

Two weeks ago Iowa Public Television broadcasted a two part program, “The Calling.” The program followed young people preparing for ordination, or formal commission, as a priest, rabbi, pastoral minister, or imam in the Catholic, Jewish, Evangelical Christian and Muslim traditions.

This weekend’s celebration of the feast of Jesus’ baptism brings the liturgical celebration of the Christmas season to a close. Jesus’ baptism marks the beginning of his public ministry. All three scripture readings highlight aspects of this event. In the first reading we hear the prophet Isaiah describe an unnamed “servant” who we are told is God’s “chosen one” with whom God is “pleased” and upon whom God has placed his “spirit.” Isaiah then goes on to describe the attributes and work of the servant. He will “bring forth justice to the nations” but with gentleness and compassion “not crying out, not shouting ... a bruised reed he shall not break and a smoldering wick he shall not quench.” St. Paul in the second reading and the gospel text from Matthew clearly identify this servant with Jesus. Our Holy Father Pope Benedict XVI commenting on this scene notes, “In the Gospel account of the baptism of Jesus, the mystery of death and Resurrection, sin and redemption, sin and forgiveness is prefigured: Jesus descends into the depths of the Jordan. Being submerged in the river is a symbolic representation of the process of death. An old life is buried, so that a new one can arise. Because Jesus himself is without sin and has no old life to bury, his acceptance of baptism is an anticipation of the cross, whereby he begins to share in our lot and to take upon himself our sins and our death. At the moment when he comes up out of the river, the heavens part, and from them is heard the voice in which the Father acknowledges him as his Son. The opening of heaven is a sign that this descent into our night is the dawning of a new day, the barrier between God and man is being broken down by this identification of the Son with us.” Jesus’ baptism was the culmination of years, (decades, really) of a hidden life in Nazareth.

In the television program “The Call” each of the young adults preparing for professional ministry was asked the question: “How did you know that this is what God was calling you to do?” None of them spoke of an experience like that of Jesus in today’s gospel. All of them talked about how their decision was arrived at gradually,

and their still on-going quest to discern God's will in their daily life. As I listened to these young people and contemplated today's scriptures, I reflected that, most likely, a similar process of discernment was also the experience of Jesus. I recalled my own experience of ordination to the transitional diaconate. Some of my peers in the seminary who were ordained before me talked about how their ordination had been a "spiritual experience" an "epiphany" much like that of Jesus in today's gospel, obviously not literally, but a spiritual "high" nonetheless. So when ordination day arrived for me, I was psyched for an outpouring of God's Spirit. I approached Cardinal Shehan, Archbishop of Baltimore who was the ordaining bishop. The Cardinal laid his hands on my head, the traditional symbol of the imparting of the Holy Spirit. Then: NOTHING!! No parting of the heavens, no voice proclaiming me "chosen." I wanted to say, "Excuse me, Eminence. Could you do the laying on of hands again? I don't think it took!" I took my quandary to my spiritual director who in his wisdom said, "Jim, you did receive the Holy Spirit. However, the sign of the presence of the Spirit is not so much in what you felt or didn't feel, the sign of the Spirit is and will continue to be how open you are to his presence and invitation as he calls you to offer yourself to ministry everyday of your life from here on. Baptism, Confirmation, Eucharist, Marriage, Ordination—are not "magic moments" but occasions of God's grace bestowed, which is freely given and continues to need to be built on a receptive human nature, in the everyday."

This weekend the Church in our country observes its annual week of "Vocation Awareness" particularly in regard to church ministries of priesthood and religious life. Like the young people in "The Call" professional church service can be, and is, a lifestyle through which one can find happiness and fulfillment. It has been, and continues to be, for me. At the same time today's celebration challenges all of us to take seriously our baptism, confirmation and their renewal in this and every Mass to, like Jesus, open ourselves every day to serving God where we are at this time and circumstance of our lives allowing the real, but hidden light and presence of the Holy Spirit to work through us and bring the kingdom to greater realization in the lives and circumstances of our times as God's "servants"; God's "chosen"; God's "Beloved Sons and Daughters" in whom God is "well pleased."