I have been writing reflections on the annual vocation messages from the Popes—John Paul, Benedict, and now Francis—for a number of years. Although it was Paul VI who initiated the World Day of Prayer for Vocations, the messages that I found began appearing in 1979. Since I was curious to see how the messages may have changed over the years, I went back and read them. As I was making my way through them, someone called my attention to the remarks of Pope Francis speaking, off-script, to the priests, religious, and permanent deacons of the archdiocese of Naples. Four things that Francis said struck me. “Not having a family, not having children, not having conjugal love, which is so good and beautiful, just to end up arguing with the bishop, with brother priests, with the faithful, and to end up with a sour face: this is not bearing witness.” Addressing the seminarians who were present, he said: “What I would like to say to you is this: if you do not have Jesus at your center, defer your ordination. If you are not sure that Jesus is the center of your life, wait a little, in order to be certain.” With respect to priestly witness he noted the importance of the spirit of poverty. Diocesan priests don’t make this vow, he told them, but they need to have this spirit. And, lastly, “the spirit of prayer is a witness that we see . . . and this witness attracts vocations.”

The annual messages for the World Day of Prayer urge us, over and over, to pray to the Lord of the harvest for an increase of laborers. The words of Jesus in Matthew 9:38 are
cited more than any other scriptural text (about twenty-five times). The messages speak of Christian families as “the first seminary of vocations and the consecrated life” and “the permanent school of the civilization of love.” They call upon parishes and dioceses, bishops, priests, religious, schoolteachers and catechists, to cultivate vocational awareness in young people. One thing the messages tend to leave undeveloped, however, is the challenging mission of supporting and strengthening the vocations already in place. Perhaps that is why Pope Francis’ remarks struck me. He was talking about the critical role that witness plays in stirring young imaginations to envision a God-filled future. Thus I have to ask myself, “What witness am I giving?” Where joy is lacking, where mercy is thin, where hope and great desires have grown cool, where gossip becomes the secret pleasure of rectories, convents, and religious houses, vocational witness, for all practical purposes, is dead. Pope Benedict wrote something similar for the 2010 Message. “Prayer is the first form of witness which awakens vocations.” Speaking of priests and religious as called to a life of communion, he continued: “if young people see priests who appear distant and sad, they will hardly feel encouraged to follow their example.”

Vocation: making the word inclusive

There is a certain tension that runs through the annual messages. The Church certainly needs ordained ministers. The multiple forms of consecrated life express the richness of the charismatic impulse to live the gospel totally and unreservedly: not for the sake of personal achievement or perfection, but in imitation of the Jesus who “did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mk 10:45). But we also read in the messages that life itself is a vocation,
since it is God who calls us into existence; that every Christian has a vocation by virtue of baptism; and that Christian marriage is a vocation. John Paul II, for example, wrote in 1998: “You husbands and wives, be ready to account for the profound reality of your matrimonial vocation.” In 2002 he spoke of “the vocation to holiness.” Vocation, in other words, has many expressions. How, then, do we showcase one form without diminishing the importance of the others, especially if every calling—every vocation—is born from the Spirit?

Perhaps vocation talk would be less complicated if we simply said that there is one vocation, namely, the call to holiness, and that this call unfolds in forms that are diverse yet complementary; Vatican II reminded us of this in Chapter 5 of *Lumen Gentium*, “The Universal Call to Holiness in the Church.” After all, in an age that is witnessing such breakdown in marriage and family life, vocations to truly Christian marriage are as vital to the life of the Church as ordained ministry and consecrated life. And given the re-emergence of the permanent diaconate, we at least have to ask whether this development has not come as a partial response from the Lord of the harvest.

**What’s in a salutation?**

John Paul II’s messages from 1979 to 1985 are addressed to his brothers in the episcopate and to his brothers and sisters throughout the world: “Dear Brothers in the Episcopate, Dear sons and daughters throughout the world.” Starting in 1986 the messages are addressed: “Venerable Brothers in the Episcopate and Dear Faithful of the Whole World” or “Venerable Brothers in the Episcopate, Dear Brothers and Sisters throughout the World.” And sometimes he just writes “dearest Brothers and Sisters throughout the world.”
Benedict addressed his first two messages the same way, but I noticed that in 2008 the message is addressed, simply, “Dear Brothers and Sisters.” In 2009 and 2010 the address again puts first his “brothers in the episcopate and the priesthood,” but as of 2011 it becomes “Dear Brothers and Sisters.” For Pope Francis, it is just “Dear Brothers and Sisters,” and he signs his name simply “Francis.”

Benedict’s first vocation message is instructive. The first part of the title is “the vocation to the service of the Church,” but the second part is “as communion.” The Church as communion has been an important corrective to a “model of the Church” that is more institutional, hierarchical and often clericalized. Those of us who are a little older may be excused for recalling the refreshing contribution that Avery Dulles made to our theology of the Church with his book Models of the Church, not to mention the work of theologians like Yves Congar and, of course, Lumen Gentium itself. To his original list of models, Dulles later added the Church as “community of disciples.”

Integrating this ecclesiological corrective into the annual vocation messages, however, poses somewhat of a challenge. Benedict wrote: “In order to foster vocations, therefore, it is important that pastoral activity be attentive to the mystery of the Church as communion.” And again: “the Second Vatican Council highlighted the importance of educating future priests to an authentic ecclesial communion.” That was 2007. In 2010 he would write: “A third aspect [of witness] which necessarily characterizes the priest and the consecrated person is a life of communion… In a particular way the priest must be a man of communion, open to all … helping to overcome divisions, to heal rifts, to settle conflicts and misunderstandings, and to
forgive offences.” I think the communion of which Benedict spoke finds its anchor in the experience of belonging to a community of disciples—an experience that brings together religious, Christians both married and single, and priests in a shared life of the Spirit.

Communion versus clericalism

Fostering communion and being a person of communion not infrequently run into resistance in the form of clericalism. The effort to promote vocations becomes ineffective when local ecclesial cultures are clericalized. Francis has warned against this frequently. “Lord, free your people from a spirit of clericalism,” he prayed during a homily, “and aid them with a spirit of prophecy.” And again: “[Clericalism] is one of the evils of the Church. But it is a ‘complicit’ evil, because priests take pleasure in the temptation to clericalize the laity, but many of the laity are on their knees asking to be clericalized... This is a double sin!”

While Francis was still archbishop in Buenos Aires he said in an interview: “I am reminded of some Christian communities in Japan that went without priests for over two hundred years. When the missionaries returned, they found them all baptized, catechized, and legitimately married in the Church. What’s more, they realized that every person who had died had had a Catholic funeral. Faith was kept intact by the gifts of the laity, who only received baptism but continued to live their apostolic mission.” And those Christians must also have found paths to forgiveness and reconciliation. The Catechism includes a salutary reminder of an insight that dates back to medieval theology: “God has bound salvation to the sacrament of Baptism, but he himself is not bound by his sacraments.” We should not underestimate the presence and
action of the Spirit in ordinary lives. I think of John the Baptist reminding the crowds that came to hear him: “God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham” (Lk 3:8).

The pastoral care of vocations (a phrase that sometimes appears in the annual messages) needs to take place within an ecclesial climate permeated by *communio*—communion—and that is constantly monitoring itself for any tendency to clericalize. The way we think about the calling to priesthood and religious life—as essential as these are to the life of the Church—cannot be normative when it comes to understanding vocation. The life of every believer is special. Again, to quote Francis: “I would ask the question: who is more important in the Church? The Pope or that old lady who prays the Rosary every day for the Church? Only God can say; I cannot say.” So, caring for vocations means that in every church and in every place, each time we assemble for worship, there should be a shared sense that each of us is known by God and called to holiness and to service. Yet this sense of being called that we experience individually grows and bears fruit within the Church—the community of sisters and brothers in the Lord. This Church—the community of faith—likewise responds to a call: a call that leads it outside of itself and into the streets of an everyday world. As Francis wrote in last year’s message, “Jesus lives and walks along the paths of ordinary life.”

**Vocations and hope**

Some years ago I had an opportunity to spend several months in a village in northeast India. The farmers had become desperate because the monsoon rains were very late, and the lateness of the rains would delay the planting of rice. Weeks went by. The sky would darken, and then clear; there was no rain. And since there was no rice planting, the specter of famine
began to spread. Then, one afternoon, a very heavy looking sky
darkened the village; the clouds exploded and the earth began to
drink. The excitement of the villagers was unforgettable. I was
witnessing the rebirth of hope.

It is hope, of course, that leads people to get married, to
have children, and to raise a family. It is hope that leads us to
ask the question, “What do I want to do with my life?” Apart
from hope there is no future, no place to house our imagination.
When we make promises—at marriage, at baptism, at religious
profession, at ordination—we affirm life. On those occasions
when we watch others make the promises that will carry them
forward and create their future, we have the privilege of sharing
the excitement and joy that surge from hope. To put it another
way, a culture in which people do not marry or do not want to
have children, a culture where people no longer make or keep
lifelong promises: that would be a culture of death. And the
reason? Because it would mean that people no longer have
hope; no matter how ambitious their plans, their minds for all
practical purposes would remain stuck in the present.
Imagination would atrophy and the light of transcendence
would go out. The people of Israel in exile longed to return to
their homeland, and yet as the years passed that hope grew dim.
To keep hope alive, God sent them prophets. Thus we have the
voice of an Isaiah, a Jeremiah, and an Ezekiel. But there would
have been no prophetic voice, if there had not been people who
still dreamed of going home.

The annual vocation messages come from men of the
Church who have faced the world with hope. Their
imaginations opened on to a world desperately in need of the
leaven and the light that come from faith. They were not
thinking that the Church needs vocations in order to carry on the
family business. Rather, they are looking at the world in much the same way that Jesus did. “And Jesus went throughout all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every affliction. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, ‘The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore pray to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest” (Matt 9:35-38). Jesus could see the field as being ripe for harvesting because he looked at the world through eyes of hope. There, in the crowds in front of him, he saw life and he saw Kingdom possibilities. The voice of God was calling to him through his people, and Jesus responded. He made a promise—he said yes to the Spirit at the Jordan; that is where the journey begins.

The prayer for vocations, then, is actually a prayer for the world. If the laborers seem too few, then perhaps we need to wonder where our society or our culture has placed its hope. Have we become like people living in exile who have given up on returning home? Have we forgotten where our true homeland is? This is a truly frightening prospect. The fading of God from the human world would mean the eclipse of hope, and once hope is eclipsed the human soul vanishes. For this reason, praying for vocations is part of the Church’s effort to protect and preserve the earth’s spiritual landscape. To pray for vocations is to pray for the salvation of the human race.

[2015]