

# A Reflection on Vocations

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It is common for sincere Catholic young people to anguish about their vocation. They anxiously ask, "What does God want me to do?" They try to figure out this question and can really spin their wheels in their prayer life and overall life as Christians. To deal with this situation, I think it is good for us to recall that we already know with absolute certitude what God wants us to do. We know the most important vocation. In answer to the question of a scribe about the most important commandment, Jesus tells us exactly what God wants:

The first [commandment] is, 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.' The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these (Mark 12:29-31).

Following these commandments, we know, is made possible through grace. It is not simply doing it with our will. Jesus never asks us to do something without giving us the grace to do it. In the beginning of his account of the Gospel, St. John describes what Jesus does in us to follow this call to love God and neighbor:

But to all who received him [Jesus], who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God (John 1:12-13).

Jesus works so deeply within us, we call it a new birth into a new identity, children of God. St. John is clear that it comes through our encounter with the Incarnate Lord:

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace (John 1: 15-16).

Notice that it is through seeing the Word made flesh that we receive the abundance of grace that makes us children of God.

Through knowing and having a relationship with Jesus we live in the grace needed to fulfill the great commandments. The call to love God and neighbor turns out to also be a call to live in deep union with Christ. It is a call to loving friendship with Him and His Father. Jesus reveals this profoundly personal plan for us when He says, "Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them" (John 14:23).



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Baptism and the Eucharist make this identification with Jesus a reality in our life. We receive a new identity in the outpouring of grace in Baptism, and through our Baptism, a new capacity to enter into the most profound communion with Jesus present in the Eucharist. If we believe in these great Sacraments, then we need to believe in the truth that we are all called to intimacy with God. It does not get more intimate than being given a new heart in Christ as children of His Father and being united with Christ in the communion of the Eucharist.

This life in Jesus is what is at the heart of what it means to be a Christian and a Catholic. To realize that we are called to this kind of closeness with God and to live out our deep friendship with Jesus should be our greatest joy and highest goal. In faith, we know that Jesus says this to each one of us:

Come to me all you who are weary and heavy burdened and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon me and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble of heart. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light (Matthew 11:28).

It is no exaggeration to say that Jesus had each one of us held in His Sacred Heart and in His mind when He said these words 2,000 years ago.<sup>1</sup> Realizing that Jesus speaks these words to each

<sup>1</sup> "Jesus knew and loved us each and all during his life, his agony and his Passion, and gave himself up for each one of us" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 478).

of us is our real joy and our deepest identity and true worth. All other specifics about how we are called to live out our friendship with Jesus pale in comparison to the incredible truth that we truly are His close friends.

If we look at the examples of Jesus' friends in the Gospel, we can see how this should play out for all Christians. We can start with two public sinners who became friends with Christ, the tax collectors Matthew and Zacchaeus. Both men had kind of "who me?" encounters in which Jesus unexpectedly reached out for them. He called them away from lives of sin and corruption into a new life of friendship with Him. Notice that they were not just called to behave themselves better, but to be Jesus' friends. He says to each that He wants to have dinner at their houses. Yet, though both became friends of Jesus, Zacchaeus seems to have stuck around in Jericho, and Matthew became an apostle and followed Jesus around Palestine. Both had amazing relationships with Jesus that changed them and gave meaning to their lives, and both did the will of God. I venture that both also had great joy in knowing Jesus' love for them and how He lifted them up.

Another example for us is the siblings of Mary, Martha and Lazarus. What was their vocation? We don't know! But we do know that they had the incredible joy of being Jesus' friends. The relationship with Christ must have been unique to each one of them, and we know that being close friends with the Son of God was their joy and treasure. Each would have done anything Jesus wanted and each knew Him well enough to hear and understand Him. Lazarus would have gotten up and left everything just like Peter, but it does not seem that he was called to venture too far from Bethany. So even though we do not know for sure what they ended up doing, we know for sure that they are great saints. They are among the great saints because they provided a place of love and affection for Jesus in their hearts and in their home. I think they are not only among the great saints but also are probably among the most joyful of saints because of the intimacy they enjoyed.

Notice: the keys are knowing that we are called to intimacy with Jesus and embracing it for what it is – the most amazing thing – and then living life in the joy of such an amazing truth about who we are. Simply enjoying Jesus and seeking to stay close to Him. (Incidentally, isn't this the simple desire behind why we go to Eu-

charistic adoration?)

From this central truth of the exalted nature of our Christian life in our Baptismal identity as sons and daughters of the Father and our Eucharistic communion with Jesus, we can understand the notion of vocation. I would like us to consider it as three-fold reality for each soul. The first aspect of our vocation is the one we have been talking about, the most important one, the call of all the baptized to holiness, to loving God with our whole heart, mind, soul and strength.

The second aspect is the unique individual way each of us is called to love God. It is said that in Heaven we will hear our unique name pronounced by God. Our heavenly name signifies who God created and calls us to be. The idea behind this is that we are

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all made for and called to an individual friendship with Christ and are unique children of the Father in Him. Thus, the call to holiness, though true for all Christians, is lived out in ways unique to each of us.

The third aspect of vocation has to do with where God wants us to be within the Church. It is about God's plan for us to participate in building up the Body of Christ. We can call it an ecclesial vocation and we often refer to it as a call to a state in life. This aspect of vocation is always for the sake of building up new life in the Church and presupposes the vocation of closeness with Jesus. Under this vocation we have the married life of husband and wife, and father and mother; we have the clerical life of deacon, priest and bishop; we have the consecrated life of men and women in religious communities, ecclesial institutes who live out particular charisms in the Church, and consecrated virgins; and we have the single life where a person may be called by God to a particular way of spreading the Kingdom.

Notice the orientation of these vocations to a state in life. The person is already called to closeness with Jesus and the Father and the ecclesial vocation is about where in the Church the person will live out this amazing relationship with God. Put another way, the most important thing for us to know is that we are truly a part of the Body of Christ, and the particular place we have in the Body is second.

So, some basic points about helping young people discern vocations and also about promoting vocations might be:


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First each of us needs to know that Jesus wants us close to Him. The first and primary focus in discerning a vocation is to know that we can live this reality each day. Holiness happens now and does not need to wait for when we figure out our place in the Church. We can receive God's love and return it now, even before we know our state in life. Seek the face of God each day and moment and the vocation in the Church falls into place.

Through deeper intimacy with God we become more understanding and open to God's will. Our life's desire becomes to simply want Jesus and we are purified to be generous in our life with Him. We come to know life is all about conforming to Christ, living His life of grace, and discernment becomes calmer and a more personal question brought up in our life with Jesus. For example a young man might ask Jesus, "Do I love You in the priesthood or as a husband and dad?" and then quickly follow with the peaceful aspiration, "Regardless of what You have in store for me, I love and serve You now." In a life focused on simply loving God in the moment, vocation becomes the right kind of big deal and not the kind that anguishes and causes a person to put their life on hold. Further, as a person grows closer to God, he gains the capacity to recognize His voice and confidence to trust Him. It gives the person the right sense of adventure about their vocation. They will more willingly throw their life into the venture because it becomes less about doing something for Christ or the Church and more about following Him on His path and into His work of salvation.

**Here are some possible take-homes for Serrans.** First, we need to see vocation as a natural outgrowth of the desire to love Christ. We need to be fire catching fire, which means we focus on this reality in our own lives and then seek to bring others into it. Second, we can incorporate this way of understanding vocation into the way we encourage vocations in young people. We often encourage vocations in those who seem fervent, and this is absolutely good and necessary. We need to continue to do this. We should also encourage other young people who are not quite ready to understand life as all about being close to Jesus. We need to encourage them in a different way. It may be more like telling Zacchaeus when he is standing behind the crowd to climb up the tree and have a look at Jesus. It involves some mentoring and friendship and begins with being interested in their lives: knowing them, seeking their good, praying for them and introducing them to the truth of Jesus' presence and desire for them. It is in a sense a mediating of Christ's friendship through our love and concern for them.

Above all, this work calls for reliance on prayer. God is doing what He does and we simply want to humbly be a part of it. The primacy of prayer is the only way we ensure that our work is cooperating with His will and is efficacious. God allows us to be instruments if we are open through prayer. Mary of course is our great aid in this work of vocations, and we commend ourselves to her motherly care. 🙏



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