27.

Open Minds to the Mystery of God:

A theological reflection on John Paul II’s letter for the 42nd World Day of Prayer for Vocations

There is something quite moving about this year’s letter for anyone who has seen recent pictures of the Pope. The letter is brief. Five times it cites the Apostolic Letter of January 6, 2001 Novo millennio ineunte, where John Paul II wrote in the opening paragraph: “At the beginning of the new millennium, and at the close of the Great Jubilee . . . our hearts ring out with the words of Jesus when one day, after speaking to the crowds from Simon’s boat, he invited the Apostle to ‘put out into the deep’ for a catch: ‘Duc in altum’ (Lk 5:4). Peter and his first companions trusted Christ’s words, and cast the nets. . . Duc in altum! These words ring out for us today, and they invite us to remember the past with gratitude, to live the present with enthusiasm and to look forward to the future with confidence.”

Addressing himself to young people in this year’s letter on vocations, John Paul reminisces: “I still hold in my heart the memory of the many opportunities I have had over the years to meet with young people, who have now become adults, some of them your own parents perhaps, or priests or religious, your teachers in the faith. I saw them happy, as young people should be, but also thoughtful, because they were conscious of a desire to give full ‘meaning’ to their lives.” From his own declining health and diminishment the Pope is remembering the past with gratitude. I suspect that the Gospel’s words “Put out into deep water” have assumed profound meaning four years later in the way the same Lord who spoke to him when he was young is
now inviting him to look forward to the future with confidence. The deep water in which we find ourselves seems to change over time.

While this year’s letter does not go beyond what the Pope wrote in years past concerning vocations, two points struck me. The first is his positive, even enthusiastic assessment of young people today. “I came to recognize more and more,” he writes, “how strong is the attraction in young people to the values of the spirit, and how sincere is their desire for holiness.” And the second is his familiar yet always refreshing appreciation of the variety of vocations. Speaking of the Lord’s invitation to “put out into the deep” the Pope continues: “Some he calls to family life, others to consecrated life or to the ministerial priesthood.” While he might easily have included here those Christians who feel themselves called by the Spirit to lead single lives in the world, John Paul’s understanding of marriage as a calling or vocation is noteworthy. He then goes on to say: “Do not forget that today too there is need of holy priests, of persons wholly consecrated to the service of God!” But where will these vocations come from, if not from the subculture of firmly Christian families?

The Pope is keenly sensitive to the crucial role family life plays in promoting vocational awareness. By virtue of our baptism each of us has undergone a second birth, a rebirth into mission. Although most parents probably do not use the language of being called and sent when they speak to their children about God, they are constantly evangelizing by example: “When adult Christians show themselves capable of revealing the face of Christ through their own words and example, young people are more ready to welcome his demanding message, stamped as it is with the mystery of the
Cross.” While it is certainly true that vocational awareness can be stimulated and cultivated in church and in Catholic schools, religious sensibility is usually born within households where couples live each day by faith. Hence the Pope sees a connection between ordained ministry, consecrated life, and Christian marriage. The Church cannot promote vocations to ministry and religious life without at the same time promoting, assisting, and defending married life.

**Another look at the story in Luke 5**

A glance at a map of Palestine in the time of Jesus shows the Sea of Galilee to be about seven miles across at its widest stretch and a bit less than thirteen at its longest, if I can trust my ruler. An encyclopedia tells me that its deepest point (in the northern corner, where Capernaum was located) measures a little over 150 feet. Given Simon’s answer “Master, we have worked hard all night,” we know that the scene takes place during the morning.

At its simplest level Luke 5:1-11 is about the calling of Simon Peter and his partners, the brothers James and John. Sitting in Simon’s boat, Jesus was teaching a large crowd that had assembled at the water’s edge. The fishermen meanwhile were washing and perhaps mending their nets. A note in The New Interpreter’s Study Bible tells us that fishermen were reckoned among the socially “despised,” while another commentary states that the poverty of fishermen was “proverbial” in the ancient Mediterranean world.

Although Luke reports that “they left everything and followed him,” I do not think he was speaking about a literal and total renunciation of family, home, and material goods. After all, if we follow Mark’s account, Peter’s house appears to have been the location of considerable healing activity and
teaching. According to the Fourth Gospel the disciples did return to fishing (John 21), and according to Paul both Peter and the other apostles were accompanied by their wives when they went on mission (1 Cor 9:5). The “everything” of which Luke speaks, like his phrase “into deep water,” teases our imaginations. What these expressions mean concretely for each of us is going to change over time. What does it mean for each of us, personally, to leave everything? What does it mean for us, here and now, to put out into deep water?

What should not be overlooked, however, is the likelihood that the ones Jesus called in this scene were poor (though not beggars) and disdained by people of standing and privilege. The poor, Jesus would later tell John the Baptist, have the good news preached to them (Lk 7:22); the fishermen washing their nets (and presumably listening to Jesus) would have been among them.

Ministerial and religious vocations have crossed, of course, all social lines. Over the centuries rich families and poor ones, the households of nobility as well as those of peasants, have seen their children enter holy orders or join religious communities. But it may be worth reminding ourselves that the first disciples, like Jesus himself, came from the humblest of backgrounds. In light of the painful inability of the rich ruler in Luke 18 to respond to Jesus’ invitation (Matthew 19:20 identifies him as a “young man”), we may wonder whether it was easier for the fishermen to follow Jesus simply because they owned so little; they would not have had to step down so many rungs on the social ladder. Or to look at things from a different angle, the fishermen might have had a less cluttered view of the world than the social elite, whose lives were encumbered by privilege and wealth.
The gospel reader might suppose that a fisherman who had just taken a surprise catch of fish should not have been at all reluctant to follow Jesus. And yet it was not the net-splitting haul of fish that so moved Simon and the others. Strictly speaking, such a huge catch, however unexpected and astonishing, need not automatically be labeled a miracle. People do occasionally stumble across buried treasure, farmers on occasion are blessed with a harvest beyond their wildest expectations, merchants once in a while find a priceless jewel, and fishermen sometimes have extraordinarily good luck. Still, what seized their minds that morning was hardly the prospect of sudden prosperity. The fishermen put everything aside because something in the message of Jesus sounded so compelling that they wanted to be part of his mission. More than anything else, what counted was gathering and rescuing lives; what counted above all was the reign of God. Their minds must have been already open to the mystery of God. Otherwise they would not have been paying attention to Jesus’ words as they washed their nets; indeed, with a bow to the Fourth Gospel, they would never have gone to the Jordan to listen to John (see Jn 1:35-42).

Sinful yet nonetheless called

The fishermen were decent, God-fearing people, which accounts for why Peter fell to his knees before Jesus. He realizes that he has been in the presence of mystery and reacts by asking Jesus to leave him. This reaction makes us notice an important moment in a person’s coming to vocational awareness, namely, a profound sense of personal inadequacy and sinfulness. Peter may have loaned Jesus his boat, but it now appears that the lake itself belonged to Jesus.

The listening, the skepticism about Jesus’ instruction to put out into deep water, the huge catch: these elements have to be
taken together as we try to understand Peter’s disorientation. The world of the lake must have suddenly felt terribly small, yet the unknown beyond the lake, beyond Capernaum, beyond Galilee must have been correspondingly frightening. Kneeling before that unknown Peter asks that it go away. In this moment of vulnerability, confusion, awkwardness, and fear Jesus calls Peter to be with him. Calling appears to presuppose a recognition of unworthiness and inadequacy, an experience that was going to leave an indelible memory. “Jesus knew that I was a sinful man,” Peter might later have reminded himself, “but he still called me.” Could the apostle ever forget what happened on the lake?

The vocational dynamic in this passage might well be summed up in Peter’s words “Depart from me for I am a sinful man” and Jesus’ reply “From now on you will be catching men.” We are painfully aware of our inadequacies, waywardness, and shortcomings; yet at the same time we hear Jesus calling us to join his mission. In Luke’s story, Jesus’ invitation to Peter is not quite so direct as the words “Follow me,” but maybe this indirection makes the invitation all the more striking. “From now on you will be catching men” seems to imply that Peter had already come to a decision. If Jesus did not walk away, then Peter was not going to be the one to leave.

We need this background in order to hear Jesus aright when he says, “Put out into deep water.” These are the words that should logically follow our experience of being called, not precede it. First we are called, and then we are asked to put out into the deep. The challenge of faith, of putting out into the unknown where we are no longer in charge either of our lives or of the world, will become a permanent feature of our discipleship. Vocation means letting go of one’s own life, or as
Luke says, “They left everything and followed him.” But that is just half of what happens. The other half is surrendering to the mystery of God for the rest of one’s life, or as the earlier verse would have it, “Put out into the deep and let down your nets for a catch.” In this case they caught fish. The next time they would be fishing for human lives. And at some much later moment it might even have occurred to them to wonder about the hand that so mysteriously had caught and rescued each of them, that morning on the Sea of Galilee when Jesus turned their world upside down.

**One call to holiness, many paths**

As usual, the Pope concludes his letter with a prayer. It opens: “Jesus, Son of God . . . You call all the baptized to ‘put out into the deep,’ taking the path that leads to holiness.” That the call to holiness is universal was a clear teaching of the Council’s Dogmatic Constitution on the Church. “Thus it is evident to everyone that all the faithful of Christ . . . are called to the fullness of the Christian life and to the perfection of charity . . . The classes and duties of life are many, but holiness is one—that sanctity which is cultivated by all who are moved by the Spirit of God” (*Lumen Gentium*, 40).

The Pope’s prayer clearly echoes the Council. The passage in Luke 5 thus applies not to just a few in the Church but to every Christian. To promote vocations, therefore, requires that we cultivate the sense of being called across the spectrum of possible vocational forms and choices. We cannot promote vocations to ordained ministry and religious life, for example, without promoting the vocation of Christian marriage, and neither can we support and encourage family life without promoting and nurturing the other manifestations of the Spirit’s care for the Church. We cannot encourage those drawn to lead
solitary lives without nurturing the call to service; we cannot promote traditional religious institutes and their charisms without supporting new ecclesial expressions of common life and purpose. We cannot animate people toward ordained ministry without celebrating the call experienced by many laypeople to be spiritual directors, chaplains, catechists, retreat masters, missioners, and so on. Just as the notion of “seamless garment” has been deployed to help us reflect on life and death issues, perhaps it could also be applied to vocations. Respect for life must take into account human life at all its stages and conditions. So too a “seamless garment” approach to vocational awareness would encompass the whole of Christian existence and the multiplicity of ways in which Jesus’ followers give expression to their union with the mystery of God.

The particular form a vocation takes is in the end secondary to the birth and development of the believer’s relationship with God in Christ. No one is going to start thinking about vocational forms and choices before she or he has had an experience of his or her existence both as gift and as mystery. The more the Gospel takes over our minds and hearts, the more we are going to find ourselves desirous and excited about proclaiming and bearing witness “to the wonderful truth of the saving love of God,” as John Paul writes.

In the end vocation is not about choosing an occupation or profession for the sake of personal fulfillment and financial gain. The disciples were not simply being asked to change one occupation, whether it was fishing, collecting taxes, or tent making, for another sort of gainful employment. They were really being asked to become a different kind of human being, namely, people transformed by the saving love of God and, just as importantly, by a saving love for God’s people. For the Pope,
the clearest indication that such transformation is taking place is our readiness to put out into deep water. Even before it takes a definite shape, the Pope seems to be telling us, vocation means opening oneself to a lifelong engagement with the mystery of God. Vocation is going to mean putting ourselves out further and further into those deep waters where other human beings are waiting for the saving hands of God. And to press the metaphor a bit more, perhaps no one is fit to go fishing for other human beings who has not, at one time or another, been drawn from the sea in someone else’s net.

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