

- This past Wednesday evening Bishop Jugis confirmed 42 young people from our parish. It was really a beautiful evening in many ways. As a pastor, I am always glad to see God's sacramental grace poured out upon my parishioners – especially our young people!
- During his homily Bishop Jugis mentioned that he had visited that morning with a young lady who grew up here at St. Ann's who is entering the convent today.
- This young lady, whose name is Mary Beth, was raised in this parish; she attended St. Ann's School, graduated from Charlotte Catholic, and eventually went on to college.
- For the past several months she has been discerning a call to enter the convent. Both Sr. Helene and I have been privileged to work with Mary through this process.
- This afternoon Mary Beth will enter the Poor Clares of Perpetual Adoration in Portsmouth, Ohio, a group of cloistered Franciscans. And today is actually a perfect day for this because today is the World Day of Prayer for Vocations.
- This is the day when all Catholics are called to pray in a particular way for an increase in vocations to the priesthood and consecrated life, for truly, my friends, every vocation for the Church is a product of prayer and sacrifice.
- As for Mary, she was greatly influenced in her vocation by the good example of Sr. Helene, Sr. Judy and all the other Sisters of St. Joseph who have blessed St. Ann's over the years. Mary also grew up in a home where our Catholic faith was practiced and fully embraced.
- Most importantly, Mary came from a prayerful family in which her parents encouraged their children to be open to a vocation. Not surprisingly, Mary has an older brother who is currently studying for the priesthood.
- Today in the Gospel we heard Jesus referring to Himself as the Good Shepherd, and thus the 4th Sunday of Easter is often called "Good Shepherd Sunday."
- In talking about being a good shepherd, Jesus makes the point that integral to being a good shepherd is the laying down of one's life. His point is that those who shepherd the Church are called to be an embodiment of sacrificial love as He Himself was.
- While being a shepherd in the Church pertains particularly to the priesthood and being a pastor, the truth of the matter is that being an embodiment of sacrificial love like Jesus is necessary for any religious vocation within the Church.
- For it does not matter if one is called to be a priest, a deacon, a brother, or a sister, all of these vocations require sacrifice and learning to live one's life for others. And I can tell you that there is great joy in living this kind of sacrificial life! Unbelievable joy, actually.
- Much has been made of the decline of religious vocations in recent decades. And certainly there has been a huge drop in the numbers of vocations in our country. Right now there are only 41,000 priests in the United States, 5000 brothers, and only 63,000 women religious.
- 40 years ago there were nearly 60,000 priests in the United States, 13, 000 brothers and about 170,000 women religious.
- I really do not believe that God has called less men and women to serve the Church in recent decades. I believe the problem is that some refuse the call out of selfishness, fear, or a lack of support, or they simply don't hear it because they are too distracted by the world.
- That's why every vocation is a treasure! Vocations do not grow on trees! They have to be cultivated. While we all need to pray and sacrifice that more young people will heed God's call to serve His Church, the cultivation of vocations begins at home.

- While I didn't grow up in a Catholic home – and thus there was no discussion of becoming a priest in my family – I did grow up in a family where faith was important. My parents instilled in my siblings and me a real love for God, and they taught us to trust Him.
- Furthermore, my father formed me to love Truth, and it was this love for Truth that ultimately led me to the Catholic Church, and subsequently to the priesthood.
- And thus, for you who are parents, I'd like to encourage you to be very conscious of forming your children in the practice of the Faith. Our Catholic Faith is the best gift you can ever give to your children. Our Faith is beautiful and it's true...every single bit of it!
- So teach your children from an early age to love our Lord and His Church. And teach them to pray. If they can speak, they can pray!
- Form them to be virtuous, and be careful with what they are exposed to so as to help them to be pure in every way. Our world is beautiful, but it's also dangerous, so don't throw your children to the wolves, but rather protect them.
- It is so easy for young people today to lose the capacity to hear God because they are too distracted by or attached to the things of this world. So be very careful about what you allow them to be exposed to. Protect your children.
- Also, ask your children to consider a vocation to the priesthood or religious life, and be supportive and encouraging if they express an interest in priesthood or religious life.
- Sadly, I've met many well-intentioned parents who have told me that they would never want their child to be a priest or nun for fear that they may be unhappy or lonely as a celibate person.
- But the truth of the matter is that none of us will ever truly be happy or at peace unless we are following God's will. So make it point to help your children to discern and follow God's will – and not your will.
- For those of you in the community, if you notice a young person whom you think might be a good priest or nun, speak up and encourage them to think about it.
- Doing this helps in the discernment process because it helps young people to see things in themselves that they might not recognize otherwise.
- I can tell you from experience that seminaries are full of men who entered, in part, because they have been encouraged by others to pursue a vocation to the priesthood.
- And for all of you young people, I encourage you to be open to the possibility that God may be calling you to a vocation within the Church. I would also tell you that just because you have a natural attraction to marriage doesn't mean you don't have a religious vocation.
- So many times when I've spoken to young men about priesthood, they say something like: "Father, I could never be a priest because I am too attracted to marriage."
- Being attracted to marriage is a natural phenomenon that occurs in almost all people. It's a good and healthy thing to want to be married. So if you're attracted to marriage, it just means that you are normal and healthy!
- But God calls some of us to something else, and if you want to find true peace, then be willing to open yourself up to God's will.
- To my shame I will tell you that when I first sensed our Lord calling me to the priesthood, I told Him no. I refused to be open to His will. I very selfishly wanted to live my life according to my will.
- But God was very patient – and very persistent. Eventually I came to realize that God's plan for my life was much better than anything I could ever come up with. And without a doubt, these past 5 years that I've been ordained have been the most fulfilling years of my life.

- Moreover, I know that I wouldn't have made it to the priesthood without the prayerful support of many, many people.
- My dear friends, it is a very special and wonderful thing to be called to vocation within the Church. Vocations are precious – but precarious. They are precarious because they require sacrifice. So let us pray on this World Day of Prayer for Vocations that each of us may encourage and support those whom God is calling.
- And let us pray that young people everywhere will be generous in laying down their lives for God and His Holy Church and find joy in the process!