

Fr. Len Plazewski
2010 NCDVD Convention
Presidential Address – 9/13/2010

Good evening. It is great to be with you this evening and a great honor to formally welcome you to this annual convention and most especially to have the opportunity to address all of you, both my fellow diocesan vocation directors as well those who are privileged to work in seminary formation who have gathered here in Milwaukee this week to learn, to network, and to pray. As most of you know, at this convention, the members of NCDVD will elect a new president and vice-president. This convention also marks the end to my time of service to you as your president. In addition to leaving the NCDVD Executive Board, I learned over the summer that I also will be leaving vocations ministry in my diocese at the end of the year. So, after twelve and a half years as the Director of Vocations for my diocese, I will return to parish ministry on January 1st. It occurred to me the other day that I have spent more time as Director of Vocations for my diocese than FDR served as president! Surely this is a sign that it is time to move on to other things. I must confess a bit of sadness as I stand before you this evening realizing that this is the last time I will have the opportunity to address you as both your president and as a fellow vocation director. Nevertheless, I am so happy to be with you as we gather here in the great state of Wisconsin for these days of refreshment and renewal. As this region, Region VII, is made up of three states, with Wisconsin being the northernmost, anatomically speaking I don't think I can say that we are in the heart of Region VII. So maybe it would be more correct to say that we gather here in the region's head – or more accurately its cheesehead. I hope and pray that our time together this week will help us to embrace the work entrusted to us with even greater zeal and enthusiasm. After all it is not just our bishops who are depending upon us to do this work well, but even more importantly, the people of God! I am most grateful to the Region VII vocation directors who ironically have had great turnover of vocation directors this year. So many of them found that not only had they been given the awesome task of helping to provide good and holy priests for their dioceses, but that they were having to host a convention as well! Actually, I can think of no better way to inaugurate your vocation ministry than to be in the company of so many good and holy priests. And so it is my awesome privilege, one last time, to formally open this 47th national convention of the National Conference of Diocesan Vocation Directors.

We gather this year in the Dairy State of Wisconsin, on the shores of Lake Michigan, ever mindful of the words of Our lady, the mother and model of vocations, and her response to the angel, *Thy will be done!* I remember my first NCDVD convention - and yes that did take place in the last millennium! It was held in Cincinnati, on the banks of the Ohio River. Though I would be hard-pressed to remember specific workshops, presentations, or even speakers, what I do remember more than anything else was the tremendous sense of welcome and encouragement that I received from the more seasoned vocation directors.

As vocation directors and seminary personnel, it is crucial that we put at ease those men who are beginning to discern a priestly vocation or who are just starting seminary formation. It is a critical time in their lives and I would add **even a sacred time** in someone's life when he seriously begins to consider the priesthood or when he has made that decision to enter seminary and put aside other things to answer the call of Christ. I am sure that one of the reasons that most of us even made it to the altar was the fact that there was a vocation director or seminary rector in our past who put us at ease and allowed us to see how God was working through our lives.

Hopefully we have experienced this same sense of hospitality as we went on to new assignments. This sense of welcome and support is key to this work as well. In addition to providing both ideas and resources for those who work in diocesan vocation ministry, we are called to give fraternal support for each other as we undertake the important work of helping to provide priests for our respective dioceses.

At this convention, we are very blessed with nearly fifty new colleagues in vocation work who have been here since Saturday night trying to take in as much as possible so as to get to work in this crucial ministry in the Church today. We welcome you into our midst and we hope you will not only be successful in your work, but that you will be greatly enriched by it. I now ask those new to Vocation Ministry to please stand so that we all can welcome you. We look forward to not just sharing our corporate wisdom but from being enriched by your perspectives and ideas as well. While working in vocations ministry exclusively for the past twelve plus years has meant some personal sacrifices, I can also say that it has also enriched me as a priest more than I could have ever anticipated. It has given me a deeper and more profound understanding of my own call as I have worked with those focusing on theirs. Additionally, I cannot imagine doing this work all these years without the support of those whom I have come to know over the years, a number of whom I now consider my very best friends. No doubt it takes a while to figure out exactly how “to do” this work. The challenges and obstacles to effective vocation work are great. Yet, realize this, we are never alone in this work. Christ is with us every step of the way and I believe it is Christ Himself who has brought us together in this great fellowship of vocation directors. We are only alone if we shut ourselves off from the Lord in prayer or if we isolate ourselves from each other in this remarkable ministry. Far from offering you my condolences that you are either entering into vocation work or still stuck in it, see it as a blessing and privilege and embrace this extraordinary ministry and count on this blessed organization that will be here for you whatever your need.

I don't know about you, but when I think of Wisconsin, the first image that comes to mind are those crazy football fans that make their pilgrimage to the frozen tundra each year to watch their beloved Packers slog it out in sub-human temperatures. And while the legendary “Number 4” has since moved on to the Twin Cities, their passion for football, beer, and brats remains unrivaled. Beer may have “*made this city famous*” but of course that is not the reason why we are gathered here tonight...at least I hope not! No doubt I am dating myself when I tell you that the image I most associate with Milwaukee is not the Harley Davidson Museum, nor is it Santiago Calatrava's Quadracci Pavillion nor even Lake Michigan, rather it is that unstoppable sitcom duo, *Laverne and Shirley*. It harkens back to a different time in our culture – a more innocent and less complicated time that highlighted the value of friendship, family, community, and work.

While I have no desire to glorify the 1950's in which that show was set or the late 1970's and early 80's when it was filmed, TV shows like that do say something about our culture and our values as a society at the time. Allow me a moment of nostalgia here for when I think of shows like this, I think about watching them as a child in the rather uncomplicated reality that was my childhood. I consider myself to be so blessed to have been given the family that I grew up in: two loving parents, who this summer celebrated 55 years of marriage and five siblings, each with their own unique gifts and perspectives, yet always there for each other. As a child it was a rare exception that we did not all eat dinner together and both Sunday mass and Sunday dinner were never to be missed! Perhaps this kind of childhood was not all that different from your own, but my experience of growing up was not in a big northern city or a western suburb,

but rather in a small southern town whose identity was rooted in the Catholic faith and family values. It is not that we were kept shielded from the world for even as a child I was aware of drugs, violent crime, and low sexual mores. But it was as if those things were shown for what they were – something far less than what God called us to be. It was an environment where my siblings and I knew the difference between right and wrong, the difference between the cost of something and its value, and where we were given the freedom to make choices for our lives. I know that my childhood upbringing is so different from what is the experience of most young people today. Fast food or micro-food has replaced the family meal. Real conversation has been substituted by ipod headphones. Online friends have more importance than the people we live with. I don't say this to bemoan the past, just an acknowledgement of our present situation.

This year's theme which calls to mind Mary's great "yes" is an opportunity to reflect on our own "yes" to God. What were our feelings? What were our fears? Did we try to run from our call or did we embrace it enthusiastically from the start? All these are good questions to bring to prayer as these are the very same situations that those who are contemplating the priesthood today face.

When I think of this year's theme and more poignantly the will of God, I cannot but think of my maternal grandmother. All four of my grandparents were immigrants to this country in the first decade of the 20th Century – two from Poland and two from Sicily. However, as the other three had died before I was born, my mom's mom was the only grandparent I ever knew. Angela Midili was born in a very small mountain town in Sicily south of the port city of Messina. She came to the United States with her parents as a young girl. She remembered with great terror the two weeks spent at sea and the terrible conditions they endured. Like so many other European immigrants at the time, she remembered seeing "Lady Liberty" as they came into New York harbor. She and her three sisters never lost their faith nor their Italian accents. She would later marry my grandfather, a very religious fellow Sicilian, and they would go on to raise eight children and in the midst of that move the entire family to Florida to raise citrus and work the land. They did not have much, but they had the Lord. The situation was made worse when my grandfather died suddenly at the age of 50 from a heart attack, leaving a family struggling to survive. It was the kindness of the pastor that made sure that my mom and her siblings not only continued to go to Catholic school, but that they had clothes and food. Though by the time I was born, those difficult days were a distant memory, such struggles never left the consciousness of my grandmother. Before her death at the age of 90, she would bury two of her children and one of her grandchildren as well as lose a younger sister to Lou Gehrig's Disease.

Growing up, it was not unusual to see my grandmother three to four times a week. We went to see her often. I never asked why; it was just something we did. She was a woman of great faith who when she was not working in her garden most often would be found sitting in her front room praying her various devotional prayers or the rosary. Though she never finished the 5th grade, she was wise beyond any formal education. If I could share just one thing about her, it was her absolute trust in the will of God. Grandma had certainly seen her ups in down in life, but everything, **and I mean everything** was tied in her mind and heart to the will of God. There was not any future event that any of us could ever refer to without her adding "*if it is the will of God*" so much so that even if we were leaving her house and we knew we were going to see her tomorrow, she would not let us get away with just saying, "*see you tomorrow*" for she would add "*if it is the will of God.*" Looking back, I think that she taught me not to be afraid of God's will. In ways I certainly did not appreciate at the time, she prepared me to accept God's will in my life and ultimately to say yes to the priesthood, long before I ever knew I had been called.

No doubt God's will in your life may unfold in unexpected ways, but it is never to be feared even if there is some portion of the Lord's cross that lies in your path.

I daresay that this concept of trusting in God's will is so often foreign to most Americans and in particular for young people today. Our society today focuses almost exclusively on self-determination, living our own life, and getting what we want out of life. It is easy for us, even though we have been theologically trained, to fall victim to this great temptation as well. How many times have we heard a fellow priest complain about an assignment or covet another because of his own individual want or desire? As Pope Benedict reminds us, God's will is something beautiful and wonderful even if we do not always fully comprehend it from the outset. Perhaps that is the message more than anything else that our young people need to hear today. They fear God's will as it seems to be something that is frightfully limiting of their human freedom instead of the wonderful gift that it truly is. But before we can ask others to embrace God's will in their lives, we must be willing to do so in our own. Accept your assignment as a manifestation of God's will in your life at this point. Instead of fighting it or looking to get out, realize that he has placed you in this assignment and that it is you, despite your own limitations, that he is using to bring men to His holy priesthood. How awesome is that! What a sacred responsibility you have been given! ***You will touch more lives through the men that you assist to ordination than you will ever do on your own even if you were assigned to your diocese's largest and most prestigious parish.***

This March, I had the great opportunity to go to Ars on retreat during the Year for Priests. It was a private retreat with only five of us there, including two of my fellow Board Members, Msgr. Rob Panke and Fr. Tom Richter. It was a tremendous retreat and being there in the church of St. John Vianney, our NCDVD patron, was a particular grace that had a very deep impact on me. I gained much spiritual grace and a new favorite saint in the person of the *Curé d'Ars*, but that was nothing in comparison to the grace the Lord was about to share after the retreat! After the retreat was over, the three of us went into Lyons for the day to visit the sites. After a great dinner and heading out to the airport hotel, we discovered that everything had been stolen from the trunk of the rental car. Everything was taken: clothes, cellphones, albs, breviaries, and, yes, even our passports. We literally had nothing left, but the clothes on our backs. I won't go into all the details, but to make a long story short, we had to make our way to Paris to get emergency passports.

Being the victims of a crime, it was initially hard to see anything good in this. It upset travel plans, messed up my schedule for that week, not to mention the hassle of having to worry about getting new clothes, a new computer, another cellphone, etc. At that moment, it seemed like a total disaster! You might be asking where is the grace in all of that? Well let me tell you. I experienced God's grace in the kindness of strangers from airline agents to hotel clerks to consulate officers. I experienced God's grace in the support of my fellow priests I was traveling with who reminded me of the need to pray for those who victimized us and to forgive them. I experienced God's grace in the tremendous hospitality of a missionary community of priests in Paris who bent over backwards to help us in this time of need. I experienced God's grace in a sense of detachment as things that I had come to rely on every day in my work such as my computer and blackberry were no longer there. It was as if God was saying: those "things" are "just things," mere tools, far from the most important things in life and far even from being the most necessary components of vocation ministry itself. Ultimately through it all, I was given the great grace of the reminder of being totally dependent on God's grace and mercy. This is the lesson that my grandmother had taught me. This was the life that John Vianney had lived. The

Holy Pastor of Ars never took for granted the awesomeness of his vocation and the great grace of serving *in persona Christi*. Though he worked hard, he always knew that being a priest was not about himself, **but about Christ!** He knew that there were so many things in his life which had they occurred in a different way, he would have never been given the grace to serve God as a priest. Though he was ever mindful of his own limitations and sinfulness, he was acutely aware how divine providence had guided him. That does not mean that it was always easy for him to accept God's will. In fact, we know that he tried to flee his parish several times, yet it all came back to the Lord whom he loved so much. So often, when people came asking for advice or in his preaching he would simply point to the tabernacle and say "*Il le la*" – *He is there!* As vocation directors and seminary formators, most often it is not a matter of us coming up with something clever or even insightful to say to a candidate with promise nor do we have find a theologically compelling argument to convince a man of his call to the priesthood. Rather, like St. John Vianney, the best that we can ever do for them is to bring them to the Lord, most especially in the Blessed Sacrament. If we point Him out to them then they can go to Him themselves! Do not be afraid to show them the Lord or simply to point and say: *He is there!*

As I said before, St. John Vianney knew that it was never about him, but rather about the Lord. Perhaps that is one of the reasons that he was so ready to sacrifice. He would say, "*My secret is very simple, keep nothing for yourself, but give everything away.*" We must be willing to do the same for those the Lord puts in our path. We know full well that to follow the Lord faithfully, there is always sacrifice. There is a great sacrifice required of you to work in vocations or in seminary formation. Embrace those sacrifices and present them to the Lord at the foot of His cross as did Our Lady. But it is not enough just to accept as a passive sacrifice those things beyond our control. I believe that we must seek out and embrace particular sacrifices in our own personal lives and offer them consciously for vocations and for the men in our care. No one need ever know what those sacrifice are, but the Lord will know! After all among the most important things that John Vianney did after coming to Ars was to make sacrifices for the conversion of his parish. Your success can never be measured in the size of an ordination class, but rather will be determined by the sacrifices you make for Christ and His Church. A successful vocation director is the one who puts other things aside, works hard for the Lord, but who ultimately knows that it all depends on God!

The dreams of our model and patron had nothing to do with himself, only the Lord, as we see so beautifully expressed in his famous prayer: *I love You, O my God, and my only desire is to love You until the last breath of my life*. No, it is not about us. It is not about you or me. It is not a matter of doing it "*our way, yes, our way to make our dreams come true*" rather it is a matter of opening ourselves up completely to the will of God in our lives. It is about not merely settling for our own dreams, but rather by saying, living, and breathing with profound hope, and from the depths of our soul, **not my will, but thy will be done!**