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 that 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]