37. 

Vocation as a Particular Reflection of God’s Love

“God is love,” writes the author of 1 John, “and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them” (1 Jn 4:16). The story of each human life, like the story of the universe itself, begins with God’s love. This is the indispensable first principle of our faith. It is also the starting point of the Holy Father’s message for the 49th World Day of Prayer for Vocations.

Vocations, like every gift, begin and end in the love that God has for the world. “The discovery of this reality,” he writes, “is what truly and profoundly changes our lives.” In other words, the process of conversion that sustains life in the Spirit begins the first moment we realize that we have been loved with a mercy and a tenderness that go beyond all human imagining. Each of our inner senses—the senses of the human spirit—is awakened. We start to feel the presence of the transcendent mystery from which we come and which surrounds us on every side. The Pope recalls the memorable words of Saint Augustine in the Confessions: “You shouted,” “You flashed,” “You breathed,” “I have tasted,” “You touched.” The mind may give its assent to the proposition that we have been created, but it can take a long time to notice the One who does the creating. Once Augustine’s mind was seized by love, he was finally ready to understand.

Love’s effect

The experience of God’s love is not without consequence; it leaves an imprint and calls for a response. Jesus instructed his disciples, “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly
Father is perfect” (Matt 5:48). But what does such perfection mean? What does it entail? The Pope answers: “The high standard of the Christian life consists in loving ‘as’ God loves; with a love that is shown in the total, faithful, and fruitful gift of self.” I don’t think he means that we are called to imitate God; that would be impossible. He means, I think, that love is what God is. Each time that we love, whether in the rare moments of heroic self-sacrifice or in the countless simple, everyday ways, we do what God does; we are, albeit very incompletely and imperfectly, what God is. Eventually, we become what we do, even as we “do” or perform what we are. As the Scripture says: “those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them.” We are never more truly ourselves than when we love, and yet the love that is in us, the love that we bring to expression, is ultimately not us; it is God.

For this reason, whenever anyone of us loves another, what the other experiences from us is not just our love, but God’s own love for them. These are not two loves—human love and divine love. There is only one love, and it is divine; it simply has two expressions, as the Pope writes: “two expressions of the one divine love.”

**Love and vocation**

So, what happens in the case of vocations? What does love have to do with hearing and seeing and tasting and feeling the God who loves us? Or, to make the point a bit more forcefully, what happens when someone hears and answers the God “who so loved the world” (Jn 3:16)? The answer is simple: having experienced themselves as deeply and totally loved by God, some will be moved by the Spirit to want to bring others to share the same experience.
“Love of God, which priests and consecrated persons are called to mirror, however imperfectly,” the Pope explains, “is the motivation for answering the Lord’s call to special consecration through priestly ordination or the profession of the evangelical counsels.” This same love of God, of course, is what leads other disciples to become spiritual directors, hospital chaplains, religious educators, permanent deacons, and more. The one who has known God’s love feels the need to respond, and the quintessential response to divine love is the love we want to give to others.

The message continues: “The other practical expression of love, that towards our neighbor, and especially those who suffer and are in greatest need, is the decisive impulse that leads the priest and the consecrated person to be a builder of communion between people and a sower of hope. The relationship of consecrated persons, and especially of the priest, to the Christian community is vital and becomes a fundamental expression of their affectivity.” Here, I believe, we are looking at the charismatic and prophetic nature of vocation.

In a general way, every Christian life involves vocation, since vocation is a consequence of our baptismal immersion in the dying and rising of Christ. The heavenly voice that set Jesus apart when he was in the Jordan River is the same voice that calls to each of us, not only at the moment of our baptism, but at every moment of our lives. For all of us, the tale of our lives is really a story about the unfolding of a vocation. Rightly understood, the baptismal promises cannot be made more complete or more perfect, since they direct us towards a perfect love of God. As the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (Lumen Gentium) tells us: “all the faithful of Christ of whatever rank or status, are called to the fullness of the Christian life and
to the perfection of charity” (no. 40). The Great Commandment becomes the cornerstone of our lives, directing our minds, our hearts, our energies, our very souls (Deut 6:4-5). It is the same commandment that directed Jesus throughout his life. He didn’t need two seconds to reply to the scribe’s question about which commandment was the first of all (Mk 12:28-30). Then, adding a second about loving one’s neighbor, he bundled them together as a single commandment (Mk 12:31).

**Building community, accompanying the poor**

The phrases which I set in italics “especially those who suffer and are in greatest need” and “becomes a fundamental expression of their affectivity” draw our attention to two central characteristics of vocational awareness. These characteristics set the vocation of priests and religious in a light slightly different from the call to holiness that comes to all of us by virtue of our baptism.

Priests and religious are, the Pope says, builders of communion and sowers of hope. Yet building communion and sowing hope extend beyond the believing community to embrace the world. For God’s love (which is the impulse behind every vocation) is without boundaries. Religious and priests carry the world in their hearts. Their lives are marked by “a particular intensity” and by “purity of heart.” Their experience of God’s love brings the whole world closer. They are not only deeply aware that God loves; they are also acutely mindful of what God loves. Their lives are marked by clarity of vision and singleness of purpose.

To know God is to find oneself in communion with others who have likewise experienced divine love. That all human beings have the potential to experience this love and thus to be drawn into communion is the ground of hope. The
world \textit{can} be one; prophets dare to dream about all the peoples of the earth ascending God’s holy mountain.

As carriers of this vision, priests and religious have a distinctive relationship with the believing community. Their love for the Church, their prayer for the Church, and their attentiveness to the deeper needs of the human spirit reflect the Lord’s own love and care for his people. They understand that the world’s future hinges upon whether or not loyalty to one’s nation, one’s ethnic group, one’s family, or one’s social class can be transformed or even transcended by the desire for communion and the persistent hope that keeps this desire alive. So long as human beings remain locked into these narrow, regional identities, they will be unable to imagine the larger picture of a world made whole. Priests and religious have glimpsed this larger picture, much the way prophets do. That larger picture shapes and defines who they are. But how do they arrive at that picture? What reformat\-\textit{s} their imagination so that their inner eye can see the new heavens and the new earth of which Isaiah spoke?

Perhaps the answer to this question lies in the Pope’s words “especially those who suffer and are in greatest need.” Vocational awareness can be prompted by many things: inspiring stories, exemplary lives, courageous witness, faith-filled preaching, intense spiritual thirst, direct invitation, or even being seduced by God’s word, the way Jeremiah was. But many of us have discovered that vocational awareness is prompted and sustained most effectively by contact with “those who suffer and are in greatest need.” Human needs and human suffering take many forms, as we know. Yet there is something about contact with the poor that sets this particular experience apart.
The expression “the preferential option for the poor” is rooted in the experience of a Church that knows and accompanies women and men who are at the bottom. They are the world’s refugees, those fleeing hunger and civil war, immigrants, exploited workers, defenseless women and children, the abandoned, the homeless, those who have no family or friends to turn to, the excluded, the voiceless—in a word, the ones whom Scripture simply names “the poor.” They are the ones who would have been the primary hearers of Jesus’ proclamation that the kingdom of God is at hand. And they can be encountered all over the globe. To meet them is to be drawn to give that “practical expression of love” of which the Pope speaks. We want to do in our day what Jesus did in his: to lift away burdens, to drive out demons, to heal wounded lives, and to set captives free. Gospel scenes of Jesus among his people claim our imagination, and inwardly we follow Jesus as he walks with them. The line from Isaiah that Matthew cites after describing a day in the ministry captures the “practical expression of love”: “He took our infirmities and bore our diseases” (Mt 8:17).

Eucharist, love of God’s word in Scripture, and unceasing prayer are essential for sustaining vocational awareness over the long haul, as the Pope states. But many of us have discovered that regular immersion in the lives and fortunes of the poor has helped us to read and relish Scripture in new ways. It has brought greater meaning and depth to our celebrations of the Eucharist. And it has taught us fresh lessons about the nature and fruits of prayer.

Priests and religious know that their vocation is truly a gift from God, a particular expression of God’s love. They also know that vocations are not given for the benefit of the
individual religious or priest, but for the benefit of the believing community and the wider world in which this community lives. They understand, humbly, that in and through them God’s own eternal love for the world is being revealed afresh. It is this mystery to which their lives always point, however inadequately and incompletely. Yet where would the Church and where would the world be without them?