How To Know
You Have A Vocation
To The
Religious Life
Signs of a Vocation
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I was asked to share with you some thoughts on how a person knows he has a vocation to the religious life, and in particular to the Capuchin Life. It is a bit difficult to pin that down because a vocation is first of all a mystery. God does not just jump out of the sky and tap us on the shoulder or knock us off a horse the way He did some people in the Bible. Ordinarily God uses very ordinary instrumental means to let us know what He is calling us to and that is always a mysterious thing. It is always very personal to each of us. I can't give you any absolute rules for this. I guess, in one sense, that's a wonderful thing — that God respects our individuality and treats us all as persons. He respects our freedom and He wants us to use our heads in trying to discern our vocation. Remember that famous line in A Man for All Seasons where Thomas More says something like “God made the animals to serve Him by blindly but He made man to serve Him willingly,” that is, to use his wits. We have to use our wits to try to discern what God is asking of us.

In the history of the Church, you will consistently find spiritual writers and theologians saying that there are certain natural signs that God uses by which He inclines us and draws us toward a vocation and the Church has always looked for those signs. If a person has those signs in some degree, then there is a good chance he is called. You never know for sure until the day you make final profession to the Capuchin Life but all the way along the line you will be asking yourself if there are present several discernable signs by which you can judge whether you are called or not.

Three Basic Signs of Vocation

There are three basic signs and they are really very simple — nothing complicated about it. The three signs are (1) a desire for the life, (2) the right motivation for the life, and (3) fitness for the life. Let us take each one separately.

THE FIRST SIGN I look for in myself or in anyone looking for a vocation is “do I have a desire for the life?” Am I inclined, am I drawn toward it? Does it give me a certain amount of satisfaction to think about myself as a Capuchin, a certain amount of enthusiasm or joy or some kind of positive feeling? I want to stress that, because God does not draw us to a vocation against our will; it is something that is extremely important. I have talked to people who said “I want to be a priest, or brother, or sister, not because I want to but because I think I should, because I think God wants me to. If I don’t go, I’ll be punished in some way or I will be miserably unhappy—something like that. God does not operate that way. He draws us according to our natural inclinations and if we
are inclined to a religious life, that is a good sign. If we are repulsed by it and are thinking about it only because we have to, I call that "a monkey-on-your-back-vocation" and you carry it around like some kind of heavy load, that some how God is zapping you and you "gotta go or else." God doesn’t zap people that way. The one thing God wants us to be is free—He wants us to freely choose our vocation. That desire is some kind of spontaneous attraction to Capuchin Life and it is one indication that a person is called. But that is not enough, because a lot of people have an attraction to religious life—the other two signs are also important.

THE SECOND SIGN is "I want the life for the right reasons." This is a question of motivation. What motivation is behind my interest and attraction? Here the Church looks for some positive spiritual reasons, for example, "I want the religious life because I want to serve God in a very direct way or I want to further the love and knowledge of God or I want to extend the kingdom of God or I want to live the Gospel Life as fully as possible or I want to work for the betterment of the world or I want to share a common vision of faith and spirituality with other like-minded people and somehow further the project of God’s designs." Any or all of these spiritual, religious reasons are adequate motivations. That is what we look for—something based on faith, not just some kind of natural desire, but something based on faith—that is a spiritual motive—not because I see this as a very groovy outfit which I want to join—like joining the K of C or because the Capuchins are a neat bunch of guys and I’d like to be a part of them. That is not yet a faith vision. Something has to touch us at the level of the Gospel—that we want in some way to profess a life based upon very solid Christian religious principles.

A number of inadequate reasons can creep in here, for example:

(1) a person sees religious life as somekind of security blanket; after all, religious life does have some security: you know where your meals are coming from, you have a bed, a certain kind of life insurance, social security in your old age, a place to live, a roof over your head, lots of things that people in the world have to grab for. If a person has a lot of doubts about whether he can hack it in the world and therefore thinks the monastery is the place to go, chances are he is not really called. That’s not an adequate reason for applying. As life gets more complicated and more demands are made upon us in the world out there, some persons may be drawn to religious life for that reason, but security is not an adequate motivation.

(2) Another inadequate reason is loneliness: a person has a very difficult time making friends and he feels very alone most of the time; he might see religious life as an instant
friendship establishment, where all he has to do is walk in and he has a whole bunch of instant friends and that protects him from all the hard knocks of being a lonely person in the world. Again, that is not a faith or spiritual reason; a very understandable reason but not enough.

(3) Or say a guy has had some unhappy love affairs or difficulties with girls and he figures women are no damn good and so the best thing to do is get away from them and flee to the monastery—"If I can't be happy, at least I can save my soul." So if a guy is afraid that he can't hack it with the opposite sex, he might be inclined to look to the monastery for salvation or protection or something. But again that would be an inadequate reason.

(4) Another inadequate reason would be if anybody looks to Capuchin Life as a kind of glamour experience or an instant status symbol. Years ago it was kind of neat if you were a religious; you had recognition right off the bat; you walked out and everybody said "Oh, he must be a good holy man he has the habit on, he's a religious." You had an automatic, built-in status of recognition which was pretty nice; especially, if you were a priest—think of all the gratification you get for being a priest! You stand up there and say "The Lord be with you" and the whole Church has to say "And also with you." Look at all that power-experience! You can control that whole group of people out there just by your presence. So if you are an "ego-tripper," that's a neat way to do it. After all, you are the center of attention at the altar and it is really kind of satisfying. If that's what motivates a person, the Church will blow the whistle and say that's not enough. Instant status-seeking or instant ego-tripping or controlling people is not an adequate motivation for religious life.

**Mixed Motivation**

It should be rather obvious that lots of us can have some of these reasons somewhere in the back of our minds. None of us have a pure spiritual motive for most things we do. There is always a mixture of this kind of inadequacy in our lives and that's O.K. You can live with a certain amount of this kind of thing and there may be a mixture of motivations in one's desire for religious life, but the primary driving force ought to be something deeper. It is not always easy to discern our motives and that's why it's so important to have a spiritual director who can help us sort things out.

So far we have two of the signs—attraction and motivation for the right reasons. There is still something missing, because I know lots of people in the world who have adequate desire and pretty solid spiritual reasons for coming to religious life but they still were not called. Why? The third sign is missing. THE THIRD SIGN is fitness, by which I mean the ability to live a religious life, to live it comfortably, cheerfully and generously, without going to pieces or without a constant drain on your inner resources or energies or without a whole lot of tensions. Somehow the life itself must suit you and you must
suit the life and you aren't paying a horribly high price just to stay in. Somehow there must be a meshing of your interest and ability and competency with those of Capuchin religious life. Both must mesh. Lots of people, very good people, have tried the life but found they just didn’t fit—they couldn’t live it. Some people are just not cut out for it anymore than some people can’t teach or be airline pilots or engineers or salesmen or what not. Religious life just doesn’t fit some people—they haven’t got the skills or the ability to handle the job. They are very happy and very good at some other vocation. Again, God does not do violence to the person. He respects the individual gifts each person has.

Likewise, there are a lot of people who are fit for religious life but don’t want it—they are not attracted to it. A lot of married friends or your sisters and brothers could live religious life but they are not drawn to it. The desire is not there but the fitness is. All these requirements have to be there at the same time. So by a positive sense of fitness, I mean the ability to live the life comfortably, cheerfully, generously and graciously, without undue drain on your personality.

**Areas of Fitness to be Considered**

The opposite of that would be some very serious difficulty in accepting some of the basic structures and basic thrusts of Capuchin life today. For example, religious life demands a certain amount of cooperation, which in turn, demands a certain renunciation of your own personal desires. Today you call it obedience. It means that sometimes for the sake of the larger community you have to say "no" to something you very much like to have or do. You have to somehow mesh your life with what's going on around you, with the brothers you live with. They may want to embark upon a project which is very good for the kingdom of God and somehow you don't want to go along with that; or some kind of agreement is made in the community and you have a hard time going along with it, so you have to renounce a certain amount of your independence and your freedom. You will always be listened to but you won't always be acted on. So at times you must be able to yield graciously to the needs and the thrust and the requirements of the larger community. If you are a person, therefore, who needs a very great amount of personal freedom in your life and it is very hard for you to mesh your independence with others, that's O.K.—nothing unchristian about that—but it might not be adequate for religious life. Thus obedience is an important area you have to look at.

Another aspect very obviously is the vow of celibacy. Celibacy is one of the corner-stones of religious life and if you have any ideas that we are going to change that in the next twenty years, you're badly mistaken. The diocesan priesthood possibly might change the celibacy requirements but religious life will not, because celibacy is one of its founda-
tions. Here, too, a person must be able to live celibacy with comfort, graciousness, and cheerfulness. He must see it as a positive value and must be able to live with the renunciation it requires.

If a person, for example, has a very difficult time controlling sexual desires or giving up the idea of love of his own, a sweet wife to come home to and comfort him, it that's a severe renunciation that boggles his mind and he can't see himself doing that, then chances are he is just not called to religious life. This has to be considered in many different aspects, of course, because we all hate to give that up in some way or the other, but that's one way to look at it.

Another situation is a person who has a very difficult time controlling his sexual desires, for example, the point of masturbation. Masturbation is a very common phenomenon—most people at some time in their life masturbate. There's no question about that. Some wise guy said: 98% of the people masturbate, the other 2% are liars. No doubt that is an exaggeration but at times it's going to be a problem. By itself, this does not necessarily mean that a person isn't called but it is an important point to consider. If one has a chronic and constant problem in this regard, there might be indications that he cannot live the celibate life generously and cheerfully. It's as simple as that.

There is also the possibility in some cases where a person, for example, has a tendency or attraction toward homosexuality. That, too, must be considered. Again, we know that there are lots of people who at some time in their lives or at various times in their lives, have some kind of attraction to their own sex. It's a very natural thing. Most people go through a period at least where they are curious about each other's body and so on, and occasionally when they are attracted to their sex, an occasional desire, thought, fantasy, etc. Again, this is not necessarily a sign that one can't live celibacy, but that's relatively common. But if a person is chronically fighting this kind of thing, if it's very pronounced and long standing, a habitual pattern, that might be an indication that this person is not called to this kind of life. After all, he will have to live surrounded by his own sex for years and years. He may be able to do that for a couple of months but after a while it just kind of takes its toll. Even if he never, for example, propositions anybody, still the energy it takes just to keep control on that all the time, may bog him down from being able to work freely and to give himself to the rest of his Capuchin life. It just ties him in knots inside and drains all his energy.

All those kinds of thing, however, are relative. There is a relativity that is very flexible and each case must be considered on its own merits. But the point is that we do need men who are able and willing to live celibacy as a real positive value and sign of the Kingdom of God—a man who is single and free and loving and generous, who can renounce the joys and pleasures of sex and do it in a very gentlemanly and gracious way. The Church needs that kind of sign and we look for it in the members of the Capuchin Order.
Another area which would require some scrutiny regarding fitness is commitment to community life. A Capuchin has to live in community. That is one of our corner-stones and we love it. It is something we treasure very highly. That means I have to be able to get along with all kinds of characters. If you haven't noticed that yet, you soon will. No two Capuchins are alike. There is a lot of rubbing of elbows and compromising and sharing and dialoging, trying to come to some kind of mutual understanding and mutual acceptance of each other. That takes a real hard serious effort.

But living in community can be a tremendous liberating joy—living with guys you can get along with, guys who have the same basic mentality and kind of values and goals you have. This really releases you to do all kinds of good things for the Kingdom of God. But if I am a person who has a lot of difficulty getting along with people, for example, if I am pretty much of a loner and have a hard time relating to people, if I sit off in a corner by myself because of whatever insecurity I have I just can't reach out to others, well I might be a pretty good person in the world, but I might not be a good Capuchin. It's just not where we are at. A Capuchin must be one who can relate.

Or if I'm a person who gets along very well with people as long as I am the boss and domineering everybody, telling what to do and making them afraid of me in wielding power, I may be a pretty good executive in the world but I am not going to be a good Capuchin, because domination is not one of our strong points. It's not what we are all about. We are not a power-community. So a person who has domineering personality will have a hard time getting along as a Capuchin.

Likewise, a person who is constantly dependent on somebody else, who needs somebody to pull him along and make decisions for him, and tell him he is good, to hold his hand and that kind of thing, day after day, cannot make a good Capuchin. We can hold your hand once in a while because we all need encouragement, but we can't stop living and working because we have to pull somebody along all the time. Thus a certain amount of independence is important and a certain amount of being able to shift for oneself.

Those kind of inter-personal relationships that are comfortable and comforting are important to religious life. Again, a person may have some difficulty with that and one can grow into it as time goes on, but there must be some indication that a person is able to live community life.

The last thing I would say about fitness is that a person has to be able to appreciate the life of the spirit, the life of prayer, the life of the Scriptures. He has to have a kind of taste for that sort of thing. He has to be willing to work at it. If he wants to be a spiritual person, but just doesn't take the time or can't stick with it, if he is not a man of spiritual convictions and prayer, he is going to have a very difficult time living Capuchin life. He may be a good Christian but a good Capuchin calls for a commitment to a solid spiritual prayer-life. If that turns me off, I am not going to be a very good Capuchin.
Two Extremes

What I want to avoid is two extremes, both in my own mind and in yours. One extreme would be to imagine that the Capuchin Order would take almost anybody in, that these kind of signs are so vague and general that almost anybody who can walk will be able to get into the Order. It seems that from around 1910 to 1960 a lot of religious orders did that—if you came to the door and said "I want to join your outfit, I'm a Catholic"—that was enough, or at least there was a lot of lee-way and religious orders found themselves taking in a lot of people who were just not ready for the life or not fit for it. We have learned much since then and are becoming much more discriminating about the people we take in, so that we won't make religious life a joke and anyone saying a few nice things about a guy is sufficient to accept him into our life. It takes much more than that.

Another extreme would be to imagine that only the perfect can make it, only those who are absolutely physically and psychologically and spiritually on top of everything will be accepted. No! Brother Bill Hugo put it very well when he said that we are called to work at and accept our limitations and weaknesses. We believe that Christ can help these, can draw them out of us, can somehow supply for our weaknesses, if we have some basic strength to give. So we don't want to scare anyone away either. We don't want you to get the idea "My God, I'm not perfect, I better run away from this joint." No, we have a lot of room for growth in our community and we take people where they are at and if they show signs of being able to develop, that's all we can ask of a person. If they show some indication of a solid desire for the life and solid motivation and solid fitness, we are willing to accept them.

If you would care to get together with one of our friars to discuss the possibility that the Lord may be calling you to serve Him in religious life, please contact: