

Fr. Len Plazewski
2009 NCDVD Convention
Opening Address - 9/27/09

Good evening. Once again it is a great privilege to formally welcome you to this annual convention and to address all of you, my fellow diocesan vocation directors, as well as those from other places or ministries who have joined us here this week in New Jersey. I must admit that this is only my second time in the state of New Jersey so most of what I know about New Jersey I learned from watching the Soprano's! Like you I have come to this year's convention hosted by Region III to learn how to be a better and more effective vocation director. And so it is my awesome privilege to formally open this 40th national convention of the National Conference of Diocesan Vocation Directors.

We gather this year in the Garden State of New Jersey, in this *Year for Priests*, as we focus and reflect on *Jesus Christ the Great High Priest*. One of the major goals of NCDVD is to provide both ideas and resources that will be of help to those who work in diocesan vocation ministry. We are blessed with approximately forty new colleagues in vocation work who have been here since Friday night trying to take in as much as possible as they take on this most urgent task entrusted to them by their bishops. I would like to welcome those new members in our midst as valuable new colleagues and I would ask that they now stand so that we all can welcome them. Vocation work has many complexities today. One of the tremendous benefits of NCDVD is the ability just to reach out to one another to share ideas, to bounce a thought off someone else, to seek advice as how to handle a situation we may not be sure about, or just to have an understanding voice at the other end who's first question is not going to be: "*so how many do you got?*" I am now in my eleventh year in vocations work and I still rely on the wise council and fraternal support of other vocation directors in our conference.

Despite its crucial role in the Revolutionary War and in the founding of our country, we all know that New Jersey is generally not looked upon that favorably. Consider the fact that both of the NFL teams that play here, chose instead to identify themselves as belonging to the neighboring state across the Hudson River. It is not that New Jersey and Newark itself have made no contributions to American culture. In fact, quite the contrary, the list of notable contributors from New Jersey is actually quite extensive. Classic entertainers like Frank Sinatra, Sarah Vaughan, and more recent icons like Bruce Springsteen, Jon Bon Jovi and Queen Latifa all hail from these parts. No doubt the comedic work of Jerry Lewis and Lou Costello have probably brought a smile to our faces on more than one occasion. The author Stephan Crane was actually born in Newark, but like so many, he gained his fame not by staying in New Jersey, but by leaving. And while Grover Cleveland and Woodrow Wilson have somewhat rehabilitated the Garden State's political black eye since Newark's own Aaron Burr "took out" Alexander Hamilton in that famous duel, it certainly does not help the local chamber of commerce that five of the last seven Newark mayors have been indicted on corruption charges. Even though we may not associate New Jersey with "high society" it is a state **full of good and hard working people** who probably most often go unappreciated – actually that sounds an awful lot like vocation directors!

For the last eight years, every time I have gotten on a plane to come to our annual convention, at some point I am always reminded of the convention we had in September

2001 in San Antonio just a few weeks after the terrorist attacks that hit this part of our nation so hard. In fact the same airport that most of us arrived here at convention and to which most of us will depart is the very same airport that the now famous United flight 93 left on the morning of September 11, 2001. The 40 innocent souls who boarded the plane that morning had no idea of the evil plot unfolding around them. As we all know and remember, this flight crashed in rural Pennsylvania due to the heroism of the passengers and crew. Their heroic sacrifice saved lives and inspired a nation. A lot has happened since then. Our nation has engaged in two foreign wars, our economy has faltered, and political power has shifted dramatically, yet the somber scene in the airport when I boarded the plane for Texas that day eight years ago is still fresh in my mind. I remember that there seemed to be somberness and sadness lingering over everyone in the airport which was almost tangible. After taking my seat on the plane, a complete stranger stopped in the aisle, looked over at me and said “*Thank you Father for being here.*” From my vantage point, there was nothing particularly heroic about just sitting on a plane especially in comparison to the passengers and crew of United 93 or the New York City firefighters and emergency personnel. Many times since then, I have reflected on the words that that businessman said to me on the flight to Texas.

Sometimes I think we underestimate the significance of what we do as vocation directors. It seems to me that vocation work is not all that different from being on a plane with someone. So much of what we do in vocation ministry is accompanying those on the journey. Think about it. Most of the time, we do not choose who we will encounter. It can seem to be as random as a seat assignment on an airplane. We did not book their ticket. We do not fly the plane. We don’t even decide the destination and have no ability to limit the amount of turbulence a candidate may encounter, yet all this should not obscure the crucial responsibilities that we are given. Not unlike the potpourri of passengers on a flight, as vocation directors, we meet all kinds. Those of you new to vocation work – just you wait! We encounter the confused and those who are searching. We see the enthusiastic and the reluctant. We get to work with some extremely fine people, yet at times we also have to deal with the manipulative and the devious.

Even though most often as vocation directors, we physically travel alone whether in our cars or on a flight, we know that we are not really alone. We know of course that Christ accompanies us and that the Holy Spirit is ever present in our lives. Yet as Vocation Directors we can sometimes feel alone in our work without any true understanding or appreciation from the priests of our diocese or even our bishop. It is good for us to be together not just because we have common professional needs, but rather because it is Christ himself who wants unity among the brethren and it is Christ who also desires us to strengthen one another. We should not underestimate the importance of this. Not only does this support give us good counsel, new ideas, and proven strategies, but more importantly *it helps us to live out our vocations faithfully.* I have often told potential candidates that a vocation to the priesthood, especially in its early stages, can best be described as “**terrifyingly exciting!**” Some days that call may seem very exciting, even thrilling, as one contemplates the possibilities of “saving souls.” On other days when we think of the unknowns and worry about the perceptions of others as well as our own human limitations it may seem down right terrifying! I think the same can be said of vocation work, it is, in fact, **terrifyingly exciting** as well, but just like someone contemplating a vocation to the priesthood, who do not have to walk alone, so

too as vocation directors we need not walk alone either. Beyond all the keynotes, workshops, and networking, that is really what NCDVD is!

I would be remiss in my comments this evening if I did not take note of the historic keynote address we will hear tomorrow from Archbishop Sambani. This is the first time in our nearly half a century of existence that the Holy Father's personal representative will be addressing the vocation directors of the United States. In my letter of invitation to Archbishop Sambani, I described our membership as "*loyal servants of the Church serving in a ministry with much scrutiny and great expectations.*" To be blunt, I do not think that that could always be said of NCDVD. A remarkable transformation has taken place in our organization over the last decade. Gone are the days of blessing vocation directors in some quasi-Christian service with eagle feathers and soot. Instead we offer the opportunity to be with the Lord in the Blessed Sacrament and to encounter his forgiveness and grace through sacramental confession. We are not an organization of angry voices clamoring for change as to who should be ordained. Instead we are made up of priests, religious, and laity who love the holy priesthood and want nothing more than to help those men who are called to the priesthood discover and accept the awesome call that is already within them!

It seems to me that just as the identity of the diocesan priesthood has become more and more clear, no doubt in large part due to the magnificent example of priesthood lived out by Pope John Paul the Great, so too the identity of the diocesan vocation director has solidified as well. We don't have to be the "rah rah" guy or even "the recruiter." We understand the parameters the Church has asked us to work within and so don't need to drift into the areas of friendship or spiritual direction with those we are responsible for. We have been charged by the Church to work in the external forum as authentic mentors as we assist others in the discovery of their God-given vocations.

Allow me a brief personal opinion here. I think a contributing factor to the dearth of vocations that happened in the Western world after the Second Vatican Council was a lack of clarity about what the priesthood is. Too often in the past, I think that priesthood was described principally in terms of functionality. How many pamphlets and videos were almost exclusively focused on describing *what priests do* instead of focusing on *who a priest is*. Defining priesthood as a mere job no doubt was a contributing factor that allowed priests to bifurcate between their public and personal lives most often with scandalous consequences. I believe that that indeed has changed particularly in the formation of seminarians today. As important as the work that priests do, the priesthood is not a job – **it is an identity that must impact every part and every aspect of those called to minister in the person of Christ Himself!** I think we have a much clearer idea today of what it takes not just to get someone through seminary, but more importantly what it takes to make a man a good priest. Obviously *Pastores dabo vobis* and the revised editions of the *Program for Priestly Formation* have been major factors, but we see this in other areas as well. The impact of the *Institute for Priestly Formation* on the spiritual health of priests and seminarians and a growing sense of priestly identity in our county should not be underestimated. The *Fishers of Men* video picked up on this. It is such an effective tool not because it is a slick video with compelling music and cool special effects, but rather because it addresses the deeply profound question of who the priest is as opposed to just looking at the practical questions of what a priest does everyday. It is in short about identity not functionality. **If we do not have a clear idea of**

who we are, then it is virtually impossible to either invite others into that way of life or even model it for them. St. John Vianney, our NCDVD Patron, was a priest pure and simple. To the extent that a solid priestly identity grows and deepens in priests so too will priestly vocations. We see some very encouraging signs of this in our midst. Take for example the results of the USCCB's "Class of" project which surveys each year's ordination class. When asked who was it who first encouraged you to consider the priesthood, in 2006, 68% said it was a priest; in 2007, 82% identified a priest; by 2008 it was up to 83%; and among this year's ordinands (2009), 88% said it was a priest who most impacted their discernment. The word is definitely getting out there! But we do not need to rely on statistics. We know who our seminarians are and who those who come to our discernment retreats and programs are. They love the Church and are deeply devoted to the Eucharist. They aspire to holiness and are not ashamed to seek a relationship with Our Lady. I have had the privilege to work with many outstanding men and even though I have been their "Vocation Director," they have taught me about my vocation and have helped me to grow as a priest. It has been one of the unexpected graces of this ministry.

I would like to share one brief story. It has to do with one of our seminarians who is now in Second Theology. He was born in Vietnam and since childhood, he felt a call to the priesthood. Because of the limitations on religious freedom, he tried on several occasions to enter the seminary only to be precluded by the Vietnamese government each time. Because his uncle is a well-know priest and outspoken proponent for religious freedom, this young man along with several other members of his family were arrested in 2001. They would spend the next three years in prison much of it in solitary confinement. His family suffered much during this time at the hands of the communist authorities. His mother actually had her hand cut off and there were many other atrocities that I will not go into. After his release and deportation, he moved to my diocese and shortly thereafter came to see me to begin pursuing that dream of the priesthood that he has held for so long. While this story is remarkable in and of itself what is even more striking is something that happened last year when I was visiting him at the seminary. At our meeting, he handed me the pictures of the President of Vietnam and the Head of the Vietnamese Communist Party. *He told me that he prays for them everyday and asked me if I would pray for them too as he believes it is still possible that they can be converted.* Wow! What could I say in the face of such holiness and forgiveness? No doubt it is seminarians like him who have made me want to become a better priest. I am sure that all of you who have experience in vocation work have had similar such stories as well.

But as proud as I am of the seminarians studying for my diocese and the anticipation that I hold for one day being able to stand at the altar of Christ with them, they are not the only ones who have made me a better priest. When people ask me what is an NCDVD convention like, I simply tell them: ***"Imagine having some of the best priests in the country together in one room! That is what NCDVD is like!"*** How they ever elected me as their president (and twice no less) is still a mystery to me, but I can say this: *You have helped me not only be a better vocation director, but a better priest. You inspire me to enter more fully into the mystery of my own priestly vocation and for that I thank you!*

Yes there were heroes that stepped forward on September 11th, but there are heroes here too. **In fact I am looking out at a roomful right now.** You labor day in and day out, oftentimes with multiple responsibilities. You go from parish to parish,

school to school all the time, yet you do so without complaint solely out of love for the Lord and His bride the Church. In this *Year for Priests*, let us support each other all the more and pray for each other every day. The time we will spend together celebrating the Church's liturgies is without a doubt our most important time together this week. And I would urge you in a particular way during this special year, that every time you approach the altar of the Lord, you pray not just for vocations, but particularly for your fellow vocation directors.

In this *Year for Priests* it seems only appropriate we should not only look to, but hear from some of those priests that the Church holds up as models for us to imitate. At times we might be tempted to throw in the towel and ask for a change of assignment because we are not seeing the results at the speed we would like (or that our bishop wants). Treasure the words of the saint whom we would normally celebrate this day, St. Vincent de Paul who said: "*The grace of perseverance is the most important of all; it crowns all other graces.*" Pray for that grace; ask the Lord everyday for it! But perseverance and hard work are meaningless without prayer for as St. Vincent would also say "*A man of prayer is capable of everything.*" When we truly encounter Christ we are so willing to give Him everything and want nothing more than to be with Him. That is why the last words of St. John Vianney on earth are so striking: "*O my God, I prefer to die in love with you rather than to live one single instant without loving you*" St. John Vianney knew the Lord and it was from that real encounter that flowed the strength to do everything he did.

Were the Cure d'Ars offering one of our workshops on effective vocation promotion this week, I have no doubt that he would repeat to us as the same advice he was often known to say: "*My secret is easy to learn. It can be summed up in these few words: give everything away and keep nothing for yourself.*" My friends, **let us hold nothing back** as priests, as vocation directors, as vocation personnel, let us give it all to the one who loves us completely – **Jesus Christ the Great High Priest!**