The Unfolding of a Vocation Is Not a Solitary Process:

A reflection on Benedict XVI’s message for the 46th World Day of Prayer for Vocations

The gospel text for the Fourth Sunday of Easter in each of the liturgical cycles is taken from John 10. This is the chapter where Jesus refers to himself as “the good shepherd,” the very role attributed to God in Psalm 23. Thus, with the image of Jesus pasturing his people in the background, the Church dedicates the Fourth Sunday of Easter to praying for vocations and cultivating vocational awareness. And so we might reflect, what does the pastor—the Good Shepherd—actually do?

The birth of vocational awareness

In the Ezekiel passage we hear God speak: “I myself will search for my sheep and look after them. As shepherds look after their scattered flocks when they are with them, so will I look after my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places they were scattered on a day of clouds and darkness. . . I will search for the lost and bring back the strays. I will bind up the injured and strengthen the weak” (34:11-12, 16). Consider what the Shepherd does: he searches for the lost or strayed, rescues, gathers together, looks after, binds up, and strengthens.

One does not have to grow up on a farm or in the countryside to appreciate the prophet’s metaphor. Given the fractured nature of human society; given that so many men and women are adrift, wounded, isolated, weak; given that the peoples of the world do not yet know how to live together as God daughters and sons, then who is going to make caring for
the human family their life’s mission? Who among us is not going simply to see and pass by like the priest and the Levite of the gospel parable, but see and have compassion, and then tend the world in its need?

The way such men and women express their care will not be the way of those who rule and govern civil societies. They will have no interest in exercising authority over others, like the great ones whom Jesus warned his disciples against (Mark 10:42-43). Instead, they will look at the human scene and, out of great compassion, feel drawn to repair and restore the human family. Because they cannot take on such a huge mission alone, these apostles in waiting will seek out the company of others already engaged in this task. And they will eventually discover that the divine Shepherd does not simply send others. He is already at work in the world.

Vocational awareness is born, then, from a sense of concern for people that leads to feeling responsible for the well-being of others. By being responsible I mean that our hearts do not allow us merely to observe or witness other human lives; we want to accompany them. And then, following on this experience of wanting to accompany others, there comes the graced realization that the people we care for belong to God. No matter what else human beings possess or achieve, if they do not know the mystery of God, if they do not understand whom they really belong to, then they remain poor, lost, and away from home.

Finally, vocational awareness and the desire to walk alongside others on the journey of faith lead directly into the community of faith. For all of us, our relationship with God deepens and flourishes above all in contact with other disciples. The unfolding of a vocation, like salvation itself, is not a
solitary process. This unfolding, furthermore, never stops. Sacramental moments and religious professions are over quickly; living them out takes a lifetime.

Thus vocational awareness unfolds in at least three moments. First, there needs to be a compassionate, contemplative seeing of what is going on in the world. Second, the one being called comes to see that human beings belong, not to themselves (nor to their shepherds), but to the Lord. Finally, an ecclesial sensibility is imprinted on the mind and heart of the one called. The surest way out of suspicion, estrangement, and alienation is life with the People of God.

**Initiative and response**

The theme of Benedict XVI’s message is “faith in the divine initiative—the human response.” In other words, when thinking about vocation the starting point is always God’s call, and I have tried to explain that frequently we hear the call by paying attention to the world. The divine call is always mediated in some way. It can come through contact with the poor, through friendships, through reading about the lives of the saints, or through the faith, simplicity of life, and apostolic zeal of a deacon, a priest, a religious, or another minister of the gospel. The call can come from a combination of all of these. In the end, however, what the Lord is inviting us to notice and internalize is the hunger that men and women have for the bread of life. Human lives become broken and need to be healed; the community of faith needs a shepherd. Or to vary the image, the nets are waiting for apostles to cast them. Benedict refers to this as “the mission of salvation.”

Christian communities know how much they depend upon ministers of the gospel, and the ministries they exercise—corresponding to the community’s needs—come in many forms.
The foremost prerequisite for church ministry, of course, is the minister’s prayerful union with God and his people. As it deepens and pervades a person’s life, this union purifies and transforms us; it leads to the dying to self that Jesus spoke of and which came to fullest expression on the Cross. Each day the grain of wheat falls to the ground again, and it dies (John 12:24). Ministry is going to be fruitful to the extent that we have “the same attitude of mind Christ Jesus had” (Phil 2:5), who emptied himself and took the form of a servant.

Paul wrote about the variety of gifts that the Spirit gives to the Church (1 Cor 12:1-11), and many of these are clearly ministries. Whether we think of priesthood, the permanent diaconate, spiritual direction, chaplaincy, catechizing, evangelization, or directly working with refugees, the poor, or the sick, there is wrapped up in each of these forms of service a sense of being called by God, a call which is inseparable from a sharp awareness that these people belong to us and we to them. Consecrated life, I believe, follows a similar pattern. No matter what the apostolic work of a particular religious community is, no one is called to religious life purely for the sake of a private pursuit of perfection—or to escape the world. Religious life finds its home in the Church, and the Church expects that the various forms of religious life will contribute to a deeper understanding of the universal call to holiness, “the great plan of love and salvation that God has for every man and woman and for the whole of humanity.” In this sense, religious life as a particular form of evangelical witness is a spiritual ministry.

We embrace consecrated life because we believe that God has called us to it. But since the life of the vows is patterned after key features of the life of Jesus, we need to keep reminding ourselves that the pattern of Jesus’ life emerged from
his commitment to the reign of God, that is, to what God was doing on behalf of his people. Apart from an enduring love for God’s people, the life of the vows would wither. Jesus did not live for himself but for the Father—and for the men and women of Israel, for whom he had come (Mark 1:38). Religious indeed live for Jesus and in relationship to him, yet the Jesus of our faith is also the ecclesial Jesus—the Jesus who abides with his disciples until the end of the age (Matt 28:20).

The centrality of Eucharist, the importance of priesthood

The annual messages for the World Day of Prayer for Vocations generally follow a template. Something will be said about priesthood and the consecrated life, of course, and they will include a particular word about Eucharist. Occasionally they might mention the connection between baptismal grace and a developing awareness of vocation. In his message “Putting out into Deep Water” four years ago, for example, John Paul II spoke of Christian marriage as a vocation. The annual messages conclude with several paragraphs about Mary since the dynamic of divine call and free, joyful, human response is played out so wonderfully in the scene of the Annunciation. At the end of this year’s message, for instance, the Pope writes that Mary is “especially the mother of priests and consecrated persons.” He then adds, “I want to entrust to her all those who are aware of God’s call to set out on the road to ministerial priesthood or consecrated life.” Given this focus at the end of the letter, I would like to reflect for a moment on priesthood.

To be a priest is to have both a role in the Church and a particular way of identifying with the Jesus of the gospels. Of all the things a priest does, presiding at the Eucharist best expresses who he is. All Christians are disciples. All are witnesses to the risen Lord and share responsibility to proclaim
the gospel by the way that they live. All are called to imitate the attitude and response of the Good Samaritan before the neighbor in need. In other words, the Church expects all of us to be faithful to our baptismal promises. And implicit in those promises is our commitment to participate regularly and wholeheartedly in the Eucharistic liturgy.

The role of the priest during Mass hardly means that he participates in the Eucharistic mystery at a deeper level than anyone else in the community. Mindfulness of the Lord’s real presence does not come more easily to him because of his liturgical role. And when the Spirit comes upon the gifts of bread and wine to make them holy, the Spirit is doing so in response to the faith and the prayer of the People of God. As Saint Augustine realized centuries ago, if this were not the case, then the people at worship could never be certain that the gifts had been sanctified. Some ministers, Augustine knew too well, were not living by faith. The validity of the sacrament, mercifully, does not hinge upon the holiness of the minister!

Nevertheless, when the Eucharistic mystery penetrates the heart, mind and everyday life of a priest, his spiritual identity changes. Over time, it can change immensely. The Pope touches on this in the seventh paragraph of his message. “The awareness of being saved by the love of Christ . . . cannot but arouse within [priests] a trusting self-abandonment to Christ who gave his life for us. . . . [T]he one who is ‘called’ voluntarily leaves everything and submits himself to the teaching of the divine Master.”

Three points in what Benedict says stand out. First, there is the priest’s awareness of just how much he has been loved. Second, there is the awareness that the priest does not choose Christ; it is Christ who chooses him. And third, there is the
awareness that each day involves a leaving, a brand new following, and a readiness to learn from Jesus.

Now, these moments do not stay encapsulated. The Spirit does not give its gifts for the sole benefit and consolation of individuals. The holiness of a person’s life is above all a sign that the Spirit is at work, not just for the person’s own individual good but for the good of all the Church. Thus the priest’s experience of being loved has to be shared; it wants others to know God’s love just as really, just as deeply. Second, his awareness of being chosen is not supposed to set him apart from everyone else in the community. He is chosen, after all, precisely so that he can stand with his people and help them mature in their own relationship with Christ.

Finally, the voluntary leaving of all things is the gospel’s way of talking about inner freedom. But such freedom, pursued for its own sake, could lead to narcissism. The reason one leaves everything behind is to be able to walk with Christ unencumbered and to serve his people. For a priest, sharing in the Eucharist becomes the supreme expression of being loved, of being with, and of being for. And his ministry is most fruitful when the communities he serves are growing in their sense of having been loved by God, of needing and wanting to live in the company of other believers, and of feeling both called and sent by the risen Lord as his witnesses before the world. The priest has an indispensable role to play in the formation and cultivation of a Eucharistic people. The joy and consolation he experiences have nothing to do with being singled out and placed above everybody else, but have everything to do with accompanying others as they grow in the Spirit of Christ.

I think here of Moses’ conversation with God in Exodus 33. “Remember,” Moses reminds the Lord, “that this nation is
your people.” And again: “How will anyone know that you are pleased with me and with your people unless you go with us? What else will distinguish me and your people from all the other people on the face of the earth?” Moses’ concern for the people throughout the entire wilderness experience is striking, even moving. God responds, “My presence will go with you” and “I will do the very thing you have asked” (Ex 33:14, 17). “My presence will go with you”: for a priest, this text holds special meaning. Priests serve their communities in a variety of ways, but central to their understanding of who they are is this: they know themselves called to be ministers of the real presence of the risen Jesus, the Lord who accompanies his people as they make their way through history. Not only do they know this; but this knowledge also finds confirmation in their experience. The experience of being close to his people in every human circumstance imaginable creates the heart of a good shepherd—the David that God promised to send (Ezek 34:23-24).

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