

5 Minutes With Bishop Robert J. Baker

(CUF President Mike Sullivan discusses vocations with Bishop Robert J. Baker of the Diocese of Birmingham. Bishop Baker, who recently celebrated his 40th anniversary of ordination, shares his thoughts on how all vocations require good stewardship of God's gifts. The interview is reprinted here with permission.)



final vows of two Franciscan Missionaries of the Eternal Word and also two Sister Servants of the Eternal Word. In both of those communities, I look at the commitment they make to the vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience as symbolizing a stewardship offering all people are called to make. God owns everything and we are the stewards of His gifts. The vow of poverty is the acknowledgement of God's sovereignty over our possessions. The vow of chastity is our acknowledgement of God's sovereignty over our bodies. The vow of obedience is the acknowledgement of God's sovereignty over our will. The vows of religious life are a commitment to that way of life and symbolize the total giving of our lives to God. This is how all people should think, that we are stewards of God's gifts. It is not just for consecrated people in religious life.

(Q.) What attracted you to the priesthood? Were there individuals whose example made you want to become a priest?

(A.) I had two uncles who were priests, my uncle Father. Clement Alt and great uncle Father Benjamin Alt. A vocation is not a genetic thing, but when you have priests in the family, the priesthood is appealing. I was mostly influenced by Father Cleo Schmenk, a local parish priest. He fostered many vocations among the youth in our parish in Fostoria, Ohio. He was a great example and a great influence on me. He eventually became the vocations director for the Diocese of Toledo. Father Schmenk preached at my first Mass in 1970 and this week he will preach at my 40th anniversary Mass.

So, my journey to the priesthood started with the influence of priests who modeled what priesthood was about and encouraged me along. They helped me with the initial discernment and then I began the fuller discernment process that happens in the seminary. I was in seminary in 1958 when Pius XII was pope. Back in those days it was common for young men to enter minor seminary, and I attended the Josephinum seminary in Columbus, Ohio and I did my high school, college, and theology seminary studies there.

(Q.) Was it during your seminary formation that you developed a life of prayer?

(A.) Yes. I would say that I learned to pray in the seminary. I was strongly influenced by my spiritual director, a Jesuit priest by the name of Father Richard Huelsman. He taught me to pray and helped me learn the art of meditation. Under his guidance I learned to really meditate on Scripture and develop a life of prayer.

(Q.) How does meditating on Scripture differ from the academic study of Scripture?

(A.) We have to be careful that we don't put a gulf between the academics and the spiritual because the Scriptures are spiritual books and are oriented toward fostering our life in the Spirit. However, that doesn't mean that academic study is less important, it just means that we can't stop there. Knowing the historical roots and the context, and critically analyzing the Bible is very important, but there is much more to the Scriptures than just that.

As Pope Benedict has emphasized with his work *Jesus of Nazareth*, the Scriptures portray a faith relationship in a historical setting but are meant to lead to a deeper faith in Christ. They're not just a technical or historical work. The goal of all the Scriptures is to lead people to faith, and therefore learning how to meditate on the Scriptures is basic and necessary. I think that the studies that are being done by Pope Benedict these days are an avenue to help right some of the wrongs that have happened with misguided scriptural exegesis. His work is helping people to understand how one should read the Scriptures in a proper theological and spiritual way.

(Q.) Do you have a favorite prayer?

(A.) The prayer of the Eucharist, Holy Mass, is critical and is the greatest of prayers. It is the prayer that leads to union with the Lord. It's the highest of the Sacraments. It's the source and summit of the Christian life. For a priest, offering the Mass each day is very important.

The second devotion I would mention is the daily praying of the Liturgy of the Hours. When we pray the Liturgy of the Hours, we are praying with the whole Church. The great prayer of the Psalms is the route to deepening our prayer life. The Psalms are the wonderful gift to us from our Jewish brethren. It is very important that priests, religious, and seminarians pray the Liturgy of the Hours each day, but laity can also pray the Liturgy of the Hours. It is helpful to take time to stop and meditate when a word or verse strikes them in the course of praying a psalm. This is a very fruitful way of praying.

And finally I would mention the daily Rosary. Marian devotion is very important in the discernment process and was essential in my own discernment. Mary leads us to Jesus and the more we are tied to her through the prayer of the Rosary meditatively, the deeper will be our relationship with her Son.

(Q.) Would you share with us some of your insights about the vocation of each person and the process of discernment?

(A.) I think the process of discernment for our vocation is tied in very closely with our understanding of stewardship. I had been the chairman for the U.S. Bishops' Ad Hoc Committee on Stewardship and focused on the idea of stewardship. The call of stewardship is to all people -- whatever our vocation in life. Each person has to discern how we will give back to God what He has given to us -- not just a small portion of our lives but 100 percent.

All that we have, all of our time, talent, and treasure, really belongs to God, and we are just stewards of those gifts. So we need to see our call and our vocation in that context.

When I talk to young people at the time of Confirmation, I explain to them that they are invited to give 100 percent of their lives through the power of the Holy Spirit in serving the Lord and His Church.

We can see this call to stewardship in the words of the priest as he lights the Easter candle at the Easter vigil. As he traces the symbols he says, "Christ yesterday and today, the beginning and the end; All time belongs to Him and all the ages. To Him be power and glory through the ages forever and ever." The words of the priest suggest ownership by God, by Christ, of everything we have -- all of our time, all our possessions, all we are, belong to Him. So it's a call to give back everything to Him. In that context, in our call to give to God everything, the discernment of a vocation to priesthood or religious life flows out of that stewardship way of life.

In the coming weeks, I will be celebrating the