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]