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]