

Nativity of John the Baptist (Saint Meinrad Appeal)
Isaiah 49:1-6; Acts 13:22-26; Lk 1:57-66, 80
Notre Dame Church (Michigan City, IN)
June 24, 2007

Can you remember being in your mother's womb? Perhaps you've seen the pro-life cartoon called Egbert in diocesan papers. Egbert observes from the womb how he is being loved by his parents and also the possible threats to his survival in this age of abortion. It is unlikely that anyone could give an account of their development in the womb, but it is scientific fact that the womb experience leaves physical and emotional traces in our life after birth. The feast of the nativity of John the Baptist testifies that from our mother's womb—and even before—God puts a spiritual imprint upon us. “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you,” says the prophet Jeremiah. The prophet Isaiah proclaims, “from my mother's womb God gave me my name.”

Last week I announced that I would speak today about my alma mater, Saint Meinrad Archabbey and Seminary. It is an opportunity for me to talk about the state of ordained ministry in the Church. Particularly, this feast of John the Baptist lends itself to speaking about God's call to us in the Church today.

For over 150 years, Saint Meinrad Abbey here in Indiana has educated priests, religious, and now laypersons in the work of ministerial formation, theology, and pastoral ministry. Every seminary has its own character, and Saint Meinrad's character is marked by the Benedictine spirit. In the sixth century, a young Roman boy named Benedict, disgusted by the state of the collapsing Roman world, left Rome to seek solitude in the mountains to the east. In that solitude, he listened and heard God's call. Centuries later, in the time of Charlemagne, a Swiss Benedictine named Meinrad heard God call him from his teaching at the monastery to live in solitude in the woods.

Offering hospitality in the Benedictine spirit to some strangers, he was murdered and became a martyr to hospitality. He had listened to God.

The very first word in the spiritual guide Saint Benedict wrote is “*obsculta*,”—listen carefully. That one word—listen—contains the whole of Christian spirituality in a nutshell. Whomever we are—monk, technician, lawyer or laborer—God is speaking to us and we must listen.

The major problem in the western world today is that we are *not listening*. The world is noisy with traffic, industry, and loud music, but external noise isn’t the primary problem. It is the interior noise that is blocking God’s voice from our hearts and minds. It is the noise of seeking success and money as primary goals. It is the pressure of maintaining a certain standard of living and keeping up with the Joneses. It is the noise of ambition and competition. It is the noise of wanting so much for your children that they never learn to be still. It is the noise of pursuing greed over service of others and selfish pursuits at the expense of improving the world we live in. In some cases it is the preoccupation of actually discouraging vocations to the Church or indifference because of personal agendas.

The decline of vocations to the priesthood and religious life certainly has many sociological causes—e.g. demographics, smaller families, other opportunities particularly for women. The major reason, however, is the failure to listen at every level of the Church to God’s call. The question we asked when I was young was “Do I have a vocation?” But that is not a good way to pose it, because every Christian has a vocation, a call from God rooted in baptism, that commissions us to go out and proclaim the good news of Jesus. A vocation, whether it is to priesthood, diaconate, religious life, marriage, or the single state isn’t really about *me* and what *I* want to do. A vocation is about what *God wants you or me to do*. In almost every case in the Bible, the one called is *reluctant*, often resistant. The great prophets ran and hid from God. John the Baptist pointed to someone coming after him. The Virgin Mary asked “how can this be?” It was not success, money, or

personal fulfillment that motivated these men and women. It was trust in God and acceptance of their own weakness.

The work of cultivating vocations to the Church and securing the future of seminaries is *your* work. The priest can give good example, reflect his joy in the vocation, and encourage. But vocations come from *families*; they always have and they always will.

When we pray to God for vocations, we are not asking God to suddenly send a flood of new recruits. The vocations are already there. Listen to the scripture again: “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I dedicated you...” What we pray for is that the called listen and respond.

In the Benedictine spirit, Saint Meinrad Seminary has welcomed “listeners” to its seminary and lay ministry programs for years. During the coming week our registered parishioners will receive a letter from the Archabbey and Seminary inviting your support and participation. For visitors who are interested in Saint Meinrad and its works, I’ve placed envelopes at the exits.

Together, let us listen to God calling us to take up our mission—whether it is a call to serve in ordained ministry or religious life, or the call to encourage the young to consider it.