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“To serve Christ alone in his Church”:
The message of John Paul II for the 41\textsuperscript{st} World Day of Prayer for Vocations

The Pope’s vocation message this year, prepared for the Fourth Sunday of Easter, is comparatively brief. Drawing on a point he had made at the close of the great jubilee year in his Apostolic Letter \textit{Novo Millennio Ineunte} that one of the signs of our times is “a widespread demand for spirituality,” the Pope encourages all Christian communities to become “authentic schools of prayer.” I take him to mean that all of our communities—from parishes, schools and universities, retreat houses and rest homes, to the homes of Christian families and the residences of vowed religious—need to be places where everyday life is anything but shallow, where material goods and careers do not weigh on our minds more heavily than people do, where consumerism is resisted and self-centeredness is overcome. Vocations are not going to emerge from arid hearts or from imaginations unschooled by great desires. Moreover, while the search for a satisfying interior life may be widespread, not every spirituality is Christian and not every Christian spirituality is framed or centered by the Eucharist.

By “vocations” the Pope here has in mind “priests, religious, hermits, consecrated virgins, members of secular institutes—in short, all those who have received the gift of the vocation and carry ‘this treasure in earthen vessels’.” Some readers may recall that the 1998 document “New Vocations for a New Europe” observed: “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.” And again, “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.” Furthermore in his 1981 Apostolic Exhortation “On the Role of the Christian Family in the Modern World” (Familiaris Consortio) the Pope himself had written, “Love is therefore the fundamental and innate vocation of every human being.” All of which invites us to remember that while religious life and ordained ministry have essential roles to play in the life of the Church, there are indeed other ministries, each with its corresponding “call.” Recognizing this fact the Pope’s message continues, citing 1 Corinthians 12: “In the Mystical Body of Christ there is a wide variety of ministries and charisms, all of them meant for the sanctification of the Christian people.” Assisting others on the path to holiness—that they might attain “the highest possible degree of evangelical perfection”—applies therefore to every vocation in the Church.

The scriptural context

Luke 10:2 is the gospel verse that provides the context for this year’s message: “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.’” Building on these words, the papal message emphasizes the responsibility all of us have to be praying for vocations, a responsibility we fulfill both by individual prayer and by our being contemplative, God-centered
communities. For vocations will never come to life unless all of us are contributing to the formation of the appropriate spiritual environment. The Pope further reminds us that “every minister of Christ” needs to be praying for vocations. Ministers of Christ, after all, should understand better than anyone “the urgency of a generational exchange” in order for Christian word and sacrament to root themselves in the future.

Taken by itself, Luke 10:2 does not single out any particular group of pastoral agents as harvesters par excellence. Throughout the centuries there have been innumerable laborers in fields “ripe for harvesting” (John 4:35) and their labors have taken many different forms. Luke opens chapter 10 with Jesus appointing “seventy others,” that is, seventy in addition to the Twelve. He gives them specific instructions about how to conduct themselves as they travel throughout Galilee announcing to whoever will receive them, “The kingdom of God has come near to you.” But the labor in this case appears to be explicitly missionary. If the Lord’s fields are to be harvested, then someone will have to be sent into them. Yet no one can be sent who is not already disposed to being on a mission. And this is a point that intrigues me. Since we cannot be called to something we do not want, the key to acquiring a desire to serve the kingdom of God is exposure to individuals and to communities of faith where seeking and doing the will of God is a matter of ultimate concern.

The desire to live a mission

Given how we have been created, the way in which our personalities have taken shape, the concrete histories that define and distinguish us from one another, and so on, the fact that there should be different vocational forms is hardly surprising. Yet the process by which we appropriate and develop a
particular vocational form is nothing short of mysterious. What is it that disposes or prepares someone to want to be on a mission, not just for a brief period but for a lifetime? What separates or distinguishes the journeying aspect of religious development from that of being sent? Interpreting one’s life as a journey or pilgrimage has long been a major aspect of religious experience. Since the time of Abraham and Sarah—indeed, from the time when Eve and Adam embarked upon their long historical pilgrimage—“journey” has served as a rich metaphor for the life of the spirit, whether one’s travel is actually physical or purely inward. The well-known 19th-century Russian accounts *The Way of a Pilgrim* and *The Pilgrim Continues His Way* nicely illustrate this theme, although numerous other writings could be cited as well.

Being sent, however, is a different sort of religious experience. It dips into the world of prophets and apostles, figures whose being became identified with their believing themselves commissioned by God to perform some task or deliver some message of great moment. At its most basic form, I suppose, being sent could refer to every human being since, by virtue of our being created, God sends each of us into the world with the express purpose of learning how to love. That elementary experience of being sent “into the world” takes on a particularly Christian configuration, however, as a result of immersing ourselves in the gospel narrative and spending time with Jesus. In fact the Fourth Gospel mentions Jesus in terms of his being sent about forty times.

The Pope writes: “The vocation to serve Christ alone in his Church is an inestimable gift of the divine goodness, a gift to implore with insistence and trusting humility. The Christian must be always more open to this gift, careful not to waste ‘the
time of grace’ and ‘the time of visitation’ (cf. Luke 19:44).” This statement reflects a lifetime of ministerial experience; such words are credible only when they come from the lips of seasoned apostles. One looks back at years of engagement with the Christian community—with people who have become real sisters and brothers in faith—and realizes that everything one has done and all that one has become can only be summed up in a hymn of thanksgiving. No one, of course, can make the decisions of young people for them; they must respond to the Spirit at their own pace and in their own way. We can assure them, however, through word and witness of the consolation that comes from serving “Christ alone in his Church.”

Appreciating precisely why serving Christ alone in his Church is such an inestimable gift is largely the fruit of faithful practice.

*To serve Christ alone in his Church.* I am not altogether certain whether vocational stirrings emerge from within a person’s relationship in faith to Jesus or from within one’s engagement with the Church and the wider human family. Perhaps they originate in a combination of the two. I am certain, however, that Jesus cannot be separated from his people. As our relationship with Jesus develops, humanity itself tends to figure more prominently in our praying. In Jesus we discover the presence of the others—the “many” of Matthew 26:28—and the more time we spend among human beings, especially the ones Jesus pronounced “blessed” in Luke 6:20-21, the more likely we are to understand the experience beneath the words “We have seen the Lord” (John 20:24). The grace that confirms vocational choice is that of finding Jesus in his people and the people in Jesus. For some, this experience will turn into the all-consuming grace that makes lifelong fidelity and total availability not only attractive but also possible.
Passing along the life of faith

The strength and vitality of the Church depend upon the service and unfailing dedication of people with many sorts of gifts, but unless we pass the Church’s faith from one generation to the next, ecclesial life will die. And central to the process of this transmission is the handing on of the narrative of faith through scripture and Eucharist, or rather through preaching, sacrament and evangelical practice. While word and sacrament certainly are realities that are aesthetically charged and inspiring, their importance lies in how they build and sustain communities of faith. Ordained ministry, therefore, involves much more than the quality of one’s preaching and presiding; above all it involves a faith-filled insertion into the life of one’s people. Few are likely to be drawn to consider ordained ministry as their vocational form, for example, solely on the basis of observing someone’s liturgical presence or homiletic skills. There needs to be in addition the steady, everyday witness of a minister for whom God’s people, wherever they may be, matter more than anything else.

Genuine holiness is a thing of beauty and many will be naturally drawn to it. For holiness represents the choice of life over death, wholeness over fragmentation, communion over isolation. But insofar as we are talking about the holiness of Jesus and not about holiness in the abstract or as a religious universal, then Jesus has to be connected with his people; Christ has to be connected with his Church.

Is there light at the end of the tunnel?

Although the papal message does not delve into the reasons why traditional vocations have declined, it may be worth our thinking for a moment about what has been happening in the Church and in the world, particularly if we are going to respond
to the Pope’s “heartfelt wish that prayer for vocations be intensified.”

Few problems have proven more vexing and worrisome than the decrease in vocations to ordained ministry, religious life, and missionary service. Needless to say, before we lament the decline in traditional vocational forms we should acknowledge the emergence of new forms of evangelical living, the development of a fuller, richer spirituality of Christian baptism, and the growing lay presence in Christian mission.

We also need to take into account the increasing secularization of modern culture, lest we blame ourselves for a state of affairs that we were powerless to prevent. Some cultural forces, like ocean tides, prove virtually irresistible. Secularization, like democratization and globalization, may have tidal force. Yet the sacred and the profane must be thought of together in creative tension. If one sphere folds into the other, all sorts of mischief can result. If secularization represents the problem of collapsing in one direction, sacralization becomes a problem when the divine mystery is no longer conceived as in the world but above or outside it. Taking shelter on a remote spiritual island totally cut off from “the world” is as much out of the question as turning our churches into marketplaces.

Then, too, not all parents would be overjoyed at the prospect of their child having a “vocation” to ordained ministry or religious life, even if God were to ask the parents’ permission first! Some parents simply do not see its value. Perhaps they want to protect their children from the pressure of trying to live a high spiritual ideal in a culture that does not esteem lifelong fidelity to “Christ alone in his Church.” Others may have had their darkest suspicions confirmed by the painful disclosures of the past few years.
To the extent that the decline in vocations can be blamed on Christians themselves or on the cultural forces of modernity, we should be wary of concluding that the Lord of the harvest has been inattentive to the needs of his people or deaf to their prayers. On the other hand, it is hard to escape the conclusion that priesthood, consecrated life, and missionary service as we have known them are gradually being reconfigured and reconstituted. Much of the impetus for this profound change is coming, I believe, from a fresh appropriation of the Jesus of the gospels. There Jesus is constantly among his people, befriending and often defending the least attractive and least powerful ones among them, walking their dusty roads, sharing meals with them, blessing their children and expelling their demons, challenging selfish ambition and the system of patronage by his example of poverty and service.

As this figure of Jesus—rather traditional, when all is said and done—comes more sharply into focus, the pattern of ordained ministry and religious life changes, a change that necessarily starts from below and works its way through the Church’s institutional life. Together, since the Council, we have found ourselves treading the tedious yet purifying path to renewal, and both priesthood and religious life are feeling the effect. Much like those born during the forty years Israel when was passing through the wilderness, our young people find themselves without memory of where the journey started and without any clear sense of what the land beyond the Jordan looks like. Of course, the rest of us cannot see very far ahead either, but at least we know where the journey began and understand why it has been necessary.

A second impetus for change may be coming from our growing sensitivity to the presence of the divine mystery among
the other world religions and our understandable preference for dialogue to missionary intrusion. This means, though, that for the short term we may have to endure a certain blurring of the lines of Christian distinctiveness. While this blurring hardly explains everything, it may account for a certain reluctance to choose one of the traditional vocational forms. If the sense of being God-sent is integral to vocational awareness, then mission and evangelical purpose are going to have to be much clearer in a religiously pluralistic world. Yet such clarity can only come after inter-religious dialogue. It cannot be assumed or determined in advance of religious encounter.

Thirdly, we should also think of the negative but paradoxically salutary impact of the twin forces of consumerism and individualism upon vocational awareness, especially with respect to priesthood and consecrated life. The document I cited above “New Vocations for a New Europe” identified pretty well the cultural pressures working against us. It often happens, however, that those very attitudes or forces that lead to a neglect or defacing of the interior life create the conditions for spiritual rebirth.

Emptiness is a feeling we cannot tolerate for very long. The empty promises made by a culture that preaches and fosters the acquisition and consumption of material goods, or that positions individual achievement and satisfaction above the common good, eventually reveal themselves to be depressingly untrustworthy. The current vocational crisis has been in the making for some time; we simply did not see its arrival for what it was, namely, the consequence in large measure of a culture turning more and more consumerist. Constant exposure to such an environment leads to the deadening of vocational awareness, and that awareness will remain dead until spirit itself revolts
against the seductive superficialities of our time. Hence the Pope’s words at the close of the jubilee year: “in today’s world, despite widespread secularization, there is a widespread demand for spirituality, a demand which expresses itself in a large part as a renewed need for prayer.”

Widespread secularization accompanied by widespread demand for spirituality: here we have a paradox of Christian redemption, perhaps best summed up in Paul’s words “but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more” (Romans 5:20). Meantime, the harvest awaits laborers schooled in the way of the Spirit and purified through the empty way of the desert.

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