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“along the paths of ordinary life”: A reflection on Pope Francis’ message for the 51st World Day of Prayer for Vocations

“Today, too,” Pope Francis writes, “Jesus lives and walks along the paths of ordinary life in order to draw near to everyone, beginning with the least, and to heal us of our infirmities and illnesses.” Francis is picking up on the gospel verse that introduces this year’s letter: “Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and curing every disease and sickness” (Matt 9:35). Earlier, in recounting the call of the first disciples, Matthew spoke of Jesus going back to Galilee and making his home “in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulon and Naphtali.” He cites this text because Isaiah had spoken of the “road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles” (Matt 4:12-15). The disciples then accompanied Jesus throughout Galilee as he taught in synagogues and cured “every disease and every sickness among the people.”

Jesus would not have been able to get very far in his mission without companions; that much is clear. And the mission would not have continued over time if others had not heard the same call and responded with as much energy and enthusiasm as Peter and Andrew, James and John. But what is just as remarkable is how Jesus and his followers took to the road. Whoever else was going to join them would be found along the paths of ordinary life.
“You are God’s field”

The Pope comments on the words of Jesus “the harvest is plentiful.” If there is a field to be harvested, then someone must have been tending it; that someone has to be God. The field, he says, is humanity; it is us. So, since we are the harvest, then what is it about us that is so precious in God’s sight, so full of promise? Is it our capacity for holiness, for spiritual greatness? Is it our searching hearts, our longing for life and for love? Is it our heart’s potential, the power of our imagination to envision a world without fear and division? If human beings are the field waiting to be harvested, then what exactly is it that makes us so good and desirable in God’s eyes? Or maybe the Pope is suggesting that the very moment when we realize how much God loves us puts us on the path to holiness and that this experience makes communion with others possible. Paul told the Corinthians, “You are God’s field.” Once we realize what we are, Francis says, three prayerful moments follow: wonder over the fact that God loves us so deeply, gratitude for that love so freely given, and adoration that expresses itself in the way we live. Wonder, gratitude, and adoration are what sustain vocations over a lifetime and keep them fresh.

Jesus lives and walks along the paths of ordinary life in order to draw near to everyone, beginning with the least. I think often about the difference between John the Baptist and Jesus. John appears to have localized his ministry along the Jordan, not far from the wilderness that may have been his home. While crowds were drawn to hear him, the gospels tell us, there seems to be a pronounced stridency to his voice. It is as if John saw humanity falling into one of two groups: either you belonged to the disciplined, spiritually prepared elect, or you belonged to the brood of vipers, the chaff, the ones who would certainly be left
behind, once the Day of the Lord arrived. And the crowds came to him from everywhere.

Jesus, however, is remarkably different. He is not about to break the bruised reed or quench the smoldering wick or wrangle in the streets, as Isaiah would say (Mt 12:19-20). Jesus travels the countryside of Galilee, visiting all its villages and towns. The gospel leaves us with the impression that the people who surrounded Jesus were not the sort of folks John had in mind for the renewed Israel. How else could we explain John’s question as he languished in Herod’s dungeon, “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?” (Mt 11:3) Jesus tried to ease John’s doubt by putting him in mind of Isaiah’s vision—the deaf hear, the blind see, and the lame walk—signs that a people's ancient hope is being fulfilled at last. Then he adds, “and the poor have the good news preached to them” (Mt 11:5). Throughout the gospel story, Jesus is defined by the company he keeps. John apparently had not noticed these signs, perhaps because he was looking in the wrong direction. The wilderness may have been a privileged place to find God, but most human beings live along the paths of ordinary life. Jesus did not find his first disciples in the desert or at a monastery, but in the bustle of the lakefront, where they were working.

**Vocational pathways**

The Pope mentions the three traditional vocational paths—marriage, religious consecration, and priesthood. Each of these paths requires, he writes, “an exodus from oneself.” Each of these paths calls for a letting go of self for the sake of others: we learn to live for them and walk alongside them on “a communal journey.” Whatever the vocational path, we walk still together; we are church. Then, citing John Paul II’s Apostolic Letter *Novo Millennio Ineunte* (2001), he speaks of
“pathways of holiness” and the need for a “training in holiness” that can be “adapted to every person’s need.” The overall dynamic is going to be the same for all of us, namely, to work towards a love of neighbor that is at the same time a love of, and constant search for, God. But there is no such thing as a one-size-fits-all pathway to holiness. The reason for this is that each pathway is personal, that is, each human being’s relationship to God is unique. We do not all experience the divine mystery in exactly the same way.

The vocational paths of which the letter speaks are only paths; each path refers to a particular form of Christian living. It is worth asking, however, at what point “path” (whether ordained ministry, religious life, or marriage) actually becomes “vocation.” Many couples get civilly married, for example, but they would not automatically refer to their marriage as a calling. Sometimes people enter religious life or ordained ministry for reasons that are not altogether clear, or they do so without sufficient freedom, and they wind up leaving. Couples may divorce. Yet many times they discover reasons to remain on the path; they experience a calling. “A vocation flows from the heart of God,” Francis writes. The only reason for staying on the road, in other words, is that we have found God there. The point is worth dwelling on.

The notion of calling can get so caught up with ideas about ministry, service, mission and apostolate—very good ideas—that it is easy to overlook where the pathway is meant to lead. There are innumerable models of holiness, as many models as there are saints. Yet what is common to all of them, if we stop and think about it, is the self-emptying or “exodus from oneself” that makes it possible to live the Great Commandment. Holiness comes from union with God, but there is no union with
God that bypasses the world. A vocation, after all, is not a pathway on a faceless map. Vocations unfold in very particular times and places.

The medieval theologian Hugh of St. Victor wrote: “The man who finds his homeland sweet is still a tender beginner; he to whom every soil is as his native one is already strong; but he is perfect to whom the entire world is as a foreign land. The tender soul has fixed his love on one spot in the world; the strong man has extended his love to all places; the perfect man has extinguished his.”

But Hugh’s historical moment and ours are quite different. This difference becomes very clear when we juxtapose what Hugh wrote with Thomas Merton’s frequently quoted Fourth and Walnut reflection in Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander:

In Louisville, at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, in the center of the shopping district, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all those people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers. It was like waking from a dream of separateness, of spurious self-isolation in a special world, the world of renunciation and supposed holiness. … This sense of liberation from an illusory difference was such a relief and such a joy to me that I almost laughed out loud. … I have the immense joy of being man, a member of a race in which God Himself became incarnate. As if the sorrows and stupidities of the human condition could overwhelm me, now I realize what we all are.

For us, then, the world is not something to flee from but to embrace. And this means that the world that God loves is always with us; our souls do not step out of the world when we
pray, but into its deepest pulse. Vocational spirituality in our
time must take this into account, whether we’re talking about
Christian family life, ordained ministry, or religious life, even
within the walls of a monastic enclosure. The Christian
imagination is poised to take in the world.

Vocation vs. profession

Many of us have grown accustomed to hearing about
being called to religious life, or called to ordained ministry, or
called to marriage; but these are not the only things to which
believers might feel themselves called. I am not thinking of the
many choices in front of us when it comes to professions—
physicians, attorneys, teachers, scientists, accountants, and so
on; or to occupations and trades. Instead, I am thinking of
something more basic than any profession or occupation,
namely, the particular thing that evokes a cry of the heart for a
new heavens and a new earth and which fires us to want to do
something that will make a difference—something we embrace
not because it might be profitable or even personally fulfilling,
but because it holds the possibility of being redemptive.

When I ask what that something might be, a lot comes to
mind. I think of an urgent awakening to care for the
environment, or being drawn to find common ground with those
who practice other religions, or the call to accompany migrants,
refugees and the undocumented, or to work for peace,
disarmament, and reconciliation, or to wrestle with hopelessness
and unbelief. I think of the voices and faces that we cannot
forget because they have lodged in our memory and staked a
claim on our hearts. In the end, it’s usually the people who call:
the homeless, the refugee, the religious other, the estranged,
those paying the price as the world’s climate changes, those
trapped in a spiral of violence. I think of men and women who
want to find God but don’t know where to look, who crave community and connectedness but have no one to point them in the right direction—in gospel terms, sheep without a shepherd. God calls to us through his people. How we respond to their voice is what gives definition and depth to the particular vocational form we eventually choose.

So, perhaps it is not the vocational form itself that attracts us, but what women and men of faith have done with those forms, how they have lived and enfleshed them. That is where vocational beauty lies, and it is the beauty of those lives that bears witness to the truth.

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