the person: Inadequacy, unworthiness, doubt and fear of the unknown.

Points for Reflections: Identifying the Call. Listening to the Call.

INTO THE DEEP: MONDAY AND TUESDAY

Sessions 2 and 3. Discovering the Person of the Father.

Situationer: Countless devotions to the saints and Mary. Three major devotions to Jesus- The Suffering Christ, the Infant and the Sacred Heart. There's devotion to the Holy Spirit: Charismatic Movement. But devotion to the Father?

Present the Person of the Father from Scriptures. Refrain from using high sounding abstract theology. We want the participants to connect with the Father through the heart and not through speculative abstraction.

Three characteristics of the Person of the Father:

- a. **LOVE.** Which is right to say: do I love you because I need you or I need you because I love you? Let the participants vote. The first one is human love which is basically based on need; fifty/fifty. “If I don’t get my fifty back, I’ll see you in court!” Need could easily move to “disposable”. Human beings, on their own capacity, are not capable of unconditional love. It’s funny sometimes how people demand from each other something they cannot give (Henri Nouwen). The second one is divine love. It’s 100% giving; unconditional. The good stays in the object and it makes the object lovable. This is what the Father did in creation. Human love can only be true if it is a participation of divine love through grace. This is why human love needs sacrament.

- b. **LOYALTY.** Human beings take promises very lightly. “We eat our words.” God knows the meaning of a promise, when he makes one, he does it against all odds. Recall: John Paul II second encyclical letter: *Dives in Misericordia*. He described the Person of the Father as Mercy (the masculine form of the Hebrew *HESED* – LOYALTY OR FIDELITY TO ONE’S WORD).

Here enumerate persons and milestone events in the history of salvation: Abraham called from Ur; life of Joseph; Moses in Midian; the Judges, Samuel, David, the construction of the Temple; Solomon; the Prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah and the Book of Lamentations; Ezekiel); the Babylonian Exile, Cyrus the Great and Ezra; the Reconstruction of the Temple; the Greek Invasion and the rise of Movements; Julius Caesar crossing the Rubicon; the Coming of the Messiah, Pentecost and the Church. God never forgets his promise of mercy.

- c. **DIVINE GIVING.** “When God gives, He gives the very best.” Quite different from the way people give. We usually give things we don’t need or don’t like anymore. Even from our surplus, it’s still difficult to share. But look at Jesus in Gethsemane. As he stooped to the ground sweating blood and water, he prayed, “Father let this cup pass!” On the cross, Jesus again shouted, “My God, my God why did you abandon me?” Can you ever imagine the pain of the Father looking at Jesus? I sometimes tell people that the Father suffered more than Jesus. His heart was breaking in silence. Why? Because He was giving Jesus to us. “God so loved the world that He gave His only Son.” When God gives, He gives the very best!

Session 4. ABBA, FATHER! Before you know what you own, it is important to know who owns you. Jesus’ true identity: “You are my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased.” (Baptism at the Jordan; Transfiguration at Tabor). Focus on Jesus’ title “Son of God.” The entire Gospel is about Jesus and his relationship to the Father. He

talked to the Father before he called the apostles, before he chose Peter to be the leader of the Twelve, and before he performed miracles. When he said, "I and the Father are one," his enemies plotted to kill him.

He is one with the Father who gives him love, affirmation and support. After his baptism, he performed miracles, cured the sick, fed the hungry and transformed sinners. At Tabor, in the region of Carmel, he went away from the city. But after the Transfiguration, he was fired up. He told Peter and the rest of the apostles, "Let's go down to Jerusalem." He was assured by the Father. Now he could face his passion.

SESSION 5. "Doing Nothing Moments": True Presence. This session is about true stories of the father/mother–son/daughter relationship. It is a helpful tool to build our appreciation for marriage and the family. These are stories that people can easily understand, and participants will be invited to share. [It is often said or heard that if one did not experience a loving father or mother, one may never become a good spiritual father or mother. The hope and possibility of becoming a good spiritual father or mother must never be lost in one's vocational discernment.]

I grew up in a 300-acre farm in central Philippines. My father, a wizard in agriculture employed 40 people to help him grow sugar cane, tropical fruits and vegetables. At the heart of the property was a beautiful river where we fished and swam. I was a twelve when I remembered my father said, "Tell your mom, Joe (my younger brother), you and I are going to the river." "What will you do there?" mom asked. "Nothing," dad replied. We walked, dad in the middle

with his arms on our shoulders. My brother and I were noisy but dad was quiet. He never spoke a lot. Joe and I felt so loved and secure. I could never forget those moments. I keep them in my treasure chest, the power source of my vocation. My father drove me to the seminary when I made the decision to become a priest.

“You are my beloved so in whom I am well pleased.” The Father is not asking for anything. He just wants you to be with Him.

Session 6. The Temptation in the Desert. Read the entire text. Outline salient points. It is about the devil trying to confuse Jesus of his true identity. He does not want Jesus to rely on the Father. “If you are the Son of God...” He was forcing Jesus to replace God with something else.

This brings us to the concept of worship. Explain the first commandment. *Solus Deus* (St, Theresa of Avila). “Lord, you created us for thee, we will always be restless until we rest in thee.” (St. Augustine). God alone can fulfill our every desire, enabling us to become what He created us to be.

The truth about worship is that we become like what we worship. The object we adore could either make or unmake us. If it is incompatible with our nature, it will prevent us from maturing into responsible, thoughtful adults.

When people ask us who we are, we usually tell them the things we do. Then they start yawning while looking at their watches. Very few people are attracted to priesthood or consecrated life when they see a priest, brother or sister who is always tired. Get fired up, not burned

out. Vocation is not about the things we do; it's about who we are and who owns us. It's being a child of a loving Father whom we know through Jesus. He called us and gave us the strength to say "yes." In the middle of a dark, cold and rainy night, while responding to an emergency call, He is beside us whispering in our ears that He is so pleased that we went.

LOWER: WEDNESDAY

The focus of the day is Prayer, the soul of Liturgy which cements our relationship with the Father through Jesus.

Session 7. Prayer in General. Vocal Prayer and Contemplation.

Notes on Vocal Prayer. I remember telling my students in the Theology seminary: "We speak because we have something to say. If you have nothing nice to say, don't say anything!" Words are conventional signs to express thoughts and feelings. Therefore, words without thoughts and feelings are empty. Parroting words is not prayer. Words and sounds have the power to transform and lead us to God.

Vocal prayer should be said slow, loud and clear. Let every word open the door to the world of thoughts and emotions. That is why Jesus preferred short prayers like the Our Father. For example, "Our (implies fellowship, belongingness, community, family), "Father"

(God, love, strength, security, power, support) “in Heaven” (peace, comfort, rest, beauty, contentment, glory).

Notes on Contemplation. As Dean, I told the priests in my deanery about the importance of contemplative prayer, especially for parish and school staff. I suggested that they hold staff meetings every week. In these meetings, ample time must be devoted to some form of contemplative prayer. The priests reported that after a couple of months, morale had bolstered and they noticed a significant increase in productivity with their staff.

As a third order Carmelite, I also consider the works of Theresa of Avila and John of the Cross as milestones in contemplative prayer. Through the years here in Florida, I conducted a number of retreats on contemplative prayer for Carmelite Tertiaries.

Sessions 8 and 9. The Mass, the Summit of Worship.

Session 8 serves as background information on the Mass. In place of silent reflection and sharing, the actual celebration of the mass may follow which is labeled as Session 9.

The goal of Session 8 is to concretize everything we’ve said about prayer. The Mass is the summit of worship because it is the perfect blend of all types of prayer. As sacrament, it delivers what it signifies. The Mass is the celebration of the presence and encounter with the Father, Son and the Holy Spirit. The Spirit calls. Recall the words of the Nicene Creed: “I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of Life which proceeds from the Father and the Son, together with the Father and the Son is worshipped and glorified.” The verb “proceeds”

signifies that love in all levels builds whereas hate destroys. The relationship between the Father and the Son is love in its most perfect form. The Spirit draws us to the Father and the Son and infuses into our soul a new awareness of God.

Jesus is in our midst as we enter the church."When two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in their midst." We venerate the altar, symbol of his presence. We formally begin our celebration through signs and chants. Being in the presence of the divinity we cleanse and purify ourselves so that we may praise and glorify God with more perfect love for God. Then we ask. (Opening Prayer)

Here, recall the **THREE ASPECTS** of the Mass provided in the **BACKGROUND**. (Presence, Community, Offering)

NOTES ON EUCHARISTIC SPIRITUALITY.

People have been asking about the spirituality of the Eucharist. The words of the Consecration provide the answer: Jesus **TOOK** bread, **BLESSED** it, **BROKE** it and **GAVE** it to his disciples.

TAKE, BLESS, BREAK AND GIVE. If we apply these verbs to **BREAD**, to **JESUS**, and to **US**, we will discover an amazing parallel.

TAKE

First, we talk about the Bread. I made a little research on wheat farming in Iowa and Kansas where two-thirds of the world's grain is produced. Wheat is a winter crop. After the harvest around July, the farmers prepare the soil for the next crop. While the soil is being

prepared, they consult farm laboratories all over the world that produce the best hybrid grains. The quality of the new hybrid is judged on the number of barrels per acre and its resistance to diseases. Prominent genetic laboratories like the ones in Parma and Modena in Northern Italy usually get the farmers' attention. Orders are made via the internet. The grains are carefully and meticulously packed under controlled conditions before they are flown to the US. The packages are time sensitive. When they arrive at the airport, the farmers pick them up in person to be sure that they are in the best condition. (Talk about TAKE!). This calls to mind how God planned our salvation. From the call of Abraham in 3250 B. C. in Ur to Moses, David, and the Prophets, God fertilized the soil to receive the coming of the Messiah announced by the angel Gabriel to Mary.

BLESS

The seeds are sown in the fall and they sleep the whole winter. Alas! The first rain of spring sometime in March. Light and heat gradually intensify. Green little flimsy blades sprout from the soil. Heat, water, fertilizer and a lot of care will determine the fate of the crop. After three months, the heart of the wheat will burst with grains shooting up to the sky because they are light and sturdy. This brings us to the little town of Nazareth where Jesus was reared. The little boy grew up in wisdom and strength with his family, relatives and friends.

Again, with water, heat, fertilizer and a lot of care, the grains will turn gold and heavy while the stalks turn weary. When is the best time to harvest the grains? When they start to bow. If the farmers fail to act immediately, they will lose the crop. The heavy rains in the summer

will push the wheat to the ground and the combines cannot harvest them.

Jesus was thirty when he started his ministry. From the moment he received the mandate and commendation from the Father at the Jordan, he was “gold” to everyone. After three years, in Gethsemane, while stooping to the ground in agony, the soldiers came to harvest him.

BREAK

For the wheat, breaking starts at the moment of harvest. Before combines were used to harvest wheat, farmers harvested wheat by hand slashing them off the stalks with a scythe. Then they tie the grains together and spread them on the threshing floor. Threshing separates the grains from the stalks.

The grains stay under the sun till they’re brittle. When they are dried enough, they are shipped to the mill where they are again broken, pressed and processed to become flour.

The flour is sold in stores in packages. Baking begins by sprinkling water on the table. Flour is poured and kneaded (slapping, squeezing, shifting, turning, hitting, boxing). After the scouring, the flour lies flat, “dead” on the table. While shaping it to desired size and form, the baker brushes butter on it before it is placed in the oven. Locked inside the oven in intense heat and with the clock set to a specific time, the bread will rise, ready to give life.

When Jesus said, “I am the bread of life,” he really meant it literally.

GIVE

Being given to nourish is the highest point in the saga of the wheat. It's the reason why it was created. The saga of the wheat is parallel to the life of Jesus. By his death and resurrection, he gave us eternal life.

The Eucharist was called the Breaking of the Bread by the early Church. After being broken, the Body of Jesus is given to all in the assembly. Bread, first broken before it is given surely packs tremendous spiritual impact.

In the Eucharist, the verb "give" assumes a new level of meaning. It's not "giving to a need" but "[our] need to give". From the standpoint of community, the goal of the Eucharist is to create a culture of giving where people share not because they have to but because they need to. The need to give is the very essence of stewardship which is a response to discipleship.

NET

This is the fourth day of the discernment retreat. We already have enough tools to work on the difficult areas of self-knowledge. We cannot close our eyes to our vulnerabilities. We have to confront them. Our unwillingness to embrace and manage them might affect

and hinder our journey of discipleship. We have to be open to God's grace, because grace can propel us to new heights in our efforts to heed Jesus' call.

The three sessions will focus on the evangelical vows, three disciplines to persevere in priesthood and religious life.

Session 10. The Vow of Poverty. "Anawim" (poor) in Scriptures refers to those who are dependent or those who put their trust in God. They are open to grace which fills their soul with divine benefits. This attitude to openness allows them freedom from attachments and self-sufficiency. Recall the temptations of Jesus and his complete dependence on the Father; the prayer of the publican. The same reliance on the Father is prerequisite in every miracle that Jesus performed. In the light of theological virtues, poverty can be deeply related to the virtue of faith, a leap to the deep.

Vocation, by its very name and essence, cannot survive without poverty. It is God who calls; therefore, He owns it. We drive, but God leads the way and decides the itinerary. We have to follow directions and we cannot change the destination. Sometimes we make wrong turns and hit a tree; sometimes we get dented, a ding here, a dong there. But God allows some margin for error. As long as we pull back, do some backing and re-enter the lane, we can merge again with traffic.

One of the greatest challenges to poverty is false sense of security. We live in a culture where everybody wants to be safe and self-sufficient and where achievement is measured in quantity and

numbers. If we are not careful, our vocation will easily evaporate. Wrong attitude will kill our potential for growth. As Dean, I had a priest who has been an associate pastor for nine years. The Personnel Board thought it was time for him to be assigned as Pastor. So they called him for an interview. The board was frustrated and his promotion was cancelled because he would not accept his new assignment: a struggling new parish with financial and construction issues. I met with him after the interview and his shoulders fell. I asked him why he turned down the assignment. He said that the board offered him a poor parish and he didn't want to be caught in the middle of a fire. I told him that there's no such thing as a rich or poor parish. It all depends on the leadership of the pastor. There are good people everywhere. If the pastor has the right vision, he can move mountains. Look at St. John Mary Vianney. The bishop assigns a pastor to a parish because he knows the priest's potential. The young priest lost the opportunity; he could have used this assignment to showcase his abilities. I told him that the bishop does not send a priest to a parish so that he will be comfortable. No. He is sent there to work!

The vow of poverty means that we are very clear with our identity from the start. We should know who we are and who owns us. We should also know what we're looking for. "This is my beloved son in whom I am well pleased." Called to be a son, God alone is our true security and freedom.

Session 11. The Vow of Chastity. This is a very important issue in priestly and religious life. Chastity is necessary in all levels of human relationships whether married or single. In the light of the theological virtues, it is like the virtue of hope in action. Chastity is about loyalty or fidelity. It's a participation of God's character as being true to His promise. God takes promises very seriously. Man thinks he can play with promises. Without sacramental grace, it's very difficult to be loyal because man is incapable of unconditional love.

The Church has provided both clergy and religious tools to strengthen fidelity: the daily celebration of the Eucharist and the Liturgy of the Hours. The bottom line is worship. Worship demands space and time for the beloved. How can you say you love someone if you don't have space and time for him? Backing off from regular worship will lead to kicking the habit. I met a seventy-two year old nun who left her congregation thirty-three years ago. She confessed that before she left the monastery, she lost interest in daily Eucharist. She got tired of the routine, and she lost interest in prayer. She became seriously ill and was sent home temporarily. When she recovered, she decided to leave for good.

NOTES ON CELIBACY

This is the most controversial issue in priestly and religious life nowadays. People are searching for some meaningful explanation of why the Church insists on making celibacy a prerequisite for ordained and consecrated life. For vocation campaigns to work, boys and girls, men and women everywhere should hear something they can connect to.

In an interview, the CNN correspondent asked a bishop why the Church upholds the “doctrine” of celibacy. The bishop corrected him by saying that it is more of a discipline rather than a doctrine. As discipline, it is a means to realize the goals of priestly and religious vocation.

John Paul II insists that we go back to the sources of the faith (Scriptures, Tradition, Magisterium) in explaining matters and issues pertaining to the life of the Church.

Biblical theologians refer to Luke 20:27-40 as the foundation of celibacy. It is a witness to the Resurrection: “The children of this age marry and remarry; but those who are deemed worthy to attain to the coming age and to the resurrection of the dead neither marry or are given in marriage (vv. 34-36).” Celibacy is a testimony to the words of Jesus. As a priest once said, “By living celibate, we testify the truth of the resurrection.”

Celibacy is also an expression of sexuality. A vocation to be a priest or brother is a call to be a spiritual father to the whole family of faith. Similarly, the consecrated life for a young woman is a call to be united to Christ in a unique way, and to be a spiritual mother to those she encounters in her life and service. The challenge for priests and religious is to be joyful models of their vocations.

We should never underestimate the power we have received from ordination. In my experience, I can’t stop being amused by all kinds of people who come to me every day and say, “Father, thank you for being a priest. You have helped me reconcile with my brother,” or the two girls who hugged me while weeping over their mother who just

passed away, “Father, thank you for accompanying mom to heaven.” Handshakes, pats on the shoulder, hugs and warm words like, “Thank you for showing me the way,” “Thanks for the absolution,” “Thanks for being a good priest.” What a wonderful life indeed. These are the fruits of my celibacy, the expression of my sexuality, my ability to generate life.

Session 12. The Vow of Obedience. In relation to the theological virtues, the vow of obedience can be likened to the virtue of charity. Obedience is an expression of love, and it can be “tough love”. A priest once made a comment. When you do something you like to do for someone you love, it’s like drinking coffee, with cream and sugar. But when you have to do something for someone you don’t like, it’s like drinking coffee, black, no cream, no sugar.

When I was a seminarian in the college seminary, I remember our rector telling us that being obedient is still the surest way to progress in vocation. It can be the virtue of charity in action.

Sometimes it is so tempting to question the decisions made by our superiors. We hear some priests murmur, “Do they know what they are doing?” “Are they in touch with reality?” Well, sometimes we feel they don’t. But that’s not the point. The point is that - whether we like it or not – we have to obey because our superiors’ decisions represent the will of God.

The vow of obedience requires a right attitude. This is the goal of seminary training and on-going formation of priests and religious. Seminary formation is really 100% drill in the vow of obedience.

CATCH

This is the last day of the discernment retreat. The candidates are invited to recall the first session that dealt with the call. The goal of the day is to give the participants ample opportunity to seriously consider their vocation. Again, it is good to look back at the beginning and ask the participants why they checked into a vocation discernment retreat.

The biblical text in focus is the final conversation of Jesus and Peter in John 21:15-17. Three times Jesus asked Peter if he loves him. There will be three sessions dealing with the three questions. The sessions will be cut to 30 minutes, each followed by a two-hour reflection. There will be 45 minutes of sharing after each reflection.

Session 13. "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" I interpret this text as referring to the initial call of Peter. Leaving his nets and boat, he immediately followed Jesus. Heeding the Master's call was Peter's act of faith. He did not hesitate to respond. He acted immediately. He was open for guidance. He allowed himself to be formed.

The following questions are relevant. How did I know that God was calling me? What was my initial reaction? Was I doubtful, scared and confused? What did I decide to do?

Session 14. “Simon, son of John, do you love me?” At this point Peter was wondering why Jesus asked him the same question the second time. I interpret this as referring to Peter’s performance as a disciple. He possessed the basic leadership qualities, having operated a small fishing business. He was also vulnerable as a person with choleric personality. Many times he appeared astute, narrow-minded and stubborn. He denied Jesus three times. But Jesus knew that Peter was a good man.

The following questions are relevant to the participants. How am I handling the call? How is it affecting my life? Am I comfortable with it? Is my vocation compatible with my behavior and conduct? Am I willing to risk? Can I accept its demands? What are the obstacles I have encountered? How do I react to negativity and conflict?

How is my prayer life? Have I noticed an inner desire, an inner longing for God? Do I find spiritual nourishment in the sacraments?

How is my family and friends taking my decision? Am I open for guidance?

Session 15. “Simon, son of John, do you love me?” At this point, Peter’s temperature was rising. Probably, shivering and in tears, he gave Jesus his final answer:

“Lord, you know everything, you know that I love you. I may not be the best disciple because many times I failed you. I was narrow-minded, astute and stubborn. I am deeply sorry that I did not live up to your expectations. When I asked to walk on water, I didn’t even know what I was saying. One time I got so stupid that I understood why you drove me away and called me Satan. I denied you three times

because I was scared to death. But you know, I have nowhere else to go. I cannot imagine life without you. You're all I have. With you, I have eternal life!"

THE END

DELNECA: A SCRIPTURES BASED RETREAT FOR VOCATION DISCERNMENT

I. BACKGROUND

- A. DEEP**
- B. LOWER**
- C. NET**
- D. CATCH**

II. THE GOAL OF THE RETREAT

III. THE FOUR STEPS

IV. THE SESSIONS

SESSION 1 – GOD CALLS

SESSIONS 2 & 3 – DISCOVERING THE PERSON OF THE FATHER

SESSION 4 – ABBA, FATHER!

SESSION 5 – “DOING NOTHING MOMENTS”

SESSION 6 – THE TEMPTATION IN THE DESERT

SESSION 7 – PRAYER IN GENERAL

SESSIONS 8 & 9 – THE MASS, THE SUMMIT OF WORSHIP

NOTES ON EUCHARISTIC SPIRITUALITY

SESSION 10 – THE VOW OF POVERTY

SESSION 11 – THE VOW OF CHASTITY

NOTES ON CELIBACY

SESSION 12 – THE VOW OF OBEDIENCE

SESSION 13 – “SIMON, SON OF JOHN, DO YOU LOVE ME?”

SESSION 14 - “SIMON, SON OF JOHN, DO YOU LOVE ME?”

SESSION 15 - “SIMON, SON OF JOHN, DO YOU LOVE ME?”