

1-27-08 Homily by Msgr. Elmer Charles
Ordinary Time 1st.Cor. 1-10-17

Today's story is the call of the prophet Paul. Jesus said, "Come, follow me."

Today's subject is the voice of the Lord. I have a question? How did they know it was God's voice? It touched their hearts and souls surely they had heard Jesus preach. There must have something in the voice of the Lord that cut through everything and touched their hearts and souls that they were willing to leave everything for him. It was like the prophets of faith like Abraham, when God said to him, "Pack everything up. I am going to take you to another land and I'll show you." Now how did Abraham know that that was God talking to him and not the devil? The devil is pretty tricky isn't he? He fools all of us I think at one time or another. But here we have Abraham. It wasn't just to follow him, but it was pack up, take your larger family, I'll lead you to another land. He didn't even tell him where that was going to be. He was asking him to follow him. You know when you have those kinds of greetings. I think almost every priest needs to stop and think and remember how he was called and the struggle he went through.

One of my jobs at the seminary was a spiritual one. Part of it was working with young men trying to help them to determine if the church is God really calling them. And that's not an easy topic, especially with beautiful women

running around and the attractions of the world. And it's difficult for all of us to follow God, as Christians, and give ourselves to God, because this world is not friendly to Christians. I want to tell you about a little incident in my own life. My first assignment as a priest was to test the men in the chapel and I know this is dangerous territory. One of the requirements that he gave me was to go every day into Bryan at St. Joseph's church to have one meal because he was afraid I would starve if I ate out. Anyway, one day I got there a little early and I was sitting at the dining room table. Now St. Joseph's rectory had a wonderful cook. She was a wonderful person. She was Afro American. I was sitting at the table by myself and she had a visitor in the kitchen and the visitor was saying to her, "Who is that new priest I see hanging around?" And she said, "Ah, that's Father Elmer and he got his vocation in the fox hole." Well, you know they say there are no atheists in fox holes. And I believe that is pretty true. And I can't really think I got my vocation in a foxhole because my primary concern and my prayers with the Lord at that time was to get me home and get me home safely and alive. I think that's where most of my thoughts were. But it did help me think. Since that war that I fought, that I saw, did it touch me? Did it change me? You can't go through a war fighting with people that's the enemy. You shoot at them and they shoot at you. But they are not people that you know. But you

still can't do that without it changing you, without it touching you. I think so often about our boys and girls in Iraq and Afghanistan in a sense what are they fighting for. They are fighting for us.

It was much later I had gotten out of the army, thank you, and my dad said well you have to go to college. So I went to the University at Wisconsin and I took pre-med and my last year of pre-med my father died. Someone has to take over the store. For my brother, my sister, and my mother all depended on the store for their livelihood. So I went home and I was talking with my mother. In the meantime my mother because of the death of my father had gone into deep depression. She wanted me to take her to Mass every morning, and after a couple of months of going every morning that I began to be attracted to the priesthood. And I thought I couldn't even think about that because I had to run the store. But as the months went on, I felt the desire and it got stronger and stronger. And finally I said, "Lord you know I can't go to the seminary. Now if you are really serious about me going to the seminary you have to do something about someone running the store.

Within a week, the same week, my older sister called from San Antonio and she said we are getting out of the army and we are coming home. We don't want to go back to our jobs in Milwaukee. We'd like to be in the store business. So I said you can have the whole thing. The next step I called the

pastor and made an appointment with him. When I told him I wanted to go to the seminary I think he almost fainted. He told me to see the Bishop. The first thing the Bishop asked me was how much Latin have you had? Well I said I had 2 years high school and 2 years college Latin. If you add two more years in seminary, that should be enough. Then he asks me how much Greek do you have? A couple of years I said. Well, maybe a little Hebrew? Again he said the seminary will take care of that. So I spent the next two years in St. Francis Seminary in Milwaukee. The city so much dominated by the Germans. It has always been a large German community. Then the word came that a new seminary had been built in Mississippi and all of the Michigan Seminarians would be transferred there. I didn't want to go. After a war and you have to decide what to do with your life, going to the University of Wisconsin, I just didn't want to have to pick up and go and I told my spiritual advisor. So he said, "Why don't you write a letter to the Bishop?" So I wrote this long letter to the Bishop and explained the whole circumstances and I sent it to him and when the list of those being transferred came out my name wasn't on it and so I breathed a great sigh of relief and thanked God, for I thought, leaving me at the seminary in Milwaukee. I went home for the summer and the first week I was home the Bishop came to town to ordain a young man and at the end of the ordination

the Bishop said,” I got your letter and as a result of your letter I was so impressed that I am going to send you to Rome for theology.” I said, “Rome?” Now I don’t want you to think I’ll make you go. It is just that I would like to have you go. I’ll give you a couple of weeks to think about it. So where do you think I went? I headed back to Milwaukee to talk to my spiritual director. You told me to write this letter and now the Bishop is asking me to go to Rome. The spiritual director paused for a moment he had kind of a grin on his face and I remember saying to him, “I don’t think this is funny.” “Well, you will have to excuse me for smiling. I have two things to say to you. One is when the Bishop says to you I would like to have you to do something and the other is when the Bishop asks you to go to Rome that’s pretty hard not to do that. And on top of that, who do you think recommended you to go to Rome?” I did go to Rome.

That doesn’t solve everything about your vocation. You wonder if God is really calling you. All of us have our faults. All of us struggle through failures. Find it difficult to obey. At the seminary in Rome we had to be in by six o’clock. I thought I fought a war, and I thought I was big enough to brave the city of Rome at night. Anyway I struggled through and one day I was anointed and the Bishop gave me the title of priest on the day of

December 20th in St. Johns Basilica by the Cardinal Vicar of Rome 1962. I

have been a priest for 55 years. I have to say I have no regrets.

Now what do you have to do? You have to go back and talk to the Lord.

You know the Lord listens and the Lord talks back. But one of our problems

today is we have all that stuff stuck in our ears. The television going, the

music playing, sometimes you have to turn the music off. Sometimes in

your life you need to shut everything down and in the quiet of your soul

from the depths of your heart you talk to God. He will hear you. But don't

always expect God to talk. I always think of the prophet who is told God is

going by on the mountain and so he climbs up the mountain and he is

waiting for God to pass by. And as he is waiting there for God to pass by,

there is a big earthquake a sure sign of the earth. The next thing that

happened was a huge thunderstorm, and lightning and he thought for sure

that was God. Finally everything was very, very quiet and that's what God

wants. It's in the quiet times of our life, in the quiet of our own hearts, in the

quiet of our souls, because that's where he lives. There is a reason why God

lives there. That's one of the doctrines of the Catholic faith. All the great

spiritual theologians say look down deep into your very self you will find

God. Even if you whisper, God listens. Talk to him.