Homily for 13th Sunday 2016
June 26, 2016
Readings:  1 Kgs. 19:16-21, Ps. 16, Gal. 5:1-18, Lk. 9:51-62
Place:   Stella Niagara
Theme:  Religious vocations
Mood:  Informative and inspirational

The gospel today reports Jesus’ inviting someone to, “follow me.” But the person hesitates. Another person volunteers, “I will follow you, Lord, … but first let me say farewell to my family at home.” And Jesus himself hesitates, in calling that person.

Vocations to religious life have suffered tumultuously during the last half-century. Numbers of diocesan priests, religious order priests, and religious sisters have plummeted respectively by 30%, 50% and 70%. This rise and fall and rise, the Church experiences about every 300 years; we have been through these organizational and fundamentally spiritual vicissitudes five times previously in church history. No need to worry, sisters, in church history, sisters outnumbered priests by three and four to one. Many explanations may be offered for this precipitous but historically customary drop. On the one hand, some civilization factors are external to and transcend the life of the Church. Other internal factors, I would suggest, are more symptomatic than causative, although we religious orders bear much responsibility for how we have responded to larger external and internal factors.

Where do we stand now? … Vocations to diocesan priesthood have been on the increase for the last twenty years. Vocations to diocesan priesthood recover sooner than vocations to men’s religious orders, and men’s religious orders recover sooner than women’s religious orders. The adage is: the clearer the identity, the sooner the recovery.

What’s working now? … During this past school year, I researched at the request of my provincial “what are universities successfully doing to attract vocations to priesthood?” I visited twenty-two Catholic, non-Catholic and formerly Catholic universities. Back in February that article was published in “Horizon,” the Journal of the National Religious Vocation Conference. More recently, CARA out of Washington, D.C. published a report of much greater extent, 1600 recently entered seminarians and ordained men, and 900 recently entered and professed women. My results and CARA’s coincide on most points with slight differences. And our recent data coincides with all the general data for the last couple of decades.

What works? … In grade school, girls more often than boys think of vocation to priesthood and/or religious life. Girls mature about two years ahead of the boys, and the boys catch up around age 65!!!! In high school about 10% of the boys and girls think more deeply about the possibility of vocation. At the university level, many students decide on vocation, but in this post-Vatican II era, they have been spending a few years furthering their education, working or serving in the world before entering religious life. Today, the average age of entrance into religious life is mid’ to young 30’s, but that has been dropping rapidly in successive years. Greater stability within the church encourages earlier decision-making for these vocations. Interestingly, Catholic colleges
and universities play a major role in developing vocations. While only 7% of Catholic college-age men go to Catholic institutions of higher education, these Catholic institutions account for 45% of all seminarians.

What attracts young people to religious vocation? ... There are no big surprises here. What attracted you? ... What motivated you? ... What feelings did you experience?

What attracts? ... Retreats, service programs, and campus ministry activities, namely, rosary, Eucharistic adoration, liturgy of the Hours, and Bible study. I would add Taize Prayer. They attend Sunday Mass and sometimes daily Mass. Among a dozen or more factors in the spiritual life, what matters virtually least: the quality of the homily? What matters most is the Eucharist. Catholic universities, overwhelmingly more than non-Catholic institutions, provide this: freedom to discuss religion with peers and professors inside and outside of class.

What very much encourages these young candidates? Personally knowing a priest, brother or sister, and having one person encourage them. If three people encourage the same person, the person is a lock to enter the seminary.

What discourages them? Friends, profs, and fear of being ridiculed for their decision.

I will leave copies of both articles with Sr. Peg Sullivan. Next Sunday, I would be happy to receive the copies from next week’s celebrant. Also, Sisters, after Mass I would be happy to answer any questions you might have.

“Follow me.” Remember when you said, “yes.” It has been a rather rocky road since then, yes?!!! But today, young men and women are answering the same call proclaimed in today’s gospel, “Follow me.” And they are answering in ever increasing numbers, “I will follow you, Lord.”