15.

**Holiness as Vocation:**

Papal message for the 39th 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]