



Promoting a vocations culture in our schools

by Rev James Kerr



Fr James Kerr is an assistant priest in Ballarat's cathedral parish and chaplain at St Patrick's College, a boy's secondary school with over 1400 students.

He describes here the steps he took to organise a Saturday morning of prayer and vocational discernment with the help of Bishop Paul Bird and seminarians from Melbourne's Corpus Christi College.

A few months ago, when speaking to a fellow priest about my chaplaincy at St Patrick's College, he asked me if I had been speaking to the boys about priestly vocations. The promotion of vocations was certainly behind much of my efforts in regards to the College, but I hadn't wanted to give the impression that vocations were my only concern or even my primary concern.

My primary concern has been, and always will be, leading the staff and students to an encounter with the only One who can save them. For that mission to be carried into the future though we desperately need to promote vocations to the priesthood and I would be frankly negligent not to take advantage of the position I am in. In order to serve the wider mission therefore, the idea arose to organise a vocations retreat for boys.

Being reasonably sure of success I took the idea to Geoff Brodie, Director of Mission at the College, who was very enthusiastic in his support. We settled on a plan of a morning of prayer and discernment

hosted by the College but also open to boys from outside. Ballarat's cathedral parish has a large number of faithful families who engage in home schooling.

Knowing that general invitations are too easy to ignore, my plan was to invite boys by name. In order to arrive at a usable list of names I first approached the RE teachers at the College, and then with Geoff's help conducted a survey among the student body.

Vocations survey

The results of the survey were really very heartening. We asked the boys to first write a short answer to the question "Why is it good to have a priest in the life of St Patrick's College?" There followed a series of 'yes' or 'no' questions:

- "Are you interested in learning more about life as a priest?"
- "Have you ever thought God might be calling you to become a priest?"
- "Would you ever consider it?"

The boys had the added option of answering 'maybe' to the last question.

Only counting the genuine responses,

over 140 boys indicated at least an openness to a priestly vocation. Some remained anonymous in their response, particularly at the senior end. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the greatest response was at the junior end of the school where I have concentrated my efforts through the year. Around a quarter of the Year 7 boys indicated that they would consider a priestly vocation and even more encouragingly, so did about half of the boys I coach in rugby. Familiarity with a priest is an obvious first step in considering a vocation.

More encouraging still was what appeared to be a strong response to the sacrificial nature of the priesthood. When asked by the Year 7 boys about celibacy, I have always related it to Nuptial Mystery of Christ's covenant with the Church and of our imitation of that self-gift as manifested above all on the Cross.

When pressed further with questions like, "But don't you want to get married?" I haven't shied away from speaking of celibacy as a life of sacrifice and then explaining that such sacrifice has the capacity to bear fruit, using the analogy of the wounded side of Christ on the Cross becoming a source of blessing for the world. Apparently such notions are still attractive to boys.

Finally, it was also heartening to see a general trend across the year levels. Even in the higher grades where my contact has been more limited, there was a significant number of boys at least open to the idea of a priestly vocation. The candidates are there, we just have to find the best way to reach them.

Morning of recollection

Limiting our final list only to the students who were most committed in their response, Geoff and I sent out invitations to the parents of about fifty boys. I also spoke to parents of some of the boys in the parish youth group. I explained the boys would have the opportunity to meet with some seminarians, participate in a period of adoration of the Blessed Sacrament, pray the rosary, and have an opportunity to go to confessions. The morning would conclude with Mass, offered by the bishop. Doughnuts and pizza completed the offer.

In the end we had 17 boys participate in



The seminarians who assisted included transitional deacons L-R: Francis Denton, John-Paul Mount, Joel Peart, Patrick Bradford; pictured with Fr Nicholas Pearce.

the retreat. Five more would have liked to come, but were unable to. It proved to be a terrific morning and its success far exceeded my expectations. In numerical terms, it is a very small step, but for a first step it is more than I had hoped for. In qualitative terms, measuring the impact of the experience for the boys, I was really blown away. For instance, the boys surprised me by their willingness to go to confession. As it turns out I didn't schedule enough time during adoration, so confessions continued throughout the Mass. At the risk of sounding sentimental, sitting there during Mass, watching the boys one by one make their way to the confessional without any compulsion was one of the happiest moments of my life.

This joy was strengthened by the way the junior boys stayed in the chapel and prayed after Mass, even after telling them about the pizza waiting for them. The rosaries which were distributed during adoration were not returned, but were deposited in the boys' pockets. A priest doesn't often get to see the fruits of his labours, so it was a truly blessed experience. Teenagers being teenagers, the boys were good at masking their emotions, but even they couldn't disguise the flame that had been kindled in their hearts. All of them are keen to come back next year. I must thank here the seminarians who assisted me on the day.

The future

Hopefully after building on this foun-

ation over a number of years we can begin to foster a strong culture of vocations within the College and the cathedral parish. Our challenge next year will be to improve the response rate to the invitations sent out. Some sent in apologies but most were apparently ignored. Going from the survey, the interest is certainly there. We just need to find the best way to translate that interest into some genuine vocational discernment.

From the responses we did receive, my impression is that the uptake will improve as trust is built, both with the parents and with the boys. The parents of all but three of the boys who came to the morning knew me personally, either through my parish work or through my rugby coaching. Of the three families who don't know me, two families are faithful Mass-goers in neighbouring parishes. Given the history of abuse and betrayal in Ballarat, the reality is that trust from parents will have to be earned.

Furthermore, all but one of the boys had met me previously and the great majority knew me quite well. Even those who knew me well however, were tentative about coming. To commit to such an event takes a lot of courage, for which I was careful to thank the boys. Hopefully the great joy they themselves so tangibly experienced during that morning will encourage them to encourage others next year. As always, participant are the best recruiters. ●