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## Getting to Know the God We Believe in: Some Lessons from Religious Life

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Getting to  
Know the God  
We Believe in:

*Some Lessons  
from Religious Life*

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WILLIAM REISER, S.J.

Getting to Know the God We Believe in:  
Some Lessons from Religious Life

**William Reiser, S.J.**

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Deep is the trail that religious life—since Benedict of Nursia—has carved into the history of the European spirit. Has it now come to an end? Has it faded away once and for all? Is it now nothing but the signature of a glorious past, given over only to historical or aesthetic appreciation? Rather, the existence of religious orders is indispensable even today as a passionate and in no way merely private articulation of the possibility of God in this age.

—Johann Baptist Metz

No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.”  
(Matthew 5:14-16)

## Introduction

I have learned two important lessons about the nature of religious life which have led to (if I may speak personally) its re-founding in my own mind and imagination. The first is that religious life, as a particular expression or pattern of Christian existence, originates “from below.” By this I mean that religious life emerged from experiment and practice; it did not pre-exist in some ideal state, waiting to be discovered by Christian visionaries. Religious life, with its characteristic stresses upon poverty, chastity, and obedience, did not descend from on high but arose from within the human world. The fact that religious life has analogues within the major religious traditions of the world underscores further its anthropological basis. *Christian* religious life traditionally based itself on a particular reading of the gospels—a somewhat circular reading—which drew attention to Jesus as the exemplar of the three vows. But the way Jesus himself lived—and this lies at the heart of what I learned—was not scripted in advance, as if Jesus had been destined to be the archetypal religious. Jesus’ life assumed the form or pattern we perceive in the gospels because he walked with his people. His life reflects what had been so obvious from the Hebrew Bible, even though it took us a long time to frame the point correctly, namely, that God loves the poor preferentially and accompanies them throughout history. The vows are what happens (if I may put things this way) when people choose to live prophetically and walk with the poor. In other words, it is the story of Jesus that gives meaning to the vows, not the other way round. Apart from his life, death, and resurrection, poverty, chastity, and obedience are empty forms.

Religious life, therefore, at least in its ideal form, ought to be a living embodiment of human solidarity, the solidarity so

deeply impressed upon Christian imaginations by the Incarnation itself. This second and complementary idea is simple, although coming to see it took me many years. Our aspirations for a world totally remade—the new heavens and the new earth of the visionary who gave us Revelation—should be manifest in the way religious communities function from day to day. Commitment to this ideal will be obvious in a community's holiness and work, if the Eucharist is the liturgical expression of Christian solidarity and if communities regularly center their religious lives in this mystery. Solidarity is what assures the quality and depth of a religious community's prayer, its evangelical witness, and its apostolic projects. And solidarity demands a real connectedness to the pressing concerns of the whole human family.

For people outside of religious life, religious communities have frequently proven to be welcome, liberating, even indispensable sources of spiritual guidance and encouragement. The spiritualities or approaches to the interior life underlying religious communities and devoutly practiced by the men and women who have joined them have been sifted and tested over centuries. Each community, it might fairly be said, develops its own particular insight into the life of prayer and Christian practice. From the experience of those communities as well as from the writings and example of individual religious all of us in the Church have learned valuable lessons about how we are put together, about the human condition, about different ways of approaching the mystery of God, about discernment and living the Gospel, and about mysticism and contemplation.

For all these reasons, religious life has been a priceless gift to the Church. Without underestimating the enormous social and educational contributions religious have made over

centuries to their societies and to human civilization itself, the fact is that religious have been above all reservoirs of wisdom and exemplars of holiness for countless “ordinary” men and women eager to develop their interior lives. I hardly mean to discount the honest spiritual depth of those who spend their lives outside religious communities, since married life and the single state can certainly claim the lion’s share of Christian saints—even if they have not been canonized. I mean simply that, in my view, religious life exists for the good of the Church and not for the personal spiritual wellbeing of individual religious. People depend upon us, not because we are morally better or more fully graced, but because we are fellow travelers who have learned a thing or two about the routes to union with God. The expectation created by the rich legacy of wisdom and holiness could well lead to the reinvention of religious life in our new millennium. As it continues along its way through history, the Church is going to need both pioneers in the ways of the Spirit and the sure footing of trustworthy experience, the wisdom of its ascetics and saints. After all, the fact that we have learned so much about the interior life does not mean that the Spirit has nothing left to teach us.

One thing which has left an indelible imprint on religious life and which has been gradually transforming the face of Christian spirituality in our time is the realization that God and the people of God are inseparable. Their histories are locked together forever; we simply cannot talk about one without the other. Just as the body of Christ and the blood of Christ are sacramentally inseparable, God and the people of God are linked in an abiding sacramentality: the brother or sister we do see, and the creator God whom we do not.

The far-reaching implications of this realization will be unfolding for some time. I do not mean that God and the people of God are not *conceptually* distinct, or that belief in divine transcendence is no longer timely. But in daily practice and in the everyday dynamics of Christian prayer God does not become present to us without the people. The Christian may pray in solitary places, but the Christian never prays alone. A dedication or consecration of one's life to the things of God would be meaningless, as far as the Gospel is concerned, if one overlooked that chief among the concerns of God is the liberation and sanctification of God's people.

Being married to God would be relatively smooth going, if God were to move into our lives alone, unaccompanied. But marriage to God further translates into marrying God's people. No wonder Simeon foresaw a sword of sorrow when Mary presented the infant Jesus at the temple. She was soon to learn that the son so concerned about his Father's business would be engaged in a lot more than dusting the furnishings of a sacred building or mastering sacred texts. The temple stood for the people as much as it stood for God, and in the end the stones of the old temple would have to come down as Jesus constructed a new temple—a new people—around himself. Yet whoever marries the people also marries their crosses; Simeon must have known that. Numerous religious have grasped this truth with a depth and seriousness that turned them into prophets, even into martyrs.

There is a mystery here with deep roots in our ascetical traditions and in the biblical narratives themselves, but that mystery has been particularly refocused for us by the recurring use of the word *solidarity*, a term which may have become part of our ordinary spiritual coinage because John Paul II has used

it so often. Joined to this usage is a phrase that expresses richly and suggestively another dimension of God's oneness with the people of God, namely, *the preferential option for the poor*. The term *solidarity* and the expression *preferential option for the poor* are complementary. Indeed, any talk of solidarity that does not include the option for the poor is destined to slide into political and social romanticism. Where Teilhard de Chardin spoke some years ago of the evolution of a planetary consciousness, we today should point to the globalization of the human spirit as one of the chief signs of our times. Neither the Omega point nor the "divine milieu" would be comprehensible for people today without lived solidarity and the precision of thinking that follows from making a preferential option for the poor.<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth Johnson captured the idea very well:

Solidarity is a type of communion in which deep connection with others is forged in such a way that their sufferings and joys become part of one's own personal concern and a spur to transformative action. It entails a movement out of a selfish seclusion and into relationship where people bear one another up in mutual giving and receiving.<sup>2</sup>

The practice of solidarity both on the part of individuals and of communities has the power to remake us totally; ultimately it will be what truly saves us, the poor and the non-poor alike. Thus Johnson goes on to say:

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<sup>1</sup> See Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The Phenomenon of Man* (New York: Harper & Row, 1961 and 1965).

<sup>2</sup> Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Friends of God and Prophets: A Feminist Theological Reading of the Communion of Saints* (New York: The Continuum Publishing Co., 1998), 175.

In situations of tremendous injustice, solidarity among the victims themselves is expressed in initiatives mutually taken to resist, to hope, and to celebrate even in the midst of suffering. For those not directly affected by the particular victimization, solidarity is expressed in conversion toward those who suffer, not just being affected emotionally by their pain but choosing to love by taking it as one's own, joining the struggle for life for all. *When engaged in as a practice of faith, solidarity ushers both groups, those whose life is being destroyed but who are resisting and those who accompany them, asymptotically toward the mystery of God.*<sup>3</sup>

When the spirituality upon which religious build their lives is sound, the whole body of the Church will be healthy and full of light. But following Jesus' parable through to its sober finish, when the eye fills up with blindness the entire body becomes dark. The intense efforts on the part of religious institutes to renew themselves during the post-conciliar period underline the important role their spiritualities continue to play in the life of the Church. Communities were obviously complying with the instructions of Vatican II when they returned to their spiritual roots, charter documents and founding charisms for guidance in responding to the challenges created by the modern world. Perhaps the Council perceived even greater urgency in the matter of renewing religious life because of the ripple effect this would undoubtedly have on the rest of the church.

In many cases religious communities verified, from their strenuous efforts at renewing themselves, the truth of another gospel text that says that new wine demands new wineskins. The process of renewal, they saw, could be checkmated when

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 176. Italics added.

individual religious, either through rigidity or fear, lost their imagination. Yet they also witnessed the great apostolic and spiritual energies which were suddenly released as numerous others began interpreting and responding to the signs of the times.

According to the Council, “religious life is intended above all else to lead those who embrace it to an imitation of Christ and to union with God through the profession of the evangelical counsels.”<sup>4</sup> But profession of the counsels should eventually lead a religious into a radical oneness with the world. The vows orient a person toward something essentially positive: not to a denial of or turning away from the world but toward a deep interior union with all men and women, and particularly with men and women in distress, the gospel’s poor.<sup>5</sup> At the risk of sounding presumptuous, I think we could rephrase the conciliar teaching to say: “Religious life is intended above all to lead those who embrace it to *union with the people of God* and thereby to encounter and immerse themselves in the mystery of Christ.”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> *Decree on the Appropriate Renewal of Religious Life*, #2(e).

<sup>5</sup> See my *Religious Life Today: Re-Thinking a Promise* (North Hills, CA: Rogate Publications, 1994).

<sup>6</sup> See Marie Vianney Bilgrien, “Solidarity—More than a Polish Thing,” *Review for Religious* 56:6 (1997), 566-70; “Solidarity—The Newest Virtue,” *New Theology Review* (1997), 82-90. Also, Kevin P. Doran, *Solidarity: A Synthesis of Personalism and Communalism in the Thought of Karol Wojtyla/Pope John Paul II* (Peter Lang, 1996). And W. Reiser, “Solidarity and the Reshaping of Spirituality,” *The Merton Annual* (1999).



The form of the passion which is appropriate to religious life (for every Christian life participates in some way in the passion of the Lord) is the suffering born of solidarity, a solidarity which is total, lifelong and paradoxically joyous. I say paradoxical because there is a peculiar, evangelical blessedness whenever one finds oneself living and standing alongside Jesus in his suffering. Paul would confide to the Corinthians: “Therefore, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong” (2 Cor 12:10). “*Blessed* are you,” Jesus instructed his followers, “when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account” (Matt 5:11). A mysterious blessing indeed! I don’t know whether solidarity is the wine or the wineskin, but if solidarity is the wineskin, then at least for today the option for the poor is that new wine of which Jesus spoke.

Religious life, then, is uniquely poised to explore, explain and embody solidarity. This it can do in its liturgical practice; its forms of personal prayer; its networking with other groups throughout the world formally committed to the God-quest; its insertion into the local church, and into civic communities and neighborhoods; its awareness of the wide possibilities surrounding human life over against the narrow vision and parochialism which blunt the prophetic force of the gospel’s message; and in its ability to contextualize the individual’s suffering and sinfulness in terms of the corporate sufferings of ethnic groups, marginalized peoples and entire nations.

In a popular article entitled “Religion Makes a Comeback. (Belief to Follow)” Jack Miles, the writer who gave us *God: A*

*Biography*,<sup>7</sup> drew attention to the remarkable resurgence of interest in religion in the United States today, a resurgence accompanied by a high lack of concern for traditional beliefs. America has long been known for its avid cultivation of individualism. In the matter of religion, this boils down to what Miles referred to as “an institutionalized anti-institutionalism.” He wrote:

Americans are particularly at ease with forms of religious expression that require little in the way of organizational commitment and impose little in the way of group identity. Religious books, television shows and one-time events like marches and revivals all meet those criteria. Less in the individualist American grain is church or synagogue or mosque membership, which does indeed impose a group identity and which, even more important, demands regular attendance, steady financial support and religious education of the young. In general, classic organized religion functions more as a corrective to American individualism than as an expression of it; for that very reason it is both prized and resisted.<sup>8</sup>

Miles put his finger on something deeply troubling. Catholics, it would appear, have become infected with the same individualist spirit or attitude that has marked the rest of Americans. Individualism is a national trait sharply at odds with the spirit of the gospel, yet it runs through us at so deep a level that we may not even be conscious of how much it infringes on our claim to be a church which is one and catholic. Furthermore, Catholic culture in the United States appears

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<sup>7</sup> New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995.

<sup>8</sup> Jack Miles in *The New York Times Magazine* for December 7, 1997, p. 56.

incapable of protecting the Church against such individualist tendencies. In his preface to *American Catholic* Charles Morris noted:

American Catholicism is the country's largest religious denomination. But it has always been as much a culture as a religion, one defined by its prickly apartness from the broader, secular American culture—in America, usually enthusiastically *for* America, but never quite *of* America. In its glory days, especially in the 1940s and 1950s, the Catholic Church constructed a virtual state-within-a state so Catholics could live almost their entire lives within a thick cocoon of Catholic institutions.

The story of American Catholicism is therefore the story of the rise and triumph of a culture, and of the religious crisis that ensued in the wake of that culture's breakdown.<sup>9</sup>

If we agree with what these writers (and others) have reported to us, then a major challenge facing the Church in our time has to be one of creating and promoting a new matrix for nurturing the life of faith, a culture of solidarity. After all, if it is not to degenerate into a set of lifeless concepts and disembodied beliefs, faith requires a sustained exposure to the prayer and practice of everyday church life. Unless it is planted in an environment of everyday belief and practice, faith will never take root and flower. Apart from a culture of solidarity, the gospel story is not going to seize our imaginations the way God intended that it should.

The breakdown of which Morris wrote cannot be reversed by retreating into a suburban ghetto or by retrieving past

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<sup>9</sup> Charles R. Morris, *American Catholic: The Saints and Sinners Who Built America's Most Powerful Church* (New York: Times Books, 1997), vii.

markers of Catholic identity. We need something fresh, or in the words of Robert Schreiter, a “new catholicity.”<sup>10</sup> We need a Catholicism that is fully conscious of itself as a world religion. Responding to the challenge of our times is going to force us to become in a healthy sense counter-cultural. We shall have to learn to define and distinguish ourselves over against the American mainstream and to offer our society a gospel corrective to lopsided spiritualities more concerned about making people feel good about themselves than about lifting burdens off human shoulders. Once again, the Church will be looking to religious men and women for instruction and example as it sets about replacing a culture of individualism with one of solidarity. The price for failing to meet this challenge of creating a culture of solidarity will be spiritual isolationism and the eclipse of God, a tragic way to start the new millennium.

I do not mean to suggest that religious need to cast themselves as social reformers, although genuine social reform is really and truly God’s work and certainly fitting for religious to engage in. “Blessed are the peacemakers,” Jesus told us, “for they will be called children of God” (Matt 5:9). Yet like Jesus performing his symbolic cleansing of the temple—a small-scale prophetic action which evoked the memory of past prophets, announced God’s future judgment and prefigured the establishment of a new, living temple—religious communities can help the rest of the Church to understand why talking to God is both more interesting and more gratifying if one knows how to carry on a conversation with the world.

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<sup>10</sup> See Robert J. Schreiter, *The New Catholicity: Theology between the Global and the Local* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997), 116-133.

Personal relatedness to God is enriched and deepened when one integrates the preferential option for the poor with his or her politics, worship, religious observance, interpersonal relationships and economic choices. To opt for the poor is to take as the coordinates of one's inner space the movements of communities in exile, the people of God waiting for deliverance from their Egypts and Babylons. The solitary praying of individual Christians as well as the communal praying of our liturgical assemblies stand to discover enormous spiritual energy the more they unite themselves with those movements and hopes.

In his penetrating study *Violence Unveiled* Gil Bailie wrote: "By claiming the victim as Lord, the Gospels slowly begin to awaken an empathy for victims everywhere."<sup>11</sup> And that is exactly the dynamic behind solidarity as the contemporary form of Christian holiness. When Christians declare that God's Word has become flesh, and especially the flesh of a victim, they are in effect announcing that whatever is done to human beings anywhere is also done to God.

Of course, the rule about solidarity applied above all to Jesus. At the beginning of his ministry, at the wedding feast in Cana, Jesus had symbolically married his people, offering them the new wine of the messianic time. His identity had been formed in terms of the experience and fortune of the men and women of Israel, in whose lives he had encountered God.

Jesus' solidarity with men and women becomes strikingly evident in his standing with them for baptism, in his praying with them in the synagogues of Galilee, in the crowds which

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<sup>11</sup> *Violence Unveiled: Humanity at the Crossroads* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Co., 1995), 27.

would not let go of him, in his realignment of family loyalties, in his being compared with Moses as people-founder and nation-builder, through the option for the poor which marked his preaching and miracles, and at the cross, where Jesus hung alongside the victims of every time and place. Perhaps Matthew's gospel gives us the most beautiful insight into Jesus' solidarity with his people when the evangelist quotes Isaiah 53 in connection with Jesus' healings and exorcisms: "He took our infirmities and bore our diseases." To walk with the people of God is to accompany them in their suffering and desperation, to shoulder their burdens and to share their oppression. The Central American theologian Jon Sobrino has even spoken of a "God of solidarity." He explains:

The phrase "crucified God" is therefore no more than another term, provocative and shocking, with the same meaning as "God of solidarity." . . . [I]n history there is no such thing as love without solidarity and there is no solidarity without incarnation. Solidarity that was not prepared to share the lot of those with whom it wanted to show solidarity would be paternalism, to put in mildly, or would lead to despotism. Solidarity in a world of victims that was not prepared to become a victim would in the end not be solidarity.<sup>12</sup>

In the conclusion to her informative book on the history of religious women, Jo Ann Kay McNamara wrote:

The premise of the contemplative life has always been that self-mortification informed by love of God and God's creatures can generate transferable grace. No other modern profession can supply this service. . . . Monasticism on the

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<sup>12</sup> *Jesus the Liberator: A Historical-Theological View* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 244-45.

model of the first millennium church might prove again to be the ideal force around which Christian communities could be formed and nurtured.<sup>13</sup>

While I readily agree with her point about the potential contribution that monastic forms of religious life could make to the Church of the future, the idea that monks discover a wisdom to be shared with the rest of us needs to be set alongside another point. Apostolic religious life can teach the rest of the Church what it means to find God in the midst of the world, which is not quite the same thing as serving God in the midst of the world. Learning to experience God right in the world also constitutes a great lesson, a special wisdom and a “transferable grace.”

Most of the material in the following pages first appeared as articles; their explicit concern has been the spirituality underlying religious life. But as I explained, when it is truly a symbolic enactment of the gospel story about Jesus, religious life reveals a relevance that goes far beyond the walls of religious houses. Sidney Callahan once said: “I view vowed religious vocations as a condensed, crystallized, intensely focused, institutionalized, corporate embodiment of every Christian’s call to love God and one’s neighbor wholeheartedly.”<sup>14</sup>

Religious certainly have not cornered the spirituality market. Their experience of God and whatever insight they have

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<sup>13</sup> *Sisters in Arms: Catholic Nuns through Two Millennia* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), 637.

<sup>14</sup> “A Witness of Unique Witnessing,” *Review for Religious* 57:2 (1998), 141.

gleaned into the gospel are not the Church's only fountains of holiness and wellsprings of wisdom. Yet the fact is, as Thomas Merton eloquently reminded us, no one who takes the interior life seriously can escape a lifelong engagement with the human condition. The monk, he had painstakingly learned, understands a lot more about the world than the world understands about monastic existence. In the end, perhaps, religious vows, marriage vows and baptismal promises are not nearly so unrelated as one might think. They share the same theological center. Hence it is my hope that the pieces assembled here will be of interest to Christian readers outside of religious life as well as within it.

I am grateful to Fathers Rodolfo D'Agostino R.C.J., John Bruno, R.C.J., and Antonio Fiorenza, R.C.J., the editors of the magazine *Vocations and Prayer* over the past twenty-five years for permission to use material that I have published in the magazine. One of the ideas developed in those chapters is that religious life is the place where the Church experiments with prayer. I was tempted to write that religious life is the place where men and women experiment with God, except that way of putting things sounds awfully irreverent. It would be far truer to our experience to say that in religious life God experiments with us, testing and assaying us. In religious life God stretches our minds and our theology to embrace more fully Christ's revealing word. God does this, moreover, not just for the sake of religious themselves but for the sake of the whole people of God. It is God who has lighted us; we are his lamps. The light that is in us shines for the sake of all who dwell in the household of the Church.

The opening chapter "Looking for the Sign of Jonah: God's Revealing Light Today" first appeared in the January



1998 issue of *The Way*. The article “It is Good for Me to Be Here” came out in *Praying Magazine* in its issue for January-February 1997 (that article has become chapter 4 in these pages). Chapter 10 “The Vows ‘from below’” first appeared in the *Review of Ignatian Spirituality* in 2002. And chapter 13 “Reformulating the Religious Vows” was published in the July/August 1995 issue of *Review for Religious*. Chapters 5 and 9 are previously unpublished. A number of the chapters are commentaries or reflections on the annual messages from Popes John Paul II, Benedict XVI and Francis for the World Day of Prayer for Vocations in the spring. The messages themselves can be found on the Vatican website.

For any reader who may be familiar with the original pieces, I trust that the revisions I have made will be seen as improvements. Biblical quotations throughout are usually taken from the New Revised Standard Version, although sometimes I draw on the English Standard Version. Perhaps I should apologize for the fact that I have not been able to come up with a comfortable, unobtrusive way to avoid the use of the personal pronoun in reference to God. I am aware of the theological and spiritual sensibilities many Christians today have in this regard, but the Christian biblical tradition employs personal pronouns in reference to God (or at least in reference to God as a literary character). Avoiding the pronouns consistently and on principle makes one’s writing sound unscriptural and one’s thinking aseptic. I do not want to leave the reader with that impression.

Finally, my own sense of what religious life is and can be has been influenced by the fact that for the past forty years I have been a member of the Society of Jesus. The Ignatian vision of what religious life was supposed to be for the young Society was not uniformly welcomed by others in the church of the

sixteenth century. Even today, not all subscribe to that vision. Today one hears in some quarters that the “liberal” model of religious life, with its insistence upon linking faith with justice, has bottomed out. I hope and pray that this is untrue, especially since the Society so deeply incorporated that insistence into its own renewal. Whatever else one says, however, Ignatius had made the story of Jesus the absolutely first principle of his own life, and he was skilled in drawing others into the utter reality of that story. No matter what happens in the future of religious life, the one non-negotiable must always be the story of Jesus. And that story will only be told effectively by those who know him.

# 1.

## Looking for the Sign of Jonah

Ever since reading Thomas Merton's journal *The Sign of Jonas* one summer some fifty years ago, I have associated this expression with religious life. Religious life, I had concluded, was in some way a parable about humanity's search for God. Merton understood the sign to be a reference to the way life springs from death. He wrote:

Receive, O monk, the holy truth concerning this thing called death. Know that there is in each man a deep will, potentially committed to freedom or captivity, ready to consent to life, born consenting to death, turned inside out, swallowed by its own self, prisoner of itself like Jonas in the whale. . . . This is the truth of death which, printed in the heart of every man, leads him to look for the sign of Jonas the prophet.<sup>1</sup>

Just how Merton's observation applies to religious life today is something I am not altogether sure about. There is a lot of dying and downsizing in religious orders and congregations, but what we hope is going to emerge in the end is not at all discernible. That explains why religious, like everyone else in the Church, must make reading the signs of the times an important part of their daily prayer. We do not want to wind up in the position of misidentifying the action of God as the action of an evil spirit, which the gospel calls an unforgivable sin (Mark 3:29).

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<sup>1</sup> *The Sign of Jonas: The Journals of Thomas Merton* (New York: Doubleday Image Books, 1956), 329.

Many communities have made valiant efforts at adaptation and renewal, yet as institutions they still continue to decline. This does not mean, however, that the changes and adaptations that they made were at fault, as if by precipitously abandoning the past communities had sealed their own fate. No; the past had become wooden. In some cases decay in the form of a failure to take seriously the present historical moment had set in; the same was true of the institutional church. That fact, after all, explains why Vatican II was so necessary.

Religious communities should not blame themselves for the fact that the culture around them appears to be losing its appetite for God and prefers not to be prophetically challenged in matters touching upon personal religious belief. Religious life must be patient, for the Spirit has not abandoned the world or the Church. We have to learn to capitalize on the thirst for global solidarity and peace as the discernible route to salvation at this stage of human history. The history of revelation is hardly finished.

### **Revelation as experience of God**

Does God deal with us directly, in ways that we can experience both personally and communally? The answer to this question, of course, should be a confident Yes; over centuries the answer has been repeatedly confirmed in the lives of devout men and women both inside and outside the Christian tradition. That *Yes* forms the presupposition of the process of spiritual direction and of every Ignatian retreat; that certainty is also what rendered Ignatius of Loyola suspect in the wary eyes of the Spanish Inquisition:

. . . during these Spiritual Exercises it is more opportune and much better *that the Creator and Lord communicate Himself* to the faithful soul in search for the will of God, as

He inflames her in His love and praise, disposing her towards the way in which she will be better able to serve Him in the future. Hence the giver of the Exercises . . . *should leave the Creator to work directly with the creature, and the creature with the Creator and Lord.*<sup>2</sup>

Leaving aside exactly how those experiences are mediated and which metaphors best describe them, the conviction that the mystery of God can actually be experienced underlies the classical doctrine of the spiritual senses which we find, for instance, in the writing of Origen.<sup>3</sup> And that conviction appears clearly and reassuringly in scripture itself. “O taste and see,” urges the psalmist (Psalm 34:8). Throughout the two testaments, not only is the mystery of God disclosed; above all it is known intimately and experienced in the everyday circumstances and events of people’s lives.

The Christian doctrine of revelation is essentially an affirmation about the possibility of really experiencing God. Indeed, the experiential dimension of revelation must be kept firmly in mind when reading the opening paragraphs of Vatican II’s *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation*; otherwise the

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<sup>2</sup> *Spiritual Exercises*, Annotation 15. See *Saint Ignatius of Loyola: Personal Writings*, translated with introduction and notes by Joseph A. Munitiz and Philip Endean (London: Penguin Books, 1996), 286. Emphasis added. Ignatius was not the only saint to run into trouble, of course; both John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila had their share. See, for example, Gillian Ahlgren, *Teresa of Avila and the Politics of Sanctity* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996).

<sup>3</sup> See Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Origen: Spirit and Fire. A Thematic Anthology of His Writings*, translated by Robert J. Daly S.J. (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1984), 218-257.

very scriptural texts cited by the document lose their meaning and power. Revelation consists of an *experience* of God and salvation before that experience is ever conceptualized and finds its way into a formal description about the nature of God and God's extraordinary deeds. No matter how we eventually articulate or describe the content of "the mystery that has been hidden throughout the ages and generations" (Col 1:26), that content is inseparable from our experience of salvation and the workings of grace. The entire second volume of Edward Schillebeeckx's monumental christological study turns on this important point.<sup>4</sup>

### **Revelation: not closed but ongoing**

But if revelation supposes the ongoing self-communication of God both within the broad framework of human history as well as within the smaller compass of individual lives, then we can rightfully ask ourselves about what God might be "saying" to us today, particularly in terms of the "signs of our times".<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> *Christ: The Experience of Jesus as Lord* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1980). My aim in this article is not to present a fully worked out theology of revelation. For that, one would best consult, e.g., Avery Dulles, *Models of Revelation* (New York: Doubleday, 1983; reprinted [1992] by Orbis Books); Heinrich Fries, *Fundamental Theology*, translated by Robert J. Daly, S.J. (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1996), 179-381; or Richard McBrien, *Catholicism* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1994 [new edition]), 227-273.

<sup>5</sup> This celebrated gospel phrase appears in the opening of paragraph 4 of Vatican II's *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*. And as the accompanying note to this paragraph in the volume *The Documents of Vatican II* edited by Walter Abbott reminds us, this phrase was a favorite of John XXIII, especially in his encyclical *Pacem in Terris*.

Jesus' promise to remain with us always, until "the end of the age" (Matt 28:20), would be pointless unless his presence was going to be active, disclosive, prophetic, healing, challenging and empowering. In this sense, therefore, revelation is hardly "closed."

The apostolic generation may have ended with the death of the last apostle; the canon of scripture may have been definitively fixed for centuries. But there is nothing closed about God's dealings with the human race; God's hands are certainly not tied by human claims about definitiveness, finality or irreformability. If as individuals and communities we are always capable of deeper and richer prayer, then as individuals and as church we are likewise capable of "tasting and seeing" the mystery of God with ever greater sensitivity, gratitude and wonder. The Bible is a great word about God, but it is not humanity's only word about God, or its most accurate and complete word, or its last word. Such adjectives are simply out of place. Anyone who attempts to compare genuine experiences of God runs the risk of falling into great immodesty, if not irreverence. None of us would ever dare to say, "My prayer is better than yours." Yet Christians might be tempted to harbor such judgments in secret when they observe the pluralism that characterizes the religious world of today; some of our theological rhetoric, like old wineskins, does not tolerate well the dizzying action of the Spirit. Maybe it is because we have been so accustomed to claiming and justifying Christian uniqueness that we do not possess at this moment a Christian theological language that does justice to the profound religious complexities of our time and place in history. Someday, however, we shall.

If the Christian doctrine of revelation affirms, at least from the viewpoint of religious experience, that there can never be closure in the matter of God's addressing us, it also affirms that a world without God is unthinkable. Or rather that a world in which all stories and remembrances of God had been completely obliterated from humanity's memory would become pure torment; such religious amnesia would presage the dreaded reign of the great beasts of Revelation 13.<sup>6</sup> We can conceive a world with a much smaller Christian presence and not lose heart, but not a world totally without God.<sup>7</sup> A world without God would be a world overwhelmed by darkness. Christian faith insists, of course, that this has not happened: "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it" (John1:5). And Christian hope knows that "even the darkness is not dark to you" (Psalm 139:12).

Men and women, we believe, are created for conversation with God; the divine signature is indelibly imprinted upon our minds and hearts. That signature is also imprinted across the length and breadth of human history, particularly the history of

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<sup>6</sup> See Rahner's meditation on the word 'God' in *The Content of Faith: The Best of Karl Rahner's Theological Writings*, edited by Karl Lehmann and Albert Raffelt, translation edited by Harvey D. Egan, S.J. (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Co., 1992), 205-211.

<sup>7</sup> Thomas Merton's 1961 reflections along this line make interesting reading in light of what has taken place in the church and in the world over the past thirty-seven years. See *Turning Toward the World: The Journals of Thomas Merton*, volume 4, edited by Victor A. Kramer (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), 138-139. Merton was here reacting to what he perceived to be the excessive confidence in Rahner's thinking about the future of Christianity.



those living in exile from their true homeland,<sup>8</sup> deprived of their rights and dignity as children of God: the poor, the powerless and voiceless like the biblical orphans and widows, the exploited ones at the bottom of every human society, the slaves, the masses of immigrants, refugees and political prisoners. To find where God might be in human history, as followers of Jesus we need only to look for the signs of his cross and to the darkness that has marked so many lives. To hear God in history, we begin by learning how to pay attention to the desperate voices of the crucified and abandoned ones. Jesus, after all, was not the first human being to pray the anguished words of Psalm 22, and he certainly would not be the last.

A conversation with God which is not at the same time a conversation with the world of the poor simply fails as an expression of genuine Christian prayerfulness.<sup>9</sup> Perhaps it was just this sort of reasoning that led the author of the letter to the Hebrews to write: “Remember those who are in prison, *as though you were in prison with them*; those who are being tortured, *as though you yourselves were being tortured*” (Heb 13:3).

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<sup>8</sup> In his book *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), N. T. Wright takes the historical experience of Israel’s exile as the controlling metaphor underneath Jesus’ message of the kingdom of God. The return from exile thus becomes a way of signifying God’s saving, liberating action on behalf of the people. While the memory of the Babylonian exile would have been more recent for Jesus, the memory of the exile in Egypt<sup>9</sup> might have been more paradigmatic of God’s liberating power.

<sup>9</sup> I have developed this point in *To Hear the Word of God, Listen to the World: The Liberation of Spirituality* (New York: Paulist Press, 1997). See pp 1-43.

We are not only, in Karl Rahner's memorable title, "hearers of the word"; we are also bearers of the word. The doctrine about revelation maintains not just that God speaks to men and women; the Church's teaching holds further that human beings are by nature capable of discerning God's word and according it the major place in their lives. The gospel text "Blessed rather are those who *hear* the word of God and *obey* it!" (Luke 11:28) would be religiously meaningless unless the capability of hearing and responding to God's word belonged to how we had been fashioned "in the beginning."

To say that we are bearers of God's word means that revelation becomes incarnate within us as women and men of faith; the word of God comes to expression within our minds and imaginations, and informs all that we say and do. The life of a believer is itself the primary and basic confirmation of the truth that God's self-communication is ongoing and that the promise Jesus made to remain with us always is constantly being fulfilled.

### **Reading with Pope John the "Signs of the Times"**

John XXIII employed this phrase four times in his 1963 encyclical letter *Pacem in Terris* as a section heading.<sup>10</sup> In each instance, the signs he appealed to were of a secular character. "Our age has three distinctive characteristics," he writes. Then he enumerates: "workers all over the world bluntly refuse ever to be treated as if they were irrational objects without freedom"; they demand and have a right to a share in anything touching

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<sup>10</sup> The heading occurs in the encyclical above Nos. 39, 75, 126 and 142. The document can be found in *The Gospel of Peace and Justice: Catholic Social Teaching since Pope John*, presented by Joseph Gremillion (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1976).

upon their social and economic well-being. Next, “women are becoming ever more conscious of their human dignity”; women are insisting that they be treated justly. Finally, “there will soon no longer exist a world divided into peoples who rule others and peoples who are subject to others”; the march towards full political freedom is irreversible. He later mentions under this heading that “modern times” are characterized by the writing of civil constitutions and enshrining in them fundamental human rights and the political wisdom that disputes are better resolved by negotiation than by weapons. And finally he singles out the creation of the United Nations and its Universal Declaration of Human Rights (in 1948) as “an important step on the path toward the juridico-political organization of the world community”.

It is impossible not to be struck by one particular attitude in that encyclical (an attitude which also carried through Vatican II’s *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*), namely, its sober, non-defensive openness to the world. The Pope saw positive developments and forces at work in human societies; he read the signs of the times and welcomed the message they gave. Darkness and pessimism did not overcome his sense of God’s faithfulness as he thought about the Church and the aspirations of the modern world.

### **No sign except the “sign of Jonah”**

John XXIII had borrowed this phrase, of course, from Matthew’s gospel:

The Pharisees and Sadducees came, and to test Jesus they asked him to show them a sign from heaven. He answered them, “When it is evening you say, ‘It will be fair weather, for the sky is red.’ And in the morning, ‘It will be stormy today, for the sky is read and threatening.’ You know how

to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times. An evil and adulterous generation asks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of Jonah.” (Matt 16:1-4)

Jesus’ adversaries were looking for evidence that Jesus’ mission and message were truly from God, but in the exchange Jesus moved the meaning of the word “sign” from that of miraculous proof or confirmation to that of parable. The adversaries wanted divine testimony; Jesus directed them to pay the closest attention to the events and circumstances of their historical moment. Luke’s version of this episode makes the point clear: “but why do you not know how to interpret the present time?” (Luke 12:56) The scandal here is that as experts or professionals in religious matters the Pharisees and Sadducees did not know how to discern. As discerners they had failed miserably; their “eyes” were not healthy. Hence Jesus’ admonition: “Therefore consider whether the light in you is not darkness” (Luke 11:35).

Needless to say, the meaning of the above passage hinges in large measure on the phrase “sign of Jonah”. There could be a reference here to Jesus being raised from the “belly” of death. In an earlier scene Matthew had made this association explicit; the connection seemed evident to him: “For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the sea monster, so for three days and three nights the Son of Man will be in the heart of the earth” (Matt 12:40).<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Readers may recall that Thomas Merton picked up on this allegorical sense of the gospel passage in *The Sign of Jonas* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., 1956). He wrote: ‘The life of . . . every Christian is signed with the sign of Jonas, because we all live by the power of Christ’s resurrection.’ Then he added: ‘But I feel that my

What is probably more remarkable about the ancient story, however, at least from the standpoint of a Jewish prophet was not Jonah's experience inside the fish but his astonishment that Gentiles should have responded so promptly and so contritely to the preaching of a messenger dispatched by the God of Israel. Jesus' insight into gentile readiness for the gospel appears to have originated in his encounter with a Canaanite woman as he made his way through gentile territory. "Woman," he declares practically with astonishment, "great is your faith!" (Matt 15:28)

Immediately after this we read that great crowds come to him for healing and they left him, singing the praises of the God of the Jews. In the very next scene Jesus is described as having compassion for the crowd, which consisted presumably of a large gathering of Gentiles. He then repeats what he had done earlier among his own people; he feeds them from seven loaves. What then is to be made of the surprising fact that Gentiles responded to God's word more readily than the children of Abraham, or that repentance occurred outside the pale of Israel's temple, cult, priesthood and scripture, or that revelation had truly happened among the "pagans"? Jesus had learned an

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own life is especially sealed with this great sign . . . because like Jonas himself I find myself traveling toward my destiny in the belly of a paradox' (pp. 20-21). Later in the book Merton elaborated a little (pp. 329-330). It is not likely, however, that Jesus himself would have taken the 'sign of Jonah' to be a death-resurrection symbol. In Merton's life, the real paradox may have been the constant tension he experienced between his desire for solitude and for solidarity; he was caught, prophet-like, between two very different worlds. In this sense, Merton remains one of the signs of our times.

important lesson, but the Pharisees and Sadducees would hear none of it.

In short, interpreting the sign of Jonah calls for a special interpretative skill; it requires a readiness to discern God's presence and action in unfamiliar, unlikely places. Jesus' reply obviously is not about discovering how to predict the future, not even about making accurate weather forecasts. He is speaking about taking appropriate measures in light of the political, religious and social realities of the time. What started out as a hostile demand for a miraculous sign wound up as an examination of discernment skills.<sup>12</sup> The religious professionals regarded Jesus and everything he represented not as a welcome development but as dangerous, subversive and evil. Jesus, they had claimed, was in league with the devil (see Matt 3:22). Yet in this episode it was the religious experts who had put Jesus to the test, not Satan.

### **What are the signs of our times?**

If we are on the right track in connecting revelation with the "signs of the times," then we can legitimately ask, What are some of the illuminating moments of our time at the close of the twentieth century, and what might God be saying to us by means of them? For by saying that the mystery of God can be experienced, we have to consider not only those interior moments when a person may be consciously attending to the Spirit's presence in, say, the psalms, the gospels, the liturgy, or devotional practices. There is also the further moment of history itself, the political and social experience that defines our time

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<sup>12</sup> See Daniel J. Harrington, S.J., *The Gospel of Matthew* (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1991), 243-246.

and place at the close of the second millennium and the dawn of a new century. Following the lead of John XXIII and the Council, we confidently believe that God is still being revealed in the signs of the times, in the political and social circumstances of our particular historical moment. Scripture, after all, is a like a mirror, reflecting in its inspiration, composition and transmission the worlds from which the biblical books emerged. History itself may well be the ongoing word of God, of which scripture for us is a privileged though not exhaustive reflection.

John XXIII showed admirable foresight when he highlighted the forces of democratic reform throughout the world, the aspirations of economically and socially disenfranchised peoples, the urgent desire for nuclear disarmament, and the consciousness-raising and consequent empowerment taking place among women. There were other “signs” as well, yet all of them shared one important feature: they provided a sense of direction as to where the Spirit has been drawing us, thereby reconfirming the gospel text “and the darkness did not overcome it.” The signs helped us to focus on what we should be thinking about, praying over and doing as followers of Christ. From prayerful consideration would come strategies of action and cooperation with other people of good will. Looked at with eyes of faith, problems become challenges, and challenges pave the way toward unity and peace.

### **Signs from within the Church**

With the hindsight of forty years, we can only admire and applaud John XXIII’s vision. Prompted by the same spiritual impulse, we might even venture to add some “signs” of our own. What Christians in some circles perceive to be the theological annoyance of religious pluralism, for example,

becomes an opportunity for discovering new dimensions within the Christian religious experience. The political problems caused by religious fundamentalism in various parts of the world create the possibility of arriving at a view of our basic human identity based not on ethnicity and culture, but on solidarity and compassion. The problem of diminishing numbers among religious communities and ordained ministers invites us to envision a Christian spirituality consistently rooted in baptism and Eucharist, and to envision a laity confident of its vocation and fully empowered to be church. The problem of dissent with respect to some of the Church's teaching about sexuality and the debate prompted by those women who feel themselves called to participate in ordained ministry have already challenged the Church to a more authentic appropriation of the gospel.

Perhaps no developments have been more impressive than the rich outpouring of Catholic scriptural studies in the second half of our century, together with the corresponding renewal of our liturgical forms, and the great numbers of lay men and women pursuing advanced theological studies. What we have been witnessing in the years since the Council is an historical enactment of the gospel text: "And no one puts new wine into old wineskins . . . one puts new wine into fresh wineskins" (Mark 2:22). The sign here is that the Spirit has been preparing the Church to step into a vastly different religious and cultural world. We might also think of the sign of Catholics and Protestants praying and worshipping together, or even the more astonishing sign of Christians talking about ethical sensibilities and religious experience with Hindus, Muslims and



Buddhists.<sup>13</sup> Our dogma, our practice and our prayer are gradually being liberated from the darkness of historical blindness, spiritual isolationism, theological triumphalism, and even from the residual intellectual imperialism of western culture.

The remembrance of John Paul II landing in so many countries over the course of his pontificate is yet another “sign.” The Church has dramatically bridged the world. No one place, not even Rome, can be the Church’s true center, for the “center” is neither cultural nor hereditary, but demographic; the Church’s center exists wherever the people of God live. As the Pope traveled, the Catholic imagination traveled with him, and the pressing concerns of the nations became ever more firmly our own. The mystery of God is being revealed to us today with breathtaking freshness in terms of a church without a geographic center and a spirituality that transcends national and cultural boundaries. This might not have been the point the Pope intended to make as he traveled the globe, but one effect of his journeys has been to demythologize the location of Rome and to enlarge the theological and pastoral significance of the world’s great population centers.

### **Signs from the heart of the world**

Yet there are secular points of light to mention as well as religious ones. Several years ago I was visiting a village church in India. On the table in the priest’s kitchen sat a pitcher of milk

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<sup>13</sup> See, for example, Hans Küng, *A Global Ethic: The Declaration of the Parliament of the World Religions* (New York: Continuum Publishing Group, 1994); and *Christianity and World Religions: Paths of Dialogue with Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993).

with a cloth over it. Despite the protective net, ants had found their way into the milk. “Why don’t you set the pitcher in a pan of water?” I asked my friend. “Because,” he replied, “the ants just build bridges, one over the other, so that they can cross to the pitcher.” I watched incredulously while he demonstrated. The ants patiently engineered their bridge to food and salvation. “And there you have it,” the priest exclaimed, “a parable in action! A few die that the colony might live. Like ants crossing over one another, the famished people of the world are going to make their way across rivers and oceans, across every obstacle rich nations set up, until they get what they need to survive.”

Two things that have worsened since John XXIII wrote his great social encyclicals are the condition of the poor and their numbers. No sign stands out so sharply as the plight of the world’s destitute. The great migrations caused by tribal hatreds in Africa, or refugees displaced by ethnic violence and unemployment spilling across borders into Europe or the United States, are symptomatic both of the sinfulness of the world and the determination of the poor to find or to create lasting sanctuaries. Anyone who watches the nightly newscasts or reads the daily newspaper cannot fail to answer the question “Where is God speaking to us today?” with the words “There, in the faces of our suffering sisters and brothers.” How could one ever separate the mystery of God from God’s people? Given the gospel story, it would be unrealistic to think that the divine mystery would reveal itself in a manner that would not bring us directly into the lives and fortunes of communities of suffering, or that the Church’s daily Eucharistic remembrance of Jesus would not include, of necessity, a “critical remembrance of

suffering humanity.”<sup>14</sup> Discovering and experiencing the living God among those men and women who are languishing in the world’s figurative dungeons of poverty, racial hatred, exploitation and greed may be to understand, perhaps for the first time, why even the abode of death—the deepest darkness imaginable—is not impervious to God (Psalm 139:8b).

### **Solidarity: the globalization of the human spirit**

Perhaps no “sign of the times” is more important than the fact that we are developing souls that reach out to embrace the world. Solidarity as both the consequence and the expression of having made a preferential option for the poor is fast becoming the premier Christian virtue of our time, generating new forms of asceticism and holiness.<sup>15</sup> The globalization of the economy is a precursor of the far more radical transformation that has started taking place within the human spirit. Powerful technological and economic forces may be tying men and women more closely to one another, but the globalization of the human spirit could well bring us to a new moral and spiritual threshold. Jesus’ words about the poor being given the kingdom

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<sup>14</sup> The phrase comes from Edward Schillebeeckx, *op. cit.*, 670ff.

<sup>15</sup> There is no need to explain here the critical importance of the notion of the option for the poor in contemporary theology and spirituality; the literature on this topic is extensive. One might consult, for example, Pedro Casaldaliga and José-María Vigil, *Political Holiness: A Spirituality of Liberation*, translated by Paul Burns and Francis McDonagh (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1994; published also by Burns & Oates [1994] under the title *The Spirituality of Liberation*), 137-143; or Juan Luis Segundo, *Signs of the Times: Theological Reflections*, translated by Robert R. Barr (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1993), 119-127 and 128-148.

of God and the meek inheriting the earth sound more like a promise to be welcomed than a warning about impending judgment to the degree that our prayer and our politics are rooted in a solidarity with those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. Solidarity, in other words, gives rise to an experience of God that is distinctive. In experiencing God, one is also experiencing the life of God's people. The more realized our solidarity becomes, the more the people of God become the interior horizon within which every conversation with God takes place.

Compassion and solidarity, I would urge, deserve to be differentiated, although never separated. In an address to Polish pilgrims, John Paul II spoke of the need to reconsider solidarity as moral behavior and a virtue. Quoting what he had already written in *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, the Pope told the visitors:

[Solidarity] is not a feeling of vague compassion or shallow distress at the misfortunes of so many people, both near and far. On the contrary, it is a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good; that is to say, to the good of all and of each individual, because we are all really responsible for all.<sup>16</sup>

Compassion (or mercy) is clearly a supreme gospel virtue (see Luke 6:36 and 10:37), but it often appears to be more of a reaction to particular instances of suffering than a state of mind and heart resulting from having identified oneself with the victims of history. Solidarity implies a crossing-over, at least in one's loyalties and prayer, to the side of the poor. Economically secure Christians, for example, could experience compassion

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<sup>16</sup> The address can be found in the English edition of *L'Osservatore Romano* for 4 December 1989 (No. 49, p. 10).

towards human beings in need without having undergone the interior transformation that comes from making a preferential option for the poor.

### **Revelation is mostly ordinary**

The Church teaches that scripture is inspired, yet there are many texts both of a religious and non-religious character which “inspire” us even though they do not enjoy inspiration in the technical sense. For some people, revelation is primarily a language event. In reading a biblical text, a person is moved by the words of the text and in them discovers meaningfulness; the truth of God is “revealed” on the sacred page. This sort of thing happens all the time, of course, apart from reading the Bible.

Consider for a moment the text of Matthew 25:31-46, the great judgment scene. We read the passage, think about its message and are moved by what the passage is saying to us. Perhaps we catch a new insight into the way God has identified with men and women in desperate conditions, or draw a connection between images in the passage and similar encounters we may have had with people in distress. The moment of revelation for us as reader could be simply the realization of the truth behind Jesus’ words, a realization that stirs us to speak to God.

But we might also imagine any number of situations in which the message of the gospel story comes home to us forcefully in real life, and not just while quietly meditating on the gospel text. Coming face to face with an individual imprisoned, or bedridden, or panic-stricken and away from home, or traumatized by hunger, we may receive an immediate awareness of the presence of the risen Jesus; or perhaps later, Emmaus-like, we come to recognize that we had actually encountered Jesus. The point is that revelation occurs endlessly

in events, in actions and in everyday circumstances. For the most part the “deeds of God” do not consist of stunning miracles and wonders; God’s doing is an integral part of the ordinary, often messy situations of everyday life, which is exactly what St. Ignatius recommends we think about at the end of the *Exercises* in the “contemplation for attaining love.” Precisely for this reason we can consider the “signs of the times” to be instances of revelation. The evangelist Matthew could not have given us the graphic, moving description of the final judgment scene unless he had already discovered in real life the mysterious reality revealed in the story. And the same point could be illustrated in terms of many other elements in the gospel narratives. For those whose eyes are healthy (Luke 11:34), that is, for those who see and live by faith, the familiarity (and sometimes the opaqueness) of what they witness and listen to each day yields to the penetrating light of God’s Word. Such people are not merely passive observers, dull listeners and unthinking actors in the world’s daily drama. Rather, they are ever reading and reacting to the present moment.

For a believer, God’s self-disclosure or self-communication usually happens in humble, ordinary events and circumstances. It is taking place continually in the lives of devout men and women who share our particular moment in history. The presence of the risen Christ associated with scripture and sacrament does not displace the presence of God elsewhere, in other texts, in other symbols and rituals, and in other religious traditions. The grace of finding God in all things would be unthinkable if God’s revealing action could be circumscribed by the conceptual limitations of our theology or our spirituality, or false dichotomies between sanctuary and world.

But that puts things negatively. The conviction that God can be found in all things, even in suffering and the belly of death, is probably the central expression of the Easter experience, for the resurrection celebrates the abiding presence of God-in-Christ and life-giving hope. For those who have eyes for it, Easter is a sign for all times of divine solidarity with the human condition, a sign which is both promise and judgment. It is a promise to remain with us until “the end of the age” (Matt 28:20), and it is a judgment against those whose preferential option is to stand anywhere except alongside God’s poor. After all, it was the *crucified* One who was raised from the dead.

[1999]

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### **The Grace of Interruptions**

Snowstorms in New England may be lovely to watch, and we're accustomed to them, but unless one is a skier they usually upset a lot of plans. A case of the flu, on the other hand, has no redeeming features. There may be times when we would welcome the chance to spend a day in bed, but not on account of sickness. Lots of things can make us lose our concentration or modify our schedules, of course; some are trivial, others are very serious. If she gets a phone call while mixing cookie dough, for instance, my mother loses count of the cups of flour or sugar already in the bowl, and we laugh about it. When a student learns that his twin has just been killed in a car accident, tomorrow's mid-term suddenly appears awfully inconsequential. If I'm on my way to the library, I generally don't mind pausing to chat with a colleague along the way; but running into a traffic delay when I have only minutes to get to church makes me tense and impatient.

Life works better, it seems, when everything obeys a schedule. Imagine the temperamental adjustment we would have to make if airplanes simply departed when the pilot felt ready, or if banks kept random hours, or if one did not know from one day to the next whether schools, or post offices, or grocery stores would open their doors. There is nothing unspiritual, in other words, about the need for order and routine in our lives. Indeed, order and tranquility may rightly be regarded as great blessings. All of us depend on a healthy measure of structure and predictability if we are to lead secure, productive lives.



Still, each day has its share of interruptions, the things we were not counting on or expecting but which are part and parcel of human existence. Some we welcome, others cause us to be anxious or to grieve. Some interruptions delight and console us, while others invade our good moods and steal our peace. I would wager that interruptions of whatever sort are probably good for our souls, in the same way that distractions paradoxically can refocus, strengthen, and purify our efforts to pray. For one thing interruptions prevent order and routine from turning into the narcotic of false security. An existence from which all interruptions had been sealed out would be not just dull but downright grotesque. The human spirit would wither quickly if it were compelled to live inside a huge, aseptic bubble.

More importantly, however, interruptions require that we learn how to adapt and respond to the fluid and unpredictable everyday world of which we are so much a part. Circumstances, events, and people are constantly exerting their claims on our attention. Sometimes we are merely distracted, sometimes we have to adjust our schedules and reapportion our psychic energy, and sometimes we can be thrown completely off course. Yet dealing with the things that either sidetrack us or force us to pause in whatever we have been doing, I believe, leads to resilience of spirit, patience, compassion, and even to wisdom. “The human mind plans the way,” says the author of Proverbs, “but the Lord directs the steps” (16:9). Interruptions may sound like an odd way to direct our steps, but if the mystic is someone who knows how to find God in all things, then Proverbs has summed up a great mystery.

## Interrupted by the Spirit

From a religious point of view, what else is a vocation if not one enormous interruption? Although some men and women gravitate toward ministry or religious life in a fairly smooth and almost instinctive fashion, there are many others who would describe the history of their vocations differently. For them, being interrupted by the Spirit lies at the heart of the experience of being called. Fresh from the waters of the Jordan Jesus certainly interrupted the lives of the four fishermen by the lakeside and Levi at his tax station, while the risen Jesus movingly interrupted a determined young Saul as he was rushing toward Damascus. The word of the Lord often proved to be a notoriously powerful interruption, as figures like Jeremiah and Amos had discovered, and as many a Christian reader over the centuries has likewise learned.

In many cases it was not a biblical text but the stories of martyrs and saints that suddenly broke into the ordinariness of their lives and led them to ask, “What am I doing for Christ?” Ignatius Loyola, thrown onto a sickbed by French cannon fire, suffered a far more serious interruption when he came across the medieval compilation of saints’ lives referred to as the *Golden Legend*. And Edith Stein’s decisive interruption occurred when, fingering a friend’s bookshelf, she chanced upon *The Book of Her Life*, the spiritual autobiography of Teresa of Avila.

In other cases events have played the key role. The murder of Father Rutilio Grande radically interrupted Archbishop Oscar Romero’s life and ministry, while Sister Helen Prejean recounts her vocational identity being interrupted by poor people in a Louisiana housing project.

Vocation is not a matter of having one's life interrupted just once, however. Experience reminds us that after God has entered our lives in some momentous way, sameness often resumes, old habits or patterns gradually reassert themselves, and pious resolves tend to blur. A major reason for making retreats or undertaking a daily examination of consciousness is to create an opportunity for the mind and heart to recollect themselves. The thought strikes me often that praying is a matter of talking to oneself, but always with the firm awareness that God is listening. Where that awareness of a God who constantly hears and knows is lacking, then the talking amounts to little more than processing and ventilating one's feelings. The exercise of talking with oneself may be therapeutic, but it is not really prayer. A well-placed distraction now and then can pull us out of those monologues. The ease with which we slide inwards, even as religious men and women, makes interruptions all the more salutary.

All of this brings me to wonder whether vocational awareness, whatever the particular path we embark upon, does not involve a deep, lifelong acknowledgement that ours will be (to draw on the title of Etty Hillesum's unforgettable diary entries) an "interrupted life." Although we do not exactly promise to solicit interruptions, the reality is that we do pledge ourselves to remain open to the divine mystery; for what else does walking in the presence of God—living by faith—mean? And openness to that mystery inevitably leads to being interrupted in minor or major ways. To those familiar with the ways of the Spirit it is not surprising that the unplanned moments, like the stone rejected by the builders, should turn into the cornerstones of our lives.

The lesson, however, can be all too easily forgotten. The more determined we are to set goals, follow agenda, and finish what we have on our ministerial plates, the greater the risk that we may wind up being celebrated for the wrong accomplishment. Mission sometimes transmutes into fixation. A veteran religious once remarked that the figure in the Gospel with which he identified most was the donkey Jesus rode into Jerusalem, because when the Lord needed him he was tied to a post! The people and situations that occasionally throw us off course may thus be doing us a great favor. After all, isn't that what the disciples did when they untied the donkey? And is that not what the Spirit does in untying us from our ministerial routines or our religious comfort zones? The human mind may plan the way, but (as the proverb reassures us) it is truly the Spirit who directs our steps.

[2001]

### 3.

## A Reflection after Visiting San Marco

The convent of San Marco in Florence was once the friary of the controversial 15<sup>th</sup>-century preacher and reformer Girolamo Savonarola. But the convent is perhaps better known because on its walls Fra Angelico and his school painted scenes based on the Gospels, one scene in each of the monastic cells. A striking feature of these 15th-century frescoes is that Saint Dominic appears in many of them. The fact that Dominic was obviously not alive at the time Jesus lived was beside the point. Dominic, after all, had died in 1221. The artist could include him in the scenes from Jesus' life because in Dominic's own imagination he had indeed been present as the Gospel story unfolded. In the fresco depicting the resurrection, for example, Saint Dominic "sees" the angel, three holy women, and the mother of Jesus, who is staring into the empty tomb. Above Mary is the artist's rendering of the messenger's words about the gloriously risen Jesus, whom Mary presumably sees within her imagination. So we have Mary's vision of Jesus, within Dominic's vision of the empty tomb, within the artist's vision of Dominic, within the evangelist's recounting of the Jesus story—and all on a wall in some unknown monk's cell!

Anyone familiar with Ignatian spirituality through the Spiritual Exercises would recognize the affinity between what Fra Angelico and his assistants did and Ignatius' recourse to imagination. Ignatius, undergoing his conversion nearly a century later, would have us apply not only our imaginations but all of our senses as well to contemplating the Gospel story. The one making the Exercises would become so "present" to each scene that by the time the individual completed the

Exercises he or she would have acquired an intimate knowledge of the events being contemplated, a deeply personal familiarity with Jesus, and a vivid sense of what the Gospel reveals to us about the mystery of God. And perhaps like Fra Angelico, Ignatius had no scholarly qualms about sometimes stepping outside the scriptural text. For instance, Ignatius believed that the first apparition of the risen Jesus was to the Virgin Mary. He wrote: “Although this is not stated in Scripture, still it is considered as understood by the statement that he appeared to many others.”

While recourse to imagination is by no means the only, or even the primary method by which Christians pray, for many of us imagination has paved the way to God. Not simply have we regularly visualized the Gospel story, assisted in this through pictures, works of art, cinema, music, stained glass, nativity scenes, and so on; we have truly inserted ourselves into the Gospels and there accompanied Jesus and his disciples on the dusty roads of Galilee and Judea. The supremely important role played by imagination in prayer is evident, for instance, in the Christian preoccupation with place. One time on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land I noticed a woman as unobtrusively as she could, reaching to the ground to pick up a stone and slide it into a canvas shopping bag. She later explained to me that from each site she had acquired a stone which she was going to put somewhere in her home, each one a reminder of a particular place Jesus had most likely walked.

The same devotional impulse has led Christians over the centuries to make pilgrimages, frequently risking their health and safety in doing so. Although pilgrims have traveled to plenty of other sites besides biblical ones, the land of the Bible conjures up a sense of divine immediacy and nearness. Not

actually, of course; no one part of the planet is more sacred than another. God created the heavens and the earth; the Spirit of God fills the world; the risen Jesus is present wherever his disciples are. But contact with the land of the Bible concretizes the desire of a believer to set foot in those places where men and women so evidently encountered the mystery of God. The places have names; some of those ancient cities still exist. One can walk through a real, not a fictive history in retracing the journeys made long ago by the people of Israel. That is exactly what Bruce Feiler did, a journey he describes in his engaging book *Walking the Bible: A Journey by Land Through the Five Books of Moses* (HarperCollins, 2001). The land, in other words, symbolizes a tradition of faith and to touch that land is to have one's belief confirmed. Those who cannot set their feet on the land of Jesus physically can do so through their imaginations. One can step where he was, and in doing so Jesus comes to stand where we are. That is what Fra Angelico, and Ignatius after him, and countless others before and since, have realized.

The saints also realized, of course, that no matter how much they might have liked to, they could not turn back the calendar and return to Palestine at the time of Jesus. While some saints have bordered on an extreme literalism in their efforts to imitate the historical Jesus, I think the great majority learned, probably through trial and error, that the living Jesus was to be encountered in their own time and place, not in an imagined, romanticized past. We should not, however, glide by too quickly the actual process of making this profound discovery. When, one must ask oneself, did I finally grasp the connection between Jesus' historical moment and my own, between his place and the places in which my life has been unfolding? When and under what circumstances did I start to

see that there is not just one Gethsemane or one Golgotha, but many? At what point in my life did it begin to sound utterly natural to speak (at least to the Lord) in terms of “our” Galilee? When did I begin to read the newspapers and routinely interpret what I read through a gospel lens? The process of making these gospel connections is all-important, and more likely than not it had been going on a considerable time before we ever attended to it.

If I had been a friar of San Marco and every day opened my eyes to one of the frescoes, then eventually I would probably have visualized myself in one of those gospel scenes. The mind contemplates an idea inside the image, and the heart penetrates the image by clothing itself with the idea. I would have felt that I belonged there as much as Saint Dominic did, or Saint Peter Martyr (whom Fra Angelico had also inserted), or indeed as much as any of the women and men who accompanied Jesus during his lifetime. For those who do not awaken to a Fra Angelico on the wall, there is always the New Testament itself. Regular contemplation of the Gospels is, for a religious person, *the* Christian devotion par excellence. Contemporary biblical scholarship will one day prove to have been, I am convinced, one of the greatest aids to Christian prayer and devotion of all time. Scholarship, like great art, helps a person to wear the Gospel.

### **Imaging Jesus and vocational awareness**

There is no doubt that vocational awareness is stimulated by the example of men and women whose lives are marked by zeal, generosity, reverence, a clear sense of mission and purpose, simplicity of life, and solidarity with the poor. But the spark—the awakening to God, the feeling of being called to allow God to be the exclusive focus of one’s mind and heart—is



less easily accounted for. It is probably not just a single event but a cluster of events that figure into the awakening. Books that capture our imagination, conversations with close friends, Christian family life, being seized by the beauty of the natural world, or even coming face to face with severe human misery and deprivation, the innate attractiveness of a particular work which religious men and women have undertaken, stories of martyrdom: these are the sorts of things which contribute to the birth and development of religious awareness.

There are individuals who have a sense of being called to surrender their lives to God fully and unconditionally, even without knowing what that will entail, and without having much prior understanding of the Gospel or Jesus. The Ethiopian eunuch who ran into Philip was someone searching for Jesus without realizing what he was looking for: “About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?” (Acts 8:34). Perhaps something similar was going on in the soul of the man born blind. Jesus asked him, “Do you believe in the Son of Man?” And the man born blind answered, “And who is he, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in him” (John 9:36).

It seems to me more likely, however, that vocational awareness is triggered either because of the way Christians in religious or priestly life model an attractive way of being human, or because the work in which such people are engaged excites the imagination and mobilizes desires.

But having said this I should add that neither the example of selflessness and faith given by others nor the importance of the mission or work to which religious people have committed themselves is enough to sustain vocational awareness over the long haul. Sooner or later our eye must catch up with the

Gospel, for it is out of that story that the living Jesus inspires us, calls, forms, and satisfies us. Sooner or later we have to find our place inside the Gospel story, understanding the Jesus story so well that, from the viewpoint of Christian prayer, it can meaningfully and honestly be said that we were eyewitnesses to the scenes and events that the evangelists have recorded. And insofar as the life and times of Jesus—the places where he walked and healed and instructed and drove out demons—is what constitutes our interior landscape, a person’s sense of vocation and mission will be firmly “grounded.”

Once we have committed ourselves to ordained ministry or religious life, we must be prepared for the ongoing but essentially healthy and invigorating challenge of keeping our vocational awareness strong. One of the greatest sources of assistance for this, I have found, is the people of God. For in some mysterious way, vocations come from the Spirit working within the life and historical fortunes of God’s people. The divine call ordinarily comes from below, not out of the skies. The people of God challenge us to remain faithful to our calling and the experience of sharing their lives can provide a constant confirmation of the Spirit’s voice.

Yet the people form only one leg of the challenge and support on which our vocation stands. The other comes from the heart of the Gospel, since it is from within those texts that Jesus himself helps us to stay in touch with our most profound desire to find God and to walk alongside God’s people. When the imagination ceases to play its part, when prayer is no longer steeped in the concreteness of the Gospel stories, then vocational awareness is in jeopardy. One might be moved to greater generosity and dedication by accounts of religious and priests who have been killed because of their persistence, say, in

defending refugees or victims of injustice. But without the fresco that keeps constantly before the mind's eye a vision of Jesus as the evangelists have presented him, accompanying marginalized or impoverished people is going to exact a very high toll. Or to put it another way, we might easily lose sight of why we chose to accompany them in the first place.

[2001]

## 4.

### How Do I Pray?

Over time, I have learned two things about my religious quest: First of all, that it is God who is seeking me, and who has myriad ways of finding me. Second, that my most substantial changes, in terms of religious conversion, come through other people. Even when I become convinced that God is absent from my life, others have a way of suddenly revealing God's presence.

—Kathleen Norris, *Amazing Grace*

Prayer is a matter of solidarity.

—Johann Baptist Metz, *Courage to Pray*

How do I pray? This is, of course, a very personal question. Prayer is a matter of intimacy with God, and details of intimacy on any level are not shared lightly, and certainly not without safeguards. How a person prays involves taste and style, as in the manner of when and where one prefers to pray, one's customary way of addressing God, the particular sights, sounds and circumstances that trigger off an awareness of God's nearness.

Adult religious sensibility is acquired over a long time. It is stretched and refined by everything from chance encounters and friendships, the countless crises and challenges life sets before us, to the thoughtful words we read or hear preached, the tensions and tragedies of our time and place in history, and those everyday experiences and moments which constantly feed our desire for communion and transcendence. We are, first and last, creatures of the world.

*How* do I pray? I really cannot answer *how* without including something about the *when*, the *where* and the *why*.

The prayer of no two days is ever alike, perhaps because the I—my praying self—seems constantly to be changing, continually bounced back and forth, shaped and reshaped, by events largely outside of my control.

I think I could manage, if asked, to describe the current state of my religious belief, or my understanding of Christian existence at the twilight of the twentieth century and as I push towards fifty-four. I could give a reasonable account for my hopefulness, as the first letter of Peter directs us, and I could render a satisfactory picture of how I view my relatedness to God, that lifeline to the divine which comes from the core of my being.

I could even venture an account of other people's prayer, drawing on what people confide to me, and on what I observe every Sunday at Mass. Quiet, profound and unsung moments of being with God: that is what their faces and their lives reveal so surely and vividly as they kneel on the sanctuary step before Mass, or as they finger their rosaries in front of the statue of Mary. The greatest Eucharistic devotion I have ever observed is regularly embodied in the humble posture of several men who do not receive communion out of respect for the sacrament; they are living in irregular marriages. I marvel at their unabashed union of spirit with Christ, as they kneel week after week with eyes closed while others approach the altar.

From what I witness around me each Sunday, I can infer the source of so evident and so reverent a faith within ordinary men and women. I do not hear the silent words they speak to God, and I cannot say for sure that words are even being used. But I have no doubt that these lives would reveal more finding than seeking, more oneness with God than frustrating ambivalence about God's care for the world. Bread, wine and

the faith of the people: I could remain God-centered in church without the first two, but never without the third.

How do I pray? Speaking as a believer and to other believers, the honest answer is that I never stop praying. For me, praying has no boundaries. There is rarely a time in my waking hours in which I can clearly differentiate when I am praying from when I am not.

Now lest this admission sound more like a boast than the truth, I should add immediately that I honestly believe the same to be the case with most people who take their religion seriously. The problem is that our way of defining prayer frequently tends to be too restrictive. The fact is that we are constantly living out of our fundamental relatedness to God, even when we are not attending to that relatedness directly. There is nothing exceptional about our being prayerful, spiritual people; I presume this to be the rule for countless Christians. We can be God-centered even when we are not expressly directing words to God.

How do I pray? The question had been playing in my head as I was making my way one summer through Kathleen Norris' book *The Cloister Walk*.<sup>1</sup> I related effortlessly to her description of the spiritual rhythm in a Benedictine monastery, her enthusiasm for the Liturgy of the Hours, her attentiveness to the feast days of particular saints, and her engagement with the daily readings at Mass. Life in the Jesuit novitiate had been fairly monastic; even today, many years later, I occasionally drive outside the city to enjoy the grounds of the nearby Trappist monastery. I closed the book one evening, not without

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<sup>1</sup> New York: Riverhead Books, 1996.

a touch of envy, and sighed for the predictability of the quiet life.

The following morning I was seated in a packed courtroom, awaiting our case to be called; it was Probate Court. As I listened to the tales of disappointment and frustration people were revealing to the judge about their family situations, I felt my soul stirring from its monastic drowsiness. I had accompanied a young woman to a messy custody proceeding. Since minors were involved, the judge mercifully cleared the courtroom of all those not connected with the case. And with good reason! Tears, shouts, threats, insults and accusations came pouring out in all directions.

The week before our court date, I had requested a police escort for the first time in my life. A six-week-old child was, I knew, hidden in a large housing complex of mainly poor Latino families. The experts at the Department of Social Services had advised that we request the police to be in the parking lot, just in case of violent resistance. The court order for temporary custody turned out to be useless; we left the housing project without the infant.

Eight long hours passed in the courtroom the following Thursday with a stubborn teenager who refused to disclose the whereabouts of her little girl, and by the end of the afternoon everything seemed less sure than when we began. Although I had known the family for almost eight years, the public defender asked the judge that I not be listened to as an expert witness, since I was neither a child psychologist nor a licensed social worker.

In the end, it was not the sense of time wasted which annoyed me, but the sheer craziness of spent lives and the awful, chilling madness of sin. I knew, too, that I was as much a

part of the human scene as everybody else; I felt unclean as I left the courthouse, and disgusted. It was as if humanity itself had let me down. Then out of the blue the totally unrelated thought crossed my mind that no matter how much I had cleaned up and simplified my own life, I had already consumed as much of the earth's resources as most people on the planet would consume in five lifetimes. There was no escaping entanglement in the human condition, not even in the painful events of that courtroom.

Yet what happened that day was, to my reckoning, all part of the same fabric as everything else in my life and in my soul. Each moment of that day, each feeling, each thought and reaction, each desire, each sorry detail in the faces and stories of the people in that court room, moved in and out of my abiding sense that God is present within everything that takes place in our lives. I was simultaneously attending to the moment and attending to God.

Two different worlds, the cloister and the court. I would never claim that God was present to one of those worlds but not to the other. I do confess, however, that I have never been able to pray, *really* pray, in cloistered settings. Outdoors, yes; in churches, on occasion, although even less so as I get older; but in holy places like shrines and pilgrimage sites, great cathedrals or monastery chapels, no. About this I am neither defensive nor apologetic. My sense of God's presence is inseparably connected to the people and events that make up my life. Some of those events, and some of those people, are immediate or close by. Many of them fall into my world from newspapers and television, or from the opportunities I have had to study and travel in the Far East and in South America.



When I am with other people, especially with people who are poor and struggling for a more secure place in society, I feel God's presence and something from deep inside keeps whispering, "Lord, it is good for me to be here." Occasionally it breaks into a cry, "Lord, it really is you!" The moment is not euphoric; it is not ecstatic; it does not come close by a million miles to classical accounts of mystical states. Yet the moment is nearly always immeasurably rich. It is characterized by a sureness and a confidence that I have come to associate with the Easter scenes in the gospels. In those moments, the haunting question, "Lord, when did we see you . . ." from Matthew 25, gets turned around: "Lord, I *did* see you, I *am* seeing you. . ."

Many of us are understandably accustomed to look for God in the quiet places of great natural beauty. The mysterious silence of a clear night sky, the powerful majesty of crashing surf, mountains and valleys, rivers and forests, lush hillsides and even barren deserts: how frequently these have provided the setting for wonderful experiences of God. After enjoying such experiences of divine transcendence it is never hard to join one's voice to the words of Psalm 8. And for a long time, this is the direction in which I naturally looked to refresh my spiritual bearings.

The cross, however, is another place to look for God, for the cross is also a place of transcendence. The cross reminds us not only that there is a harsh side to creation; it reveals to us just how intimately God has bound himself to the misery, the poverty and the brutality that have marked countless human lives. I have ever so gradually learned to sense God in the history of oppression. Poor people have become for me a marker of transcendence every bit as evocative as breathtaking natural beauty. I am drawn to collections of photographs that

record their lives, to the personal memoirs and recollections that chronicle their histories, and even to the buildings and neighborhoods where they are forced to live. These, too, are markers of transcendence. They elevate the mind and heart towards God.

How do I pray? I pray with my imagination and my fantasies, especially when I begin fantasizing the good things that I would love to see happen in the lives of people that matter to me, or whom I read about in the newspapers, or whom I hear about from friends. Many others pray this way, too. I pray with my memory when, before going to sleep, the people whom I love and those who have shared their concerns with me, pass through my mind's eye. Again, so do many others.

I pray with my hands when I cook and clean, or lift a child, or gesture during a lecture, or write, or bless and absolve, or hold a sick person's hand, or rake leaves. So do many others. I pray with my mind when I help a youngster with homework, or prepare my classes, or do research, or figure out what concretely can be done in situations of great human need. So do many others.

I pray with my heart and soul when I refuse to speak ill of someone who has judged me wrongly, or when I try to be fully truthful with others, or with myself in terms of my own deeper motivations and inclinations. Once more, so do many others. I pray when I pause in the thick of a hectic day to listen to myself breathe, to re-center my energies, to recall what I am and what I am not, to feel that holy specialness that surrounds each of us, individually and together. I live and breathe and walk on holy ground; we all do.

Above all, I am praying when mindfulness of God becomes mindfulness of God's people, and when mindfulness of God's

people becomes mindfulness of God. That is the yardstick by which I measure the meaningfulness of every Eucharistic celebration, the fruitfulness of my reading scripture, and the integrity of my recollection. That is how I discriminate, in all the things that I either do or endure, between what is genuine and what is worthless. The business of the interior life is to achieve union with God by way of communion with God's people. If what I am engaged in does not further that end, then I *do not want* to continue doing it. As I said, the *how* has to take into account the *why*, the *when* and the *where* of prayer.

I am not very helpful when it comes to recommending methods of prayer. Besides, we are hardly wanting for books and articles on the subject! Once, when I was a novice, the master of novices gave us an illustration of simple, meditative praying. He selected a gospel text, knelt down in front of a confessional screen, and began addressing Jesus, telling us to imagine that Jesus was on the other side of the screen: really there, in front of us, but not visible. The effort was valiant, and I attempted the exercise numerous times. In the end, however, I abandoned the technique because it struck me as contrived. My imagination still needed to learn how to pray, but the master's method was not the way for me. I was unable to pretend that the Jesus of the gospel scenes had stepped into my time and place in history. I had yet to discover how I might step into his.

Nevertheless, the novice master's faith impressed me for life. The simple, sincere, direct manner in which he addressed the Jesus of the gospel story has stayed with me over thirty years. He was not at all embarrassed to vocalize for us his way of relating to the risen Christ. And that is all I am doing here, vocalizing my way of relating to God in Christ. To be sure, my way is not going to be everybody's. But whenever any of us

speaks from our hearts and shares honestly how we relate to God, we give each another great encouragement. For while we are all striving to lead God-centered lives, none of us can go it alone. As a community of disciples, we are also continually learning from one another's oversights when in all candor we recount to one another the missteps we may have taken along the way. The perfect disciple, after all, is not one who never stumbles; the perfect disciple is the one who after making a mistake learns more about the gospel.

Some writers have attached great importance to the fact that Jesus addressed God as *Abba*. They hear in this familiar form of address a confirmation of that intimacy with God that makes Jesus special. There is no doubt that the early Christians picked up on that usage. Paul tells us that precisely because we have the Spirit of Jesus we can know God as Jesus did, calling God "Abba! Father!" (Rom 8:15 and Gal 4:6). The place in the gospel story where we hear this mode of address on Jesus' lips is the garden of Gethsemane in Mark's passion narrative (Mark 14:36), a scene which must have very early etched itself on the imagination of the Church. The Letter to the Hebrews seems to be alluding to that moment when it speaks of Jesus crying out with loud cries and tears to the one who could save him from death (Heb 5:7).

It is quite probable, of course, that Jesus addressed God as *Abba* on many occasions, and that the term was his typical or preferred way of addressing God. Yet it is not at all impossible that this form of speaking to God emerged as Jesus became more conscious of the hostile forces arrayed against him. *Abba* might therefore reflect a prayer of growing desperation, an experience of God arising from the midst of rejection, disappointment, betrayal and suffering. In other words, it is

possible that Jesus' way of relating to God grew more intimate, the more the cross loomed on the horizon.

In either case, I do not believe that it would have been possible for Jesus to experience God as *Abba* without at the same time experiencing God's love for his people. How could we untangle Jesus' personal experience of the painfulness of the world's sin from what so many others in Israel were also forced to endure? To know God must have certainly meant knowing and feeling God's great love for the human race, or at least God's affection for the people of Israel and his passionate desire for their liberation and lasting redemption. It makes little sense to say that love is the very nature of God, if that love has no object apart from God's own self. For a people steeped in scripture it is clear that God is revealed through saving actions in history. And the central action of the biblical God is the ongoing creation and salvation, the healing and making holy of the human race.

Jesus was not a monk who had discovered God in prayerful isolation from the rest of the human family. He was not a person who had received an intimate revelation of the divine mystery that he then felt compelled to share with the rest of us. Jesus had inherited the faith of his ancestors; he was a product of Israel's long engagement with the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. From a scriptural point of view, there was little particularly novel in his moral teaching, and there does not appear to be anything in his understanding of God that we could not locate, for instance, in the prophets and psalms. Jesus would not have been the first child of Israel to think of God as his father and to relate to God accordingly.

My concern here, however, is not to examine what makes Jesus unique. I am simply suggesting that his calling God

“*Abba*, Father” points not only to God but to the people whom God loves. Anyone who would contemplate the holy mystery of God will inevitably have to look at what God is looking at. To anyone who believes strongly that the *Abba*-experience was central to Jesus’ awareness of who and what he was, I would add that oneness with God which was not simultaneously oneness with God’s people would be unthinkable.

[1997]

## 5.

### **In the Company of Prophets**

The story of the Transfiguration has to be one of the most mysterious scenes of the gospel narratives. John Paul II drew upon this episode in his Apostolic Exhortation in order to provide the theological-mystical background for the consecrated life. The scene has been a favorite of religious writers because of the depth of its symbolism and its connectedness with the mystery of the risen Christ. Teilhard de Chardin, for instance, embraced the Transfiguration as a metaphor for the Christian's ascent into the even deeper mystery of the Incarnation.<sup>1</sup>

#### **Understanding the story**

The account of the Transfiguration is indeed an encounter with mystery and there are many levels to the story; no Christian writer or preacher is going to exhaust its richness. At one level, the gospel account is actually a creedal statement or a proclamation of faith expressed in narrative rather than doctrinal form. The evangelists are telling us that Jesus is continuous with the plan of salvation revealed within the history of Israel, that he is greater than all of the Old Testament prophets, and that Jesus alone beholds the glory of God.

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<sup>1</sup> Teilhard wrote in *The Divine Milieu*, for example, that “some readers . . . may feel vaguely upset or uneasy in the face of a Christian ideal which lays such stress on the preoccupations of human development and the pursuit of earthly improvements. They should bear in mind that we are still only half way along the road which leads to the mountain of the Transfiguration.” See *The Divine Milieu: An Essay on the Interior Life* (New York: Harper & Row, 1960), 40.

Whoever listens to Jesus hears God's voice; whoever lays eyes on Jesus has caught a glimpse of God.

From a strictly narrative point of view, the transfiguration also serves to relieve some of the tension created by the predictions Jesus made about his suffering and death. The story signals to the reader that victory and glory are on the horizon.

It would be a mistake to read this gospel story as if it were a reminiscence of an actual moment during the ministry of Jesus, despite what we read in 2 Peter 1:18 (a letter which the apostle Peter almost certainly did not write). What we have before us in the transfiguration scene is more likely to be a meditation upon or contemplation of the significance of Jesus that is deeply rooted in the religious traditions of the Jewish people. Jesus is the new Israel; he is God's faithful and obedient son. Standing in the company of Moses and Elijah, Jesus is both a teacher and a prophet; indeed he becomes the symbolic culmination of the law and the prophets. For Christians, Jesus is above all God's self-revelation, the glory of the Lord in human form.

The heavenly voice, which we also heard earlier at the Jordan river, has most likely been stitched together from several Old Testament texts (from Psalm 2:7, Isaiah 42:1 and possibly Genesis 22:2). The divine declaration is essentially a proclamation on the part of the Church about its faith in Jesus. It occurs to me that the most appropriate place for that voice, however, was neither the baptism nor the transfiguration scenes, but the resurrection itself. Yet an evangelist for one obvious reason could not have inserted the voice there; the tradition realized that there were no witnesses to what happened that Easter morning at the grave. Like a tree falling in a forest, the voice would have fallen on deaf ears.



If we were going to appropriate the transfiguration story in order to shed more light on the nature of religious life, what elements might we want to underline? We could fix our attention upon the two brief sentences “Listen to him!” and “they saw . . . only Jesus.” These few words could frame an understanding of religious life in terms of listening to and fastening one’s eyes on Jesus alone. Or we could follow the Exhortation and highlight the mystical dimension of the scene. Religious, like the three disciples, are men and women who have been called to behold and to contemplate the glory on the face of Christ. The Transfiguration was, after all, a vision. Matthew’s version of the story makes that clear (Matt 17:9).

Moses’ first encounter with the divine mystery took place on Horeb, “the mountain of God” (Ex 3:1). It was there that he came upon the bush that burned yet was not consumed. We learn later in the book of Exodus about the extraordinary intimacy that had developed between Moses and God: “Thus the Lord used to speak to Moses face to face, as one speaks to a friend” (Exodus 33:11). But when Moses asked to behold God’s face, he was told that such a vision was impossible:

Moses said, “Show me your glory, I pray.” And he said, “I will make all my goodness pass before you, and will proclaim before you the name, ‘The Lord’; and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy to whom I will show mercy. But,” he said, “you cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live.” (Ex 33:18-20)

The similarities between the story of Moses and the transfiguration are striking. On coming down from the mountain, Moses’ countenance had turned bright: “the Israelites would see the face of Moses, that the skin of his face was shining” (Exodus 34:35). Luke writes of Jesus: “And while he

was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white” (Luke 9:29).

Jesus, of course, did not veil his face from his disciples after the revelation on Mount Tabor, although the point of the veil Moses used to cover himself was not lost on Paul: “the people of Israel could not gaze at Moses’ face because of the glory of his face, *a glory now set aside*” (2 Cor 3:7). Paul allegorized the ancient story in a different direction as he contrasted the old with the new. He continued: “And all of us with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit” (2 Cor 3:18). For Paul, the Christian confidently beholds the face of the risen Jesus and is transformed; we become what we contemplate, through the power of the Spirit. Paul does not appear to be thinking here of Jesus’ own transfiguration as recounted by the evangelists but rather the transfiguration of those who love and follow the risen Lord.

But to return to our point about seeing. Elijah, like Moses, never saw God’s face. He was a prophet of great passion and spoke with God; he heard the sound of God’s voice (1 Kings 19:11-14) and was taken to heaven at the end of his career in a chariot of fire (2 Kings 2:11). Yet Elijah was not God’s son the way Jesus was. He never encountered God face to face, although in the baptismal scene neither did Jesus actually see God; he heard God’s address, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased” (Mark 1:11). Perhaps the reason for the prominence of hearing instead of seeing is that

Christian revelation is primarily a revelation of hearing, not of seeing. Although the image of seeing is not excluded . . .

the comparison with hearing is the dominant one in revelation.<sup>2</sup>

The three disciples did not see God, either. Like the others, they heard God's voice. Like the others, their encounter occurred on a mountain, and like Moses they experienced God's presence within a cloud, recalling the glory of the Lord that filled the tabernacle (Exodus 40:34-38). Yet the disciples do not really occupy center stage in the transfiguration scene; they are simply witnesses to Jesus' glory, for the moment belongs to him.

Still, the scene clearly confers great authority on Peter, James and John; it bolsters their position within the early Christian community, or perhaps more accurately it firmed up the position of those who claimed to succeed them. But in the scene the three disciples strike us more as fearful, uncomprehending spectators than as men being empowered for a life of bold witness. They do not at all come across as men set apart to know and love Christ more intimately than any of the others. Paul, for one, would have objected strongly to any such claim.

Another interesting feature of the story is that the tents Peter was babbling about never got built. In fact, the story reads as if poor Peter was roundly interrupted in mid-thought by none other than God—one more embarrassing moment for the future leader! The permanent place for Jesus and the disciples was not

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<sup>2</sup> Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Christian State of Life* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1983), 393. He explains: "That God speaks to us in his personal word is a greater grace than that we are allowed to see him . . . for it presumes that God considers us capable of understanding his word through the gift of his grace" (393-94).

going to be a mountaintop; they could not remain there, however consoling and beautiful the moment. All four of them had to return to everyday life among the people of God. The same thing happened in the case of Moses and Elijah. Moses had to return to teach and to lead, Elijah to deliver God's word and continue his prophetic mission, Jesus to heal an epileptic boy and resume his messianic journey.

### **Living in the company of prophets**

I do not believe that it would be fair to say that all religious are called to be prophets, although I do believe that religious life, like Christian existence itself, is prophetic at its core. The reason is that the radical following of Jesus that lies at the heart of the baptismal commitment all of us make involves bearing witness to the gospel. More often than not, bearing witness to our profession of the gospel takes place in a social and cultural environment that does not fully share our moral vision or religious conviction about the nature and destiny of human beings.

Yet even though not all religious are called to be prophets after the manner of an Elijah, Amos or Jeremiah, each of us does, through our religious profession, express a desire to embody the story of the prophet Jesus. Besides, some religious will indeed catch the fire of the martyrs for justice; zeal for God's house will consume them (John 2:17). Thus even if individual religious do not consider themselves to be prophets, they may sometimes find themselves living in the company of prophets. And this can become pretty unsettling. I can think of nothing that uncovers the occasional illusion that religious life is supposed to be a peaceful sanctuary safe from the world than the disquieting presence of prophets in our midst. To be a religious is to be called to spend one's life in the company of

prophets. The disciples must have been caught off-guard on many occasions, not knowing what exactly Jesus would do next to get himself and them in hot water with religious authorities, wealthy landowners, people with ties to Herod, or with Roman officials. If they had thought initially that Jesus' mission was to bring peace upon the earth, then they were badly mistaken.

The transfiguration story leads us in this direction. Although Moses is usually thought of as the great lawgiver of Israel, both he and Elijah were identified as prophets. It was said of Moses, "Since then no prophet has arisen in Israel, whom the Lord knew face to face" (Deut 34:10). Earlier Moses himself had told the Israelites, "The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people" (Deut 18:15). So too Jesus was identified by the crowds as a prophet, indeed, as *the* prophet (John 6:14, 7:40). This designation is especially noticeable in Luke's account of the Transfiguration:

The identity of Jesus as prophet is here made explicit. Whatever the significance of Moses and Elijah in the other Synoptists, their presence in Luke's story serves to confirm Jesus' identity as the prophet "raised up by God" to "visit the people" (7:16). Luke's account makes earlier narrative hints explicit and directs the reader toward Jerusalem, where Jesus will accomplish his "exodus." The concluding command, "listen to him," cannot be anything but a deliberate allusion to Deut 18:15 as Luke reads it, and certifies Jesus not only as God's Son and the chosen servant, but the "prophet like Moses."<sup>3</sup>

Because a prophet's message and conviction are rooted in an experience of God, there is always going to be a mystical

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<sup>3</sup> Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Gospel of Luke* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1991), 156.

side to the prophetic vocation. In place of action and contemplation, perhaps we ought to be positing the prophetic and the mystical as the spiritual axis upon which religious life turns.<sup>4</sup>

One suspects that the encounters which Moses and Elijah had with God were not so spectacular as the biblical narratives suggest. The stories do us no good turn if they tease us into craving mountaintop experiences. The prophetic vocation was more likely to be awakened, not by theophanies, but by intense contact with men and women whose lives were wrecked by the miserable social and economic conditions in which they were forced to live. We hear their cries constantly in the psalms of complaint. The thirst for God can be kindled and nourished in a wonderful way by an awareness of the suffering of God's people.

The prophetic call was also rooted at times in the conviction that Israel had failed in its covenant obligations. Concern for the things of God was often what prompted the prophets to denounce, chastise and threaten divine judgment. Leaving aside, however, precisely how Moses and Elijah began their careers, perhaps the point to notice is that in the transfiguration story the disciples had suddenly found themselves in the company of three great Jewish prophets. And two things that each of these figures had in common were an intense experience of God and an all-absorbing dedication to God's people.

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<sup>4</sup> See Johann Baptist Metz, *A Passion for God: The Mystical-Political Dimension of Christianity* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1998). And David Tracy, *Dialogue with the Other: The Inter-Religious Dialogue* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1990).

No matter how much they excoriate, for the most part Israel's prophets come across as embodiments of solidarity. Ezekiel, for example, accompanied his people into captivity, while Hosea symbolically married God's wayward nation. John the Baptist may have died in Herod's dungeon, but we remember him above all by the Jordan River, with crowds flocking to him from every corner of the country. In suggesting that the transfiguration story invites us to think of religious life in terms of living in the company of prophets, I am simply trying to show from yet another angle that the religious experience which binds us together includes two poles, God and the people of God.

While I would not define religious life as a school for prophets, I think that without prophets religious life as an institution in the Church is finished. We might not find them in every single community, but we must be able to find them in religious life as such. And by prophets I do not necessarily mean pioneers; we have been blessed with many of those. By prophets I mean men and women who experience across every part of their being the life of the people of God. That experience is both intense and effective. The appearance of prophets among us often engenders a great deal of conflict, even in the Church; but God in his mercy is the one who raises them up. Both the Church and the world need them to survive.

Religious life is by no means the only place where prophets arise, but the integrity of religious life cannot be maintained where communities no longer walk in the company of an Elijah, or an Amos, or an Ezekiel, or the prophet from Nazareth (as Luke described him). What a different story we would have inherited if Jesus on the mountain had been found in the company, say, of Confucius and the Buddha, or of Solomon and

Socrates. What a different story if, instead of marrying the people, Jesus had wedded the temple and followed in the priestly footsteps of Zechariah. What a different story if, instead of John the Baptist, Elijah or Jeremiah (Matt 16:14), the people had come to associate Jesus with Judas Maccabeus. The point need not be pressed any farther. The gospel narrative receives its definition from the pattern of Jesus' life. And so does religious life.

To ascend the mount of the Transfiguration and spend time there is to take a great risk. We might well discover that in the end the spirits of the prophets have set their tents up within our minds and imaginations. Although the Apostolic Exhortation on the Consecrated Life did not adopt this perspective, it could easily have done so. For the religious vows themselves are prophetic markers of a person's oneness with the people of God.



## 6.

### **Who Are the Poor in Spirit and Why Are They Blessed?**

Who are the poor in spirit? The simplest answer to this question, as many of us are aware, might be that “poor in spirit” refers to those who, while not materially poor, are inwardly detached from whatever wealth and privilege they enjoy. This explanation has the advantage of softening the blow of Luke’s version of the first Beatitude with its straightforward “Blessed are you [who are] poor.” Luke’s version seems to exclude those who cannot honestly number themselves among the economically poor but who earnestly want to follow Jesus just the same. Matthew’s way of putting the blessing leaves the door open for another way to be poor.

Those of us who have wrestled over the years with the meaning of the first Beatitude know how easy it is to dodge the challenge of Jesus’ words in Luke’s Gospel. We may have taken a vow of poverty, but how visibly do we live it? Interior detachment, following the lead Matthew provides, is no quick and easy achievement, and precisely because of its invisibility one needs to exercise constant vigilance. One thing we have learned, however, is that living with evangelical freedom in the matter of material resources and social privilege requires the regular infusion of a special grace. Without steady and meaningful contact with people who are actually poor we risk losing our spiritual edge, our sensitivity to the underlying business of the Gospel and Jesus’ mission. For the Gospel above all is supposed to be glad tidings for the poor.

## Living in solidarity

I prefer to interpret the phrase *in spirit* in the sense of solidarity: Blessed are those who live in solidarity with the poor. Solidarity renders interior detachment a lot more public and practical. Detachment, that is, Gospel freedom across the length and breadth of one's life, is much easier to examine and to assess when I think of it in terms of being ready and willing to be part of the world of men and women at the bottom of society.

Of course, solidarity that originates in prayer as the experience of communion ordinarily leads to action on behalf of those who are deprived, disadvantaged, or pushed to the side; and conscience rests content when we are actually doing something. But sometimes what matters is less what we do for others than what we are for them. Perhaps, therefore, the examination of conscience with respect to inner freedom and detachment could be formulated this way: "Do I have friends who are poor? Am I embarrassed to be seen in their company?" If I can reply yes to the first question and no to the second, then my conscience lets me sleep.

Religious poverty certainly expresses itself in the way we approach material goods while living in a consumerist culture, but it also shows itself in the readiness of religious to befriend the ones who would probably never be invited into the homes of the rich and righteous: "the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind" (Luke 14:13). We are unlikely to invite such people to join us at table if we have not first invited them into our awareness and affection.

## Poverty has more than one meaning

In addition to investigating the meaning of the phrase “in spirit,” religious writers have likewise devoted a great deal of effort to understanding the word “poor.” In a very real sense all human beings qualify as poor because whatever we have, we have received it from God. But this sort of poverty—the absolute or elementary poverty of human existence—is not what most people immediately think of when they hear the word “poor.”

There is also the poverty of spirit we associate with people who are almost totally lacking of any moral or religious sensibilities. Maybe they should be called the spiritually destitute. Such people probably would not think of themselves as poor, but in the eyes of those whose minds and hearts have been awakened to the things of God, they embody an impoverishment as devastating and grotesque as one finds in the most wretched slums. There is no reason for blessedness in this form of poverty, however.

The economically and socially poor could be considered blessed because they are going to receive the kingdom. The poor *in spirit* could be considered blessed because, for one reason, they have joined themselves in solidarity and friendship with those who are actually poor and will therefore be allowed to share the kingdom; and, for another reason, because they have discovered the freedom of living in this passing world with their hearts set on the world that will never end (to echo the Church’s prayer).

There may even be something blessed about the elementary poverty of the human condition itself, provided, of course, that people accept the reality of that poverty and are willing to live under its discipline. It has to be said, after all, that God created

us poor and, by sharing life with us, placed us eternally in his debt. Existential poverty (what Johannes Baptist Metz referred to in his book *Poverty of Spirit* as “our innate poverty as human beings”) belongs to our original blessing. Which is why Metz could go on to write: “The unending nature of our poverty as human beings is our only innate treasure. We are unlimited indigence since our very self-possession, the integrity and lucidity of our coming-to-Being, spring not from ourselves but from the intangible mystery of God.” Some ancient Christian writers, reading the Song of Songs as an allegory of the relationship between the individual and God, described the human experience of this relationship in affective terms as being wounded by love.

### **What sort of blessing is this?**

The indigence of which Metz speaks—“love’s wound”—is well known to religious. In fact, the lifelong incompleteness that lies at the center of our being makes the presentation of the vows most of us received when we joined religious life sound all the more preliminary and introductory. Even before they are shaped and colored by the Gospel and the example of Jesus, the vows spring from a thirst deep within us. They give expression to each human being’s constitutional relatedness to God, the chief signs of which are the desires and longing that make us who and what we are and point us toward transcendence. Whatever it is about our nature and whatsoever happens in our lives that draws us closer to the source of all life and goodness are purely and simply a blessing.

So far, so good. There are many times, however, when poverty of spirit hardly comes across as living under a blessing. Instead, being poor in spirit can lead to extreme discomfort, comparable to the distress we feel when, inhale as we might, we

cannot fill our lungs fully with air. Emptiness of soul is something a person who seeks God is bound to experience at one time or another. In fact, the deeper the emptiness, the more intense the search.

Now while it would be plainly untrue to insist that all human beings are equally concerned about things of the spirit, I think it is safe to say that unless a critical mass of men and women had made looking for God the central business of their lives, then there would be no Church. It can even be argued that unless at least some men and women had allowed the poverty of their spirits to guide and direct their lives, then the whole human race would suffer grievous harm. To lose one's taste for transcendence is to change and deform one's nature. Thus the fact that there are people living among us who have centered themselves fully and unambiguously on the mystery of God prevents the soul of our common humanity from disappearing. What sort of state would the human race be in, without men and women who are friends of God?

For religious, poverty of spirit can assume a terribly disconcerting form. Others in the Church frequently turn to religious for advice and direction in matters of prayer and contemplation, discernment, the ways of God, and the meaning of the Gospel. What happens, however, when religious come face to face with the limits of their understanding of God? What happens if they should reach a point in their own spiritual life when they can no longer tell the difference between knowing God and not knowing God? What happens when they become unsure of their own ascetical practice and moral progress, or when the difference between religious accomplishment and mere accommodation becomes elusive?

To be sure, there are certainties in our life that are born of faith; but those certainties never cancel out the not-knowing which lies at the heart of our relationship to the divine mystery. In short, religious learn, just as countless believers before them have, that they are indeed poor in spirit. And the experience of being poor in spirit arises *after* they have come to know God. From this perspective, things seem to get worse rather than better over time! The lives of many Christian mystics bear eloquent testimony to this curious turn of events in the interior life.

What, then, is the blessing that corresponds to this form of poverty? First and foremost, poverty of spirit gives rise to reverence and humility in our unfolding relationship with God. One learns not to attempt to speak for God or presume an unwarranted certitude about the divine mystery. “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways” (Isaiah 55:8) and “no one shall see me and live” (Exodus 33:20) are two texts that merit ongoing meditation. Such humility is liberating, since we are set free from thinking that we have to take responsibility for others in their dealings with God and their search for the transcendent. It is also a source of wonder, for we never know from what corner the mystery of God will impinge upon our lives or upon the lives of the people whom we care about.

A further blessing attached to poverty of spirit is that we are less likely to forget the ardent, though often confused searching for God that pervades innumerable lives, or the sense of groping in spiritual darkness that may ensue as that search progresses. For while many seek, not all stumble upon a trustworthy way of letting that desire guide and inform their lives. Consciousness of the blind alleys, the maze of paths, and

conflicting signals that can derail a person's first, tender efforts to find God gives birth to unfailing compassion. Why have we found God while so many others have not? The question does not lead to boasting but to wonder, thanksgiving and praise. Compassionate oneness with all human beings, growing out of a humbling awareness of the religious and moral complexities of the human condition, is an unmistakable mark of holiness and unequivocally a blessing. Blessed are the poor in spirit, the evangelist might have written, for they have learned to see the world as God does.

[2001]

## 7.

### **Mary and John the Baptist**

Our understanding of Jesus in the gospel narratives is helped considerably the more we view him in solidarity with his people. Not only is Jesus frequently surrounded by multitudes, but the everyday concerns and the long-term hopes of those people figured significantly in shaping Jesus' ministry. In the end, Jesus died because he had lived for his people.

The same point should be made with respect to Mary and John the Baptist. The mother of Jesus is not just an individual with an important part to play within the biblical narrative. She is connected to a line of women that stretches all the way back to Eve, the mother of all the living and (for nothing prohibits our thinking this) the first woman of faith, the first woman to have walked with God. The mother of Jesus stands in solidarity with all the women of the bible, and indeed with women everywhere, particularly with those who are poor.

So too with John. He comes from a long line of Jewish prophets, human spirits awakened and inflamed by the Spirit of God. Yet it was the times in which they lived, as much as the Spirit of God, which called prophets forth. Political and social circumstances served to create the prophet, and perhaps more than any of the official religious leaders the prophets lived and breathed with the life of their people. John the Baptist, without the people of Israel whose lives had come to replace in his soul every trace of egoism and concern for his own well-being, would have been a flat and ultimately uninteresting oracle. In solidarity with the people of Israel, however, especially those



without political and economic voice, John had become a grave threat to Herod's rule.

From a purely textual point of view, the gospels do not tell us a great deal about these two major figures within the Christian story, but the little they do tell us provides our minds and imaginations with a lot of food for thought. The Church has traditionally viewed John the Baptist and Mary as great advent symbols. Each of them in different ways captures the experience of humanity waiting for the moment of its liberation. John gave dramatic voice to Israel's ancient hope when he announced the coming of the One who would baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire (Matt 3:11). The angel who had appeared to his father Zechariah foretold of John that he would walk "with the Spirit and power of Elijah" (Luke 1:17), while Zechariah himself prophesied that his son would give knowledge of salvation to God's people (Luke 1:77).

If John gave utterance to Israel's hope, Mary in her body gave life and form to the promise that God had sworn to Abraham: "that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies, might serve him without fear." (Luke 1:74)

Mary declared herself "the servant of the Lord." She was about to become immersed in the saving design of the God of Israel and to learn, through experience, that absolutely nothing is impossible to God (Luke 1:37). Zechariah prophesied, twice, that the God of Israel would deliver his people from their enemies. In her memorable song, which was equally prophetic, Mary revealed the depth of her own faith in the historical action of God:

He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,  
and lifted up the lowly;  
he has filled the hungry with good things,

and sent the rich away empty.

(Luke 1:52-53)

God had promised her ancestors deliverance, and God was about to fulfill, even to en flesh, that great promise. That is what she believed. That is what she hoped for. And that promise was what suddenly had become really present within her.

Yet for all the mention of angelic messages and people being filled with the Holy Spirit, neither Mary nor John the Baptist were ever exempt from the painful stretching of faith so central to the experience of being a believer. Simeon told Mary of a sword that would pierce her very soul (Luke 2:35), and Mark recalls that at one point she had come with other members of her family to take Jesus back to Nazareth, because they were convinced that Jesus had gone out of his mind (Mark 3:21). The crowd around Jesus was so great that the family could not get close to him. When Jesus learned of her presence he could only answer, “My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it” (Luke 8:21). Mary would live to see her son killed, his tortured body hanging for all the world to stare at; but she would also be with the disciples of Jesus in the upper room, praying with them and waiting expectantly, once again, for the outpouring of the Spirit (Acts 1:14).

John, on the other hand, would die long before the events of Easter and Pentecost. The great prophet, called before he was even born to be the voice that would cry in the wilderness, found himself silenced: arrested and imprisoned, he would be beheaded for confronting an evil regime with its breach of God’s law. “I tell you,” Jesus said, “among those born of women no one is greater than John” (Luke 7:28).

Luke tells us that at one point John, presumably from his retreat in the wilderness, sent messengers to Jesus to inquire,

“Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?” (Luke 7:19) We do not know exactly what prompted John’s question. Perhaps he was scandalized by Jesus’ approach to his mission, for John had announced: “His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor . . . the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire” (Luke 3:17). But the more apt description of Jesus might have been the hopeful text Matthew cited from Isaiah: “He will not break a bruised reed or / quench a smoldering wick / until he brings justice to victory” (Matt 12:20).

Jesus might not have been sufficiently prophetic for John, whose sense of urgency could have been heightened by a foreboding over his impending fate, and whose long schooling in the desert had left him impatient for the scorching victory of God’s justice. John was undoubtedly very different from Jesus, as Jesus himself noted:

For John the Baptist has come eating no bread and drinking no wine, and you say, “He has a demon”; the Son of Man has come eating and drinking, and you say, “Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!” (Luke 7:34)

To this difference we might add the fact that Jesus would never pass up a village wedding, with its merriment and dancing (John 2:1-11); in fact, marriage celebrations provided a favorite kingdom metaphor (Matt 22:1-10). We could also mention Jesus’ welcoming small children, even infants (Luke 18:15); or the fact that he stayed in the homes of everyday people, like Simon, rather than camp out in the wilderness. It would be next to impossible to imagine John the Baptist singing and dancing at a wedding banquet, and he does not seem like the sort of person to whom parents would present their toddlers.

For all his greatness, John marked the end of an era. Jesus implied as much when he said, “The least in the kingdom of God is greater than he” (Luke 7:28). Like Moses, who could only behold the Promised Land from a distance, John would never taste the messianic era.

What stands out, however, is not the ways in which John the Baptist and Jesus were different, but the ways in which the figures of John the Baptist and Mary were alike. Both were people of the Spirit, people of hope and longing, ready to respond in freedom to whatever God might ask. Both were people of the word. Luke writes, “The word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness” (3:2), while Mary exemplified “those who hear the word of God and obey it” (11:28).

Both were people imbued with a sense of divine justice. John was nothing if not outspoken and fearless, and the sentiments in Mary’s great song of praise were nothing if not revolutionary. Both would find their faith in God stretched painfully: John’s wondering whether Jesus was after all “the one who was to come” and his bitter silencing in Herod’s dungeon, Mary’s learning that the way of discipleship counts more than the way of family, and her being drawn into the way of the Cross. And the faith of each was firmly steeped in the promise God had made to their ancestors.

Both demonstrated through their very being, in other words, a profound solidarity with their sisters and brothers. Not only had they inherited the memories that made up Israel’s history of salvation; they also shared the poverty and desperation of those who hungered and thirsted for justice. When Jesus remarked, “Look, those who put on fine clothing and live in luxury are in royal palaces” (Luke 7:25), he may

have had in mind that the crowds were too easily bedazzled by the splendor of Herod's court, or by the lives of the rich and famous. Like bad leaven, the opulence of the palace spoils the imaginations of the poor. John the Baptist hardly belonged to that powerful, wealthy elite. Neither did the woman who was so poor that her child had to be born in what to us would amount to an abandoned garage.

John, of course, was called to be a prophet. Poor Zechariah! Zechariah belonged to the priestly order, and his wife Elizabeth was a descendant of Aaron. John had priestly blood in his veins, but he would probably never set foot in the Temple, let alone offer sacrifice. All the trappings of the cult, the official service and prayers, must have remained foreign to John in the Judean desert.

What might have been most disturbing to Zechariah about the angel's message was not the fact that he and Elizabeth were promised a child in their old age, but that their son would never follow in his father's footsteps. In fact, the religious establishment at the Temple appears to have flatly rejected John's baptism and his teaching (Matt 21:25-26). John's obedience was to the Spirit of God and his loyalty was to the people, not to the official religious leaders of Israel.

By suggesting that these two biblical figures could serve as models for religious life I do not mean that either John the Baptist or Mary lived like vowed religious. By using the word "figures" I am leaning on how the image of each of them has been shaped by the evangelists. We have very few historical details about the mother of Jesus and the Baptist that could broaden our understanding of their role in the gospel story. There are elements in the portraits of each, however, which religious men and women, and indeed which anyone contemp-

lating a vocation to ordained ministry, might reflect on. Yet before considering those elements, there is something we need to examine about religious life itself.

### **Religious life and the Church**

Whether communities are contemplative or active, or a combination of the two, what typifies and unites all forms of religious life is their commitment to, and insertion within, the life of the Church. The most obvious contribution of contemplatives, and indeed of all religious and those who take upon themselves the commitment to pray the Liturgy of the Hours, is that they pray through the whole of their lives for the good of God's people. Many of our greatest spiritual writers have come from the ranks of Christian contemplatives. Their insight into the dynamics of faith and growth in the interior life, even their psychological insight into the human condition and what it means to be a human being, has helped many of us to find our way as believers making our way through the world.

The active or apostolic communities have served the Church in innumerable ways, not only through the example of their faith and prayer, but also through their preaching, through the ministry of spiritual direction and hearing confessions, through education, attending the sick and the founding of hospitals, orphanages, schools, printing presses, agricultural cooperatives, and so on. Indeed, it would be hard to imagine what Western culture would look like today had the Church not been present to it through the great service of the apostolic communities.

But another contribution of religious communities to the life of the Church has been that from within them men and women have explored different paths to God as they grew in prayer and holiness, and in times of great social and cultural

upheaval have even charted new spiritual ways. Particularly in periods of uncertainty and doubt, of religious crisis brought on by a world that may be changing too fast or confronting believers with too many problems and pressures, religious life becomes a kind of laboratory of the spirit.

In our own day, for example, the Church will probably have to depend upon the experience of Christian contemplatives as it makes its way through the intricacies of a dialogue of the spirit with the major religious traditions of the world. We need people like Bede Griffiths or Thomas Merton, who can give us both confidence and a sense of direction when it comes to approaching the religious experience of non-Christian faiths. Or to take another example, the well known “preferential option for the poor,” which arose from the heart of a church suffering politically and oppressed economically, has become a spiritual first principle—an essential building block of Christian spirituality in our time—as a result of its incorporation within the daily practice and prayer of apostolic religious. In the laboratory of religious life, in other words, the preferential option for the poor has been “authenticated” as a privileged route to God.

Within religious life, men and women have found the spiritual room they need to explore dimensions of God’s action among us and in the world around us. The fruit of their experience, both individually and corporately, builds up the body of Christ. They never know where prayer will take them, or where the Spirit will lead them. But if they were to give up struggling with prayer out of fear of where it might be leading them, or because, like Mary Magdalene, they are reluctant to let go of the familiar Jesus, then ultimately the Church itself is going to suffer.

What would have happened if Charles de Foucauld had shied away from the impulses in his prayer and imagination that were luring him to identify with the poor of the North African desert? What would have happened if Mother Teresa had rejected the insight she had when she saw a beggar dying outside her convent gate? The parable about the steward who buried his talent in the ground might be a warning of the danger of running away from the totally unexpected experiences of the Spirit which God entrusts to us: “I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours” (Matt 25:25). Those were not words the Master wanted to hear.

Both Mary and John the Baptist faced a new and different experience of God, and they responded magnanimously and with deep faith. We get a better sense of the personal cost to John when we recall the religious background of his parents and his being rejected by the priestly class from which they descended. To be a person of the word is to surrender one’s mind and imagination to the Spirit, and to render oneself open to directions which until now have been untested. And who appreciated that lesson better than Mary? When she replies to the angel, “Let it be with me according to your word” (Luke 1:38), she is exemplifying that daring yet fearful openness to the Spirit which is, I believe, an essential characteristic of religious life.

### **Mary and John the Baptist as prophetic models**

The first observation to make might be that religious life at its liveliest is also dangerous. Religious life is a thing of the Spirit, a feature easily overlooked because we are so accustomed to viewing religious congregations and orders as solid institutional fixtures within the Church. But the older forms of religious life can disappear almost as easily as they



began, and new ones can emerge to take their place. The words of John the Baptist deserve to be heard and pondered repeatedly: “Do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our ancestor’; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham” (Luke 3:8).

Religious should not console themselves that they are special and their existence is assured because they descend from Benedict, or Francis of Assisi, or Ignatius Loyola, or Teresa of Avila, any more than the Baptist’s audience could reassure itself by laying claim to the patriarchs of Jewish faith. Or to state the matter positively, spiritual identity is established by a person’s practice, not by religious lineage.

Mary and John lived dangerously, prophetically, for they had both been pulled into God’s ancient yet steady reach toward Israel and indeed toward the whole human race. Only one thing would matter from the moment of their being called, and that was the great promise of God. Within a short time after the birth of their son, Mary and Joseph would be refugees in Egypt, just as their ancestors had once been. But this would be just a small taste of what lay ahead. For John, the future spelled imprisonment and death.

The second observation is that religious life, at its best, is anything but conventional. Some would say it is counter-cultural, and that point is well taken. But religious life is unconventional because it bypasses the ordinary and not simply because, like a sign of contradiction, it is inherently opposed to earthly power and pretension. The religious establishment did not greet John’s preaching and baptizing by the Jordan with enthusiasm. “Who are you?”, they wanted to know, and “Why then are you baptizing?” (John1:19, 25). They were offended. The word of God had bypassed the priests and Levites in

Jerusalem; it had bypassed the Pharisees and the teachers of the Law. In fact, the word of God had done an end-run around the institution itself and settled upon the son of a priest, who preferred the desert to the splendor of the Temple and the solemnity of the cult.

In Mary's case, there was nothing conventional about her becoming a mother. Here the eye of our faith perceives something extraordinary, something akin to John's claim that God could raise up offspring to Abraham from the stones of the earth. "For nothing will be impossible with God": that was the message to Mary, but it was also a message for the whole people of God. God brings new life to barren wombs and to women advanced in years, and God even brings life out of the normal course in order to give hope to all men and women who live in disgrace, or in poverty, or in slavery, or in fear. By meditating on the figure of Mary, religious steep themselves in the mystery of the God who does impossible things in order that all things might be possible for us.

Religious life, at its best, is a school for prayer. That John prayed is something we can safely assume. He did not attend synagogue services each Sabbath, and he may never have celebrated the Passover festival in Jerusalem. But the desert was Scripture's rich symbol of Israel's encounter with God. It was the place through which Elijah passed on his way to Mount Horeb, to speak with God directly. The desert was a place of prayer. Jesus himself would retreat there. And of Mary, Luke records that she was very religious in the traditional sense. She went to Jerusalem to present her young son to the Lord and offer sacrifice (Luke 2:22-24), in the long years at Nazareth she treasured events in her heart (2:51), and at Pentecost we find her praying with the other disciples in the upper room.

At the same time, however, both John the Baptist and Mary had to learn something new about God, something that went beyond what they may have learned from their parents, or childhood religious services. Each had to face something darkly mysterious about the God of their ancestors. Matthew intimates that Joseph found the account of Mary's being with child too much to accept; he would have broken his engagement to her, quietly, had it not been for his dream (Matt 1:18-21).

It is hardly likely, however, that Mary faced only one such crisis in her life. The episode where Jesus' family believed he had gone crazy must have been another. What was she to make of the reports that her son was getting into arguments with religious authorities, confronting demonic forces, or incurring the hatred of local landowners by calling for the remission of debts? And when the final days arrived, what a dark night her faith must have endured, as she watched helplessly while those menacing clouds gathered over her son!

To say that religious life is a school for prayer is to learn from the example of these two figures that openness to the Spirit sometimes paves the way for revolutionary experiences of God. By "revolutionary experience," I do not mean the sort of mystical experiences of the classical ascetics who secluded themselves from the world in order to center themselves completely upon the divine mystery. Rather, I have in mind people who are basically rather ordinary, but the God to whom they responded was a God who involves himself in our history. *That* God pulls down rulers from their thrones and exalts the lowly. *That* God raises up children to Abraham even from the stones in the ground. *That* God confronts kings and princes with their crimes, and *that* God calls for the greatest debt relief humanly imaginable.

In short, the God of Mary and the God of the Baptist was not a God of silence and dust-free majesty, not a God who was willing to share authority and dominion with the Caesars and Constantines of history, and certainly not a God who craved human approval or official religious certification.

Religious life is a school for prayer, as the desert was for John, as Nazareth was for Mary, and as the world is for us today. There is, then, a boldness to the prayer of religious men and women, proceeding, as it does, from an encounter with the God who teaches from the heart of the world. Religious thus help the whole community of faith to hear with greater clarity the word of the Lord in our time. They are unafraid when that word comes to them other than from the Temple, or from the priests and religious experts; or when that word points towards possibilities of being and doing that seem radically incompatible with our present ways of thinking and acting. We might even say that if religious life encounters no resistance whatsoever, it has probably failed us.

Finally, religious life, at its best, is a realized solidarity with the marginalized and oppressed people of the world. The religious vows, when embraced in the spirit of the kingdom, orient men and women toward the poor and the disenfranchised of every time and place. Zechariah's prophecy about redemption and about being saved "from the hand of all who hate us" is one that might be prayerfully repeated by every father and every mother who have longed for a better life for their children.

The deliverance Zechariah longed for never came to Israel. But then God's salvation was never intended exclusively for Israel, either. The only practical and enduring solution to the deliverance Israel had been praying for was not a Messiah as a

single individual, but a messianic people. That is, the deliverance we seek must come from a people committed to the kingdom of God: from men and women who, in imitation of Jesus, dedicate themselves unreservedly to the cause of God's justice and love. For every age looks for redemption. Every age needs liberation and salvation, to have its sins taken away, to have the yoke of slavery lifted from its shoulders, to have the scourge of poverty and injustice removed from its midst.

Religious life at its best makes visible, just like sacraments do, a vibrant oneness with the poor of history. The poverty of religious life does not consist of an inner detachment from material things because of a universal ascetical ideal that says detachment is good for the human spirit. At its core, religious life spells solidarity with others, above all with the innumerable others who do not belong to religious communities. In that solidarity, something of God is known. There is a lesson about God which cannot be learned in any other way apart from solidarity with men and women at the bottom of our societies. And there is an experience of God unique to making and living an option for the poor.

Religious men and women, at their best, are gifted in the way they point to the presence of God in the most unlikely places. Certainly, no one would have thought to look for something of God in Nazareth! That was the disciple Nathanael's first thought: "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" (John1:46) The priests and Levites who asked John to give them his credentials surely did not expect the word of God to be thriving by the banks of a river, among the unlettered masses that traveled to listen to John. And because their hearts were hardened, those officials could never have heard that word, no matter how convincingly John had spoken.

The figures of John the Baptist and Mary are rich, powerful symbols. To think of John apart from the crowds who came to hear him, or to think of Mary apart from the generations of believers who came before her, would be to distort the Church's remembrance of them. They are not just two solitary individuals; they are symbolic embodiments of the hope and aspirations of men and women from every time and place. They are people who lived from the word of God. In the world of the gospel, Mary as a woman represents a marginalized class: defenseless, powerless before the law (Luke 18:1-8), easily cast aside (Mark 10:1-9), often poor yet devout, whose faith was easily manipulated by unscrupulous scribes "who devour widows' homes" (Mark 12:40).

To imagine Mary without all the other women of the gospel story would be to deprive the symbol of some of its power. But to divorce her from the women of history, especially those whose sad, tragic plight has made them mothers of the crucified ones of every time and place, would be to erase her solidarity with her son. Indeed, Mary is the woman of a million faces.

Religious life is a sacrament of solidarity, a school of prayer, a laboratory of the Spirit. It draws its vitality from the gospel story. There religious life finds the enduring spring of its hope, and there it recovers the images and symbols by which it constantly renews itself. "For nothing will be impossible with God"—a message pondered, tested and verified in one's own life—are the words to which religious life continually gives fresh form and substance.

[1996]

## 8.

### Who Will Step into the Empty Tomb?

Of all the Easter memories, the story about the women approaching the empty tomb is the one that teases and excites my imagination the most. While the other paschal stories give us warm and colorful scenes about meeting Jesus again, the empty tomb leaves my mind spinning with questions and tense with hope.

Each of the gospels recalls the prominence of women as witnesses to Jesus' crucifixion. According to Matthew, "Many women were also there, looking on from a distance" (Matt 27:55). According to Mark, "There were also women looking on from a distance" (Mark 15:40). Perhaps sensing an imbalance here, Luke enlarges the group of witnesses: "But *all* his acquaintances, including the women who had followed him from Galilee, stood at a distance, watching these things" (Luke 23:49). John recalls the presence of three Mary's and a beloved (male) disciple, who were standing near the cross (John 19:25-26).

Yet it was not Jesus' closest disciples, men or women, who had the privilege of burying him. That honor fell to a certain Joseph of Arimathea, whom John describes as a secret follower and whom Mark characterizes simply as someone waiting expectantly for the kingdom of God. Luke says that Joseph was "good and righteous" and Matthew calls him rich; it was into his new tomb that Jesus was placed. But as the curtain descends in the burial scene the spotlight returns to the women: "Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were there, sitting opposite the tomb" (Matt 27:61). How long their vigil lasted, we are not told.

In the reverent haste to bury Jesus before the onset of the Sabbath rest, there had been no time for the women to give his body the final, customary anointing. And so Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome set out at the break of dawn on that first day of the week, expecting to find the body of their beloved teacher where it had been laid. Each of the gospels takes note of the stone that had been rolled against the entrance, a fact which the women could have scarcely forgotten. There is then something curious, even unreal about their plan to anoint Jesus, because they could never have rolled away the stone unaided. The male disciples had pretty much disappeared after Jesus' arrest, and the women certainly would not have been counting on assistance from the Roman soldiers or the high priest's police! Do the evangelists want us to assume therefore that the women were trusting that God would somehow provide? At the grave, a heavenly messenger meets them:

“Do not be amazed! You seek Jesus of Nazareth, the crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Behold, the place where they laid him” (Mark 16:6).

But why shouldn't they be amazed? Who of us would not be astonished coming upon that menacing, puzzling scene? Not finding the body of Jesus where they had supposed it to be, and unable to comprehend the full import of the messenger's words, the women flee from the tomb, trembling, bewildered and fearful. So, I imagine, would we, and for much the same reasons. The evangelist does not tell us that the women had been in a state of fear when they set out for the tomb. The disciples would have had good reason to be apprehensive, but these women appear to be remarkably unafraid as the scene opens.



I think the idea of “stepping into the tomb” and discovering it empty is rich with symbolic possibility, especially for anyone interested in the meaning of religious life, or even Christian life in general, on the eve of a new millennium. The women had gone in search of Jesus. They were seeking the Jesus of their memories, the one betrayed and crucified; the Jesus whom they had known as a friend, whose physical features and mannerisms, whose voice and turns of phrase, whose passion and humor had become so familiar to them. Looking for *that* Jesus, they were “utterly amazed” when they found his grave empty. “They said nothing to anyone,” Mark tells us, “for they were afraid.”

Were the women afraid of being misunderstood, doubted, or even accused of fabrication? Was their fear so strong that they were literally unable to speak? Or were they fearful because they suspected that the enemies of Jesus might have removed the body, and would have killed anyone unfortunate enough to stumble upon the facts? Of course, their reaction might well have been just the final instance in the gospel of disciples responding with fear in the face of what they do not understand. The amazement here is really not all that different from the reaction of the disciples when Jesus calmed the winds and the sea. Both scenes are beset with mystery; one hears in them resonances of divine power at work in the human world.

Perhaps the women reported nothing, at least initially, because there was as yet nothing to say. What exactly had happened? What did the discovery of an empty tomb mean? What was the God of Israel doing and declaring in raising Jesus from the dead, why this person and not someone else? Their fear and amazement must have stemmed, at least in part, from not knowing how to make sense of their experience. They stood

in the messenger's presence stunned, speechless, without words that might have brought to the moment a sense of fulfillment. The women had taken a fateful step into the wide-open darkness of God, into what Pierre Teilhard de Chardin once called "the mystery hidden here on earth in the womb of death." The world as they had known it was turned upside down; everyday life would never look or feel the same way again.

No wonder, then, that the women took to their heels! Given the extraordinary reversal into which they had just stepped, fear and confusion would have been natural human responses. Creation had been turned inside out and made to reveal its inner surface. The terrifying darkness of death had just been torn in two, from top to bottom, like the curtain in the temple. But the women would never have been able to grasp the far-reaching significance of all that in a single morning! They had expected to find in the tomb the body of the crucified One. Instead they received the startling announcement that the crucified One was, from that morning and ever after, to be encountered among the living.

In subsequent encounters the disciples would sometimes stand before the risen Jesus uncomprehending, doubtful, saddened, skeptical and confused. At other times they would experience profound peace, joy, forgiveness, love, freedom, and a sense of being called and sent. Yet it is the empty tomb that strikingly captures the mystery and complexity of the Easter experience. In order to anoint the body of Jesus, the women had no choice but to step into the place where he had been buried. While I would be obviously stretching things to suggest that they had come upon the tomb at the moment when Jesus was descending into hell to rescue the spirits of the dead (1 Peter 3:19), the fact is that they had stumbled upon the divine

unknown, into a certain mystical darkness. God had rolled back the great stone that would have refused them entrance, the stone that in some way was protecting them against the abyss and darkness that surrounds human beings on every side.

And in that moment of seeing but not finding, of knowing but not speaking, what was the revelation that they were being given? It was that Jesus' disciples should be looking for him here, in this world. Finding and following Jesus would demand a completely new way of perceiving, hearing, thinking and praying. Instead of withdrawing from the world, Jesus risen had joined himself to it in lasting solidarity. The Word had already become flesh; now it was also becoming history.

### **Religious life: resource for the Church**

Many religious have long sensed that entering religious life was a way of inserting oneself more deeply into the human community, not of withdrawing from it emotionally and even physically in order to find God. They know very well that finding God is the paramount business of everyone's life, and that others in the Church should be able to approach religious for assistance, confidently, as they seek to deepen their interior lives.

Yet it has also been our experience that religious life is no refuge against personal struggle, self-centeredness, dealing with the human condition and with other people, and against the daily misfortune endured by so many men and women who live (for want of a better expression) in the world. On the contrary, sometimes religious life seems to concentrate and intensify ordinary human struggle to the breaking point.

Whatever insights into the interior life religious men and women achieve are gifts of the Spirit and these gifts are not

intended primarily for the benefit of individual religious and their communities. The reason is simple. An individual's or a community's interior life is incomplete unless it is rooted in the life of the people of God. Gifts of the Spirit, after all, are not bestowed for the private delight and enrichment of individuals, as Paul reminded us in his correspondence with the Christians at Corinth:

There are different kinds of spiritual gifts but the same Spirit; there are different forms of service but the same Lord; there are different workings but the same God who produces all of them in everyone. . . . [S]ince you are eager for spiritual gifts, strive to excel in them for building up the church. (1 Cor 12:4-6; 14:12)

The Spirit bestows its gifts for the building up of the one body, which is Christ. For Paul, purely private gifts of the Spirit would be a contradiction, since each of us has been given to drink of the *one* Spirit (1 Cor 12:13). Those men and women drawn by the Spirit to embrace religious life are actually being drawn to share more deeply in the life of the people of God. Apart from the Church, religious life has no persuasive reason for existence. The Easter appearances, to cite an important example, were hardly private consolations for divinely selected individuals. Each of them figures in some way into the forming and strengthening of the Church. In other words, the full meaning of the Easter stories is ecclesiological; they shed light on the ongoing and deepening relation between the risen Jesus and his disciples.

If the spirituality underlying a religious community were to become so specialized that it applied to vowed religious alone, bearing little or no relevance to the wider Christian body, then that spirituality would soon lead the members of that community into an idiosyncratic, maybe even an alienating

enactment of Christian existence. Even if they repeated the same creed, we would not recognize them as belonging to us in spirit and in practice. The creation of a spirituality which was a world apart from the interiority of ordinary men and women would further reinforce the mistaken idea that Christianity is two-tiered, comprised of a church of the zealous religious professionals and a church of the less than fully committed.

To avoid this mistake we religious have to keep reminding ourselves that the basic form of our life is a gift of the Spirit and the living of it presumes a charism. Of course baptismal existence itself, because it is life according to the Spirit of Jesus, is thoroughly charismatic, provided it has been fully embraced. Yet the particular charism of religious life is to serve the people of God and contribute to the upbuilding of the Church. Through their teaching, their example, their prophetic witness, and often through their writing and spiritual direction, religious men and women assist the rest of the Christian community in finding God in their own lives and within their particular circumstances.

Religious life is not an exception to ordinary Christian existence but an intensification of it. Naturally, its witness to the gospel has to be unambiguous; mixed signals are worthless. Indeed, when religious life is unsure of itself it undermines the credibility of the gospel; the emptiness of charism is concealed by the outward success of institutions. People are not looking for reeds shaken by the wind or for someone dressed in soft robes, but for prophets (Luke 7:24-26). The majority of Christians might not be able to accompany the women into the empty tomb, but some Christians must do so in order to bring what they discover there back to their sisters and brothers. Perhaps, like Jesus, they will proclaim God's victory to spirits still languishing in their prisons.

The vast majority of those writing on the interior life have been religious, as we would probably expect, and they write best when their experience and instruction enable others in the Church to walk the way of faith more securely and confidently. The whole Church has been helped in its ascent to holiness because those men and women, within the challenges and limitations of their time and place in history, embarked upon journeys of the human spirit. Their pilgrimages have illuminated the often obscure, sometimes treacherous paths upon which the rest of us have sometimes found ourselves.

They have stepped into the tomb of the heart's poverty and sinfulness, and they have identified the long thread tying our petty, everyday sins with the violence, greed, hatred and pride that can destroy nations and entire civilizations. They have walked into the riddles of the heart's deceits, the tomb of its not-knowing, and there discovered the purifying darkness of God's own truth. They have penetrated the womb of death and discovered there the paradox of risen life.

They have entered the emptiness of egoism and self-love, and there discovered the road to a truly redeemed, liberated love—a road which has to be taken by all of us, religious or not. Religious men and women enter the tomb of human fear, the repository of all that terrifies us in the face of incomprehensible mystery, and there discover the great freedom that sets hearts on fire with a message of hope and of life. Religious are men and women who have entered the tomb and faced its mysterious, life-giving emptiness.

### **Religious as pioneers in the ways of the Spirit**

Religious are pioneers in matters that touch the human spirit. The ways or dynamics of the interior life that they uncover and map out for us are not something esoteric, reserved

only for a select few. Rather, to the degree that their own interior growth takes place through and in the Spirit of Jesus, their spirituality can guide the rest of God's people into the fullness of truth and life.

The Spirit calls upon only a fraction of Christians to embrace religious life. They are not singled out in order to attain more remarkable holiness or perfection than everybody else, but to chart the way of the Spirit. They have been called to teach and to accompany their brothers and sisters in living the gospel fully and without compromise.

Just as the women were instructed to bring their news to the disciples, so too religious are sent to tell the rest of God's people about where Jesus is to be found:

“But go and tell his disciples and Peter, ‘He is going before you to Galilee; there you will see him, as he told you’.”  
(Mark 16:7)

Properly *Christian* holiness (for I believe that there are other forms) is not a personal attribute, a quality or accomplishment that a person attains as a result of his or her private effort, no matter how strenuous or even noble that effort may be. The point represents both sound theology and the wisdom of experience. The Christian does not pursue holiness for its own sake. We do not even want to be holy in order to be more pleasing in God's sight, and certainly not to be more attractive and virtuous in the eyes of our neighbor. We are just as surely not seeking holiness for our own pleasure, as if to satisfy some primeval craving to be like God. Holiness is a mark of the Church, a Christ-pointer; it is the consequence of loving God with an undivided heart and it is rendered “visible” in terms of solidarity with communities of suffering.

The Christian *becomes* holy by loving God above all things, a love that unfolds and matures in the concrete decisions and choices of everyday life; and by loving and serving the neighbor. Holiness is a matter of growing outward and upward, and while it frequently entails strenuous effort, growth in the Spirit only happens as we respond to God's overtures toward us in the hundreds and thousands of details, encounters, moments, memories, conversations, meals, relationships, joys and sufferings of everyday life.

Like other Christians, men and women in religious life wrestle with belief and despondency, frailty and temptation. They have to learn, sometimes painfully, the way of discernment. They know what it is like to resist God, to lose their taste and their appetite for spiritual things, and finally to be lifted into intimacy with God. If the Spirit of God leads them to a deeper, richer prayer life as a result of the storms that not infrequently pass through their souls, and even into mysticism, then this too is always for the sake of others. For the whole people of God is invited to be mystics, and that this invitation might be realized the Church will always turn to its religious for guidance and encouragement.

The point here is that Christian holiness should never be thought of along the lines of individual achievement, the way we think about the accomplishments of athletes, inventors or recipients of Nobel prizes. No one becomes holy unaided and holiness without solidarity would be empty and meaningless. The Holy Spirit itself raises up men and women who will become familiar with the ways of the Spirit by traveling those paths to God which unfold inside the human heart. The failure to appreciate how holiness is actually given *to the Church* would seriously jeopardize the integrity of Christian spirituality.



Religious may be pioneers in the ways of the Spirit for the men and women of their time, but as people learning about God they are never lone rangers. God has clearly not called most Christians to be religious consecrated by vows, yet through baptism God has called each and every one of us to holiness and perfection.

Religious play a vital role in bringing the rest of the Church to understand what living out our common baptism is all about. Once again, they enter the tomb for us. These men and women are not necessarily holier than other Christians, but they ought certainly to be more knowledgeable in the ways of the Spirit. The Easter women did not actually observe the risen Jesus inside the tomb. They, together with the other disciples, would have to locate him “in Galilee,” where the risen Jesus once more would be walking ahead of them. The risen Jesus, the disciples learn, is recognized through the indelible marks of crucifixion; he will always remain the crucified One. And this implies that if the disciples want to find Jesus risen, they must seek him not only among the living, but especially among those men and women in our world who, like Jesus, carry the marks of crucifixion.

### **Joy and freedom**

Finding and recognizing the risen Jesus becomes the ultimate explanation for Christian joy. John tells us:

When [Jesus] had said this, he showed them his hands and his side. The disciples *rejoiced* when they saw the Lord.  
(John 20:20)

Being with the risen Jesus with a happiness and hopefulness that disarm every fear is what creates Christian freedom and makes it bold. It is not just the truth that sets us free; it is also deep, abiding joy. Joy and freedom might well be the principal

evidence that our lives are rooted in the Easter story. For from joy springs hope and confidence that the ultimate victory over the forces of death and sin belongs to God. And from freedom there springs the bold speech and daring actions of prophets, or the freedom of those who are willing to let go of whatever is necessary in order to stand with the crucified ones of history.

Men and women in religious life are expected to enter the tomb, to learn in all humility and modesty the way of the Spirit, to traverse the inner reaches of the human mind and heart, and to master the difference between the way of life and the way of death.

[1996]

## 9.

### **Sacraments and Solidarity**

Although the Church decided long ago not to include the consecrated life on its list of official sacraments, the fact is that religious life has conferred a kind of sacramentality upon the lives of religious men and women just as surely as marriage has done for the majority of Christians. The sacramentality that marks the lives of most of our families, our friends and the families we meet in our ministries and apostolic work is the mystery of Christ's union with his people, the covenant faithfulness of God, and the friendship which brings about an intimate union of minds and hearts. But in what respect is religious life sacramental?

Sacraments, of course, are signs. Indeed, each sacrament embodies not just one but a number of signs. Baptism, for instance, points to the new and redeemed human community called church. It points to the new and redeemed human being grounded in the mystery of Jesus' dying and rising. Baptism points further to God's ongoing creative power in human life, to cleansing from sin and to the beginning of eternal life right here in this world.

Religious life too is a sign. It points to the deep, pervasive desire for God that has characterized countless lives in every time and place. As that desire becomes conscious and is allowed to direct the mind and heart, it leads a person to pray. Religious life turns the process of inner transformation, from natural orientation to conscious desire and to formal prayer, into a sacrament. Indeed, religious life might even be described as the sacrament of human desiring.

Obviously, I am not suggesting that only religious should be thought of as men and women of prayer; that would be downright nonsense. Nevertheless, religious life is a public sign within the Church that points to humanity's native potential for union with God. Religious life is a constant reminder to the Church that prayer is not an appendage to each day but a whole way of life, and that contemplative union with God is our common destiny. While it would be equally ridiculous to claim that religious men and women more than others in the Church signify in their lives the importance of service, humility, forgiveness and compassion, the fact is that religious life in its outward form and mission gives vivid expression to these gospel values too. As we have already seen, the soul of a Christian is not truly whole until it has acknowledged and integrated its active and contemplative sides.

It may be significant that in the *Summa Theologica* Saint Thomas treated religious life after his discussion of prophecy, ecstasy, the gift of tongues, inspired speech and the grace to work miracles. Thus it would appear that for him religious life should most logically be classified with the charismatic gifts. At the risk of overstating the obvious, it is worth repeating that religious life, like every other charism, does not exist for its own sake but for the sake of the whole people of God. And as a charism religious life rests upon the power of the Spirit for its existence and ongoing effectiveness. The same holds true, of course, for each of the Church's sacraments. Without the Spirit empowering us to believe, sacramental celebrations would have no redemptive value.

Many of us had been so accustomed to thinking that sacraments are something we *receive* for our personal spiritual benefit that it was easy to overlook the daily challenge they

place upon us. Sacraments have to be enacted or put into practice not just liturgically, but in the details of everyday life. What merit would there be in partaking in the Eucharistic bread if we are not prepared to be broken and shared ourselves? What point would there be in seeking reconciliation with the Church if we are not prepared to extend the same forgiveness to those who have offended us? The lasting fruitfulness of the Church's sacramental life is revealed and verified in the sacramentality of Christian existence, the enduring sign of the Lord's presence on earth. In its own particular sacramentality religious life reveals one of the modes of the risen Christ's real presence to his Church.

These observations may strike the reader as pretty formal and theological, and they are. My first point is simply that sacraments have to signify something, and that what they signify ought to be apparent. What they signify should also be beautiful so as to attract others to the beauty of their source. My second point is that religious life is attractive insofar as it draws attention to what all of us, vowed religious or not, intuitively recognize what our lives are about. Our lives are about prayer, they are about desire, and they are about God. But the praying, desiring and encounter with God do not unfold independently of other human beings, especially human beings who are oppressed and poor. Religious life, therefore, not only gives visible, public expression to the human thirst for God; it is preeminently a sacrament of human solidarity. Now, what does this mean?

### **A sign of realized solidarity**

First of all this means that every sacrament presupposes our rootedness in the human condition and our belonging to a concrete community of faith. The first Adam exists inside every

one of us; we recognize immediately the preposterous nature of the Pharisee's prayer, "God, I thank you that I am not like other people" (Luke 18:11). Yet within the circle of the human community there is a clearing, a place where we can see and celebrate a way out of the human predicament. Sacraments thus express the way we live and grow as church.

Each sacrament has the potential to draw us more intimately, concretely and irreversibly into the life of the people of God. We may need to do further revision of our rituals to bring this potential into focus. Be that as it may, the life of the people of God is not only a spiritual or interior life; it is also a political, social and economic life. The believer's inner landscape eventually becomes the world itself. Vatican II suggested as much in the celebrated opening sentence of The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World: "The joy and the hope, the grief and the anxiety of the men and women of the present time, especially those human beings who are poor or in any way afflicted, these too are the joy and the hope, the grief and the anxiety of the disciples of Christ." The Church realizes, the Council went on to say, that it is "truly and intimately joined with the human race and its history."

The Council called upon us to make our own the historical experience of other men and women, particularly the experience of communities of suffering. Doing this, however, has important consequences not only for our practice, but also for our interior life and the way we pray. For by joining ourselves truly and intimately to the human race we begin to experience in ourselves the sin of the world, the hunger of the world for bread and for reconciliation, the infirmities human beings have to bear, and the world's longing for faithfulness and truly adult

love. In short, the Council was teaching us that to be a follower of Christ means living in solidarity with the world.

Living in solidarity is a lesson that requires patient instruction and constant exemplification. I think that living in solidarity also neatly defines an essential aspect of religious life. The sacramentality of religious life necessitates that this aspect be signified, that is, realized solidarity needs to be a clear, unambiguous and attractive sign.

### **An emerging form of Christian spirituality**

In describing a spirituality that is genuinely Christian, the Orthodox theologian Dumitru Staniloae of Romania wrote:

True spirituality implies communion and true communion implies spirituality. True communion cannot be fostered or achieved by external measures of discipline or worldly interest. True spirituality is not individualist in character nor is it realized by taking refuge in the self, and that is certainly not true spirituality which is found wanting in love for the rest of men. Spirituality does not mean the accumulation of the experiences of a refined spirit, an undisturbed enjoyment of certain insights which can be cherished without reference to the community. True spirituality grows with the experience of the communion of many persons, with the understanding of the many complex situations born in the life of communion. It is fed from the richness of the nature of concrete realities and from the limitless variety of relationships with more and more persons, and it shows its power by overcoming contradictions and by establishing a harmony among these relations. True spirituality is seen in the efforts of all men to achieve a common unity, but a unity which respects the specific contribution which each individual can bring to this

growth of understanding and to the content of mankind's common experience and values.<sup>1</sup>

There is considerable resonance between this Orthodox description of true spirituality and the ideas we have been developing throughout these pages. Spirituality cannot be individualist, it is by nature relational, and it envisions the unity of the human race as the goal of Christian prayer and practice. Although I have urged that *solidarity* is a sharper and more arresting word than *communion*, the fact remains that a healthy spirituality cannot be God-centered without being world-centered. In addressing a meeting of Jesuits engaged in the social apostolate, Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, the twenty-ninth Superior General of the Society of Jesus, expressed the same idea in different words:

Our mission for justice, culture and dialogue impels us to be near people and with them in daily life, like the first Jesuits to take once again to the streets of our cities, in order to read there in the very heart of people's existence the signs of the times, the signs of the Spirit's action. If God loves the world, our mission among people should reveal to them that, in all aspects of their existence, they are already grappling with God, whether they know it or not. For this reason the Ignatian call to mission is a call to be involved in the world, not to break with it; a call to become wide open

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<sup>1</sup> See his chapter "The Problems and Perspectives of Orthodox Theology" in Dumitru Staniloae, *Theology and the Church*, trans. Robert Barringer (New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1997), 217-218. I am indebted to Tom Neal of the Diocese of Pensacola for bringing this work to my attention.

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to humanity where God is at work in all things, laboring for the salvation of all.<sup>2</sup>

The spirituality of solidarity is still in its formative stages both within religious communities and elsewhere in the Church. The steps or stages that usually mark a person's ascent to union with the people of God have not yet achieved the distinctiveness of the traditional stages within the ascent to perfection. The forms of ascetical practice that must accompany the ascent are becoming clearer, along with criteria of discernment. Those engaged in giving spiritual direction are becoming more sensitive to the social context in which people's lives unfold as well as the social context of the directors themselves. And the Church has yet to integrate the enormous labor and wonderful results of Catholic biblical studies into its catechesis, especially in the way the Church hands on the story of Jesus. Families are joined together much more closely because of the stories they share than the blood in their veins, and the same holds true for the Church. The narrative about Jesus provides the foundation of our being Christian; believing communities without individuals skilled in telling the Jesus story will be anemic at best. But before that story can be told in a new key it as to be lived in a new key, and that calls for laboratories of the Spirit.

How the classical ways of purgation, illumination and union are going to translate in a spirituality of solidarity, as I said, has yet to be worked out. There is certainly a form of asceticism, quite different from the penitential practices often associated with Christian holiness, which has emerged. People

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<sup>2</sup> Father Kolvenbach's address was entitled "A Paschal Love for the World" and it appeared in *Promotio Iustitiae*, No. 68 (September 1997), 95-103.

network with grassroots organizations, they work at keeping themselves connected and informed about issues like hunger, welfare reform, the death penalty, migrant farmers, care for the environment, immigration, unfair labor practices, landmines, and so forth.

And the work here can be strenuous. People expend time, energy and passion in order to bring about a more just and humane world in whatever ways they can. Sometimes they engage in hunger strikes, boycotts and protest marches, and even suffer imprisonment. Indeed, these are modern-day counterparts of the forms of asceticism embraced, say, by the desert Christians of the third and fourth centuries. When Christians engage in such actions, and where such actions are really expressions of a person's developing relatedness to God, genuine spiritual development takes place. But all of this needs to be looked at closely and situated in terms of growth in prayer. Holiness can certainly be called "political," but this always entails a dying to self in order to live for the people of God. What is new is not the element of purgation, the stripping away of disordered attachments, or the acquisition of humility. The newness comes from connecting the individual's movement towards God with his or her accompanying other human beings in their struggle for justice and peace.

Similarly, Christians are finding new forms of illumination, or rather they are discovering dimensions to the gospel stories which they had not noticed before. At the beginning of the Spiritual Exercises Ignatius offered the following guideline:

The person who gives to another a method and order for meditation or contemplation must faithfully narrate the story to be meditated on or contemplated by merely passing through the principal points and adding only brief clarifications; so that the one who is going to meditate, after

having first accepted the basis of the historical truth, will then go over it and consider it by himself. Thus it would happen that when he finds something that would offer a greater elucidation or apprehension of the story (whether it happens through his own reflection or a divine inspiration in his mind), he will harvest a more delightful taste and more abundant fruit than if the same thing had been more extensively narrated and explained by someone else. It is not, indeed, the abundance of knowledge, but the interior sense and taste of things, that usually satisfies the desire of the soul.<sup>3</sup>

Ignatius here gives us an idea as to what the illuminative stage is all about: learning the history, coming to insight, relishing the texts, acquiring an “interior sense and taste of things.” What we are seeing today, however, goes beyond what Ignatius knew about the history and even the meaning of the sacred texts. What Christian from the past who loved scripture would not have been thrilled by the developments in our understanding of the Bible? And chief among those developments is our growing knowledge of the social, economic and political situation of the times in which Jesus lived, together with a fresh sense of the prophetic dimension of his ministry. In short, perhaps the present-day form of illumination is our realization that the gospel is not only an ethical message to be applied in new circumstances. In addition, it is still unfolding in front of us. We are grasping aspects of the Jesus story which confirm just how rooted in an everyday human history that story really was. Insights galore into the text are giving way to a fresh appropriation of the overall narrative. We are learning to read

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<sup>3</sup> This is called the Second Annotation. See *The Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius*, translated and with commentary by Pierre Wolff (Liguori, MO: Triumph Books, 1997).

the gospel in a way that connects Jesus with the present historical moment. The Jesus of the gospels was born, he lived and he died in solidarity with his people.

As a sign of realized solidarity, therefore, religious life faces a wonderful future. It is being called upon to sacramentalize in its community life and in its apostolic witness that connectedness with the wider human community of which I spoke. Religious communities will increasingly become socially networked communities, and they will find ways to bring that networking to the level of public sign. Our society in particular has a crying need for reconciliation and wholeness. The way we take each other to court so quickly, for example, indicates how fractured we have become as a society. The tensions we face over issues such as race, immigration, abortion, vast discrepancies in income and welfare reform point to a social disaster waiting to happen.

Yet there are many people who do not want to live in that kind of world or that kind of society, and for that reason the Church through its religious communities must constantly hold out another way to be human together. From their corporate searching, acting and discerning religious men and women are fashioning spiritualities of solidarity, a sense of the divine mystery among us that is appropriate to our time and place. When others in the Church look at religious life, they are increasingly going to find their fellow Christians who in their prayer and practice exemplify the globalization of the human soul. Father Adolfo Nicolás, the thirtieth Superior General of the Society of Jesus, used the expression “the globalization of superficiality,” and Pope Francis has often spoken of “the globalization of indifference.” Whichever expression we use, the spiritual corrective to the superficiality and indifference of

our time is going to be the same: the world must get inside of us to the point that we can say, with Saint Paul, that we have been crucified to the world and the world to us (Gal 6:14), for this is where the following of Christ takes us.

## 10.

### The Vows “from below”

Each of us finds a way to reclaim religious life in our own minds and imaginations, since the reasons why we entered religious life are probably not the exact same reasons for which we have stayed. For me, the process of reclaiming can be summed up in terms of two discoveries. The first is that religious life, as a particular expression or pattern of Christian existence, originates “from below.” And the second is that religious life makes a sacrament of human solidarity.

The terms “from above” and “from below” are best known from their usage in Christology as a way of distinguishing methodological starting points. “From above” generally means that one’s understanding of Jesus starts with the doctrinal statements of fourth and fifth-century councils, and that one interprets the gospel portrayals of Jesus in light of them. “From below,” on the other hand, describes an approach to the study of Jesus that begins with the human, historical dimensions of the life and ministry of Jesus embedded within the gospels. There is probably something artificial about the terms in view of the fact that our understanding of God and ourselves always begins from within history, that is, from within our social and cultural experience. Besides, scholarly attentiveness to the human and historical features of the gospel story can illumine and support the Church’s belief in Jesus as God’s Son; historical research hardly needs to be opposed to faith.

Nevertheless, the methodological distinction of “from above” and “from below” can be useful in developing a contemporary theology of religious life. For not only has the scriptural recovery of the human, historical Jesus had its impact

on the way we think about the nature and mission of religious life, but religious life itself has human, historical origins and deep this-worldly commitments. By proposing that we look at the vows “from below,” therefore, I mean that religious life has emerged from experiment and practice; it did not (and does not) exist in some ideal state, waiting to be discovered by Christian visionaries. Religious life, with its characteristic stress upon poverty, chastity, and obedience, originated from within the human world.

Nevertheless, the foundational narratives of religious communities can tend to mythologize their origins and confer on them a normative status that both obscures the humanness and contingency of the beginnings and distracts us from the equally important histories of later believers, whose lives give equal testimony to the ongoing action of God among his people. Religious life then starts to assume a “from above” character. To some degree Luke mythologized the beginnings of the Church in his foundational narrative of the Church itself in Acts. What prevents Acts from turning into pure myth-making, however, is the seasoned faith of the reader who knows enough not to lose sight of the abiding presence of the Spirit within history, no matter how fantastic some of the deeds Luke reports. While I do not deny the constructive role of myth in the life of social, political, or religious institutions, when divorced from critical reason and from faith, myth can turn authoritarian and steal our spontaneity.

The fact that Christian religious life has analogues within the major religious traditions of the world underscores its anthropological base—a base that indicates strong odds for its long-term survival. Religious life, in other words, belongs to the spiritual patrimony of the human race. It serves as a mirror in

which humanity can discover a reflection of its deepest religious and moral struggles, its desires, aspirations, sinfulness, thirst for healing, and so on. The many modalities of religious life testify further to its essentially historical character as well as to the adaptive potential of the human spirit in its search for wisdom and transcendence.

Christian religious life traditionally based itself on a particular reading of the gospels—albeit a somewhat circular reading—which focused on Jesus as the exemplar of the three vows. But the way Jesus himself lived was not scripted in advance, as if Jesus had been destined to be the archetypal religious. Jesus’ life assumed the form or pattern we perceive in the gospels because he walked with his people. For the most part his ministry was shaped by the particular pressures of his times; his message and consequent death were intimately tied up with the historical situation of Galilean peasants. Jesus’ life exemplified what had been so obvious from the Hebrew Bible, namely, that God loves the poor preferentially.

Christians have known from the moment the Church was born that they had a particular responsibility toward the poor, but it took us a long time to understand why helping the poor could not proceed without thinking about the social and economic structures that privilege some while excluding the vast majority of others. Apparently God has taken the side of the poor because he so hates injustice: the good things of the world were intended for all, not just for a select few. As Exodus 3:7-8 says in such memorable fashion, God heard the cries of the poor and witnessed their affliction; therefore he “came down” in order to take them to freedom. The redemption of the human race is conceptually inseparable from the biblical insistence upon doing justice.



The vows *as particular ways of responding to the world* are what happens when people make a deliberate choice to live prophetically and walk with the poor, not simply for two or three years or for certain hours of the day or week, but continually. In other words, it is the story of Jesus that gives meaning to the vows, not the other way round. Apart from his life, death, and resurrection, poverty, chastity, and obedience might exist as valid transcendental religious forms, but they become dissociated from the historical experience of suffering communities. They remain valid but, from an evangelical perspective, incomplete.

### **Religious life as a way of identifying with the poor**

My second discovery was that religious life, at least in its ideal state, ought to be a living embodiment of human solidarity—the solidarity indelibly impressed upon Christian imaginations by the Incarnation itself. This second and complementary idea is simple, although coming to see it took me a number of years. Our fervent hope for a world totally remade—the new heavens and the new earth of the seer who gave us Revelation—ought to be manifest in the way religious communities function from day to day. The sustaining power of this vision of a reconciled, unified world should be evident in a community's zeal and dedication, if the Eucharist is the liturgical expression of Christian solidarity and if communities regularly center their religious lives in this mystery. Solidarity is what assures the quality and depth of a community's prayer, its evangelical witness, and its apostolic projects. The Eucharist logically fosters a tangible, effective awareness of the pressing concerns of the whole human family, for global consciousness belongs to the core of Christian religious experience. The divine

eye that holds each of us individually simultaneously beholds the entire human family.

Each of the vows can be rethought in terms of how they express and promote solidarity. The intentionality of the vows, that is, how the vows orient us and shape the kind of person we choose to be, displays itself on three levels.

On the first and most elementary level, a religious is someone who wants to imitate Jesus and who wants the imitation of Jesus to be the central business of his or her life. Then, understanding why Jesus' life assumed the concrete features exhibited in the gospel story, we are drawn, on a second level, into wanting to associate with the sort of people with whom Jesus mainly associated—those whose wholeness and salvation were the principal object of his ministry because their needs were so obvious. Furthermore, not only are we drawn to associate with such people, but we also begin to identify with them and view the world through their eyes. In short, we are capable of a self-emptying that can be every bit as radical (and occasionally as dramatic) as that of the one who, though rich, became poor for our sake (2 Cor 8:9).

In the rhetoric of the Exercises we name the intense desire to share the lot of the crucified ones wherever they may be as a grace of the Third Week. For us the gospel text “Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you *because of me*” (Matt 5:11) translates into “because of the company you keep.” We are not likely to be insulted, persecuted, and unjustly charged merely on account of our doctrinal or even our ethical positions. Instead this Beatitude would more likely apply to us when, like Jesus, we associate with people outside respectable social, economic and moral boundaries. Later the evangelist has Jesus answer the

followers of John the Baptist, “Go back and report to John what you hear and see: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor” (Matt 11:4-5). The major beneficiaries of Jesus’ healing and preaching are not those who live in palaces and dress in fine clothes. If we were to bracket Jesus’ dedication to the poor from the gospels, then the overall narrative structure would collapse. To grasp the range and force of this social identification, one needs to understand as thoroughly as possible the social and historical contours of the gospel narratives. The grace of the Second Week truly mandates a lifetime of scriptural study.

The third level of intentionality within the vows centers on the mystery of God. When I think of Jesus’ being poor, I do not attribute the poverty of his life to the socio-economic situation of his family in Nazareth. His was very likely a family of slender means, but his walking with the poor had to be the result of a choice that came to expression at the Jordan, with the personal history and its attendant mystery that Jesus brought with him when he left Nazareth to hear John preach. Anyone born into destitution (although Jesus was not) could not be blamed for resisting their fate and working mightily to escape it, but Jesus was not teaching the peasants of Galilee a means of religious escape by concentrating on the afterlife any more than he was encouraging them to initiate a tax-revolt or violent political protest. Prophets resist poverty through their teaching and their actions—words and deeds through which we hear the divine “No!” to human misery. With feet planted in the experience of the people, prophets advocate for the kingdom of God, challenging the rest of us to opt for a world ever more just. Jesus accompanied the poor because God had called him to do so. His poverty, in other words, reflected a “preferential

option.” So in the end, that option reflects his calling—his desiring—to accompany the people at the bottom or at the margins of society. And that option is founded, I believe, upon the premise that the life of God and the life of God’s people are, from the point of view of religious experience, inseparable. Examine a person’s experience of God—a person raised on the Judeo-Christian narratives and the Psalms—and we shall find the experiential threads that hold God and his people together.

The preferential option for the poor may in fact be the most adequate idiom to explain what the vow of poverty means. When they pronounce this vow, it might make a great deal of sense for religious to speak it in the presence of those who are actually poor, those who represent the disenfranchised, people trapped at the bottom or at the margins of society, the homeless, refugees, migrant workers, the unskilled, and so on. I would argue further that the promises of chastity and obedience flow from this option. A commitment to the least ones among God’s people—a commitment with both practical and ideological aspects—gives rise to a desire, a calling, or an attraction to live for them with all of one’s affective energy, and to listen to their voices so humbly and so totally that in effect one pledges them his or her “obedience,” which is to say his or her life.

Every community—religious, civil, or familial—requires a minimal level of obedience from its members if the community is to remain cohesive and flourish. But from a religious viewpoint, this practical or functional aspect of obedience may be the least interesting (and the most annoying). All of us have to learn how to live within systems and institutions in ways that are mature, not juvenile, and that keep us focused on the wider or greater good of the family, the local community, the nation, and so forth. In this sense, obedience is a natural virtue. The

mystery underneath religious or vowed obedience, it seems to me, is not that superiors represent Christ or that they render the divine will concrete in our regard—unless one wants to generalize the point and argue that anyone occupying a legitimate position of authority could be imagined as placed there by God.

Paul argues this way in Romans 13:1-7, and the same idea reappears in Ephesians 6:5-8 and 1 Peter 2:11-25. Such an argument, however, is loaded with serious dangers. At the very least the pious practice of imagining that Christ himself is speaking in the person of those in authority betrays a fundamentalism about the interior life. It violates the cardinal theological principle that no one can directly represent Jesus, and it may be spiritually regressive. At its worst, the practice undermines the life of faith by naively fusing divine and human authority. The author of Revelation furnishes us with a very different view of how Christians should regard and respond to the culture of Roman imperialism. The imperial culture, after all, held considerable responsibility for the social and economic hardship of Jesus' people. In the end, Roman arrogance and power cost Jesus his life, and the author of Revelation quite possibly believed that it had cost Jerusalem her temple. Imagining ourselves responding to and obeying the voice of Jesus makes better sense, it seems to me, *after* we have come to a decision, not before it.

What, therefore, is the underlying mystery in the matter of obedience? Just as there is an elementary poverty that defines the human condition—all of us are existentially poor—so also there is an elementary relation of obedience to God that defines who we are and limits what we can do. We learn our place in the created scheme through the things that we suffer, to echo a

phrase from Hebrews. Existential obedience names the lifelong process by which human beings attain wisdom, humility, and equanimity. In this basic or existential sense, poverty and obedience are spiritual complements. They represent the constraints imposed upon human existence by virtue of creation and, to be honest, cannot properly be the objects of a vow, any more than a person could make a vow to grow up.

The obedience of religious, however, moves in a different direction, taking its cue once again from the gospel story. One patiently listens for God, but the direction to which we turn is the human world as it is described, for example, in the well-known paragraph that opens Vatican II's Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World. We pay attention to God by listening carefully to the needs and aspirations of God's people, especially those undergoing daily crucifixion. The poor do not become a substitute God for us, even though in Jesus God became poor. Nevertheless, their presence in history and our world today rivet our attention as nothing else does. While we clearly do not promise to do whatever they tell us, we do profess that their lives have placed a permanent call upon us, challenging us to keep real and credible the message of the Gospel as good news for the poor. Like the vow of poverty, religious obedience rests upon an option and its practice is a manifestation of true solidarity.

In a world where millions of human beings are desperately trying to climb out of poverty and achieve a decent standard of living, the renunciation of material goods hardly seems sensible. Although the aging process has a way of teaching us not to cling to possessions, complete dispossession is not a very compelling ascetical ideal, either. Our lives may become considerably simpler as we grow older, and it is undoubtedly

true that in a consumer-oriented society the vow of poverty runs against the cultural grain. Nevertheless, we cannot very well encourage poor people to improve their lives while saying at the same time that material goods do not matter to us. Detachment may be an ascetical ideal, but for most people it sounds like a religious luxury, not a virtue for ordinary living. One thing we do know, however, is that it would make no evangelical sense to promise to live celibately if we were then to compensate ourselves with physical comforts and more possessions than we honestly need. Religious grasp intuitively the logical connection between poverty and celibacy. And the reason is that poverty and chastity are about commitment and fidelity to the people of God—a sign to those who struggle that we are with them and a counter-sign to those with more resources than they need of the needle’s eye that awaits them.

There is a solitariness to every human life which has to be acknowledged; any effort to deny or escape it only frustrates the Spirit’s way of teaching us wisdom. Celibacy is a public acknowledgement of the human condition as a state of incompleteness. In the end, we believe and hope, we shall find the completeness we long for in communion with the mystery of God and with one another in God. But once again, one does not have to pronounce a vow of celibacy in order to enact this incompleteness; married people also have to come to terms with the limits of one person’s union with another. Jesus, it is worth remembering, was not celebrated for leading a rigorous way of life in the manner of John the Baptist.

Whenever celibacy is conceived as a form of abstinence, we probably need to be reminded that Jesus himself was not remembered for regular fasting (Mark 2:18) and saw no value in going hungry. After all, he did feed people (Mark 6:30-44 and

8:1-13), and joined them at table (Mark 1:31, 2:15), and was most sensitive to their need to eat (Mark 2:23-26, 5:43). Not only were some of his apostles married, but their wives accompanied them on mission, as Paul informs us (1 Cor 9:5). Celibacy is not a matter of rejecting sexual union—something that God created and called good—but of wanting to live for the kingdom of God. And this translates into a public declaration of wanting to be men and women for others.

There are Christians who feel drawn to a solitary way of life; they may or may not pronounce vows. If they do, then their solitude will contour the intentionality of the vows for them. But I do not believe that Jesus deliberately chose celibacy the way religious do. His being single was the consequence of a prior call to “marry” his people. That is, Jesus’ being single was an accident of his ministry. It might well have been a central aspect of his life if he had been part of a monastic community readying itself for the coming of Israel’s messiah, but he does not appear to have emerged from a desert recess the way John the Baptist did.

I do not think a convincing argument can be made that celibacy creates the inner space for a more concentrated attentiveness to the mystery of God. That single people have more disposable time than do married people with children goes without saying, and that this extra time is often devoted to prayer and good works is likewise true. But raising a family is a good work of the most basic sort, and busy parents do learn how to pray between the cracks, as it were, of the many demands on their time and energy. They will pray differently, of course, as they get older, just as religious do; and they may have more time for reading and meditation once their children move on. But the mystery of God would be very strange if it was



more accessible to solitary people and celibates than to married couples and parents. The value of celibacy, then, lies in its power to connect us with the overall following of Jesus, where following him is viewed as solidarity with the people in desperate need of divine attention.

Religious vows undoubtedly affect the piety and spiritual development of religious themselves, but they can only be understood fully within a theology of the Church. Not only do religious live among and for the people of God, but what happens among the people of God, as I have proposed here, forces us to re-think the meaning of the vows for our time. The classical formula of poverty, chastity, and obedience might not have to be crafted anew in order for Christian religious life to maintain its relevance to the Church and contemporary society, but like all religious formulas the horizon that gives it meaning needs constantly to be retrieved. Two of the major signs of our times—at least for religious life—have been the great strides made in our understanding of the human, historical Jesus and our theological recovery of the cross and resurrection as a revelation of divine solidarity with all victims. Redemption takes place in time, in history, and so the more we understand the one human history of which we are all a part, the better shall we be able to explain ourselves when we claim that God accompanies his people, or as the author of 1 Peter puts it, when we are asked to account for the hope that we have (1 Peter 3:15).

We are forced to rethink the vows, I suspect, because we are no longer praying the way we once did. As we appropriate historical research into the gospels and Christian origins, our grasp of Jesus as God's incarnate Word is going to purify and develop. Yet as our understanding of Jesus changes, so too must

our experience and understanding of God. Finally, if the way people find God changes—and there indications that such change has been taking place as the process of globalization continues—then it should come as no surprise that vowed religious, precisely because religious life is a laboratory of the Spirit, will be among the first to feel the effect.

[2003]

## 11.

### **The Place Where the Church Experiments with Prayer**

Do you suppose I have a spiritual life? I have none, I am indigence, I am silence, I am poverty, I am solitude, for I have renounced spirituality to find God.

—Thomas Merton

At the end of his Apostolic Exhortation on the Consecrated Life, John Paul II wrote to the Church's religious: "You have not only a glorious history to remember and recount, but also *a great history still to be accomplished!*" (#110) In a religiously uncertain age, the Pope's words ring with confidence. What might that future, the "history still to be accomplished," look like?

With one eye on key moments in the past history of religious life, and above all on the gospels, we have to discern what message the world and our times is sending us. The Church, Vatican II told us, "has always had the duty of scrutinizing the signs of the times and of interpreting them in the light of the gospel. . . . We must therefore recognize and understand the world in which we live, its expectations, its longings, and its often dramatic characteristics." The charge ought never to be leveled against us, "But you cannot interpret the signs of the times" (Matt 16:3).

For many devout Christians, religious life is the most natural place to turn to if one wants to be schooled in the gospel. It is a wonderful place in which to fathom the richness of the Easter message: "You are looking for Jesus of Nazareth,

who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here” (Mark 16:6). Given the enormous investment of their personnel and resources in works such as retreats, spiritual direction and catechetical formation, religious life certainly appears to be a school with open doors, providing the opportunity for all who desire it of an experience of God in Christ which is liberating and life-giving.

Many people would welcome the chance for an apprenticeship in discipleship and to be schooled in the ways of the Spirit, but they do not want to remain in school forever. They ultimately want, and are called, to live in the world with greater spiritual depth. After all, encountering God in Christ sooner or later takes one directly into the world of the poor and oppressed. Within this world religious life, too, finds its energy and the confirmation of its charism.

Whenever I think about the nature or the future of religious life, I start with the presupposition that the mystery of God will draw some men and women in every age to want, more than anything else in life, to pursue single-mindedly the things of the Spirit. For them, marriage and family, career opportunities, professional advancement and financial security simply cannot be the only options available as they pass through this world. Even the fields of human service, health care and education, or dedication to serving the common good through politics and law, do not sufficiently capture their imaginations and their desires. They seek more from life than what they read about, say, in a college catalog, and they want to give more. To ask why conventional options and goals leave something deep inside of them unsatisfied is to step into that region where grace and nature meet, and where the ways in which God arranges and guides the human world remain wonderfully hidden.

What these God-seekers are looking for is not a higher or purer state of life, or a more secure path to salvation. For God has created a world where different people respond in different ways to the multiple calls and challenges which life holds out to us. And in that diversity of response, the wisdom of God is revealed: all thereby profit, all gifts serve to further the salvation and redemption of the entire human race. The whole people of God is built up by the graces and desires accorded to each and everyone of us, personally and uniquely. In matters of beauty, there does not exist a single standard by which every work of art can be judged, except perhaps this: whatever liberates, heals and builds the human spirit is by definition something of beauty. In matters of religion, we are tugged one way or another by the endlessly fascinating beauty of the mystery of God.

### **Three signs of the times**

In his Exhortation, John Paul II wrote: “There is an urgent need for consecrated persons to give more space in their lives to ecumenical prayer and genuine evangelical witness, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit the walls of division and prejudice between Christians can be broken down” (#100). Religious life is uniquely poised to promote greater understanding and unity among Christians. A spirituality that is rooted in the gospel somehow transcends confessional differences, suspicion, and misunderstandings, as well as the insularity that arises from being familiar with only one path to holiness or only one way of experiencing the mystery of God. The longing for unity among Christians, so strongly affirmed by the Second Vatican Council, is one of the major signs of our times.

Yet perhaps just as importantly for the next millennium, ecumenism will need to become increasingly *inter*-religious,

too. Here the Exhortation becomes more cautious. “[I]nstitutes of consecrated life cannot exempt themselves from involvement in [interreligious dialogue], each in accordance with its own charism and following the directives of ecclesiastical authority. . . . In order to foster reciprocal knowledge, respect and charity, religious institutes can also promote *appropriate forms of dialogue*, marked by cordial friendship and mutual sincerity, with the monastic communities of other religions” (#102). One feature that makes religious life an appropriate context for such dialogue, the Pope notes, is “the freedom of spirit proper to the consecrated life.” Deep interest in, and openness to, the manifestations of the Spirit within the other religious traditions of the world becomes a second major sign of our times.

Furthermore, the Pope continues, religious men and women play a key role in helping their contemporaries find God and develop their own interior life. “[Consecrated persons] are able to offer a response to the longings of their contemporaries, and can help to free them from solutions which are for the most part illusory . . . [T]hey bear witness . . . to the true nature of the search for God. . . . [T]he consecrated person points to Christ loved above all things and to the mystery of the Trinity as the response to the profound longings of the human heart and the ultimate goal of every religious journey sincerely open to transcendence” (#103).

Religious themselves might want to enlarge upon what the Pope says. They know that the consecrated life can instruct the world about the way to God because they have wrestled with life’s empty promises. They have done battle with the demons of narcissism, self-centeredness and sensuality, and even with the prideful pursuit of holiness apart from community. Religious men and women have learned the elementary lessons

of life according to the Spirit. Not every search for transcendence and spiritual depth has led to God; the history of religious life has verified this sober piece of wisdom over and over again. Rightfully, then, the rest of the Church looks to religious life for assistance. The Pope writes: “[C]onsecrated persons are in duty bound to offer a generous welcome and spiritual support to all those who, moved by a thirst for God and a desire to live the demands of faith, turn to them” (#103). The thirst for holiness—for *wholeness*—is a third major sign of the times.

### **Religious life as a laboratory of the Spirit**

Most religious would never think of themselves as scientists, yet more often than not religious life functions as a laboratory of the Spirit. Religious life is probably the most notable place where the Church experiments with prayer. At its healthiest, the institution of religious life provides consecrated men and women the freedom, the encouragement and the support to explore the virtually countless ways in which human beings encounter God. It affords them the freedom to engage in dialogues of the Spirit.

From the wisdom of the desert Christians of the third and fourth centuries to the wisdom of prudent spiritual directors down through the ages, from the proliferation of new forms of religious community in our own time to the great renewal which has been taking place within the traditional religious institutes following Vatican II’s *Decree on the Appropriate Renewal of Religious Life*, such liberty of spirit has been demonstrated over and over again. Experimenting with the ways of the Spirit belongs to the very nature of religious life. By “experimenting” I mean *to have experience of, to confirm through trial and testing, to discover personally or first-hand* the mystery of God

as it reveals itself within the human world, in human lives and within the recesses of the human heart.

This is not to overlook the fact that even solitary searches for God need to obey the elementary principles of discernment. For discernment has been an indispensable requirement of life according to the gospel from the very beginning, as the New Testament reminds us (1 Cor 12:10). And in the matter of ecumenism, the “results” of prayerful encounter and dialogue with people who walk along other religious paths will always have to be weighed and tested by the wider believing community.

Nevertheless, the history of Christian spirituality is replete with examples of men and women who have charted fresh paths in that vast interior landscape where the human spirit meets the Spirit of God. From the remote desert wastes where they found God without benefit of the Church’s sacraments and liturgical celebrations, to chapel choirs where they encountered God in the faithful, rhythmic singing of the Psalms and daily celebration of the Eucharistic mystery; from the contemplative silence of monastic enclosures and the laborious task of preserving and developing humanity’s precious cultural and religious endowments, to all-absorbing immersion in the everyday world of human societies—the unsung Galilees of ordinary life—religious men and women have pioneered and plumbed the ways of the Spirit.

Sometimes, enthusiasm and inexperience have led to regrettable mistakes. Yet even mistakes could be turned into the stuff of prudence and wisdom, and the rest of the Church thereby profited from the experience. At other times, profound insights won by religious have been greeted with suspicion and



rejected by others in the Church. And these attitudes have likewise led to regrettable errors.

Some years ago I met a missionary sister in India who remarked that she never knew the meaning of the First Commandment until she arrived on the shores of India and saw Hindu temples richly colored with images of gods and goddesses. She understood herself to be in the middle of a pagan, faithless world. That reaction stands in marked contrast to figures like the Benedictine Bede Griffiths, whose ashram in southern India was a testimony to a spiritually intense, prayerful dialogue with the Hinduism he met on all sides. It stands in marked contrast, too, with the explorations undertaken by Thomas Merton into the spirituality underlying Buddhist meditation. After Merton's fateful pilgrimage to India and the Far East in 1968, some people began wondering what a Christian monk was doing by stepping outside the ascetical depths and revelatory truth of the Christian religious world, while others saw in his pilgrimage a parable of the Christian soul for our time.

The deeply moving testament left by Christian de Cherge, one of the Trappists slain in Algeria just a few years ago, bears eloquent testimony to the intense desire for a communion which transcends religious frontiers. It could even be asked, "What else is religious life, if not a lived desire for that communion between God and the human race which lies at the heart of the mystery of the Church?" Perhaps only a religious could have composed such words:

I know the scorn with which Algerians as a whole can be regarded.

I know also the caricature of Islam which a certain kind of idealism encourages. . . .

For me, Algeria and Islam are something different: they are a body and a soul.  
I have proclaimed this often enough, I believe, in the sure knowledge of what I have received from it, finding there so often that true strand of the Gospel learnt at my mother's knee, my very first Church, in Algeria itself in the respect of believing Muslims. . . . This is what I shall be able to do, if God wills—immerse my gaze in that of the Father, to contemplate with him his children of Islam just as he sees them, all shining with the glory of Christ . . .<sup>1</sup>

Sentiments like these can be found in the lives—the breathing, praying testaments—of numerous men and women of our time. We know the names of some of them, like Thomas Merton and Bede Griffiths. But the majority of these pioneers of the interior life are engaged unobtrusively in a patient, prayerful encounter with the Spirit that dwells in temples “not made with [human] hands” (Mark 14:58; see also John 3:24). They provide dramatic confirmation of that fact that we are really becoming a world church. Cardinal Ratzinger recently observed: “We are very attentive not to quench the flame of the appropriation and creation of an Asian identity for the Catholic faith. Perhaps this is one of the greatest challenges for the Church of the third millennium, to bring faith in Christ, the Son of God made man, finally to the Asian soul.” If this appropriation is ever to be

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<sup>1</sup> The entire text of “Testament of a murdered monk” can be found in *The Tablet* (June 8, 1996), 749. It can also be found in the *Christian Spirituality Bulletin* 5:2 (Fall 1997), 14. In the same issue on pages 15-17, see Armand Veilleux, “The Importance of the Monastic Community and the Church in the Contemplative Life.”

realized, it surely will *not* happen by bypassing the great religious traditions of the world. There will be no great breakthroughs into the Asian soul without prayerful, honest, and respectful yet discerning encounter with the religions of Asia. This is something Christian religious have recognized for centuries.

### **Religious life as an experiment with God**

But it is not only at the macro level of inter-religious dialogue that religious life serves the Church. On the micro level of individual faith-experience, the lives of religious men and women sometimes become “divine experiments.” The fact that such experiments take place is vitally important to all of us. Religious men and women have traditionally been among the most prominent writers on the interior life. Their insight into human nature, their skill at discerning the religious significance of major cultural and social forces at work in the world, and their efforts to pray with the whole of their lives, have often enabled countless others to live out their faith more steadily and confidently. In their own time, they helped to guide their contemporaries through many a wilderness and along many an inner journey, and to this day through their writings they remain some of our best teachers.

Not all religious write and lecture, of course; not all are engaged in the ministry of spiritual direction. Yet together, as communities, they have helped to deepen the interiority of the whole people of God. Together they help to define and protect the freedom all believers enjoy in Christ to seek the face of God, each one of us in his or her own particular ways.

The wise insight religious gained, however, was frequently won at great personal cost. One recalls, for example, John of the Cross enduring hostility and imprisonment, and in that

experience undertaking the composition of *The Spiritual Canticle*. Or Ignatius Loyola's terrible personal battle with scruples, which nearly drove him to suicide. Or Teresa of Lisieux enduring severe desolation of spirit, and dying of tuberculosis as a young woman. What those religious suffered was no greater than what the vast majority of men and women intent on loving and serving God often have to endure. But the pioneers pave the way for the rest of us so that we can learn how to make sense of the hard interior events or moments that inevitably accompany growth in the Spirit, and not lose our way.

Lest any of us think that religious life no longer has a clear mission, it is worth pausing a moment to realize how desperately modern society needs women and men of the Spirit. Michael Downey describes the present situation this way:

The culture that breeds narcissism, pragmatism, and unbridled restlessness is a dead end, and this is being learned at great personal cost to individuals, communities, and nations. It is my view that people today are beginning to realize that this kind of culture does not work. It has betrayed us. It has not delivered on its promise. It has failed to satisfy the deepest desires of the human heart, and it has resulted in fragmentation and depersonalization of a magnitude previously unimagined. We are looking for another way. And this calls for the cultivation of an awareness of levels of reality beyond the self and what is immediately apparent, beyond what is practical, and what keeps us constantly stimulated. The culture in which we live has numbed us to the deep reserves of spirituality within. ... People today are seeking to find those deep reserves of spirituality within because they know that they are trapped

by self-centeredness, utilitarianism, and agitation, and have decided that this is simply no way to live.<sup>2</sup>

Toward the close of his Exhortation, John Paul recalled one of the visionary experiences of Teresa of Avila. In that vision Jesus asked her, reassuringly: “For what would become of the world if it were not for religious?” In response, John Paul quotes from Paul VI: “Without this concrete sign there would be danger that the charity which animates the entire Church would grow cold, that the saving paradox of the Gospel would be blunted, and that the ‘salt’ of faith would lose its savor in a world undergoing secularization.” Then John Paul adds his own words: “The church needs consecrated persons who, even before committing themselves to the service of this or that noble cause, allow themselves to be transformed by God’s grace and conform themselves fully to the Gospel” (#105).

In other words, the Church of tomorrow is going to need people experienced in the ways of the Spirit—a Spirit that is sometimes gentle and at other times relentless. It will need—because humanity’s thirst for transcendence will otherwise be blind—men and women who are in touch with the “deep reserves of spirituality within.” Religious life is the Church’s charter school.

[1997]

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<sup>2</sup> Michael Downey, *Understanding Christian Spirituality* (New York: Paulist Press, 1997), 19-20.

## 12.

### The Consecrated Life<sup>1</sup>

During the month of October 1994 the ninth general assembly or world Synod of Bishops engaged in a consideration of the consecrated life. John Paul II concluded the work of the Synod and promised to develop the fruits of its deliberations in a future document. *Consecrated Life* appeared in March 1996 in the form of an “apostolic exhortation.”<sup>2</sup> The document does exactly what the Pope had intended, namely, it brings together many of the ideas and points which had been raised during the Synod and expands upon them.

In his concluding homily, the Pope laid the theological cornerstone for his future exhortation. He said:

Baptism is the first and fundamental consecration of the human person. Beginning new existence in Christ, the baptized—man or woman—participates in this consecration, in this total donation to the Father which is proper to his eternal Son. It is he himself—the Son—who incites in [someone’s] soul the desire to give oneself without reservation to God . . .

Religious consecration, with its distinct eschatological dimension, is inserted on baptismal consecration. . . .

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<sup>1</sup> This article appeared in 1997, initially entitled “Religious Life and Its Tensions.”

<sup>2</sup> *Consecrated Life (Vita Consecrata): Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation of the Holy Father John Paul II* (Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 1996).

Consecrated persons have the duty of reminding everyone of this.<sup>3</sup>

All the key ideas that would later appear in the Exhortation can be found here: the theological and spiritual priority of Christian baptism, the deeply Trinitarian nature of Christian religious experience, the call of God as mysterious and unfathomable, the eschatological (or “already/not-yet”) character of Christian existence, and the fundamental *religious* responsibility toward the people of God on the part of all those who choose to embrace one of the many forms of the consecrated life.

Although the Exhortation elaborated these basic ideas considerably, seasoned religious will probably not discover in the document anything fundamentally new or revolutionary, with the possible exception of one emphasis that I shall come to later. The papal Exhortation made extended use of the transfiguration episode to provide a contemplative backdrop for its presentation of the mystery underlying the consecrated life, and it took great pains to show the vital connection between every form of the consecrated life and the Church.

The Pope left no doubt as to how greatly he and the bishops of the world esteem every way of life governed by the evangelical counsels. He recognized the enormous good accomplished by men and women religious over the centuries both for the Church and for the world at large, he welcomed the new forms of the consecrated life which have been recently emerging in the Church, and he encouraged older religious to lose neither vision nor heart in an age which has witnessed so

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3 John Paul II, “What Would the World Be Without Consecrated Life?”, *Origins* 24:22 (November 10, 1994), 374.

much diminishment. Indeed, the Apostolic Exhortation might well be the best single document articulating the Church's understanding and expectations of religious life today.

Yet the document is not without a number of tensions. There is nothing unhealthy about tensions, of course; the existence of tension in our thinking indicates that our imaginations are alive. In fact, the presence of tension in the Exhortation was probably unavoidable, because religious life itself is something of a parable and parables are notoriously tense and open-ended. The parables Jesus told keep playing on our minds long after we hear them.

No document could definitively sum up what the consecrated life is all about. Religious life was not formed and did not develop in the abstract but within the ever-changing circumstances and challenges of human history. Even the sacred texts of the Bible could never do full justice to the mystery of God's self-revelation. Because men and women of faith are constantly growing, seeking, attempting, daring, struggling, and contemplating, the divine reality to which their lives bear witness will always exceed what can be recorded in words.

Perhaps the deeper reason why the papal document had to remain a work in progress, however, is that our theology of the laity and our theology of the Church are still in the process of developing. Religious life exists in and for the Church, and its underlying spirituality does not exist independently of the rest of the people of God.

### **All share the same baptism**

The first tension within the document arises from the fact that Christian existence is rooted in our common baptism. All of us have been called to a perfect following of Christ. Whether



married or single, whether religious or cleric, whether old or young, whether fresh convert or Catholic by birth and by social heritage, all have been sacramentally clothed with Christ. All have died and risen with him to a newness of life that allows for no qualitative distinctions. Every effort to understand the nature of the consecrated life must begin with this absolutely central acknowledgement.

But what then becomes the rationale for embracing the life of the vows or the consecrated life? After all, both Christian marriage and religious life are governed by the gospel's call to moral perfection and holiness. Both of these graced ways of being human, with their distinctive challenges, opportunities and forms of asceticism, can lead people to experience the mystery of God. It would strike many Catholics as arrogant, if not downright nonsense, to assert that religious life as one form of Christian existence is superior to the life publicly pledged to mutual and lasting fidelity.

The Exhortation does not seem to know how to render a fully satisfactory theological case for the consecrated life without underestimating the path to holiness that is Christian marriage. The idea that one state of life might be by its nature nobler or "higher" than another is simply incompatible with our renewed understanding of Christian baptism. In every state of life there can be an intensification of religious desire leading to a more complete and literal following of the crucified Jesus. Many of the characteristics which the Pope ascribed to the consecrated life could be similarly applied to Christian marriage: that it is prophetic, that it bears witness to an eschatological reality, that at its core it participates in the divine mission of redeeming the world, that it challenges the world and human society to inner transformation or conversion.

The new human being, which, ideally, a consecrated person represents, might also refer to a human couple remade and redeemed as a result of faithfully living out the marriage vows. The Trinitarian imprint upon religious life carries equally into marriage and family life, and the transfiguration episode could be rendered in a way that illumines the mystery of Christian marriage as easily as it is appropriated to illumining the nature of the consecrated life. Christian marriage must play as essential a role in the new evangelization of which the Pope has frequently spoken as religious life. Similar examples could be cited from other parts of the document, and the Pope readily concedes this. For instance:

those whom God calls to follow [Jesus] are also consecrated and sent into the world to imitate his example and to continue his mission. Fundamentally, this is true of every disciple. In a special way, however . . . (No. 72)

All the sons and daughters of the Church, called by God to “listen” to Christ, necessarily feel a *deep need for conversion and holiness*. But . . . (No. 35)

The option for the poor is inherent in the very structure of love lived in Christ. All of Christ’s disciples are therefore held to this option, but . . . (No. 82).

In short, to speak of “consecrated persons” is to speak of all the baptized; in all fairness, the rich resonance of this phrase should not be restricted to those who have pronounced the classical religious vows. “As a way of showing forth the church’s holiness,” the Exhortation reads, “*it is to be recognized that the consecrated life, which mirrors Christ’s own way of life, has an objective superiority*” (No. 32; italics added). But do not fully sacramental Christian marriages likewise mirror the life of Christ, that is, life according to the Spirit of holiness? The first disciples became apostles, not consecrated religious,

and it is clear that they did not give up their marriages to follow Jesus. Otherwise Paul's words would have made no sense:

Do we not have the right to be accompanied by a believing wife, as do the other apostles and the brothers of the Lord and Cephas? (1 Cor 9:5)

Celibacy appears to have been an accidental, not an essential feature of the life and ministry of Jesus. The essential feature of his life was his single-hearted dedication to the kingdom of God, which he proclaimed through his preaching and teaching, his practice of healing, exorcising, forgiving, and table-fellowship, his example of prophetic zeal and faith, and even in his death. A person could, like Paul, bear witness to Christ and the kingdom as an unmarried person. One could also be an apostle, and suffer martyrdom for Christ and the kingdom, while being married. For many religious today, to speak of the "objective superiority" of their way of life makes as much sense as claiming the usefulness of the foot over the hand.

What the Pope says about religious applies equally to all the baptized: "The more consecrated persons allow themselves to be conformed to Christ, the more Christ is made present and active in the world for the salvation of all" (No. 72). Furthermore, just as some institutes of the consecrated life have concluded that their charism and spirituality can be shared with the laity, as John Paul observes, so also the charism of sacramental marriage in its often heroic fidelity to a covenantal promise, its daily dying to self, and in its living radically for others, is a sacramental sign that can speak to, animate and encourage vowed religious.

What is needed, therefore, is a different footing in order to build the spiritual or theological case for the consecrated life. Such a footing will recognize the distinctiveness of religious life

while resisting every temptation to view religious life or ordained ministry as somehow competing with marriage for God's favor. It seems to me that the choice to embrace religious life is soundest when people have recognized its Spirit-driven attractiveness, not when they think they are embracing a superior or higher state of life. In the case of the consecrated life what takes place is a sometimes sudden, but usually gradual perception of what is beautiful. This process or dynamic is every bit as wonderful and mysterious as falling in love and marrying. In fact, the Pope suggested such an alternative footing in at least three places in the document.

1. The first place is the document's reminder that the consecrated life is an eschatological sign and a foreshadowing of the kingdom. Although the idea is not pursued, the eschatological perspective governs the whole of the document's vision of life under the religious vows. Precisely in its ability to signal the possibility of a strikingly different and immensely beautiful way of being human together, the consecrated life works on the world's deepest religious aspirations and sensibilities.

Through its fidelity to the religious vows, the consecrated life does not merely announce that there is more to human existence than what the eye takes for granted, or that there is another life beyond the present one. For baptismal existence as such signals this truth. Rather, by their identification with human beings and their societies who are so evidently and so painfully unfinished, men and women in religious life embody in every aspect of their existence the world's longing for full redemption. Religious life points to the graced possibility of societies re-founded and remade in the image of divine justice and compassion.

2. This brings us to the second place in the Exhortation where our understanding of religious might be structured on a different footing. Those called to the consecrated life, the Exhortation states, “cannot fail to feel the commitment to bear in their hearts and in their prayer the entire world’s needs” (No. 73). And again:

The quest for divine beauty impels consecrated persons to care for the deformed image of God on the faces of their brothers and sisters, faces disfigured by hunger, faces disillusioned by political promises, faces humiliated by seeing their culture despised, faces frightened by constant and indiscriminate violence, the anguished faces of minors, the hurt and humiliated faces of women, the tired faces of migrants who are not given a warm welcome, the faces of the elderly who are without even the minimum conditions for a dignified life. (No. 75) . . . *And how could it be otherwise, since the Christ encountered in contemplation is the same who lives and suffers in the poor?* (No. 82; italics added)

The religious person is someone who bears in his or her heart and prayer the great needs of men and women who suffer. And lest we pass over this point too easily, the Pope freshens our minds by recounting who those desperate men and women are. The religious or spiritual identity of consecrated men and women is forged above all in contemplating the Christ “who lives and suffers in the poor.” Not only must the consecrated life have a profound experience of God, as the Pope says; the call to the consecrated life must likewise be rooted in a profound experience of the world. The statement, “It is in the contemplation of the crucified Christ that all vocations find their inspiration” (No. 23), might even be turned around to read: “Today it is in the contemplation of the crucified *people* that every genuinely religious call makes itself heard.”

Perhaps, therefore, the categories we need to draw on in order to understand the role of celibacy in the consecrated life are solidarity and the option for the poor. The vow of celibacy reflects an intensification of the desire to live in solidarity with the poor, a love affair with the people of God. This way of formulating the intent of the vow seems consistent with what the Pope writes.

The consecrated life, like a school of the Spirit, is the place where men and women learn to find God. But the wisdom they discover is not for themselves alone. Their insight and the confirmation of their pioneering experience are intended for the whole Church. The spiritual consciousness of consecrated men and women, therefore, has to be rooted and grounded in the deepest solidarity with those who hunger and thirst for justice and peace. Precisely in this are religious men and women signs of the kingdom and living embodiments of humanity's incompleteness, its groaning for full redemption, and its orientation towards a God who dwells among his people.

3. The third place we might look for an alternative footing is the theme of the beautiful. The transfiguring brilliance of the mystery of Christ is essentially a matter of a totally new kind of beauty. The Pope intimates as much when he draws on a passage from Saint Augustine's commentary on the psalms: "Beautiful is God, the Word with God. . . . He is beautiful in heaven, beautiful on earth; beautiful in the womb . . ." (No. 24). The consecrated life is as much a matter of aesthetics as it is a matter of asceticism. Comparing Christian states or ways of life (all of which are blessed) is like comparing works of art, each of which has its distinctive form and features. Because our religious sensibilities are different, no single way of life will have a universal appeal. Life in Christ, whatever form or "state"

it assumes, is always a thing of beauty. The consecrated life not only represents a quest for divine beauty, as the Pope puts it. There is a particular, even “special” form of evangelical beauty that emerges from within the lives of men and women who incarnate that consecration.

Three motifs, then, that the Exhortation could have brought into greater prominence for a richer understanding of the consecrated life today are (1) the eschatological nature of the evangelical counsels, (2) the importance of solidarity with the oppressed in forming one’s identity as a consecrated person, and (3) the beauty of the consecrated life as an expression of a mature Christian aesthetic.

### **Consecrated life and the Church**

In keeping with the ecclesiological orientation of the Second Vatican Council, the document situated the consecrated life squarely within the mystery of the Church as *communio* or communion. It is neither an appendage nor a refuge for those disenchanted with life in the local church. There is nothing sectarian about the many forms of the consecrated life, and those who choose the life of the vows should never think that they are thereby joining a spiritual elite within the Church.

The consecrated life is fully inserted into the life of the Church. It prays from the same Scriptures, drinks from the same sacraments, and shares in the same mission. At the same time, the document insists on the duty of consecrated men and women to lead their lives in union with the successor of Peter and in fidelity to the Magisterium. “A distinctive aspect of ecclesial communion is allegiance of mind and heart to the Magisterium of the bishops” (No. 46), the document notes. “Faithful adherence to the directives of the Magisterium” and “ready obedience to the bishops and especially to the Roman

Pontiff” are taken for granted as important features of the consecrated life.

Once again, however, we face the possibility of a certain tension. Perhaps the form of this tension is nothing more than the traditional one between institution and charism. “Neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem” (John 4:21) and not “in houses made with human hands” (Acts 7:48) will true worshippers discover the Father. Thus the scriptural tradition depicts the Spirit as essentially free and freeing: “the wind blows where it chooses. . . . So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit” (John 3:8). The consecrated life, indeed Christian existence itself, is at its core a charismatic reality. To obey the Spirit of God in thought and deed, to recognize and to lead one’s life according to the promptings of the Spirit, is by definition to lead a charismatic existence.

Echoing Vatican II’s Decree on the Appropriate Renewal of Religious Life, both the Synod and the Pope have called upon religious communities to rediscover their founding charism. But recovering charism is not just a matter of rediscovering the spiritual insight, apostolic purpose and vision of founders and foundresses. It is also a matter of rediscovering the pivotal experience of evangelical freedom, the kind of freedom which makes it possible to risk and even to lose all things for the sake of the gospel. The consecrated life should be a constant testimony to the freedom, the profound liberation of mind, heart and imagination, which proceeds from an absolute and unconditional Yes to the Spirit.

Nevertheless, leading a charismatic existence is also tied in closely with one’s belonging to and responsibility toward the whole people of God. The major way in which the consecrated life expresses the reality of *communio* may be through the



profession of the vows, for the classical vows are a symbolic expression of a gospel-driven desire to lead one's life in solidarity with the poor and suffering. In other words, the consecrated life would be meaningless, from a Christian point of view, if it did not manifest in concrete, recognizable ways a person's solidarity with the people of God. As we have already seen, solidarity may be a crisper term than communion. *Communio* carries the sense of an interior union, based in the Spirit, with all members of the Church. Solidarity adds to this the note of concrete embodiments of such interior union through social location, civic and economic choices, political loyalties, and so forth. A clear, living, prayerful solidarity with the poor, we might say, is itself a manifestation of charismatic existence. The document states:

Taking up the Lord's mission as her own, the Church proclaims the Gospel to every man and woman, committing herself to their integral salvation. But with special attention, in a true "preferential option," she turns to those who are *in situations of greater weakness*, and therefore in greater need. "The poor," in varied states of affliction, are the oppressed, those on the margins of society, the elderly, the sick, the young, any and all who are considered and treated as "the least."

The option for the poor is inherent in the very structure of love lived in Christ. All of Christ's disciples are therefore held to this option, but those who wish to follow the Lord more closely, imitating his attitudes, cannot but feel involved [experience a solidarity with the poor?] in a very special way. (No. 82)

The Exhortation may be invoking this foundational loyalty to the people of God from a slightly different perspective when it calls upon religious to be involved in ecumenical dialogue. John Paul's dedication to the cause of ecumenism throughout the course of his pontificate is well known. Thus he writes:

“There is an urgent need for consecrated persons to give more space in their lives to ecumenical prayer and genuine evangelical witness, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit the walls of division and prejudice can be broken down” (No. 100). Such dialogue may also assume inter-religious proportions: “religious institutes can also promote appropriate forms of dialogue, marked by cordial friendship and mutual sincerity, with the monastic communities of other religions” (No. 102).

Yet ecumenical dialogue, undertaken in genuinely prayerful openness to the Spirit of God, has the potential of becoming religiously prophetic. In matters of the Spirit, careful discernment is always necessary in order to determine what is and what is not of God. Nevertheless, the readiness to listen to the faith and experience of those outside the Catholic tradition supposes a readiness to be challenged by the Spirit.

An ancient Christian memory preserved in the Acts of the Apostles may be instructive here. The first Christians were overwhelmingly Jewish. Some were offended, but all appear to have been surprised when they learned that the gospel had been offered to, and received a warm reception among, the Gentiles. The early church set about discerning and deciding, although not all the community’s leaders were on board after the Council of Jerusalem gave Paul and Barnabas the go-ahead to continue their evangelizing efforts among the non-Jewish peoples of the ancient world.

The consecrated life, the document tells us, can play an important role in ecumenical dialogue and in fostering greater understanding among various religious groups and traditions. Understanding and dialogue build upon “participation in common prayer” and can lead both to a sense of spiritual communion and even to collaboration in works of charity and

service to the poor. As consecrated men and women reach the frontiers or doctrinal boundaries of their own religion, they may find themselves in the unenviable position of being confronted and challenged by the limitations which are inevitably present in all human understanding, particularly when it comes to the things of God. The scriptural text “So are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts” (Isaiah 55:9) testifies to a wisdom painfully acquired by those who are learning to obey the Spirit in all things.

The Apostolic Exhortation is both comprehensive and balanced, respecting the diversity that exists among the various forms of the consecrated life. The actual strategies of renewal and growth that are called for today will almost certainly have to be discovered by communities themselves. The Exhortation’s vision of the consecrated life tends to be somewhat conventional, although at several points it raises the interesting, even exciting prospect of breakthrough moments.

Ultimately, however, the major difficulties the consecrated life is facing do not arise from the Gospel, but from our time and place in history. The cultural forces at work in our world are constantly affecting and shaping our consciousness of what it means to be human. Until those forces are recognized, understood and then evaluated in light of the gospel, the consecrated life will continue to suffer the pains of diminishment on the way to rebirth.

## 13.

### **Should We Reformulate the Religious Vows?**

Today it is very fashionable to talk about the poor. Unfortunately, it is not fashionable to talk with them.

—Mother Teresa

I don't believe that anyone has yet come up with a satisfactory explanation as to why religious life has experienced so much diminishment in recent years. There probably is no one simple answer, but rather a cluster of reasons. Religious life, like the Church at large, can influence but it cannot control the many social and cultural forces that have carried us toward the end of this millennium. And if there no one easy answer, then there is unlikely to be just one clear solution for revitalizing religious communities. The task of interpreting the signs of the times is both challenging and ongoing.

The Christian story is getting old and maybe feels a bit too worn; or to put things even more sharply, it appears to be losing its timeless character and increasingly regarded as a cultural relic. Contemporary biblical studies have so focused on questions of history in interpreting scriptural texts that some Catholics have found themselves spiritually adrift, cut off from the Jesus in whom they had once placed so much faith. The reaction is unfortunate but understandable. We are still in the early stages of learning how to read and preach the gospels in a new key. We cannot shoot the messenger who announces that there are political, social and human dimensions to the gospels that until recently we had not recognized.

The real culprit behind the sense of loss and separation that some people have experienced is not contemporary biblical studies. The real culprit was a religious cosmology and a catechesis that put too much emphasis on heaven and too little

emphasis upon history. Recovering the human, historical Jesus unsettles any rhetoric which concentrates on the next life at the expense of this one. For those who refuse to rethink their understanding of the story of Jesus in light of the biblical movement there is no choice but to watch the gospel grow less and less relevant to their lives. Left unchecked, this sorry state can only become worse as years turn into decades, and decades roll into centuries. We ignore at our peril the figure of Jesus in all his Jewishness and his rootedness in the political and cultural life of first-century Palestine. If religious life is supposed to be patterned after the life of Jesus in the gospel, then it is imperative that we learn as much as we possibly can the Jesus of the gospels. Sometimes this learning process is going to cost us and force us to rethink our identity and our mission.

Yet even when the gospel is understood anew there can be difficulties. People who build their lives on the gospel story might sense themselves increasingly out of place in a post-modern world. It is not that they mind being treated and accounted as fools for Jesus' sake; it's just that no one wants to look and sound like a cultural oddity needlessly. As the numbers of believers declines, or as our grasp of what it means to be Christian crumbles under the weight of spiritual and doctrinal illiteracy, the present situation will only grow worse. It is difficult to imagine religious life flourishing in a culture which has little familiarity with the things of God, or where the name of God is not hallowed, or where families do not eat and pray together. Religious life presupposes a culture of faith. One doesn't harvest grapes from thistles.

The traditional marks of religious life are, of course, the three vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. Through these vows a person dedicates himself or herself to God in and for the

people of God, the Church. To these three vows, like codicils, some groups have appended other promises. Benedictines, for example, pronounce a vow of stability. Jesuits take a special vow to obey the Pope in matters relating to mission, while the Rogationists take a fourth vow to pray and work for vocations.

But the orientation of the three traditional vows strikes some people as negative: one *renounces* material possessions, marriage and family life, and control over one's own future. The vows themselves appear to be negative instruments or forms by which a person shapes his or her very humanity in order to render it increasingly open to the mystery of God. The truth of the matter is that the goal of religious life is God, pure and simple. A person does not actually live the vows; one lives the desire for God. A person's whole existence as a religious man or woman ought to reveal or sacramentalize that desire. Religious life itself, therefore, is guided by something positive. It should be shaped, not by renunciation, but by affirmation; not by the act of turning away from the world but by turning towards it.

The institution of religious life is not uniquely Christian, of course. The search for God, or for the Absolute, has led countless individuals across various spiritual and cultural traditions to embrace a way of life centered on prayer and meditation. That universal thirst has been drawing Christians for nearly two thousand years into the wilderness, or into monastic enclosures, or into world-renouncing solitude. There they have often discovered the one Spirit which knows no national or ethnic frontiers, no cultural or institutional boundaries, and which never utters a word or a reveals text which exhausts or surpasses all other words and all other texts.

More than anything else, spirituality is what at least potentially we have in common; it is what creates the possibility of religion and religious institutions. Spirit after all forms the backbone of human nature. *Contemplative religious life*, understood as a steady and prayerful search for the mystery of God, will surely persist in some form or other within humanity's major spiritual traditions for as long as there is human life on the planet.

Apostolic religious life is a different matter. Members of active communities live out a dialogue with the world. Their mission, basically, is to promote the full development of the human spirit. They help human beings to find the God of life within the everyday world. The inspiration behind such communities is clearly evangelical. Jesus in the gospel story lived and worked in the villages and towns of Galilee, amidst ordinary people with ordinary concerns. For this reason some God-seeking men and women choose the "apostolic" or mission-oriented life of engagement with people. The vows themselves provide visible structure to consecrated life. They define publicly what makes that radical living for others specifically and formally "religious."

The distinction between active and contemplative is an uneasy one, however. In different degrees, action and contemplation are dialectically related to one another in every Christian life. For practical reasons alone, no one can pray absolutely all the time and no one can work all the time. For one thing, as we grow older and mature as Christians, we realize existentially how little we ultimately accomplish by ourselves, how much of what we do depends upon the work of others, the support and ongoing liturgical life of the Church, and the grace

of God. Age has a wonderful way of drawing the contemplative out of us.

But to return to the vows. There are a number of problems associated with the traditional religious promises. First, the promises are basically negatives; they name what a person is giving up. And no matter how much one has been assured that what is being renounced are things which are good in themselves, the fact remains that framing the vows in terms of renunciation leaves one feeling that these goods could not have been all that beneficial for salvation after all.

Second, the traditional vows need to be constantly rethought in light of the fact that Jesus himself was not a religious. One can say, of course, that the life of Jesus was characterized by a total dedication to the reign of God. But he did not (so far as we know) pronounce any religious promises. The way he lived followed from what he had surrendered himself to. Men and women in the “consecrated life” run the risk of configuring the gospel portrait of Jesus in light of their own lifestyle, highlighting those aspects of the story which might make him appear to have been an exemplary religious: poor, chaste and obedient. Such a picture, however, is not helpful to the majority of Christians who have not embraced religious life.

Yet a third problem is created by each of the vows individually. What does it mean to be poor? This question has occasioned endless discussion and debates in religious communities. Does the poverty which one commits to designate spiritual poverty or material poverty? With what social class or classes is one identifying? Are all human beings poor by the sheer fact that we depend upon God? There has never been a single, uniform definition of religious poverty.



And why could there not be a form of religious life that includes married people? What is so precious about remaining celibate in view of the fact that Jesus did not make celibacy a requirement for following him?

Finally, why obedience? What special merit is there in surrendering one's will to another, or to a community? There are a good number of veteran religious who could testify to the immense personal frustration and suffering inflicted on them by those in positions of religious authority. Perhaps a far more important religious promise would have been the renunciation of power (Mark 10:42-45), or of security (Luke 9:57-58), or of prestige (Matt 18:1-5).

Fourth, the Church's renewed understanding of Christian baptism has highlighted the universal call to holiness and the consecration in Christ that marks the life of every believer. Having promised to follow Christ faithfully and wholeheartedly in baptism, it is hard to imagine that a person could ever improve upon such a far-reaching commitment. Religious vows may specify the direction of living out one's baptismal promise, but the vows do not replace baptism and they certainly do not improve upon it.

The survival of apostolic religious life hinges upon far-reaching cultural and social forces which we do not yet fully understand and which we certainly cannot control. The words of John Paul II at the opening Mass of the 1994 synod are intriguing:

One could say that the horizon of the kingdom of God is revealed in a unique way through the vocation of consecrated life. *And, one could also say, in the marvelous flowering in recent years of secular institutes and societies of apostolic life, which are doing so much good in the*

church. *We are also witnessing the birth of new forms of consecration, particularly inside the ecclesial movements and associations, which seek to express in ways adapted to the present culture* religious life's traditional tension between contemplation of the mystery of God and the mission to our brothers and sisters.

At the outset of his homily, the Pope called attention both to the variety of recent developments within religious life and to its adaptability. As we move further into the future, we should anticipate more experimentation, more searching, more efforts at adaptation and inculturation, as the universal call to holiness prompts Christians to find ever more creative and satisfying ways to balance their thirst for the mystery of God with their love for their neighbor. At the same time, the future might also entail the deconstruction of the more traditional forms of consecrated life.

### **Preferential option for the poor: a new expression of the religious vows**

The one idea in Christian theology and spirituality to emerge over the last fifteen or twenty years which warrants special consideration in any effort to think about the future of religious life is the preferential option for the poor. This important expression entered into the wider Catholic world chiefly as a result of the meeting of the Latin American bishops at Puebla, Mexico, in 1979. The harsh political, economic and social experience, together with the rich grass-roots reflection underlying the preferential option for the poor, have turned out to be a grace for the whole Church.

As a kind of theological first principle, the option for the poor distills and clarifies what the gospel story and Christian reflection are fundamentally about. They are about a God who

has “chosen” the side of the poor and the oppressed in their long historical journey toward justice and equality. Whatever else we say about the God of Jesus, we must take into account where that God has “opted” to reveal himself. For Christians there is one unavoidable conclusion. To find and to contemplate the God of Jesus is to encounter the faces of the world’s poor and powerless and to be joined to those people in the deepest loyalty and affection.

The Latin American bishops were not suggesting that the preferential option was a matter reserved for religious communities. The whole Church, they believed, was called upon to make such an option. Indeed, that call comes to us by means of our baptism and our immersion into the mystery of Jesus’ life, death and resurrection.

Nevertheless, a strong case can be made that just as the vows of poverty, chastity and obedience have specified for centuries a particular way of living out one’s baptismal commitment, so also a promise to make and to live the preferential option for the poor would specify Christian existence in a way that speaks to the men and women of our time. By defining religious life in terms of the preferential option for the poor, one would be stating unequivocally and positively what is specifically evangelical about religious life in the Church.

Consecrated life is *evangelical*, not because it renounces wealth, or marriage, or the liberty to determine one’s own future, but because it associates a person unambiguously with Jesus and the God whom he knew and worshipped. Consecrated life is fully and properly *evangelical* when it becomes a matter of living out a consistent and public solidarity with men and women who hunger and thirst for justice, just as Jesus did.

It would be misleading to assert that at the center of Jesus' life lay the universal search for the holy and transcendent, or that Jesus' primary concern was to help men and women to know and experience God. Many of the people who followed Jesus were already religious; they knew and loved God through the practice of their Jewish faith. Jesus' attention was fixed on the *kingdom of God*, the Jewish meta-narrative of salvation history; that is what he preached. To desire the kingdom of God was to anticipate the divine action through which the world would be transformed. Those on the top would suddenly find themselves on the bottom (Luke 1:52). Indeed, the kingdom of God would belong to the poor (Luke 6:20).

To make the preferential option for the poor the content of a religious promise would spell out the real, everyday consequence of one's consecration to the reign of God. With a little theological imagination, this promise could be explained as translating for today the intention behind the traditional vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. The reformulated promise might also enable religious life to chart a new course for itself by clarifying its mission and defining how it wants to be present in the world today.

Whereas faithful observance of the traditional religious vows often appeared to be essentially a matter between the individual and God, observance of the preferential option for the poor would expose religious to the constant scrutiny of the faithful and the world. It would be impossible to dissociate religious observance from a full immersion in the political, social and economic realities of our time. The imaginary spiritual line sometimes drawn between the cloister and the world would disappear. Committing oneself to living a preferential option for the poor would render the spirituality

underlying religious life an essentially corporate and public matter.

What would happen if at religious profession or final vows, instead of making our vows in front of a religious superior, on in the imaginary presence of the whole heavenly court, the ones receiving the vows for the Church were the poor themselves: street people, homeless people, single mothers on welfare, the poor to be found in many urban parishes, migrant farm workers, and so on? What testimony would we be giving? What high ideals would we be committing ourselves to?

The option for the poor as the content of a religious vow would underline a profound gospel truth, namely, that the Christian search for God takes us to the side and the defense of our victimized neighbor. Those men and women who have already internalized this option seem to have discovered an invigorating consciousness of their religious identity. We should listen to their confirming experience as a sign for our times. The Christian community needs joyful, unambiguous witnesses to the presence of the crucified and risen One in our midst.

According to the curious, paradoxical example and teaching of Jesus in the gospels—where stones rejected by the builders turn out to be the cornerstone—God often becomes present where one least expects to encounter the mystery of the kingdom. Sometimes gently, sometimes prophetically, apostolic religious should always be directing the contemplative attention of the whole Church to those unlikely groups, places and situations where God-in-Christ is to be found. John Paul speaks of “new forms of consecration.” It may be that new religious communities will emerge specifically founded on the option for the poor, communities capable of integrating that option both

theoretically and practically into their way of life. Perhaps the new form of consecrated solidarity will begin with a fresh way of formulating ancient religious promises.

[1995]

## 14.

### **Praying for Vocations and Evangelizing Life**

In anticipation of the thirty-eighth World Day of Prayer for Vocations, John Paul II prepared a message on the theme of “Life as a Vocation.” In its most basic sense, vocation refers to God’s personal calling of each and every human being through the very act of creating us or “calling” us into existence. And as we know, God’s creative activity on our behalf did not cease when we were conceived, or when we were born. The creative love of God is at work within us at every moment of our lives. We shall not be fully created until we are definitively and eternally one with God and all of redeemed humanity.

Every life, then, is almost by definition a vocation; and if there is vocation—calling—then there must be mission, since vocation and mission are two sides of the same theological coin. The Pope quotes the opening of paragraph 19 of the Second Vatican Council’s Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World:

The outstanding feature of human dignity is that human beings have been called to communion with God. From its very first moment a human being is invited to encounter God. It exists solely because it is continually kept in being by the love of the God who created it out of love, and it cannot live fully and truly unless it freely acknowledges that love and commits itself to its creator.

In other words, corresponding to the basic vocation which has been woven into our existence there is an equally basic mission to love God with all our heart, all our soul, and all our strength (Deut 6:4); our mission (in the words of Ignatius Loyola) is “to praise, reverence, and serve God our Lord.”

While there is a basic or universal vocation that derives from existence itself, Christian baptism sharpens our understanding of divine calling considerably and it enables us to see with the clarity of the Gospel what our mission is as followers of Jesus. Perhaps no religious experience is so powerful, so laden with consequences, as knowing from the depths of our souls that we have been called by God for a great purpose. “To consider life as a vocation,” the Holy Father writes, “encourages interior freedom . . . [and] the rejection of a notion of existence that is passive, boring, and banal.” If life is a calling, then our vocation is to live it.

The realization that we have been called sets the human heart free. It enables us to take great risks, to make great promises, and to envision (with the seer of Revelation) new heavens and a new earth. The experience of being called gives rise to a liberating confidence in the power of God. The vocation of a Christian—someone who has died and risen with Jesus—is to put on the mind of Christ. It is to embody for our time the values of the Gospel. Each of us in his or her own ways, whether married or single, whether religious or ordained, lives out in distinctive fashion the message of Jesus and the liberating mystery of his dying and rising.

### **The vocation of a community**

I believe that the Holy Father’s approach to vocation can be broadened. Not only do individuals have vocations, but so also do institutions. Or to state the idea a little differently, God also calls communities into existence. Thus not simply individual men and women, but humanity itself has received a vocation together with a corresponding mission. The human race has been called from the dawn of history to be the people of God.



Israel, of course, regarded itself as specially called and loved by God, even to the point of taking upon itself the designation “child” or “beloved son” of God. And Israel’s mission was sometimes conceived as one of exemplifying in its corporate life the moral wisdom, justice, peace, and holiness that come from knowing, loving, and serving God. In the richly hopeful vision of Isaiah, for instance, Israel would serve as the guiding star for the nations of the earth.

In the wonderfully prophetic vision of Jesus, a renewed Israel would bear God’s offer of salvation to the world. The Spirit which called the Church into being was the same Spirit which brought the world into existence and had reached into the life of Abraham in order to create a people who would be bearers of God’s promise. The sense of having been called to be a people who are bearers of the divine promise leads to a freedom that empowers us for mission. In a word, we have been called, together, to be both light of the world and salt of the earth.

In Israel’s self-understanding as the people chosen to be a revelation of God’s saving love for the world the Church discovered its own essence as sacrament of salvation. For the Church is the place where peoples of every culture, language and ethnic group can see and touch the mysterious oneness of God with the human race, as Vatican II stated in the well-known opening paragraph of The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church. Because we are creatures of flesh and blood, inner realities need to be made visible and tangible. Words have to be enfolded, if people are going to embrace them with their hearts and put them into practice. And so by analogy, religious communities and those living the sacrament of orders provide for the Church what the Church provides for the world: a sign,

sacrament, or enfleshing of God's creative plan for human salvation. Their vocation is to be living, compelling expressions of fidelity, hope, freedom, and love.

### **Praying for vocations**

Given such understandings of vocation—life as a vocation, and communities as manifestations of divine calling—what are we asking when we pray for vocations?

All of us have prayed at one time or another for an increase of “vocations” to religious life and ordained ministry, and we have also prayed for the strengthening of Christian marriages. It is hard to imagine that there could be an abundance of vocations in the traditional sense without the supportive, faith-filled soil of Christian families. But it is just as hard to imagine a bright future for the Church without Christian couples earnestly living out their baptismal commitment. To pray for vocations, therefore, is simultaneously to pray and to work for the strengthening and renewal of Christian family life. For this reason the Pope could write:

[W]e need a unified effort of the whole Christian community to “re-evangelise life.” For this fundamental pastoral effort, there has to be the witness of men and women who show the fruitfulness of an existence that has its source in God, that has its strength in its docility to the workings of the Spirit, that has its guarantee of the authentic meaning of daily toil in its communion with Christ and the Church. Within the Christian community, each person must discover his or her own personal vocation and respond to it with generosity. Every life is a vocation, and every believer is invited to cooperate in the building up of the Church.”

That there should be more vocations is not just another intention one adds to one's prayers. The Spirit, after all, is hardly unwilling to call men and women to deeper holiness or

union with God; and the Spirit is by no means unwilling to draw people to ministry and religious life. But the prayer for vocations is truly implicit in every prayer we make. And the reason is that those who have opened themselves to God and who are constantly nurturing and developing their mindfulness of God's presence make this world a more spirit-filled place. They increase the likelihood that others will learn how to be attentive to God's word and respond to it.

Every time we utter the words "Thy will be done," are we not expressing our desire that all human beings should become conscious of their vocation? Are we not asking God to open the hearts of every single human being to the wonderful truth that each of us has a role to play in the drama of the world's salvation? The more sensitive each of us becomes to the world's need for reconciliation, justice, and peace—humanity's need for redemption—the more conscious we become of the urgency and necessity of voices that will announce God's liberating word. The deeper our compassion for others, the more steadily and insistently will our hearts implore the Spirit to send laborers to harvest or rescue human lives. For how can we have compassion without a corresponding desire—a cry of the heart—that something should be done to alleviate human misery, poverty, and grief?

In the case of some people, compassion for their brothers and sisters will lead them to ask "Is it I, Lord?" or even to say, "Here I am, Lord; send me." Others, filled with the same compassion, will encourage those whom they consider more appropriately gifted to open themselves to the Spirit's prompting, in keeping with Paul's wonderfully evangelical logic: "But how can they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how can they believe in him of whom they have

not heard? And how can they hear without someone to preach? And how can people preach unless they are sent?" (Rom 10:14-15) The word of God, contemplatively grasped and vigorously practiced, will always incite some men and women to risk everything for the supreme consolation of being ministers of the Gospel for others.

### **The need for Christian extremists**

A good number of the Church's saints exhibited at some stage in their ascent to holiness what probably strikes many of us today as indications of fanaticism. Their legendary fasts or corporal penances, their heroic love for the poor or the sick, their zany devotions, or their perilous contact with victims of plague or leprosy, can disconcert many who read the lives of the saints. Granted that the line between heroism and recklessness is sometimes paper-thin, their stories frequently induce some feelings of guilt; we simply do not measure up to the high moral or religious standard they set.

Needless to say, such champions of the interior life never regarded themselves as chosen by God to set standards for others. They would not have wanted their neighbors and friends to be drawing unwelcome comparisons or feeling inadequate on their account. Nevertheless, the presence of spiritual extremists both in the Christian tradition and in the Church today is an important reminder of just how great a challenge the Gospel sets before us and what power lies within it for transforming human lives. Hermits, ascetics, martyrs, pilgrims, mystics, missionaries, servants: they are the ones who (in Jesus' intriguing metaphor) have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of God. They have undertaken what many in their culture or in their society would have considered to be utter nonsense. Even their fellow believers may have found

their actions imprudent, even foolhardy. Still, the fact that they embraced the Gospel so completely (and on occasion so literally), causes the rest of us to think. What is the “priceless pearl” of my life? For what “field” would I sell everything I own in order to buy it?

The Church needs extremists; or should we call them Christian revolutionaries? We may not always agree with what such people say or do, but their zeal for the story of Jesus and the intensity of their commitment to the people of God summon the rest of us to examine the status of our own promises, our own prayerfulness, our own desires, and our own participation in the life of the Church. Although I do not look upon religious, priests, and deacons as extremists, I have to wonder whether I would have been led to contemplate ministry or religious life unless I had read about some of the extreme examples of Christian witness. I wonder, too, whether my praying for vocations does not contain within it a semi-conscious desire that the Spirit enkindle in other hearts the selfless zeal I so admired in some of the Church’s heroes.

Augustine recounts the story of what he and his friends experienced when they read about the zeal of those Christians who had abandoned the world and retreated to monasteries and caves in the Egyptian desert, and Ignatius Loyola narrates how his imagination was challenged by the deeds of Dominic and Francis. Paul was certainly caught off-guard by the extreme devotion to Jesus he had encountered among the first Christians. A list of examples like these would be virtually endless. Yet the point remains. To pray for vocations is to keep the memory of our saints alive and fresh. Especially it is to meditate on the example set by heroic Christian witnesses in our own time: the martyrs for justice, the lovers of God’s poor and energetic

bearers of God's promise. For these are the men and women who have helped us to see why life itself is a vocation. Their lives furnish us with some idea of the great capacity for solidarity that lies within each and every one of God's children.

[2001]

## 15.

### **Holiness as Vocation:**

Papal message for the 39<sup>th</sup> World Day of Prayer for Vocations

The gospel reading for the Fourth Sunday of Easter—the day designated this year as the world day of prayer for vocations—is taken from John 10. It is the text that presents Jesus as the Good Shepherd: the one whose voice the sheep recognize, the one ready to lay down his life in order to protect his sheep from harm. While the Gospel passage is certainly meaningful to those who exercise pastoral ministry in the Church, it actually does have a wider relevance. Shepherd and sheep, after all, are simply metaphors for Jesus and his people, and the great love each has for the other. Jesus is ready to give his life up for his people, and his people follow him—they recognize his voice—because they know instinctively the depth of his fidelity and affection. The text becomes most alive when we find ourselves noticing our heart's desire to hear Jesus' voice and to be with him, and *at the same time* our eagerness to hear the voice of his people and wanting to be with them. These are not two loves, but one. To experience oneself as both sheep and shepherd simultaneously is to grasp a mystery that lies at the heart both of ordained ministry and religious consecration.

#### **The content of the message**

The papal message reminds us that the vocation to holiness is not exclusive to religious and to those in ordained ministry. By virtue of our baptismal immersion into the life of the Spirit, all of us are being called constantly to an existence which is ever more evangelical, selfless and courageous, an existence grounded in ever deeper communion with God. Without

Christian family life, one would be hard pressed to imagine where religious and ministerial vocations would come from! Thus the Pope writes: “Families are called to play a decisive role for the future of vocations in the Church. The holiness of marital love, the harmony of family life, the spirit of faith with which the problems of daily life are confronted, openness towards others, especially towards the poorest, and participation in the life of the Christian community form the proper environment for their children to listen to the divine call and make a generous response.” If we want to encourage vocations, the Pope is telling us, then Christian communities everywhere have to be places where people can learn about the human relationship to the mystery of God. There they can be taught how to carry on a lifelong conversation with the divine mystery that is both their origin and their destiny. Christian communities—families, parishes, and religious houses—above all have to be “schools of prayer.”

In terms of its structure, this year’s message follows a familiar pattern. Its focal points are Trinitarian, ecclesiological, Christological, and Marian. The mystery of the Trinity lies behind every aspect of Christian existence; the Church exists as the “home of holiness” and the place where each of us discovers what God wants of us; Jesus’ life provides the model of ministerial service and religious observance; and Mary remains for us the paradigmatic witness of vocational response. Of course, in her maternal love for God’s people, the Church also sees Mary as a model of pastoral care. Some years ago, my camera was nearly confiscated by a zealous custodian in an old colonial church in the Peruvian city of Cuzco after I had photographed *La divina pastora de las almas*—a painting of Mary as the “divine shepherdess of souls.” To behold Mary seated near a tree in the countryside and surrounded by sheep



was for me an invitation to think afresh about the message of John 10.

### **The distinctiveness of religious and priestly vocations**

The Pope's message describes ministerial and religious vocations as "privileged paths towards the fullness of spiritual life," yet the Holy Father is aware of the fact that others outside these states of life bear eloquent witness to "the absolute primacy of God" precisely because every Christian calling is a vocation to holiness. For this reason I prefer to use the word "distinctive" rather than "special" in describing vocations. The vocation of every Christian is special, since it is the risen Lord who calls us; but not every calling is the same.

The vocation to ordained ministry, the Pope suggests, invites a person to a "privileged intimacy" with Jesus, mirroring the way that the apostles were his closest companions. It is not clear, however, what the nature of such intimacy means. Not all of Jesus' disciples were sent out on mission; some may have been too old, or too young, or infirm, or (in the case of parents with children) happily fulfilling their God-given responsibilities. Yet the possibility for intimacy with Jesus was not thereby diminished, any more than ours is even though we have come on the scene two millennia later. In the Gospel, closeness to Jesus was predicated upon one's readiness to do God's will, a closeness that would go beyond even the most venerable family ties (Mark 3:34-35). Closeness to Jesus was dependent upon a person's faith, and apparently not all of the apostles were equal on this score.

Like the vocation to religious life, the vocation to ordained ministry has to be properly situated within the universal call to holiness addressed to all of us in the Church. The failure to do so runs the risk of creating two classes of Christians, the zealous

and the not-so-zealous. The human reality is, of course, that not everyone makes God absolutely primary in his or her life all the time. Not every Christian approaches the practice of religion with the same degree of seriousness. Indeed, not everyone who aspires to a perfect following of Jesus winds up in a religious community. And it should come as no surprise that even in religious life and ordained ministry, not all pursue their vocations with the same dedication and consistency of vision. It is not the state of life as such but the love of God—the theological virtue of charity—that determines the shape of perfection. This is exactly what Vatican II said in the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church:

Thus it is evident to everyone, that all the faithful of Christ of whatever rank or status, are called to the fullness of the Christian life and to the perfection of charity . . . In the various classes and differing duties of life, one and the same holiness is cultivated by all (nos. 40 and 41).

Whenever holy orders and the consecrated life are juxtaposed in terms of ministerial function, the lines that distinguish each vocational choice are fairly clear, except in those cases when religious are also ordained. But whenever these forms of Christian existence are looked at in terms of a realized holiness that is simultaneously apostolic and contemplative, the defining lines are more difficult to locate. The supporting spiritualities may not be identical, but the markers of holiness reveal how much they have in common.

### **What is so inviting about these vocations?**

We shall never “sell” young people on the importance of religious life or ordained ministry on the basis of theological arguments about the relative merits of the different states of life. The weight of practice over theory underscores why family life

is so utterly important in awakening young people to vocational awareness and vocational possibilities. First and foremost, we have been called to holiness, but holiness is not going to be attractive or aesthetically appealing unless we have been helped by those closest to us in developing a sensitivity towards things of the Spirit. Holiness is something one has to feel, touch and handle, as it were. A person's attraction to a religious community or to ordained ministry is practically always connected to the example of dedicated religious and the energetic witness of those who are ordained.

The Pope notes four elements with respect to “every vocation” (though in this case I believe he means vocations to consecrated life and ordained ministry) that account for why others would find the way of life inviting. People of vocation demonstrate (1) a love for contemplation, (2) joy in serving others, (3) single-heartedness for the kingdom of God—chastity—which is energizing and liberating, and (4) a generous devotion to the work entrusted to us. He hopes, too, that bishops and priests will exemplify the “inspiring adventure” which awaits those who choose to live completely for God and for others.

Theologically, I am inclined to think of religious life on the model of a sacrament. That is, the life of the vows is a sacramental expression, a living embodiment of the kind of life to which Jesus invited *all* who would listen to him. Religious life furnishes the people of God with a concrete illustration of what the Gospel means. It represents a condensing or intensification of the most important features of Jesus' life and teaching: his prayerful dedication to the will of God, his trust in the God of the prophets and psalms, his passionate engagement

with the people of Israel, his purity of heart, his zeal for the kingdom.

Religious life exists primarily for the Church, not for the spiritual comfort or the opportunity for interior growth of individual religious. To be sure, the consecrated life can be very fulfilling, and within it one does mature spiritually; but its prayerful impulse is fundamentally outward, towards the whole community of believers, even when the external form of a particular community is strictly contemplative. In other words, religious life at its healthiest displays in a highly condensed way what all people of God are striving for day by day. It is a school of compassion, of understanding, and of faith. It is a place where one practices forgiveness, charity, and advocacy of the poor and defenseless, and where one has experienced, reflected upon and shared the liberating love of God.

I have occasionally heard people dismiss the counsel of religious and priests because they are presumed to know nothing about some of the painful realities of married life, and there may be an element of truth here. Yet there is not a priest or religious I know of who could not attest to hard lessons learned on the basis of having wrestled with the same human nature. The practice of love and fidelity does not come more easily to religious and to clergy because they are single. Rather, the school of charity is as demanding for us as it is for anybody else. Seasoned religious and experienced pastors alike know a great deal more about the human heart than some give us credit for. As Thomas Merton observed almost fifty years ago in his "Notes for a Philosophy of Solitude," the outer desert and the inner desert come together in religious life.

The consecrated life can offer a lot of wisdom to the rest of the Church about how to live the Gospel with integrity. Besides,

to argue that one needs to be married to understand what couples go through would logically have to be stretched to include prisoners, immigrants, the dying, the depressed, the mentally ill, the sexually abused, the recovering alcoholic, and so on. Pushed to the limit we would then be forced to say that none of us could ever understand anyone else because we can never step into the shoes of the other person. Becoming the other person, however, is one way of describing what happens in the dynamics of the consecrated life. Religious discover the Adam that we all carry inside, as well as the Christ we are gradually changing into.

### **The life of vocation as inspiring adventure**

In section 3 of his message, John Paul II refers to the “inspiring adventure reserved for those who, in the footsteps of the Divine Master, choose to belong completely to God and offer themselves so that every person may have life and have it to the full.” The allusion here is, of course, to the Gospel text about the Good Shepherd (John 10:10), and the Pope has bishops and priests in mind at this point. One of the most obvious features about the image of a shepherd is that it forces us to think of the sheep. Or to state the idea a little differently, one of the most obvious characteristics of Jesus in the Gospel is that his being Son of God is relational. The Word is made flesh *for us*, since everything that happens in the Gospel story is “for us and for our salvation,” as the Creed says. In other words, Jesus stands with his people.

Now, the Pope does not elaborate upon what the inspiring adventure could be, but living for others must surely be part of what he has in mind, because that is the sense of the text from John’s Gospel. The adventure begins as men and women permit us to enter their lives and share with us their inmost selves. The

adventure unfolds as our awareness deepens of the sacredness that pervades every human life. The adventure becomes richly textured as men and women keep asking for our prayers and our souls become home to countless human concerns. If one truly loves people—wants to accompany them and share life with them, even to the point of sharing their crucifixions,— then the consecrated life and ordained ministry are, as the Pope says, privileged paths and an adventure which is bound to inspire others.

[2002]

## 16.

### **We Never Stop Growing**

The reasons why someone enters a religious community may not be the same reasons why, as the years go by, the person remains in it. I cannot help but think of Jesus' first disciples, how they responded to his invitation and set out so enthusiastically without knowing everything that lay ahead; how they gradually learned that their initial understanding of the kingdom of God had to be stretched in order to take into account rejection, humiliation, betrayal, and death; and how their experience of Easter inspired them to take a giant leap of faith from the villages and towns of Galilee into the great cities of the Empire and beyond.

At one point during the course of his ministry, when many of his followers had started to find his teaching problematic, Jesus asked the Twelve, "Do you also want to leave?" (John 6:67) They remained, of course. And the reason they gave was as profound as it was brief: "Lord, to whom shall we go? Your words are words of eternal life." The question "To whom shall we go?" could inadvertently be interpreted to mean that the Twelve had agreed to stay with Jesus simply because they were too dull to think of anything better to do with their lives, if it were not for the declaration that follows.

The gospels leave to our imaginations just how long it took the disciples to realize that Jesus was able to teach the words of eternal life because he was the word of eternal life. The process of growing awareness and deepening faith on the part of the disciples is something to which religious men and women can readily relate. The Twelve stayed with Jesus out of commitment

and faith, not because they had colorless imaginations and sluggish hearts.

### **Why do they join?**

Some people join a religious community because they have been attracted to the particular work of that community in hospitals, schools, foreign missions, houses of prayer, serving the poorest of the poor, and so on. They may indeed spend the whole of their religious lives deeply engaged by the major work of their institute, with a blessed sense of fulfillment and peace. Nevertheless, it occasionally happens that the work one envisions or undertakes at the outset is not the work that one eventually does. And this occurs, not because of a mere change of assignment or the emergence of a new apostolic need, but because one becomes more conscious of the hand of God in one's own life. The work of God little by little reveals itself as wider and deeper than the particular projects or works undertaken by religious communities.

Coming to know the mystery of God and how God is ever at work in human lives is the real project of a lifetime. There are no shortcuts to the graced vision that finds God readily in all things and rejoices each day in the wonders of God's love. Jesus' warning "What does anyone gain by winning the whole world at the cost of his life?" (Mark 8:36) assumes a curious application in the case of religious. We are not expected to set about winning the world for the gospel at the expense of our own union with the mystery of God. Saint Paul made a similar point when he wrote to the Corinthians: "I may have faith enough to move mountains . . . I may give all I possess to the needy, I may give my body to be burnt, but if I have no love, I gain nothing by it" (1 Cor 13:2-3)



While some joined their religious communities on the basis of work and mission, others joined because they were drawn by the holiness and zeal of one or more of its members. Whenever religious men and women give evidence of having discovered the pearl of great price, their very humanity becomes immensely challenging and appealing, especially for young people trying to figure out what to make of their own lives. The human being fully alive not only glorifies God; the man or woman who is fully alive demonstrates to the rest of us the beauty and mystery of which we too are capable. To paraphrase St. Irenaeus, a man or woman fully alive brings glory to the whole human race. Eventually, every religious should be able to identify with the discovery of the Samaritan villagers: “It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Savior of the world” (John 4:42).

If in the beginning one was struck by the example or witness of individual religious, as time goes on the person discovers that Presence in their own hearts which fashions each of us ever more closely in the image of Christ. Religious men and women experience the power of the Spirit within themselves, a power that over time produces in them the same features of freedom, generosity, service, and faith that they had first spotted in someone else. In time one becomes what one admires and loves.

### **Why do they stay?**

It is relatively easy, then, to identify reasons why men and women enter religious life. The reasons why they remain may be far less obvious. Vocational vision is hard to sustain over a long period of time, and even when one does manage to sustain it the initial glow tends to fade. Human life has its stages. Thus

the way we find God at one point in our lives is not likely to be the way we encounter God later. A religious vocation, insofar as it is the unfolding of a desire to follow Jesus, embraces the whole world. Through the vows one joins Jesus in his mission—a mission which of its nature extends to all humanity. Unfortunately, the world cannot be healed in one person's lifetime, it cannot be instructed in a single lifetime, and it cannot be brought back to God by a single life.

The parables of Jesus make use of the images of seed and harvest, the idea being that between the sowing and the reaping there is a long interval; not until the end of the age will we ever get a full picture of the unfolding of God's redemptive plan (Matt 13:39-40). We are going to die without seeing our heart's central desire realized. The Spirit, we confidently believe, will raise up others after us who will want to follow Jesus as totally and energetically as the Twelve did. No matter what we once imagined we might one day accomplish with and for Christ, we realize that in the end the work of redemption is not in our hands. By ourselves we cannot radically change the world. The only thing we can do in the time allotted to us is to join Jesus in the long historical process of the world's being transformed, or redeemed, or set free from darkness and sin. Coming to this insight is intellectually easy, but living with it and experiencing its truth can tax our prayer and our patience.

What sustains a religious vocation, it seems to me, is that men and women in religious life actually experience God at work in themselves and in the world. This experience, furthermore, becomes so pervasive and runs so deep that it creates a distinctive way of being human. Years of religious practice, of attempting to follow Jesus through the observance of the vows, of devoting time and energy to prayer and

contemplation, and of reaching out to others in tireless service have a lasting effect on our nature and impress themselves on our deepest personhood.

Yet an integral part of this lifelong encounter with the mystery of God is the discovery of our common humanity. The more time one spends in the company of God, the more one grasps how much he or she shares the human condition. One never lives apart from the wider human experience, but within it. Even Christian hermits will testify to this important lesson. In other words, it belongs to the essence of religious life to create and foster a far-reaching solidarity with all men and women. We share their history; their spiritual fortunes are inextricably bound up with ours. The discovery of God eventually leads to a mindfulness of the world. Or to state the matter with a bit more spiritual precision, to know God is to discover the depth of God's love for the world.

An attentiveness to the world as loved by God, an attentiveness which is paradoxically both spontaneous and enduring, is one of the most remarkable features of the consciousness of men and women in religious life. What sustains them in their calling, in other words, is their love for God's people and the experience which religious life makes available of feeling intensely and joyously the life of the people of God. This holds true for those who belong to contemplative communities as much as for those who entered active ones.

### **Facing the future**

Standing on the threshold of a millennium, it is tempting to speculate about the future of Christian religious life and even of the Church itself. Besides, we desperately need visionaries to help us articulate our hopes and to urge upon us an abiding confidence that the risen Jesus always walks ahead of us. I

suspect that religious life will take on an increasingly contemplative stamp, that it will dip more and more into the spiritual and ascetical traditions of the other major world religions, and that as some institutes die there will be many creative efforts to raise up new ones. Given the severe strains on the earth's resources and the longing so many have for a more equitable distribution of them, no form of religious life can hope to survive that fails to grasp the connection between faith and justice. Yet my eyes, at least, cannot see much beyond where we are today. That religious life is a sacrament of solidarity, however, I have no doubt. Its future is going to depend upon how well it speaks to the deepest spiritual aspirations and practical idealism of young men and women. That solidarity, concretely lived and lovingly practiced across the length and breadth of a lifetime, is a major aspiration of men and women today—a sign of our times—is something I sincerely believe. At least I can say that while this may not have been the sort of thinking which led me to enter religious life, the experience of solidarity as a dimension of my experience of God has confirmed that initial decision over and over again.

[2000]

## 17.

### **“But the laborers are few”**

Why, we may ask, should we have to pray for vocations? After all, doesn't God already know how much the Church needs them? Doesn't God realize that the Church depends upon ministers of the gospel for its spiritual vitality, even for its very survival? Perhaps the need to pray earnestly for vocations simply provides an occasion for the rest of us to sensitize ourselves to the role each Christian plays in inspiring others to special forms of service to the believing community.

#### **Preparing the Lord's way**

The Gospel of Luke tells us twice, within the space of several verses, that Jesus sent messengers “ahead of him,” to prepare the way for his arrival. This may have been Jesus' customary practice. Luke writes: “When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem. *And he sent messengers ahead of him*”(Luke 9:51-52). And again: “After this the Lord appointed seventy others *and sent them on ahead of him* in pairs to every town and place where he himself intended to go” (Luke 10:1).

Both of these passages put us in mind of a text, drawn from the prophet Malachi, which Jesus applied to John the Baptist, for the Baptist likewise had been sent ahead to prepare the way:

“See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,  
who will prepare your way before you.”

(Luke 7:27)

The idea of preparing the way for the coming of the Lord lies the heart of all Christian ministry. Indeed, it is also central to the very notion of discipleship. The disciple is one who

prepares “the Lord’s way” by pointing to the one who is yet to come. The disciple points to “the one to come” by word and by deed, by faith and by practice, by the whole of his or her life. In fact, our love and service, our faithfulness and hope, our steadiness in confessing and living out what we deeply believe, are exactly the elements which make up “the way” of the Lord. For how else could the Lord continually enter our world, if not through the lives of men and women of faith? Fidelity to the gospel in day-to-day living provides powerful and eloquent testimony to God’s presence in human history.

Yet while preparing the Lord’s way is central to discipleship, it is also true that the more explicit proclamation of the gospel depends for all sorts of practical reasons upon people who have visibly and publicly dedicated their lives to the service of God’s word. In every generation, the Spirit has raised up voices who will carry the message of faith to places where it has not been heard before. The Spirit of Jesus continually raises up men and women who will confirm their brothers and sisters as they endeavor to bear everyday witness to the gospel. In other words, the Spirit awakens certain individuals to a different sort of desire: a desire to live completely for others and to love them, a desire running so deep and so strong that one dare not resist it and ever hope to remain at peace. No wonder Paul could cry, “and woe to me if I do not proclaim the gospel!” (1 Cor 9:16)

People whom the Spirit awakens to this desire know that the gift of inner freedom counts above absolutely everything. They can feel and taste the liberating power of the gospel. They sense in their souls that to serve the gospel in complete peace and freedom is the most authentic way for them to live. They realize that they can set no conditions upon their response; it

must be total. To the words, “I will follow you, Lord; *but . . .*” (Luke 9:61), the Lord will always respond, “. . . *but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God*” (Luke 9:60). The urgency of proclaiming the good news to a broken world unseats every other obligation and attachment. Those who have been schooled about freedom through constantly trying to live according to the Spirit will understand the necessity of laying aside everything in order to follow the Lord wherever he goes.

### **“Ask the Lord of the harvest”**

Jesus’ words to those he sent ahead of him have often set the stage for a reflection on the prayer for vocations:

He said to them, “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.” (Luke 10:2)

From the very beginning the Christian community was aware that it needed more “laborers”: teachers, evangelists, prophets, leaders, apostles. The harvest, we presume, consists of those men and women disposed to respond to the good news about the kingdom of God. The imagery of harvest time strikes a note of expectation and optimism. The world stands waiting to receive what Jesus, and his messengers, are ready to share.

The text seems to imply that some are already laboring in the field, but that their hard work cannot do justice to the richness before them. Why then should the Lord of the harvest even have to be asked to send additional workers into his fields? Is it not to his advantage to reap as much as possible?

As a matter of fact, in the gospel passage from Luke, Jesus had just appointed an additional seventy disciples to go ahead of him. As the Lord of the harvest, he is anticipating the community’s prayer and is already sending out others besides

the Twelve to announce that “the kingdom of God has come near” (Luke 10:9). Their message was not merely a single, bare-boned piece of news, but a full-bodied teaching about the reign of God in this world. The phrase *kingdom of God* is gospel shorthand, a kerygmatic formula that points us to a much longer and fuller story that the messengers undoubtedly shared. Needless to say, the laborers themselves are hardly responsible for the abundance before them. We recall the words of Jesus in the fourth gospel:

Do you not say, “Four months more, then comes the harvest?” But I tell you, look around you, and see how the fields are ripe for harvesting. . . I sent you to reap that for which you did not labor. Others have labored, and you have entered into their labor. (John 4:35, 38)

The woman at the well with whom Jesus had been speaking in the previous scene, and the people of her village, represent the fields waiting to be harvested. They are already disposed to hear the truth of God’s word, if only someone would bring it to them.

If we connect the prayer for vocations to these texts, then it becomes evident that the community is not asking the Lord for something that he is not already prepared to bestow. In Luke’s gospel, Jesus sends out the additional seventy disciples ahead of him. In John’s gospel, we are left wondering about how much of the harvest might be lost, not because workers have not been sent, but because the workers appear to have overlooked a whole group of people. The disciples had not realized how much even the despised Samaritans were ripe for the word.

### **Prayer for vocations as prayer for the Church**

In praying that the Spirit raise up men and women who will feel themselves especially called to preach the gospel, just as



the first disciples were, the Church is actually asking the Spirit to renew and transform the Christian community itself. For the issue is never whether God is willing to give, but whether we are disposed to receive. Are we ready to welcome the kind of vocations that the Spirit wants to send us? Does each of us take his or her practice of Christian faith with such seriousness that our lives offer clear and unambiguous witness to the values and beliefs we profess? Are our communities, whether families, parishes or religious communities, attractive signs of freedom, commitment, service, love and evangelical risk? Does following Christ make a real difference? In short, each Christian formulates the prayer for more workers above all by the way that he or she lives and acts. Each Christian contributes to the religious climate which both challenges and excites people to listen to the Spirit, for the Spirit might be drawing them to drop everything and follow Jesus.

Each of us has a part to play in awakening others, especially young Christians, to a desire to do something great for the kingdom of God. That the Spirit implants such desires is beyond doubt. But arousing young men and women to notice and trust that desire normally requires the example, the encouragement and the testimony of parents, teachers, friends, pastors and others who are fiercely, selflessly committed to building the human community.

In a paradoxical way, arousing people to notice the desire to abandon everything for the sake of the gospel, provided the Spirit has instilled such desire within them, also depends upon the poor and the outcast. Perhaps the woman at the well, in her need, awakened Jesus to the rich possibilities that were lying even in Samaritan territory. Perhaps it was the plight of the tax-collectors, the demon-possessed, the landless poor, the

unrighteous, the exploited widows, the beggars and paralytics, the prostitutes and unemployed day-laborers, and so on, that stirred the heart and soul of Jesus. What faces, what people did he see in front of him when he proclaimed the good news about God's coming kingdom? Few things work so powerfully to pull our imaginations toward the kingdom of God as an immediate, personal encounter with people forced to survive at the margins of society by poverty, injustice, ignorance, violence or despair. The poor have a special role to play in awakening the rest of us to the things of the Spirit.

### **The Spirit already knows what the Church needs**

The prayer for vocations is not a demand. Obviously, we cannot force the Spirit to raise up for us ministers of the gospel. Yet the fact is that many people equate vocations with the call to priesthood and religious life in their present forms. They are then forced to conclude that, given the tremendous drop in the numbers of priests and religious, the Spirit has not been answering the Church's prayer.

While I believe we should not underestimate the importance of these traditional vocational expressions to the well-being of the Christian community, neither should we overestimate their importance. But is this not precisely what happens when we overlook the generosity, the enthusiasm, the faith and the commitment of those people who want to serve the world and the Christian community, although not in the traditional vocational forms? Many people feel themselves called, but the customary forms for realizing and expressing this call do not excite them. Can we find ways of encouraging their faith and their desire to serve the people of God?

In his homily at the Mass that opened the 1994 Synod on religious life, John Paul II remarked on "the marvelous

flowering in recent years of secular institutes and societies of apostolic life, which are doing so much good in the church.” He called attention to “the birth of new forms of consecration, particularly inside the ecclesial movements and associations” and he noted the efforts to express the heart of religious life “in ways adapted to the present culture.”

In light of the Pope’s remarks, one might ask whether this “marvelous flowering” and this “birth of new forms of consecration” are not truly signs of the times. That is, perhaps such religious movement is nothing less than the Spirit’s way of preparing us for new forms of vocation and ministry in the Church. Why not? After all, there was nothing in the Pope’s words to suggest that adaptation to present-day culture implies a begrudging acceptance of the conditions and experiences of life at the end of the twentieth century. Rather, adaptation is an indication of imagination and vitality.

The wonderful ferment or activity to which John Paul called attention may be a harbinger of something new. If the Spirit is already moving among us, leading and inspiring men and women to want to *do* something for the Church (through active engagement or mission) and to *be* something for the world (through the habit of viewing the world contemplatively, with eyes used to noticing God), then we must be careful about presuming that our prayer for vocations is not being answered. God may be answering our prayer (why would the Lord of the harvest refuse to send more laborers?) in ways that we have not adequately recognized. The answer we are being given might not be the answer we were expecting, or even wanting; but it might be the answer that the Church today needs.

“But the laborers are few.” This brief text draws us to notice the richness of the harvest, the great thirst among men

and women in every time and place, for the kingdom of God. In effect, these simple words from the gospel reflect a sigh, an awareness of great promise, even a prayer uttered by someone with an urgent sense of mission. It is not complaint that echoes in these words but desire and love: burning desire to share the word of God, and great love for the people waiting to hear it.

The prayer for vocations starts, then, with an experience of the world. One contemplates the world, rich with possibility and promise, hungry for the things of the Spirit, and loves it. But the harvest master has anticipated our prayer. Already, into fields ripe for harvesting, men and women have been sent. They work among us in all sorts of ways, ministering and bearing witness. They are living words of gospel truth. Their lives are joyful examples of baptismal consecration. Can we see in them the answer to our prayer? Can we accept them as the Spirit's gift to the Church? Can we recognize in the changing face of mission and vocation the abiding presence of the Spirit of Jesus? This is something we need to consider carefully.

[1995]

## 18.

### **New Vocations for a New World**

One of the hazards of being recognized as a religious or a priest is that we sometimes become ready targets for people on the lookout for a sympathetic ear. In airports, bus terminals and train stations, it is difficult to escape public notice and nearly impossible to prevent a determined person from cornering us.

Occasionally, for a priest, the ostensible issue is confession. The person says that he or she wants to make a confession. The real issue, however, often turns out to be one of loneliness, psychological disorder or social dysfunction. As caring, religious people, we sincerely want to be of assistance to anyone who needs us; openness to the people of God, after all, is the central part of our calling. Nevertheless, our very goodness and visibility can lead to our being trapped by people whose needs are not really spiritual and who in the end are probably not going to benefit from anything we have to offer about the life of faith. The encounter can be frustrating and time consuming; the prayer we make afterwards is likely to be one of surrender to divine providence.

Frequently, after Mass, someone in church will ask to talk with me. On occasion, from the facial expression and tone of voice, I sense with a shudder of resignation that the matter is not going to be about arranging a baptism or securing legal assistance for an immigration issue, not about discerning a vocation or about some point raised in the homily, not about a serious domestic problem or the need for encouragement in a job search. Instead I am about to learn that the person is under a doctor's care and suffering emotional distress, and has perhaps

decided to discontinue her prescribed medication and cast her care upon the Lord; or that he is bothered that we do not preach more about the portents described in the book of Revelation. What a welcome surprise, then, when things turn out otherwise!

One weekday morning several summers ago I noticed an older man, neatly dressed in a dark suit, kneeling in the back of the church. From his genuflection when he first entered the pew to his reception of Communion, his movements were reverent, almost as if he were bowing in slow motion. Yet his facial expression seemed pained and agitated, and when he asked afterwards if he could talk with me, my dread of being cornered suddenly awakened. I replied that I would not be able to speak with him until the following morning. The next day he was there, wearing the same suit and worried expression.

His concern, it turned out, was that he loved the Mass and that ever since his retirement, hastened by a nervous breakdown, he was more eager than ever to attend as many Masses in a day as he could. In the small town where he had been living, there were simply too few churches, and daily trips to the city were taxing. Words like “obsession” and “neurosis” came rushing through my mind.

Still, the more he spoke, the more I noticed that there was something genuine, something mysterious, in the way he described his prayer life. His piety was so centered on the Eucharist that he often spent entire afternoons on the front steps of locked inner-city churches, feeling himself in deep communion with the sacramentally present Lord inside. It was easy to see that he was never going to find a religious community that would accept him, purely on psychological grounds.

Yet it was also becoming evident, however, that the man had a genuine vocation, a call every bit as true and religious as one would expect to find in convents, monasteries, and religious houses. He had been called, he believed, to a life of prayer. While clearly conscious of his own psychological limitations, he was convinced that God was closer and more real to him than anything in the world. His manner of living was necessarily simple, given his small pension. He fasted assiduously, and he carried with him a small, thick notebook, filled with the names of all those for whom he had promised to pray. I asked him to include mine. He truly belonged to the growing number of inner-city hermits.

The evening before meeting this gentleman I had started reading “New Vocations for a New Europe,” the final document of the Congress on Vocations to the Priesthood and to Consecrated Life in Europe (1998). The man’s description of his interior life made me recall a sentence from the document: “If at one time vocations promotion referred only or mainly to certain vocations, now it must tend ever more towards the promotion of all vocations, because in the Lord’s Church, either we grow together or no one grows” [#13(c)]. What about unconventional vocations, I wondered. Does our responsibility to promote and nurture vocations extend to the unusual ones as well?

Later that day I began recalling other people I had met who, like him, were actually leading religious lives in humble, uncelebrated fashion. Each of them was single, drawn as if by nature itself to sharing what they owned and to living simply, and fully open to God’s will in every circumstance of their lives. Their piety or spirituality was strongly Eucharistic, while

the transcendent had grown into a discernible dimension within their conversation and their simplest actions.

Some were women. One woman had been a secretary in an embassy, another a widow for many years, a third was a retired teacher. Generally, though not always, they were older; and they tended to be, if not reclusive, then somewhat reticent. Because Christians like these men and women so not belong to a religious community, it is easy to overlook them when thinking about nurturing vocations. Yet such figures are helping to build and maintain the faith matrix, the “vocational culture” within which others might be awakened to the mystery of the transcendent and the sense of being called. The everyday holiness of mature Christians remains a powerful stimulus for those who are but nominally members of the Church to undertake the journey of faith with renewed purpose.

### **The vocations document**

The first part of the document characterizes modern European societies as prone to becoming anti-vocational. That is, they manifest a culture in which men and women have little or no sense of being called by God to do anything. Young people today, the document finds, have “an incomplete and weak identity.” They are afflicted with “chronic indecision.” And they lack the “elementary grammar of [human] existence.” The text continues, soberly: “They feel themselves superfluous to the game or drama of life, as if they have resigned in the face of it [and] been wounded along the broken paths which have been reduced to the minimum level of tension in life” (#11c).

Yet before men and women can hear specific calls within the framework of the general call to holiness, life and fullness of being which comes from the Spirit and which is addressed to each and every human being, they have first to be awakened



and sensitized to the mystery of transcendence that surrounds and penetrates us. The document views modern society to be afflicted, however, by the “culture of distraction.” If the steady trickling away of religious and vocational sensibility prevails, then Europe’s Christian future—and not just Europe’s, of course—looks bleak indeed.

### **Culture of life, culture of vocation**

Vocational culture, as opposed to the culture of distraction, is essentially humanizing and life-giving. Emerging within believing communities, vocational culture can spread and transform present-day societies: “the vocational culture, insofar as it is a complex of values, must more and more cross over from the ecclesial consciousness to the civil, from the awareness of the individual or the believing community to the universal conviction that it is impossible to build any future . . . on a model of man without vocation” (#13b). Whether the context is Europe or North America, there will be no future where the culture has grown deaf to the Creator’s voice.

The document, then, analyzes the decline in vocations within the Church in terms of a society-wide malaise. Modern western societies appear to have lost their spiritual center. They are foundering on the shoals of individualism and relativism, and as a result of numerous social and economic choices they have started to create an enormous religious vacuum. Anti-vocational culture is vulnerable to moral chaos and social collapse, perhaps even to a dark ages of the spirit.

Building a vocational culture will involve helping all of God’s people to believe that they have a vocation: “today true vocations promotion can be carried out only by those who are convinced that in every person, no one excluded, there is an original gift of God which waits to be discovered.” And again

(citing John Paul II): “Love is therefore the fundamental and innate vocation of every human being.” Baptism specifies this general call in the direction of our becoming increasingly like Christ: “every disciple is called to repeat and relive the sentiments of the Son [and] to make visible the mission of Jesus.”

The work of establishing a culture of vocation, furthermore, starts with the renewal of church life everywhere and the local community’s becoming ever more centered on the Gospel. The nurturing of specific calls, after all, presupposes a climate of faith, and fostering this climate is a responsibility of every member of the Church. Without vibrant Christian witness, testifying to the divine source of the community’s freedom, peace and sense of purpose, no charisms will be awakened.

### **All have a vocation**

In a marvelously sensitive passage the document insists: “The discernment and care of the Christian communities is extended to all vocations, whether to those already traditional in the Church or to the new gifts of the Spirit: religious consecration in the monastic life and apostolic life, the lay vocation, the charism of secular institutes, the societies of apostolic life, the vocation to marriage, the various lay forms of association related to religious institutes, missionary vocations, new forms of consecrated life” (#22.b). References to the “lay vocation” and the “vocation to marriage” are significant in a document addressing vocation promotion. They are telling us that the Church has a responsibility to engage in formal vocation work on a much wider scale than it has in the past, when so much attention was given to fostering vocations specifically to the priesthood and religious life. It is worth recalling that over thirty years ago the Second Vatican Council

had referred to the “vocation of spouses” in The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, and its Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity had spelled out the apostolic dimensions of Christian marriage.

The document recognizes that a vocation does not consist simply of one single call discerned and answered, but of many calls, indeed of a daily calling: “every vocation is ‘daily,’ is the response every morning to an appeal made anew every day (#26.a). And again: “The idea should also be corrected that pastoral work for vocations is exclusively for young people, because in every time of life the Lord’s invitation to follow Him is heard, and it is only at the point of death that a vocation can be said to have been fully realized” (#26.e).

Given its perspective—adopting the spiritual vision of the Council—that the call to holiness is the basic human and Christian vocation, it is easy to see why the document can claim that “pastoral work for vocations is the vocation of pastoral work today.” People need to be schooled in what it means to be human, to have been created, to be made in God’s image and likeness. While we have been called into existence for a purpose, human beings have to be able to feel and appropriate that truth if they are ever going to learn who they really are. And when the minds and hearts of men and women do fill with gratitude to God for the gift of existence, the document says, they will naturally want to express their gratitude in works of love and service: “The Christian vocation is, in fact, existence for others.”

The fourth part of the document considers some of the practical aspects of vocations work. How concretely might we invite young people to give serious consideration to a vocation in the more conventional sense of priesthood, religious life and

ministerial service? At least, this is how I interpreted the words, “And then the young person refuses, declares himself not to be interested, has already planned his future.” The refusal envisioned here obviously does not have to do with marriage or the lay state.

The document understands that vocation promotion requires (1) skilled spiritual directors, (2) an ongoing accompanying or mentoring of young men and women as they search for and grow in the mystery of God, and (3) the most elementary form of catechesis. Because the surrounding culture is so individualistic and consumerist, many young people simply do not understand who and what they are. “How many young people,” the text wonders, “have not welcomed the call not because they are ungenerous or indifferent, but simply because they are not helped to know themselves, to discover the ambivalent and pagan roots of certain mental and affective plans, and because they are not helped to free themselves from their fears and defense mechanisms, conscious and unconscious, in facing up to their vocation” (#35.a). In other words, they need to be instructed as to the social and cultural forces, largely unseen, which have been acting upon and forming them. They have yet to taste the freedom of the children of God (Rom 8:21).

The young person, on the other hand, who has been mentored to face up to the vocational choice is someone who has discovered “the signs of his call by God not only in extraordinary events, but in his history, in the events that he has learned to read as a believer, in his questions, anxieties and aspirations.” From the viewpoint of Christian spirituality, the explicit acknowledgement that one’s personal history is a locus of God’s revealing presence may be one of the most important observations the document makes. Yet there must be a

companion observation. God also calls men and women through the signs of the times, through the events and circumstances that define their particular historical moment. Jesus, like the prophets of Israel before him, was in large part awakened to God's call by the political, economic and social circumstances in which he lived. The wider context of the daily life of his people played an indispensable role in what he taught, what he did and why he died. He had learned to see God there, in Israel's past; and he had also learned how to read and respond to the signs of his times, Israel's present historical circumstances. Vocation, as the document notes, is inseparable from mission both in Jesus' case and in ours. And missions never unfold in a timeless bubble.

North American readers might well wonder what relevance "New Vocations for a New Europe" holds for them. Our cultural situations are not in all respects similar. For one thing, religion in general appears to be healthier, more widely pursued and practiced, here than in Europe. There is considerable interest in theology and spirituality on the part of lay men and women, and at least for the time being Americans as a nation have not succumbed to the secularism that prevails in much of the West. For another, while vocations in the conventional sense have declined, there is no dearth of people, both younger and older, who want to be engaged ministerially in church life as prison or hospital chaplains, spiritual directors, teachers and catechists, advocates of Catholic social teaching on the parish and diocesan levels, visitors to the sick and shut-ins, and as temporary volunteers in church-sponsored service projects among the poor and under-served groups both at home and overseas. Many believers want to involve themselves in Christ's mission in whatever ways they can. In this sense, we have not run short of vocations.

## **A shortcoming in the document**

But perhaps the strengths of the document become its shortcoming. It is not easy to write about vocation in the sense of a universal call to holiness and at the same time leave enough room to develop a theology of vocation in the traditional sense. On the one hand, we do not want to view the various Christian states of life in comparative terms, and yet on the other hand we want to help young men and women understand the intrinsic attractiveness and beauty of priesthood and religious life.

The terms “vocation,” “mission,” “apostolate” and “discipleship” probably need to be more crisply distinguished. By virtue of their baptism, all Christians are called to a life of discipleship and a perfect following of Jesus. By the same token, all Jesus’ followers are essentially men and women who have been sent into the world as witnesses, examples, guides, and heralds. Differentiating vocation (singular) from vocations (plural), or mission from missions, represents an attempt to do justice to what is specific and what is universal about life according to the Spirit. But is this subtle change in wording sharp enough? The more intense and single-minded following of Jesus traditionally associated with religious life has to be set in bold relief in order to safeguard this particular charism. While it should not be thought of as higher or nobler than the Spirit’s other gifts, the desire to follow Jesus in an almost literal reenactment of the Gospel is a grace God gives the rest of the people of God. I think the word “vocation” has a special application in such cases.

Furthermore, while all Christians can be described as men and women who are sent, the particular sending by the Spirit to announce the Gospel with every ounce of one’s energy and every fiber of one’s imagination also has to be set in relief. Not

all of us are inclined, suited or called for this work. In other words, Paul's forceful question "Are all apostles?" (1 Cor 12:29) means that when the term "apostle" is applied to every Christian, it loses much of its powerful effect.

The document is right not to blame anyone for the current decline in vocations, as if religious communities and the Church's ministers had failed in being faithful to their calling in the three decades since Vatican II, or even as if young people themselves were at fault. And it warns, perhaps surprisingly, that "importing vocations" is no solution to the current vocations crisis: "if at a time not so long ago certain people deluded themselves by seeking to resolve the vocations crisis by debatable methods, for example, by 'importing vocations' from other places (often uprooting them from their environment), today no one should delude himself about resolving the vocations crisis by going around it, because the Lord continues to call in every Church in every place."

That the vocational forms of religious life and priestly ministry might themselves be undergoing profound transformation today is a prospect which should not be overlooked. Indeed, it ought to be carefully examined. Needless to say, whenever identity and mission are fuzzy or unclear, people understandably will demonstrate little interest in such an institution or community.

But mission and identity cannot be brought into sharper focus independent of the times in which we live. And this is what makes times of transition deeply challenging. Because we are so immersed in the social and cultural processes around us, it can be extremely difficult to figure out just how to respond to the driving questions and concerns of our age. Yet out of the present challenges there will surely be new vocations: for a new

Europe, a new America, new world, and a new Church. There already are. In the end, two constants will continue to shape Christian vocations choices, namely, the human being's innate thirst for things of the Spirit and God's loving, unbroken call.

[1995]



## 19.

### **What Makes Priesthood Special?**

I probably ought to begin by qualifying the question a little. The truth is that I'm far less concerned about what makes being a priest special in other people's eyes than about what makes priesthood important to me. I grow uncomfortable when people voice expectations of a priest beyond what he is capable of, and I feel awkward when they think that we are closer to God than we actually are. In between there lies the ground where the priest tries his utmost to be a good Christian.

#### **All have a vocation**

Whatever shape and path they take, vocations are matters of mystery. Every human being can appropriate the language of vocation—of divine calling—because God has called every one of us into existence. That God out of love created us is something we can do little more than wonder over. Still, the fact remains that life is our calling and love is our vocation. And to take things one step further, every Christian can claim that he or she has been called to follow Jesus with evangelical perfection. Jesus' words "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matt 5:48) are addressed to all of his disciples, not just to a select few.

Yet the reasons why each life takes the form it does and why individual Christians follow such distinctive routes to God are things we shall never completely understand, either. Social environment, family histories, emotional and psychological makeup, educational backgrounds, and so forth, play their essential part. They weave together and, under the impulse of the Spirit, constantly work us over until we reach full stature as

a son or daughter of God. Although Christians are drawn to *do* many different things, they are not drawn by the Spirit to *be* many different things, since in the end what really matters is our being clothed with Christ, indeed our being new creations in him, as St. Paul says: “So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation” (2 Cor 5:17).

Nevertheless, who we are and what we do are very much tied together. If there was one thing that Paul was certain of, it was that God had called him to be an apostle. It was as if his deepest self—his soul—had been indelibly stamped with an urge to preach the Gospel, and woe to him if he failed to do so! (1 Cor 9:16) While many had been called to follow the Lord and thus to be his disciples, not all had been called to be an apostle. There was, after all, a variety of gifts, since in the Church there was a wide variety of needs.

### **Callings should not be compared**

There is no particular satisfaction in comparing myself, for better or worse, with others. Isn't there something immodest and self-justifying when a person seeks to elevate one vocational choice over others? That fact is that I am not a missionary, that I am not a Carthusian, that I am not a married man, or that I did not choose to work in medicine, or law, or politics, or human service. We are who we are. I don't have the least inclination to speculate about what might have happened *if*. Whatever specialness I feel, then, derives not from drawing comparisons with other lifestyles or even with other roles in the Christian community. My sense of who I am comes first and foremost from the conviction that it was God who called me into existence and that God's hand has ever been at work in my life fashioning me into the kind of person that I am. Psalm 139 has long been the one I turn to most—and the prayer I invite

others to pray as if Jesus were standing alongside, reciting the words with us. Paul tried to help the Corinthian Christians appreciate the importance and complementarity of the different gifts the Spirit had bestowed upon the community by appealing to the metaphor of a body (1 Cor 12:12-31). Yet nowhere does he suggest that the body would be whole without a particular member or that it could still function without certain parts.

In other words, the hand is not “better” than the foot, or the ear more elevated than the eye, and so on. Each member contributes to the life and well-being of the person. Likewise, a priest would never think of himself as special because he is more prayerful, more theologically literate, or more conscious of his baptismal vocation than anyone else. How would he know that? A priest might locate some personal *distinctiveness* in the fact that he is a religious, or a missionary, or a medical doctor, or a licensed counselor, or a theologian, or perhaps a bishop, and so forth. But his specialness arises from his being placed or situated within the whole body of Christ. And so too for everyone else. We are all special because we come from God and because we have been immersed in the dying and rising of Jesus. The fact that one exercises a position of leadership in the community does not automatically guarantee his or her holiness, which accounts for why the truly effective priest is above all a man of God.

### **A ministry of word and sacrament**

For most Catholics, it may be safely said, priesthood spells two basic activities: the priest preaches and he presides at the Eucharist. Yet underneath this twofold ministry of word and sacrament, of course, there lies the one commitment that transfigures the individual’s Christian consciousness and characterizes it as priestly, namely, the person’s overriding

concern for the welfare of the Christian community. For the community is the place where men and women discover the rich possibilities of wholeness, reconciliation, and genuine freedom of spirit. Church is, or at least it ought to be, the place that nurtures and sustains hope, and the school of right living. Indeed, parish communities create the framework within which men and women encounter the mystery of God in Christ. Yet while word and sacrament clearly contribute to the building of the Church and its ongoing life, they do not exhaust what a priest does.

I find abiding consolation in preaching and presiding, and I am bold enough to think that there is an experience of the risen Lord which is specific to these ministries. One knows Jesus in preaching about him, and one knows him as one recites, in the name of the whole community, the Eucharistic prayer. But what I bring to homilies and to leading an assembly in worship comes from an awareness not of ministerial function, but of something else. It is my attachment to God's people that has come to define my sense of who I am as a priest. It often seems that my private life has been displaced by the life of God's people, and the older I grow, the more their life and historical fortunes claim my heart's attention. What happens to God's people anywhere moves me, shapes my praying, conditions how I read Scripture. Physically I can only be in one time and place, but my spirit suffers no such limitations.

I think of the amazing grace that was Paul's. He could be in prison, but physical confinement imposed no restrictions upon his consciousness of the people to whom he had been sent. Paul wrote them letters, prayed for them, corrected and encouraged them, and beheld them continually with his mind's eye. Solitude and solidarity are by no means incompatible, as

Thomas Merton showed us, and Thérèse of Lisieux before him, and so many others who have pioneered the ways of the human spirit. Indeed, if what we know about Israel's prophets provides any clue here, how could Jesus have been alone with God for more than a few moments before the voices and faces he had encountered on his travels through Galilee crossed into his prayer? Sharing this experience may not be sufficient for someone who wants to know with conceptual precision what makes a priest special, but for me it has been the grace that confirms and reconfirms the call to which I am constantly responding.

### **The Bible's call stories may mislead us**

For me there has long been a note of unreality about some of the classic call stories of the Bible. God has never spoken to me with the directness one might fantasize on the basis of the story of Abraham, or Moses, or the young Samuel, or Isaiah, or Paul. For most of us, the Spirit's vocational action is mediated through the example of faithful Christian witness, whether clerical, lay, or religious; encounters with grave misfortune, severe human need, or everyday heroism; the idealism of close friends; a vibrant worshiping community; religious art; key historical events; biographies of faith; frustration with the Church or perhaps excitement about the Church. Any of these can prompt one to consider a tighter, more focused, or more intense relationship with the people of God.

The biblical stories are quite realistic, however, in the fact that divine calling is usually portrayed as a process rather than a once and for all instance of divine action. There was nothing static, for instance, about Moses' vocation or Paul's. And there is nothing static about the priesthood, either. Priesthood in the Church is not a timeless essence but an ongoing relationship

with the people of God. Who I am is necessarily being affected by the people among whom I live and work and worship. Indeed, in real, tangible, sensible ways the people have been drawing priesthood out of me, bringing shape and definition to a call that I sincerely believe comes from God.

From one point of view, then, I suppose priesthood does become a matter of what someone is. The people of God become the instrument through which the Spirit makes us into a particular kind of person. More than a role, more than a clearly defined job, priesthood corresponds to what the Church needs and expects of us at our particular historical moment. Are we to assume that the way Oscar Romero perceived priesthood in the months and weeks prior to his assassination was the same as on the day of his ordination? His understanding would have been the same only if his being a priest of the Church was completely divorced from who he was as a human being and from the historical fortunes of the Salvadoran people. The “character” of his priesthood was forged in that mysterious juncture where grace meets history and where political, social and economic circumstances determine the shape of a people’s expectations and hope. God’s word is never announced in a vacuum, and the Lord’s Supper is never celebrated in sterile isolation from the everyday world. Thus priesthood is not so much a matter of function or role in the Church, but a relationship with the people of God. If Christian baptism initiates a relationship with God’s people, then ordination represents its intensification.

### **The Council and the world: two formative forces**

My understanding of priesthood has certainly changed since I entered the minor seminary almost forty-five years ago. Some of that change I naturally trace to intellectual, affective and spiritual growth on my part; much of it came as pastoral

experience seasoned some youthful naiveté. But in large measure that change occurred, first, because Vatican II set in motion a process of renewal so vast and deep that no element of church life was left unaffected, and second, because for the greater part of this century the world has been going through technological and social developments of seismic proportions.

The image of the priest in the frequently cited description from the nineteenth-century Dominican Jean Baptiste Lacordaire struck me, even in high school several years before the Council, as too clean, too smooth. It lacked the warmth that comes from human fallibility. *Living in the midst of the world without wishing its pleasures. A member of each family yet belonging to none. Penetrating all secrets, healing all wounds. A heart of bronze for chastity and a heart of fire for charity. To go from men to God and offer him their prayers, to go from God to men to bring pardon and hope.* The figure of the priest here borders on being unrealistic. It is hard to see how such a man could have signified for anyone the wonderfully down-to-earth Jesus of the gospel parables and healings. Did Fr. Lacordaire think that a priest was supposed to imitate the angels? The letter to the Hebrews captures the reality—and our ministerial hope—better: “For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, *but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin*” (Heb 4:5).

Above all, however, it was the image of the priest as some sort of mediator between the divine mystery and the human world that left me uneasy. It wasn't that humility should make a priest reluctant to think he stands between his brothers and sisters, and God. The reason was, rather, that the Word became one of us, identified with our flesh, truly lived among us, and thus forever removed the necessity of a special class of

believers to represent the people before God. Perhaps it was an incipient Protestantism on my part, but my head never quite grasped why, given who we believed Jesus was, believers would settle for anyone else in the mediator's role. Or perhaps I had simply decided for myself that some few human beings were not friends of God more so than the rest. In Christ, we can all relate to God directly and personally as daughters and sons, and the priest's task is to assure men and women of this basic truth. He is supposed to lead them to taste the mystery of God but without ever insinuating that he had a corner on human access to the divine. It should come as no surprise, therefore, that Karl Rahner's words touched a more sympathetic nerve: *The priest is not an angel sent from heaven. He is a man chosen from among men, a member of the Church, a Christian.* Wherever priesthood shines, it is not because the priest is doing or living something nobody else does, but because he is leading a radically Christian life.

But while it is possible to think of priesthood without importing the notion of mediation, I cannot think of it apart from the dimension of reconciliation. For reconciliation is integral to preaching: the word of God opens our eyes to the presence of alienation in our lives and then it moves us to seek forgiveness and to do whatever we can to overcome it. And reconciliation is obviously central to the celebration of sacraments.

Still, reconciliation is important to my self-understanding not simply because I preach or celebrate sacraments, but because it is so deeply embedded in life of Jesus. That Jesus was profoundly aware of alienation's many forms in the everyday life of his people—illnesses, demonic possession, injustice, hunger, sin—is apparent from nearly every page of the



Gospels. That his ministry should have been devoted above all to reconciling men and women to one another and to God strikes the reader as the only sane response to the presence of sin in the world. And thus in one way or another all my preaching and presiding constantly draw their breath from the life of Jesus; they have made me keenly sensitive to the myriad forms of brokenness within individual lives, in families, and in society around me. The consequence, in other words, of delivering homilies and leading communities in liturgical worship is that one's consciousness becomes shaped by the message that pervades the entire Christian mystery, namely, God in Christ reconciling the world to himself (2 Cor 5:19). You think about it in reading the newspapers or watching the nightly news, or as you listen to people share their life stories. Your awareness of brokenness—your own first, and then that of others—generates a way of being present to people. Urging people to seek reconciliation, to make peace, to beg the grace of being able to forgive, to labor against every form of injustice becomes practically a passion. This driving concern is not part of a job description, but I believe it is central to every priest's consciousness the more he ponders the liturgical mysteries in his care.

Why, then, is priesthood so important to me? Because being a priest has enabled me to experience deeply the life of God's people—an experience that has been a steady privilege and joy. Why is it important? Because I love the believing community called Church, and priesthood allows that love to direct my life and my energies. Why? Because priesthood has enabled me to face the world's alienation and wretchedness without being overwhelmed, and in the ministry of reconciliation I find a singular fulfillment. Paul's language about being an ambassador for Christ does not quite resonate

with me, but there is another image that comes to mind. To twist Jesus' parable a little, what if the elder brother had stood beside his father as he waited patiently for the younger son's return? What if he had come to share the father's anxiety for the one who was lost and longed for homecoming just as much as the father did? The sleeplessness and the longing of an older brother who will not rest until all have safely returned to their father's house somehow captures for me the unyielding passion that makes a priest what he is.

[2000]

## 20.

### Experiencing Priesthood Today

The birth of a prophet is something of a mystery. I'm not referring to a prophet's biological origins but to the prophet's spiritual or interior awakening. Prophets would undoubtedly have possessed some prior sensitivity to the things of God—it would be hard to imagine someone's becoming a prophet who was utterly lacking in any sensitivity to the way of the Spirit or whose ears were not already primed to the word of God. I think of the piety of Hannah, the mother of Samuel, and the temple precincts in which the young boy was reared. I think of the faith of John's parents Elizabeth and Zechariah, who was a priest—as was the father of Jeremiah. While not much is known of the background of prophetic figures like Amos and Hosea, I'd wager that the religious history of each of them had been unfolding long before their encounter with God. Indeed, Ezekiel reports that he was a priest before he became a prophet.

#### **Vocation and cultural context**

Prophets believe themselves “called”; the word of the Lord, they are convinced, has been spoken to them. But so far as I can tell, the Spirit does not speak and thereby awaken the prophetic vocation or mission unless the times—the political, ethical and religious situation of the people—require a prophetic voice and witness. Thus in periods of social or cultural upheaval, in response to oppression and exploitation of the poor or covenantal infidelity, the biblical prophets emerged to name and denounce in the name of God what was wrong in Israel. Prophetic vocations are generated within particular social and

historical contexts. No Pharaoh, no Moses. No Ahab, no Elijah. No Nebuchadnezzar, no Ezekiel. No Herod, no John the Baptist.

If we are on the right track here, then perhaps we could broaden the point to include vocations to the priesthood. Calls take place in specific contexts and those contexts shape and often dictate the responses we make. No one is drawn to priesthood in the abstract, any more than the biblical prophets were drawn to prophecy in the abstract; one is drawn to a particular way of evangelical living and serving the people of God. Someone who says “I want to be a priest” is articulating a desire for a distinctive place in the life of the Church, a vocational role scripted more or less in terms of what he or she has observed priests doing. When St. Thérèse of Lisieux cried, for instance, “If only I were a priest! How lovingly, Jesus, would I hold You in my hands when my words had brought you down from heaven and how lovingly would I give You to the faithful,” she was reflecting her understanding of priesthood.

Of course, to the degree that others are now doing what priests alone once did, the customary picture or definition of the priest’s role and place in the Church was bound to become less precise. I would suggest though that “priesthood” is not a great Christian universal—timeless, abstract, conveying the same essential idea from one age to the next. In many respects priesthood is a social construct; it takes its form or definition within the everyday life of the Church. In this sense priesthood becomes what the Church needs and wants it to be.

For most of us priests have been models of selfless dedication to the spiritual and corporal needs of the Church and the wider human community. Yet there have been numerous others, non-ordained, who have also served the Church and the world tirelessly and without any desire for personal gain. The

one thing that distinguished priestly ministry from everything else was obviously the sacraments. After all, priesthood in itself is a cultic notion. But as other baptized persons have been enlisted to serve the community as catechists, ministers of the Eucharist, spiritual directors, hospital chaplains, presiders at non-Eucharistic worship services, preachers, evangelizers, missionaries, reconcilers of the estranged, and so on, our conception of priesthood has been undergoing a subtle but sure adjustment.

It ought to be said, however, that for many Catholics the integrity of a priest's cultic service—the impression priests made on us as they preached and celebrated the Eucharist—was intimately connected to how they had served and stood by their people. In particular we intuited that the faith that led them to align themselves with the poor, the sick, and social outcasts was the very same faith that undergirded the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist. Successful fundraising, important though it was, did not carry the same evangelical valence as caring for the indigent or laboring to keep school doors open for poor inner-city children. In other words, the Eucharist alone never fully delineated what priesthood was all about. It was the Eucharist plus service, and in particular service slanted towards those most in need, that best captured—and continues to capture—what it means to be a priest. Archbishop Romero's assassination while reciting the Eucharistic prayer would be not nearly so memorable if one did not know the story of his solidarity with the poor of El Salvador.

There used to be a painting somewhere in Lisieux, a friend mentioned to me recently, of St. Thérèse vested like a priest for Mass (the picture may still be there). His comment put me in mind of a crucifix in several nearby parish churches where the

figure of Jesus appears vested with alb, chasuble and stole, signifying the conjunction of priest and victim. Besides being anachronistic, this particular way of representing Jesus skews the image of priesthood. The one standing at the altar saying the Eucharistic prayer in the name of the whole people of God is not simultaneously representing all victims; only Jesus can do that. Furthermore it is not the priest's faith that makes the real presence of Jesus possible during the celebration—in the readings and prayers, in the homily and the body of believers, and in the bread and cup—but the Spirit, who animates the Church and enables each of us to lift our minds to God.

Each person in church bears a measure of responsibility for the fruitfulness of the Liturgy. Each person's faith and dispositions of mind and heart are as vital to the celebration as the faith, piety, and recollection of the priest. The celebrant, in other words, does not represent the crucified Jesus, and so Jesus should not be portrayed as wearing a chasuble and stole. A vested Jesus leaves everyone except the priest disconnected from Jesus crucified. No one in his right mind is going to be attracted to ordained ministry because of a fascination with vestments. A liturgically clad Jesus fosters a spiritual and moral apartness in the community's thinking about priesthood that is unlikely to help anyone.

### **Looking to the future**

I have no firm idea as to what priesthood might look like in another twenty years. What I do know, however, is that communities of faith need tending. If faith communities were to disappear the world would look and feel increasingly like the biblical Sheol. I know further that our culture is bracketed by individualism on one side and consumerism on the other, and that these cultural pressures together can suffocate the life of the

spirit. In response to this danger, Christian liturgy will increasingly highlight solidarity and community as key elements of the Christian religious experience. Increasing attention will be paid during penitential rites and reconciliation services to the ways in which individualism and consumerism have seeped into family and civic life. And there will be a corresponding thirst among many Catholics for a fuller and richer way of being human, of being women and men of God, and of being church. The priest of the future will be someone who thinks, lives, and breathes community; someone for whom local community is inconceivable without solidarity and a truly global consciousness; someone who exemplifies the vital connection between the virtue of solidarity and the option for the poor. Vocation is shaped by context.

As I look back over a number of years in ministry, three sources of enduring consolation stand out. I mention them because consolation is an indication of what has brought freedom, peace, and joy into one's life. Consolation confirms decisions and eases misgivings, second-thoughts, and even regrets over roads not taken.

First, I relish every opportunity to preach. I love to spend time studying and thinking about scriptural texts, reading them aloud over and over, inflecting phrases differently each time, weighing the sound and meaning of each word. To hold a lectionary or a Bible in one's hands is to take one's place within the innumerable generations that make up our religious tradition—those who composed the texts, those who lived by them, and those who handed them along to us. I imagine the people before whom I will be standing, reconstructing what their week may have been like—what they may have done each day, what their worries might be, what has brought them

happiness, where failure may have presented itself. I review the events of the week at home and abroad, connecting the dots between the local community and the global community. I start praying for the people who will be listening and remind myself that the scripture readings and the homily are not about me and my concerns but about the Lord and his relationship with his people. I enjoy being a steward of sacred texts.

Preaching is most gratifying not when I have the chance to illumine a text's historical background or offer fresh insight into a passage but when in and through the scriptural word I feel the connection between what I believe, what the Church has always believed, and what the people in front of me somehow already know in the depths of their own minds and hearts. And yet I cannot imagine a worship service that would stop after the homily or where the homily would be the highpoint—something has to follow. The bread of life is not only a word for the heart and the mind; it must enter the soul through our mouths, not just our ears. The word has to be performed. Jesus did not just teach; he taught *and* he sat at table. Tables were as much his classroom as the synagogues of Galilee.

And this brings me to the second consolation. Priesthood makes it possible to step into people's lives and into their homes. Several years ago I made it a point to visit the homes and apartments of the families with whom I worship each week in order to bless the family tables. There is a profoundly religious connection between the table where families share their meals and the Eucharistic table—a connection that merits continual explanation, cultivation and attentiveness. On Sundays my mind's eye recalls each of those tables, where I've probably had coffee. More importantly, I am minded of the particulars of each household and immensely grateful for



having the opportunity to be a small part of so many lives—an opportunity made possible by the nature of priesthood and the role it plays in building the Church. For the Church would not be the household of God apart from families; their spiritual and material wellbeing is absolutely essential if the Church is to be salt, leaven, or light for the world.

Few experiences have proven so strengthening and reaffirming as being invited into people's homes—to hear their stories, to share their concerns, to admire their accomplishments, to watch the affection and care they lavish on their children. The experience of being trusted is one of the warmest and most humbling consolations of anyone's life. In priesthood such graces can be overwhelming. It would be a pastoral calamity of the worse proportions if because of the exposures and scandals of the past few years the door that opens between the two tables—the table of the Lord and the table in each home—were henceforth closed to priests. Such a pass would spell personal desolation and the end of the Church as we have known it. People welcome us into their hospital rooms or when we visit them in prison, for that is where they are more likely to feel vulnerable and alone; but no one wants to stay there.

The third consolation comes in the distribution of Communion. And here I'm not echoing the sentiments of Thérèse so much as drawing attention to a facet of Christian sacramentality, namely, the wonder of human hands. Giving Communion is no longer a practice reserved to priests—we all know that. But when joined with the sense of finding God in preaching and the experience of having been trusted by others with a share of their life, placing the Bread of life in people's hands is an extraordinary consolation.

Hands reveal biographies, lives far spent or lives just beginning. The thin, wrinkled skin of the elderly. Joints made painful with arthritis. Hands permanently creased from hard work. A mechanic's hands blackened from grease and motor oil. Wedding bands, whose silent histories one recalls or reconstructs with the quickness of an Amen. The taut palms of a teenager who has played endless hours of basketball, the hands—full of promise—of a youngster who only months ago received First Communion. “It’s all in the hands,” I tell myself, “Christ’s hands.” For how else does he touch, embrace, heal, repair, teach, untie, set loose, and bless? Some hands have arrived at church fresh from painting a wall, others from slicing onions, changing a diaper, weeding a garden, or maybe even fingering a rosary. The hands tell the story, and into those hands one places the body of Christ. The effect lingers long after the Communion rite is finished. I go home, still seeing those hands before me, marveling at how priesthood could bring the sheer ordinariness of grace so close and astonished at how the life of God displays itself among us. Sometimes I recognize hands more easily than I can remember faces.

I am simply describing several consolations which, taken together, have helped me to understand what priesthood can mean and confirmed for me a vision of priestly ministry. Needless to say, priests engage in a rich variety of works as healers, teachers, and community-builders. These works, moreover, are not so much expressions of their ordination but of their baptism. Watching priests one cannot fail to notice an impressive range of human gifts, skills, and interests.

How we identify the specific role or function of a priest does not hinge on the way we first think of Jesus, because Jesus’ life sets the pattern for *all* of his disciples. In other

words, baptism is logically prior to ordination; priests are disciples like everybody else. But our vision of priesthood does depend very much on how we think of the Church and the needs of the people of God in the world we wake up to each morning. In a general way priesthood represents an intensification of concern for the spiritual and physical wellbeing of God's people. Each member of the believing community is concerned for his or her sisters and brothers in the Lord; but when this concern intensifies to the point at which "Zeal for your house will consume me" (John 2:17) we have, I believe, the first sign of priestly calling, which is less about cult than about care. Perhaps this verse could tease us into appreciating the dynamic of passing from the priestly to the prophetic, which was what Jeremiah and Ezekiel did many centuries ago.

Which leads me to the more specific. To the extent that communities fracture—the global community, societies, neighborhoods, families—some among us are going to be aroused by the Spirit to the point of dedicating their lives to reconciliation and renewal within the Church itself. Why? Because they know in their bones that the Church is truly meant to be a sacrament of God's oneness with the human race. To the extent that the human spirit has been compromised by individualism, some are going to feel drawn, irresistibly, to preaching and bearing witness to solidarity as a very different way of being human. And to the extent that we become more aware of the awful disproportion that exists between rich and poor, some among us are going to discover that they breathe best and rest most securely when the poor can claim them as their friends. I cannot imagine priesthood any other way.

[2003]

## 21.

### **Celibacy under Siege**

After the attack on New York in September of 2001, many Americans were reluctant to board an airplane. Some hesitated to visit a restaurant or theater, and nearly everyone experienced a heightened sense of apprehension and need for vigilance. Civic leaders reminded us that by succumbing to the fear of stepping outdoors, we would be conceding to the terrorists.

Given the grave sexual abuse crisis in which the church in North America church and elsewhere found itself, those of us who are celibate may be experiencing a similar sort of nervousness. We need to remind ourselves, therefore, that despite the collapse of trust we have witnessed, the people of God will not be well served if clergy and religious lose the spontaneity and imagination, the capacity for affection and sacrifice, and the zeal for mission for which celibacy has set us free. We have realized that we need to be cautious and alert, attentive like Americans everywhere to anything unusual or suspicious in our public space, but we cannot let ourselves be paralyzed by fear of how society may be looking at us or by a loss of confidence in our vocational choice.

In the present social context, then, I feel some reticence about advocating that now is not the time to give up on the value of the celibate way of life, but I believe that clergy and religious should not surrender their vision in the midst of emotional and ideological confusion. In times of desolation, Ignatius of Loyola counsels, one should not make changes in former decisions.

## Has celibacy become an ambiguous sign?

A number of students in my theology courses have been raising questions, voicing their concerns, and even speaking of their sense of betrayal at the hands of the official Church. It was always understandable to me that young people should shy away from celibacy on account of the sacrifice it calls for, but at least until now they were able to grasp the motivation and religious rationale behind it. Today, however, many of them suspect that celibacy may be downright unhealthy; a few have started to associate it with a disorder that is potentially criminal.

I have heard several commentators argue that celibacy itself has been either the cause or at least a contributing factor to the scandal of sexual abuse. In some cases, that might very well be true. But to draw a parallel, failures with respect to Christian marriage do not mean that we should renounce as unworkable, or out of touch with modern culture, the gospel ideal that lies behind this sacrament. After all, the fact that human beings are not perfect all at once does not excuse us from trying to live like God's children as best we can.

The great commandment of Deuteronomy 6:5 (“You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might”) expresses the call to perfection in the clearest and simplest terms. “*All* your heart” means that we are to hold nothing back—absolutely nothing—in this business of centering our hearts on “the LORD alone” (Deuteronomy 6:4). None of us complains that the commandment is impractical or that God is unreasonable because of the patient effort that fulfilling the commandment requires. Why? Because we recognize that the Great Commandment is less a matter of divine legislation than of divine invitation. Such great love could not be commanded unless the human heart was

capable of it. In other words, the value of celibacy is not lessened because there have been failures.

As a gospel ideal, celibacy has nearly always been seen as part of a religious package. Centering our lives fully on God is what we aim at, and celibacy, like poverty and obedience, becomes a means. Now in describing poverty and celibacy as means or instruments in seeking and finding God, I don't mean that the vows should be lived in a mechanical way. Literal or mechanical observance of a community's legislation does not automatically bring a religious to the spirit of evangelical life. Paul's words "For the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life" (2 Cor 3:6) have a particular relevance for religious. All of us know that good actions are easier than good thoughts, that outward behavior is not always a trustworthy indicator of how things truly stand between God and us. But we also know that faithfully living out our absolute dependence upon God (which poverty represents), having our affections totally centered on God and his people (which chastity represents), and becoming free of all the distracting desires of the false self (which obedience represents) assume a "three-in-one" character.

The vows stand together; one vow does not stand without the others. Together, they comprise an evangelical whole. For us, Jesus is the revelation of what God-centered living means. He is the one who, though rich, became poor for the sake of his people; the one who emptied himself so totally that there was never any trace of the false self in him. And Jesus prayed in keeping with the way he lived. When faced by incomprehensible evil he would say to the Father, "Not what I want but what you want" (Mark 14:36). Poverty, chastity, and obedience become our way of naming and embodying the essential features of Jesus and his mission.

Society can only judge us on the basis of our actions; after all, what else is there for it see? But for those who are striving to be totally God-centered, actions do not guarantee much. True, Jesus says, “Thus you will know them by their fruits” (Matt 7:20). But perhaps more important to religious are his words: “If then the light in you is darkness, how great is the darkness!” (Matt 6:23) If the light of divine innocence were to render the secret thoughts and desires of our hearts transparent, would we be able to stand such exposure? And yet, such transparency of spirit is exactly what religious life aspires to. Celibacy becomes an ambiguous sign only when celibate living is not fully transparent. The people of God have to be able to perceive in us, clearly and distinctly, the whole package of a life centered fully on God.

### **Why commend celibacy?**

Each religious probably has her or his own reasons for embracing celibacy, but I think all of us would agree that any talk about one vow takes places in the shadow of the others. We did not choose celibacy by itself; we elected a way of being human. In the same way, clergy would want to frame their reflections on celibacy in terms of their call to ministry, their experience of belonging to a believing, worshiping community, and their prayerful efforts to appropriate the mind and heart of the one who lays down his life for his sheep.

Many thoughtful Christians simply do not believe that being married would compromise the dedication and effectiveness of their clergy. The perfect following of Jesus hardly precludes disciples being married, as we realize very well. What makes celibacy attractive, therefore, is not that it is evangelically superior to marriage but that, like Christian marriage, celibacy creates a distinctive set of relationships

between the person who is called to it and the rest of the world. It is not that we are single that makes our living distinctive, but that our being single is measured by the mission of Jesus. We do not embrace celibacy as an ascetical practice, the way someone might take up lifelong fasting or abstinence from meat. It is not a self-imposed penance. And we do not embrace it because being single allows us more time for spiritual pursuits. In the end, I think, we choose celibacy as one part of a total response to Jesus' words to come and follow him; we want to be as open and available to other human beings as Jesus was. Celibacy represents an intensification of the human thirst for God—"the LORD alone"—a thirst that cannot separate itself from the heart's need to find room within it for every member of the human race. Precisely why this intensified desire occurs in some lives but not in others is perhaps best accounted for by appealing to the Spirit. The Spirit calls some to be prophets, others to be teachers and missionaries; some to be married and others to be celibate. And so on. For Saint Paul in 1 Corinthians 12, the point was elementary

Obviously, no one should choose celibacy out of a fear of intimacy, or to escape the responsibilities of family life, or to avoid dealing honestly with issues of sexual identity. A healthy celibate is someone who has "married" God's people, just like Jesus did. Celibacy creates the possibility of a lifelong availability towards other men and women. Perhaps this is what accounts for its mysterious attractiveness and is the reason why the Church esteems it so highly. Celibacy is the virtue of those who walk through life with the single-heartedness we associate with Jesus as he proclaimed the nearness of the kingdom of God. Celibacy appeals to those women and men who feel themselves drawn to a solidarity with others that both nourishes their prayer and makes their desire for God concrete. Whether



they realize it early in life or later, whether because of native disposition or graced inspiration, some Christians just know deep inside that they belong to the entire human family, and they feel called to live out that belonging. They declare who and what they are before the people of God. “I am, I exist,” they are saying, “for you.” For its part, the Church intuits in this openness and belonging to others the profile of the Good Shepherd.

### **Not a matter of law, but of Spirit**

Celibacy, of course, is a charism, a particular manifestation of the Spirit within the life of the Christian community. The sad experience of the Church today confirms what religious life has known for a long time. The Church runs a grave risk in requiring celibacy as a precondition for ordained ministry if at the same time it does not insist that the one being ordained embrace poverty or make an option for the poor.

Sometimes a person does not discover until after ordination that he does not possess the charism to lead a celibate life. Maybe the individual was responding, not to the Spirit’s prompting to lead a celibate life, but to a holy desire to serve the people of God and accompany them on their journey of faith. The strong desire to assist people in sacramental and pastoral ways (which we have no reason to doubt comes from God) was resting unsteadily on the requirement to be celibate.

It can happen, of course, that a charism can be lost because one has not taken steps to safeguard and nurture what is essentially a gift of the Spirit. Visions, for example, are important inner events. One “sees” or “beholds” some aspect of the mystery of God and its connection with daily life or with human history. Visions structure and guide our imagination, our decisions, and our actions. But without prayer visions fade; if

they do not permeate our practice, they lose their energy and their capacity to animate and excite us.

In the same way, individuals can lose the charism of celibacy by growing out of touch with the gospel story, or by ignoring the connection between celibacy and poverty, its evangelical twin. Celibacy can also be lost because a person's commitment to mission is not exercised and stretched, or because one has stopped facing the challenge of becoming a spiritually and emotionally integrated adult. A person can continue to choose celibacy only if he or she has a life-sustaining vision. A celibate is someone irresistibly drawn by Jesus' words, "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head" (Matt 8:20). This particular calling is not for all, which may be why Jesus had to say, "Let anyone accept this who can" (Matt 19:12). The harsh phrase "eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven" calls attention, not to the freely chosen deprivation of sexual relationship, but to the supreme beauty and importance of the kingdom of God, the pearl for which one is prepared to pay any price. The question that we need constantly to keep before us is, "To whom do I belong?" We cannot answer simply "I belong to God" because that is the answer every Christian should give. But so long as we can truthfully reply "I belong to God's people," then we are sharing in the charism of celibacy.

**"Lord, it is good for us to be here"**

Do the people of God need the witness of celibate living? I sincerely believe so. For me, the very fact that in the Church there were women and men who chose not to marry led me to ask myself, "What is it about our faith that brings some believers to choose such an untypical, even puzzling way of life?" And then I intuited an answer, although several years

passed before I was able to put that answer into words: we—the people of God—are worthy of such focused dedication! What had impressed me was not just that the religious women and the priests I had come to know were single; it was also that they lived simply and their affection was blind to social class and all the other things that separate the poor from the privileged.

I grew up in a large, loving, deeply Catholic family; family has always been the dominant category from within which I approach the world. In meeting people for the first time, my initial impulse is to wonder about their families; within minutes family life is what we are talking about seriously. Later, when we meet again, I listen to them against the invisible background of my mental reconstruction of their family experience.

My early contact with religious women and clergy had stirred my imagination to contemplate a way of access into more homes, more lives than I could ever count. The world family to which all of us belong because we are human was far larger than the household into which I had been born, and my love for that wider family became stronger and clearer as the years went by. Eventually a gospel passage would capture my experience and elevate it to the level of Jesus' own experience of the world: “‘Who are my mother and my brothers?’ And looking at those who sat around him, he said, ‘Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother’” (Mark 3:33-35). This may not be the text to which most people would turn for a reflecting on celibacy, but it has greatly helped me to understand who I am and what I am looking for.

[2002]

## **Being a Missioner without Leaving Home**

The most enduring images of ministry I carry in my head are those of sisters and priests working in mission areas overseas. Whether tending sick children, chatting with women washing clothes under a bridge, conducting classes in adobe buildings, celebrating Mass in out-of-the-way chapels or on hillsides, caressing orphans or teaching poor farmers how to cultivate their land more productively—even today the images remain vivid and diverse—the missioners appeared immensely happy, dedicated, appreciated, and seasoned. They appeared to know something about life that the rest of us did not. I stared at such scenes in mission magazines, on calendars, and posters from the Society for the Propagation of the Faith. As I grew older, I devoured stories of heroic lives in distant lands and tried to imagine what it might be like, not just to live in strikingly different climates and cultures, but to leave home for good. Leaving your family, I believed, was the hardest sacrifice anybody could ever make. Adventure was one thing, but I was no more prepared to say goodbye to my family than to put a hot iron on my hand.

The fact is that many missioners did leave home for long periods of time. One La Salette missioner I met in Burma (now Myanmar) a number of years ago was unable to return to visit his family because, if he had left Burma, he would never have been permitted reentry. Just a few years ago I learned of a sister who had arrived in Bolivia from a town in Germany when she was in her early twenties, settled into a remote village where people spoke only Quechua, and after seventy years had neither learned Spanish nor ever gone back home to visit and rest. Most

missioners, of course, have taken regular home leaves, although a surprising number discovered that after a few weeks they felt increasingly out of place and could not wait to return to their adopted people. The northern culture of plenty and privilege seemed like an alien place after years of accompanying people who would eke out the most meager living as farmers, hired hands, or day laborers.

Mission builders were pioneers—independent, resourceful, fiercely hardworking, tireless. It was hard not to think of them as martyrs in slow motion. Some died from exhaustion, some from exotic diseases contracted in jungles or remote outposts, and others were actually killed when the missionaries turned their attention to correcting social and economic abuses. As a group they typified the ideal of Christian ministry. If we want to go for broke and give absolutely everything to the Lord, the child in me reasoned, then the best way to do that would be to become a missionary. Whether this would involve direct, hands-on engagement with people in poor countries or leading a contemplative life, say, among Muslims in Algeria, an earnest young Christian would find no more satisfying way to live the Gospel and serve God's people. The mission prospect would appeal to anyone blessed with a spirit of adventure, high ideals, and the desire to do ever greater things for God's glory.

### **The changing face of mission**

In the space of thirty or forty years, many things in the world and in the Church have clearly changed. While there have been fewer priests and religious to work as missionaries, many lay men and women have stepped forward to help, sometimes singly and sometimes as couples. These wonderful people have surrendered to the missionary impulse and become partners in mission, laboring for various lengths of time as associates

within veteran missionary groups. This welcome development follows the general trend since Vatican II of ordinary Christians living out their baptismal commitment more expressively and assuming greater responsibility for the Church's life and mission.

A second development has been the Church's growing sensitivity to the mystery of God as it touches people from within the other world religions. While a number of Protestant groups continue to make membership in their church a primary goal of their missionary aims, Catholics are increasingly circumspect when it comes to conversion. For one thing, in the past great harm was done to native cultures and traditions by a preaching of the faith that was frequently more imperialistic than evangelical. For another, Catholic imagination at its best has always been intrigued by the multiple presences of God beyond its own narratives, tradition, spirituality, and practices. The failure to acknowledge those showings ultimately impedes the preaching of the Gospel and its necessary inculturation.

Thirdly, as Paul VI pointed out in *Populorum Progressio* (1967) and *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (1975), evangelization always needs to take into account the integral development of the whole person and the humanizing of societies. Our relationship with God will not flourish unless we also grow in the virtue of solidarity, as John Paul II has said repeatedly, and this means that promoting faith cannot proceed without a passionate commitment to justice. Preaching the Gospel cannot be separated from cultivating peace, and there will be no lasting peace until systems and structures of injustice are dismantled. After all, we preach the word of God in the context of our times. This context includes huge disparities in the matter of access to the earth's resources, and a serious tension between the forces

of globalization on the one hand and a fierce desire to preserve cultural identities on the other.

So long as the Church continues to read the Acts of the Apostles and to follow the life of Paul through his letters, the missionary imagination is going to remain alive and well among us. The idea that the word of God is on the move and that faith travels is deeply embedded in the Christian narrative. Yet the world is vastly different today from the world of antiquity—or from the world of Francis Xavier, for that matter. Xavier traversed more of the planet than Saint Paul did, but Xavier lived at a time when the Gospel frequently hitched rides on vessels of European commercialism. He also labored under the belief that without baptism countless souls would be lost. Today, of course, our perception of the world's size, so tied up with our sense of time and distance, has made the prospect of leaving home less daunting. Even the most remote areas of the earth appear less inaccessible in an age of the internet and cellular phones. Moreover, few of us would be comfortable with the idea that the non-Christian world has to be “conquered” for Christ. Such language would sound perilously close to a new religious colonialism.

### **A world that starts at our doorstep**

Last summer, while I was visiting a parish on the edge of the Bolivian *altiplano*, the Jesuit provincial directed my attention to the newly constructed road several hundred meters in front of us. There in a place on the tail end of the electric line, where a fifty-mile stretch of Andean peaks provides a magnificent backdrop for the waters of Lake Titicaca—a place where llamas graze and vicuña roam freely among fields of wheat and potatoes—a narrow strip of pavement originates beyond one end of the horizon and runs across this high-altitude

plain to the other. Far too modest to be called a highway, it's just a road passing through the uncomplicated lives of people of the land. "Now there," the provincial said, "lies the great hazard this culture faces." He went on to explain that the children of the *campesinos* stare at that road, wondering where it originates and where ultimately it might take them. The presence of a road with its occasional trucks and tour buses awakens in them a youthful restlessness. They realize intuitively that the asphalt trail could connect them to people and experiences beyond their fields, the mountains, and the lake. All at once that road became for me a poignant symbol of the nearness and far-awayness of things.

I remembered a childhood experience, a morning many years past when I was sifting my fingers through the sand that had gathered at the roadside. As I studied the street, my eye followed its path to the corner, where it would turn sharply and take on a different name. Eventually it would connect, together with many other small streets, to a wider road; once on that wider road a person could drive to anywhere in North America he wished. The road could even take someone to the sea where a ship might set sail for another part of the world. For a brief moment the street in front of our house signified the connectedness of places and people. I would have been unable to formulate this thought then, but I can put it into words now. I ask myself, can a person be far away without leaving home, without actually stepping onto that fascinating web of roads which leads potentially everywhere? I think the answer should be yes, provided we understand that being in another place physically is not the same as being in another place inwardly.

The earth is full of interesting and beautiful places, but above all it is home to human beings. The more we open



ourselves to human existence in its depth and breadth, the more deeply shall we understand the connections between human beings, their cultures, histories, and societies. Travel enriches us, not just because we get to witness the beauty and wonders of nature, but because we encounter human beings whose difference from us socially, economically, culturally, and religiously makes us reflect on the intriguing oneness of the human family. As Vatican II noted, travel “refines human qualities and enriches men with mutual understanding.” Nevertheless, the point is not simply to sign up for a world tour, if one has the chance, but to have one’s consciousness of sharing a common humanity raised and stretched. The point, it seems to me, is to develop an awareness of how much we are connected with other human beings, both the men and women whom we interact with from day to day and above all with the countless others who share this world and its diminishing resources.

### **The at-home missionary**

An at-home missionary is someone who possesses a global awareness, a person for whom the world starts at the threshold of the mind. He or she is going to be someone who necessarily lives and works in a particular place (as we all do) but whose interior life is joined to the lives of men and women everywhere. In terms of their loyalties and aspirations they identify with the deepest longings of people all over the world, particularly the multitudes who have been forced to live at the very bottom of the economic ladder. I doubt whether such awareness can develop apart from some exposure to segments of the underprivileged world; one needs actual contact to set the process of consciousness-raising in motion.

Given the times in which we live, today's missionary can have a profound impact on people living in other areas of the globe without physically being there. I am referring to the fact that in an increasingly interdependent world we can assist impoverished people without actually living among them. Those who educate for justice, for example, are reaching toward those unseen others all the time. Young men and women whose consciousness has been raised can make significant contributions to the welfare of human beings in need; in short, they can become mission-minded. As they take their place in the world of business, finance, education, government, human service, medicine, international aid organizations, and so on, they bring to their work an awareness of the wider human community and of the necessity of creating a world that is ever more just and humane.

Needless to say, plenty of people live and work abroad simply because they are employed by multinational corporations. I would not label them missionaries on that basis alone, although even capitalism has its apostles. Those motivated by an overriding concern for faith and justice, however, will be selective about the firms they work for. The word of God, as we have noted, cannot prescind from the circumstances that either hinder or advance the integral development of people. Every genuine commitment to work for the economic and social improvement of disadvantaged peoples, from a Christian perspective, creates partners in mission.

The prospect of leaving one's family and native land to work overseas for the sake of spreading the Gospel may be less compelling today. One reason for this, as I have explained, is that religious conversion often seems less urgent than the need

for economic and social transformation, that is, the moral conversion of the world's privileged and the empowerment of those who pay the price of others' success. Besides, dependence on foreign missionaries eventually has to yield to the need for local churches to stand ministerially on their own. However attractive the classical missionary types were because of their zeal and energetic witness, the missionary's role, like that of John the Baptist, is supposed to be to decrease. With gospel humility and apostolic pride in their accomplishments, in the end foreign missionaries were (and are) paving the way for vibrant, self-sustaining, indigenous Christian communities.

While I do not envision a surge in missionary vocations of the classic type, the missionary spirit is not about to disappear. The proof is that Christians still want to bear witness, share in the proclamation of the Gospel, and reshape their world. They are as capable as ever of heroic love. Committed Christians might not feel as if they need to convert the world, but I think they do feel a holy longing to tell the Christian story. In sharing faith and relating their narrative about Jesus, Christians reenact the ancient impulse to announce the good news that we associate with Pentecost. But whereas the apostolic generation carried that word throughout the ancient world, we have to find ways to proclaim that word afresh to the growing numbers of unevangelized folks who live within our own shores. This too belongs to the vocation of missionaries whom God has called to stay at home.

In recalling the mission of "the seventy-two others" Luke writes: "After this the Lord appointed seventy-two others and sent them on ahead of him, two by two, into every town and place where he was about to go" (Lk 10:1). Most of the time, Jesus walks ahead; a disciple is one who follows. In this case,

however, the order is reversed. But Jesus does not visit just “towns” and “places”; he visits homes. So the mission of the seventy-two takes them into the places where people live—and they should not be in a rush to leave. “And remain in the same house,” he instructs them (Lk 10:7). In the end, perhaps, all mission (like politics) is local, and even domestic. There’s a good reason why so many gospel scenes take place inside a home and why “house” became a metaphor not only for the church, but even for the human heart.

[2002]

## 23.

### **Knowing Jesus as Only One Who Serves Can:**

A reflection on the papal message for the 40<sup>th</sup>  
World Day of Prayer for Vocations

The Fourth Sunday of Easter, with its gospel text about the Good Shepherd from John 10, is especially suited to thinking and praying about vocations. In this year's message, however, the Pope draws on Matthew 12:18, with its citation from Isaiah 42:

Behold my servant, whom I uphold,  
my chosen, in whom my soul delights;  
I have put my Spirit upon him,  
he will bring forth justice to the nations.

The theme of this year's reflection is vocation as seen from the perspective of being called to serve others, in imitation of Jesus.

As he has done before, the Pope understands vocation in three senses. First, in a very wide sense, corresponding to our creation—the call to praise, reverence, and serve God our Lord. Secondly, in a more specific, Christian sense—the call to follow Jesus that we celebrate at baptism. And thirdly, in an even more focused way—the particular call addressed to each of us, reflected in the choice each believer makes about his or her way of life.

#### **Calls come in a variety of shapes and sizes**

Calls come to us in all sorts of ways and take many forms: the call to repentance, the call to discipleship, the call to undertake a pilgrimage, the call to celibacy, the call to marriage, the call to ministry, the call to preach, the call to deeper prayer, the call to forgive, the call to atone, the call to serve others

(which becomes concrete in so many different ways), the call that brought us into existence and the call that will take us to be forever with the risen Lord. We learn to recognize the Lord's voice calling us from within the people around us, usually our families, close friends, teachers, and spiritual guides. Sometimes the voice comes from people far away whose needs touch a nerve in our hearts—men, women, and children whom we've never actually laid eyes on but whose plight we have watched on television or read about in newspapers. In rare instances they might even visit us in the night, like the desperate man who besought Paul, "Come over to Macedonia and help us" (Acts 16:9).

The voice of the Lord may reach us from inside scriptural texts. A classic illustration was Antony of the Desert, destined to become one of the pillars of eremitical spirituality. As a teenager he was passing the open doors of a church and heard from inside the words of the gospel passage about selling all possessions and coming after Jesus. The same thing happens to us a bit less dramatically whenever our imaginations are set on fire by a particular gospel scene or while reading a biographical account of bold Christian witness within the quiet of our homes.

Sometimes calls reach us horizontally. Thus other people call out of us ever greater levels of patience, fidelity, compassion, selflessness, or courage. We may find ourselves resisting and complaining about these calls, for spiritual exercises are no less demanding than physical ones. Spouses are constantly calling the best from one another, children call their mothers and fathers to be better parents, students call their teachers to be better instructors, friends call each other to deeper levels of trust and openness, members of religious communities call one another to more earnest and effective evangelical

witness, parish communities call their priests to greater prayerfulness, perseverance and deeper understanding of the human condition, even as priests call their people to proclaim daily the mystery of faith, and so on. Human beings are constantly calling to one another and upon one another to strive for richer and fuller life. Such is the way God has knit us together.

### **Not to be served, but to serve**

John Paul II addresses himself especially to young Christians when he speaks about the call to service, in imitation of Jesus. “For the Son of man also came not to be served but to serve,” Jesus said. Herein lies the pattern for our lives, the route to greatness in the sight of God.

In its context, Jesus’ instruction about service was prompted by an argument among his disciples about which of them deserved greater recognition for the indispensable role they presumably would be playing in Jesus’ mission. Seizing the moment to teach, Jesus freshened their memory of the imperial style, with which they would have been painfully familiar: “You know that those who are supposed to rule over the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great men exercise authority over them” (Mark 10:42). And as soon as that reminder sinks in he warns them, “But *it shall not be so among you.*”

It would have been pretty hard to imagine the likes of Herod, or Pilate, or Caesar—the great one himself—waiting on table and consorting with slaves! But apparently there is something in the disciples, and maybe in each of us, that secretly envies the lifestyle of the rich and famous. Deep down, we may find the prospect of waiting on table, yoking our loyalties and affection to the defenseless and poor ones among

us, not so much repulsive as boring. Jesus envisioned a new community—a revitalized Israel—in which men and women, whatever their economic and social station, would see each other as sisters and brothers. In this new community there would certainly be authority, but it would be the authority of holiness and humility. In that community those called to leadership would never lose sight of the fact that obedience and respect are owed to the people of God and that leaders become strong in the measure they empty themselves.

A person might wonder, of course, about what makes the idea of self-emptying and renunciation of the desire to get ahead so attractive. Why not aspire to seats of honor alongside Jesus, the way James and John wanted? These spots apparently have been reserved, but not necessarily for those who suffer the most for the Gospel. The two disciples are clearly willing to drink with Jesus from the cup of suffering, and he assures them that they will share his baptism. But labor on behalf of the Gospel does not pay off in terms of greater reward or higher places near Jesus in glory. The point may be that minds and hearts which have been truly converted to the mystery of the kingdom would not even dream of occupying positions that would set them above their sisters and brothers.

Yet it is the second half of this saying that contains the hard part: “and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45). The Pope realizes that one of the greatest threats to the gospel ideal of service is the individualism that reigns in large segments of modern culture. At the same time, however, he notes among many young people “a natural disposition to open up to others, especially the most needy.” Thus he writes:

Dear young people, service is a completely natural vocation, because *human beings are by nature servants*, not being masters



of their own lives and being, in their turn, in need of service of others. Service shows that we are free from the intrusiveness of our ego. It shows that we have a responsibility to other people. And service is possible for everyone, through gestures that seem small, but which are, in reality, great if they are animated by a sincere love. True servants . . . do not seek egoistic benefits, but expend themselves for others, experiencing in the gift of themselves the joy of working for free.

Jesus' expectation that his followers would imitate his pattern of service builds, as the Pope explains, upon a "completely natural vocation." Men and women are servants by nature, since society itself—families, neighborhoods, local communities—would collapse if we did not tend to one another's needs, or if we could not depend upon one another throughout the course of our lives. Living and doing for others produces a sense of satisfaction, whether what we do for each other consists of very small deeds or actions of heroic proportions. In the matter of raising children, for example, parents work "for free." What hourly rate could possibly be assigned to the work of feeding, clothing, educating, tending and caring for children? Or to the work of caring for elderly parents or an infirm spouse?

Everybody enjoys being paid for their labor, but it is important sometimes to experience the freedom and joy that come from serving or assisting others simply because it is good and wholesome to let our very self be a gift. Although we live in a market-driven world, we are not by nature consumers; we are by nature lovers. And human love is not a commodity that can be bought and sold. The Pope invites young people to consider the many forms of ministry that the Christian community needs, for indeed among believers there are many

gifts. He goes on to single out priestly ministry and urges young men to consider being a servant of the community “in a yet more radical way.”

### **The more radical way**

In order to understand this “yet more radical way” we have to think about the hard part of Jesus’ saying. Jesus gave his life as a ransom “for many,” an idiomatic expression which he also used at the Last Supper (Matt 26:28); it means “for all.” The “ransom” metaphor implies that the price of freedom for “the many” is the life of “the one”: one person dies so that others may have freedom and life. We have witnessed this equation being enacted many times; it is the quintessential expression of being a servant. Firefighters and rescue workers, soldiers and policemen, organ donors, medical personnel who risk contamination: we can think of numerous examples of the few human beings who ransom or save many others from suffering and death.

But in summarizing his life as a “ransom for many” Jesus was not referring solely to his impending crucifixion; he was describing his entire ministry. At an earlier point in his gospel narrative long before the Cross emerges, after recounting how Jesus had healed very many sick, wounded people, Matthew commented: “He took our infirmities and bore our diseases” (Matt 8:17). In other words, the act of ransoming started as soon as Jesus emerged from the waters of the Jordan and would continue until his death. For no matter how we describe the mystery of the Cross, the fact remains that, historically speaking, Jesus’ death was a consequence of his prophetic ministry. He died for the people because he had lived for them.

In the course of his message the Pope also cites John 12:26—“If anyone serves me, he must follow me; and where I

am, there shall my servant be also.” Since Jesus has already declared that he did not come to be served but to serve, we cannot be faulted for wondering what serving him means or in what sense we are his servants. Admittedly, we are dealing with distinct gospels. Still, I think it can safely be said on the basis of his own example that the only way we can serve Jesus is by loving and serving one another.

The only Jesus we meet is the risen Lord; but where do we meet him? While it is certainly true that we meet Jesus in scripture, in our prayer, in the sacraments, and in the assembly of believers, the most tangible and familiar encounter with him is in and through the people around us. We serve Jesus by putting his teaching into practice, that is, by doing for each other what he has done for us (John 13:15). When he says “where I am, there shall my servant be,” perhaps we ought to take his words to mean: “where my people are, there will my disciple be.” Jesus’ people are the ones in need of ransom right here and now; without our help they will languish and die. If we want to walk alongside Jesus, then we shall have to learn how to accompany his people and do for them all the things that Jesus showed us. The Pope has reaffirmed that the inner spirit or dynamic of the Gospel is to live for others totally, unreservedly, generously and with confidence in the power of God. And to carry the point a bit further, priestly ministry represents an intensification of this kind of living.

The “yet more radical way,” therefore, may be simply another expression for the virtue of Christian solidarity. As with every virtue, solidarity is not going to be achieved in a single moment; one grows in it over a lifetime—through a process that we normally refer to as discipleship. One difficulty with our use of the word “servant” is that people who can afford servants are

probably the ones least likely to need our service. Caesar's household numbered many servants, I would imagine; so also Pilate's, Herod's, and that of Caiaphas. Having servants would have been a mark of opulence, and I doubt very much that Jesus was asking his disciples to make life smoother for landowners and the well-to-do. The rhetoric of servants and service does not make much sense in contexts or communities where no one really needs anybody else.

One might reply, of course, that spiritual needs belong to a very different order and that the spiritual needs of the Caesars and Herods of this world are just as real (even if unacknowledged) as those of, say, tax-collectors, petty thieves, and day laborers.

Looked at this way, people who might attempt to preach the Gospel before emperors, kings, and princes would be true servants of the word. After all, not all redemptive service takes an immediate social and economic form. Service of the word is itself a special type of response to a particular kind of call. One serves the word of God "in season and out of season" (2 Tim 4:2). The prophets hardly refrained from preaching to the rich and powerful, and if the book of Jonah offers any clue here, then the conversion of the rich and powerful concerns God greatly.

Nevertheless, when Jesus says, "But I am among you as one who serves" (Luke 22:27), is he not suggesting that we truly need his service and that our needs are not fabricated, that they are not the inflated needs of the wealthy? Jesus is "there" for others: for the sick, for the demon-possessed, for the broken-hearted, for the poor, for the God-seekers, for the spiritually hungry, for the people who know they need help, and for the

people who need help but don't realize just how deeply needy they are.

I would argue, then, that the attraction of service as a lifelong ideal for the sort of persons we want to become is directly proportional to our sensitivity to the various kinds of human needs. The more informed our awareness of the concrete situations in which human beings live, the more likely it is that our desire to serve will be awakened.

For most of us the awareness of human need is prompted by an exposure to men and women who are actually poor. The experience of human poverty can be a powerful stimulus to thinking evangelically. Why was the announcement of good news to the poor in Luke 4:18 such an obvious starting point for Jesus' ministry? Because the needs of the poor were so evident. Thus whenever we reflect on the meaning of service we should start with what is most apparent. The poor have no need of servants; besides, they could never pay for them. But the point of Jesus' saying is not about the poor; it is about the mentality of a disciple and the disciple's willingness to live for others.

There is a spiritual payoff in all of this. Our relationship with God would feel very strained, even thin, if instead of relating to God we found ourselves relating to an idea of God. So also with Jesus. There is a huge difference between Jesus as a person and Jesus as a lovely concept or idea, but sometimes the distinction gets by us. In order to know Jesus, a person needs to follow him, and this usually means doing what he did. It is largely from within the experience of accompanying human beings in need—the poor, refugees, the abandoned, the defenseless, the poor who are chronically ill, social misfits, the spiritually disoriented—that a disciple knows and understands Jesus. The people of God call us. In answering their call, we

know Jesus: the Jesus who loves, who serves, who gives his life as a ransom, who walks with us in unfailing compassion.

The Pope concludes his message with a prayer to Mary—servant of the word, servant of the Son, servant of Redemption, and servant of the Church. Perhaps the final stanza of the prayer best captures the spirit for the World Day of Prayer:

Make them understand that to serve God satisfies the heart,  
and that only in the service of God and of his kingdom  
do we realise ourselves in accordance with the divine plan,  
and life becomes a hymn of glory to the Most Holy Trinity.

[2003]

## 24.

### **“To serve Christ alone in his Church”:**

The message of John Paul II for the 41<sup>st</sup>

World Day of Prayer for Vocations

The Pope’s vocation message this year, prepared for the Fourth Sunday of Easter, is comparatively brief. Drawing on a point he had made at the close of the great jubilee year in his Apostolic Letter *Novo Millennio Ineunte* that one of the signs of our times is “a widespread demand for spirituality,” the Pope encourages all Christian communities to become “authentic schools of prayer.” I take him to mean that all of our communities—from parishes, schools and universities, retreat houses and rest homes, to the homes of Christian families and the residences of vowed religious—need to be places where everyday life is anything but shallow, where material goods and careers do not weigh on our minds more heavily than people do, where consumerism is resisted and self-centeredness is overcome. Vocations are not going to emerge from arid hearts or from imaginations unschooled by great desires. Moreover, while the search for a satisfying interior life may be widespread, not every spirituality is Christian and not every Christian spirituality is framed or centered by the Eucharist.

By “vocations” the Pope here has in mind “priests, religious, hermits, consecrated virgins, members of secular institutes—in short, all those who have received the gift of the vocation and carry ‘this treasure in earthen vessels’.” Some readers may recall that the 1998 document “New Vocations for a New Europe” observed: “If at one time vocations promotion referred only or mainly to certain vocations, now it must tend ever more towards the promotion of all vocations, because in

the Lord's Church, either we grow together or no one grows." And again, "The discernment and care of the Christian communities is extended to all vocations, whether to those already traditional in the Church or to the new gifts of the Spirit: religious consecration in the monastic life and apostolic life, the lay vocation, the charism of secular institutes, the societies of apostolic life, the vocation to marriage, the various lay forms of association related to religious institutes, missionary vocations, new forms of consecrated life." Furthermore in his 1981 Apostolic Exhortation "On the Role of the Christian Family in the Modern World" (*Familiaris Consortio*) the Pope himself had written, "Love is therefore the fundamental and innate vocation of every human being." All of which invites us to remember that while religious life and ordained ministry have essential roles to play in the life of the Church, there are indeed other ministries, each with its corresponding "call." Recognizing this fact the Pope's message continues, citing 1 Corinthians 12: "In the Mystical Body of Christ there is a wide variety of ministries and charisms, all of them meant for the sanctification of the Christian people." Assisting others on the path to holiness—that they might attain "the highest possible degree of evangelical perfection"—applies therefore to every vocation in the Church.

### **The scriptural context**

Luke 10:2 is the gospel verse that provides the context for this year's message: "He said to them, 'The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.'" Building on these words, the papal message emphasizes the responsibility all of us have to be praying for vocations, a responsibility we fulfill both by individual prayer and by our being contemplative, God-centered



communities. For vocations will never come to life unless all of us are contributing to the formation of the appropriate spiritual environment. The Pope further reminds us that “every minister of Christ” needs to be praying for vocations. Ministers of Christ, after all, should understand better than anyone “the urgency of a generational exchange” in order for Christian word and sacrament to root themselves in the future.

Taken by itself, Luke 10:2 does not single out any particular group of pastoral agents as harvesters par excellence. Throughout the centuries there have been innumerable laborers in fields “ripe for harvesting” (John 4:35) and their labors have taken many different forms. Luke opens chapter 10 with Jesus appointing “seventy others,” that is, seventy in addition to the Twelve. He gives them specific instructions about how to conduct themselves as they travel throughout Galilee announcing to whoever will receive them, “The kingdom of God has come near to you.” But the labor in this case appears to be explicitly missionary. If the Lord’s fields are to be harvested, then someone will have to be sent into them. Yet no one can be sent who is not already disposed to being on a mission. And this is a point that intrigues me. Since we cannot be called to something we do not want, the key to acquiring a desire to serve the kingdom of God is exposure to individuals and to communities of faith where seeking and doing the will of God is a matter of ultimate concern.

### **The desire to live a mission**

Given how we have been created, the way in which our personalities have taken shape, the concrete histories that define and distinguish us from one another, and so on, the fact that there should be different vocational forms is hardly surprising. Yet the process by which we appropriate and develop a

particular vocational form is nothing short of mysterious. What is it that disposes or prepares someone to want to be on a mission, not just for a brief period but for a lifetime? What separates or distinguishes the journeying aspect of religious development from that of being sent? Interpreting one's life as a journey or pilgrimage has long been a major aspect of religious experience. Since the time of Abraham and Sarah—indeed, from the time when Eve and Adam embarked upon their long historical pilgrimage—“journey” has served as a rich metaphor for the life of the spirit, whether one's travel is actually physical or purely inward. The well-known 19<sup>th</sup>-century Russian accounts *The Way of a Pilgrim* and *The Pilgrim Continues His Way* nicely illustrate this theme, although numerous other writings could be cited as well.

Being sent, however, is a different sort of religious experience. It dips into the world of prophets and apostles, figures whose being became identified with their believing themselves commissioned by God to perform some task or deliver some message of great moment. At its most basic form, I suppose, being sent could refer to every human being since, by virtue of our being created, God sends each of us into the world with the express purpose of learning how to love. That elementary experience of being sent “into the world” takes on a particularly Christian configuration, however, as a result of immersing ourselves in the gospel narrative and spending time with Jesus. In fact the Fourth Gospel mentions Jesus in terms of his being sent about forty times.

The Pope writes: “The vocation to serve Christ alone in his Church is an inestimable gift of the divine goodness, a gift to implore with insistence and trusting humility. The Christian must be always more open to this gift, careful not to waste ‘the

time of grace’ and ‘the time of visitation’ (cf. Luke 19:44).” This statement reflects a lifetime of ministerial experience; such words are credible only when they come from the lips of seasoned apostles. One looks back at years of engagement with the Christian community—with people who have become real sisters and brothers in faith—and realizes that everything one has done and all that one has become can only be summed up in a hymn of thanksgiving. No one, of course, can make the decisions of young people for them; they must respond to the Spirit at their own pace and in their own way. We can assure them, however, through word and witness of the consolation that comes from serving “Christ alone in his Church.” Appreciating precisely why serving Christ alone in his Church is such an inestimable gift is largely the fruit of faithful practice.

*To serve Christ alone in his Church.* I am not altogether certain whether vocational stirrings emerge from within a person’s relationship in faith to Jesus or from within one’s engagement with the Church and the wider human family. Perhaps they originate in a combination of the two. I am certain, however, that Jesus cannot be separated from his people. As our relationship with Jesus develops, humanity itself tends to figure more prominently in our praying. In Jesus we discover the presence of the others—the “many” of Matthew 26:28—and the more time we spend among human beings, especially the ones Jesus pronounced “blessed” in Luke 6:20-21, the more likely we are to understand the experience beneath the words “We have seen the Lord” (John 20:24). The grace that confirms vocational choice is that of finding Jesus in his people and the people in Jesus. For some, this experience will turn into the all-consuming grace that makes lifelong fidelity and total availability not only attractive but also possible.

## **Passing along the life of faith**

The strength and vitality of the Church depend upon the service and unfailing dedication of people with many sorts of gifts, but unless we pass the Church's faith from one generation to the next, ecclesial life will die. And central to the process of this transmission is the handing on of the narrative of faith through scripture and Eucharist, or rather through preaching, sacrament and evangelical practice. While word and sacrament certainly are realities that are aesthetically charged and inspiring, their importance lies in how they build and sustain communities of faith. Ordained ministry, therefore, involves much more than the quality of one's preaching and presiding; above all it involves a faith-filled insertion into the life of one's people. Few are likely to be drawn to consider ordained ministry as their vocational form, for example, solely on the basis of observing someone's liturgical presence or homiletic skills. There needs to be in addition the steady, everyday witness of a minister for whom God's people, wherever they may be, matter more than anything else.

Genuine holiness is a thing of beauty and many will be naturally drawn to it. For holiness represents the choice of life over death, wholeness over fragmentation, communion over isolation. But insofar as we are talking about the holiness of *Jesus* and not about holiness in the abstract or as a religious universal, then Jesus has to be connected with his people; Christ has to be connected with his Church.

## **Is there light at the end of the tunnel?**

Although the papal message does not delve into the reasons why traditional vocations have declined, it may be worth our thinking for a moment about what has been happening in the Church and in the world, particularly if we are going to respond

to the Pope's "heartfelt wish that prayer for vocations be intensified."

Few problems have proven more vexing and worrisome than the decrease in vocations to ordained ministry, religious life, and missionary service. Needless to say, before we lament the decline in traditional vocational forms we should acknowledge the emergence of new forms of evangelical living, the development of a fuller, richer spirituality of Christian baptism, and the growing lay presence in Christian mission.

We also need to take into account the increasing secularization of modern culture, lest we blame ourselves for a state of affairs that we were powerless to prevent. Some cultural forces, like ocean tides, prove virtually irresistible. Secularization, like democratization and globalization, may have tidal force. Yet the sacred and the profane must be thought of together in creative tension. If one sphere folds into the other, all sorts of mischief can result. If secularization represents the problem of collapsing in one direction, sacralization becomes a problem when the divine mystery is no longer conceived as in the world but above or outside it. Taking shelter on a remote spiritual island totally cut off from "the world" is as much out of the question as turning our churches into marketplaces.

Then, too, not all parents would be overjoyed at the prospect of their child having a "vocation" to ordained ministry or religious life, even if God were to ask the parents' permission first! Some parents simply do not see its value. Perhaps they want to protect their children from the pressure of trying to live a high spiritual ideal in a culture that does not esteem lifelong fidelity to "Christ alone in his Church." Others may have had their darkest suspicions confirmed by the painful disclosures of the past few years.

To the extent that the decline in vocations can be blamed on Christians themselves or on the cultural forces of modernity, we should be wary of concluding that the Lord of the harvest has been inattentive to the needs of his people or deaf to their prayers. On the other hand, it is hard to escape the conclusion that priesthood, consecrated life, and missionary service as we have known them are gradually being reconfigured and reconstituted. Much of the impetus for this profound change is coming, I believe, from a fresh appropriation of the Jesus of the gospels. There Jesus is constantly among his people, befriending and often defending the least attractive and least powerful ones among them, walking their dusty roads, sharing meals with them, blessing their children and expelling their demons, challenging selfish ambition and the system of patronage by his example of poverty and service.

As this figure of Jesus—rather traditional, when all is said and done—comes more sharply into focus, the pattern of ordained ministry and religious life changes, a change that necessarily starts from below and works its way through the Church's institutional life. Together, since the Council, we have found ourselves treading the tedious yet purifying path to renewal, and both priesthood and religious life are feeling the effect. Much like those born during the forty years Israel when was passing through the wilderness, our young people find themselves without memory of where the journey started and without any clear sense of what the land beyond the Jordan looks like. Of course, the rest of us cannot see very far ahead either, but at least we know where the journey began and understand why it has been necessary.

A second impetus for change may be coming from our growing sensitivity to the presence of the divine mystery among

the other world religions and our understandable preference for dialogue to missionary intrusion. This means, though, that for the short term we may have to endure a certain blurring of the lines of Christian distinctiveness. While this blurring hardly explains everything, it may account for a certain reluctance to choose one of the traditional vocational forms. If the sense of being God-sent is integral to vocational awareness, then mission and evangelical purpose are going to have to be much clearer in a religiously pluralistic world. Yet such clarity can only come after inter-religious dialogue. It cannot be assumed or determined in advance of religious encounter.

Thirdly, we should also think of the negative but paradoxically salutary impact of the twin forces of consumerism and individualism upon vocational awareness, especially with respect to priesthood and consecrated life. The document I cited above “New Vocations for a New Europe” identified pretty well the cultural pressures working against us. It often happens, however, that those very attitudes or forces that lead to a neglect or defacing of the interior life create the conditions for spiritual rebirth.

Emptiness is a feeling we cannot tolerate for very long. The empty promises made by a culture that preaches and fosters the acquisition and consumption of material goods, or that positions individual achievement and satisfaction above the common good, eventually reveal themselves to be depressingly untrustworthy. The current vocational crisis has been in the making for some time; we simply did not see its arrival for what it was, namely, the consequence in large measure of a culture turning more and more consumerist. Constant exposure to such an environment leads to the deadening of vocational awareness, and that awareness will remain dead until spirit itself revolts

against the seductive superficialities of our time. Hence the Pope's words at the close of the jubilee year: "in today's world, despite widespread secularization, there is a widespread demand for spirituality, a demand which expresses itself in a large part as a renewed need for prayer."

Widespread secularization accompanied by widespread demand for spirituality: here we have a paradox of Christian redemption, perhaps best summed up in Paul's words "but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more" (Romans 5:20). Meantime, the harvest awaits laborers schooled in the way of the Spirit and purified through the empty way of the desert.

[2004]



## 25.

### **Asceticism and Vocational Awareness**

How do we keep our minds and hearts fastened on the kingdom of God from one day to the next, from month to month and year to year? I think every religious, every priest, every married couple that looks at life in vocational terms, and any Christian called to remain single in the world knows how much attentiveness and effort are required to remain God-centered. The great commandment about loving God with all our mind, heart and strength is realizable, but it is also the project of a lifetime. The discipline necessary in order to lead our lives according to the Great Commandment of Deuteronomy 6:5 is what asceticism is all about.

Whenever it becomes linked to mortification asceticism gets a bad name. A healthy Christian spirituality today has to start with a positive assessment of the created world. God fashioned the heavens and the earth and pronounced them “good.” While sin has certainly distorted things, even to the point of rendering some parts of the human world grotesque, it has not canceled the Creator’s primeval blessing. For this reason we dare to live in patient expectation of the new heavens and the new earth envisioned in Isaiah 65:17 and Revelation 21:1—a world in which the power of sin will have been definitively broken. Mortification—the killing of the flesh—sounds strangely at odds with the sentiments of our age precisely because its underlying attitude is one of suspicion toward creation and a chronic nervousness about physicality, bodiliness and sexuality. Indeed, it would be hard to defend any number of penitential practices of the past which treated the

human body as an obstacle to grace or as sinful flesh needing to be beaten into submission by the spirit.

But asceticism is to the spiritual life what exercise and practice are to the development of athletic skill. Physical exercise is a way of caring for oneself, which is a healthy thing to do so long as working out does not become addictive or narcissistic. In the same way, asceticism is healthy so long as it does not degenerate into bloodless routine or into a dogged pursuit of spiritual growth as if union with God were “something to be grasped” (Phil 2:6). In the matter of spiritual growth the problem is less the intransigence of the flesh than the daunting challenge of learning to live by faith.

### **Asceticism and contemplation**

To insist that asceticism should not ignore or deny the goodness of the created world actually states things negatively. To make the point in positive terms I would say that the practice of asceticism focuses our attention upon those aspects of creation that are transparently good, wholesome, healing and fulfilling. Or to express the idea a bit differently, asceticism should never be divorced from prayer and contemplation, since contemplation almost by definition is loving attentiveness to the mystery of God loving us. And the first and only place where we meet that mystery is in what God has fashioned, as Paul reminds us: “Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made” (Rom 1:20).

The things God has made (and continues to make) cover the gamut of divine works: from the creation of light to the creation of Adam and Eve, from the formation of the chosen people to the birth of prophets, from the great homecoming

when Jewish exiles returned to the land of Israel to the conception and birth of Jesus, from the formation of the Church to the testimony of martyrs, from the birth of children to the formation of friendships, from the planets and stars in the night sky to the herbs and flowers in one's garden, and so on. To view absolutely everything as coming from the hands of God is the fruit of contemplation, and whatever we do in order to foster "the contemplative attitude" belongs to the practice of asceticism.

Only a disciplined heart knows how to pay attention to God. And the human heart becomes disciplined not simply through regular and fervent praying, but by allowing one's praying to be framed by the question, "Where is God present and laboring in my life and in the world?" Searching for God, constantly, out of the conviction that the divine mystery never stops revealing itself and redeeming us, chastens human desire and purifies motivation. Many people address words to God from time to time, but loving attentiveness to God cannot be cultivated if one only prays sporadically. The seeking needs to be regular and persistent, as we read in the Psalms: "'Come,' my heart says, 'seek his face!' Your face, LORD, do I seek" (Ps 27:8).

### **Asceticism and the gospel**

Yet there is also something else. Whatever is distinctive about Christian asceticism comes from the effort to follow Jesus and letting ourselves be formed by the gospel narratives. Three times in the Gospel of Mark, for example, Jesus announces what awaits him in Jerusalem. On each occasion his disciples misunderstand him, which furnishes Jesus an opportunity to instruct them about what journeying with Jesus means. Walking with Jesus means denying oneself, taking up one's cross and

coming after Jesus (Mark 8:34). It means becoming “last of all and servant of all” (Mark 9:35), and it further means not lording it over others but becoming their slave (Mark 10:42-44). From these texts it would appear that asceticism boils down to doing whatever is necessary in order to join Jesus on his “way.”

The language about servant and slave, about denying self and losing one’s life both for Jesus’ sake and for the sake of the gospel (Mark 8:35), is deeply antithetical to upward mobility, cultural privilege, social respectability and the politics of patronage. Joining Jesus on his “way” is going to land us sooner or later in the company of the Bartimaeuses of this world—disenfranchised, disesteemed, discarded. The burning sense that we are walking with such folks is a quintessential expression of an asceticism based on the gospel. Jesus, the one who though rich became poor for our sake (2 Cor 8:9), invites his disciple to do the same, especially the disciple who has hitherto enjoyed status, financial security and privilege, like the enthusiastic rich man of Mark 10:17.

There are sound reasons for suggesting that solidarity has emerged as a major form of Christian asceticism in our time. Solidarity disciplines our wants and affections, and it tames our insecurities. The more mindful I am of the condition and needs of others, the less likely I am to want to acquire more and more things for myself. The more mindful I am of how hard some people have to work and then just barely survive, the less likely I am to think that, like James and John, I have earned a position of special closeness to Jesus. But as soon as solidarity diminishes or disappears, ambition rears its divisive head. Someone who journeys in solidarity with Bartimaeus is hardly likely to want to lord it over anybody. It is much easier to resist the seductions of a consumerist culture when we are in touch

with people who cannot pay their rent, carry no health insurance, or live in constant fear of deportation. Conversely, it is far easier to maintain our vocational awareness the more readily and confidently we allow ourselves to be drawn into other people's lives, particularly the lives of the poor. Setting aside time to meditate and pray becomes a lot less burdensome or even annoying the more we recall how much men and women depend upon our being people who regularly meet the Lord in prayer.

Was Jesus an ascetic? Understanding asceticism along the lines in which we have been discussing it here, the answer is certainly yes. His mind and heart were absolutely fastened on God; he was totally God-centered. How else could we account for the heavenly voice that owns Jesus both at the waters of the Jordan and at the mount of the transfiguration? But we are not simply born God-centered. There needs to be a steady, lifelong practice of contemplative awareness—of relating oneself every day, through the exercise of prayer, to the divine mystery that creates and sustains us. Jesus was also an ascetic in the further sense that he had died to self and was living for his people; he looked not to his own interests but to the interests of others (Phil 2:4). Jesus practiced the asceticism of love.

### **An asceticism shaped by mission**

But not all asceticism is alike, even though it may be motivated by strong religious conviction. I think of the problem that arose because, unlike the Pharisees and the followers of John the Baptist, Jesus' disciples—and presumably Jesus himself—did not fast (Luke 5:33). Granted, Jesus replied that when the bridegroom is taken away, then they would start to fast. Nevertheless, Jesus and his followers seem to have been better known for their eating and drinking. Indeed, Jesus

himself was charged by his adversaries not only of being a friend of tax-collectors and sinners, but a drunkard and a glutton (Luke 7:34, Matt 11:19)! It is hard to imagine such an allegation ever being leveled against Moses, the Buddha or the Prophet, let alone against Christian saints after their conversion.

Historically the reason that the Pharisees adopted a distinctive fast might possibly have originated in their longing for the completion of the construction of the temple. The reason John fasted may have been connected with his ardent longing for the coming of God's anointed. If so, then Jesus' not fasting would have sent a message to both groups. The new temple was finally complete in the person of Jesus and the people that had gathered around him, who were largely society's throwaways. And the new age John had been preaching about had in fact finally dawned. Of course, there would have been other motives for fasting besides these. The community of Israel fasted on the Day of Atonement, for example, and the Old Testament mentions other occasions when fasting was undertaken.

Jesus instructed his disciples about the proper way to go about fasting (Matt 6:16-18), which implies that Jesus too must have fasted from time to time. But we are still left with the remembrance of Jesus frequently at table, eating and drinking, as an enduring sign that the kingdom had come and the moment of reconciliation was at hand. Besides, given the prominence of hunger within the gospel story—disciples having to pick grain on the Sabbath, famished crowds with Jesus in the wilderness, an impoverished widow with nothing left to live on, Lazarus outside the rich man's gate, and so on—we can appreciate why many of the people with whom Jesus associated might not have been in a position to observe religious fasts. For them, hunger had become a way of life: not the hunger that leads to

immediate death but the gnawing pain of stomachs that were rarely ever filled. Against such a background we can understand the words of Isaiah regarding the sort of fasting that God desires: “Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin?” (Isa 58:6-7).

Clearly, not all asceticism is alike. Not every form of asceticism is patterned after the life and ministry of Jesus, nor does every form of asceticism promote the same sort of vocational awareness. It seems pretty clear that not every form of charitable contribution qualifies as almsgiving. Nor does tending an infirm parent seem to be what Jesus was urging when he said, “I was sick and you took care of me” (Matt 25:36). He had once said, after all, “For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have?” (Matt 5:46) If we want to understand distinctively Christian asceticism and the sort of practice that shapes and continually nourishes vocational awareness, then the religious vision underlying the judgment scene of Matthew 25 is going to point us in the direction of actions aimed at helping and serving others. While it would not be hard to think of a variety of rich devotional practices that might contribute to the birth and development of vocational awareness, Christian asceticism embraces more than a person’s devotional life. Regular contact with disadvantaged people, finding ourselves in situations where we have to meet others on the shared ground of our common humanity in its poverty, is one of the surest ways I know of for keeping us mindful of why God has called us in the first place.

I would conclude, then, that Christian asceticism is going to be shaped by mission. Apostles and missionaries have long realized that preaching the gospel has to take into account the cultural context in which people live and the message is heard. A certain amount of evangelical pragmatism is healthy and to be expected as part of the process of inculturation. This means that there are forms of asceticism that might be congenial to one religious culture but not to another. For apostles, however, the vocation to preach the gospel and embody its power and beauty through bold, selfless witness generates a particular ascetical style.

Jesus' devotional life would have borne an indelible Jewish imprint, but his asceticism was intrinsically tied to his mission. On one occasion, we are told, he had gone off to pray; but the disciples tracked him down and Jesus resumed his activity of teaching and driving out demons (Mark 1:35-30). On another occasion, plans for much-needed rest were upset by the arrival of "a great crowd" (Mark 6:30-34). Finally, Jesus' saying "The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath" (Mark 2:27) reflects a liberating insight that has repercussions on how we conceive of asceticism within a Christian framework.

As a religious ritual sabbath observance comes under the umbrella of asceticism, but the observance cannot be absolute. Means must not become ends; hence the heated exchanges between Jesus and religious leaders over sabbath regulations. The "end" is human life itself—its dignity, peace, and well-being—which Jesus ultimately defended with *his* life. What guided Jesus' practice, therefore, was the mission he had received from God. As always, our vocational awareness finds its energy in the gospel texts. In contemplating those scenes and



sayings we need to keep our eyes fixed on how Jesus is habitually responding to people and their needs, just as generations before us have done. The asceticism that characterized the life of Jesus was determined fundamentally by his call to love and serve the people of Israel—a call which may have come from the people as much as it came from God. Different people (but the same God) has also called us.

[2004]

## **Whatever Happened to the Rich Man?**

There is a lot more to a vocation than choosing—or, for that matter, being called to—a particular way of life. The reason is that vocation is not something static. The outward form of a person's life, say, in terms of consecrated life or ordained ministry, and the signs that accompany those forms such as a religious habit or clerical collar, may not change all that much over time. But vocation goes much deeper, as engagement with the mystery of God shapes and reshapes us, endlessly. I know we sometimes speak of marriage in vocational terms, and people might refer to their life as a teacher, a physician, a politician, or a social worker in terms of a calling. And that makes perfect sense. Insofar as any Christian is being guided by the Spirit, the “calling” one discerns in terms of work and state of life might be characterized as “religious.”

But there is a more restricted sense of vocation that has to do with the experience of God's pressing a claim against one's life. This claim not only cannot be brushed aside; it also leaves an indelible mark upon the individual's existence, whether or not the person ultimately chooses to live out that claim in consecrated life or ordained ministry. Jacob may have wrestled with an angel for just a single night before being given the name “Israel,” but most of us will probably spend our whole lives contending with God in one way or another, and like Jacob be bruised for life (see Genesis 32:22-32). It is that divine claim upon a person, not only to do something but also to be a particular kind of human being, which makes vocation so dynamic a reality.

Discerning the will of God in the matter of vocation is seldom easy, and here the various gospel accounts may be a bit misleading. Jesus “found” Simon and Andrew, James and John, Nathanel, Philip and the others, and invited them to join him. “At once they left their nets and followed him” (Mark 1:18). Or again: “and Levi got up, left everything and followed him” (Luke 5:28). And further, “So they went and saw where he was staying, and spent that day with him” (John 1:39). The details, so abbreviated yet so charged with pristine remembrance, play on our imaginations. “At once they left their nets” and “they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men” (Mark 1:18, 20). When the call to discipleship is clearly spoken, the message seems to be, generous and zealous hearts ought to respond without the least hesitation.

In real life, however, a lot of discerning has to take place before one sets out on the road with Jesus. No one would start to build a tower without serious forethought, lest people wind up saying, “This fellow began to build and was not able to finish” (Luke 14:30). But while the initial discernment might indeed put someone on the way with Jesus, there are going to be many times along the road when the person is going to wonder what in the world she or he has gotten herself—or himself—into. Callings do not merely unfold laterally, like routes along a map; they also unfold vertically, pushing constantly deeper into the uncharted territory of a person’s mind and soul.

### **Gospel figures as aspects of Christian experience**

Most of us have long since recognized that the figures of Martha and Mary represent very inadequately the difference between active and contemplative communities, but those two sisters might very well represent two poles of Christian religious experience. That is to say, each of is at one and the

same time both Martha and Mary; we identify with both women—the one sister who opened her house to Jesus and the other sister who sat at his feet and listened. Jesus does indeed tell the “Martha” in us that “Mary” has chosen the better part (Luke 10:42), but in doing so Jesus has simply drawn attention to the priority of our union with God no matter whatever else we do in life.

Yet how long does it take us to learn this lesson? How many times in the course of a month or a year do our spirits swing back and forth between these two poles? Our hands, after all, were not given to us to sit on, or even to keep permanently folded in prayer. Martha and Mary may be distinct literary personalities, but the gospel reader recognizes both of them within his or her life. I would suggest that, in much the same way, many of the figures who appear in the gospel narratives coexist inside of us. Their actions and reactions, their inner thoughts and spoken words, are frequently things we have heard or noticed before inside our own minds.

### **Invitations declined**

Our imaginations gravitate so automatically toward the call stories in the gospels whenever we think about vocation that we might not spend much time reflecting on the individuals who decided not to follow Jesus. Moreover, we may have grown so accustomed to hearing Jesus call individuals to discipleship that we cannot imagine him not allowing someone to follow him who desperately wanted to. Several scenes come to mind.

The first passage I think of appears in John’s Gospel. After the discourse on the bread of life, John recalls many disciples saying, “This is a hard teaching. Who can accept it?” (John 6:60) As a result, “From this time many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him” (John 6:66). It is interesting

that this collapse of discipleship and perhaps of vocational awareness was apparently occasioned by an inability to grasp the Eucharistic mystery.

But the story of an invitation declined that stands out would have to be the moment when someone youthful and rich approached Jesus (Mark says he *ran* up to him) looking for guidance. Jesus counseled him, “If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me” (Matt 19:21). The price was more than the young man had the spiritual freedom to pay, and so “he went away sad.” The young man was torn between a genuine desire to accept the invitation and follow Jesus, and an attachment to property and his family name—“he had great wealth.” He would be losing whatever made him special and set him apart from everybody else. He would have been aligning himself with a lower class where everybody looked and spoke the same. He is sad (the Gospel’s word here means “sorrowful,” “grieving,” “with deep regret”), not so much because he cannot part with his goods but because Jesus’ invitation exposed a certain hollowness in his relationship with God. Maybe the young man is saddened because he realized he was losing something he had long wanted, just as he was about to find it.

The second story that comes to mind is that of the demon-possessed man of Gerasa, the monster of the hills and tombs who kept everyone terrified. Once the demons were driven out we find the man sitting at Jesus’ feet—the position of a disciple—clothed and in his right mind. “The man from whom the demons had gone out begged to go with him, but Jesus sent him away, saying, ‘Return home and tell how much God has done for you’.” (Luke 8:38-39) Mark tells us that he did more

than simply go back home: “So the man went away and began to tell in the Decapolis how much Jesus had done for him” (Mark 5:20). And the Decapolis appears to be a rather extensive piece of territory when you look at it on a biblical map!

Thus we have two individuals and two stories. One is about a person who was called to discipleship but declined the invitation, and the other is about someone who took the posture of a disciple, who really wanted to stay with Jesus but was sent away. The fact that the man with the demons was a gentile may account for why Jesus would not let him be a disciple, but for most of us being non-Jewish would be beside the point. The earnestness of his desire to stay with Jesus is underscored by the striking way in which he showed his thanks and obeyed Jesus’ instruction. Nevertheless, he was not permitted to travel in Jesus’ company.

### **How do the stories end?**

Now the gospels do not tell us what happened next; they leave that to our imaginations. Did the rich man, despite his evident moral and religious goodness—Jesus, after all, “looked at him and loved him” (Mark 10:21)—eventually get over his sadness and forget about Jesus, or did he spend the rest of his life wondering how his life would have turned out if he had done exactly what Jesus suggested? Did he wind up torn between what was good and what was better?

And did the man from Gerasa, liberated from his uncleanness and those terrifying demons, eventually conclude that he had said enough about how much Jesus had done for him? Did he ever see his deliverer again? Did he come to think that some residue of his former madness and contagion must have made him permanently unworthy to share Jesus’ fellowship? Or did he ultimately discover mission and identity

in bearing witness to Jesus, buoyed by a gratitude and a freedom so immense that his one encounter lasted him a lifetime? Was his testimony so effective that by the time Jesus reached the region of the Decapolis there were already four thousand people prepared to spend three days listening to Jesus, the Jewish prophet from Galilee, without anything to eat? The evangelist does not satisfy our curiosity, but his text teases our imagination. For although the man disappears from our view in Mark 5:20, his life and his story obviously went on. The same seems to hold true for the wealthy young man, but maybe at least for the evangelist the unnamed man's leaving "the way" was not the story's true ending. The encounter with Jesus may have left his soul bruised; the wrestling would continue.

Commenting on Mark's Gospel, the New Testament scholar Bas M.F. van Iersel has suggested that there may be a literary connection between the young man clothed in a white robe who interprets for the women what the empty tomb means (Mark 16:5) and the young man in the passion story who dropped the linen garment that covered him and fled from the garden naked (Mark 14:51-52). The two young men might in fact be the same figure and, if so, that figure could well be the evangelist himself, painted into the gospel narrative—not as an historical eyewitness but as a faith-witness. The one who drops the garment in the garden and runs away in disgrace could symbolize the Christian who, in face of persecution, "drops" his or her baptismal commitment. And the young man inside the tomb would symbolize the person whose faith has been recovered—once again clad in white and announcing with conviction that Jesus of Nazareth is not to be found among the dead, but among the living.

Van Iersel went on to link the young men in these two episodes with the demon-possessed character of Gerasa who lived among the tombs and roamed the countryside naked, but the rich young man strikes me as a more promising candidate for the one who would join Jesus, lose his nerve at the moment of crisis, and recover it when he later relived the memory of how Jesus had loved him. If we are on the right track here, then the rich young man—at least in the reader’s imagination—does indeed return to the story. Three figures become one. Someone was called to discipleship, turned away grieved, found his way back, abandoned Jesus with the others, and in the end became an Easter witness. Each stage of the journey would represent another moment in the unfolding of a call, a spiritual “week,” a further stage in the evolution of a vocation.

The point here is to realize that in contemplating passages like these we connect with and even become many of the characters in the gospels. They live inside of us, continually advancing and receding as our faith-life matures. Distinct as characters in the narrative, they help us to become aware of the many different forces, both internal and external, which stretch and test us. We know what it is like to run up to Jesus, full of enthusiasm and looking for what will satisfy the longing of our hearts. We know what it is like to walk away because our hearts may not be ready for the answer and the invitation that Jesus gives. But the longing, the sense of being called to make something more out of life, does not dissolve when we walk away; we shall always be wanting to find our way back. Still, the return can be unsteady; for it is one thing to make a decision and another to live with its implications. The young man who ran away naked was no exception; the rest of the disciples ran for cover as well. They may have kept their clothes on, but they had dishonored themselves just the same. The end of the story



reveals a Jesus who virtually calls his companions a second time. Thus the one who fled has now become our Easter witness.

In one way or another, perhaps many vocations follow a similar pattern. Between the moment when one is first called and the moment when one's whole life turns into a testimony to the memorial acclamation "Christ has died, Christ has risen, Christ will come again" there stands a process, a journey, the great unfolding. Sometimes it may seem that we are the rich man who walked away, the young man who fled, and the figure seated in the empty tomb—all at the same time. Not only that. We might even feel like the one who wanted to remain with Jesus but was told he could not. Yet in some sense that character refused to take no for an answer; for while he could not remain with Jesus, he took the memory of Jesus with him, sharing that remembrance with all who would listen. There can well be a vocational season when a person wants to be with Jesus but feels that Jesus will not allow it, at least not on the terms she or he was anticipating. Being with Jesus does not necessarily mean accompanying him physically in Galilee, of course. But learning to let go of what seems to be such a wholesome and holy desire—sailing off with Jesus—is an important lesson. Living alongside Jesus physically, much like the urge of many Christians to spend their lives in the Holy Land, is not an end in itself. Mission and testimony seem to matter more in God's plan.

We never outgrow the gospels. That sounds like such an obvious statement that it scarcely deserves to be said. But the gospel narrative is a little deceiving because it flows so easily like a history of Jesus' ministry; we read and listen to it in a linear fashion. But the gospels also read us, over and over again.

A person tires of the familiar scenes and images and starts searching for some other source of spiritual nourishment only when the vocational journey stalls. One may seem to have outgrown praying with the imagination. We can become temporarily frozen, isolating one character—one moment or “week” of the gospel story—from all the rest. The result is that we are no longer capable of feeling the overall rhythm of our lives or of God’s engagement with the world.

Yet insofar as the remembrance of being called takes over our hearts and minds, we are not going to remain stuck for very long. The Spirit will not allow that to happen. All of us know how alienation feels, but we also know the feeling of being invited and being sent. We know what it’s like to walk away sad, but we also know that walking away only makes the sadness worse. We know, too, what it’s like to be an Easter witness, reinterpreting the empty tomb—the emptiness and bewilderment so many people experience at one time or another—by pointing to the real presence of the risen Lord in everyday life. These moments come and go within us; such are the mysterious seasons of vocation.

[2004]

## Open Minds to the Mystery of God:

A theological reflection on John Paul II's letter for the 42<sup>nd</sup>  
World Day of Prayer for Vocations

There is something quite moving about this year's letter for anyone who has seen recent pictures of the Pope. The letter is brief. Five times it cites the Apostolic Letter of January 6, 2001 *Novo millennio ineunte*, where John Paul II wrote in the opening paragraph: "At the beginning of the new millennium, and at the close of the Great Jubilee . . . our hearts ring out with the words of Jesus when one day, after speaking to the crowds from Simon's boat, he invited the Apostle to 'put out into the deep' for a catch: '*Duc in altum*' (Lk 5:4). Peter and his first companions trusted Christ's words, and cast the nets. . . *Duc in altum!* These words ring out for us today, and they invite us to remember the past with gratitude, to live the present with enthusiasm and to look forward to the future with confidence."

Addressing himself to young people in this year's letter on vocations, John Paul reminisces: "I still hold in my heart the memory of the many opportunities I have had over the years to meet with young people, who have now become adults, some of them your own parents perhaps, or priests or religious, your teachers in the faith. I saw them happy, as young people should be, but also thoughtful, because they were conscious of a desire to give full 'meaning' to their lives." From his own declining health and diminishment the Pope is remembering the past with gratitude. I suspect that the Gospel's words "Put out into deep water" have assumed profound meaning four years later in the way the same Lord who spoke to him when he was young is

now inviting him to look forward to the future with confidence. The deep water in which we find ourselves seems to change over time.

While this year's letter does not go beyond what the Pope wrote in years past concerning vocations, two points struck me. The first is his positive, even enthusiastic assessment of young people today. "I came to recognize more and more," he writes, "how strong is the attraction in young people to the values of the spirit, and how sincere is their desire for holiness." And the second is his familiar yet always refreshing appreciation of the variety of vocations. Speaking of the Lord's invitation to "put out into the deep" the Pope continues: "Some he calls to family life, others to consecrated life or to the ministerial priesthood." While he might easily have included here those Christians who feel themselves called by the Spirit to lead single lives in the world, John Paul's understanding of marriage as a calling or vocation is noteworthy. He then goes on to say: "Do not forget that today too there is need of holy priests, of persons wholly consecrated to the service of God!" But where will these vocations come from, if not from the subculture of firmly Christian families?

The Pope is keenly sensitive to the crucial role family life plays in promoting vocational awareness. By virtue of our baptism each of us has undergone a second birth, a rebirth into mission. Although most parents probably do not use the language of being called and sent when they speak to their children about God, they are constantly evangelizing by example: "When adult Christians show themselves capable of revealing the face of Christ through their own words and example, young people are more ready to welcome his demanding message, stamped as it is with the mystery of the

Cross.” While it is certainly true that vocational awareness can be stimulated and cultivated in church and in Catholic schools, religious sensibility is usually born within households where couples live each day by faith. Hence the Pope sees a connection between ordained ministry, consecrated life, and Christian marriage. The Church cannot promote vocations to ministry and religious life without at the same time promoting, assisting, and defending married life.

### **Another look at the story in Luke 5**

A glance at a map of Palestine in the time of Jesus shows the Sea of Galilee to be about seven miles across at its widest stretch and a bit less than thirteen at its longest, if I can trust my ruler. An encyclopedia tells me that its deepest point (in the northern corner, where Capernaum was located) measures a little over 150 feet. Given Simon’s answer “Master, we have worked hard all night,” we know that the scene takes place during the morning.

At its simplest level Luke 5:1-11 is about the calling of Simon Peter and his partners, the brothers James and John. Sitting in Simon’s boat, Jesus was teaching a large crowd that had assembled at the water’s edge. The fishermen meanwhile were washing and perhaps mending their nets. A note in *The New Interpreter’s Study Bible* tells us that fishermen were reckoned among the socially “despised,” while another commentary states that the poverty of fishermen was “proverbial” in the ancient Mediterranean world.

Although Luke reports that “they left everything and followed him,” I do not think he was speaking about a literal and total renunciation of family, home, and material goods. After all, if we follow Mark’s account, Peter’s house appears to have been the location of considerable healing activity and

teaching. According to the Fourth Gospel the disciples did return to fishing (John 21), and according to Paul both Peter and the other apostles were accompanied by their wives when they went on mission (1 Cor 9:5). The “everything” of which Luke speaks, like his phrase “into deep water,” teases our imaginations. What these expressions mean concretely for each of us is going to change over time. What does it mean for each of us, personally, to leave everything? What does it mean for us, here and now, to put out into deep water?

What should not be overlooked, however, is the likelihood that the ones Jesus called in this scene were poor (though not beggars) and disdained by people of standing and privilege. The poor, Jesus would later tell John the Baptist, have the good news preached to them (Lk 7:22); the fishermen washing their nets (and presumably listening to Jesus) would have been among them.

Ministerial and religious vocations have crossed, of course, all social lines. Over the centuries rich families and poor ones, the households of nobility as well as those of peasants, have seen their children enter holy orders or join religious communities. But it may be worth reminding ourselves that the first disciples, like Jesus himself, came from the humblest of backgrounds. In light of the painful inability of the rich ruler in Luke 18 to respond to Jesus’ invitation (Matthew 19:20 identifies him as a “young man”), we may wonder whether it was easier for the fishermen to follow Jesus simply because they owned so little; they would not have had to step down so many rungs on the social ladder. Or to look at things from a different angle, the fishermen might have had a less cluttered view of the world than the social elite, whose lives were encumbered by privilege and wealth.

The gospel reader might suppose that a fisherman who had just taken a surprise catch of fish should not have been at all reluctant to follow Jesus. And yet it was not the net-splitting haul of fish that so moved Simon and the others. Strictly speaking, such a huge catch, however unexpected and astonishing, need not automatically be labeled a miracle. People do occasionally stumble across buried treasure, farmers on occasion are blessed with a harvest beyond their wildest expectations, merchants once in a while find a priceless jewel, and fishermen sometimes have extraordinarily good luck. Still, what seized their minds that morning was hardly the prospect of sudden prosperity. The fishermen put everything aside because something in the message of Jesus sounded so compelling that they wanted to be part of his mission. More than anything else, what counted was gathering and rescuing lives; what counted above all was the reign of God. Their minds must have been already open to the mystery of God. Otherwise they would not have been paying attention to Jesus' words as they washed their nets; indeed, with a bow to the Fourth Gospel, they would never have gone to the Jordan to listen to John (see Jn 1:35-42).

### **Sinful yet nonetheless called**

The fishermen were decent, God-fearing people, which accounts for why Peter fell to his knees before Jesus. He realizes that he has been in the presence of mystery and reacts by asking Jesus to leave him. This reaction makes us notice an important moment in a person's coming to vocational awareness, namely, a profound sense of personal inadequacy and sinfulness. Peter may have loaned Jesus his boat, but it now appears that the lake itself belonged to Jesus.

The listening, the skepticism about Jesus' instruction to put out into deep water, the huge catch: these elements have to be

taken together as we try to understand Peter's disorientation. The world of the lake must have suddenly felt terribly small, yet the unknown beyond the lake, beyond Capernaum, beyond Galilee must have been correspondingly frightening. Kneeling before that unknown Peter asks that it go away. In this moment of vulnerability, confusion, awkwardness, and fear Jesus calls Peter to be with him. Calling appears to presuppose a recognition of unworthiness and inadequacy, an experience that was going to leave an indelible memory. "Jesus knew that I was a sinful man," Peter might later have reminded himself, "but he still called me." Could the apostle ever forget what happened on the lake?

The vocational dynamic in this passage might well be summed up in Peter's words "Depart from me for I am a sinful man" and Jesus' reply "From now on you will be catching men." We are painfully aware of our inadequacies, waywardness, and shortcomings; yet at the same time we hear Jesus calling us to join his mission. In Luke's story, Jesus' invitation to Peter is not quite so direct as the words "Follow me," but maybe this indirection makes the invitation all the more striking. "From now on you will be catching men" seems to imply that Peter had already come to a decision. If Jesus did not walk away, then Peter was not going to be the one to leave.

We need this background in order to hear Jesus aright when he says, "Put out into deep water." These are the words that should logically follow our experience of being called, not precede it. First we are called, and then we are asked to put out into the deep. The challenge of faith, of putting out into the unknown where we are no longer in charge either of our lives or of the world, will become a permanent feature of our discipleship. Vocation means letting go of one's own life, or as



Luke says, “They left everything and followed him.” But that is just half of what happens. The other half is surrendering to the mystery of God for the rest of one’s life, or as the earlier verse would have it, “Put out into the deep and let down your nets for a catch.” In this case they caught fish. The next time they would be fishing for human lives. And at some much later moment it might even have occurred to them to wonder about the hand that so mysteriously had caught and rescued each of them, that morning on the Sea of Galilee when Jesus turned their world upside down.

### **One call to holiness, many paths**

As usual, the Pope concludes his letter with a prayer. It opens: “Jesus, Son of God . . . You call all the baptized to ‘put out into the deep,’ taking the path that leads to holiness.” That the call to holiness is universal was a clear teaching of the Council’s Dogmatic Constitution on the Church. “Thus it is evident to everyone that all the faithful of Christ . . . are called to the fullness of the Christian life and to the perfection of charity . . . The classes and duties of life are many, but holiness is one—that sanctity which is cultivated by all who are moved by the Spirit of God” (*Lumen Gentium*, 40).

The Pope’s prayer clearly echoes the Council. The passage in Luke 5 thus applies not to just a few in the Church but to every Christian. To promote vocations, therefore, requires that we cultivate the sense of being called across the spectrum of possible vocational forms and choices. We cannot promote vocations to ordained ministry and religious life, for example, without promoting the vocation of Christian marriage, and neither can we support and encourage family life without promoting and nurturing the other manifestations of the Spirit’s care for the Church. We cannot encourage those drawn to lead

solitary lives without nurturing the call to service; we cannot promote traditional religious institutes and their charisms without supporting new ecclesial expressions of common life and purpose. We cannot animate people toward ordained ministry without celebrating the call experienced by many laypeople to be spiritual directors, chaplains, catechists, retreat masters, missionaries, and so on. Just as the notion of “seamless garment” has been deployed to help us reflect on life and death issues, perhaps it could also be applied to vocations. Respect for life must take into account human life at all its stages and conditions. So too a “seamless garment” approach to vocational awareness would encompass the whole of Christian existence and the multiplicity of ways in which Jesus’ followers give expression to their union with the mystery of God.

The particular form a vocation takes is in the end secondary to the birth and development of the believer’s relationship with God in Christ. No one is going to start thinking about vocational forms and choices before she or he has had an experience of his or her existence both as gift and as mystery. The more the Gospel takes over our minds and hearts, the more we are going to find ourselves desirous and excited about proclaiming and bearing witness “to the wonderful truth of the saving love of God,” as John Paul writes.

In the end vocation is not about choosing an occupation or profession for the sake of personal fulfillment and financial gain. The disciples were not simply being asked to change one occupation, whether it was fishing, collecting taxes, or tent making, for another sort of gainful employment. They were really being asked to become a different kind of human being, namely, people transformed by the saving love of God and, just as importantly, by a saving love for God’s people. For the Pope,

the clearest indication that such transformation is taking place is our readiness to put out into deep water. Even before it takes a definite shape, the Pope seems to be telling us, vocation means opening oneself to a lifelong engagement with the mystery of God. Vocation is going to mean putting ourselves out further and further into those deep waters where other human beings are waiting for the saving hands of God. And to press the metaphor a bit more, perhaps no one is fit to go fishing for other human beings who has not, at one time or another, been drawn from the sea in someone else's net.

[2005]

## **Eucharist and Vocation**

Many a Catholic of a certain age might recall a moment of praying in a quiet chapel or church and longing for some signal from the veiled Presence inside the tabernacle that would confirm Christ was actually there. Such wishes may have been naïve, but they are understandable. If the risen Lord is actually present in the Blessed Sacrament, then why is it unrealistic for a believer to request and expect divine reassurance? The miraculous signs do not come and yet we still believe. No miraculous catches of fish, and nevertheless we still choose to follow Jesus. Perhaps the only way to account for this blessing is to say that adult faith eventually gets beyond the need for signs, as in the Beatitude spoken to Thomas: “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe” (John 20:29).

For countless priests, early devotion to the Eucharist played a pivotal role in the growth and development of their vocational awareness. Holy stirrings, deep inside, were quickened and nourished by going to Mass and not infrequently by the privilege of kneeling and serving in the sanctuary. One had a firm, unquestioning, and profoundly consoling sense of the Lord’s real presence in the tabernacle, a combination of faith and feeling that made going to church other than at Mass times a rich and rewarding practice. The silence, the red glow of the sanctuary lamp, the colored light that came pouring through the windows: all this conferred on our churches a warmth and intimacy that acted like a magnet upon a youthful imagination. The gospel scenes and stories that crossed one’s inner space each Sunday sounded fresh and contemporary, attractive and utterly believable to anyone accustomed to kneeling for a while

in the stillness made sacred by the tabernacle. People developed habits of reverence that carried over into everyday life. The mystery of God came to feel as real outside of church as inside.

Eucharistic piety, like nearly everything else in our lives, changes over time. We do not read the gospels the same way, we do not hear the articles of the Creed in the same way, and our devotional practices may shift. Does a work of art, a poem, a piece of music change over the years? Or is it we who change? Why do we continue to discover freshness in the enduring symbols of faith? I think the answer is that our lives unfold as lifelong conversations with God; one's relationship with God is never static. And if our relationship with God is not static, then the Church's religious symbols will be regularly mediating fresh experiences of the divine mystery. We grow, but in some way so do the gospels, the doctrines, the symbols, the sacraments—the Christian community's works of art—as they gradually and often imperceptibly disclose their depths.

It would be gratifying to be able to say that Eucharistic piety grows and deepens in all of us as the years go by, but clearly the Eucharist figures more prominently in some Christian lives than in others. Yet even where the Eucharist occupies a central role, we notice considerable diversity in terms of how Eucharistic faith becomes integrated into our spiritual life. The texture of the interior life of someone in a religious community whose existence is organized entirely around Eucharistic adoration, for example, is going to be different from that of people who are married, raising a family, and attending Mass on Sundays. We have all been baptized, but we do not all live out our baptism in the same way. Consequently, we are going to internalize the Eucharistic mystery differently.

Every so often during the recitation of the Eucharistic prayer I become conscious of standing in a long line of celebrants that stretches backwards into history to the earliest days of the Church and then reaches forward into centuries, to communities yet to be born. Eucharistic faith is my faith insofar as I am a member of a believing community, but the Eucharist is hardly mine to possess just because I am a priest. The celebrant is but one of many human links, both clerical and lay, in a very long history; what he gives voice to is the faith of God's people.

At such moments I become aware, not only of the real presence of Christ in the gifts, but also of the real presence of Christ's people—the people who have lived before us, the people now alive, and the countless numbers of people yet to be born. Beyond the men, women, and children facing me in church, my inner eye glimpses a great multitude. The words of Revelation echo in my ear: "Then I heard what seemed to be the voice of a great multitude, like the sound of many waters" (Rev 19:6). Indeed, why should this not happen, given such globalizing phrases in the Eucharistic prayer as "advance the peace and salvation of all the world," "those here present and all your people, and all who seek you with a sincere heart," and "all the dead whose faith is known to you alone"? As I look at the bread and cup and then shift my gaze toward the assembly, the Liturgy sharpens my awareness of Christ's real presence in and among his people. The Eucharist, one might say, makes *all* God's people really present to us, each time we assemble to celebrate the Lord's Supper.

### **Eucharist and world**

The dynamic of the Eucharistic mystery leads from the sacrament to the people, from love of Christ to love of the

world, from bread to life, and then back again: from the world to Christ, from people to sacrament, from life to bread. The more we let ourselves be pulled into the historical fortunes of God's people, the more we are going to feel ourselves drawn to ponder and contemplate the risen Lord's presence in the Eucharist. While I cannot predict whether vocational awareness will be awakened in this back and forth movement, I am convinced that in this dynamic our sense of being called is stretched, deepened, purified, and sustained. It is *stretched* because the Christ who calls us to be with him is the same Lord who sends us out on mission (Mark 3:14), and that mission is potentially limitless. When shall we tell the Lord that we do not want to meet any more of his people?

Calling is *deepened* because as our prayer moves between people and sacrament the Spirit keeps revealing to us, however gradually, the awesome significance of the words "For God so loved the world" (John 3:16). How, we might wonder, does one love human beings, given the horrible things we so often do to one another? Yet God does love us; love defines God's mystery (1 John 4:8). Moving back and forth between Eucharist and world, one's vocation becomes steeped in the mystery of divine love.

Calling is also *purified*. The Lord of the Eucharist was a victim, but he was by no means history's only victim. To stand alongside those who suffer is to allow oneself to be stripped, to be made powerless and vulnerable, to have no answers. It is to cry out with the psalmist, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Psalm 22:1) To place oneself in the real presence of the risen Jesus is to invite into one's heart all victims and all those who suffer. Increasingly we ask ourselves: What ultimately matters? What has lasting worth? What is truly

important? With whom, finally, have we chosen to stand? Gradually every false security is pulled away from us and we are left bare, with nothing to cover us except our calling to spend ourselves for others. For in the end, “those who want to save their life will lose it” (Mark 8:35).

And finally, in this back and forth movement between sacrament and world vocational awareness is *sustained*. The fact is that we are constantly drawing life from one another. A priest draws life from the people he serves (as does every other minister of the gospel), for the people keep us mindful of our calling, especially the poor and heavily burdened. After recounting a day of healing, Matthew cites Isaiah, “He took our infirmities and bore our diseases” (Matt 8:17). Yet the impression we are left with is that rather than exhausting Jesus, the great crowds who came to him gave him life, too, even as he brought new life to them. The people immediately before us, the ones we actually see and serve, help us to remain evangelically animated and focused on the risen Lord. Their faith inspires us, while our awareness of how much they thirst for God makes our own search all the more honest and intense. Stretched, deepened, purified, and sustained: this is what happens to vocational awareness as we move back and forth between Eucharist and world. Whether kneeling in a silent church or participating in the Liturgy, the world that intrudes makes us pray like apostles.

### **Breaking and sharing**

During the Easter season, with the Emmaus story still ringing in our ears, the phrase “and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread” (Luke 24:35) becomes the object of a great deal of reflection. What was so significant about the breaking of the bread? To figure that out,



perhaps we have to use our imaginations a little. In my imagination, at least, I envision Jesus at supper with a group of disciples at Peter's house early in his ministry. Peter's wife, mother-in-law, and children are there as well. He would routinely bless the food, break the bread, and then hand pieces to those around the table. I imagine further that he had been conversing with them, as he customarily did, about the kingdom of God and what its arrival would mean.

At some point, one of Peter's children catches Jesus by the sleeve or interrupts the grown-ups and asks Jesus what someone would have to do in order to enter the kingdom of God. And Jesus, with bread still in his hands and an imagination that could draw parables from practically anywhere, answers the youngster. "The kingdom," Jesus might say, glancing from the loaf to the child, "is just a matter of breaking and sharing. Even as we break and share bread, so too do we break and share our lives." Being a clever child, the youngster continues, "Am I like a loaf of bread?" And Jesus replies, "Yes, you are bread of life. And I am bread of life, and so are your mother and father. And when we all learn to break and share, not just with our families and close friends, but with everyone living in Capernaum, and Galilee, and Judea—and even outside of Israel—then the reign of God will truly have arrived." That moment would have imprinted itself so indelibly on the memory of his disciples that from then on every time someone broke bread the disciples were minded of Jesus, and each time Jesus came to mind they remembered further that no one ever broke bread—or shared his life—quite the way he did. They would remember him as the living bread, come down from heaven, broken for the life of the world. Breaking and sharing life thus expressed, in a nutshell, everything that Jesus taught them and everything he was for them.

Admittedly, this is an exercise of imagination. But there is a certain plausibility to thinking that the connection between Jesus and the breaking of bread was forged fairly early in his ministry. How else could we satisfactorily explain why the connection became so central and proved so determinative for the community's worship after his death? It is not unreasonable to conjecture that maybe a child had indeed prompted him to create a parable—an enacted parable—since at least in John's account it was a young boy who shared his five small loaves with Jesus (John 6:9). Somehow a child had gotten into the story. The kingdom of heaven, the parable might have opened, is like the breaking and sharing of bread.

Many a homilist has picked up on the symbolic nature of the breaking and sharing of bread. Jesus' words "and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh" (John 6:51) fill out the meaning of these very ordinary actions. Yet what we notice once again is how world and bread become linked. What does vocational awareness consist of, if not the desire to give ourselves "for the life of the world," just as Jesus did? After all, it is the risen Jesus, ever present in word and sacrament, who empowers us both to desire and to do this.

What then is the connection between Eucharist and vocation? Maybe in the end it is not Eucharist alone, or the world alone, but how we come to view and understand one through the other.

[2005]

## 29.

### **Lamp to My Feet, Light to My Path:**

The message of Benedict XVI to the youth of the world  
on the importance of living with Scripture

#### **The letter's occasion and plan**

The occasion for this papal letter is the 21<sup>st</sup> World Youth Day, which is being celebrated this year on Palm Sunday. While last year's celebration took place in Cologne, this year's celebration (and apparently next year's as well) is to take place in local churches. In July 2008, the site for the World Youth Day celebration will be Sydney. The overall theme for these three years is the Holy Spirit and mission. For 2006, the Pope's reflection focuses on the Spirit of truth who reveals Christ to each of us, particularly through the devout reading of Scripture. Next year, the Pope's letter will reflect on John 13:34 where Jesus says, "Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another." And in 2008 he will ask us to turn our attention to Christian mission and to ponder the text: "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8). The Pope explains the reason for this three-year plan of reflection and celebration: "There is an urgent need for the emergence of a new generation of apostles anchored firmly in the word of Christ, capable of responding to the challenges of our times and prepared to spread the Gospel far and wide."

## **The Bible as the Church's book**

Scripture, the Holy Father writes, drawing on Psalm 119:105, is the “lamp” and “light” by which we make our way through the world. He says, “The loving presence of God, through his word, is the lamp that dispels the darkness of fear and lights up the path even when times are most difficult.”

But Scripture is the Church's book; apart from the community of believers, Scripture would have no life. We read and meditate upon the Bible from within the Church, and from within the Church the Holy Spirit teaches us as we read, think, and pray. Love for Scripture and love for the Church should grow apace. The Pope reminds us that Scripture is one of the two “breads” that nourish the Church, since the people of God are fed both by word and by sacrament. His concern in this letter, however, is Scripture. “My dear young friends,” he writes, “I urge you to become familiar with the Bible, and to have it at hand so that it can be your compass pointing out the road to follow. By reading it you will learn to know Christ.”

## **Reading the world through God's eyes**

But merely letting our eyes fall on the pages of the Bible is not enough. To read Scripture in a way that lets us hear God speaking to us requires, first and foremost, an attentive ear. The heart, the Pope explains, must be trained to listen. And for this training he recommends *lectio divina*, the contemplative reading of biblical texts. Reading a passage from the Bible is followed by thinking and reflecting (*meditatio*). This leads to conversing with God (*oratio*) and finally to an abiding mindfulness of the presence of God (*contemplatio*). The study of Scripture needs always to be accompanied by a mindfulness of the presence of Christ.

At this point we may want to elaborate on what the Pope says, since there are multiple presences of the risen Jesus. We speak of his presence in the biblical word, yet we can also speak of the presence of Christ in the believing community, in the Eucharist, in other men and women, especially the poor, in the Church's ministers, in families and Christian marriages, in the many "Galilees" where human beings live, and even in the graced aspects of human culture. Contemplative awareness should extend to the presence of Christ in all these places.

It is important to notice a serious undercurrent that runs through the letter. Thus we read: "It is not easy to recognize and find authentic happiness in this world in which we live, where people are often held captive by the current ways of thinking." The human race is stumbling and groping in darkness, the Pope reminds us, searching for a freedom that remains unattainable apart from the Word of Truth which is Christ. The one who meditates regularly on the words of Scripture will discover the difference between "God's way of thinking" and the way human beings think. In other words, the Holy Spirit helps us to understand the fundamental difference between the way of life and the way of death that is so memorably spelled out in Deuteronomy 30:15-20.

Although the Pope does not go into detail about these two different ways of thinking, a moment's reflection might bring to mind the sharp contrast within the gospels between what Jesus represents and what Caesar represents. One might think of the difference between the imperial way of power, ambition, patronage, honor, influence, wealth, and military might, and the altogether different way of the Son of God. "God's way of thinking" (or what we might call "true divinity") is revealed in poverty, powerlessness, humility, service, solidarity, being

disesteemed by social and religious elites, compassion, forgiveness, and love. Through the meditative reading of Scripture, we deepen our understanding of these two vastly different sets of categories. We learn how to discern the signs of the times and “to read the events of history through [God’s] eyes.”

Of course, we ought not to contrast “God” and “world” so sharply that we lose sight of the fact that God created the world, and continues to create it, out of love. The gospel reveals not only God’s judgment about “the way of Caesar” and the empty values of the imperial style (what the Pope refers to as “the errors or illusions of aberrant ideologies”). But the gospel also reveals God’s redeeming love. It reveals God’s reaching into history, inviting and calling people, especially young people, to be messengers of God’s truth and life. Echoing John Paul II, Benedict XVI urges the youth of the world, “Do not be afraid to respond to him with generosity . . . Do not be afraid.” Within the world there are, after all, many elements of goodness and hope, of which the world’s youth are a pre-eminent sign.

### **Morning star rising**

The contemplative reading of Scripture should yield extraordinary results, the Pope assures us, both in terms of what we do and the kind of people we become. He cites the letter of James, “Be doers of the word, and not merely hearers” (James 1:22). The practice of meditating on Scripture eventually reshapes everything we do, so that our actions increasingly draw their form and energy from the word of God. But the Holy Father also appeals to 2 Peter 1:19. This verse reads: “So we have the prophetic message more fully confirmed. You will do well to be attentive to this as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts.”

The message of which this text speaks is what the writer once heard “on the holy mountain” when the heavenly voice spoke, “This is my Son, my Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” The event he is talking about was, of course, the transfiguration. In that scene, Jesus’ clothes became “dazzling white” (Mark 9:3). Luke writes that “the appearance of his face changed” (Luke 9:29), and Matthew says that “his face shone like the sun” (Matt 17:2). How did such a change happen?

The clue is perhaps to be found in the story of Moses. For we read in Exodus 33:17-23 the wonderful story of Moses’ asking God for the favor of beholding the divine face. The favor was denied, but God compensated by letting Moses see his back. The result was that Moses’ own face became so bright that the Israelites were afraid to look at him and asked him to cover it (Exodus 34:29-35).

In the transfiguration story, Jesus “shone like the sun” and his clothes became brilliantly white because he was constantly looking into the face of God. The eyes of his heart were fixed on his Father, and on “the holy mountain” that deep communion erupted into full view. Nevertheless, the moment of glory passed, for human beings are not meant to spend their lives on mountain tops. They must live and find God in the everyday world. Thus when the disciples looked around “they saw no one with them anymore, but only Jesus” (Mark 9:8)—the everyday, flesh-and-blood Jesus, the carpenter turned rabbi, whom they had come to know and love. And yet in that instant the three disciples had glimpsed the mystery that lies at the heart of contemplation. Contemplating the face of God brings about an extraordinary transformation. Knowing this, the Pope has invited the youth of the world to read and meditate upon Scripture. For in contemplating the divine Word, the eye of

their hearts will fasten on the face of Christ. And they will, in time, become what they contemplate.

[2006]



**Mary—Vocation of the Mother,  
Mother of the Vocation**

That vocations come from God is something all of us believe. Very few callings, however, are first heard from the lips of an angel. For most of us, God works mysteriously in everyday circumstances and events, in relationships and encounters, in the inspirations born of good example and dedication that leap, like words off a page, from people around us. The Gabriels who step into our lives have flesh and blood. Their approach may be less spectacular than apparitions, but they make the presence of God every bit as real.

**The Call of the Mother**

Paintings of the annunciation, such as the well-known scene of Fra Angelico, give us a visual representation of the supernatural encounter, but one usually needs to look closely to appreciate how they also highlight Mary's faith—her relationship with God before the annunciation took place. Mary may be praying when the angel arrives, or devoutly reading scripture. Yet how, we might ask ourselves, did Mary come to be a woman of prayer? How did the word of faith get sown in her heart, and in what ways was it nourished? A spiritual path had to be prepared in order for her to be able to hear the heavenly voice when it broke into her life. The Lord called, and she responded. But faith does not suddenly appear, in full blossom, in someone's life; it has a history. Our relationship with God has to be awakened, cultivated, stretched and tested. Mary's faith, too, must have had its history.

What is the history behind Mary's vocation? In trying to answer this question, our minds turn automatically toward her family, the friendships she must have had, and the people she prayed alongside in worship services each Sabbath. Without such human contacts and exposure to the faith of others, it is hard to imagine how Mary would have ever been able to hear the angel's message, let alone comprehend it. If she had not been raised in an atmosphere that fostered openness to God, she would have had no context in which to receive the angel's words and grasp their meaning. The language faith speaks takes time to learn and years to master.

The Mary who gives us the *Magnificat* was well schooled in the religious traditions of her people and the great lessons of biblical faith. She knew the story of Abraham and how God had revealed himself to Abraham in the call to take a great risk: "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you" and "So Abram went" (Gen 12:1, 4). Perhaps Mary had pondered the words of Ruth, whose son would become the great-grandfather of David: "Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people and your God my God" (Ruth 1:16). If Mary was familiar with the thanksgiving song of Hannah, Samuel's mother, she must also have known the words spoken later by the young boy in the temple: "Speak, for your servant is listening" (1 Sam 3:10).

More often than not, however, the word of God needs human instruments to help with its translation. What this means, concretely, is that God's call frequently comes "from below," from within the community. Granted, the sense of being called is a graced inspiration, and the potential shape of a call may emerge as a result of reading the biography of an exemplary

Christian or from meditating on a portion of Scripture. But callings do not bypass ordinary human experience; in fact, they run right through it. The needs of people—their need for reassurance, their need of other men and women to accompany them along the journey of faith, their thirst for freedom and life—become a call of the Spirit.

Sometimes the call seems but a whisper, at other times it feels like a mighty rush; but the vocation is always heard through the people, since God reaches into our lives through theirs. Mary could hear God’s call because her people lived inside her, especially the lowly and the poor ones among them. Few things so confirm one’s experience of God and steady one’s religious commitment as living among families struggling to survive, sharing their world, and joining one’s life to theirs. Artists have depicted Mary as reading, but it’s not likely that she was so literate. The Scripture Mary learned she would have known largely from hearing, while faith would have enabled her to “read” the word of God in the faces and events that made up the everyday world of Nazareth.

### **Annunciation in the Spiritual Exercises**

In his *Spiritual Exercises*, St. Ignatius intertwined the contemplation on the annunciation—the divine call to Mary—with the Trinitarian conversation about the state of the world. For the first thing the Trinity does, after viewing what has been going on in human history, is to call upon Mary of Nazareth to be the mother and teacher of the “one who was to come” (Luke 7:20). In the imaginative narrative sketched by St. Ignatius, the Divine Persons, witnessing the tragic loss of soul that is taking place in human lives, say, “Let us bring about the redemption of the human race.” Ignatius then adds “etcetera,” in order to invite the one contemplating to imagine more details of that

conversation, filled so richly with compassion and divine humility. For Ignatius, divine initiative is unthinkable without human response, and the human world would be without meaning unless it were founded on a relationship with God.

While the Divine Persons are contemplating the world, Mary at the very same moment is responding to the profound longing of God's people for a new and definitive exodus. She is both handmaid of the Lord and handmaid of the Lord's people. "Then the angel departed from her," Luke writes. "Then": that is to say, "only then," because the heavenly messenger could not depart until Mary took the risk of faith, just as Abraham had once done. For the word of the Lord never returns to him empty: "so shall my word be that goes forth from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it" (Isaiah 55:11).

Saying yes to God's call leaves Mary rejoicing, trusting (for she cannot see the future) and eager to talk with someone in the family who had also received vocational grace. She sets out from Nazareth, in haste, for "a Judean town in the hill country" in order to share her experience with Elizabeth, and to listen to Elizabeth share hers. The divine Persons "speak," and their speech becomes a call. The two mothers likewise speak. Both are to have sons, whom they will hold for a while; and then they will lose them. But during the precious time they hold them, they will become the mothers of two vocations. The faith of the mothers will prepare the way for their sons to hear the voice of God and respond as prophets.

### **The Call of the Son**

We may not be used to thinking of Jesus as having a vocation, but that is exactly what is suggested by the account of

his baptism. At the Jordan, Jesus said yes to God, just as his mother had done in the hour he was conceived. The gospels are reticent when it comes to giving details of Jesus' upbringing. Luke's verse "And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor" condense in a few words the years of adolescence and young adulthood during which his interior life widened and deepened.

The heavenly voice that said "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased" is informing us, not Jesus, about his identity. These words were spoken, and are always being spoken, for the benefit of his followers, for those witnessing the event in their imaginations. The fourth evangelist reminds us, "This voice has come for your sake, not for mine" (John 12:30).

Still, the baptism in the Jordan marked the moment when Jesus began his mission, and the heavenly voice, echoing a text from Isaiah, affirmed his readiness and his call. "Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him" (Isaiah 42:1).

Years of learning, thinking, observing, and of growing; years of being schooled by Mary's word and example in the ways of God; years of Sabbath instruction and praying with the villagers of Nazareth; years of internalizing the historical fortunes of his people; years of conversing with friends about the hopes they shared for the restoration of Israel; years of learning what it meant to live, not for oneself, but for the people of God; years of hearing his mother hymn, perhaps like a mantra, "He brings down the powerful from their thrones and lifts up the lowly; he fills the hungry with good things, and sends the rich away empty": these are the hidden years Luke

was summing up when he reports, so succinctly, “And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years.”

The lessons and experience of those years accompanied Jesus to the Jordan. Without them, the heavenly voice would have fallen on deaf ears. In a most real, most human sense, if Mary had not been a woman of faith, Jesus would probably not have known how to answer the divine call. Not even God’s call to Jesus would bypass his humanity. Mary’s response at the annunciation, therefore, needs to be taken with the utmost seriousness. She was not lending only her body to the divine initiative but her very humanity. Her vocation was to nurture the vocation of her son. And in this way Mary would nurture the vocations of all those who would later follow him.

### **The Mother as follower**

The Son of God, in all humility, acquired much of his sensitivity and openness to the mystery of God from the mother who taught him to pray and how to live. If Jesus knew how to hear the word of God and put it into practice, then Mary must be credited with having given her son more than milk (Luke 11:27-28). And yet their relationship changed, for as the story unfolds further, Mary becomes increasingly the model disciple. The son learned from his mother, but afterwards the mother was learning from her son. To draw once again on the *Spiritual Exercises*, the first Easter contemplation St. Ignatius presents is the appearance of the risen Jesus to his mother. Scripture makes no mention of an appearance to Mary, but the piety and devotion Ignatius inherited took such an encounter as all but certain.

Now, why an appearance to Mary? Perhaps the motive behind this presumed apparition was simply the special bond between mother and son. But all the Easter experiences

mentioned in the gospels concern disciples, namely, the men and women who followed Jesus because they believed in him. For St. Ignatius, it could well be that the appearance to Mary underscored the affectionate bond between teacher and the most outstanding follower; Mary truly understood the mystery of the kingdom of God. When Jesus “appointed and sent out seventy others” (Luke 10:1), perhaps Mary was among them, even at their lead. In Christian piety, to find Mary is to find her son, for everything in her life points to him. And conversely, anyone who finds Jesus is sooner or later drawn to Mary, because the shape of his humanity cannot be understood apart from hers.

I would not want to argue that vocational awareness and devotion to Mary are directly proportional, but I think it can be said that regular contemplation of the annunciation sensitizes one’s imagination to the reality of divine intrusion. The presence of an archangel at the beginning is not going to make our journey of faith or the unfolding of our call any easier. Nevertheless, mindfulness of what happened to Mary enhances our anticipation, indeed our desire, that God would call us to be more than mere spectators as the Divine Persons decree the redemption of the human race.

[2006]

## Consecrated Life and the Service of Peace

In his second letter to the Corinthians Paul writes of having been given “the ministry of reconciliation” and being “ambassadors for Christ” (2 Cor 5:19, 20). Down through the centuries, in ways sometimes hidden and sometimes public, the Church has carried on this ministry. The sacramental practice of reconciliation is familiar to us, but the ministry of reconciliation entails much more than what takes place in the confessional. A gospel verse that points us beyond the chapel and confessional room and into the wider world is the beatitude, “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God” (Matt 5:9). Jesus also says, “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you” (John 14:27). Jesus is above all a peacemaker, “making peace through the blood of his cross” (Col 1:20), and he expects the rest of us to be and to do the same. The cross reminds us that peacemaking may exact a high price.

Before we consider how consecrated life is so well poised to promote peacemaking, it is worth recalling the extent to which working on behalf of peace has been a notable characteristic of the Petrine ministry for well over a century. The World Day for Peace was first observed under Paul VI on January 1, 1968. The headers for the annual papal messages are worth recalling: “The promotion of Human Rights, the way to Peace” (1969); “To be reconciled with each other, to educate themselves for Peace” (1970); “Every man is my brother” (1971); “If you want Peace, work for Justice” (1972); “Peace is possible!” (1973); “Peace depends on you too” (1974); “Reconciliation—the way to Peace” (1975); “The real weapons of peace” (1976); “If you want peace, defend life” (1977); and



“No to violence, yes to peace” (1978). Paul VI was following up on John XXIII’s great encyclical *Pacem in terris* (Peace on Earth) with its vigorous defense of human rights and its fierce condemnation of the arms race that was going on between the Soviet Union and the United States. Before John XXIII there was Pius XII, and before Pius XII there were Pius XI and Benedict XV—pontificates that unfolded against the horrifying backdrops of World War II and World War I. When Paul VI wrote *Populorum progressio* (On the Development of Peoples), the Vietnam War was being fought, while during John Paul II’s pontificate the U.S. and its allies were waging the War in Iraq. Both in terms of writing and diplomatic efforts, recent popes exercised the ministry of reconciliation and peacemaking before a world that had known war for almost a century.

When explaining why he chose the name Francis, Monseñor Bergoglio said, “Francis was a man of peace, a man of poverty, a man who loved and protected creation.” Pope Francis stands very much in the current of his recent predecessors. Watching him at the vigil for peace in Syria in September and reading his remarks on the anniversary of *Pacem in terris* in October remind us that peacemaking and reconciliation are still very much at the heart of the Petrine ministry.

The call to serve peace by being men and women of peace comes to all of us through baptism. The call is echoed at the end of each Eucharist in the words “Go in peace.” But when I try to think of the connection between the service of peace and consecrated life my mind moves in two directions. One direction is toward the prophets among us and the other is toward the contemplatives. On the contemplative side the major moment that comes to mind is that of the Trappist monks slain

in Algeria. Their story is told in John Kiser's book *The Monks of Tibhirine* (2002) and movingly recounted in the film *Of Gods and Men* (2010). Thomas Merton also comes to mind. Writing from the silence of his monastery in Kentucky, Merton contributed significantly to the peace movement of the 1960s and 70s. Much like Blessed Charles de Foucauld, the monks of Tibhirine became a prayerful presence in a Muslim world, a presence that fostered understanding, compassion and reconciliation. And here we could also include other figures who devoted their lives to the patient and often uncelebrated work of interfaith understanding. I think, for example, of the Benedictines Dom Henri Le Saux and Bede Griffiths who set up ashrams in the largely Hindu subcontinent of India. The promotion of interfaith understanding and cooperation is consummately the service of peace. Those who make such efforts the center of their lives are brilliant signs of the presence of the Spirit in our world.

On the prophetic side I am drawn to think of figures such as Dorothy Day, Oscar Romero, and the four American churchwomen slain in El Salvador, although Day, Romero and Jean Donovan (one of the churchwomen) were not vowed religious. Nevertheless, there are countless examples of the prophetic character of peacemaking in Central and South America alone, many of them martyrs who put flesh on Paul VI's words "If you want peace, work for justice."

[2014]

## **Ecclesial Communion Is the Climate for Cultivating Vocations:**

A reflection on Benedict XVI's message for the 44<sup>th</sup>  
World Day of Prayer for Vocations

Last year the papal message took as its theme “vocation in the mystery of the Church.” This year’s message situates vocation in terms of service to the Church under the model of communion. Vocations serve and promote our life together in the Spirit. Moreover, vocations are born in an experience of the love and union with God that one discovers in belonging to the Body of Christ. The papal message cites paragraph 4 of the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (*Lumen gentium*). Quoting St. Cyprian, the council wrote: “Thus, the Church has been seen as ‘a people made one with the unity of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit’.” To this quotation the Pope adds the words “in which is reflected the mystery of God.” He could equally have written “in *whom* is reflected the mystery of God” because the “intimate and faithful communion” which is at the heart of this year’s letter is the communion of believers with one another in and through the Spirit of the risen Jesus.

### **Service to the Church as communion**

The mystery of our communion with God and one another receives its most visible expression in the Eucharist. For that reason, vocations to the priesthood are a matter of particular urgency. Benedict cites paragraph 16 of the 1992 Apostolic Exhortation *Pastores dabo vobis* [“I will give you shepherds”] of John Paul II. There the priest is described as “the servant of the Church as communion” precisely because the priest “builds up the unity of the Church community.” Benedict then notes

that all ministries and charisms contribute to the one goal and purpose of realizing “full communion.” Here he singles out consecrated life, which “of its nature, is at the service of this communion.” I think what he means is that consecrated life helps the rest of the Church to visualize what communion can mean and how it is to be fostered and safeguarded.

While the development and preservation of communion ought to be of deep concern for every Christian, the Spirit calls some Christians to dedicate their lives to the mystery of communion in a more focused, intense, and selfless way. The Pope recalls how God called Abraham, Moses, and the prophets, and then how Jesus invited the apostles “to be with him, and to be sent out to proclaim the message” (Mark 3:14). What we must do, therefore, is to pray insistently that the Father send us vocations “for the service of the Church communion.” If young people hear and feel a community at worship as it prays for vocations, they might be led to ask themselves, “Could the Lord be calling me?” For this reason, we need to be caring for the spiritual environment without which it is impossible to awaken to and discern the voice of God. Ecclesial communion is the climate for cultivating vocations.

### **Communion and mission**

In concentrating on communion, however, it is important for us not to lose sight of the Church’s mission to the outside world. For the integrity of ecclesial communion is conditioned by our readiness to express our love in deeds. Those deeds consist of the works of charity and mercy, peace-making and healing, that we perform on behalf of other members of the believing community and what we do for those outside the circle of faith. Every vocation embraces an element of mission and service that reaches beyond communion and, by doing so,

seeks to extend the communion of love and life that overcomes political and social division. If ministry and charism were to become closed in on the Church itself, then believing communities would soon become isolated from the wider culture and have minimal impact on the moral and spiritual challenges of our time.

Perhaps for this reason the same paragraph that the Pope cites from *Pastores dabo vobis* explains that the priest is servant in three ways. He is servant of the Church as mystery; he is servant of the Church as communion; and he is servant to the Church as mission “because he makes the community a herald and witness of the Gospel.”

### **Divine calling through human voices**

A person’s vocation ordinarily draws its energy from the experience of communion that lies at the heart of our being church. Indeed, the call of God is often sensed as coming from the community. I think of St. Paul’s vision recounted in the Acts of the Apostles: “there stood a man of Macedonia pleading with him and saying, ‘Come over to Macedonia and help us’.” People call us to mission. They call us to the service of faith and to the work of announcing the kingdom of God. They call us to accompany them in their struggles and their suffering. Indeed, the people expect us to know the Lord, and this holy expectation can make our own faith grow. Our own relationship with God becomes stronger and purer as a result of what others see in us and thus expect of us. Paul must have grown enormously in his relationship with Christ as he responded to the communities that kept drawing the apostle out of him. Even apostles must find their interior lives stretched as they respond to their people’s request to be taught how to pray.

There are two points then to think about. First, vocations come from God, following the words of Jesus, “No one can come to me unless drawn by the Father who sent me” (John 6:44). The initiative is always God’s. Yet in the day-to-day unfolding of faith, it is the mystery of communion we experience in the Church that makes it possible to feel drawn by the Father in the first place. That is why families, like household churches, and parish communities together play such a vital role in nurturing vocational awareness. At the same time, Jesus is “the one sent,” and he is “sent” into the world (John 3:17). As Mark put it, Jesus called some to be with him precisely so that he might send them out. “Being with” and “being sent” seem to form the axis of vocational identity. Ecclesial communion, we might say, will be as strong and vibrant as the community’s—and the individual’s—corresponding sense of being on mission.

### **Waiting for the Lord of the harvest**

I have not yet seen any prescription that will guarantee an increase of vocations to ordained ministry and religious life. That we need vocations in order to sustain our life together in the Spirit goes without saying. That vocational awareness is greatly enhanced by faithful Eucharistic worship, by contact with men and women whom God has chosen “to work with him in a more direct way,” and by a deep experience of human and divine love, is also beyond question. That we have to help young people understand why their culture so desperately need heralds of the Gospel, and then help them to hear the Lord’s voice should he be calling them to this service, is abundantly clear.

What more then can we do? Certainly we can pray, imploring the Lord to send more laborers into his fields. Yet

sometimes I wonder whether the sort of vocations we need now will not be given to us until we reach the point of crisis: not a crisis of numbers, but a crisis of hope. Centuries ago, the prophet Amos wrote: “The time is surely coming, says the Lord God, when I will send a famine on the land; not a famine of bread, or a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the Lord” (Amos 8:11). The words of Amos may be especially appropriate today. For Scripture tells us that human beings cannot survive only on bread, since “one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord” (Deut 8:3)

It could be a mercy if such a famine should descend on us. For if the human spirit need to be fed just as our bodies do, lest the human soul wither and die, then when the famine of the word comes we may be crying to the Lord with an earnestness that we have so far not expressed. And the Lord of the harvest may answer us. We may yet witness a flowing of vocation: prophets, heralds of the Gospel, servants to the Church as mystery and communion, consecrated persons living against the currents of their culture, ministers of peace and reconciliation. As we make our way through the crisis of hope, perhaps we will learn to hear in a new key the words of Mary, “Do whatever he tells you” (John 2:5)

[2007]

## The Apostolate of Good Example Is Not Enough

A reflection on Benedict XVI's message for the 45<sup>th</sup>  
World Day of Prayer for Vocations

“The Church is missionary as a whole and in each one of its members.” Many of the ideas that come up in this year’s message are likely to sound familiar to readers of *Vocations and Prayer*. Jesus, we are reminded, sent his first disciples to preach, to heal, and to drive out demons. Thus today’s ministers of the Gospel are likewise living out the mystery of simultaneously being with Jesus and being on mission. Every calling is in some sense a sending, a pattern set by Jesus himself: “As the Father has sent me, so I send you” (John 20:21). His oneness with the Father was dynamically ordered toward mission.

The Pope singles out priests: “the missionary aspect is specially and intimately bound with the priestly vocation.” And again, “Among the persons who dedicate themselves totally to the service of the Gospel, there are, in a special way, [missionary] priests . . .”

The Pope also mentions religious men and women, quoting the Second Vatican Council’s Decree on the Missionary Activity of the Church (*Ad gentes*): “Religious institutes of the contemplative and active life have so far played, and still do play, the main role in the evangelization of the world” (no. 40). Then he writes: “It is necessary to maintain alive in the faithful an active sense of missionary responsibility and a shared solidarity with the peoples of the world.” Once more the Pope appears to be picking up on the conciliar decree. For the



Council wrote: “The Church is not really established, it does not fully live, nor is it a perfect sign of Christ among humankind, unless, together with the hierarchy, there exists a genuine and active laity. For the gospel cannot be deeply impressed on the outlook, life and activity of a people without the active presence of the laity” (*Ad gentes*, no. 21). Earlier the decree states: “It is not sufficient, however, that the Christian people be present and established in a particular nation, nor is it sufficient that they practice the apostolate of good example. The purpose for which they are established, the purpose for which they are present, is to proclaim Christ to their non-Christian fellow citizens by word and deed and to help them receive Christ fully” (*Ad gentes*, no. 15).

Although the decree is speaking here about Christian communities founded by missionaries in non-Christian lands, the point it makes has wider relevance. The “apostolate of good example” is not enough for a Christian; we need to undertake more than that if we want to be faithful to our baptismal commitment. Christ must be proclaimed “by word and deed.” Still, the words of Paul VI are important to remember: “for the Church, the first means of evangelization is the witness of an authentically Christian life, given over to God in a communion that nothing should destroy and at the same time given to one’s neighbor with limitless zeal” (*Evangelii nuntiandi*, no. 41).

Benedict XVI is writing, therefore, that everyone in the Church—priests, lay men and women, and religious—has an important role to play in evangelization. And the principal way by which they do this is through fidelity to the call they have received to embrace the Gospel.

## Calling, bearing witness, and mission

The theme of the Pope's message is "Vocations to the service of the Church—mission." This phrasing contains three inter-connected points. First, to be called is to be sent. It makes little sense to speak of having a "calling" without adding what we have been called to. Moreover, calling is correlative to desire; and holy, wholesome desires are excited in us by the Holy Spirit. If the Spirit of God has called us to become followers of Jesus, that is, if the Spirit has awakened in us the desire to be with Jesus, then the same Spirit prompts us to bear witness to the faith in him with which we have been blessed.

Second, bearing witness is itself a form of service. And here the sentiments of *Ad gentes* are timely. The example of virtuous living needs to be accompanied by words, in keeping with the instruction of 1 Peter 3:15—"Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have."

Third, mission belongs to the very nature of the Church. Not only does the Church carry on a ministry of the word out of obedience to Jesus' instructions to his followers, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations . . . teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you" (Matt 28:19-20). But the Church is also missionary by nature; it is not a community closed in on itself. "In fact," the Pope writes, "the Christian communities, which live the missionary dimension of the Church in a profound way, will never be inward looking."

Clearly, not everyone in the Church has the freedom or the ability to leave everything and follow a call from the Spirit to travel "the roads of the world announcing the Gospel." The Pope notes that from among those who followed him during his ministry, Jesus selected just twelve to be apostles. After Easter,

of course, the definition of apostle would be broadened to include anyone sent on mission by the risen Jesus. The point Paul makes in chapter 12 of his first letter to the Corinthians, however, is important. Paul asks, “Are all apostles?” And by this he means that in a community where there are different gifts not everyone is going to be an apostle. “Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone” (1 Cor 12:4-6).

Nevertheless, the Spirit still draws men and women to be apostles in the sense that Paul understood the term. In a world that is religiously pluralistic, the need for voices that bear witness to the distinctiveness and richness of Christian religious experience becomes all the more urgent. In addition, however, the need for evangelization seems to be more pressing now than it was 2000 years ago. “For you always have the poor with you,” Jesus said. Yet poverty can take many forms. People can be suffering the poverty that is ignorance of God: ignorance of where they come from, why they are here, and where their lives should be heading. They are “like sheep without a shepherd” (Mark 6:34).

### **Being on mission in a time of globalization**

Some missionaries—that is to say, some apostles—will still travel to foreign lands either to establish or to support the work of local churches. Increasingly we see lay men and women, sometimes singly and sometimes as married couples, becoming partners in mission with veteran missionary groups. Of course, priests and religious still leave their own countries and travel elsewhere. They may travel from North America to other parts of the world, or they may be leaving India, Africa, and South

America to labor in churches in North America. Other missionaries, animated by love of the Gospel, take to internet highways and websites, ministering to the word in ways Saint Paul or Francis Xavier would never have dreamt of.

Paul VI understood that evangelization—service of the Church-mission—includes making the world more human; preaching the Gospel entails the promotion of authentic human development. He wrote: “Between evangelization and human advancement—development and liberation—there are in fact profound links. . . . [H]ow in fact can one proclaim the new commandment without promoting in justice and in peace the true, authentic development of man? We ourselves have taken care to point this out, by recalling that it is impossible to accept ‘that in evangelization one could or should ignore the importance of the problems so much discussed today, concerning justice, liberation, development and peace in the world’.”

Another way of stating Paul VI’s insight is to say that the service of faith is inseparable from the promotion of justice. Whatever form service of the Church-mission takes, because it is modeled after the example of Jesus the impulse of faith is to reach out to others and to share one’s experience of God. And central to that experience is the realization that the God of Israel—who is always the God of Jesus—is the God who intervened in history in order to liberate his people (Exodus 3:7-10). It was for this mission, Benedict XVI notes, that God called Moses.

Religions should never be in the business of competing for adherents, and the “success” of a religion is hardly to be measured in terms of the number of converts it makes. The mystery of God cannot be commercialized any more than it can be politicized. First and last, mission activity has to be

motivated by a love of God's people. Passion for his people is what moved God to call Moses, according to the memorable scene depicted in Exodus 3. Jesus' mission likewise originated in God's love for his people: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son" (John 3:16). Mission without love would be theologically meaningless. In the end, what matters is that men and women should become free to love and to live for one another. And this will happen in the measure that they come to know and experience God. The call to mission is a vocation to love and care for the people. Indeed, it is a call to embrace the world.

### **Keeping missionary awareness alive**

"It is necessary to maintain alive in the faithful an active sense of missionary responsibility and a shared solidarity with the peoples of the world." What Benedict XVI says in this sentence invites elaboration. We have a great deal of work to do in terms of evangelization within the Church, certainly within the context of North Atlantic culture. The belief profile of young Catholics today that Thomas Rausch presents in his book *Being Catholic in a Culture of Choice* (Liturgical Press, 2006) is cause for concern. Given the weak faith formation of so many people, it is all the more urgent that believers who take their faith seriously view themselves as men and women on mission. "No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house" (Matt 5:15). Jesus expects his followers to let the light of their faith "shine before others." But letting our light shine is not enough; Jesus also expects that there will be words of testimony.

The Pope's point, however, seems to be that a sense of responsibility for the Gospel is not reserved to ordained

ministers and religious. All of us are responsible for the story of Jesus, for the good news of the kingdom. Awareness of our mutual responsibility for the Gospel has to be cultivated.

Yet the Pope links this evangelical awareness with a second: “a shared solidarity with the peoples of the world.” By making this linkage, perhaps Benedict XVI is suggesting that living in solidarity with the peoples of the world promotes our sense of being responsible for the Gospel; and living the Gospel—hearing the word of God and putting it into practice—leads to a oneness with others that is at once both spiritual and concrete. For solidarity is not simply a matter of inner union with others; solidarity has political and economic expressions as well.

Solidarity was the virtue that John Paul II spoke of frequently. For an apostle, this virtue is indispensable. Before apostles preach they need to understand the people before whom they stand. They need to understand the culture. They need to understand social and economic conditions. They need to recognize the form or shape of a people’s spiritual yearning. Above all, effective apostles become inwardly one with the people, especially the world’s poorest. They are keenly sensitive to the assaults people endure against their dignity as children of God, and they share the passionate, blessed desire of oppressed people everywhere who hunger and thirst for righteousness (Matt 5:6). Solidarity is the great antidote against the individualism of consumer culture. “Shared solidarity,” as Benedict XVI writes, is crucial to vocational awareness. In an age of globalization, the Church cannot promote vocations without cultivating this essential virtue.

## **When suffering creates apostles**

The third paragraph of the Pope's message mentions those "whose missionary vocation results from providential circumstances, sometimes painful ones." The example he has in mind comes from Acts 8, when persecution forced disciples in Jerusalem to flee the city. "Now those who were scattered went from place to place, proclaiming the word" (Acts 8:4). Those first Christians had to leave their homes, but their faith traveled with them. The Pope concludes, "The Holy Spirit permits this trial to be changed into an occasion of grace."

Saint Paul wrote of power being made perfect in weakness (2 Cor 12:9), and most of us could probably confirm Paul's experience with examples from our own. Sometimes the cost of remaining faithful to Christ creates the conditions for the Gospel to spread. Yet this does not necessarily mean fleeing a place of persecution and carrying the faith to places where the Gospel has not been sown. Difficulties of any sort can stretch and challenge our faith, and cause it to deepen. And as faith is purified and made stronger through adversity, we may find ourselves speaking with greater conviction about the things of God.

Frequently, because of suffering, our lives bear witness to the Gospel more clearly and credibly, and such witness attracts others to a closer relationship with the Lord. Of course, not all suffering arises because believers "have risked their lives for the sake of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Acts 15:26). Nevertheless, things that happen to us often turn out to have been providential, although we might not have recognized God's hand at the time. The reach of the Spirit is not shortened even when the circumstances of our lives become painful. The Christian who hopes and prays that through his or her life others

will be brought to the Lord is living “the missionary dimension of the Church in a profound way.”

[2008]



## 34.

### **The Unfolding of a Vocation Is Not a Solitary Process:**

A reflection on Benedict XVI's message for the 46<sup>th</sup>  
World Day of Prayer for Vocations

The gospel text for the Fourth Sunday of Easter in each of the liturgical cycles is taken from John 10. This is the chapter where Jesus refers to himself as “the good shepherd,” the very role attributed to God in Psalm 23. Thus, with the image of Jesus pasturing his people in the background, the Church dedicates the Fourth Sunday of Easter to praying for vocations and cultivating vocational awareness. And so we might reflect, what does the pastor—the Good Shepherd—actually do?

#### **The birth of vocational awareness**

In the Ezekiel passage we hear God speak: “I myself will search for my sheep and look after them. As shepherds look after their scattered flocks when they are with them, so will I look after my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places they were scattered on a day of clouds and darkness. . . I will search for the lost and bring back the strays. I will bind up the injured and strengthen the weak” (34:11-12, 16). Consider what the Shepherd does: he searches for the lost or strayed, rescues, gathers together, looks after, binds up, and strengthens.

One does not have to grow up on a farm or in the countryside to appreciate the prophet's metaphor. Given the fractured nature of human society; given that so many men and women are adrift, wounded, isolated, weak; given that the peoples of the world do not yet know how to live together as God daughters and sons, then who is going to make caring for

the human family their life's mission? Who among us is not going simply to see and pass by like the priest and the Levite of the gospel parable, but see and have compassion, and then tend the world in its need?

The way such men and women express their care will not be the way of those who rule and govern civil societies. They will have no interest in exercising authority over others, like the great ones whom Jesus warned his disciples against (Mark 10:42-43). Instead, they will look at the human scene and, out of great compassion, feel drawn to repair and restore the human family. Because they cannot take on such a huge mission alone, these apostles in waiting will seek out the company of others already engaged in this task. And they will eventually discover that the divine Shepherd does not simply send others. He is already at work in the world.

Vocational awareness is born, then, from a sense of concern for people that leads to feeling responsible for the well-being of others. By being responsible I mean that our hearts do not allow us merely to observe or witness other human lives; we want to accompany them. And then, following on this experience of wanting to accompany others, there comes the graced realization that the people we care for belong to God. No matter what else human beings possess or achieve, if they do not know the mystery of God, if they do not understand whom they really belong to, then they remain poor, lost, and away from home.

Finally, vocational awareness and the desire to walk alongside others on the journey of faith lead directly into the community of faith. For all of us, our relationship with God deepens and flourishes above all in contact with other disciples. The unfolding of a vocation, like salvation itself, is not a

solitary process. This unfolding, furthermore, never stops. Sacramental moments and religious professions are over quickly; living them out takes a lifetime.

Thus vocational awareness unfolds in at least three moments. First, there needs to be a compassionate, contemplative seeing of what is going on in the world. Second, the one being called comes to see that human beings belong, not to themselves (nor to their shepherds), but to the Lord. Finally, an ecclesial sensibility is imprinted on the mind and heart of the one called. The surest way out of suspicion, estrangement, and alienation is life with the People of God.

### **Initiative and response**

The theme of Benedict XVI's message is "faith in the divine initiative—the human response." In other words, when thinking about vocation the starting point is always God's call, and I have tried to explain that frequently we hear the call by paying attention to the world. The divine call is always mediated in some way. It can come through contact with the poor, through friendships, through reading about the lives of the saints, or through the faith, simplicity of life, and apostolic zeal of a deacon, a priest, a religious, or another minister of the gospel. The call can come from a combination of all of these. In the end, however, what the Lord is inviting us to notice and internalize is the hunger that men and women have for the bread of life. Human lives become broken and need to be healed; the community of faith needs a shepherd. Or to vary the image, the nets are waiting for apostles to cast them. Benedict refers to this as "the mission of salvation."

Christian communities know how much they depend upon ministers of the gospel, and the ministries they exercise—corresponding to the community's needs—come in many forms.

The foremost prerequisite for church ministry, of course, is the minister's prayerful union with God and his people. As it deepens and pervades a person's life, this union purifies and transforms us; it leads to the dying to self that Jesus spoke of and which came to fullest expression on the Cross. Each day the grain of wheat falls to the ground again, and it dies (John 12:24). Ministry is going to be fruitful to the extent that we have "the same attitude of mind Christ Jesus had" (Phil 2:5), who emptied himself and took the form of a servant.

Paul wrote about the variety of gifts that the Spirit gives to the Church (1 Cor 12:1-11), and many of these are clearly ministries. Whether we think of priesthood, the permanent diaconate, spiritual direction, chaplaincy, catechizing, evangelization, or directly working with refugees, the poor, or the sick, there is wrapped up in each of these forms of service a sense of being called by God, a call which is inseparable from a sharp awareness that these people belong to us and we to them. Consecrated life, I believe, follows a similar pattern. No matter what the apostolic work of a particular religious community is, no one is called to religious life purely for the sake of a private pursuit of perfection—or to escape the world. Religious life finds its home in the Church, and the Church expects that the various forms of religious life will contribute to a deeper understanding of the universal call to holiness, "the great plan of love and salvation that God has for every man and woman and for the whole of humanity." In this sense, religious life as a particular form of evangelical witness is a spiritual ministry.

We embrace consecrated life because we believe that God has called us to it. But since the life of the vows is patterned after key features of the life of Jesus, we need to keep reminding ourselves that the pattern of Jesus' life emerged from

his commitment to the reign of God, that is, to what God was doing on behalf of his people. Apart from an enduring love for God's people, the life of the vows would wither. Jesus did not live for himself but for the Father—and for the men and women of Israel, for whom he had come (Mark 1:38). Religious indeed live for Jesus and in relationship to him, yet the Jesus of our faith is also the ecclesial Jesus—the Jesus who abides with his disciples until the end of the age (Matt 28:20).

### **The centrality of Eucharist, the importance of priesthood**

The annual messages for the World Day of Prayer for Vocations generally follow a template. Something will be said about priesthood and the consecrated life, of course, and they will include a particular word about Eucharist. Occasionally they might mention the connection between baptismal grace and a developing awareness of vocation. In his message “Putting out into Deep Water” four years ago, for example, John Paul II spoke of Christian marriage as a vocation. The annual messages conclude with several paragraphs about Mary since the dynamic of divine call and free, joyful, human response is played out so wonderfully in the scene of the Annunciation. At the end of this year's message, for instance, the Pope writes that Mary is “especially the mother of priests and consecrated persons.” He then adds, “I want to entrust to her all those who are aware of God's call to set out on the road to ministerial priesthood or consecrated life.” Given this focus at the end of the letter, I would like to reflect for a moment on priesthood.

To be a priest is to have both a role in the Church and a particular way of identifying with the Jesus of the gospels. Of all the things a priest does, presiding at the Eucharist best expresses who he is. All Christians are disciples. All are witnesses to the risen Lord and share responsibility to proclaim

the gospel by the way that they live. All are called to imitate the attitude and response of the Good Samaritan before the neighbor in need. In other words, the Church expects all of us to be faithful to our baptismal promises. And implicit in those promises is our commitment to participate regularly and wholeheartedly in the Eucharistic liturgy.

The role of the priest during Mass hardly means that he participates in the Eucharistic mystery at a deeper level than anyone else in the community. Mindfulness of the Lord's real presence does not come more easily to him because of his liturgical role. And when the Spirit comes upon the gifts of bread and wine to make them holy, the Spirit is doing so in response to the faith and the prayer of the People of God. As Saint Augustine realized centuries ago, if this were not the case, then the people at worship could never be certain that the gifts had been sanctified. Some ministers, Augustine knew too well, were not living by faith. The validity of the sacrament, mercifully, does not hinge upon the holiness of the minister!

Nevertheless, when the Eucharistic mystery penetrates the heart, mind and everyday life of a priest, his spiritual identity changes. Over time, it can change immensely. The Pope touches on this in the seventh paragraph of his message. "The awareness of being saved by the love of Christ . . . cannot but arouse within [priests] a trusting self-abandonment to Christ who gave his life for us. . . . [T]he one who is 'called' voluntarily leaves everything and submits himself to the teaching of the divine Master."

Three points in what Benedict says stand out. First, there is the priest's awareness of just how much he has been loved. Second, there is the awareness that the priest does not choose Christ; it is Christ who chooses him. And third, there is the

awareness that each day involves a leaving, a brand new following, and a readiness to learn from Jesus.

Now, these moments do not stay encapsulated. The Spirit does not give its gifts for the sole benefit and consolation of individuals. The holiness of a person's life is above all a sign that the Spirit is at work, not just for the person's own individual good but for the good of all the Church. Thus the priest's experience of being loved has to be shared; it wants others to know God's love just as really, just as deeply. Second, his awareness of being chosen is not supposed to set him apart from everyone else in the community. He is chosen, after all, precisely so that he can stand with his people and help them mature in their own relationship with Christ.

Finally, the voluntary leaving of all things is the gospel's way of talking about inner freedom. But such freedom, pursued for its own sake, could lead to narcissism. The reason one leaves everything behind is to be able to walk with Christ unencumbered and to serve his people. For a priest, sharing in the Eucharist becomes the supreme expression of being loved, of being with, and of being for. And his ministry is most fruitful when the communities he serves are growing in their sense of having been loved by God, of needing and wanting to live in the company of other believers, and of feeling both called and sent by the risen Lord as his witnesses before the world. The priest has an indispensable role to play in the formation and cultivation of a Eucharistic people. The joy and consolation he experiences have nothing to do with being singled out and placed above everybody else, but have everything to do with accompanying others as they grow in the Spirit of Christ.

I think here of Moses' conversation with God in Exodus 33. "Remember," Moses reminds the Lord, "that this nation is

your people.” And again: “How will anyone know that you are pleased with me and with your people unless you go with us? What else will distinguish me and your people from all the other people on the face of the earth?” Moses’ concern for the people throughout the entire wilderness experience is striking, even moving. God responds, “My presence will go with you” and “I will do the very thing you have asked” (Ex 33:14, 17). “My presence will go with you”: for a priest, this text holds special meaning. Priests serve their communities in a variety of ways, but central to their understanding of who they are is this: they know themselves called to be ministers of the real presence of the risen Jesus, the Lord who accompanies his people as they make their way through history. Not only do they *know* this; but this knowledge also finds confirmation in their experience. The experience of being close to his people in every human circumstance imaginable creates the heart of a good shepherd—the David that God promised to send (Ezek 34:23-24).

[2009]



## 35.

### **What does it take to awaken desire?**

A reflection on Benedict XVI's message for the 47<sup>th</sup>  
World Day of Prayer for Vocations

#### **An overview of the letter's contents**

The theme of this year's message is the power of witness to awaken vocations to ordained ministry and religious life. Three elements to be found in every vocation, the Pope explains, are friendship with Christ, the complete giving of oneself to God, and living a life of communion. Concretely, the first element is about our being clearly perceived by others as prayerful women and men. The second is about our being unreservedly dedicated to serving God's people. And the third is about our being fully taken over by Jesus' prayer "that all of them may be one" (John 17:21). The desire for communion—the unity that God wills for the human race—so penetrates our thinking and acting that we practically embody the mystery of reconciliation and forgiveness, and our daily life shows it.

Religious and ordained ministers alike do their best "to witness to the whole gift of self to God." For religious, community life should reflect the idealized Christian existence we see in the Acts of the Apostles and which attracted the attention and affection of many in the gentile world. For those in ordained ministry, their spirit of charity, collaboration and fraternity should send a clear signal about the beauty and possibility of this way of life. Not all priests are religious, and not all religious are priests. Nevertheless, there is considerable overlapping in terms of the spiritual ideals they have embraced. This overlapping occurs because we all share the same baptism,

the primordial Christian consecration for being the light of the world and the salt of the earth.

What makes priesthood distinctive and attractive? To answer this question the Pope draws upon John Paul II's 1992 Apostolic Exhortation *Pastores dabo vobis* ("I will give you shepherds"): "The very life of priests, their unconditional dedication to God's flock, their witness of loving service to the Lord and to his Church—a witness marked by free acceptance of the cross in the spirit of hope and Easter joy—their fraternal unity and zeal for the evangelization of the world are the first and most convincing factor in the growth of vocations." In writing this sentence, John Paul II had in mind Vatican II's Decree on Priestly Formation: "All priests especially are to manifest an apostolic zeal in fostering vocations and are to attract the interest of youths to the priesthood by their own life lived in a humble and industrious manner and in a happy spirit as well as by mutual priestly charity and fraternal sharing of labor" (*Optatam totius*, 2).

For those in consecrated life, the distinguishing feature of their lives might well be that they are "signs of contradiction." To the extent that the prevailing culture is characterized by individualism, consumerism, and acquiring and holding on to privilege, then religious life runs against these cultural currents. Of course, in this sense Christian existence itself ought to be a sign of contradiction, and not just consecrated life. But consecrated life intensifies this sign, and as a sign it reminds the whole church of the elementary vocation that comes with baptism.

Young people who are searching for their own deepest identity will find the life of the vows immensely clarifying and attractive. Religious men and women witness to "the absolute

primacy of God” in human life and in human history. They develop a new self as a result of their dying and rising, continuously, with Christ. In this sense, they become masters of renunciation. For them, life is not about clinging but about letting go. This letting-go is not an end in itself, however. Evangelical freedom means being able to be with Jesus in whatever situations, circumstances, or physical conditions he chooses to be.

### **The faces of God-centered living**

The Pope’s message is brief and the points it makes will sound familiar to anyone who has followed these annual letters for Good Shepherd Sunday. The power of example to awaken vocational awareness cannot be emphasized enough. Sometimes this awakening happens through stories, like reading the lives of the saints; sometimes it results from personal contact. And frequently it’s a combination of both. Selflessness inspires. Spirit-filled living is compelling. Prayerfulness and familiarity with God are indispensable, constitutive elements of the priest’s soul as well as the souls of women and men in consecrated life. So also a sense of being called by God, a sense of urgency for the gospel to be proclaimed and take root in human lives, and above all a tireless concern for the most vulnerable of God’s people.

In addition to the witness given by religious and priests themselves, however, another sort of witness also plays a major role in the awakening and sustaining of vocational awareness. I remember when I was growing up going to daily Mass and relishing the immediate peace and silence of the darkened church. There were always others in the church—grown-ups—kneeling before the Mary altar, or quietly in a pew with rosary beads or prayer book, or slowly making the Stations of the

Cross. What impressed me then was the faith and devotion—so evident, so humble, so ordinary—of the others in the church. I didn't know very much about priests and how they lived, apart from their saying Mass and hearing confessions on Saturday afternoons. But I did observe the piety of the people, and at some place in my imagination a line was being drawn between their faith and the priest at the altar. Yet they were in church, not because of the priest, but because of the Eucharistic mystery; and he was a servant of that mystery. Some priests rushed; others celebrated Mass slowly. What did not change, however, was the faith that brought people those people to church, morning after morning, rain or shine.

In the end, the picture that stays with me is not that of the priest at the altar or in the confessional, or at any of the other sacramental occasions. My sharper and weightier memories are those of a priest kneeling in the pews, like everyone else, saying a rosary or reading the Liturgy of the Hours. The witness of believers at prayer is powerful. Years later, many years after ordination, nothing supports and sustains my own vocational awareness more than coming to church and seeing everyday faces in silent, earnest prayer.

### **Unconditional dedication to the Lord's flock**

The Pope writes that from the capacity to give oneself wholly and completely to God there flows the capacity to give oneself to God's people. The consolation that confirms the rightness of such self-giving is the joy and satisfaction that come from accompanying others along their journey of faith. The ideas here need to be pondered.

The desire to serve is the other side of love—of experiencing ourselves as loved by God and as wanting to respond to divine love in real, concrete ways. In gospel terms,

our love for God first manifests itself in the desire to follow and imitate Jesus: this is our initial response. But what does following and imitating Jesus mean? Above all, it means service, and perhaps the most dramatic remembrance and sacrament of service is that of Jesus washing the feet of his companions. I think of this scene from John 13 as a “sacrament” because it points to and sums up the whole of his life: the teaching, the healing, the driving out of demons, the outreach to people who had lost their way, the prophetic stance against the pursuit of privilege and power, and ultimately his death.

Another text that comes to mind is that of Isaiah 53:4, “Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows.” Matthew quotes this text because it shed light on the deeper meaning of what Jesus was doing: “When evening came, many who were demon-possessed were brought to him, and he drove out the spirits with a word, and healed all the sick. This was to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet Isaiah” (Matt 8:16-17). For Matthew, to serve is to step into the lives of those who are heavily burdened and to accompany them.

In both of these texts—the foot-washing scene from John, the scene of healing in Matthew—we have to imagine that Jesus’ service of others was not undertaken as an act of penance. What he did, he did not just willingly but also joyously, because he was impelled by love.

### **Consecration and service**

The close connection that Christians have detected between love of God and love of neighbor goes back at least to the first letter of John, not to mention Jesus’ answer to the scribe about the greatest commandment (Mk 12:28-31); but the point needs to be understood carefully. We do not simply *prove* that we love God by the way we love our neighbor, for loving

God is not a matter of having to prove something. Rather, to experience God—to have a relationship with God—is to find ourselves drawn into the company of others, especially those in need. And conversely, in the experience of accompanying others and serving them people of faith can make the discovery that they have been living and walking in the presence of God. To love others is to know God, and to love God is to know oneself as belonging to others. For this reason, the self-gift to God leads right away into a giving of oneself to others.

Once again, witness is powerful. I remember the sisters who taught us in grammar school, and the many religious I've met who have been engaged in other ministries: from giving catechetical instruction and baking bread for the poor to attending to prisoners and caring for those left to die on the street. There is the witness of pastors concerned for families: the readiness of priests to listen to people in distress and to help those in need—immigrants, fathers who have lost jobs, single mothers, addicts. And we see their dedication to building communities of faith. In so many ways such good people awakened vocational awareness. Yet here, too, the cloud of witnesses includes more than priests and religious.

The witness of service and loving commitment started, for most of us, in our own homes. But as time goes by we notice in others what we first felt in our parents, sometimes to a surprising, exceptional degree. The example of friends and neighbors supporting one another in moments of crisis or loss, the example of people working generously and quietly in parish communities, stories bordering on the heroic about people who have taken a stand with the poor: all of this creates a climate in which the young Samuels among us can learn to recognize the sound of the Lord's voice. The call comes, ultimately, from

God; but the God who speaks usually has some of the features of the people in our lives who create the culture of service and faith.

**“Come and see,” what?**

Reflecting on the role of witness makes me wonder about what might turn young people away from ordained ministry and religious life. An obvious reason would be a cultural ethos put off by gospel values. In this case, the fault lies with the prevailing cultural attitudes, not with the religious institutions themselves. We live in a culture, after all, in which the non-existence of God is quite thinkable for many people.

But the fault might also lie with a certain negative witness on the part of ordained ministers and religious communities. In the Fourth Gospel, Jesus answered the two disciples who asked him where he was staying, “Come and you will see.” And shortly afterwards Philip told Nathanael, “Come and see” (John 1:39, 46). But suppose they came and saw nothing that excited their imaginations. The Pope speaks of priests who are “lonely and sad” (and we could add “exhausted, over-extended and over-worked”). Would such a sight be likely to attract any healthy young person? Or suppose seekers of today came and found religious and priests more invested in respectability, recognition, and advancement than in accompanying the crucified ones of this world. Would there be anything really to see and imagine? What sort of vain desires would such a sight awaken? “Blessed are you,” Jesus said, “when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me” (Matt 5:11). How many of us would welcome this sort of blessing? And yet this is exactly what is likely to happen when, in order to be with Jesus, one elects to walk with the throwaways of the world.

And then there is always the danger that consecrated life and ordained ministry might become a refuge for individuals who are frightened by the winds of religious and social change. For just as there is a true consolation that comes from the Holy Spirit, there is also a false consolation born of a very different spirit. People can turn either to the institutional church or to religious communities because they think that there they will find sanctuary against the social, cultural, and spiritual instability of the time. But here is where we may need to meditate longer on the phrase “sign of contradiction,” and consider Jesus’ words: “Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head” (Luke 9:58). The gospel’s remedy for insecurity is, paradoxically, to let go of the desire for anything short of God. As the psalmist said: “Find rest, O my soul, in God alone; my hope comes from him. / He alone is my rock and my salvation; he is my fortress, I will not be shaken.” (Ps 62:5-7)

In the end, the only reason to follow Jesus is to learn from him and allow him to reshape our hearts, and by doing so, to be with and to love the people of God the way Jesus did, namely, as one who serves. No other consolation will sustain a vocation over a lifetime.

[2010]



## Vocations and the Local Church:

Two points in the message for the 48<sup>th</sup> World Day of Prayer for Vocations caught my attention. The first comes in the sentence: “The Lord does not fail to call people *at every stage of life* to share in his mission and to serve the Church in the ordained ministry and in the consecrated life.” The second point comes up towards the end of the Message: “every moment in the life of the Church community . . . can be a precious opportunity for awakening in the People of God, and in particular in children and young people, *a sense of belonging to the Church* . . .”

With respect to the first point, the Pope seems to be telling us that, while we need to cultivate vocational awareness among children and teenagers, vocational awareness can mature over the course of a lifetime. The interior life has its seasons. Not just young adults, but people in middle age and older might find themselves being nudged by the Spirit toward service either as ordained ministers or as vowed religious. With respect to the second point, this movement of the Spirit is very much tied up with “a sense of belonging to the Church.” The greater the feeling of belonging, the stronger grows the impulse to serve and to lead a more evangelical life.

The Message confines its attention to priesthood and religious life as the principal vocational forms. Yet when I think about the scriptural texts usually cited in a reflection on vocations—the calling of the fishermen (Matt 4:18-22), for example, or the selection of the Twelve (Luke 6:12-13)—I am minded that these gospel scenes are not about invitations to

consecrated life or ordained ministry. They were calls to join Jesus in his mission to proclaim the kingdom, to heal, and to drive out unclean spirits (Matt 10:7-8). And then I think of something else. When Jesus “called his closest associates to proclaim the kingdom of God,” he sent them off in pairs: “After this the Lord appointed seventy others and sent them on ahead of him in pairs to every town and place where he himself intended to go” (Luke 10:1). Some of the pairs might have been couples. Saint Paul informs us that when the apostles went on mission, they were accompanied by their wives (1 Cor 9:5).

What grounds and sustains vocational awareness, then, should be a sense of mission. Vocation means having a deeply felt conviction about being sent, about being needed, about having a role to play in the saving work of Christ. To be on mission means facing the world with a sense of urgency: “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few” (Luke 10:2). Unless laborers go into the fields immediately, the crop is going to spoil. What will we do to rescue it?

Priesthood and religious life are charismatic expressions of life as mission, of imagination on the move. They are not the only expressions, but they are the two expressions that feature in this year’s Message.

### **Exemplary pastors**

Shortly before I received a copy of “Promoting Vocations in the Local Church” I was reading The New York Times obituary of Samuel Ruiz, the retired bishop of Chiapas, Mexico. Bishop Ruiz was a pastor deeply wedded to his people, who were largely the poor, indigenous Mayans of Chiapas. Over the years he had ordained an astonishing 300 married, permanent deacons to serve the communities of his local church. Reading this story in light of the Pope’s Message, I

could not help but think that what Bishop Ruiz had done was a remarkable sign of the vitality of the local church, as well as an extraordinary answer to a local church's prayer for vocations. The Lord of the harvest may surprise us yet, if our prayer is earnest, and if the people who are praying sense that they belong to the Church and that the Church belongs to them.

But the story of Bishop Ruiz accompanying and defending the Mayans of Mexico, like the memory of Oscar Romero walking with and standing up for the poor of El Salvador, or Leonidas Proaño alongside the indigenous of Ecuador, also makes me think of how impoverished, disenfranchised people came to feel that they really belonged to the local church. They belonged because their bishops enabled them to trust that they indeed *were* the local church.

We promote vocations most effectively, the Pope reminds us with a quotation from Vatican II, by exercising “a fully Christian life.” Lived example is key. Leading a fully Christian life naturally entails “a genuine and affectionate friendship with the Lord” and learning “to listen attentively and fruitfully to the word of God.”

But following Christ is going to transform our lives only insofar as the example Jesus left us challenges us to leave the comfort and security of what is most familiar and to take the risk of stepping into the unknown. We could find ourselves, like the disciples at Levi's house, in bad company. We could regularly find ourselves in danger. The disciples who readily agreed to set sail with Jesus were not counting on nearly drowning in a storm. They must have been terrified when, on reaching shore with him, they ran into someone so riddled with demons that he had become in effect a monster. There are risks. We take those risks, at the outset, because we want to be with

Jesus. We take them, later in life, because, like Jesus, we want to be with his people. That's what those bishops did.

The Pope's Message addresses the bishops of the world. He writes: "I address a particular word to you, my dear brother Bishops. . . . The Lord needs you to cooperate with him in ensuring that his call reaches the hearts of those whom he has chosen." Cooperating with the Lord goes beyond the proper management of a diocesan office of vocations, of course. Bishops, like priests, promote vocations best when they exercise lives that are fully like the life that Jesus led. And that leads into accompanying our people—together with the risks that come with associating with the least ones, whether the Mayans of Chiapas, the *campesinos* of El Salvador, the indigenous of Ecuador, or migrant workers, refugees, and undocumented families in our own country. When the least ones are made to feel that they belong, perhaps that's when mission becomes contagious and vocations start to germinate.

Few signs are so attractive, so compelling, as the example of the Church's pastors courageously living the Christian mission. I remember the inspiration and pride many of us in seminary training or in priestly ministry drew when the U.S. bishops issued their pastoral letters *The Challenge of Peace* (1983) and *Economic Justice for All* (1986). I think back to the 1960s and Paul Hallinan's dedication to civil rights and social justice as archbishop of Atlanta. While I do not know whether those letters or the archbishop's witness drew vocations, they certainly helped to sustain them by providing clear, prophetic statements about where the Lord's call can take us.

## Vocational realism

Vocation often has an unglamorous, unromantic side, whether we're talking about ordained ministry, religious life, or marriage. And some vocational situations can be a lot more challenging than others. In a letter written to a Maryknoll sister who was considering leaving her community and joining the Catholic Worker, Dorothy Day counseled the sister not to be hasty. "When you say you are going to join us, I can only say that within a very short time after you do that you will be most disillusioned with us." After urging her to wait a year before making a decision, Dorothy continued: "I warn you, you know nothing of our work when you announce that you will join us (after traveling for a time!) and if you do come to stay with us you will find nothing to satisfy you here. . . . If I, with long experience (I am 67), find the work utterly frustrating and full of most humiliating failures, I do not know how you could stand it."

Language about dropping one's nets and answering Jesus' "Come follow me," putting out into the deep, imitating the example of the Good Shepherd, or accompanying the Lord on mission sounds exciting. But there is a spiritual messiness to vocation, too, and we need to be realistic about that. There may be moments when one wonders whether the path taken is ultimately the "right" one, as in the case of the sister that Dorothy Day was writing to. Or there may be moments when we wonder whether we've truly accomplished anything of lasting value—the "most humiliating failures," that Dorothy speaks of. The fields may have looked ripe, but the harvest could wind up looking pretty meager, even when we've labored in them for years.

None of us should undertake the path of discipleship with the expectation that we will behave more responsibly and faithfully than the Twelve themselves, that we will learn faster than they did, or that we will not make the same mistakes, or that we can finish the journey without having to hear the Lord's call a second or a third time—and probably even more often than that! It's hard to contemplate all of what might lie ahead as one is starting out. Those who are going to encourage young people to consider priesthood or religious life have to be honest about what can happen when disciples enroll in the school of the Spirit.

### **Not just what we do, but what we are**

Priests and religious undertake many good works, but that is not all that the Lord calls to do. We also try to lead others into “constant contact with the living God.” We cannot, however, guide people in territory where we ourselves have not yet set foot. Even Jesus would have been unable to assist those wrestling with the demons that attack one's faith and trust in God if he had not gone through the testing first, as the Letter to the Hebrews reminds us.

Perhaps, as Mark says, the Spirit “drove” Jesus into the wilderness (Mark 1:12). Or perhaps, as Luke says, the Spirit simply “led” him there (Luke 4:1). Yet whether driven or led, the wilderness experience was both unavoidable and necessary. It was unavoidable because, after the charismatic moment of the Spirit's descent into a person's life, the response needs proving or testing. Is the call truly from God, and can this God be trusted to the end?

And the wilderness experience was necessary. How could Jesus call others to such trust if he never faced the countless ways the demon—and the world—tries to steal the

word sown in our hearts? Jesus may have been speaking from experience when he said, “When they hear, Satan immediately comes and takes away the word that is sown in them” (Mark 4:15). That is what Satan tried to do with Jesus. As a result, Jesus was able to sympathize with others and accompany them as they went through the same experience. Young people are understandably attracted by people doing good works, and all the more so if those works are heroic. But maybe it’s not so much the works themselves as the courage and the faith of those who do them that really catches a young person’s imagination. In the end, it’s not the remembrance of Jesus’ works that sustains us—the healing, the teaching, the spending time with people, the prophetic boldness. What sustains us is the desire to know God the way he did and our confidence that this prayer is gradually being answered.

### **“I chose you”**

A scriptural text that might be very appropriate for a letter on vocations is Jesus’ words “You did not choose me but I chose you” (John 15:16). These words were not spoken to the disciples at the beginning of their life with Jesus, but several years later. And they were words that would need to be remembered and pondered carefully many times in the years that followed. In ways that we probably could never understand at the outset, we don’t choose the vocation. The vocation, rather, chooses us. “But I chose you.” It sounds so simple, so clear at the beginning, no matter how long the discernment might take. Yet as life moves along, Jesus’ words become increasingly reassuring, consoling, and necessary to hear.

Vocations do not always assume fixed, readily identifiable forms, as when we think of “priesthood,” “consecrated life,” “permanent diaconate,” or “Christian

marriage.” It comes as no surprise that, as we get older, the contemplative side of our nature often becomes more pronounced, with a corresponding desire to pray more and talk less. Our affections become more chaste, our wants become leaner, our sense of sharing the brokenness of the world more acute. We are less distracted by the attractiveness of material things, and increasingly disposed to accept what we cannot change and to trust the providence that brought us to where we are. The evangelical ideals of chastity, poverty, and obedience infiltrate our interior life, even without our thinking about them.

When the Pope writes about people “at every stage of life” sharing in the mission of Christ and sometimes being called to consecrated life, he may be touching upon the dynamic nature of Christian spirituality. Those who belong to the Church and stay faithful to their baptismal commitment become more and more “religious.” Although they do not pronounce vows, everything about them demonstrates an orientation towards evangelical living. They may not live in monasteries, convents, or religious houses, but they carry an everyday holiness into the world. This, too, is the flowering of vocation.

[2011]



## Vocation as a Particular Reflection of God's Love

“God is love,” writes the author of 1 John, “and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them” (1 Jn 4:16). The story of each human life, like the story of the universe itself, begins with God’s love. This is the indispensable first principle of our faith. It is also the starting point of the Holy Father’s message for the 49<sup>th</sup> World Day of Prayer for Vocations.

Vocations, like every gift, begin and end in the love that God has for the world. “The discovery of this reality,” he writes, “is what truly and profoundly changes our lives.” In other words, the process of conversion that sustains life in the Spirit begins the first moment we realize that we have been loved with a mercy and a tenderness that go beyond all human imagining. Each of our inner senses—the senses of the human spirit—is awakened. We start to feel the presence of the transcendent mystery from which we come and which surrounds us on every side. The Pope recalls the memorable words of Saint Augustine in the *Confessions*: “You shouted,” “You flashed,” “You breathed,” “I have tasted,” “You touched.” The mind may give its assent to the proposition that we have been created, but it can take a long time to notice the One who does the creating. Once Augustine’s mind was seized by love, he was finally ready to understand.

### Love’s effect

The experience of God’s love is not without consequence; it leaves an imprint and calls for a response. Jesus instructed his disciples, “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly

Father is perfect” (Matt 5:48). But what does such perfection mean? What does it entail? The Pope answers: “The high standard of the Christian life consists in loving ‘as’ God loves; with a love that is shown in the total, faithful, and fruitful gift of self.” I don’t think he means that we are called to *imitate* God; that would be impossible. He means, I think, that love is what God is. Each time that we love, whether in the rare moments of heroic self-sacrifice or in the countless simple, everyday ways, we do what God does; we are, albeit very incompletely and imperfectly, what God is. Eventually, we become what we do, even as we “do” or perform what we are. As the Scripture says: “those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them.” We are never more truly ourselves than when we love, and yet the love that is in us, the love that we bring to expression, is ultimately not us; it is God.

For this reason, whenever anyone of us loves another, what the other experiences from us is not just our love, but God’s own love for them. These are not two loves—human love and divine love. There is only one love, and it is divine; it simply has two expressions, as the Pope writes: “two expressions of the one divine love.”

### **Love and vocation**

So, what happens in the case of vocations? What does love have to do with hearing and seeing and tasting and feeling the God who loves us? Or, to make the point a bit more forcefully, what happens when someone hears and answers the God “who so loved the world” (Jn 3:16)? The answer is simple: having experienced themselves as deeply and totally loved by God, some will be moved by the Spirit to want to bring others to share the same experience.

“Love of God, which priests and consecrated persons are called to mirror, however imperfectly,” the Pope explains, “is the motivation for answering the Lord’s call to special consecration through priestly ordination or the profession of the evangelical counsels.” This same love of God, of course, is what leads other disciples to become spiritual directors, hospital chaplains, religious educators, permanent deacons, and more. The one who has known God’s love feels the need to respond, and the quintessential response to divine love is the love we want to give to others.

The message continues: “The other practical expression of love, that towards our neighbor, *and especially those who suffer and are in greatest need*, is the decisive impulse that leads the priest and the consecrated person to be a builder of communion between people and a sower of hope. The relationship of consecrated persons, and especially of the priest, to the Christian community is vital *and becomes a fundamental expression of their affectivity*.” Here, I believe, we are looking at the charismatic and prophetic nature of vocation.

In a general way, every Christian life involves vocation, since vocation is a consequence of our baptismal immersion in the dying and rising of Christ. The heavenly voice that set Jesus apart when he was in the Jordan River is the same voice that calls to each of us, not only at the moment of our baptism, but at every moment of our lives. For all of us, the tale of our lives is really a story about the unfolding of a vocation. Rightly understood, the baptismal promises cannot be made more complete or more perfect, since they direct us towards a perfect love of God. As the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (*Lumen Gentium*) tells us: “all the faithful of Christ of whatever rank or status, are called to the fullness of the Christian life and

to the perfection of charity” (no. 40). The Great Commandment becomes the cornerstone of our lives, directing our minds, our hearts, our energies, our very souls (Deut 6:4-5). It is the same commandment that directed Jesus throughout his life. He didn’t need two seconds to reply to the scribe’s question about which commandment was the first of all (Mk 12:28-30). Then, adding a second about loving one’s neighbor, he bundled them together as a single commandment (Mk 12:31).

### **Building community, accompanying the poor**

The phrases which I set in italics “especially those who suffer and are in greatest need” and “becomes a fundamental expression of their affectivity” draw our attention to two central characteristics of vocational awareness. These characteristics set the vocation of priests and religious in a light slightly different from the call to holiness that comes to all of us by virtue of our baptism.

Priests and religious are, the Pope says, builders of communion and sowers of hope. Yet building communion and sowing hope extend beyond the believing community to embrace the world. For God’s love (which is the impulse behind every vocation) is without boundaries. Religious and priests carry the world in their hearts. Their lives are marked by “a particular intensity” and by “purity of heart.” Their experience of God’s love brings the whole world closer. They are not only deeply aware *that* God loves; they are also acutely mindful of *what* God loves. Their lives are marked by clarity of vision and singleness of purpose.

To know God is to find oneself in communion with others who have likewise experienced divine love. That all human beings have the potential to experience this love and thus to be drawn into communion is the ground of hope. The

world *can* be one; prophets dare to dream about all the peoples of the earth ascending God's holy mountain.

As carriers of this vision, priests and religious have a distinctive relationship with the believing community. Their love for the Church, their prayer for the Church, and their attentiveness to the deeper needs of the human spirit reflect the Lord's own love and care for his people. They understand that the world's future hinges upon whether or not loyalty to one's nation, one's ethnic group, one's family, or one's social class can be transformed or even transcended by the desire for communion and the persistent hope that keeps this desire alive. So long as human beings remain locked into these narrow, regional identities, they will be unable to imagine the larger picture of a world made whole. Priests and religious have glimpsed this larger picture, much the way prophets do. That larger picture shapes and defines who they are. But how do they arrive at that picture? What reformats their imagination so that their inner eye can see the new heavens and the new earth of which Isaiah spoke?

Perhaps the answer to this question lies in the Pope's words "especially those who suffer and are in greatest need." Vocational awareness can be prompted by many things: inspiring stories, exemplary lives, courageous witness, faith-filled preaching, intense spiritual thirst, direct invitation, or even being seduced by God's word, the way Jeremiah was. But many of us have discovered that vocational awareness is prompted and sustained most effectively by contact with "those who suffer and are in greatest need." Human needs and human suffering take many forms, as we know. Yet there is something about contact with the poor that sets this particular experience apart.

The expression “the preferential option for the poor” is rooted in the experience of a Church that knows and accompanies women and men who are at the bottom. They are the world’s refugees, those fleeing hunger and civil war, immigrants, exploited workers, defenseless women and children, the abandoned, the homeless, those who have no family or friends to turn to, the excluded, the voiceless—in a word, the ones whom Scripture simply names “the poor.” They are the ones who would have been the primary hearers of Jesus’ proclamation that the kingdom of God is at hand. And they can be encountered all over the globe. To meet them is to be drawn to give that “practical expression of love” of which the Pope speaks. We want to do in our day what Jesus did in his: to lift away burdens, to drive out demons, to heal wounded lives, and to set captives free. Gospel scenes of Jesus among his people claim our imagination, and inwardly we follow Jesus as he walks with them. The line from Isaiah that Matthew cites after describing a day in the ministry captures the “practical expression of love”: “He took our infirmities and bore our diseases” (Mt 8:17).

Eucharist, love of God’s word in Scripture, and unceasing prayer are essential for sustaining vocational awareness over the long haul, as the Pope states. But many of us have discovered that regular immersion in the lives and fortunes of the poor has helped us to read and relish Scripture in new ways. It has brought greater meaning and depth to our celebrations of the Eucharist. And it has taught us fresh lessons about the nature and fruits of prayer.

Priests and religious know that their vocation is truly a gift from God, a particular expression of God’s love. They also know that vocations are not given for the benefit of the

individual religious or priest, but for the benefit of the believing community and the wider world in which this community lives. They understand, humbly, that in and through them God's own eternal love for the world is being revealed afresh. It is this mystery to which their lives always point, however inadequately and incompletely. Yet where would the Church and where would the world be without them?

[2012]

## Touching Faith, Sustaining the Call

“It will be a moment of grace and commitment to a more complete conversion to God, to strengthen our faith in Him and proclaim Him with joy to the people of our time.”

—Benedict XVI, announcing the Year of Faith

I recall being in the seminary chapel in the spring of 1962, listening to one of our teachers reassure us that nothing in the Church was going to change. That memory came back to me as I opened Yves Congar’s wonderful diary account *My Journal of the Council* (Liturgical Press, 2012). Congar was fifty-eight when the Second Vatican Council opened (I was nineteen); John Paul II would name him a cardinal some thirty-two years later. Reading Congar’s journal today, with its refreshing candor, one understands why some in the Church were so confident that nothing was going to change, while others saw why the need for change was absolutely crucial. For some people, the only thing necessary was to set our eyes on heaven and fix our hope on the kingdom; the path was fixed and the means were clear. For others, there was no way for the Church to walk, except through the world. And this meant accompaniment. It would also require a colossal change of outlook. The opening sentences of *Gaudium et spes* are as thrilling today as when the world first heard them:

The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the women and men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ. Indeed, nothing genuinely human fails to raise an echo in their hearts. For theirs is a community composed of men and women. United in Christ, they are led by the Holy Spirit in



their journey to the Kingdom of their Father and they have welcomed the news of salvation that is meant for every human being. That is why this community realizes that it is truly linked with humankind and its history by the deepest of bonds.

Following Congar through the Council, I notice how much the various actors in the conciliar drama were drawing from one another, how much they were learning from one another and supporting each other. In the face of ideological resistance and some not so edifying ecclesiastical maneuvering, the bishops and theologians who could read the signs of the times were truly nourished by one another's faith. They did not simply share ideas and theological perspectives, although this was important. They shared a confidence in the Spirit that enabled them to imagine a different way of being church and to face the future with hope. They enabled each other to hold on to the sureness of their vocations by trusting the providence that had brought them to that moment. It is fitting that we should remember what they achieved some fifty years ago as we embark upon the "year of faith."

### **"You faith has made you well"**

In the fifth chapter of his Gospel, Saint Mark recounts the story of a woman suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years. Counting on the safety and anonymity of the crowd, she reaches for Jesus' cloak as unobtrusively as she can, convinced that merely touching the hem of his garment would be enough to make the bleeding stop. But then she is found out; her faith gave her away.

The humanness of the story—the feelings of the woman, the reaction of Jesus, the puzzlement of the disciples—is stunning. Jesus actually does not know who touched him, and

he would not stop looking until he had found out. The woman, trying to keep her uncleanness secret, sought to avoid his notice; maybe she wanted to spare Jesus from contracting her uncleanness if she were to touch him. The disciples are flabbergasted that Jesus would ask who touched him, given the crowd heaving in on them from all sides. Fearful and embarrassed, the woman at last comes forward and falls to the ground in front of him.

The entire scene is one of Mark's wonderful interruptions: Jesus and his disciples were on their way to heal a dying girl—a matter of considerable urgency. That, Mark seems to be saying, is the way life is. The arrival of Jesus interrupts our plans, and occasionally the arrival of others interrupts his. If the reader is wondering why the woman was so desperate to touch his cloak, the answer is simple: she wanted to be cured. As Mark writes: “for she said, ‘If I but touch his clothes, I will be made well’.” Yet there is something else at work here.

At the end of the story, Jesus assures the woman, “Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease” (Mk 5:34). She wanted to be healed, yes. But the source of Jesus' healing power was the Spirit and, just as importantly, his own faith in God—a faith that had been nurtured in Nazareth and tested for forty days in the wilderness. How could Jesus have called his disciples to deeper prayer if, in praying, he never had to struggle, if his own prayer had always been drenched with consolation? How could he have credibly called others to trust God absolutely and unconditionally, if his own faith in God had never been put to the test? Maybe what the woman was really reaching out to touch, then, although she did not realize it, was Jesus' own faith. She had touched his

absolute trust in God, and he obviously had felt hers. There is no other story like it.

### **Faith is the only way**

For Mark, faith is everything: faith in Jesus, of course, as when the evangelist imagines the disciples asking, “Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?” (Mk 4:41) Or when the heavenly voice instructs them, “This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!” (Mk 9:8) But above all what matters is faith in God, as when Jesus assures the synagogue leader, “Do not fear, only believe” (Mk 5:36). Or when he says to the father of the epileptic boy, “If you are able!—All things can be done for the one who believes” (Mk 9:23). Or when he tells the disciples, “Have faith in God” (Mk 11:22).

In the end, what the believer “touches,” what grounds the disciples’ faith, is nothing less than Jesus’ own faith and trust in God, his own relationship with the Father. That is what they came into contact with, and that is what the evangelist hands on to us. The evidence for belief is not the healing miracles; the miracles are but signs that point to the action of the Spirit in the words and works of Jesus. The evidence or “proof” upon which our faith rests is what the disciples experienced in their relationship with him. Their relationship with Jesus—each one distinctive—was what shaped and eventually anchored the way they related to God. Reach back far enough and what we touch is not the miraculous deeds but the trust in God of the one who worked them. Reach back far enough and what we touch is not words on a page but the religious experience of the ancient communities who handed the memories and stories of Jesus on to us.

Discipleship was not some neatly defined “thing” like citizenship or membership in a club that each of the followers

shared equally. Mary Magdalene's relationship with Jesus was not identical to Simon's, and Simon's was not the same as that of the Beloved Disciple, or Thomas, or Salome, or the rich young man, or the nameless woman who anointed his body beforehand for burial. No two figures in the gospel stories related to Jesus in exactly the same way. The same holds true in our communities today.

### **Touching the faith of others**

The people who came to believe in Jesus believed in God first. They may have been sinners, but they were not atheists. Unless they believed in God, their minds and hearts would not have been open to what Jesus was saying about the kingdom; and they almost certainly would not have been receptive to his call. There may be a lesson for us here.

In societies that are becoming increasingly secular, where the God-question may be of little or no concern to a growing number of people, the challenge for the Church is quite different from the challenges the apostles faced. At least the Greeks and the Romans had their gods, as did the Egyptians and the peoples of Asia. Religious ritual and belief were a part of life. How then do we talk about Jesus to people who may have no sense of God to start with? In a secular age the Church might need, first, to re-light the way that leads toward the transcendent. To be sure, transcendence runs deep in the gospel story; but people are not going to find it if they don't know what they're looking for.

Sometimes in a family where parents have little or no religious faith a child will still manage to discover God. When the child undergoes a spiritual awakening and becomes a believer, nearly always this discovery or awakening occurs because the child (as a teenager or young adult) comes into

contact with religious faith. This can happen directly, through the words or witness of someone outside the family who is a believer. Or it can happen indirectly, through contact with the culture of belief by means of sacred art or architecture, through books or music. To some degree we see such indirection in the case of Thomas Merton and Aaron Jean-Marie (later Cardinal) Lustiger.

From my own spiritual tradition, there is Ignatius himself. Saint Ignatius experienced his first spiritual awakenings while recuperating in the Loyola castle, holed up with Jacobus de Voragine's lives of the saints *The Golden Legend* and Ludolph of Saxony's *The Life of Jesus Christ*. Surroundings, like books, are powerful carriers of meaning and grace. There is no telling what will happen when a child's eyes fall on beauty that a grown-up's eye no longer sees. Merton discovered such beauty in Corpus Christi Church in Manhattan and Lustiger in the Orléans Cathedral of Sainte-Croix.

### **Attractive, unsettling, and contagious**

A vibrant, practiced faith is attractive; it may also be unsettling; and it can even be contagious. Attractive, because one lives from principle and conviction, courageously, without the need to impose those convictions on others; it is joyous living. Unsettling, because such living challenges the rest of us to ask why we are not living more authentically. Contagious, because life according to the gospel—especially as it becomes more prophetic—inspires and excites; faith can be caught. And once caught, we gravitate toward a different sort of companionship. The ones Jesus called blessed are the ones in whose company we feel more and more at home: “the poor in spirit,” “the meek,” “those who hunger and thirst for

righteousness,” “the merciful,” “the pure of heart,” “the peacemakers.”

Every once in a while, upon encountering someone of great spiritual depth—whether personally or in a book or in a film—I find myself wondering what I would look like if my whole life could pivot on the mystery of God the way theirs does. I don’t think I am alone in asking this. For a brief moment or two, in the imaginary world of what might have been, we are monks and recluses, heroic missionaries, mistresses or masters of the interior life, pilgrims or saints, martyrs, men and women fully of God, prophets. For a moment, the dream of holiness seems neither impossible nor unrealistic. Face to face with the possibility of achieving such spiritual depth, “I *want* to be like that” becomes “I *could* be like that.” Consciously or not, women and men who live by faith are, at the same time, spreading and sharing that faith. They enable us to believe in ourselves. The faith of others sustains us when our own well starts to run dry, just as there are times when others take heart because of what they see and hear in us. Becoming aware of this mutual dependence is humbling; it’s also how God wants it.

### **The year of faith and vocation**

What the Pope desires for the year of faith—that it should be “a moment of grace” and a “commitment to a more complete conversion to God”—ought to be our hope, not just for the anniversary of Vatican II, but for every year. Nevertheless, for many of us, entering into the year of faith might mean reflecting on how our vocational awareness has been sustained over time. What keeps the flame alive? Ultimately, what sustains us, of course, is our relationship with the risen Christ; whatever we do, whatever we choose, we do because of him. Yet Jesus does not represent a timeless, faceless

“cause,” no matter how holy or spiritual. Whatever Jesus did, whatever choices he made, were always for the sake of his people. For us, then, to find Jesus is to find his people; and to be with his people is to know and love him.

Other things sustain us as well: Scripture and Eucharist, the joy we find in our work, and conversation with others who are living the same call. Not just chit-chat, but genuine conversation about the things that matter: this is crucial to keeping vocational awareness alive. In countless non-verbal ways, from one day to the next, we draw courage and strength from the goodness we see in one another. Our own faith deepens as we watch how others live theirs: how they handle suffering and diminishment, how they forgive, how they accept disappointment, how they thank God before beginning a meal, how they listen.

Yet we also need to *say* something. Faith that is never spoken, when our relationship with the mystery of God does not find its way into words—this sort of “implicit” faith has a certain incompleteness about it. If we cannot talk about our faith, then maybe we are not fully comfortable with the choice we made to follow Christ and to center our lives in the gospel. It is not a matter of whether we are introverts or extroverts; what matters is whether or not we have, and are, “friends in the Lord.” Imagine the disciples never talking about how their lives were different after they came to know Jesus, never sharing how they remembered him! What did they do, once Jesus was no longer with them? What do we do? They depended on one another. They preached the forgiveness of sins. They lived what they believed. They told the story of Jesus as people who were really part of it. Can we do the same? Religious, priests, and

ministers of the gospel who can do this are keeping one another vocationally alive.

Perhaps, then, the year of faith will be a year of the Church that speaks. But not about devotional practices or changes in the missal or the catechism, and not even about the cluster of red-button topics that today get tempers flaring. Fifty years ago, the Church spoke. It spoke from the depths of its faith about the mystery of God. It told the world, loudly and clearly, the reasons for the hope that it has. Together, we are still that church. But if we are to speak to the world, we must first practice speaking to one another. That's where the energy for mission comes from. That's where we sort out what we really and truly believe from what is merely learned words and ideas about God.

In his opening address to the council on October 11, 1962, John XXIII said:

In the daily exercise of Our pastoral office, it sometimes happens that We hear certain opinions which disturb Us—opinions expressed by people who, though fired with a commendable zeal for religion, are lacking in sufficient prudence and judgment in their evaluation of events. They can see nothing but calamity and disaster in the present state of the world. They say over and over that this modern age of ours, in comparison with past ages, is definitely deteriorating. One would think from their attitude that history, that great teacher of life, had taught them nothing. They seem to imagine that in the days of the earlier councils everything was as it should be so far as doctrine and morality and the Church's rightful liberty were concerned.

We feel that We must disagree with these prophets of doom, who are always forecasting worse disasters, as though the end of the world were at hand. Present indications are that the human family is on the threshold of a new era. We must



recognize here the hand of God, who, as the years roll by, is ever directing men's efforts, whether they realize it or not, towards the fulfillment of the inscrutable designs of His providence, wisely arranging everything, even adverse human fortune, for the Church's good.

The confidence of the Pope is stunning and unforgettable. His words reveal the depth of his faith and the light of his prayer, which he was sharing with the council fathers and the world. The same providence that inspired John XXIII to call the council is working among us now. From the wellsprings of our faith, we must tell the world, again, about the mystery of God unfolding in our time.

[2012]

**“We also believe, and so we speak” (2 Cor 4:13):**

A Reflection on *Lumen fidei* (*The Light of Faith*)

Towards the end of the new encyclical we come across a question from one of the earliest critics of Christian faith, a second-century Greek philosopher named Celsus: “Why claim that [grass] grows for the benefit of man rather than for that of the most savage of the brute beasts?” In other words, on what basis can the claim be made that God created the world for human beings? How is such a claim to be proven? Do human beings work harder than ants and bees and countless other living things? Are we simply deluded in thinking that human beings are special, as in the breathtaking words of Psalm 8: “When I look at the heavens, the work of your fingers, / the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, / what is man that you are mindful of him, / and the son of man that you care for him?” That ancient question has resurfaced in a slightly different form in post-modern culture; it has been a question that Benedict XVI attempted to answer anew. As the letter states, “Our culture has lost its sense of God’s tangible presence and activity in our world” (#17).

The difference in tone between the new encyclical and, for example, Pope Francis’ address to the bishops of Brazil on July 27 is striking. The encyclical is long and theological, having been started and largely completed by Benedict XVI. The address in Rio de Janeiro, on the other hand, is personal, meditative and—given the occasion—brief. The encyclical follows upon Benedict’s previous encyclicals *On Christian Love* (*Deus caritas est*), *Saved by Hope* (*Spe salvi*), and *Charity*

*in Truth (Caritas in veritate)* that appeared in 2005, 2007, and 2009. I was teaching a course on faith and reason when *Spe salvi* appeared. That letter, engaging and profound, could easily have served as the course's foundation. The background issue there—and it carries over into *Lumen fidei*—is, I suggest, the relation between faith and culture. Does Christian faith have a message that can meet head-on and engage the disenchantment with traditional belief that is gradually permeating North Atlantic societies? The question unfolding throughout *Spe salvi* was: can humanity survive without hope and can that hope be sustained if it has no transcendent ground? In *Lumen fidei* the question becomes: can the human race flourish without knowing where it came from and why it is here? Are we walking aimlessly through history, or is there a meaning to our fragile existence? And here we arrive at the junction of reason and religion: there is no true understanding of humanity's origin and destiny, the encyclical argues, without faith. In the same way, there can be no true and lasting love that is not accompanied by trust.

### **An appeal to experience**

The strongest argument for the necessity of faith that the encyclical makes is its appeal to experience: what happens to individuals, communities, and whole societies when faith is subtracted from thinking, acting, and relating? What happens when reason becomes autonomous? The encyclical answers: “the light of autonomous reason is not enough to illumine the future . . . in the absence of light everything becomes confused; it is impossible to tell good from evil, or the road to our destination from other roads which takes us in endless circles, going nowhere” (#3). And again: “Once man has lost the fundamental orientation which unifies his existence, he breaks

down into the multiplicity of his desires; in refusing to await the time of promise, his life-story disintegrates into a myriad of unconnected instants” (#13).

No reasonable person would doubt the critical role trust plays in human relationships; what else could love or friendship or social harmony rest upon? What would happen if we could not trust what others have learned and discovered? What would happen if cultures lost the traditions of popular wisdom and the hard-won lessons of the past? In other words, trust—and believing—is eminently “reasonable.” Such faith, even at its most basic human level, is a sign of grace at work. Once again the encyclical: “Because faith is a way, it also has to do with the lives of those men and women who, though not believers, nonetheless desire to believe and continue to seek. To the extent that they are sincerely open to love and set out with whatever light they can find, they are already, even without knowing it, on the path leading to faith. They strive to act as if God existed, at times because they realize how important he is for finding a sure compass for our life in common or because they experience a desire for light amid darkness, but also because in perceiving life’s grandeur and beauty they intuit that the presence of God would make it all the more beautiful.” (#35) The human being is by nature oriented towards transcendence. The moment that we recognize this basic fact about ourselves, we have taken a first step on the way of faith.

*Because faith is a way:* the journey metaphor likewise rests upon experience. In this case, it is the experience that we are all familiar with of seeking, desiring, looking. “Those who believe, see; they see with a light that illumines their entire journey” (#1). “Religious man is a wayfarer; he must be ready to let himself be led, to come out of himself and to find the God

of perpetual surprises” (#35); “the whole of life is drawn into a journey towards full communion with the living God” (#45). The 19<sup>th</sup>-century German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche once wrote to his sister: “if you want peace of soul and happiness, then believe; but if you want to be a follower of truth, then seek” (#2). But Christian experience leads to a very different conclusion: not only are seeking and believing, truth and faith, not incompatible; they are inseparable. Truth is discovered by walking, and the way we walk is confirmed to be true because it is life-giving. Such is the force of Jesus’ words, “I am the way and the truth and the life” (John 14:6). In other words, faith is something we do; it is about practice; it is about relating oneself to God. The only way to confirm its truthfulness is to walk it.

The appeal to experience in order to clarify how faith and reason are connected from within—two moments conjoined in the life of the mind—should not be underestimated. When the encyclical says, “faith ‘sees’ to the extent that it journeys” (#9), it is implicitly drawing on experience. We learn, from experience, that the failure to drink liquids leads to dehydration, and dehydration has consequences. So too we learn from experience that the reluctance or the failure to seek or to journey has consequences, and these can be dire for the human spirit. Ultimately, faith brings us to “see” that we come from God—all of us—and that we are most like God when we love. “Faith is born of an encounter with the living God who calls us and reveals his love, a love which precedes us and upon which we can lean for security and for building our lives” (#4). “Faith transforms the whole person precisely to the extent that he or she becomes open to love” (#26).

## **The communal setting of faith**

The third chapter of the encyclical situates faith in its ecclesial context. Faith is not a private matter between the individual believer and God; it lives and breathes within a community of remembrance. “By its very nature, faith is open to the ‘We’ of the Church; it always takes place within her communion” (#39). “The Church is a Mother who teaches us to speak the language of faith” (#38). The journey each of us makes is not a solitary one; it always includes the company of others. The letter argues that we have to trust the tradition—the long line of faithful women and men—that goes back to the first disciples, the first witnesses. “I cannot possibly verify for myself something which happened so long ago” (#38). And here the encyclical becomes elegant: “But this is not the only way we attain knowledge. Persons always live in relationship. We come from others, we belong to others, and our lives are enlarged by our encounter with others. Even our knowledge and self-awareness are relational; they are linked to others who have gone before us. . . . Self-knowledge is only possible when we share in a greater memory” (#38).

Just because they lived so much closer to Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection faith did not come any more easily to the first disciples than it does to us. After all, there were many who listened to Jesus and saw what he did but in the end walked away in disbelief (John 6:60, 66). Even some of the disciples, on the very mount of the ascension, still had their doubts (Matt 28:17). Yet there is a reality in every age that empowers and gives life to faith because God is to be found there; it is the reality of the poor and disheartened, a reality that is very much on the mind of Pope Francis. Drawing on the Emmaus story

about two disillusioned disciples walking away from the city of hope and promise, this is what he said to the bishops in Brazil:

We need a Church unafraid of going forth into their night. We need a Church capable of meeting them on their way. We need a Church able to dialogue with those disciples who, having left Jerusalem behind, are wandering aimlessly, alone, with their own disappointment, disillusioned by a Christianity now considered barren, fruitless soil, incapable of generating meaning. . . . Today, we need a Church capable of walking at people's side, of doing more than simply listening to them; a Church able to make sense of the 'night' contained in the flight of so many of our brothers and sisters from Jerusalem; a Church which realizes that the reasons why people leave also contain reasons why they can eventually return. But we need to know how to interpret, with courage, the larger picture.

*A Church that can walk at people's side:* here may be the best response we can make today to non-belief. "We also believe, and so we speak," Saint Paul wrote. We speak, and thus we act, as a result of our belief; and perhaps we speak most effectively today, as a Church, when we accompany those who are poor, or spiritually adrift, or searching. "Faith does not merely gaze at Jesus, but sees things as Jesus himself sees them, with his own eyes; it is a participation in his way of seeing" (#18). Jesus saw the world as a prophet would, and the gospels are very clear about what he noticed. In scene after scene we find him among his people, speaking and acting from the depths of his own faith. The Church that walks at people's side is a Church that takes risks. This is what having faith means. Pope Francis once said in an interview: "We need to avoid the spiritual sickness of a Church that is wrapped up in its own world . . . It is true that going out into the street implies a risk of accidents happening . . . And if I had to choose between a

wounded Church that goes out into the street and a sick withdrawn Church, I would definitely choose the first one.” As the encyclical warns, “Faith is no refuge for the fainthearted” (#53).

### **So, why faith?**

The encyclical does not attempt to explain *why* God created us to live by faith rather than, say, by a direct and immediate revelation that would make the transcendent dimension of our lives transparent. It does speak of Moses as a sort of privileged witness whose religious experience we have to trust, since he (like many others) became a mediator: “The people may not see the face of God; it is Moses who speaks to YHWH on the mountain and then tells the others of the Lord’s will” (#14). Yet Scripture also recalls Moses saying, “I wish that all the LORD’s people were prophets and that the LORD would put his Spirit upon them all!” (Numbers 11:29). So, Moses apparently would like to see all the people inspired! Besides, what sort of mediator would Moses or any of the prophets have been, if they were exempt from the faith struggles the rest of us must pass through?

It does not seem right that God should have given us intelligence, but at the very point where salvation is at stake we God expects us to forsake intelligence and accept on faith. Perhaps the problem is that we tend to think of faith and reason as contrasts rather than complements. It is not as if Moses’ interior life was built on certitudes received at Sinai while everyone else’s was built on faith. Faith, the encyclical insists, is itself a way of knowing; there is nothing artificial about it. Faith should not be juxtaposed to reason (especially when “reason” is restricted to what takes place in the physical and



natural sciences). Faith, like all knowing, is one more indication of how much we depend upon one another.

The search for God is at the same time a search for a community because there is no path to God that bypasses God's people. Figures like Abraham, Moses, and Elijah populate the Bible, both Testaments. But in the end the biblical story is not about individuals; it is about a people. "The individual's act of faith finds its place within a community, within the common 'we' of the people" (#14). Find the people and we will find God; find the people and we will understand.

[2013]

## 40.

### ***“along the paths of ordinary life”:***

A reflection on Pope Francis’ message for the 51st  
World Day of Prayer for Vocations

“Today, too,” Pope Francis writes, “Jesus lives and walks along the paths of ordinary life in order to draw near to everyone, beginning with the least, and to heal us of our infirmities and illnesses.” Francis is picking up on the gospel verse that introduces this year’s letter: “Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and curing every disease and sickness” (Matt 9:35). Earlier, in recounting the call of the first disciples, Matthew spoke of Jesus going back to Galilee and making his home “in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulon and Naphtali.” He cites this text because Isaiah had spoken of the “road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles” (Matt 4:12-15). The disciples then accompanied Jesus throughout Galilee as he taught in synagogues and cured “every disease and every sickness among the people.”

Jesus would not have been able to get very far in his mission without companions; that much is clear. And the mission would not have continued over time if others had not heard the same call and responded with as much energy and enthusiasm as Peter and Andrew, James and John. But what is just as remarkable is how Jesus and his followers took to the road. Whoever else was going to join them would be found along the paths of ordinary life.

## “You are God’s field”

The Pope comments on the words of Jesus “the harvest is plentiful.” If there is a field to be harvested, then someone must have been tending it; that someone has to be God. The field, he says, is humanity; it is us. So, since we are the harvest, then what is it about us that is so precious in God's sight, so full of promise? Is it our capacity for holiness, for spiritual greatness? Is it our searching hearts, our longing for life and for love? Is it our heart’s potential, the power of our imagination to envision a world without fear and division? If human beings are the field waiting to be harvested, then what exactly is it that makes us so good and desirable in God’s eyes? Or maybe the Pope is suggesting that the very moment when we realize how much God loves us puts us on the path to holiness and that this experience makes communion with others possible. Paul told the Corinthians, “You are *God’s* field.” Once we realize what we are, Francis says, three prayerful moments follow: *wonder* over the fact that God loves us so deeply, *gratitude* for that love so freely given, and *adoration* that expresses itself in the way we live. Wonder, gratitude, and adoration are what sustain vocations over a lifetime and keep them fresh.

*Jesus lives and walks along the paths of ordinary life in order to draw near to everyone, beginning with the least.* I think often about the difference between John the Baptist and Jesus. John appears to have localized his ministry along the Jordan, not far from the wilderness that may have been his home. While crowds were drawn to hear him, the gospels tell us, there seems to be a pronounced stridency to his voice. It is as if John saw humanity falling into one of two groups: either you belonged to the disciplined, spiritually prepared elect, or you belonged to the brood of vipers, the chaff, the ones who would certainly be left

behind, once the Day of the Lord arrived. And the crowds came to him from everywhere.

Jesus, however, is remarkably different. He is not about to break the bruised reed or quench the smoldering wick or wrangle in the streets, as Isaiah would say (Mt 12:19-20). Jesus travels the countryside of Galilee, visiting all its villages and towns. The gospel leaves us with the impression that the people who surrounded Jesus were not the sort of folks John had in mind for the renewed Israel. How else could we explain John's question as he languished in Herod's dungeon, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" (Mt 11:3) Jesus tried to ease John's doubt by putting him in mind of Isaiah's vision—the deaf hear, the blind see, and the lame walk—signs that a people's ancient hope is being fulfilled at last. Then he adds, "and the poor have the good news preached to them" (Mt 11:5). Throughout the gospel story, Jesus is defined by the company he keeps. John apparently had not noticed these signs, perhaps because he was looking in the wrong direction. The wilderness may have been a privileged place to find God, but most human beings live along the paths of ordinary life. Jesus did not find his first disciples in the desert or at a monastery, but in the bustle of the lakefront, where they were working.

### **Vocational pathways**

The Pope mentions the three traditional vocational paths—marriage, religious consecration, and priesthood. Each of these paths requires, he writes, "an exodus from oneself." Each of these paths calls for a letting go of self for the sake of others: we learn to live for them and walk alongside them on "a communal journey." Whatever the vocational path, we walk still together; we are church. Then, citing John Paul II's Apostolic Letter *Novo Millennio Ineunte* (2001), he speaks of

“pathways of holiness” and the need for a “training in holiness” that can be “adapted to every person’s need.” The overall dynamic is going to be the same for all of us, namely, to work towards a love of neighbor that is at the same time a love of, and constant search for, God. But there is no such thing as a one-size-fits-all pathway to holiness. The reason for this is that each pathway is personal, that is, each human being’s relationship to God is unique. We do not all experience the divine mystery in exactly the same way.

The vocational paths of which the letter speaks are only paths; each path refers to a particular form of Christian living. It is worth asking, however, at what point “path” (whether ordained ministry, religious life, or marriage) actually becomes “vocation.” Many couples get civilly married, for example, but they would not automatically refer to their marriage as a calling. Sometimes people enter religious life or ordained ministry for reasons that are not altogether clear, or they do so without sufficient freedom, and they wind up leaving. Couples may divorce. Yet many times they discover reasons to remain on the path; they experience a calling. “A vocation flows from the heart of God,” Francis writes. The only reason for staying on the road, in other words, is that we have found God there. The point is worth dwelling on.

The notion of calling can get so caught up with ideas about ministry, service, mission and apostolate—very good ideas—that it is easy to overlook where the pathway is meant to lead. There are innumerable models of holiness, as many models as there are saints. Yet what is common to all of them, if we stop and think about it, is the self-emptying or “exodus from oneself” that makes it possible to live the Great Commandment. Holiness comes from union with God, but there is no union with

God that bypasses the world. A vocation, after all, is not a pathway on a faceless map. Vocations unfold in very particular times and places.

The medieval theologian Hugh of St. Victor wrote: “The man who finds his homeland sweet is still a tender beginner; he to whom every soil is as his native one is already strong; but he is perfect to whom the entire world is as a foreign land. The tender soul has fixed his love on one spot in the world; the strong man has extended his love to all places; the perfect man has extinguished his.”

But Hugh’s historical moment and ours are quite different. This difference becomes very clear when we juxtapose what Hugh wrote with Thomas Merton’s frequently quoted Fourth and Walnut reflection in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*:

In Louisville, at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, in the center of the shopping district, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all those people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers. It was like waking from a dream of separateness, of spurious self-isolation in a special world, the world of renunciation and supposed holiness. ... This sense of liberation from an illusory difference was such a relief and such a joy to me that I almost laughed out loud. ... I have the immense joy of being man, a member of a race in which God Himself became incarnate. As if the sorrows and stupidities of the human condition could overwhelm me, now I realize what we all are.

For us, then, the world is not something to flee from but to embrace. And this means that the world *that God loves* is always with us; our souls do not step out of the world when we

pray, but into its deepest pulse. Vocational spirituality in our time must take this into account, whether we're talking about Christian family life, ordained ministry, or religious life, even within the walls of a monastic enclosure. The Christian imagination is poised to take in the world.

### **Vocation vs. profession**

Many of us have grown accustomed to hearing about being called to religious life, or called to ordained ministry, or called to marriage; but these are not the only things to which believers might feel themselves called. I am not thinking of the many choices in front of us when it comes to professions—physicians, attorneys, teachers, scientists, accountants, and so on; or to occupations and trades. Instead, I am thinking of something more basic than any profession or occupation, namely, the particular thing that evokes a cry of the heart for a new heavens and a new earth and which fires us to want to do something that will make a difference—something we embrace not because it might be profitable or even personally fulfilling, but because it holds the possibility of being redemptive.

When I ask what that something might be, a lot comes to mind. I think of an urgent awakening to care for the environment, or being drawn to find common ground with those who practice other religions, or the call to accompany migrants, refugees and the undocumented, or to work for peace, disarmament, and reconciliation, or to wrestle with hopelessness and unbelief. I think of the voices and faces that we cannot forget because they have lodged in our memory and staked a claim on our hearts. In the end, it's usually the people who call: the homeless, the refugee, the religious other, the estranged, those paying the price as the world's climate changes, those trapped in a spiral of violence. I think of men and women who

want to find God but don't know where to look, who crave community and connectedness but have no one to point them in the right direction—in gospel terms, sheep without a shepherd. God calls to us through his people. How we respond to their voice is what gives definition and depth to the particular vocational form we eventually choose.

So, perhaps it is not the vocational form itself that attracts us, but what women and men of faith have done with those forms, how they have lived and enlashed them. That is where vocational beauty lies, and it is the beauty of those lives that bears witness to the truth.

[2014]



## 41.

### ***Perfectae caritatis* Fifty Years Later:**

#### Developments and Changes in the Consecrated Life

The opening sentence of Vatican II's Decree on the Adaptation and Renewal of Religious Life (*Perfectae Caritatis*) refers us to the Constitution on the Church (*Lumen gentium*). By doing so, the Decree framed what it wanted to say about religious life in terms of ecclesiology; religious life should be situated within a theology of the Church. The Decree says nothing ground-breaking about religious life itself; poverty, chastity and obedience—the evangelical counsels—provide, as always, the spiritual architecture of religious communities wherever they may be. What the Council was asking religious communities worldwide to do, however, was to read the signs of the times—an expression John XXIII used just before he died [“The moment has come to discern the signs of the times, to seize the opportunity and to look far ahead”] and which later appeared in one of the opening paragraphs of the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (*Gaudium et spes*).

The phrase, of course, comes from the gospel: “You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times” (Matt 16:3); Jesus was challenging the religious leaders of his day to pay attention. Thus just as the Council fathers found themselves trying to guide the Church in paying attention to the “signs of the times,” so too it was asking religious communities to do the same: adaptation and renewal would be the operative words.

Reading *Perfectae caritatis* today, it is hard to see how such a document could have had a contentious beginning. Yet there were many in 1962 that could not imagine religious life, let alone the Church, being any different from what it had been for so long. The directions the Decree gave about adaption would strike most people today as modest. What seemed to generate the most controversy, however, was the Council's turn towards the world and what that turn would mean for religious communities, their apostolates, and their spiritualities.

Looking back over the past fifty years, therefore, we can ask: Did we do this? Did we adapt, and did we renew?

Answering this question in detail would require a lot more background than I have. It would necessitate a historical review of religious orders and congregations, the emergence of new forms of community life, the places where we succeeded and where we failed. A full answer would also have to take into account at least three additional forces that have been at work in the modern world: advances in interreligious encounter, the striking recovery of the prophetic dimension of the gospel on the part of many religious, and the steadily increasing secularism of contemporary cultures—a secularism hardly limited to North Atlantic societies. Religious life does not carry on in a vacuum, and any effort to ignore or escape the challenges that believers face today would be a disservice to the Church. While I cannot give the full answer, at least I can explain why the three forces I just mentioned are significant in any effort to understand where we are fifty years later. Strong winds are reshaping our sense of who we are: our belief, our practice, even how we self-identify as consecrated women and men.

## **An inter-religious time**

Religious life is a laboratory of the Spirit; it is the place where the Church experiments with prayer, where it learns the elementary skills of discernment, and where God-seekers often reach the unfathomable darkness of God that is both terrifying and loving. It is the place where the Church learns how to live with transcendence while at the same time it travels with Jesus, imaginatively, the roads of Galilee. Religious life is not a private path for those Christians who are inclined to live more inwardly, more intently focused on following Jesus. Religious life does not lie at the periphery of the ecclesial community, as if it were a spiritual exception to the ordinary way taken by most Christians. On the contrary, religious life is normative because it is life according to the gospel; it is deeply evangelical, throwing into relief the values and attitudes of Christ that all of us commit to in baptism. If the Church is like a sacrament or sign “of a closely knit union with God and of the unity of the whole human race” (*Lumen gentium*, #1), then consecrated life is like a sign within a sign of how such unity is to be achieved. Thus we read: “The profession of the evangelical counsels, then, appears as a sign which can and ought to attract all the members of the Church to an effective and prompt fulfillment of the duties of their Christian vocation” (*Lumen gentium*, #44).

It should be no surprise that people who have chosen to make the divine mystery the center of their lives would also be keenly sensitive to the presence of God in everything human, including other faiths. To leave oneself open to the mystery of God is to anticipate meeting God in the religious other. Unlike Jonah, we are not disappointed to discover that God has saving interests that go beyond the boundaries of our communities and

even our faith tradition. In a world that is becoming increasingly globalized, encounters among the world's religions are inevitable and, I believe, welcome. People in religious life, secure in their own spiritual identity, are uniquely poised to help the Church in the dialogues that ensue. But perhaps even more to the point, interreligious encounters are shaping and will continue to shape Christian religious life. Where this will lead, we do not yet know. Religious life is adapting itself to a different spiritual landscape. A more positive theological assessment of the world's spiritual landscape than people had in the fourth century, or the late Middle Ages, or at the time of the Reformation is bound to have its effect.

### **A Church of and for the poor**

The second force we might sum up in terms of solidarity or the preferential option for the poor. The insight that links faith and justice was by no means a discovery made in cloisters, monasteries and religious houses; we cannot lay claim to it. To be sure, religious women and men have been pronouncing the vow of poverty for centuries, and across centuries they have undertaken numerous works on behalf of the poor. Yet although evangelical life has certainly produced its share of prophetic figures, no one would have identified our spiritualities as liberationist.

With its powerful message about the Church in the modern world sharing “the joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties” of countless people today, the Council redirected the attention of religious communities to the world outside their walls and beyond their faith tradition. And there they began to notice the economic, social and political conditions that have so oppressed and “crucified” human beings all over the globe. Such attentiveness, coupled with a refreshed understanding of

what Jesus imagined when he spoke of the reign of God, made it far more likely that consecrated life would turn more prophetic. Religious men and women would work like prophets, living witnesses to a faith that does justice; and when because of age or infirmity they could no longer work like prophets, they would pray like them, sharing those aspirations for freedom and justice that reverberate through the psalms. In thinking about the prophetic current within religious life I recall, from my own tradition, the Jesuit educators who were killed in El Salvador in 1989. I remember the Trappist monks killed in Algeria in 1996. And I think, most recently, of the Xaverian sisters slain in Burundi. The observance of poverty looks and feels quite different when viewing the world through the eyes of the poor. The vow becomes an expression of solidarity with victims and animates the desire for justice.

### **Being a religious in a secular age**

The third force that has been at work over the past fifty years has to do with culture. Increasing numbers of people appear to have quietly accommodated themselves to the non-existence of God. God no longer plays any significant role in the life of their minds or their imaginations. Even though some might give intellectual assent to the proposition that God exists, in effect God is absent from their thinking and acting; they are practical atheists. And to be fair I should also include religious fundamentalists from every tradition whose relationship with God is essentially atheist, although they would never acknowledge it. For the God they speak of has been co-opted to serve interests that have little to do with God and a lot to do with themselves.

I am not suggesting that religious life is becoming secularized, too; hardly that. But neither is it hermetically sealed

from its cultural surroundings. Evangelical living always faces challenges—both from within and from without—and religious have negotiated those challenges, sometimes successfully and other times unsuccessfully. Reform and renewal are essential elements of the Church’s historical pilgrimage, and that includes religious life. The vows we take do not create an invisible protection against the cultural currents of the times; there can be no absolute withdrawal from the world. As the desert Christians learned centuries ago, the world finds its way even into the wilderness and desert caves.

Living the vows in a culture that is by heritage Christian is considerably different from living in a culture that is religiously neutral at best. In other words, while the call to renewal is perennial, the cultural current I am describing has been pushing us not so much to renewal as to adaptation. How will consecrated life survive and flourish when religious belief and practice are gradually receding from people’s consciousness? To what values will the vows point—what will the vows signify—in a world that does not know God?

The Decree asked religious to understand the culture around them: “religious must be given suitable instruction . . . in the currents and attitudes of sentiment and thought prevalent in social life today. . . Religious should strive during the whole course of their lives to perfect the culture they have received in matters spiritual and in arts and sciences.” Perhaps this means religious have to ready themselves for a different sort of dialogue. Inter-religious dialogue is one kind of conversation. Dialogue with atheists and non-believers is something else. Still, we need a etiquette for that kind of conversation as well. The first step is to enter into the other’s world long enough to

appreciate where they are coming from, and taking that step has its risks.

And yet the future might not be so bleak as my way of putting things may sound. For even as people push away from institutional religion, they are also searching for ways to cultivate the spiritual nature they carry inside. We have always known that religion without spirituality is fruitless. Isaiah said, “Because this people draw near with their mouth and honor me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me” (Isa 29:13). When that happens—when institutional religion becomes empty—those who are earnestly seeking God cannot be blamed for looking elsewhere. But when religion is vibrant—when the Church is truly a house of prayer for all the nations—then the religious and the spiritual unite.

What we have going for us, then, is that even though institutional religion seems to be waning in traditionally religious cultures, people do not cease to be spiritual beings. So, religious life finds itself facing this challenge: Fidelity to Christ means going to the religious margins in order to help guide those who feel the trace of transcendence in their lives but don’t know how to nurture it. This fidelity also means helping the Church to put the gospel first, always.

### **A graced moment for the Church**

One remarkable event fifty years after *Perfectae caritatis* is that the Church has a pope who is a religious. The way Francis keeps calling attention to the poor, his insistence that the Church must go into the streets and be with the people, his warning against clerical ambition, the honesty and humility with which he can speak about himself: all this makes sense when we recall that he is the product of lifelong immersion in the gospel. Some of what *Perfectae caritatis* says about religious

communities applies equally to the rest of the Church: “they should avoid every appearance of luxury, excessive wealth and the accumulation of goods.” This message comes through loudly and clearly in the words and example of Pope Francis. Consecrated life is a gift to the Church. We know how it can impart a distinctive style to ordained ministry, and now we are seeing how it can contribute a similar distinctiveness to the exercise of the Petrine ministry.

The vows intensify what we commit ourselves to in baptism. As such, they are windows on to Christian living and what it means to be church; they are not about ministry but about identity. The vows, lived and internalized over years, define who we are. The same can be said, of course, about marriage vows: those vows, too, lived and internalized over years, define who the spouses are. But religious life throws the gospel into relief and reminds the Church of the values that arise from being totally centered on the reign of God—humility, compassion, solidarity, service.

Religious have no corner on holiness, but they play a distinct role in the life of the people of God. They enrich the Church with clear public witness of re-enacted memories: the Jesus who washes the feet of his disciples, the one who breaks and shares bread with the hungry, the one unafraid to be found in bad company, the one who seeks God in deserted places, the one who sees the world through the eyes of poor widows, the one whose word uncovers and drives out demons, the one who prays for his enemies and even loves them. There is a pattern to Jesus’ life, and consecrated life is its re-enactment.

Fifty years later there are fewer religious, for reasons that have nothing to do with the Council and everything to do with cultural shifts. In a world where globalization appears to be



unstoppable, no society is immune to the forces of the market, to cross-cultural encounters, or to the spreading divorce between faith and reason. Nevertheless, the human heart's orientation towards transcendence remains. Religious life points in that direction. Hope is its horizon; we also call it resurrection. At the same time, the enacted story is about the Jesus who walked through the villages and towns of this world, and promised to remain with the Church until the end of the age; there is nothing escapist here.

In his address at the last general meeting of the Second Vatican Council on December 7, 1965, Paul VI, commenting on the wretchedness and the greatness that feature so prominently in our humanity, said:

this council . . . insisted very much more on this pleasant side of [human beings], rather than on [their] unpleasant one. Its attitude was very much and deliberately optimistic. A wave of affection and admiration flowed from the council over the modern world of humanity. . . . Instead of depressing diagnoses, encouraging remedies; instead of direful prognostics, messages of trust issued from the council to the present-day world. The modern world's values were not only respected but honored, its efforts approved, its aspirations purified and blessed.

Paul VI was defending the Council's effort to turn the Church towards the modern world. Maybe, then, the question we need to be asking fifty years later is "Have we done that?" I believe the answer is yes, with all the risks that this entailed. What would have been the alternative? Pope Francis garnered a lot of attention when he spoke about the Church going to the streets, the Church as a field hospital, the need to be bold even at the risk of making mistakes. "A church that does not go out," he said, "sooner or later gets sick in the vitiated atmosphere of her enclosure." What is true for the Church is even truer for

religious life. And how do we do this? We begin by approaching the world as the Council did: unafraid, confident of the gospel, and ready to find God in unexpected places.

[2015]

## **A Church Moving Outdoors:**

### Reflecting on the Annual Vocation Messages

I have been writing reflections on the annual vocation messages from the Popes—John Paul, Benedict, and now Francis—for a number of years. Although it was Paul VI who initiated the World Day of Prayer for Vocations, the messages that I found began appearing in 1979. Since I was curious to see how the messages may have changed over the years, I went back and read them. As I was making my way through them, someone called my attention to the remarks of Pope Francis speaking, off-script, to the priests, religious, and permanent deacons of the archdiocese of Naples. Four things that Francis said struck me. “Not having a family, not having children, not having conjugal love, which is so good and beautiful, just to end up arguing with the bishop, with brother priests, with the faithful, and to end up with a sour face: this is not bearing witness.” Addressing the seminarians who were present, he said: “What I would like to say to you is this: if you do not have Jesus at your center, defer your ordination. If you are not sure that Jesus is the center of your life, wait a little, in order to be certain.” With respect to priestly witness he noted the importance of the spirit of poverty. Diocesan priests don’t make this vow, he told them, but they need to have this spirit. And, lastly, “the spirit of prayer is a witness that we see . . . and this witness attracts vocations.”

The annual messages for the World Day of Prayer urge us, over and over, to pray to the Lord of the harvest for an increase of laborers. The words of Jesus in Matthew 9:38 are

cited more than any other scriptural text (about twenty-five times). The messages speak of Christian families as “the first seminary of vocations and the consecrated life” and “the permanent school of the civilization of love.” They call upon parishes and dioceses, bishops, priests, religious, schoolteachers and catechists, to cultivate vocational awareness in young people. One thing the messages tend to leave undeveloped, however, is the challenging mission of supporting and strengthening the vocations already in place. Perhaps that is why Pope Francis’ remarks struck me. He was talking about the critical role that witness plays in stirring young imaginations to envision a God-filled future. Thus I have to ask myself, “What witness am I giving?” Where joy is lacking, where mercy is thin, where hope and great desires have grown cool, where gossip becomes the secret pleasure of rectories, convents, and religious houses, vocational witness, for all practical purposes, is dead. Pope Benedict wrote something similar for the 2010 Message. “Prayer is the first form of witness which awakens vocations.” Speaking of priests and religious as called to a life of communion, he continued: “if young people see priests who appear distant and sad, they will hardly feel encouraged to follow their example.”

### **Vocation: making the word inclusive**

There is a certain tension that runs through the annual messages. The Church certainly needs ordained ministers. The multiple forms of consecrated life express the richness of the charismatic impulse to live the gospel totally and unreservedly: not for the sake of personal achievement or perfection, but in imitation of the Jesus who “did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mk 10:45). But we also read in the messages that life itself is a vocation,

since it is God who calls us into existence; that every Christian has a vocation by virtue of baptism; and that Christian marriage is a vocation. John Paul II, for example, wrote in 1998: “You husbands and wives, be ready to account for the profound reality of your matrimonial vocation.” In 2002 he spoke of “the vocation to holiness.” Vocation, in other words, has many expressions. How, then, do we showcase one form without diminishing the importance of the others, especially if every calling—every vocation—is born from the Spirit?

Perhaps vocation talk would be less complicated if we simply said that there is one vocation, namely, the call to holiness, and that this call unfolds in forms that are diverse yet complementary; Vatican II reminded us of this in Chapter 5 of *Lumen Gentium*, “The Universal Call to Holiness in the Church.” After all, in an age that is witnessing such breakdown in marriage and family life, vocations to truly Christian marriage are as vital to the life of the Church as ordained ministry and consecrated life. And given the re-emergence of the permanent diaconate, we at least have to ask whether this development has not come as a partial response from the Lord of the harvest.

### **What’s in a salutation?**

John Paul II’s messages from 1979 to 1985 are addressed to his brothers in the episcopate and to his brothers and sisters throughout the world: “Dear Brothers in the Episcopate, Dear sons and daughters throughout the world.” Starting in 1986 the messages are addressed: “Venerable Brothers in the Episcopate and Dear Faithful of the Whole World” or “Venerable Brothers in the Episcopate, Dear Brothers and Sisters throughout the World.” And sometimes he just writes “dearest Brothers and Sisters throughout the world.”

Benedict addressed his first two messages the same way, but I noticed that in 2008 the message is addressed, simply, “Dear Brothers and Sisters.” In 2009 and 2010 the address again puts first his “brothers in the episcopate and the priesthood,” but as of 2011 it becomes “Dear Brothers and Sisters.” For Pope Francis, it is just “Dear Brothers and Sisters,” and he signs his name simply “Francis.”

Benedict’s first vocation message is instructive. The first part of the title is “the vocation to the service of the Church,” but the second part is “as communion.” The Church *as communion* has been an important corrective to a “model of the Church” that is more institutional, hierarchical and often clericalized. Those of us who are a little older may be excused for recalling the refreshing contribution that Avery Dulles made to our theology of the Church with his book *Models of the Church*, not to mention the work of theologians like Yves Congar and, of course, *Lumen Gentium* itself. To his original list of models, Dulles later added the Church as “community of disciples.”

Integrating this ecclesiological corrective into the annual vocation messages, however, poses somewhat of a challenge. Benedict wrote: “In order to foster vocations, therefore, it is important that pastoral activity be attentive to the mystery of the Church as communion.” And again: “the Second Vatican Council highlighted the importance of educating future priests to an authentic ecclesial communion.” That was 2007. In 2010 he would write: “A third aspect [of witness] which necessarily characterizes the priest and the consecrated person is a life of communion... In a particular way the priest must be a man of communion, open to all ... helping to overcome divisions, to heal rifts, to settle conflicts and misunderstandings, and to

forgive offences.” I think the communion of which Benedict spoke finds its anchor in the experience of belonging to a community of disciples—an experience that brings together religious, Christians both married and single, and priests in a shared life of the Spirit.

### **Communion versus clericalism**

Fostering communion and being a person of communion not infrequently run into resistance in the form of clericalism. The effort to promote vocations becomes ineffective when local ecclesial cultures are clericalized. Francis has warned against this frequently. “Lord, free your people from a spirit of clericalism,” he prayed during a homily, “and aid them with a spirit of prophecy.” And again: “[Clericalism] is one of the evils of the Church. But it is a ‘complicit’ evil, because priests take pleasure in the temptation to clericalize the laity, but many of the laity are on their knees asking to be clericalized... This is a double sin!”

While Francis was still archbishop in Buenos Aires he said in an interview: “I am reminded of some Christian communities in Japan that went without priests for over two hundred years. When the missionaries returned, they found them all baptized, catechized, and legitimately married in the Church. What’s more, they realized that every person who had died had had a Catholic funeral. Faith was kept intact by the gifts of the laity, who only received baptism but continued to live their apostolic mission.” And those Christians must also have found paths to forgiveness and reconciliation. The Catechism includes a salutary reminder of an insight that dates back to medieval theology: “God has bound salvation to the sacrament of Baptism, but he himself is not bound by his sacraments.” We should not underestimate the presence and

action of the Spirit in ordinary lives. I think of John the Baptist reminding the crowds that came to hear him: “God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham” (Lk 3:8).

The pastoral care of vocations (a phrase that sometimes appears in the annual messages) needs to take place within an ecclesial climate permeated by *communio*—communion—and that is constantly monitoring itself for any tendency to clericalize. The way we think about the calling to priesthood and religious life—as essential as these are to the life of the Church—cannot be normative when it comes to understanding vocation. The life of every believer is special. Again, to quote Francis: “I would ask the question: who is more important in the Church? The Pope or that old lady who prays the Rosary every day for the Church? Only God can say; I cannot say.” So, caring for vocations means that in every church and in every place, each time we assemble for worship, there should be a shared sense that each of us is known by God and called to holiness and to service. Yet this sense of being called that we experience individually grows and bears fruit within the Church—the community of sisters and brothers in the Lord. This Church—the community of faith—likewise responds to a call: a call that leads it outside of itself and into the streets of an everyday world. As Francis wrote in last year’s message, “Jesus lives and walks along the paths of ordinary life.”

### **Vocations and hope**

Some years ago I had an opportunity to spend several months in a village in northeast India. The farmers had become desperate because the monsoon rains were very late, and the lateness of the rains would delay the planting of rice. Weeks went by. The sky would darken, and then clear; there was no rain. And since there was no rice planting, the specter of famine



began to spread. Then, one afternoon, a very heavy looking sky darkened the village; the clouds exploded and the earth began to drink. The excitement of the villagers was unforgettable. I was witnessing the rebirth of hope.

It is hope, of course, that leads people to get married, to have children, and to raise a family. It is hope that leads us to ask the question, “What do I want to do with my life?” Apart from hope there is no future, no place to house our imagination. When we make promises—at marriage, at baptism, at religious profession, at ordination—we affirm life. On those occasions when we watch others make the promises that will carry them forward and create their future, we have the privilege of sharing the excitement and joy that surge from hope. To put it another way, a culture in which people do not marry or do not want to have children, a culture where people no longer make or keep lifelong promises: that would be a culture of death. And the reason? Because it would mean that people no longer have hope; no matter how ambitious their plans, their minds for all practical purposes would remain stuck in the present. Imagination would atrophy and the light of transcendence would go out. The people of Israel in exile longed to return to their homeland, and yet as the years passed that hope grew dim. To keep hope alive, God sent them prophets. Thus we have the voice of an Isaiah, a Jeremiah, and an Ezekiel. But there would have been no prophetic voice, if there had not been people who still dreamed of going home.

The annual vocation messages come from men of the Church who have faced the world with hope. Their imaginations opened on to a world desperately in need of the leaven and the light that come from faith. They were not thinking that the Church needs vocations in order to carry on the

family business. Rather, they are looking at the world in much the same way that Jesus did. “And Jesus went throughout all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every affliction. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, ‘The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore pray to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest’” (Matt 9:35-38). Jesus could see the field as being ripe for harvesting because he looked at the world through eyes of hope. There, in the crowds in front of him, he saw life and he saw Kingdom possibilities. The voice of God was calling to him through his people, and Jesus responded. He made a promise—he said yes to the Spirit at the Jordan; that is where the journey begins.

The prayer for vocations, then, is actually a prayer for the world. If the laborers seem too few, then perhaps we need to wonder where our society or our culture has placed its hope. Have we become like people living in exile who have given up on returning home? Have we forgotten where our true homeland is? This is a truly frightening prospect. The fading of God from the human world would mean the eclipse of hope, and once hope is eclipsed the human soul vanishes. For this reason, praying for vocations is part of the Church’s effort to protect and preserve the earth’s spiritual landscape. To pray for vocations is to pray for the salvation of the human race.

[2015]

### ***Laudato Si'* and Vocational Awareness**

Pope Francis' encyclical *On Care for Our Common Home* has garnered a great deal of comment from economists, politicians, scientists, editorial commentators, and, of course, from religious writers. Some have criticized the whole of the encyclical, others take exception to parts of it, and some who simply failed to hear Francis' invitation to dialogue and conversation have been mean-spirited and dismissive. And then there are those who agree with the Pope every step of the way. I heard someone complain that Francis is not an expert either in economics or political theory; so why listen to him? To which I answered, "Then what should we make of Jesus when he says no one can serve God and money? Should we dismiss him as well? After all, Jesus was no economist. He even preached about the kingdom of God without a degree in political science." Yes, the encyclical says a great deal about the environment, about economics, about the responsibilities of governments. All of this arises from Francis' deep and abiding concern for the poorest and most vulnerable among us and a vivid sense of the traces of God in the natural world. The encyclical is passionate, but not polemical. The word "dialogue" occurs in it twenty-four times, if I've counted correctly; it wants to engage. The Pope has issued an invitation for all of us to join an urgent conversation. Why? Because "the earth herself, burdened and laid waste, is among the most abandoned and maltreated of our poor" (#2).

Although *Laudato Si'* is not directly about vocation, Francis writes: "It is my hope that our seminaries and houses of formation will provide an education in responsible simplicity of

life, in grateful contemplation of God’s world, and in concern for the needs of the poor and the protection of the environment” (#214). The “care for our common home” needs all the assistance that the world’s religions can provide, and religious assistance comes especially in the form of spirituality. He writes: “We lack an awareness of our common origin, of our mutual belonging, and of a future to be shared with everyone. . . . A great cultural, spiritual and educational challenge stands before us, and it will demand that we set out on the long path of renewal” (#202). He then adds later: “The rich heritage of Christian spirituality, the fruit of twenty centuries of personal and communal experience, has a precious contribution to make to the renewal of humanity” (#216).

### **Hearing the call**

Given the urgency of the environmental crisis, caring for our common home becomes a call which the earth itself addresses to all of us; those who respond to that call take up a mission. Francis writes: “The urgent challenge to protect our common home includes a concern to bring the whole human family together to seek a sustainable and integral development” (#13). The ecological spirituality that Francis outlines in *Laudato Si’* has to find its way into the formation programs of religious and priests. It needs to seat itself in our preaching, pastoral practice, catechesis, apostolic works, and our prayer. And it must do so, not simply as a series of concrete steps like recycling and carpooling, but as a fundamental orientation towards the created world—a creation-centered spirituality. Indeed, chapter two is entitled “The Gospel of Creation” (*El Evangelio de la Creación*). By setting creation in the spiritual foreground, the encyclical is attempting to correct the “excessive anthropocentrism” of modern times (#116). Our

understanding of evangelical living needs to expand, if creation itself is characterized as a “gospel.”

### **Five principles**

There are at least five essential principles to the spirituality that Francis is setting out. The first is that God alone is the Creator; the universe and everything in it reflects divine handiwork. Forgetting this basic truth imperils our vision, our sense of spiritual balance. We are not owners but, at best, stewards. The second principle is that human beings are part of creation, despite the modern tendency to see ourselves as somehow standing outside the circle of created things over which we are achieving ever greater mastery. The third is that we are in this world together. We live in a network of relationships both with the natural and the human worlds; natural ecology and human ecology are linked. The fourth principle is that every human being has a right to those goods that are essential to living with dignity. And the fifth is that care for our common home and caring for the poor are inseparable. Why? Because the poor disproportionately suffer, economically and physically, from the ravages that have been inflicted upon the environment; and, from a biblical perspective, attentiveness of the poor and abandoned is the yardstick by which the rest of us are to be measured. The mystery of the Incarnation fixes Christian imagination on the poor: “yet for your sake *he became poor*, so that you *by his poverty* might become rich” (2 Cor 8:9).

Each of these principles can be found in Scripture and within the “rich heritage of Christian spirituality.” They are not new. But what makes it so necessary for us to retrieve them now is the situation in which we find ourselves. For all its blessings, technology has also driven a wedge between human beings and the natural world. Thinking has become increasingly

calculative. Sadly, “our immense technological development has not been accompanied by a development in human responsibility, values and conscience” (#105). We have become so used to manipulating our environment that we have forgotten that we are part of the natural world. “Nature,” the Pope writes, “cannot be regarded as something separate from ourselves or as a mere setting in which we live” (#139). Human beings have no claim “to absolute dominion over the earth” (#75). Ecological conversion, Francis explains, “entails a loving awareness that we are not disconnected from the rest of creatures, but joined in a splendid universal communion” (#220). He repeats what he said in his Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*: “God has joined us so closely to the world around us that we can feel the desertification of the soil almost as a physical ailment, and the extinction of species as a painful disfigurement” (#89).

Another symptom of the contemporary spiritual malaise is our “obsession with consumption.” We live in “a throwaway culture,” which is “based on the lie that there is an infinite supply of the earth’s goods” (#106). But looking for peace and fulfillment by giving in to the urge to consume more goods only makes our lives worse, since the consequence is an increasing sense of loneliness and isolation. “Compulsive consumerism” and “rampant individualism” run in tandem. Together they prevent the emergence of a truly human ecology.

### **Ecological crisis and vocational awareness**

Now, how does all of this impact the way we are hearing and responding to God’s call today?

Since the promulgation of Vatican II’s *Nostra aetate* some forty years ago, the spiritualities underpinning religious and priestly life have been adjusting to the religious diversity that is so evident in today’s world. We are, I believe, less

absolutist in our claims, more inclined to recognize the presence of the Spirit in other religious traditions, more open to meet the religious other and enter into dialogue. People who know God also know that they do not own the divine mystery. They cannot limit God's Spirit, the way Joshua wanted to when Eldad and Medad began to prophesy (Numbers 11:26-30). Another example of spirituality readjusting itself can be seen in the way the Church has owned the connection between faith and justice in terms of the preferential option for the poor, and how it has appropriated the notion of solidarity. The effect of this adjustment can be seen in the very strong attention being given to social justice, not so much in official documents (of which there have been many) as in the everyday life of parish communities and religious houses.

But we have not yet integrated into the practice of faith a spirituality that is deeply earth-centered. We have yet to appropriate, as a corrective for the critical ecological situation in which we find ourselves, a contemplative vision that fastens on the beauty of creation and which re-positions the human being so that we are no longer the center of everything. Perhaps the reason for this failure is that the environmental crisis has not yet forced itself into our daily life in the same way that religious diversity or consciousness of the immediate needs of the poor has. This paragraph from the encyclical is sobering:

The current global situation engenders a feeling of instability and uncertainty, which in turn becomes "a seedbed for collective selfishness". When people become self-centered and self-enclosed, their greed increases. The emptier a person's heart is, the more he or she needs things to buy, own and consume. It becomes almost impossible to accept the limits imposed by reality. In this horizon a genuine sense of the common good also disappears. As these attitudes become more widespread, social norms are

respected only to the extent that they do not clash with personal needs. So our concern cannot be limited merely to the threat of extreme weather events, but must also extend to the catastrophic consequences of social unrest. Obsession with a consumerist lifestyle, above all when few people are capable of maintaining it, can only lead to violence and mutual destruction. (#204)

Perhaps this is the point at which we need to think about integrating concern for the environment into vocational awareness. Do we feel, as part of our calling to consecrated life or ordained ministry, the urge to live a preferential option for the poor? Do we feel, as part of the same calling, that the earth itself is groaning for relief from the way human beings have abused it? Do we feel, as a confirming grace, the presence of God in *all* things? We might not all be Franciscans (just think of Pope Francis himself), but the spirit or vision of Francis of Assisi is something all of us need to share. The mission before us has an urgency that cannot be overestimated. We would doubtlessly take whatever steps were necessary in order to defuse a situation that was heading towards a world war. We would take whatever steps were necessary in order to safeguard people from a ravaging virus. If we grasp the wisdom of political de-escalation and medical prevention, then why would we not take the same steps when it comes to the environment?

### **Towards a planetary mindfulness**

Mindfulness of human dependence upon the earth is a major feature of many indigenous religions. In some cases, the earth bears an almost divine status. Among the Aymara people of the altiplano of Bolivia, for instance, the *Pachamama*—the earth-mother—is sacred. I have been to a liturgical service that begins with a rite of reconciliation that seeks forgiveness, first of all, from the *Pachamama* for the way the earth's resources



and gifts have been abused. Our relationship with the *Pachamama*, just like our relationship with the community, is vitally important to living well; we must be reconciled with both. Francis of Assisi would have been at home among the Aymara. But Christian spirituality brings something to the religious table as well, as *Laudato si'* makes clear: “Christian spirituality proposes an alternative understanding of the quality of life, and encourages a prophetic and contemplative lifestyle, one capable of deep enjoyment free of the obsession with consumption” (#222).

The encyclical offers a series of spiritual prescriptions for improving the quality of life. One is “a return to that simplicity which allows us to stop and appreciate the small things,” “the capacity to be happy with little” (#222). Another is humility, “not being enthralled with the possibility of limitless mastery over everything” (#224). A third is inner peace, “an attitude of the heart, one which approaches life with serene attentiveness, which is capable of being fully present to someone without thinking of what comes next, which accepts each moment as a gift of God to be lived to the full” (#226). And one way of living out this third prescription is to “stop and give thanks to God before and after meals” (#227). These three prescriptions belong to the contemplative side of our lives, and they apply to all believers. A lived solidarity with the poor and most vulnerable belongs to the prophetic side of our Christian lives; it too applies to all believers.

Yet the believing community also needs leadership and inspiration from those who have dedicated their lives to the people of God in the intense and dramatic way we associate with ministry and consecrated life. Care for our common home carries more than economic, political, and moral challenges; it

also poses a major spiritual challenge. The harm that we are doing to the earth, together with the suffering we are bequeathing to the generations that will follow us, is calling out for people who are both prophetic and contemplative—people who can show us what it means to live counter-culturally and who can help us embrace a contemporary form of evangelical asceticism. Perhaps we could even say that an authenticating sign of vocational awareness today ought to be a sense of responsibility for the earth. Harm done to the earth is harm done to God’s people, especially those who are poorest. The promise to follow the Jesus who accompanies the poor will be reshaped the more aware we are of how the earth itself—our common home—has been impoverished too.

[2015]

## 44.

### **Called to Live for God's People:**

A reflection on Pope Francis' message for the 53rd  
World Day of Prayer for Vocations

In his prepared address to the clergy, religious and seminarians of Uganda last November, Pope Francis wrote: "May we never forget that our 'yes' to Jesus is a 'yes' to his people. Our doors, the doors of our churches, but above all the doors of our hearts, must constantly be open to God's people, our people." And in Kenya the Holy Father told the seminarians, religious and clergy that they should never stop weeping: "When priests and religious no longer weep, something is wrong. We need to weep for our infidelity, to weep for all the pain in our world, to weep for all those people who are cast aside, to weep for the elderly who are abandoned, for children who are killed, for the things we don't understand." For Francis, the connection between Jesus and his people is intimate, profound—a mystery of faith. Living that mystery is what energizes our vocation, even as it often brings us to tears. We carry the world—God's people—inside of us. But what does carrying that world do to us, and what response in us is it likely to elicit?

#### **A lesson from Cana**

As I was orienting myself to this year's message, a gospel curiosity caught my attention. Why does the Gospel of John relate, as the first miraculous sign that Jesus works, the scene of the wedding feast at Cana (Jn 2:1-11)? For the Gospel of Matthew, the first miracle Jesus performs is the healing of a leper (Mt 8:1-4); the story comes right after the three chapters

that make up Jesus' teaching on the mountain. For the Gospel of Mark, the first miraculous sign is the driving out of a demon (Mk 1:23-27); this story, too, follows a report of Jesus' teaching in a synagogue. The Gospel of Luke follows Mark: teaching followed by an exorcism. In each of these three gospels, the miraculous sign seems designed to highlight the power in Jesus' words about the reign of God. Demons cry out before it, lepers are cleansed by it, and those living on the periphery find themselves inside Jesus' circle. The miraculous signs punctuate Jesus' announcement that the reign of God has finally arrived. Yet why does John open with a story about the abundant supply of wine at a wedding reception?

We know that Jesus connected with wedding imagery. He says, for example, "The wedding guests cannot fast while the bridegroom is with them, can they? As long as they have the bridegroom with them, they cannot fast" (Mk 2:19). John the Baptist made a similar connection: "He who has the bride is the bridegroom. The friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice" (Jn 3:29). We also know that in the Hebrew Scriptures marriage is often used as a metaphor for God's relationship with his people: "For your Maker is your husband, the LORD of hosts is his name" (Isa 64:5). Or again: "Therefore, behold, I will allure her, / and bring her into the wilderness / and speak tenderly to her. . . And in that day, declares the LORD, you will call me 'My Husband'" (Hos 2:14, 16). Marriage has also served as a metaphor for the relationship between God and the individual soul; we see this in numerous commentaries on the Song of Songs.

Perhaps, then, the fact that in John the first epiphany of Jesus' "glory" (2:11)—the first manifestation of what the reign

of God is all about—takes place at a wedding celebration ought not to be so surprising after all. The good news is about a new relationship with the divine mystery. It is about knowing and experiencing the Father’s love—the One whose compassionate closeness to the human world is simply overwhelming. The abundance of wine becomes the abundance of love; both are intoxicating. No wonder Francis writes that the name of God is mercy.

What, then, does carrying the world do to us? What response does it elicit? I believe the answer has to be that carrying the world gradually makes us into messengers of mercy.

### **Seeing the world with eyes of compassion**

In the second paragraph of his message Francis cites a phrase of Saint Bede that describes the calling of Matthew, “*misereando atque eligiendo*,” the episcopal motto which Francis adopted when he was in Buenos Aires. Jesus saw Matthew at his tax-collector’s table through eyes full of mercy and, through that compassionate gaze, invited him to be a disciple. And Matthew allowed that gaze to penetrate his heart, which explains why he responded so quickly to Jesus’ words. But since Jesus does not physically walk among us as he did centuries ago in Galilee, how does Jesus’ compassionate gaze and his call to walk with him reach us today? The divine call, Francis writes, is mediated by the believing community. The invitational word comes from within that community and unfolds alongside the vocational journey of our sisters and brothers. They are people, just like us, who have been called to faith, called to belong to the Church, and then called to a particular way of living out their baptism.

Who is it, then, that meets us with the compassionate gaze of God and, through that gaze, communicates to us that we, like Matthew and each of the others, have been called to walk in the company of Jesus? Is it just one face and one voice, or is it many voices and many faces? The honest answer is that it can be a bit of both. We may be inspired and drawn by the faith and witness of a single individual (many vocational stories confirm this), or we may feel ourselves called to let go of everything in order to accompany the poor, the homeless, the marginalized, the forsaken, the spiritually impoverished; it is their voice and face that call out to us and will not leave us alone.

The conviction that it is God who calls us and that we are not simply responding to social and environmental stimuli when we are drawn to the gospel is profoundly important. Who of us would not be moved at the sight of other human beings in desperate need? The divine call is indeed mediated; we live, after all, in a sacramental world, a world in which the eye is forever being teased from what is seen to what is unseen. But underneath the poverty and suffering all around us there is Jesus, the same Jesus who cried to the over-zealous Paul, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?” (Acts 9:4) Or who reminds us, “Truly, I say to you, as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me” (Matt 25:45).

### **The structure of the message**

This year’s message is organized around three simple points: vocations to ordained ministry and the consecrated life are born within the Church; they grow within the Church; and they are sustained by the Church. Some might find a claim in the first point to be a bit challenging. “No one is called exclusively for a particular region, or for a group or for an

ecclesial movement, but rather for the Church and for the world,” Francis writes. Our “ecclesial horizon” should expand over time. And yet isn’t there something charismatic about a local community identifying and then calling some of its members to particular ministries in light of local needs? In other words, some disciples, in response to the Spirit, will always be on the road, while others, in response to the same Spirit, may reside in the same place for years. I think the key to understanding the Pope’s point is remembering how important to him is the Church’s presence at the social, economic, and cultural peripheries. The “ecclesial horizon” expands, not as a result of international travel or reading theology texts, but as a result of contact with communities at the edge. This idea becomes especially clear in Francis’ second point.

“During the process of formation,” Francis writes, “candidates for particular vocations need to know better the ecclesial community.” To accomplish this, he suggests, they should have “apostolic experiences” in company with those who are actively at work in the local Church. He lists the sort of opportunities he has in mind: to work alongside a good catechist; to experience what it is like to evangelize at the margins, alongside a religious community; to discover and appreciate the treasure of contemplative life alongside a cloistered community; to have contact with missionaries; to deepen their understanding of pastoral ministry alongside parish clergy. Of course, there are often numerous programs and works in the local Church founded and directed by dedicated men and women who are neither ordained nor under the vows. I think, for example, of Catholic Worker houses, thrift shops, food pantries, Pax Christi groups, and so on. Although we frequently speak of the “universal” Church, the ecclesial reality that most of us know is thoroughly local.

## Messengers of mercy

In his address in Uganda, Francis told the clergy, religious and seminarians gathered in St. Mary's Cathedral: "If we are to accompany those who suffer, then like the light passing through the stained glass windows of this Cathedral, we must let God's power and healing pass through us. We must first let the waves of his mercy flow over us, purify us, and refresh us, so that we can bring that mercy to others, especially to those on the peripheries." But perhaps the mystery of grace at work here—the spiritual insight—is that we become effective messengers of mercy as a result of accompanying those at the margins.

An old axiom many of us heard in school was that no one can give what they do not have. How then could someone help another to know God's merciful love if they have not first experienced themselves as a loved sinner? The point is elementary; but how do we learn the meaning of mercy? Some might answer that it came as a retreat grace, the moment in which they knelt before the crucified Jesus, having reflected long and hard on their personal history of sin and struggle, and then broke down in tears. Yet, like most graces, this grace has most likely been mediated. For the disciples, the mediation was Jesus himself, after Easter. Their second call—the call that came with their experience of the risen Jesus—was when they fully experienced the power of God's love to heal their failures. Mark insinuates this in the words of the messenger: "But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going before you to Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you" (Mk 16:7). And Paul's experience was similar, as we hear when he writes, "Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me," particularly when he goes to to explain: "For I am the least of



the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God” (1 Cor 15:9-9).

For disciples who come on the scene later, the mediation may have been a kind confessor. In the case of Paul, however, the mediation may have been the prayerful example of a dying Stephen and the brethren whom Paul had been persecuting. A great upheaval took place in his soul as the convictions that anchored his zeal came undone. The brethren he was persecuting responded to his violence with a prayer for forgiveness. What grace, what mercy, had those followers of Jesus understood that, up to now, Paul had no idea of? The higher righteousness on which Paul had once prided himself revealed itself as hollow. He did not know God nearly as well as the men and women he was hurting. They became for him the ones who mediated the mercy of God; they were the flesh and blood who drew him to Jesus.

What was it, then, that enabled the followers of Jesus, to forgive one another—and even to love their enemies? The answer which makes the most sense is that they had already experienced divine forgiveness, mercy and love when they were incorporated into the mystery of Christ. They had become, as a result of the “one baptism for the forgiveness of sins,” a different sort of human being. Yet this may be only half of the answer. For the other side of that experience was the memory of what they were before. And that memory of their sinfulness and incompleteness—of deep spiritual longing, even when that longing was blind—allowed them to view the human world with compassion. They carried that world inside, the creation which (as Paul would later say) has been groaning inwardly: “For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now” (Rom 8:22). In

other words, the world of which we are a part keeps reminding us of its hunger and its pain, even when it does not have words to describe it. Mindfulness of the world makes us weep. And what do those tears elicit, if not profound compassion, the same compassion that led to the Word becoming flesh.

As signs of God's closeness to the world, those in ordained ministry and the consecrated life are, practically by definition, messengers of mercy. If our lives do not give evidence of that, then our vocations have not been fully realized. I think of the words of Ezekiel, "And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh, and give you a heart of flesh" (Ez 36:26). If we pray that the Lord will give us hearts of mercy, then we need to be open to how this grace is likely to come. After all, it makes little sense to pray for transformation but then avoid the path that Jesus invites us to walk. The route which this grace travels requires us to walk through the world and share its burden, even to the point of tears: its brokenness and alienation, its poverty and non-belief, its sorrows and its desperation, and its blind longing for redemption.

[2016]

## Pope Francis as Vocational Model

Since his election three and a half years ago, Pope Francis has continued to capture the attention of people all over the world. His warmth, his humility, his simplicity, the ease with which he speaks about faith—all these qualities bear eloquent witness that he is someone who is familiar with God and at ease with himself. The story of Francis' life and some of its details are, by now, fairly well known. It has been the cover story in places as different as *Rolling Stone* and *National Geographic*. The world knows he took the bus and subway in Buenos Aires, that he paid his own hotel bill after the conclave, and that he washed the feet of women and non-Christians during the Holy Thursday service. His disarming “*Fratelli e sorelle, buona sera*” on the night of his election still plays in our ears. And for those who would like to know more we have Austen Ivereigh's *The Great Reformer* (2014), as well as Francis' remarkably candid interview with Antonio Spadaro that appeared in *America Magazine* in the fall of 2013 (“A Big Heart Open to God”). Many of us were glued to television screens when Francis visited the United States last year, both listening to what he had to say and watching how he interacted with people. It's not just because he was the pope that we watched so intently; it was because he represented so beautifully the grace or the charisma that led us to religious life or ordained ministry in the first place.

### **Ecology and the poor**

Two features of Francis' spirituality that stand out are his concern for the environment, which came through

eloquently in *Laudato Si'* (On Care for our Common Home), and his constant mindfulness of the poor and those forced to live at the margins, which he speaks of repeatedly and to which he draws our attention by going to the margins himself. He shows up at a hospital, or a prison, or a refugee center, or a soup kitchen, or a border-crossing. Sensitivity to the environment and to the earth as “our common home” is not just an expression of one of the great moral concerns of our time. It is also a mark of vocational awareness. In the “Guidelines for Pastoral Renewal,” during his address to the leadership of the Episcopal Conferences of Latin America (2013), he recalled the opening words of *Gaudium et spes*, noting that those words are “the basis for our dialogue with the contemporary world.” A major part of that dialogue is listening to the earth itself and joining the efforts of the women and men dedicated to raising ecological awareness and re-thinking how we view and use the earth’s precious resources. Of course, it’s not just for the sake of the planet that we enter the dialogue; it’s for the sake of the people of God who are most vulnerable to the potentially disastrous effects of climate change. Mindfulness of the environment is an important corollary to the option for the poor.

The reasons why people embark upon consecrated life or ordained ministry are not necessarily the same reasons that they remain, and perhaps the same thing can be said of marriage. The promises we make guide and shape us. Fidelity to them may take us down paths we did not anticipate; much depends on the challenges—seen or unforeseen—that life presents us. What centers us, ultimately, is our search for God—and our desire to be loved only the way God can. But the search for God, especially for religious and priests, leads directly into the life of God’s people—even, I would argue, for contemplatives. There is no bypassing the world. And this is

something that watching and listening to Pope Francis makes abundantly clear.

### **Noticing those at the roadside**

In the homily he gave at the Mass for the closing of the general assembly of the synod of bishops in October (2015), Francis spoke of several temptations that threaten the following of Jesus. The gospel text was the story of Bartimaeus at the end of the tenth chapter of Mark. Francis noted that it was Jesus who stopped, not the disciples. His words are worth recalling: “If Bartimaeus was blind, they were deaf: his problem was not their problem. This can be a danger for us: in the face of constant problems, it is better to move on, instead of letting ourselves be bothered. In this way, just like the disciples, we are with Jesus but we do not think like him. . . . We are able to speak about him and work for him, but we live far from his heart, which is reaching out to those who are wounded. This is the temptation: a ‘spirituality of illusion’: we can walk through the deserts of humanity without seeing what is really there . . . A faith that does not know how to root itself in the life of the people remains arid and, rather than oases, creates other deserts.” He wrote something similar in his Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* (The Joy of the Gospel): “Whenever our interior life becomes caught up in its own interests and concerns, there is no longer room for others, no place for the poor. God’s voice is no longer heard . . .” *God’s voice is no longer heard*: that is, the divine voice that speaks to us through the lives of the world’s throwaways.

Francis’ focus on people at the margins is not only the most forceful characteristic of his papacy; it is also central to the example he gives of vocation. He models what it means to be a religious today, a priest, and a disciple of Jesus. Francis’

expression “shepherds with the odor of sheep” is well known. It is, of course, deeply evangelical—an apt description of the Good Shepherd, for it puts us in mind of the people who surrounded Jesus and who often sat with him at table. Jesus had the smell of the sheep, and because of that many of the righteous ones—those who were ritually and morally clean—walked away from him. “Opening the door to the Lord means opening the door to those he loves: the poor, young children, those who have strayed, sinners . . . the heart that has space for the Lord has space for others too. . . . And the Lord is like the poor: he draws near without our calling him, and he insists a little, but he does not stay if we do not stop him from going. It is easy to get rid of him. It is enough to move a little more quickly, as happens to beggars, or to look the other way when the children confront us in the subway.”

### **“God so loved the world”**

In the narrative of our faith, God and world go together. God creates the world, God redeems the world, and God accompanies it. To hear the voice of God, we listen to the world: the voice of God in nature, in the events of our time, in the great interior silence we call the human soul—the place where the Spirit dwells—and in the people around us. Jesus spent forty days in the wilderness, but the rest of his story unfolded among his people. His concern for others was not simply a moral response that flowed from his experience of God’s love, nor was loving his neighbor basically another commandment, alongside the ten well known ones—an additional religious requirement.

How often does it happen that we confess our failed efforts to love others, as if the call to love others were like the commandments about not lying or stealing or envying or

swearing? The only remedy I know of is the grace of realizing, profoundly, how much God has loved us. “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you” (John 15:12). *As I have loved you*: that’s the part we need to think about. The love and care of the Good Shepherd are grounded in Jesus’ own experience of having been loved: “As the Father has loved me” (John 15:9). It is that experience, that grace, that enabled Jesus to love the way he did. For our part, we learn to love the world—and its people—to the degree that we learn to find God in it, just as Jesus did.

Toward the outset of the interview that appeared in *America*, Pope Francis recounted his devotion to Carravagio’s painting *The Calling of St. Matthew*:

“That finger of Jesus, pointing at Matthew. That’s me. I feel like him. Like Matthew. . . . Here, this is me, a sinner on whom the Lord has turned his gaze.”

Such is the grace that enables compassion and stretches a heart so that it can embrace the world.

### **Prayer from the heart of the Good Shepherd**

In a short, inspiring collection of homilies under the title *I Ask You, Be Shepherds* (2015), we find several places where Francis speaks about the prayer of pastors and priests. What he says, however, could easily be extended to the rest of the praying community, for no matter how solitary our lives, the Christian never steps into God’s presence alone. How many voices lie behind every Our Father, every Hail Mary, every one of the psalms—they are countless. “When we pray,” Francis writes, “we are fighting for our people. Do I pray this way?” Then he asks, “Am I like Abraham in his courageous intercession, or do I end up in that pettiness of Jonah lamenting the leaky roof rather than those men and women who are

victims of a pagan culture?” Such prayer “fatigues our heart”; it is “pastoral fatigue” or “that interior heaviness experienced by fathers and brothers who do not want to lose any of those who have been entrusted to them.” Saint Paul may have had the same thought when he wrote, “May I never boast except in the cross of Our Lord Jesus Christ, though whom the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world” (Gal 6:14).

*Crucified to the world.* Ministers of the gospel and those who have been embraced the evangelical life discover pretty quickly that the closer they come to God, the more they carry within the hopes and disappointments, the joys and the sadnesses of other human beings. Indeed, we develop a particular sensitivity to the suffering of our people, as well as to the hardness of heart among those whose social privilege or whose lack of faith makes them deaf to the cries of the many Lazaruses outside the gate. That deafness can make us angry, but in our heart of hearts we also realize that God is always seeking to break through it. God’s response to human stubbornness is a divine determination to redeem: and we must learn to respond with the same love. *That* is not easy, and it contributes to the heart’s fatigue.

The good shepherd does not simply roll over and go back to sleep after listening to the story of a broken marriage, of hungry children, of refugees terrified and rejected at a border crossing, of a parent without a job, of a deportation, of yet another crucifixion. The more we pray after listening to the world, the more our prayer joins to the plea of the Good Shepherd. Are we better off or worse off for coming to know Christ? That’s not a bad question to ask ourselves, for coming to know Jesus brings with it a brand new sort of spiritual challenge and tension—ask any one of the disciples—a tension



that both reveals our hollowness and draws us into a deeper dependence upon God. As the scripture scholar James Dunn noted in *Jesus and the Spirit*, “In short, the warfare does not end when the Spirit comes; on the contrary, that is when it really begins.”

### **Vocational joy**

“An evangelizer,” Francis reminded us in *Evangelii gaudium*, “must never look like someone who has just come back from a funeral.” And what prevents life from becoming a perpetual Lent—or an unending wake—is personal encounter with the risen Jesus. In the mission of preaching and bearing witness to the Good News, paying attention to Jesus is the only way to keep ourselves (as he would say) from being distracted by the weeds.

People radiate joy for a number of reasons. Some, because they are at peace with themselves and content with their lives. Others, because they have been naturally graced with a bright disposition. All of us could cite an example or two of socially and economically privileged people who are not necessarily happy, and other examples of people who are poor and disadvantaged yet find reasons to thank God; life still has its blessings. But true joy—the joy or peace that no one can take away from us (John 16:22)—comes from being in the presence of Jesus, as if life were one long Emmaus road. Such joy comes from the hope that Jesus is. It also comes from feeling God among the people.

An outstanding feature of the vocational model that Francis gives us is the degree to which his imagination is steeped in the gospel narratives. Every gospel scene becomes a Carravagio painting. His daily homilies reflect a warm, prayerful engagement with Scripture; they are spiritually and

pastorally rich. The only way to know Jesus is to follow him, and following him requires the use of imagination, for imagination draws us into the narrative world of the evangelists and then transposes those scenes into our own. He says, “It seems that in order to answer that question that we all hear in our hearts—*Who is Jesus for us?*—what we have learned and studied in the catechism is not enough. . . . In order to know Jesus we have to make the journey that Peter made. . . . Jesus did not say to Peter and his apostles, ‘Know me!’ What he said was ‘Follow me!’”

Life along the Emmaus road draws joy and peace from walking alongside the risen Lord. At the same time it is a journey, and we have much to learn along the way. Yet learning from Jesus is unlike learning from any other, because he never looks at us as disciples who have failed. The joy that is so evident in Francis, the tenderness with which he embraces people, especially the least ones among us, his thoughtful awareness of the earth and our environment, and the humble simplicity from which he speaks about Jesus—all of these are expressions of the vocational example Francis gives the Church.

[2016]

## Uncertainty of Faith and the Certainty of Desire

Recently I found myself reading two very different books. The first was a collection of papers by atheists entitled *Philosophers without Gods: Meditations on Atheism and the Secular Life*. The second was *The Desert Fathers: Sayings of the Early Christian Monks*, a sampling of the wisdom acquired by Christians of the third and fourth centuries who had embraced the solitary life in the wilderness. These two works could not have been further apart.

Arguments against belief are hardly recent; and, so far as I can tell, there are no fresh and exciting cases to be made against religion. It takes no skill to poke scientific holes in literalist readings of certain passages of the Bible. The problem of evil—how a God who is both good and all-powerful could possibly allow the suffering of innocent people—has been rehearsed many times. Biblical writers themselves wrestled with this question. Then, too, the absolutist claims of religion not infrequently have led to hostility, divisiveness and war. Yet some of the religious establishment's fiercest critics come from within the religious traditions themselves. One has only to think of Old Testament prophets like Jeremiah and Amos, or the New Testament prophets John the baptizer and Jesus. Finally, the so-called "proofs" of God's existence have probably never persuaded non-believers that there is a God. A mind not disposed to entertaining the words of Psalm 8 or Psalm 19 is hardly likely to find the Five Ways of Saint Thomas convincing. Atheism, a rabbi friend remarked, seems to be the condition of people disappointed with God; but, unlike Jacob, they have chosen to flee rather than wrestle.

The desert Christians, on the other hand, enacted a drama quite different. Undertaking a single-minded pursuit of God, they retreated to the barren landscape of the Egyptian desert. They seemed almost aggressive in their desire to behold the face of God, or at least to behold as much of the divine mystery as God would permit them to see. No penance was too great, no wait was too long, no demon too fearsome, no struggle of soul too exhausting. In the process of fasting, praying, and battling demons, they mapped the treacherous movements of the human heart. In the end, their lives testified to (if I might borrow a book title of Belden C. Lane) “the solace of fierce landscapes.” Those Christians, for the most part, were not highly educated; they did not wrestle in the world of ideas as philosophers do. Still, the assaults against faith that they endured strike me as every bit as severe as the philosophical conclusions that cripple the mind’s ability to live with mystery.

### **Experiencing what God is not**

I said that it appeared to me, initially, that the world of the thinkers without gods and the world of the desert monks could not be further removed from each other. Yet in one way, at least, those worlds might actually touch. After listening to a talk by one of the contributors to the *Philosophers without Gods* volume, an elderly religious remarked somewhat humorously that, if what the speaker said was an example of atheism, then maybe he was an atheist, too! He was alluding to a facet of religious experience quite familiar to many believers, namely, the “apophatic” or negative moment.

One point the speaker developed concerned how, having been a Catholic from birth, she learned to accustom herself to living in a universe without God. Since philosophy proved unable to deliver persuasive arguments for God’s existence, and

since there was no scientific evidence for a Creator, she reached the conclusion that God is non-existent and little more than a crutch for the weak-minded to make it through life. Nevertheless, religious sensibilities still anchored her life. And once she no longer believed in life after death, existence in this world assumed greater urgency. A sense of gratitude and wonder over the sheer fact of being alive seemed to be a deep and sincere part of her spiritual outlook as a non-believer.

That the divine mystery is essentially unknowable has long been recognized by Christian writers. I think, for example, of St. Gregory of Nyssa's *Life of Moses*, the anonymous medieval work *The Cloud of Unknowing*, the sermons of the Dominican spiritual master Meister Eckhart, and the "dark night" experience of the Carmelite mystic John of the Cross. The eminent twentieth-century Roman Catholic theologian, Karl Rahner, would speak of "the incomprehensible mystery of God." Christian writers like these came to their recognition of divine unknowability on the basis of their own religious experience. The Bible itself realizes that, when it comes to God, human beings are in the face of the unknown. Alongside the richly imaginative narratives of Genesis and Exodus, one could place texts like Isaiah 55:8, where we read: "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways." Or from Paul: "For who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor?" (Romans 11:34)

Moses, we are told, was never allowed to behold God's face because "no one shall see me and live" (Exodus 33:20); all his conversations with God took place under cloud-cover. "Moses' vision of God began with light," wrote Gregory of Nyssa. "Afterwards God spoke to him in a cloud. But when

Moses rose higher and became more perfect, he saw God in the darkness.”

The prophet Elijah, after witnessing rock-splitting wind, earthquake, fire, and then “sheer silence,” did not even manage to glimpse God from the back, as Moses had. Staring at the silence, Elijah stood at the mouth of the cave and “a voice came to him.” The voice he heard apparently came without sound. Despite the frightening, furious display of nature’s power, after all the special effects, the reader is left frustrated. Waiting for the divine mystery to manifest itself, we feel deflated. Elijah is instructed to leave the mountain and resume his mission; he still does not know what God looks like. Elijah’s story is recounted in 1 Kings 19.

In the apophatic moments of our experience, the accent falls on what we do not know about God. It falls on the limits of our images, concepts, and language as we try to express what God is like or how we have experienced the divine mystery. In this experience, a humble person would not say “I exist” and “God exists” in the same breath. If I exist, then God does not exist; and if God exists, then I do not. The word “exist” does not carry the same meaning in both cases. As Saint Thomas taught, God alone can truly be said “to be.” The same holds true for words like “good,” or “love,” or “life.” Perhaps this accounts for why Jesus responded to the rich man, “No one is good but God alone” (Mark 10:18). God defines what goodness is, just as God is Love. The fourth evangelist, looking deep into his memories of Jesus, would reflect, “In him was life” (John 1:4). Paul may have been making the same point when he wrote, “It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me” (Galatians 2:20). How could any human being comprehend what life is before meeting the Word made flesh? The one who

knows Jesus would never say “I have life” and “He has life” in the same breath. Language does not stretch that far.

Rightly understood, then, a believer might elaim that the God of human thought does not exist, because whatever human beings say or conceptualize about God necessarily falls far short of the mystery. I think of Augustine searching for God by exploring the corridors of his memory. There he sounds like a man at the limits of understanding and relishing the experience. He asks, in Book 10 of *The Confessions* (from the translation by Garry Wills), “So what, in loving God, do I love? One who is higher than my own soul’s highest point? Then from that part of the soul I must strive up toward him.” The idea of God as the ultimate principle of order in the universe, the ground of all reasonableness, starts to unravel when we are standing at the edge where reasoning ends and mystery begins. When driven only by the demands of rationality and logic, who would not run aground in the effort to think “God”?

Perhaps, then, there is a bit of the atheist in all of us. The mind that prays is likely to learn, over the course of a lifetime, that the God of one’s immaturity does not exist. The closer we come to God, the less we seem to know about him; and yet, at the same time, the more our lives seem to be governed by love. Paul’s words to the Corinthians could easily apply here: “When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways” (1 Cor 13:11). Paul writes this at the close of his celebrated passage about love.

### **Lives chastened by longing**

Yet there is also a trace of the desert in us. One notices about *The Desert Fathers* that, while the book contains frequent references to God, there are comparatively few references to

Christ or Jesus. Perhaps the barrenness of the desert prompted a certain leanness of imagination, although the desert Christians certainly knew the gospels. But did they perhaps pay more attention to the virtues that Jesus exemplified than to the rich narrative imagery that makes his example so memorable? I don't know. Personally, I would much prefer a fresco by Fra Angelico on the wall of my cell to a windowless cave. But at least this much can be said: the desert Christians went beyond word and image to penetrate the mystery underneath. Their hearts were firmly set on God. At every hour, they were in touch with the soul's search for God. For many of us, awareness of our spirit's thirst is often sporadic; theirs, however, was fearsomely constant.

The history of the desert Christians invites us to notice the intensity with which men and women, having removed themselves from "the cares of the world, and the lure of wealth, and the desire for other things" (Mark 4:19), are capable of attending to the heart's desire to be one with its Creator. We may not be ready to join them in the wilderness. Nevertheless, we cannot help but admire, and perhaps even envy, their eagerness to choose "the better part" (Luke 10:42). And yet if the desert represents human longing to know our Maker, then this means that each of us carries a piece of the desert inside. The thirst that drives us to keep looking for God is the same thirst that cleanses and purifies the mind by laying bare its limitations.

There is an inescapable uncertainty about faith because, even with revelation, there is much about God that we do not know. "For now," Paul writes, "we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face" (1 Cor 13:12). At the same time, the longing for communion with God only grows stronger as the



heart matures. The desire sometimes gets unfocused, but over time it steadies the mind. Many discover that no name, no human word, adequately encompasses the divine mystery. Yet there is no leaving the desert, either. Like Moses, we have to be at peace with beholding the promised land from afar. As Origen wrote in the third century, “It is better for the one who is seeking the perfect life to die along the way than never to have started on the search for perfection.”

### **The climate of faith and the culture of life**

The Church teaches that the right to life brings with it a right to all the elements that are necessary for sustaining and nurturing life. These obviously include basic physical necessities like food, housing, safe environment, and health care, as well as goods like education, political and social stability, and humane working conditions. We do not live on bread alone, however. What is indispensable for nurturing human life is “every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord” (Deut 8:3). Societies and cultures in which the air is spiritually thin are unfriendly to life. The right to life entails the right to a social environment that supports spiritual growth. If nonbelief should pervade an entire culture, its members would eventually suffocate. While I am not prepared to argue for a correlation between atheism and the breaking down of family life, I understand when a young person finds it hard to continue believing in God’s love because their home has fallen apart.

Religious men and women make a major contribution to keeping the atmosphere of the surrounding culture breathable. They talk about God. They live by faith. Their lives incarnate key gospel values of service, humility, compassion, and love. Religious lives give prophetic expression to Jesus’ oneness with his people, especially the poor. He lived with them, and he

suffered with them. At the same time, in a world where educated people reason their way out of belief, religious people understand, on the basis of their own experience, the darkness that almost always settles over faith, sometimes lasting for years. Even Mother Teresa endured this profound desolation, as we learn from her recently published private writings (*Mother Teresa: Come Be My Light*). Still, in societies where “the cares of the world, and the lure of wealth, and the desire for other things” (Mark 4:19) choke the soul, religious lives are deeply counter-cultural. They demonstrate that a thirsting heart will never be satisfied so long as the human being chooses to walk among rocks and thorns. Lives that are passionately and unequivocally God-centered can be as electrifying today as the desert Christians were centuries ago. They angle our vision toward the heavens. Yet this electricity will go nowhere unless people are made conscious of the desert that surrounds them.

### **Two poles, two tensions**

I am left, then, with an image of the religious person as someone standing between two poles. One pole is the uncertainty of faith. Through the force of this pole, the religious person should be the first to understand why men and women might slide into atheism. Someone who has never faced the dark night would probably have little to contribute in a conversation with non-believers.

The other pole is the soul’s longing. It longs for union with its Creator, and it longs for communion with other women and men. Not a superficial communion; not a communion that is more ideological than concrete. Not a romantic communion with humanity in the abstract, but a communion with the other flawed human beings whom we meet and live with from one day to the next. Together these two poles—the uncertainty of

faith and the certainty of desire—generate a lifegiving tension in the soul of religious people. The presence of such people among us helps to keep our culture from caving in on itself.

This first tension gives rise to a second. An awareness of mystery without a corresponding sense of mission would not be faithful to the gospel. Jesus, after all, did not withdraw from the world; he engaged it. But a sense of mission or purpose, unprotected by an awareness of mystery, is bound to become disoriented. Apostles sometimes lose their vision; and when this happens, they reap exhaustion. Apostles have learned, often the hard way, that their energy and effort cannot be sustained apart from contact with God. The hard-working atheist may work tirelessly on behalf of others; but in the end, how does the vision sustain itself? On the other hand, the friends of God have also learned that being absorbed by God to the extent of not noticing the neighbor outside their gate opens the way to deception. “God,” in this case, gets corralled. What remains is the not-God that atheists reject.

Religious men and women are familiar with these tensions. The Spirit has prepared them to listen sympathetically to the non-believer who struggles with mystery and then gives up. The Spirit has also prepared them, however, to accompany the God-seeker by peeling away the layers of distractions culture has placed over us, thereby laying bare the desert beneath. Once in the desert, people may again experience the thirst that can draw them to life. A culture of life requires a culture of faith. Religious women and men have been given an essential role to play in the creation of such a culture as guides, mentors, and soul friends. They know a lot about landscapes with God and landscapes without God. Their presence is a

sacramental reminder of the journey that every human being is invited to make.

[2007]

**Paul: A Man Who Found His Vocation,  
And a Vocation That Made the Man**

If we were to find ourselves stranded a long way from home and wanting desperately to get back, what most likely would we be thinking about? My guess is that we would be thinking about our families and our friends. We would be remembering their faces and imagining the sound of their voices. In our mind's eye we would be watching them in settings that felt at once very near and very far away. When the Israelites, six centuries before the birth of Jesus, had been dragged away into exile, they wanted nothing more than to get back to their homeland and especially to see Jerusalem once again. Psalm 137 memorialized that experience:

By the rivers of Babylon—there we wept when we remembered Zion. / On the willows there we hung up our harps. . . / How could we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?"

The prodigal son of Luke 15 quickly found himself dreaming of his father's house and longing to return. Exiles and refugees, runaway children, soldiers at war miles away from their native shores, captives, prisoners: the desire to be rejoined with the people they love must burn in them like a fever.

The apostle Paul was no stranger to prisons. He also knew what it was like to be without a place he could call his home. Paul did not have the slightest doubt that he received his vocation directly from God. "Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God" (Rom 1:1); "Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of

God” (1 Cor 1:1); “Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God” (2 Cor 1:1); “Paul an apostle—sent neither by human commission nor from human authorities, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father” (Gal 1:1); “Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God” (Eph 1:1); “Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God” (Col 1:1). And then: “Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus” (Philem 1).

### **Calling has consequences**

One consequence of his being called was that Paul would never again be able to claim any one place as his home. “Home” would henceforth be every place and no place; every place where there was a household of faith; and no place, because he would be constantly on mission and because the believer’s place, ultimately, is with the Lord. Yet a second consequence of his being called was that Paul would frequently find himself under arrest. “I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord” (Eph 4:1); “I am an ambassador in chains” (Eph 6:20); “my imprisonment is for Christ” (Phil 1:13); “Are they ministers of Christ? I am talking like a madman—I am a better one, with far greater labors, far more imprisonments” (2 Cor 11:23); “Remember my chains” (Col 4:18). Paul may have longed to be with Christ—“my desire is to depart his communities—but he also wanted, passionately, to be with his communities. The ear catches a wonderful tenderness in his words, “One thing more—prepare a guest room for me” (Philem 22). When Paul writes of being absent in body but present in spirit (Col 2:5), he reveals what goes on inside an apostle’s imagination. For an apostle, the body may be in prison or in chains, yet the heart never loses its freedom. In every moment, Paul is with the churches he helped to establish throughout the world of the Eastern Mediterranean. In the measure that the heart centers on

others, it becomes truly free. But the longing to see them in person and to touch them remains. When we love others, we get attached. For an apostle like Paul, those attachments become many and separation hurts, especially when the apostle is locked inside a prison.

There is much about Paul that I would love to ask him. He may have known more about the life and ministry of Jesus than his letters would lead us to think, but it looks like he did not have any contact with Jesus during his ministry. When Jesus appeared to Paul—“Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me” (1 Cor 15:8)—what exactly did Paul see? He could not have recognized Jesus because of any physical features, nor does he even hint at a description of what the risen Jesus looked like. So, what did Paul see? What did the appearance consist of? What did Paul mean when he wrote that God “was pleased to reveal his Son to me” (Gal 1:16)? Granted that his religious world had been turned upside down, was it at that moment that he began to feel himself called? For up to that point, Paul had been moving aggressively against his fellow Jews who had gone over to Christ. “I was violently persecuting the church of God and was trying to destroy it” (Gal 1:13)

### **Humility is all about God**

Whatever was driving Paul’s zeal and fierce intolerance, it was not a divine call. Maybe the appearance consisted of a sudden, electrifying realization that he had gotten the mystery of God wrong. Perhaps having been raised to think about God in terms of power, he saw nothing wrong about marshaling institutional resources against the breakaway sect of Christians. At the end of second Corinthians Paul recounts a word he received in response to an urgent prayer: “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness” (2 Cor 12:9). I

like to think that Paul had finally understood that humility is above all a divine attribute, not just a human virtue. The humility Jesus exhibited in his own life was a reflection of the humility of God himself. If discovering that insight is what happened, then I would like to ask Paul next how long it took for this insight to sink in. In the way they accepted persecution and refused to return evil for evil, the followers of Jesus may have taught Paul something about the divine nature. Paul was looking for God in the wrong place. Someone might reasonably beg God to get him out of prison; but who would have thought God would actually be in the jail?

### **A life that looked more like Christ's**

That Paul in chains was thinking of the churches and households he already knew or that he wanted to visit may not sound very remarkable, but it gives us a hint as to where Paul got his energy from: it came from his affection for the people. But his energy came from another source as well. The more he reflected on the pattern of Jesus' life, especially his suffering and death, the more privileged he felt. Paul saw the sufferings of Jesus replicated in his own life. He even boasted to the Corinthians that he had undergone more labors, more humiliation, more danger, and more imprisonment than any of the other apostles. And this fact—sharing in the sufferings of Christ—confirmed Paul in his conviction that he had been called personally by God to serve his Son. Centuries later Ignatius of Loyola would characterize what Paul experienced as the third kind of humility: “in order to imitate Christ our Lord and to be actually more like him, I want and choose poverty with Christ poor rather than wealth, and ignominy with Christ in great ignominy rather than fame, and I desire more to be thought a fool and an idiot for Christ than to be



thought wise and prudent in this world.” Humility to this degree is not the criterion of success most people have been trained to recognize. It is a peculiar sort of consolation to find oneself glad to be going through what Jesus went through. Yet why did Jesus go through it?

The simplest answer is that fidelity to God brought Jesus close to his people, and fidelity to his people brought Jesus close to God. Jesus did not embrace rejection and disgrace for its own sake. The contours of his ministry were determined by his response to the human scene as he saw it in front of him. In his effort to lift burdens and drive out demons—the forces that seek only to crush and exploit human beings, especially the most vulnerable ones among us—Jesus paid a high price. He sharply criticized the religious leadership of his day because they claimed the authority to interpret the will of God without having any idea of what God was really like. And the reason they did not know what God was like was that they could not see the world from the perspective of poor widows, men with withered arms, or those who might have fallen among robbers.

Thus Paul could say to the community at Colossae, “I am now rejoicing in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am completing what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions for the sake of his body, that is the church” (Col 1:24). The suffering he was going through resulted from his commitment to them, and in some sense Christ’s own suffering was now being extended through time in and through apostles like Paul. For him, building the church was essential because the Christian community has to be Jesus’ witness throughout the ages, doing in every generation what Jesus did in his. The resistance that Paul faced, the exhaustion he endured, the humiliation and

ridicule that came from some people in his own religious tradition, taught him about the humility of God. The self-emptying of Jesus, so unforgettably expressed in the second chapter of the letter to the Philippians, must have struck a deep chord in Paul's own experience. One does not "put on the mind of Christ" easily. There's a lot of letting go that must take place constantly. To be crucified to the world, as Paul described his life in closing his letter to the Galatians, is to carry the human family with us always.

Lifelong solidarity with God's people is, in the end, what an apostle's calling is all about. Paul discovered, painfully, that blind zeal was no substitute for a real vocation. Living that vocation fully, once he found it, made him into the human being that he really wanted to be.

[2008]



