

Do You Have a Vocation? Of Course You Do. We All Do.

By Russell Shaw

A while back I spoke at a dinner meeting of two Catholic lay organizations concerned about the troubled state of priestly and religious vocations. I'd been asked to talk on the topic of a book I wrote with the theologian and philosopher Germain Grisez entitled *Personal Vocation: God Calls Everyone by Name* (Our Sunday Visitor, 2003). It was a warm, sociable occasion, and I thoroughly enjoyed myself.

Before dinner I was introduced to the young priest who is the vocations director for the diocese. A personable, friendly man, he's undoubtedly very good at his job. Best of all (to me at least), he said he had read my book and agreed with it. What more can an author ask?

But he had a problem—a mystery, really—that he couldn't solve. Whenever he went into a Catholic school classroom to talk to the kids, he made it a point to say that all of them had personal vocations. Then, before leaving, he'd ask how many had vocations and invite a show of hands.

None of the kids ever raised a hand.

Now, he asked, what was the reason for that? I had no quick and easy answer, and before we could ponder the mystery further, it was time to eat.

After dinner, I spoke. Then the vocation director was called on to say a few words. He gave what I took to be his standard vocations talk, and as he did a light bulb came on in my head. *Now I knew why those kids didn't raise their hands.*

Although the priest tells them that they each have a personal vocation, the kids he speaks to aren't buying it, because it's clear that when he gets serious about vocations, he means a calling to the priesthood or religious life—period. They suspect that something bad will happen if they put their hands up—they'll get put on a mailing list, be hauled off to some kind of program downtown or out at the seminary, and who knows what else? Worst of all, their parents might get a phone call or a letter. They could find themselves drawn into a process they aren't ready for.

Stop the vocation recruitment machine. I want to get off!

That's about where we are now in the Church on the subject of vocation. The idea of personal vocation is in the air, but it's vocation as a calling to the priesthood or religious life that still really counts. That is a mistake.

All the same, you can see why that young priest is anxious about priestly and religious vocations. As this is written, the figures available show 44,212 priests in the United States (29,483 diocesan and 14,729 religious). Forty years ago, there were 58,632 priests (35,925 diocesan and 22,707 religious). Back then, too, there were 48,992 seminarians; now it's a measly 4,330. Proportionally as well as absolutely, the decline in the number of religious women has been even steeper: 179,954 then; 71,486 now. The news is bad, and it's getting worse.

Discernment, Not Recruitment

Yet there is no shortage of vocations in the Catholic Church—in the United States or any place else. What we're seeing is a shortage of vocational discernment. Not enough people ask themselves what God wants them to do with their lives. Discernment—not recruitment—should be central to vocations efforts today. And personal vocation should be at the heart of it.

In religious talk, the word *vocation* refers to three different things:

First is the common Christian vocation, which comes with baptism and is shared by all members of the Church. It consists in the commitment of faith and what follows from it: loving and serving God above all else, loving and serving neighbor as oneself, and collaborating in continuing the redemptive work of Christ, which is the mission of the Church.

The second meaning is state in life. A "state" puts some flesh on the bones of the common Christian vocation. It's a broad, overarching commitment to a particular Christian lifestyle. As such, a state in life sets someone choosing it on a path that will shape his character through the countless choices and actions required to follow it to the end. The clerical life, the consecrated life, the state of marriage, and the single lay state in the world are states in life.

Third is personal vocation. It's the unique combination of commitments, relationships, obligations, opportunities, strengths, and weaknesses—understood as representing God's will—in and through which the common Christian vocation and a state in life are expressed by someone (priest, religious, layperson) trying to know and live the life God has in mind for him. It is the singular, unrepeatable role in his redemptive plan that God intends for each of us.

"Every life is a vocation," Pope John Paul II says. And so it is—a *unique, personal vocation*.

Luther Was (Partly) Right

This idea isn't new. Hints of it, and sometimes more, can be found in St. Ignatius of Loyola, St. Francis de Sales, Cardinal Newman, and other masters of the spiritual life. In recent times, Pope John Paul has spoken about personal vocation more than anyone else—so much, in fact, that it's one of the central themes of his teaching as pope.

Among its advantages, personal vocation can serve as a bridge between Catholics and Protestants, a way of engaging Protestants faithful to their own tradition in a way they may not expect from Catholics.

Martin Luther had a good grasp of the idea. "Everyone must tend his own vocation and work," he wrote. And again: "It is God's firm intention that all the saints are to live in the same faith and be moved and guided by the same Spirit but in external matters carry out different works." There is much else in the same vein in his work.

Unfortunately, Luther combined this emphasis on the individual's living out of a divine call with rejection of the idea of mediation and therefore of an ordained priesthood, in the Catholic sense. Reaction against this repudiation of a central principle of the faith helps account for the scant attention the idea of personal vocation received from most Catholics. Instead, it was taken for granted that a vocation is a calling to the priesthood or religious life. And only that.

Flannery O'Connor explained the implications of this mentality with her usual acuteness. Somebody once asked her why she, a Catholic novelist and short story writer, wrote about Protestants instead of Catholics. Partly, of course, it was because she lived in the Bible Belt South, where Protestants abounded and Catholics were few and far between. But there was more to it than that.

To a lot of Protestants I know, monks and nuns are fanatics, none greater. And to a lot of the monks and nuns I know, my Protestant prophets are fanatics. For my part, I think the only difference between them is that if you are a Catholic and have this intensity of belief, you join a convent and are heard from no more, whereas if you are a Protestant and have it, there is no convent for you to join and you go about in the world, getting into all sorts of trouble and drawing the wrath of people who don't believe anything much at all down on your head.

O'Connor may not have written a lot about her fellow Catholics, but she had a shrewd understanding of them. Here was the version of vocation she found in Catholic circles: "If you are a Catholic and have . . . intensity of belief, you join the convent." Not much encouragement for committed laypeople like herself.

That thinking persists. Consider how the word *vocation* is commonly used.

A "vocation director" is someone in a diocese or religious community responsible for recruiting new candidates for the priesthood and religious life. A "vocation program" is a program for recruiting and screening them. The idea that everyone has a personal vocation because everyone has a unique job to do in continuing Christ's work hasn't yet been recognized in many quarters.

That naturally discourages people who don't immediately feel called to the clerical state or consecrated life from engaging in vocational discernment. "I don't feel called to be a priest or a religious," they reason, "so I'm off the hook." If they did practice discernment, of course, they would learn that God *is* calling them—and, in not a few cases, the call is to the priesthood or religious life.

Ever-Clearer Discovery

The idea of personal vocation radically changes all that. Everyone needs to discern a personal vocation, for that is the way to discover the role God wishes each to play in his redemptive plan. This is consistent with both the Protestant belief that every Christian has such a role and the Catholic belief that the role for some Christians includes ordained priesthood or the consecrated life.

In his document on the laity, *Christifideles Laici* (On the Vocation of the Lay Faithful), which appeared in 1989, Pope John Paul says flatly that "an ever-clearer discovery of one's vocation" is "the fundamental objective of the formation of the lay faithful" (58). He also makes the point that discovering a personal vocation is "a gradual process . . . one that happens day by day."

To be sure, there are times in everyone's life when discernment—prayerful reflection, preferably with the guidance of a spiritual director—is especially necessary as a prelude to making a major, life-determining choice. Nevertheless, vocational discernment of a simpler sort is necessary on a day-to-day basis.

It involves ongoing reflection on the current circumstances of our lives to see where the opportunities for service in the Church and in the world lie. This reflects something Cardinal Newman said: "We are not called once only, but many times; all through our life Christ is calling us . . . from grace to grace, and from holiness to holiness, while life is given us."

More Than a Plan

Vocational discernment is not the same thing as planning one's life. Planning is good and necessary, but it should be done within the framework of the vocation one has discerned, not in place of discernment.

Typically, people who *plan* but don't *discern* organize their lives in light of goals that promise personal satisfaction. This may even be the satisfaction that comes from generous, altruistic deeds. But even where that's so, the difference between discerning and planning stands. The central issue for people who plan is: "What will make *me* happy? How can I get the most satisfaction for *myself*?" For those who discern, the fundamental question is: "What does *God* want from me?"

Paradoxically, of course, the disinterested approach turns out to be more satisfying—and more exciting. Fr. Walter Ciszek, S.J., the Polish-American priest who spent many years in prisons and prison camps in the Soviet Union during and after World War II, caught the essence of it in these words:

"God has a special purpose, a special love, a special providence for all those he has created. God cares for each of us individually, watches over us, provides for us. The circumstances of each day of our lives, of every moment of every day, are provided for us by him. . . . [This] means . . . that every moment of our life has a purpose, that every action of ours, no matter how dull or routine or

trivial it may seem in itself, has a dignity and worth beyond human understanding. No man's life is insignificant in God's sight."

We find our personal vocations, and we accept or reject them, live them out or fail, in "the circumstances of each day of our lives, of every moment of every day." Not so coincidentally, finding God's will for oneself, accepting it, and living it out are what it means to be a saint.

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