Vocations and the Local Church:

Two points in the message for the 48th World Day of Prayer for Vocations caught my attention. The first comes in the sentence: “The Lord does not fail to call people at every stage of life to share in his mission and to serve the Church in the ordained ministry and in the consecrated life.” The second point comes up towards the end of the Message: “every moment in the life of the Church community... can be a precious opportunity for awakening in the People of God, and in particular in children and young people, a sense of belonging to the Church...”

With respect to the first point, the Pope seems to be telling us that, while we need to cultivate vocational awareness among children and teenagers, vocational awareness can mature over the course of a lifetime. The interior life has its seasons. Not just young adults, but people in middle age and older might find themselves being nudged by the Spirit toward service either as ordained ministers or as vowed religious. With respect to the second point, this movement of the Spirit is very much tied up with “a sense of belonging to the Church.” The greater the feeling of belonging, the stronger grows the impulse to serve and to lead a more evangelical life.

The Message confines its attention to priesthood and religious life as the principal vocational forms. Yet when I think about the scriptural texts usually cited in a reflection on vocations—the calling of the fishermen (Matt 4:18-22), for example, or the selection of the Twelve (Luke 6:12-13)—I am minded that these gospel scenes are not about invitations to
consecrated life or ordained ministry. They were calls to join Jesus in his mission to proclaim the kingdom, to heal, and to drive out unclean spirits (Matt 10:7-8). And then I think of something else. When Jesus “called his closest associates to proclaim the kingdom of God,” he sent them off in pairs: “After this the Lord appointed seventy others and sent them on ahead of him in pairs to every town and place where he himself intended to go” (Luke 10:1). Some of the pairs might have been couples. Saint Paul informs us that when the apostles went on mission, they were accompanied by their wives (1 Cor 9:5).

What grounds and sustains vocational awareness, then, should be a sense of mission. Vocation means having a deeply felt conviction about being sent, about being needed, about having a role to play in the saving work of Christ. To be on mission means facing the world with a sense of urgency: “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few” (Luke 10:2). Unless laborers go into the fields immediately, the crop is going to spoil. What will we do to rescue it?

Priesthood and religious life are charismatic expressions of life as mission, of imagination on the move. They are not the only expressions, but they are the two expressions that feature in this year’s Message.

**Exemplary pastors**

Shortly before I received a copy of “Promoting Vocations in the Local Church” I was reading The New York Times obituary of Samuel Ruiz, the retired bishop of Chiapas, Mexico. Bishop Ruiz was a pastor deeply wedded to his people, who were largely the poor, indigenous Mayans of Chiapas. Over the years he had ordained an astonishing 300 married, permanent deacons to serve the communities of his local church. Reading this story in light of the Pope’s Message, I
could not help but think that what Bishop Ruiz had done was a remarkable sign of the vitality of the local church, as well as an extraordinary answer to a local church’s prayer for vocations. The Lord of the harvest may surprise us yet, if our prayer is earnest, and if the people who are praying sense that they belong to the Church and that the Church belongs to them.

But the story of Bishop Ruiz accompanying and defending the Mayans of Mexico, like the memory of Oscar Romero walking with and standing up for the poor of El Salvador, or Leonidas Proaño alongside the indigenous of Ecuador, also makes me think of how impoverished, disenfranchised people came to feel that they really belonged to the local church. They belonged because their bishops enabled them to trust that they indeed were the local church.

We promote vocations most effectively, the Pope reminds us with a quotation from Vatican II, by exercising “a fully Christian life.” Lived example is key. Leading a fully Christian life naturally entails “a genuine and affectionate friendship with the Lord” and learning “to listen attentively and fruitfully to the word of God.”

But following Christ is going to transform our lives only insofar as the example Jesus left us challenges us to leave the comfort and security of what is most familiar and to take the risk of stepping into the unknown. We could find ourselves, like the disciples at Levi’s house, in bad company. We could regularly find ourselves in danger. The disciples who readily agreed to set sail with Jesus were not counting on nearly drowning in a storm. They must have been terrified when, on reaching shore with him, they ran into someone so riddled with demons that he had become in effect a monster. There are risks. We take those risks, at the outset, because we want to be with
Jesus. We take them, later in life, because, like Jesus, we want to be with his people. That’s what those bishops did.

The Pope’s Message addresses the bishops of the world. He writes: “I address a particular word to you, my dear brother Bishops. . . . The Lord needs you to cooperate with him in ensuring that his call reaches the hearts of those whom he has chosen.” Cooperating with the Lord goes beyond the proper management of a diocesan office of vocations, of course. Bishops, like priests, promote vocations best when they exercise lives that are fully like the life that Jesus led. And that leads into accompanying our people—together with the risks that come with associating with the least ones, whether the Mayans of Chiapas, the campesinos of El Salvador, the indigenous of Ecuador, or migrant workers, refugees, and undocumented families in our own country. When the least ones are made to feel that they belong, perhaps that’s when mission becomes contagious and vocations start to germinate.

Few signs are so attractive, so compelling, as the example of the Church’s pastors courageously living the Christian mission. I remember the inspiration and pride many of us in seminary training or in priestly ministry drew when the U.S. bishops issued their pastoral letters *The Challenge of Peace* (1983) and *Economic Justice for All* (1986). I think back to the 1960s and Paul Hallinan’s dedication to civil rights and social justice as archbishop of Atlanta. While I do not know whether those letters or the archbishop’s witness drew vocations, they certainly helped to sustain them by providing clear, prophetic statements about where the Lord’s call can take us.
Vocational realism

Vocation often has an unglamorous, unromantic side, whether we’re talking about ordained ministry, religious life, or marriage. And some vocational situations can be a lot more challenging than others. In a letter written to a Maryknoll sister who was considering leaving her community and joining the Catholic Worker, Dorothy Day counseled the sister not to be hasty. “When you say you are going to join us, I can only say that within a very short time after you do that you will be most disillusioned with us.” After urging her to wait a year before making a decision, Dorothy continued: “I warn you, you know nothing of our work when you announce that you will join us (after traveling for a time!) and if you do come to stay with us you will find nothing to satisfy you here. . . . If I, with long experience (I am 67), find the work utterly frustrating and full of most humiliating failures, I do not know how you could stand it.”

Language about dropping one’s nets and answering Jesus’ “Come follow me,” putting out into the deep, imitating the example of the Good Shepherd, or accompanying the Lord on mission sounds exciting. But there is a spiritual messiness to vocation, too, and we need to be realistic about that. There may be moments when one wonders whether the path taken is ultimately the “right” one, as in the case of the sister that Dorothy Day was writing to. Or there may be moments when we wonder whether we’ve truly accomplished anything of lasting value—the “most humiliating failures,” that Dorothy speaks of. The fields may have looked ripe, but the harvest could wind up looking pretty meager, even when we’ve labored in them for years.
None of us should undertake the path of discipleship with the expectation that we will behave more responsibly and faithfully than the Twelve themselves, that we will learn faster than they did, or that we will not make the same mistakes, or that we can finish the journey without having to hear the Lord’s call a second or a third time—and probably even more often than that! It’s hard to contemplate all of what might lie ahead as one is starting out. Those who are going to encourage young people to consider priesthood or religious life have to be honest about what can happen when disciples enroll in the school of the Spirit.

**Not just what we do, but what we are**

Priests and religious undertake many good works, but that is not all that the Lord calls to do. We also try to lead others into “constant contact with the living God.” We cannot, however, guide people in territory where we ourselves have not yet set foot. Even Jesus would have been unable to assist those wrestling with the demons that attack one’s faith and trust in God if he had not gone through the testing first, as the Letter to the Hebrews reminds us.

Perhaps, as Mark says, the Spirit “drove” Jesus into the wilderness (Mark 1:12). Or perhaps, as Luke says, the Spirit simply “led” him there (Luke 4:1). Yet whether driven or led, the wilderness experience was both unavoidable and necessary. It was unavoidable because, after the charismatic moment of the Spirit’s descent into a person’s life, the response needs proving or testing. Is the call truly from God, and can this God be trusted to the end?

And the wilderness experience was necessary. How could Jesus call others to such trust if he never faced the countless ways the demon—and the world—tries to steal the
word sown in our hearts? Jesus may have been speaking from experience when he said, “When they hear, Satan immediately comes and takes away the word that is sown in them” (Mark 4:15). That is what Satan tried to do with Jesus. As a result, Jesus was able to sympathize with others and accompany them as they went through the same experience. Young people are understandably attracted by people doing good works, and all the more so if those works are heroic. But maybe it’s not so much the works themselves as the courage and the faith of those who do them that really catches a young person’s imagination. In the end, it’s not the remembrance of Jesus’ works that sustains us—the healing, the teaching, the spending time with people, the prophetic boldness. What sustains us is the desire to know God the way he did and our confidence that this prayer is gradually being answered.

“I chose you”

A scriptural text that might be very appropriate for a letter on vocations is Jesus’ words “You did not choose me but I chose you” (John 15:16). These words were not spoken to the disciples at the beginning of their life with Jesus, but several years later. And they were words that would need to be remembered and pondered carefully many times in the years that followed. In ways that we probably could never understand at the outset, we don’t choose the vocation. The vocation, rather, chooses us. “But I chose you.” It sounds so simple, so clear at the beginning, no matter how long the discernment might take. Yet as life moves along, Jesus’ words become increasingly reassuring, consoling, and necessary to hear.

Vocations do not always assume fixed, readily identifiable forms, as when we think of “priesthood,” “consecrated life,” “permanent diaconate,” or “Christian
marriage.” It comes as no surprise that, as we get older, the contemplative side of our nature often becomes more pronounced, with a corresponding desire to pray more and talk less. Our affections become more chaste, our wants become leaner, our sense of sharing the brokenness of the world more acute. We are less distracted by the attractiveness of material things, and increasingly disposed to accept what we cannot change and to trust the providence that brought us to where we are. The evangelical ideals of chastity, poverty, and obedience infiltrate our interior life, even without our thinking about them.

When the Pope writes about people “at every stage of life” sharing in the mission of Christ and sometimes being called to consecrated life, he may be touching upon the dynamic nature of Christian spirituality. Those who belong to the Church and stay faithful to their baptismal commitment become more and more “religious.” Although they do not pronounce vows, everything about them demonstrates an orientation towards evangelical living. They may not live in monasteries, convents, or religious houses, but they carry an everyday holiness into the world. This, too, is the flowering of vocation.

[2011]