Called to Live for God’s People:

A reflection on Pope Francis’ message for the 53rd World Day of Prayer for Vocations

In his prepared address to the clergy, religious and seminarians of Uganda last November, Pope Francis wrote: “May we never forget that our ‘yes’ to Jesus is a ‘yes’ to his people. Our doors, the doors of our churches, but above all the doors of our hearts, must constantly be open to God’s people, our people.” And in Kenya the Holy Father told the seminarians, religious and clergy that they should never stop weeping: “When priests and religious no longer weep, something is wrong. We need to weep for our infidelity, to weep for all the pain in our world, to weep for all those people who are cast aside, to weep for the elderly who are abandoned, for children who are killed, for the things we don’t understand.” For Francis, the connection between Jesus and his people is intimate, profound—a mystery of faith. Living that mystery is what energizes our vocation, even as it often brings us to tears. We carry the world—God’s people—inside of us. But what does carrying that world do to us, and what response in us is it likely to elicit?

A lesson from Cana

As I was orienting myself to this year’s message, a gospel curiosity caught my attention. Why does the Gospel of John relate, as the first miraculous sign that Jesus works, the scene of the wedding feast at Cana (Jn 2:1-11)? For the Gospel of Matthew, the first miracle Jesus performs is the healing of a leper (Mt 8:1-4); the story comes right after the three chapters
that make up Jesus’ teaching on the mountain. For the Gospel of Mark, the first miraculous sign is the driving out of a demon (Mk 1:23-27); this story, too, follows a report of Jesus’ teaching in a synagogue. The Gospel of Luke follows Mark: teaching followed by an exorcism. In each of these three gospels, the miraculous sign seems designed to highlight the power in Jesus’ words about the reign of God. Demons cry out before it, lepers are cleansed by it, and those living on the periphery find themselves inside Jesus’ circle. The miraculous signs punctuate Jesus’ announcement that the reign of God has finally arrived.

Yet why does John open with a story about the abundant supply of wine at a wedding reception?

We know that Jesus connected with wedding imagery. He says, for example, “The wedding guests cannot fast while the bridegroom is with them, can they? As long as they have the bridegroom with them, they cannot fast” (Mk 2:19). John the Baptist made a similar connection: “He who has the bride is the bridegroom. The friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom’s voice” (Jn 3:29). We also know that in the Hebrew Scriptures marriage is often used as a metaphor for God’s relationship with his people: “For your Maker is your husband, the LORD of hosts is his name” (Isa 64:5). Or again: “Therefore, behold, I will allure her, / and bring her into the wilderness / and speak tenderly to her. . . And in that day, declares the LORD, you will call me ‘My Husband’” (Hos 2:14, 16). Marriage has also served as a metaphor for the relationship between God and the individual soul; we see this is numerous commentaries on the Song of Songs.

Perhaps, then, the fact that in John the first epiphany of Jesus’ “glory” (2:11)—the first manifestation of what the reign
of God is all about—takes place at a wedding celebration ought not to be so surprising after all. The good news is about a new relationship with the divine mystery. It is about knowing and experiencing the Father’s love—the One whose compassionate closeness to the human world is simply overwhelming. The abundance of wine becomes the abundance of love; both are intoxicating. No wonder Francis writes that the name of God is mercy.

What, then, does carrying the world do to us? What response does it elicit? I believe the answer has to be that carrying the world gradually makes us into messengers of mercy.

**Seeing the world with eyes of compassion**

In the second paragraph of his message Francis cites a phrase of Saint Bede that describes the calling of Matthew, “misereando atque eligiendo,” the episcopal motto which Francis adopted when he was in Buenos Aires. Jesus saw Matthew at his tax-collector’s table through eyes full of mercy and, through that compassionate gaze, invited him to be a disciple. And Matthew allowed that gaze to penetrate his heart, which explains why he responded so quickly to Jesus’ words. But since Jesus does not physically walk among us as he did centuries ago in Galilee, how does Jesus’ compassionate gaze and his call to walk with him reach us today? The divine call, Francis writes, is mediated by the believing community. The invitational word comes from within that community and unfolds alongside the vocational journey of our sisters and brothers. They are people, just like us, who have been called to faith, called to belong to the Church, and then called to a particular way of living out their baptism.
Who is it, then, that meets us with the compassionate gaze of God and, through that gaze, communicates to us that we, like Matthew and each of the others, have been called to walk in the company of Jesus? Is it just one face and one voice, or is it many voices and many faces? The honest answer is that it can be a bit of both. We may be inspired and drawn by the faith and witness of a single individual (many vocational stories confirm this), or we may feel ourselves called to let go of everything in order to accompany the poor, the homeless, the marginalized, the forsaken, the spiritually impoverished; it is their voice and face that call out to us and will not leave us alone.

The conviction that it is God who calls us and that we are not simply responding to social and environmental stimuli when we are drawn to the gospel is profoundly important. Who of us would not be moved at the sight of other human beings in desperate need? The divine call is indeed mediated; we live, after all, in a sacramental world, a world in which the eye is forever being teased from what is seen to what is unseen. But underneath the poverty and suffering all around us there is Jesus, the same Jesus who cried to the over-zealous Paul, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?” (Acts 9:4) Or who reminds us, “Truly, I say to you, as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me” (Matt 25:45).

The structure of the message

This year’s message is organized around three simple points: vocations to ordained ministry and the consecrated life are born within the Church; they grow within the Church; and they are sustained by the Church. Some might find a claim in the first point to be a bit challenging. “No one is called exclusively for a particular region, or for a group or for an
ecclesial movement, but rather for the Church and for the
world,” Francis writes. Our “ecclesial horizon” should expand
over time. And yet isn’t there something charismatic about a
local community identifying and then calling some of its
members to particular ministries in light of local needs? In other
words, some disciples, in response to the Spirit, will always be
on the road, while others, in response to the same Spirit, may
reside in the same place for years. I think the key to
understanding the Pope’s point is remembering how important
to him is the Church’s presence at the social, economic, and
cultural peripheries. The “ecclesial horizon” expands, not as a
result of international travel or reading theology texts, but as a
result of contact with communities at the edge. This idea
becomes especially clear in Francis’ second point.

“During the process of formation,” Francis writes,
“candidates for particular vocations need to know better the
ecclesial community.” To accomplish this, he suggests, they
should have “apostolic experiences” in company with those
who are actively at work in the local Church. He lists the sort of
opportunities he has in mind: to work alongside a good
catechist; to experience what it is like to evangelize at the
margins, alongside a religious community; to discover and
appreciate the treasure of contemplative life alongside a
cloistered community; to have contact with missioners; to
deepen their understanding of pastoral ministry alongside parish
clergy. Of course, there are often numerous programs and works
in the local Church founded and directed by dedicated men and
women who are neither ordained nor under the vows. I think,
for example, of Catholic Worker houses, thrift shops, food
pantries, Pax Christi groups, and so on. Although we frequently
speak of the “universal” Church, the ecclesial reality that most
of us know is thoroughly local.
Messengers of mercy

In his address in Uganda, Francis told the clergy, religious and seminarians gathered in St. Mary’s Cathedral: “If we are to accompany those who suffer, then like the light passing through the stained glass windows of this Cathedral, we must let God’s power and healing pass through us. We must first let the waves of his mercy flow over us, purify us, and refresh us, so that we can bring that mercy to others, especially to those on the peripheries.” But perhaps the mystery of grace at work here—the spiritual insight—is that we become effective messengers of mercy as a result of accompanying those at the margins.

An old axiom many of us heard in school was that no one can give what they do not have. How then could someone help another to know God’s merciful love if they have not first experienced themselves as a loved sinner? The point is elementary; but how do we learn the meaning of mercy? Some might answer that it came as a retreat grace, the moment in which they knelt before the crucified Jesus, having reflected long and hard on their personal history of sin and struggle, and then broke down in tears. Yet, like most graces, this grace has most likely been mediated. For the disciples, the mediation was Jesus himself, after Easter. Their second call—the call that came with their experience of the risen Jesus—was when they fully experienced the power of God’s love to heal their failures. Mark insinuates this in the words of the messenger: “But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going before you to Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you” (Mk 16:7). And Paul’s experience was similar, as we hear when he writes, “Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me,” particularly when he goes to to explain: “For I am the least of
the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God” (1 Cor 15:9-9).

For disciples who come on the scene later, the mediation may have been a kind confessor. In the case of Paul, however, the mediation may have been the prayerful example of a dying Stephen and the brethren whom Paul had been persecuting. A great upheaval took place in his soul as the convictions that anchored his zeal came undone. The brethren he was persecuting responded to his violence with a prayer for forgiveness. What grace, what mercy, had those followers of Jesus understood that, up to now, Paul had no idea of? The higher righteousness on which Paul had once prided himself revealed itself as hollow. He did not know God nearly as well as the men and women he was hurting. They became for him the ones who mediated the mercy of God; they were the flesh and blood who drew him to Jesus.

What was it, then, that enabled the followers of Jesus, to forgive one another—and even to love their enemies? The answer which makes the most sense is that they had already experienced divine forgiveness, mercy and love when they were incorporated into the mystery of Christ. They had become, as a result of the “one baptism for the forgiveness of sins,” a different sort of human being. Yet this may be only half of the answer. For the other side of that experience was the memory of what they were before. And that memory of their sinfulness and incompleteness—of deep spiritual longing, even when that longing was blind—allowed them to view the human world with compassion. They carried that world inside, the creation which (as Paul would later say) has been groaning inwardly: “For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now” (Rom 8:22). In
other words, the world of which we are a part keeps reminding us of its hunger and its pain, even when it does not have words to describe it. Mindfulness of the world makes us weep. And what do those tears elicit, if not profound compassion, the same compassion that led to the Word becoming flesh.

As signs of God’s closeness to the world, those in ordained ministry and the consecrated life are, practically by definition, messengers of mercy. If our lives do not give evidence of that, then our vocations have not been fully realized. I think of the words of Ezekiel, “And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh, and give you a heart of flesh” (Ez 36:26). If we pray that the Lord will give us hearts of mercy, then we need to be open to how this grace is likely to come. After all, it makes little sense to pray for transformation but then avoid the path that Jesus invites us to walk. The route which this grace travels requires us to walk through the world and share its burden, even to the point of tears: its brokenness and alienation, its poverty and non-belief, its sorrows and its desperation, and its blind longing for redemption.

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