

When people ask me about how I discerned my call to the priesthood I always end up half-apologizing because my story seems so dull. You see, there was no dramatic event or turning point, no voice from heaven or psychological struggle. What happened was that once I returned to the Church at age 25 I went off to graduate school in Baltimore and started living a Catholic life. For my age group and situation, I lived a relatively faithful spiritual life. I went to mass at least every Sunday, sometimes to daily mass. I did a lot of spiritual reading, etc. But I wasn't a saint, and I didn't notice any great graces or extraordinary changes.

But then one day, I don't remember where and when exactly, I was thinking about my future. Until then I assumed I would seek a professorship upon getting my doctorate – that was why I was working so hard on that degree, after all. But lo and behold, what came to my mind was the parish priesthood. I hadn't considered parish priesthood that I can remember. But here it was now on my mind as this large

reality – and so I considered it . . . and surprised myself by finding the thought attractive and comfortable. It seemed to fit. How . . . and when, did that happen? Somehow spiritual growth had happened while I wasn't even looking.

I mention this story not to focus on myself, but to look at how spiritual growth takes place in us. In our Gospel passage from Mark 4 Jesus uses the growth of grain and mustard plants as analogies for how the Kingdom of God develops. When the seed is sown and sprouts “the land yields fruit, first the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear.” The man knows not how. There is a gradualness to it all. We can even seem to be asleep during, but we're called to trust that, if we try to be faithful, the growth takes place in us through the action of God.

That is so often a good description of our own personal spiritual growth. I suspect that many people are disappointed in their spiritual lives because they seem . . . lifeless. Day after day, year after year, nothing is happening, it seems. But I wouldn't be so sure. If one is

faithful to the Gospel to the best of one's abilities, over time grace and change happen – as with my vocation. While Jesus uses the growth of plants in His parables today to describe this maturing, we might also think of the ocean tide coming in. The individual waves come and go. But over time if you walk the beach long enough you see a deeper change as the entire sea comes towards you. That is how growth in God also happens. Through the daily ups and downs He changes us.

Today I want this homily to be simply an encouragement for all of us in our life of the spirit. We are called to growth – to bear fruit! And it's never meant to stop. One way I'm currently taking seriously my own call to continue growing spiritually is what I'm going to be doing this summer. Since Fr. Chad is going to be with us another year, [yea!] I've applied for, and been granted, a short sabbatical. I'm going to be going on a 30-day Ignatian silent retreat next month at a retreat house in South Dakota. I'm leaving on June 25 and I'll be returning to Holy Family

on August 1. Until then Fr. Chad is in charge – seriously, I won't be getting any e-mails or other communications during this time.

St. Ignatius of Loyola wrote the Spiritual Exercises used in Ignatian retreats in the 16th century for the Jesuits, whom he founded. The Exercises take thirty days of intense prayer, led by a spiritual director, for the purpose of discerning how Jesus wants a person to develop and grow in his or her relationship with Him. I'm excited to see what Jesus wants to show me about who I am, and where I need to grow. I'm sure there will be surprises as there always is with God – think of my surprise at discovering my vocation. But, while growth can be surprising and challenging, it's so good to be stretched by God.

Where and how is Jesus calling you to grow? Are you listening and responding in any way? You may not be called right now to a 30-day silent retreat. But each of you is certainly being called by God to grow and develop your own relationship with Him in some way, like the

wheat planted in the parable. Since the conclusion of our Rerouting mission I hope you are praying about how to do that.

One small opportunity for that is coming up this week. This Thursday, June 21, at 7:00 we're offering an evening of prayer and reflection concerning taking our next steps to keep our momentum from Rerouting going. The evening will be modeled on what we did during Rerouting on Wednesday nights. We will begin in the Social Hall. I will offer some words and possibilities for things one could do over the summer. We will discuss next steps for the parish. I'll be handing out Pope Francis' document called, "The Joy of the Gospel" on sharing the Good News with the world. Then we're heading over to the church for adoration and prayer time with Jesus – because these journeys of ours need to be prayer-led. Please join us Thursday if you can.

But whether you can make that event or not, please keep looking for that next step in your spiritual journey. Jesus will work in us if we give Him a chance – and the time. Just look at my own life! A vocation

to the priesthood grew, I know not how, while I was minding my own business in prayer. Fruit ripens slowly and quietly even as we seem to be asleep. Mysterious and beautiful things can happen if we give the Grower a chance.