

Q

*What does it mean to discern a vocation? I thought if God wanted someone to be a priest or religious, that person would know when they received “the calling.”*

A

Many priests, sisters, and religious will undoubtedly smile at this thought. The word vocation comes from the Latin word *vocare*, meaning to call. A vocation is a calling or invitation from God to serve in a particular way. For Catholics, that calling might be as a priest, sister, or married person. Vocation is the way we respond to the invitation to share in God’s grace and witness to God’s love in the world. At times, that can be a difficult choice to make.

Discerning a vocation is the process in which we pray for God’s guidance. We listen for God’s message that is often quiet and unassuming in a world filled with noise and distractions. We look at our gifts and talents, seek the advice of others, examine our motives and listen to see what God is asking of us. The goal of discernment is to follow what the Lord wills, not what we think is the best idea. Many men enter a seminary to discern if that is their vocation, only to discover that their calling is to marriage. Others have resisted the idea for long periods of time, until finally they could resist no more. Some great saints have described that dilemma. In spite of what we might see as obvious, the call was not that clear to them. Others resisted, like Augustine, who prayed, “Lord, give me chastity, but not yet!” Vocation is a human process of divine origin and each of us must strive constantly to hear the call of God in our lives.