

## THE SOCIOLOGY OF A PRIESTLY VOCATION

---

*An address by the Very Reverend Peter M. J. Stravinskias, Ph.D., S.T.D., to the Society of Catholic Social Scientists Annual Meeting on 30 October 2009, at the University of Mississippi, School of Law.*

I am interested in the childhood experiences that give us clues about the nature of spirituality. Talking with adults about their religious upbringing has convinced me that spirituality is much more deeply rooted in our personal histories, in our families and congregations, than in anything else. If we are to understand it, one way of doing so is by paying close attention to these life histories.<sup>1</sup>

So begins Robert Wuthnow in his intriguing and compelling work, *Growing Up Religious: Christians and Jews and Their Journeys of Faith*. He goes on:

For many people remembering and telling their stories is a way of making sense of their lives and of their continuing quest for the sacred. Childhood religiosity is not simply the experience of children but of adults as well. Memories ripen with age, especially as they are refined in an ongoing dialogue with one's experiences.

He explains:

My aim is to recapture what it has meant for a significant proportion of the American public to have grown up religious. I am interested in how people conceive of their religious upbringing, and in understanding what seems memorable and significant to them, more than I am in abstract theories of religious socialization. My methodology has been to ask ordinary people to talk at length about their experiences and memories and to encourage them to tell the stories they use to make sense of their spiritual journeys.

He then makes his sociological profession of faith that:

Effective religious socialization comes about through embedded practices; that is, through specific, deliberate

religious activities that are firmly intertwined with the daily habits of family routines, of eating and sleeping, of having conversations, of adorning the spaces in which people live, of celebrating the holidays, and of being part of a community. Compared with these practices, the formal teachings of religious leaders often pale in significance. Yet when such practices are present, formal teachings also become more important.<sup>2</sup>

Many of you hearing these declarations from Wuthnow will recall how his approach departs markedly from the developed conventional wisdom of the sixties, which asserted without fear of contradiction that Catholicism is an “adult religion” and, therefore, the Church ought not waste time, energy, and financial resources on children.

With all this in mind, allow me to launch into what I want to dub “an autobiography of a priestly vocation,” offered in this Year of the Priest.

St. Paul, in reflecting on his own vocation, refers to himself as “one born out of the normal course” (1 Cor 15:8). I could echo that in many ways, inasmuch as I was the only child of parents who were not married in the Church, who expressed no serious interest in practicing the Catholic Faith, who had never attended Catholic schools themselves, and yet who insisted that their boy be enrolled in the parish school. In other ways, I had a very typical growth and development in the Catholic community. Just as Paul could boast of his having been a Jew’s Jew, having sat at the feet of Gamaliel (cf. Acts 22:3), I too can point to the 1950s Catholic version of the same.

In September of 1954, my mother hied me off to St. Rose of Lima School in Newark for registration. In those days, in addition to certificates of birth, baptism, and inoculation, one was also to present the parents’ marriage certificate. When Sister Matthew Joseph asked for that document, my feisty mother exclaimed, “You wouldn’t acknowledge it!” Without missing a beat, Sister replied, “Oh, well, we’ll have to work on that, won’t we?” With that, I was left in the care of the sisters for the next thirteen years.

As an only child, I truly looked forward to school, since I would have the company of other children. On my first day of kindergarten, Monsignor John Gormley, the pastor, came into class to welcome us. When I got home that afternoon, my mother asked how everything had gone at school: How did I find Sister? The other kids? Did I learn

anything? Enthusiastically, I replied: “Everything was great. And I learned what I want to be when I grow up—a Monsignor! I really like his outfit.” I hope my appreciation for the priesthood has grown since that first spark of interest, but that’s how it all started.

From 1954 to 1961, I inhabited what some in later years would disparagingly refer to as a “Catholic ghetto,” which is to say that I never performed a significant human action off church property and, aside from my father’s Jewish business associates, I never met a non-Catholic until sixth grade (except for the Episcopalian janitor and his family in our apartment building). I once asked my mother what an Episcopalian was. Her pithy reply? “Oh, they just go to Mass in English!” How things have changed on both fronts, eh?

The parish school was the bonding element among groups and generations within the mega-parish of St. Rose, with its nearly 2000 children in the school, 35 sisters, and seven full-time priests. Sunday Masses began at 6:00 a.m.—on the hour in the upper church, on the half-hour in the lower church. Needless to say, the priests distributed Holy Communion at every Mass. The celebration of the sacred rites became for me a *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*. I had no doubt that the God of the Universe was present in our church and among us when we gathered to worship Him in that sacred place. And that experience was transferred to prayer anywhere else. Contrary to the recollections of some of my generation, I never attended a single Mass in which the priest mumbled in a foreign language, with his back to the people, as they prayed their rosaries or engaged in their private devotions. We had full congregational participation at every Mass. Indeed, by fourth grade, we had committed to memory seven Gregorian Chant Masses. The last two Masses on the Sunday schedule were a High Mass and a Solemn High Mass, respectively; I lived for those awe-inspiring glimpses into eternity.

In our neighborhood, which was not identified as much as the Roseville section of Newark as by the parish name, clergy and religious were highly visible and omnipresent. The priests were like the cops “on the beat.” With amusement, I used to enjoy watching Monsignor Carney walking down Orange Street on a Monday morning, greeting people in their apartment windows and, not infrequently, inquiring if Mrs. Smith were better today since he had missed her at church on Sunday. The rectory was home to a cohesive, attractive fraternity, with four of the men under forty years of age; the differences in personality and style were not destructive but enriching and appealing. We knew that our priests really liked each other. In addition to the liturgical side of life, the priests taught in the parish school; they played with us at recess and

lunch-time; they moderated a veritable panoply of organizations for every conceivable group and taste; they did their “duty days” on Monday through Friday evenings in the parish library, where they were available to advise parishioners on good Catholic reading or to answer questions on the Faith. I don’t think I ever saw one of them look tired, and they only looked happy.

The Church of my boyhood had male and female faces alike, with both priests and sisters visible, active, and influential.

The sisters did yeoman duty. My smallest class in grammar school was 68 kids, and that nun was the principal! They were superb educators, loving surrogate mothers, vibrant examples of living faith and commitment. Again, unlike some of the horror stories told by some of my contemporaries, I never witnessed a single child being brutalized. Each Sister of Charity did have a paddle hanging from the front blackboard, with the inscription, “The Board of Education applies to the seat of the pants.” When someone got out of line, Sister merely gestured toward the board, bringing the plea, “No, ’Stir, please.”

In this context, it might do well to observe that neither the priests nor the nuns had a “job description.” In the 1980s, I had a semi-retired sister working for me as an office assistant. One day, she informed me she had to miss work the next day because of a “community meeting,” which she knew I thought very little of (as did she). She mused, “You know, Father, I’ve been a religious for 65 years. For my first 50 years, we never had a contract or any community meetings, but we all knew who we were and what we were supposed to do. In the past fifteen years, we haven’t stopped having mission statements, contracts, and community meetings—and nobody seems to have a clue as to who she is or what she should be doing!” But I digress.

By second grade, I asked to begin serving Mass. Sister Rita Gertrude said it would be inappropriate until I had made my First Holy Communion. So, second grade provided me with two powerful goals: receiving Our Lord in Holy Communion for the first time, and then becoming an altar boy. I can still see myself kneeling in the precise spot at the altar rail where I waited to make Jesus my most welcome Guest for the first time. I should note that our class was the first to communicate under the then-new norms of the three-hour Eucharistic fast, rather than the midnight fast.

The very next school day, I assaulted Sister Rita to begin my training for service at the altar; she then reminded me that this was normally not undertaken until fourth grade. I reminded her that she had told me months earlier that I could embark on the program after my First Communion; of course, she had not really said exactly that, but she

acquiesced and came to school the next day with the four-sided laminated card of altar boy responses in Latin, which she ceremoniously deposited into my hand with the directive, “When you memorize the *Suscipiat*, come back and recite it for me, and then I’ll send you off to Father O’Leary.” Old altar boys will never forget that learning the *Suscipiat* was the acid test, since it contained a whole series of Latin tongue-twisters. About a week later, I resurfaced with it memorized, and I was off to Father O’Leary, who became my personal hero and model. I would be remiss were I not to note that Sister Rita Gertrude was 78 years old when she taught me, continuing to teach until age 92, dying at 102, and having taught in the same classroom for 46 years! Her funeral Mass was held at St. Rose’s, rather than at the motherhouse, because so many people wanted to participate, causing some ways to say they all came out just to make sure she was finally dead!

Serving Holy Mass was the love of my life, as was helping the sisters in the sacristy set up for and clean up after the numerous services of the week. It was also in second grade that I began to celebrate Mass myself, making my own vestments, using a quarter to trace and cut out hosts from my Lithuanian grandmother’s Christmas and Easter wafers, pushing the dining room table up against the wall. Given my more nuanced liturgical convictions today, I am embarrassed to admit that I permitted my Ukrainian grandmother who lived with us to serve those Masses!

A most important element of my vocational journey was attending a vocations club hosted by the Passionist Fathers in Union City. It consisted of age-appropriate groups, meeting once a month on a Sunday afternoon for a film on a saint or religious order, a seasonal devotion, and good camaraderie. It had the effect of offering grammar school and high school boys both institutional affirmation and peer support. In other words, we knew that the Church took us seriously, and perhaps even more importantly, because of being with hundreds of like-minded fellows, we didn’t feel “weird.” Priesthood was seen as a very normal and even desirable life-choice. An interesting footnote: The night I entered the seminary, I discovered that out of a class of 37 young men, all 37 of us had participated in that vocations club!

In 1960, my parents wanted to move out of the city, about forty miles south. The move was postponed for a year, however, because there was no room in the local Catholic school. As you might have surmised by now, both my parents had become devout believers, with my mother even serving as a full-time volunteer at school. I refer to what happened as “reverse evangelization,” that is, because of what I received from the parochial school, I went home and passed it on to my parents who,

incidentally, were never anything but supportive of their only child becoming a priest. After being on a waiting list for a year, we got word there would be “room in the inn” for me at St. Rose’s in Freehold, New Jersey (my mother was happy that I was able to wear the same monogrammed school tie: SRL!).

The Freehold experience was a big change in many ways: It was a small town, a small parish and a small parish school (we even had two grades in the same classroom). The biggest culture shock, though, was that it was a thoroughly Protestant town. On the first day of sixth grade, as little Peter left the house in his Catholic school uniform, 95-year-old Mrs. Vanderveer, sitting on her front porch across the street in a rocker with her shotgun (to shoot out the tires of anyone who parked in front her house), shouted across the yard to her neighbor: “Oh my God, Mabel, they’re Cat’lics!” And for the next three years, no one in the neighborhood spoke to us.

Although the new parish was not as liturgically attuned as the one in Newark, the points of continuity were comforting. I continued to serve Mass every day, being named president of the altar boys already in seventh grade, and turned into a first-class “sacristy rat.” In 1963, the parish celebrated its 110th anniversary; it was only on its second pastor! The founder, Monsignor Kivelitz, had reigned for sixty years, while the incumbent had done so for a mere fifty. Will you be surprised if I tell you that since 1963, that parish has had more than a dozen pastors? I couldn’t forgive myself if I didn’t tell you that my classmate at St. Rose’s was none other than Bruce Springsteen. And to anticipate your questions, yes, he was frequently in trouble with the nuns; in fact, he was the only one in our graduating class not to go to a Catholic high school.

As my last semester of grammar school moved along, high school decisions had to be made. Having visited a minor seminary a few months earlier, I was determined to go that route. To my astonishment, my normally supportive parents were adamant in opposing such a move; even more astonishing to me was that they had marshaled the voice and vote of the new pastor, Father Thomas Ridge, who said: “A Catholic high school, absolutely; a minor seminary, absolutely not!” The reason was very simple: Father’s conviction and that of my parents that a boy belongs living at home for those critically formative years. Interestingly enough, the highest percentage of priestly defections in the post-conciliar era were the products of high school seminaries. Father Ridge ended up a life-long friend of mine—a truly wise and holy priest.

So, the hunt was then on for a high school. I had a scholarship for Christian Brothers Academy in Lincroft, New Jersey, but used to get sick on buses, so that wouldn’t work. For some unknown reason, the

train service between Freehold and Trenton was to be terminated at the end of my eighth grade year, thus making attendance at Cathedral High School impossible. We couldn't afford to live in proximity to St. Rose High School in Belmar. Then my father heard about a brand new high school in the backwater town of Toms River. St. Joseph's had not even had its first graduating class. There was room for me, and housing was affordable as we bought a house just five blocks from the parish plant.

Toms River had been a hotbed of virulent anti-Catholicism, but migration from North Jersey and New York was changing that. The tiny high school of 186 students that I attended now has nearly a thousand students; the parish grade school has a thousand (with 600 on the waiting list); the parish has been split seven times since 1968 and still has 6000 families.

At St. Joseph High School, we had eleven sisters and four priests, and a handful of lay teachers. It is a sign of the times that the school now has no sisters, one part-time priest, and a bevy of lay teachers. What was perhaps most interesting about my high school years was the attitude of classmates toward my priestly vocation. If I happened upon a conversation that involved dirty jokes or language, invariably one of the fellows would say, "Hey, clean up, Father Pete's here."

Priestly celibacy was a foregone conclusion in the mind of any Catholic boy contemplating priesthood, as it was for any other Catholic. Girls saw my impending celibate commitment as a serious challenge, causing a number of them to engage in a bidding war to get me as their date for the senior prom (I didn't go, anyway). In good humor, we had a special name for girls and young women who went after priests and future priests: chalice-chippers. On the celibacy front, it is crucial to note that, even as late as 1968, virtue was safeguarded by the whole community and not considered odd. The moral landscape was such that, within the Catholic subculture, abortion was unthinkable, divorce was only whispered about, and birth control was still a relatively unknown reality. Of course, truth be told, the Catholic moral landscape was not all that different from that of the broader culture.

Having received a stellar education—human, spiritual, and academic—I walked into Seton Hall University ready for any challenge and actually completed my bachelor's degree in three years with a double major, Classical Languages and French. The greatest achievement of my elementary and secondary schooling, however, was not the academics (as impressive as they were) but that I had come to know and love Christ and His Church and was totally prepared to give my life to them both in the holy priesthood at the age of seventeen. I had learned not only isolated theological facts or catechism questions; I had

been introduced to a Catholic culture, a way of life, that gave me the desire for more and the capacity to make a decision with firmness and conviction.

Nor was my situation unique. My entrance class of seminarians at “The Hall” had an impressive degree of commonality: All of us were under the age of 19 (very few second- or third-career vocations in those days); all of us had attended Catholic schools; all of us had been altar boys; and I have moral certitude that all of us were virgins.

The assuredness of my first seventeen years was quickly shattered as ecclesiastical life began to unravel, for I had begun my priestly formation less than a month after *Humanae Vitae*, with all the confusion and dissent conjured up by the mention of that watershed event in the life of the Church—an iconic conversation-stopper in 1968 and ever since, as Pope Benedict XVI has mentioned on many occasions. Not a few people over the years have opined: “You couldn’t have picked a worse time to enter the seminary.” How right they were. While the college seminary experience was not all that bad, the theology years were horrific, as I met truly bad priests for the first time in my life (along with some very saintly ones). The stock-in-trade, though, was heresy in the classroom, liturgical abuses on a grand scale, degradation of traditional notions of priesthood, sexual immorality, and active persecution of seminarians who adhered to orthodox views of the Church and the ordained ministry. Add to that, the approximately 100,000 priests around the world who left the active ministry during the last ten years of the pontificate of Pope Paul VI; it’s a miracle the suction didn’t take us all with them.

When such a laundry list is recited, a common response is: “Then why did you stay?” For one simple reason: I knew that I had to be a priest to be truly happy and fulfilled as a human being and as a Christian. Of course, as one might suppose, it was a rather rocky road to the altar, with massive doses of psychobabble attempting to convince me (and others of my stripe) that we were “unsuited for ministry in the post-conciliar Church.” We knew those “formators” were wrong, but it was hard to counteract their pontifications. To be sure, the tradition of the Church was clear, but that was scoffed at, and contemporary authoritative documentation was scarce.

Ordination did finally come (in 1977), and eventually some clarity began to emerge with the accession of Pope John Paul II to the Chair of Peter. Between the steady stream of documents flowing from the papal pen and his non-stop comments on the nature of the priesthood, especially during his globe-trotting pastoral visits, an arsenal of material was available to build up a case for the priesthood as the Church had always known it.

My priestly ministry has been far more challenging, interesting, and multifaceted than I ever imagined on that August evening in 1968 as I crossed the threshold of the college seminary. Although teaching, administering, and establishing Catholic schools (at the elementary, secondary, university, and seminary levels) has been a true constant from my first days as a seminarian, I have also worn many other “hats” from serving as a pastor, vocations director, and bishop’s secretary, to public relations work for the Church, to writing and lecturing on timely topics throughout the country and abroad, to founding a community of secular clergy devoted to the new evangelization, liturgical renewal, and Catholic education.

If you asked me to summarize the “success story” of priestly vocation promotion in my boyhood, I would say that the winning formula included service at the altar, Catholic school attendance, and a youthful perception of a vocation being taken seriously by the whole Catholic community. In the past forty years, all three elements have been terribly undermined: With the arrival of female servers, most boys have dropped off the scene; with skyrocketing tuition and waning clerical support for schools, most boys do not have the benefit of a Catholic school education; with the silliness of pushing for “life experience,” most boys are discouraged from even thinking about the priesthood until after college, if at all. In addition to the sociological facts of life, a spiritual principle and fact of life was at work: the centrality of sacrifice, which we saw in our parents, in our priests, in our religious. Immediate self-gratification was not only impossible; it was frowned upon as reflecting immaturity, a lack of faith, a sure sign of narcissism.

Naomi Schaefer Riley, in reviewing Christian Smith’s *Souls in Transition: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults*, reports Smith’s unsettling but irrefutable conclusion “that religious institutions haven’t done a very good job at educating kids in even the most basic tenets of their faith” in recent years.<sup>3</sup>

On the other hand, we knew what we were doing in my boyhood days, but in a non-reflective, intuitive way—which is always more effective than programs and campaigns. Wuthnow sums up his anecdotal research thus:

To say simply that such people were raised in pious households, however, does not capture what they experienced. Most would have said their experiences seemed natural. Being religious was a way of life. Indeed, to the extent that they form a distinct subculture, it is their religious upbringing that forges this identity. Otherwise, they are nearly as diverse as the American

public itself, including men and women, those who have attained high levels of education and those who have not, and people of all races and from all regions of the country.<sup>4</sup>

Let me highlight for your consideration two words of his: “natural” and “subculture.” Yes, it all seemed very “natural,” precisely because we did indeed “form a distinct subculture.” The call to priesthood and religious life was in the very air we breathed, and no vocations directors were needed because the whole parish was engaged, unconsciously, in vocational recruitment.

I submit, dear friends and colleagues, that unless and until we refashion a Catholic subculture in which priesthood and religious life are regarded as natural and have strong communal support, we will never emerge from the catacombs to which we have consigned ourselves, either all too willingly or, worse yet, unwittingly.

Permit me to conclude this perhaps overly long discourse by making my own the words of the great Cardinal Newman:

Let me dwell often upon those, His manifold mercies to me and to my brethren, which are the consequence of His coming upon earth; His adorable counsels, as manifested in my personal vocation; how it is that I am called and others not; the wonders of His grace towards me, from my infancy until now; the gifts He has given me; the aid He has vouchsafed; the answers He has accorded to my prayers.<sup>5</sup>

Finally, the soon-to-be *beatus* sums it all up most beautifully with these words, reflecting both good theology and good sociology: “Blessed are they who give the flower of their days and their strength of soul and body to Thee. Blessed are they who in their youth turn to Thee Who didst give Thy life for them. . . , that they may live forever.”<sup>6</sup>

## Notes

1. Robert Wuthnow, *Growing Up Religious: Christians and Jews and Their Journeys of Faith*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1999, xi.
2. Wuthnow, xxxi-xxxii, *passim*.
3. Naomi Schaefer Riley, "The Fate of the Spirit: The Wobbly Religious Lives of Young People Emerging into Adulthood," *Wall Street Journal*, 2 October 2009, W7. See also: Christian Smith, with Patricia Snell, *Souls in Transition: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults*. Oxford, 2009.
4. Wuthnow, xl.
5. Daniel M. O'Connell, S.J. (ed.), *A Cardinal Newman Prayerbook*. Denville, New Jersey: Dimension Books, n.d., 247.
6. *Ibid.*, 23.