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What does it take to awaken desire?

A reflection on Benedict XVI’s message for the 47th World Day of Prayer for Vocations

An overview of the letter’s contents

The theme of this year’s message is the power of witness to awaken vocations to ordained ministry and religious life. Three elements to be found in every vocation, the Pope explains, are friendship with Christ, the complete giving of oneself to God, and living a life of communion. Concretely, the first element is about our being clearly perceived by others as prayerful women and men. The second is about our being unreservedly dedicated to serving God’s people. And the third is about our being fully taken over by Jesus’ prayer “that all of them may be one” (John 17:21). The desire for communion—the unity that God wills for the human race—so penetrates our thinking and acting that we practically embody the mystery of reconciliation and forgiveness, and our daily life shows it.

Religious and ordained ministers alike do their best “to witness to the whole gift of self to God.” For religious, community life should reflect the idealized Christian existence we see in the Acts of the Apostles and which attracted the attention and affection of many in the gentile world. For those in ordained ministry, their spirit of charity, collaboration and fraternity should send a clear signal about the beauty and possibility of this way of life. Not all priests are religious, and not all religious are priests. Nevertheless, there is considerable overlapping in terms of the spiritual ideals they have embraced. This overlapping occurs because we all share the same baptism,
the primordial Christian consecration for being the light of the world and the salt of the earth.

What makes priesthood distinctive and attractive? To answer this question the Pope draws upon John Paul II’s 1992 Apostolic Exhortation Pastores dabo vobis (“I will give you shepherds”): “The very life of priests, their unconditional dedication to God’s flock, their witness of loving service to the Lord and to his Church—a witness marked by free acceptance of the cross in the spirit of hope and Easter joy—their fraternal unity and zeal for the evangelization of the world are the first and most convincing factor in the growth of vocations.” In writing this sentence, John Paul II had in mind Vatican II’s Decree on Priestly Formation: “All priests especially are to manifest an apostolic zeal in fostering vocations and are to attract the interest of youths to the priesthood by their own life lived in a humble and industrious manner and in a happy spirit as well as by mutual priestly charity and fraternal sharing of labor” (Optatam totius, 2).

For those in consecrated life, the distinguishing feature of their lives might well be that they are “signs of contradiction.” To the extent that the prevailing culture is characterized by individualism, consumerism, and acquiring and holding on to privilege, then religious life runs against these cultural currents. Of course, in this sense Christian existence itself ought to be a sign of contradiction, and not just consecrated life. But consecrated life intensifies this sign, and as a sign it reminds the whole church of the elementary vocation that comes with baptism.

Young people who are searching for their own deepest identity will find the life of the vows immensely clarifying and attractive. Religious men and women witness to “the absolute
primacy of God” in human life and in human history. They develop a new self as a result of their dying and rising, continuously, with Christ. In this sense, they become masters of renunciation. For them, life is not about clinging but about letting go. This letting-go is not an end in itself, however. Evangelical freedom means being able to be with Jesus in whatever situations, circumstances, or physical conditions he chooses to be.

The faces of God-centered living

The Pope’s message is brief and the points it makes will sound familiar to anyone who has followed these annual letters for Good Shepherd Sunday. The power of example to awaken vocational awareness cannot be emphasized enough. Sometimes this awakening happens through stories, like reading the lives of the saints; sometimes it results from personal contact. And frequently it’s a combination of both. Selflessness inspires. Spirit-filled living is compelling. Prayerfulness and familiarity with God are indispensable, constitutive elements of the priest’s soul as well as the souls of women and men in consecrated life. So also a sense of being called by God, a sense of urgency for the gospel to be proclaimed and take root in human lives, and above all a tireless concern for the most vulnerable of God’s people.

In addition to the witness given by religious and priests themselves, however, another sort of witness also plays a major role in the awakening and sustaining of vocational awareness. I remember when I was growing up going to daily Mass and relishing the immediate peace and silence of the darkened church. There were always others in the church—grown-ups—kneeling before the Mary altar, or quietly in a pew with rosary beads or prayer book, or slowly making the Stations of the
Cross. What impressed me then was the faith and devotion—so evident, so humble, so ordinary—of the others in the church. I didn’t know very much about priests and how they lived, apart from their saying Mass and hearing confessions on Saturday afternoons. But I did observe the piety of the people, and at some place in my imagination a line was being drawn between their faith and the priest at the altar. Yet they were in church, not because of the priest, but because of the Eucharistic mystery; and he was a servant of that mystery. Some priests rushed; others celebrated Mass slowly. What did not change, however, was the faith that brought people those people to church, morning after morning, rain or shine.

In the end, the picture that stays with me is not that of the priest at the altar or in the confessional, or at any of the other sacramental occasions. My sharper and weightier memories are those of a priest kneeling in the pews, like everyone else, saying a rosary or reading the Liturgy of the Hours. The witness of believers at prayer is powerful. Years later, many years after ordination, nothing supports and sustains my own vocational awareness more than coming to church and seeing everyday faces in silent, earnest prayer.

**Unconditional dedication to the Lord’s flock**

The Pope writes that from the capacity to give oneself wholly and completely to God there flows the capacity to give oneself to God’s people. The consolation that confirms the rightness of such self-giving is the joy and satisfaction that come from accompanying others along their journey of faith. The ideas here need to be pondered.

The desire to serve is the other side of love—of experiencing ourselves as loved by God and as wanting to respond to divine love in real, concrete ways. In gospel terms,
our love for God first manifests itself in the desire to follow and imitate Jesus: this is our initial response. But what does following and imitating Jesus mean? Above all, it means service, and perhaps the most dramatic remembrance and sacrament of service is that of Jesus washing the feet of his companions. I think of this scene from John 13 as a “sacrament” because it points to and sums up the whole of his life: the teaching, the healing, the driving out of demons, the outreach to people who had lost their way, the prophetic stance against the pursuit of privilege and power, and ultimately his death.

Another text that comes to mind is that of Isaiah 53:4, “Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows.” Matthew quotes this text because it shed light on the deeper meaning of what Jesus was doing: “When evening came, many who were demon-possessed were brought to him, and he drove out the spirits with a word, and healed all the sick. This was to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet Isaiah” (Matt 8:16-17). For Matthew, to serve is to step into the lives of those who are heavily burdened and to accompany them.

In both of these texts—the foot-washing scene from John, the scene of healing in Matthew—we have to imagine that Jesus’ service of others was not undertaken as an act of penance. What he did, he did not just willingly but also joyously, because he was impelled by love.

Consecration and service

The close connection that Christians have detected between love of God and love of neighbor goes back at least to the first letter of John, not to mention Jesus’ answer to the scribe about the greatest commandment (Mk 12:28-31); but the point needs to be understood carefully. We do not simply prove that we love God by the way we love our neighbor, for loving
God is not a matter of having to prove something. Rather, to experience God—to have a relationship with God—is to find ourselves drawn into the company of others, especially those in need. And conversely, in the experience of accompanying others and serving them people of faith can make the discovery that they have been living and walking in the presence of God. To love others is to know God, and to love God is to know oneself as belonging to others. For this reason, the self-gift to God leads right away into a giving of oneself to others.

Once again, witness is powerful. I remember the sisters who taught us in grammar school, and the many religious I’ve met who have been engaged in other ministries: from giving catechetical instruction and baking bread for the poor to attending to prisoners and caring for those left to die on the street. There is the witness of pastors concerned for families: the readiness of priests to listen to people in distress and to help those in need—immigrants, fathers who have lost jobs, single mothers, addicts. And we see their dedication to building communities of faith. In so many ways such good people awakened vocational awareness. Yet here, too, the cloud of witnesses includes more than priests and religious.

The witness of service and loving commitment started, for most of us, in our own homes. But as time goes by we notice in others what we first felt in our parents, sometimes to a surprising, exceptional degree. The example of friends and neighbors supporting one another in moments of crisis or loss, the example of people working generously and quietly in parish communities, stories bordering on the heroic about people who have taken a stand with the poor: all of this creates a climate in which the young Samuels among us can learn to recognize the sound of the Lord’s voice. The call comes, ultimately, from
God; but the God who speaks usually has some of the features of the people in our lives who create the culture of service and faith.

“Come and see,” what?

Reflecting on the role of witness makes me wonder about what might turn young people away from ordained ministry and religious life. An obvious reason would be a cultural ethos put off by gospel values. In this case, the fault lies with the prevailing cultural attitudes, not with the religious institutions themselves. We live in a culture, after all, in which the non-existence of God is quite thinkable for many people.

But the fault might also lie with a certain negative witness on the part of ordained ministers and religious communities. In the Fourth Gospel, Jesus answered the two disciples who asked him where he was staying, “Come and you will see.” And shortly afterwards Philip told Nathanael, “Come and see” (John 1:39, 46). But suppose they came and saw nothing that excited their imaginations. The Pope speaks of priests who are “lonely and sad” (and we could add “exhausted, over-extended and over-worked”). Would such a sight be likely to attract any healthy young person? Or suppose seekers of today came and found religious and priests more invested in respectability, recognition, and advancement than in accompanying the crucified ones of this world. Would there be anything really to see and imagine? What sort of vain desires would such a sight awaken? “Blessed are you,” Jesus said, “when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me” (Matt 5:11). How many of us would welcome this sort of blessing? And yet this is exactly what is likely to happen when, in order to be with Jesus, one elects to walk with the throwaways of the world.
And then there is always the danger that consecrated life and ordained ministry might become a refuge for individuals who are frightened by the winds of religious and social change. For just as there is a true consolation that comes from the Holy Spirit, there is also a false consolation born of a very different spirit. People can turn either to the institutional church or to religious communities because they think that there they will find sanctuary against the social, cultural, and spiritual instability of the time. But here is where we may need to meditate longer on the phrase “sign of contradiction,” and consider Jesus’ words: “Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head” (Luke 9:58). The gospel’s remedy for insecurity is, paradoxically, to let go of the desire for anything short of God. As the psalmist said: “Find rest, O my soul, in God alone; my hope comes from him. / He alone is my rock and my salvation; he is my fortress, I will not be shaken.” (Ps 62:5-7)

In the end, the only reason to follow Jesus is to learn from him and allow him to reshape our hearts, and by doing so, to be with and to love the people of God the way Jesus did, namely, as one who serves. No other consolation will sustain a vocation over a lifetime.

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