



An Inside Look

Rev. John P. Mack Jr.

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*To my parents, John and Lucille Mack,
who first formed me in faith*

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Series Foreword

An old Hasidic legend about the mysterious nature of life says that God whispers into your newly created soul all the secrets of your existence, all the divine love for you, and your unique purpose in life. Then, just as God infuses your soul into your body, an assisting angel presses your mouth shut and instructs your soul to forget its preternatural life.

You are now spending your time on earth seeking to know once again the God who created you, loves you, and assigns you a singular purpose. Raise your forefinger to feel the crease mark the angel left above your lips, and ask yourself in wonder: Who am I? How am I uniquely called to live in the world?

The authors of the five titles in this Vocations series tell how they approached these same questions as they searched for meaning and purpose in their Christian vocation, whether as a brother, a married couple, a priest, a single person, or a sister.

Christians believe that God creates a dream for each person. What is your dream in life? This is how Pope John Paul II, echoing Jeremiah 1:5, speaks of the Creator's dream and the divine origin of your vocation:

All human beings, from their mothers' womb, belong to God who searches them and knows them, who forms them and knits them together with his own hands, who gazes on them when they are tiny shapeless embryos

and already sees in them the adults of tomorrow whose days are numbered and whose vocation is even now written in the “book of life.” (*Evangelium Vitae*, no. 61)

In spite of believing that God does have your specific vocation in mind, you probably share the common human experience—the tension and the mystery—of finding out who you are and how God is personally calling you to live in this world. Although you can quickly recognize the uniqueness of your thumbprint, you will spend a lifetime deciphering the full meaning of your originality.

There is no shortage of psychological questionnaires for identifying your personality type, career path, learning style, and even a compatible mate. Although these methods can be helpful in your journey to self-discovery, they do little to illuminate the mystery in your quest. What is the best approach to knowing your vocation in life? Follow the pathway as it unfolds before you, and live with the questions that arise along the way.

The stories in this Vocations series tell about life on the path of discernment and choice; they remind you that you are not alone. God is your most present and patient companion. In the “travelogues” of these authors, you will find reassurance that even when you relegate the Divine Guide to keeping ten paces behind you or when you abandon the path entirely for a time, you cannot undo God’s faithfulness to you. Each vocation story uniquely testifies to the truth that God is always at work revealing your life’s purpose to you.

In these stories you will also find that other traveling companions—family, friends, and classmates—contribute to your discovery of a place in the world and call forth the person you are becoming. Their companionship along the way not only manifests God’s abiding presence but also reminds you to respect others for their gifts, which highlight and mirror your own.

Although each path in the Vocations series is as unique as the person who tells his or her story, these accounts remind you to be patient with the mystery of your own life, to have confidence in God’s direction, and to listen to the people and events you encounter as you journey to discover your unique role in God’s plan. By following your path, you too will come to see the person of tomorrow who lives in you today.

Clare vanBrandwijk



A Genesis

We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life—this life was revealed, and we have seen it and testify to it, and declare to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us—we declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. We are writing these things so that our joy may be complete. (1 John 1:1–4)

I think I might have a vocation. That remains one of the hardest statements I have ever made. I uttered these words over twenty years ago to a priest assigned to the parish where I worshiped. That priest simply said in reply: “You might. Let’s talk about it.” My journey started with that conversation and continued through four years in the seminary, three pastoral assignments, and countless Sunday homilies and eucharistic celebrations. Now this vocation journey includes writing my thoughts in this book. The path has encompassed unexpected twists and turns, many accomplishments matched by as many mistakes, and a mixture of joy, sadness, growth, and regret.

I am twenty years into preparing for and serving as an ordained Roman Catholic priest (including seminary formation), and my vocation still strikes me as unbelievable and overwhelming! I pinch myself daily in disbelief that the Catholic church, with the help of God, entrusts me with servant leadership through priestly ordination.

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to embark on the journey exists
except to remain true to the person
God calls you to be.*

The genesis of my out-of-this-world journey is hidden deep within the recesses of my forty-six-year story, a narrative emerging from the life stories of my parents, grandparents, family members (from Catholic and other faith traditions), and friends. No one right story or unique way to embark on the journey exists except to remain true to the person God calls you to be.

There are as many paths on the journey to priesthood as there are priests. My parents' post-World War II wedding was a "mixed" marriage (between a Catholic and a baptized Protestant). My father did not convert to Roman Catholicism until a few years into the marriage. Because the wedding occurred before Vatican Council II, the ceremony took place in the rectory, not in the church building, because my father wasn't Catholic. My mother and her family attended Mass and received Communion in church before going over to the rectory for the wedding. I am certain that the possibility of having an ordained priest from that marriage bond seemed remote at the time.

The first step on my priestly journey could have been the result of an offhand word of encouragement spoken decades ago by one of my godparents. Maybe the vocation seed was planted in wonderful child-

hood memories wrapped in the mysterious patina of a dark, candlelit church or in the glancing light reflected from a gold chalice elevated by a priest before the worshiping congregation.

The priests of my childhood memories are not distinct. Rather, they seem otherworldly, distant, and powerful, dressed in ornate clothing while performing familiar ritual actions Sunday after Sunday. To this child, church appeared bigger than life. For all the young at heart, I hope this remains the case well into adulthood.

The true divine beginnings of a priestly vocation precede all these possible explanations, as Pope John Paul II writes:

All human beings, from their mothers' womb, belong to God who searches them and knows them, who forms them and knits them together with his own hands, who gazes on them when they are tiny shapeless embryos and already sees in them the adults of tomorrow whose days are numbered and whose vocation is even now written in the "book of life." (*Evangelium Vitae*, no. 61)

Writing about the priesthood vocation gives me pause to reflect on my own vocation in the God-given favor of ordained priesthood. My voice and the voices of the other priests in this book speak in heartfelt hope that our stories may stir into faith and action the heart of readers who may be searching for their own calling. Our stories are unique, but they provide a glimpse of the great variety that is Roman Catholic priesthood and the diversity that is the church itself.

I have attempted to paint a contemporary portrait of ordained ministry by following the structure and content of the traditional ordination ritual: from the call through the laying on of hands, from the words of consecration to the first blessing imparted by the newly ordained priest. This picture is limited to the palette of colors I have available, including the diocese I serve (Buffalo, New York), the seminary I attended (Christ the King Seminary, East Aurora, New York), and the assorted priests I have encountered during my fifteen-plus years of ordained service.

I have asked a variety of folks, including young people, what a reader might find interesting about the priesthood. Their suggested topics served as a springboard for my writing. I have attempted to address a

wide-ranging audience: from the young man who is seriously considering ordained ministry to the curious bystander who casually picks up this volume.

*This work is intended . . . to serve
as a gateway for questioning
and for greater involvement
in the life of the church.*

This work is intended not to be exhaustive but rather to serve as a gateway for questioning and for greater involvement in the life of the church. Writing about priesthood vocations, including my own, and following the words of the *Rite of Ordination of a Priest* as a guide have prompted considerable self-reflection. Reflecting anew on the bishop's homiletic instruction, the ordination prayer of consecration, the questions, and the promise of obedience has been rewarding and renewing for me in my ordained ministry. The passage of time clouds over the clarity of all these words and the feelings that accompany them; yet, I see the results in my day-to-day ministry.

Words that I do vividly recall from ordination are those of my bishop, the Most Reverend Edward D. Head, now the retired bishop of Buffalo. He used to say in his remarks at ordination that priesthood "is the greatest fraternity in the world." I continue to discover the meaning of his words; in that spirit I present this reflection for consideration by all who wonder.