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 enfleshed, 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, missionarieds, 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]