Since his election three and a half years ago, Pope Francis has continued to capture the attention of people all over the world. His warmth, his humility, his simplicity, the ease with which he speaks about faith—all these qualities bear eloquent witness that he is someone who is familiar with God and at ease with himself. The story of Francis’ life and some of its details are, by now, fairly well known. It has been the cover story in places as different as *Rolling Stone* and *National Geographic*. The world knows he took the bus and subway in Buenos Aires, that he paid his own hotel bill after the conclave, and that he washed the feet of women and non-Christians during the Holy Thursday service. His disarming “Fratelli e sorelle, buona sera” on the night of his election still plays in our ears. And for those who would like to know more we have Austen Ivereigh’s *The Great Reformer* (2014), as well as Francis’ remarkably candid interview with Antonio Spadaro that appeared in *America* Magazine in the fall of 2013 (“A Big Heart Open to God”). Many of us were glued to television screens when Francis visited the United States last year, both listening to what he had to say and watching how he interacted with people. It’s not just because he was the pope that we watched so intently; it was because he represented so beautifully the grace or the charism that led us to religious life or ordained ministry in the first place.

**Ecology and the poor**

Two features of Francis’ spirituality that stand out are his concern for the environment, which came through
eloquently in *Laudato Si’* (On Care for our Common Home), and his constant mindfulness of the poor and those forced to live at the margins, which he speaks of repeatedly and to which he draws our attention by going to the margins himself. He shows up at a hospital, or a prison, or a refugee center, or a soup kitchen, or a border-crossing. Sensitivity to the environment and to the earth as “our common home” is not just an expression of one of the great moral concerns of our time. It is also a mark of vocational awareness. In the “Guidelines for Pastoral Renewal,” during his address to the leadership of the Episcopal Conferences of Latin America (2013), he recalled the opening words of *Gaudium et spes*, noting that those words are “the basis for our dialogue with the contemporary world.” A major part of that dialogue is listening to the earth itself and joining the efforts of the women and men dedicated to raising ecological awareness and re-thinking how we view and use the earth’s precious resources. Of course, it’s not just for the sake of the planet that we enter the dialogue; it’s for the sake of the people of God who are most vulnerable to the potentially disastrous effects of climate change. Mindfulness of the environment is an important corollary to the option for the poor.

The reasons why people embark upon consecrated life or ordained ministry are not necessarily the same reasons that they remain, and perhaps the same thing can be said of marriage. The promises we make guide and shape us. Fidelity to them may take us down paths we did not anticipate; much depends on the challenges—seen or unforeseen—that life presents us. What centers us, ultimately, is our search for God—and our desire to be loved only the way God can. But the search for God, especially for religious and priests, leads directly into the life of God’s people—even, I would argue, for contemplatives. There is no bypassing the world. And this is
something that watching and listening to Pope Francis makes abundantly clear.

**Noticing those at the roadside**

In the homily he gave at the Mass for the closing of the general assembly of the synod of bishops in October (2015), Francis spoke of several temptations that threaten the following of Jesus. The gospel text was the story of Bartimaeus at the end of the tenth chapter of Mark. Francis noted that it was Jesus who stopped, not the disciples. His words are worth recalling: “If Bartimaeus was blind, they were deaf: his problem was not their problem. This can be a danger for us: in the face of constant problems, it is better to move on, instead of letting ourselves be bothered. In this way, just like the disciples, we are with Jesus but we do not think like him. . . . We are able to speak about him and work for him, but we live far from his heart, which is reaching out to those who are wounded. This is the temptation: a ‘spirituality of illusion’: we can walk through the deserts of humanity without seeing what is really there . . . A faith that does not know how to root itself in the life of the people remains arid and, rather than oases, creates other deserts.” He wrote something similar in his Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* (The Joy of the Gospel): “Whenever our interior life becomes caught up in its own interests and concerns, there is no longer room for others, no place for the poor. God’s voice is no longer heard . . .” *God’s voice is no longer heard:* that is, the divine voice that speaks to us through the lives of the world’s throwaways.

Francis’ focus on people at the margins is not only the most forceful characteristic of his papacy; it is also central to the example he gives of vocation. He models what it means to be a religious today, a priest, and a disciple of Jesus. Francis’
expression “shepherds with the odor of sheep” is well known. It is, of course, deeply evangelical—an apt description of the Good Shepherd, for it puts us in mind of the people who surrounded Jesus and who often sat with him at table. Jesus had the smell of the sheep, and because of that many of the righteous ones—those who were ritually and morally clean—walked away from him. “Opening the door to the Lord means opening the door to those he loves: the poor, young children, those who have strayed, sinners . . . the heart that has space for the Lord has space for others too. . . . And the Lord is like the poor: he draws near without our calling him, and he insists a little, but he does not stay if we do not stop him from going. It is easy to get rid of him. It is enough to move a little more quickly, as happens to beggars, or to look the other way when the children confront us in the subway.”

“God so loved the world”

In the narrative of our faith, God and world go together. God creates the world, God redeems the world, and God accompanies it. To hear the voice of God, we listen to the world: the voice of God in nature, in the events of our time, in the great interior silence we call the human soul—the place where the Spirit dwells—and in the people around us. Jesus spent forty days in the wilderness, but the rest of his story unfolded among his people. His concern for others was not simply a moral response that flowed from his experience of God’s love, nor was loving his neighbor basically another commandment, alongside the ten well known ones—an additional religious requirement.

How often does it happen that we confess our failed efforts to love others, as if the call to love others were like the commandments about not lying or stealing or envying or
swearing? The only remedy I know of is the grace of realizing, profoundly, how much God has loved us. “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you” (John 15:12). *As I have loved you:* that’s the part we need to think about. The love and care of the Good Shepherd are grounded in Jesus’ own experience of having been loved: “As the Father has loved me” (John 15:9). It is that experience, that grace, that enabled Jesus to love the way he did. For our part, we learn to love the world—and its people—to the degree that we learn to find God in it, just as Jesus did.

Toward the outset of the interview that appeared in *America*, Pope Francis recounted his devotion to Carravagio’s painting *The Calling of St. Matthew*:

“That finger of Jesus, pointing at Matthew. That’s me. I feel like him. Like Matthew. . . . Here, this is me, a sinner on whom the Lord has turned his gaze.”

Such is the grace that enables compassion and stretches a heart so that it can embrace the world.

**Prayer from the heart of the Good Shepherd**

In a short, inspiring collection of homilies under the title *I Ask You, Be Shepherds* (2015), we find several places where Francis speaks about the prayer of pastors and priests. What he says, however, could easily be extended to the rest of the praying community, for no matter how solitary our lives, the Christian never steps into God’s presence alone. How many voices lie behind every Our Father, every Hail Mary, every one of the psalms—they are countless. “When we pray,” Francis writes, “we are fighting for our people. Do I pray this way?” Then he asks, “Am I like Abraham in his courageous intercession, or do I end up in that pettiness of Jonah lamenting the leaky roof rather than those men and women who are
victims of a pagan culture?” Such prayer “fatigues our heart”; it is “pastoral fatigue” or “that interior heaviness experienced by fathers and brothers who do not want to lose any of those who have been entrusted to them.” Saint Paul may have had the same thought when he wrote, “May I never boast except in the cross of Our Lord Jesus Christ, though whom the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world” (Gal 6:14).

_Crucified to the world._ Ministers of the gospel and those who have been embraced the evangelical life discover pretty quickly that the closer they come to God, the more they carry within the hopes and disappointments, the joys and the sadneses of other human beings. Indeed, we develop a particular sensitivity to the suffering of our people, as well as to the hardness of heart among those whose social privilege or whose lack of faith makes them deaf to the cries of the many Lazaruses outside the gate. That deafness can make us angry, but in our heart of hearts we also realize that God is always seeking to break through it. God’s response to human stubbornness is a divine determination to redeem: and we must learn to respond with the same love._That_ is not easy, and it contributes to the heart’s fatigue.

The good shepherd does not simply roll over and go back to sleep after listening to the story of a broken marriage, of hungry children, of refugees terrified and rejected at a border crossing, of a parent without a job, of a deportation, of yet another crucifixion. The more we pray after listening to the world, the more our prayer joins to the plea of the Good Shepherd. Are we better off or worse off for coming to know Christ? That’s not a bad question to ask ourselves, for coming to know Jesus brings with it a brand new sort of spiritual challenge and tension—ask any one of the disciples—a tension
that both reveals our hollowness and draws us into a deeper dependence upon God. As the scripture scholar James Dunn noted in Jesus and the Spirit, “In short, the warfare does not end when the Spirit comes; on the contrary, that is when it really begins.”

Vocational joy

“An evangelizer,” Francis reminded us in Evangelii gaudium, “must never look like someone who has just come back from a funeral.” And what prevents life from becoming a perpetual Lent—or an unending wake—is personal encounter with the risen Jesus. In the mission of preaching and bearing witness to the Good News, paying attention to Jesus is the only way to keep ourselves (as he would say) from being distracted by the weeds.

People radiate joy for a number of reasons. Some, because they are at peace with themselves and content with their lives. Others, because they have been naturally graced with a bright disposition. All of us could cite an example or two of socially and economically privileged people who are not necessarily happy, and other examples of people who are poor and disadvantaged yet find reasons to thank God; life still has its blessings. But true joy—the joy or peace that no one can take away from us (John 16:22)—comes from being in the presence of Jesus, as if life were one long Emmaus road. Such joy comes from the hope that Jesus is. It also comes from feeling God among the people.

An outstanding feature of the vocational model that Francis gives us is the degree to which his imagination is steeped in the gospel narratives. Every gospel scene becomes a Carravagio painting. His daily homilies reflect a warm, prayerful engagement with Scripture; they are spiritually and
pastorally rich. The only way to know Jesus is to follow him, and following him requires the use of imagination, for imagination draws us into the narrative world of the evangelists and then transposes those scenes into our own. He says, “It seems that in order to answer that question that we all hear in our hearts—Who is Jesus for us?—what we have learned and studied in the catechism is not enough. . . . In order to know Jesus we have to make the journey that Peter made. . . . Jesus did not say to Peter and his apostles, ‘Know me!’ What he said was ‘Follow me!’”

Life along the Emmaus road draws joy and peace from walking alongside the risen Lord. At the same time it is a journey, and we have much to learn along the way. Yet learning from Jesus is unlike learning from any other, because he never looks at us as disciples who have failed. The joy that is so evident in Francis, the tenderness with which he embraces people, especially the least ones among us, his thoughtful awareness of the earth and our environment, and the humble simplicity from which he speaks about Jesus—all of these are expressions of the vocational example Francis gives the Church. [2016]