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Let's create a church where young people hear and respond to God's call

As a mother of three, I often think how great it is that the church my kids are growing up in is developing a culture of vocation. I stumbled around trying to figure out how to orient my life when I was a young adult. And I suppose even the most spectacular vocation programs won't take the stumbling out of life choices. But it would have been nice to have had some of the help that's available today. So as my teenagers begin to face decisions about which path to travel, who they want to be, and whether and how they want to be disciples of Christ, I'm really glad they have some help from Catholics other than "the parental units." Take that as a big thank you from one parent in the pews.

With the discernment needs of the younger generation in mind, this season's HORIZON is geared toward further nurturing a vocation culture. Canadian vocation and formation ministers have helped us all out by drafting a clear definition of "vocation culture." Here's what the National Association of Vocation and Formation Directors came up with at their March 2006 conference in Toronto:

Vocation culture is an environment which promotes and supports the personal discernment of each person to respond to God's call, received in baptism, to live the Gospel in union with Christ and in service of others.

In order to create this type of environment, we need a theological foundation. So, in addition to articles about programs and structures that create a vocation culture, this edition also looks at Scripture, liturgy and church history through the lens of vocation and calling.

The article about the "Ready? Set ... God!" program refers to a Christian rock song that encourages people to take their life decisions and "hold them up to the Light."

That's not a bad sentiment for anyone in any walk of life. As my teenagers—and the generation that they're part of—walk and stumble and sometimes run toward their futures, let us be there for them. Let us seek the face of God in their school hallways, their playing fields, their dinner tables. Let us all hold our decisions, our anxieties, and our hopes for the future "up to the Light." ✚

—*Carol Schuck Scheiber, Editor*

What has taken place in thought and action since the North American church gathered in Montreal for the 2002 Continental Congress on Vocations?

Forming a vocation culture since the Continental Congress

by Father Raymond Lafontaine

The North American church is slowly beginning to take on the shape of a “vocation culture.” That is, we are beginning to see the fruits of seeds planted during the 2002 North American Congress on Vocations to Ordained Ministry and Consecrated Life. But before we explore what that means in the church, let’s review what took place at the event that pushed the concept of a “vocation culture” into our ecclesial language.

From April 18-21, 2002, over 1,200 delegates representing virtually all walks of church life gathered in Montreal, Quebec, Canada for the North American Congress on Vocations to Ordained Ministry and Consecrated Life. Co-sponsored by the bishops’ conferences of Canada and the U.S., the event was organized with significant input as well from the religious leadership and vocation ministry conferences of the two countries. At various stages of planning, the executive team benefited from the input of officials from the Vatican Congregations for Catholic Education and for Institutes of Consecrated Life. Following in the footsteps of two previous continental vocation congresses—Latin America (Sao Paulo, 1994) and Europe (Rome, 1997)—this North American event was, at the same time, an event of the universal church.

Although four years have gone by already, those who had the opportunity to participate in the Montreal vo-

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cation congress will no doubt still remember certain highlights of the event:

- **The theme** Vocation, Gift of God, Given for God’s People;
- **The logo** the Sower, freely and abundantly scattering the seed of vocation everywhere in the church, in each human heart;
- **The refrain of the catchy theme-song** *On A Mission*, composed and performed by Julie Lafontaine and Bernie Cossentino: “I am called on a mission to love and serve the Lord;”
- **The location** Montreal, a city with deep Old-World roots, its long Catholic heritage reflected in the beautiful basilicas where the congress liturgies were held, yet now very much a modern, secular metropolis: culturally, linguistically, and religiously diverse;
- **The historical context** negatively, the immediate aftermath of the sexual abuse scandals in the North American church, and hence, the presence of protestors and pickets outside the congress site; but positively, the infectious energy and boundless enthusiasm brought by the 150 young adult delegates and the joy and excitement of the run-up to World Youth Day in Toronto in July 2002, with the presence of the WYD Cross at the closing liturgy.

Although it is wonderful that over 1,200 persons were present at the 2002 vocation congress, that leaves over 100,000,000 Catholics in Canada and the U.S. who were *not* there! This is why it became vitally important, once the *event* of the congress had been planned and celebrated, to find some way of communicating its major insights into a practical and concrete plan for

action. Therefore, rather than a “final document” which would chronicle the history of an event now lying in the past—fondly remembered by those who were there, but of little interest or significance to those who weren’t—the congress executive team chose the route of a “pastoral plan”: a *reflection and practical action guide* to be put at the service of the church in North America as it moves into the third millennium. This was the genesis of the congress pastoral plan, published in both French and English in 2003 as *Conversion, Discernment, Mission: Fostering a Vocation Culture in North America*. (Subsequent references to the text will be abbreviated “CDM” and followed by the page number.)¹

Perhaps, four years after the congress, we may be in a position to appreciate the impact of this event and the pastoral plan it produced in terms of how it is bearing fruit for the life of the U.S. and Canadian church and beyond.

As congress co-chair, I was privileged to be closely involved with the planning and enactment of the congress as an event. I was supported by a wonderful team, which had far more practical knowledge and experience of vocation ministry than I could ever pretend to have. However, when after the congress I was asked to become the principal drafter of the pastoral plan, I faced perhaps an even more difficult challenge. This was the task of synthesizing the many insights that emerged from the congress speakers, the recommendations that surfaced from the delegates, the prophetic statement of the young adult delegates, and the palpable joy and enthusiasm that permeated the event as a whole, into a document that would not be primarily a look *back* at an event, but a look *forward* into the future of our church. In particular, the focus would be on the future of vocation ministry as an essential and constitutive dimension of the church’s mission. For if the church is *ekklesia*, the assembly of those who have been “called,” then it is only when we in turn “call” others to follow Jesus on the path of holiness, discipleship and mission, that we fulfill our deepest identity.

Forty years after the Second Vatican Council, much ink has been spilled, from a wide variety of theological and pastoral perspectives, looking back upon the event which has most decisively shaped the future orientation of the Catholic Church. Obviously, a continental congress on vocation ministry does not come close to an ecumenical council of the whole church in terms of its doctrinal and pastoral significance! Yet perhaps, four years after the congress, we may be in a better position to appreciate the impact of this event—much smaller and humbler indeed—and the pastoral plan it produced. We can evaluate it in terms of how it is bearing fruit for the life of the U.S. and Canadian church and beyond. So if this document is sitting on your shelf, collecting dust, consider this as an invitation to take it down, open it up, unfold its meaning, and put it into practice! (As vocation ministers like to say—if you are waiting for a sign from God, this is it!)

Before proceeding, I suppose that a *caveat* is in order. The evidence presented here is admittedly anecdotal, rather than systematically gathered. In Canada there is at present no central vocation office supporting the work of local diocesan and religious vocation directors, and hence up-to-date statistics and resources are often difficult to come by. More recently the National Association of Vocation and Formation Directors, led by Susan Kidd, CND, is exploring a move in this direction, although budgetary, linguistic, cultural and practical considerations render such efforts a challenge, to say the least! But the conversations are happening, and that is a start.

For my own part, since the congress, my involvement in vocation ministry has been more tangential than direct. In fact I am not, nor have I ever been, a diocesan vocation director! However, my work on the congress and pastoral plan gave me the benefit of exposure to high-quality vocation materials, attendance at vocation ministry convocations and seminars in Canada and the U.S., and most memorably, in-depth conversations with some of the most experienced and insightful people in vocation ministry. As well, looking back at the variety of ministries I have been involved in over the past four years—parish priest, university chaplain and professor of theology, seminary formator and director of field education (one gets to do so many interesting things as a diocesan priest!)—I have had occasion to evaluate the vocation culture in North America.

At various events I have attended in the past few

years, I have seen the congress pastoral plan used not only for the specific work of promoting vocations to ordained ministry and consecrated life, but also as a practical guide for lay ministry programs, for youth and young adult ministry, for adult faith education, and for parish renewal. It has been studied by those in religious leadership as a basis for renewed vocation efforts, but also for renewal in the congregation as a whole. This reflects, I would suggest, that the notion of a “vocation culture” is beginning gradually to penetrate our ecclesial consciousness. We are on the move—slowly but surely—toward a more comprehensive paradigm, in which the “vocational dimension” of *all* Christian life becomes the basis on which specific invitations to explore one’s vocation as “state of life” can be constructed, and to deepen that commitment once made.

We are on the move—slowly but surely—toward a more comprehensive paradigm, in which the “vocational dimension” of *all* Christian life becomes the basis on which specific invitations to explore one’s vocation as “state of life” can be constructed.

Our reflections will focus on three key concepts at the heart of the congress pastoral plan: 1) fostering a “vocation culture” in the church, 2) conversion, 3) discernment. For each of these expressions, we will consider the general challenge it places before the church as a whole, as well as the specific challenge it poses to those who are engaged in the ministry of promoting and discerning vocations to consecrated life and/or priesthood. We will also revisit the five priorities for action spelled out in chapter 4 of the pastoral plan—“to pray, to evangelize, to experience, to mentor, to invite”—as a concrete way of organically structuring vocation efforts in the church.

1) “A Vocation Culture”

A perennial question facing those involved in vocation ministry is that of how “narrowly” or how “broadly”

to focus our vocation efforts—and indeed, our very language about vocations. This point is well made in an article by Russell Shaw,² in which he specifies three distinct ways of understanding the term “vocation”:

- 1) The universal Christian vocation received in baptism and confirmation, the “priesthood of all believers” to life and love, to holiness and discipleship, to witness and service.
- 2) The “state of life,” a way of life, formally recognized by the church, providing a structure and a context within which the “universal” vocation may be lived out—i.e., in marriage and family life, in generous single life, in ordained ministry, or in consecrated life.
- 3) The “personal vocation,” the “unique combination of commitments, relationships, obligations, opportunities, strengths and weaknesses through which the common Christian vocation and a state of life are concretely expressed as each individual seeks to discern, embrace and live out God’s will, God’s dream for him or her.”

These distinctions are not unfamiliar to us. Shaw’s thesis is that previous to Vatican II, the church tended to focus more or less exclusively on the “state of life” question, whereas post-conciliar Catholicism, inspired by *Lumen Gentium*, has tended to stress the universal aspect of our Christian vocation. He then suggests that the time has now come to celebrate and focus on what he calls—following what Herbert Alphonso, SJ has referred to as our “first name of grace”³—the importance of the *personal* vocation: “Everyone has one—God calls every member of the church by name. Seen in this light, the challenge is not to find out whether you have a vocation, but to identify the unique vocation you unquestionably have.”

Let us now flash back to the congress. Its specific focus—indeed, the reason for which it was called—was the calling forth of vocations to ordained ministry and consecrated life. However, it quickly became apparent that to adequately engage this task, a broader mobilization of the entire church was necessary. And this would have to mean more than ensuring that everybody in the church “prayed for” vocations to priesthood and religious life! The decision to expand the invitation list beyond the “usual suspects” of bishops, religious leadership and vocation ministers to include virtually all sectors of church life—and to begin the pre-congress working document (*Instrumentum laboris*) with a reflection on “God’s loving call to all”—

was prompted not just by strategic concerns, but with theological and spiritual ones. The choice was thus made to “universalize” and “personalize” the notion of vocation: empowering each and every Catholic Christian to name, claim, and respond to a call which is at once universal in scope and yet uniquely and intimately personal. This does not imply a trivialization of the importance of the specific “states of life” in which this vocation is lived out, in the structured life of the church, or of the ministry of those who assist candidates in the discernment of this way of responding to God’s call. Rather, it places them in their proper context and helps ensure that such choices are grounded in a response to God’s call which is both personal *and* ecclesial.

“The fundamental pastoral challenge at this time is that of creating a ‘Vocation Culture’ in the church in North America: that is, a culture in which each Christian is empowered to identify and respond to the mission to which he or she is called as a member of the Body of Christ, in and for the world... Vocations to ordained ministry and consecrated life, to single and married life, to lay ministry and Christian witness in a secular society—will flourish in a church where each member can identify and live out the Father’s call to life and holiness, the Son’s call to discipleship and communion, and the Spirit’s call to witness and mission.” (CDM: 11-12)

In this light, the plan insists that vocation ministry is not ultimately about recruitment, or marketing, or effective motivation. Why? “Because the question of human vocation touches on the very foundations of Christian faith: in every generation and in every place, God freely calls individuals to life, forms them in love, inspires in them a drive for meaning and purpose, and calls forth a free and full response to his invitation.” (CDM: 43)

This point is well developed in the third chapter of the plan, on the “Biblical and Theological Foundations for Vocation Ministry.” Citing Donald Senior, CP the plan highlights the centrality of this dynamic of “call-and-response” which lies at the heart of the Bible’s under-

standing of the human person. The life of discipleship begins not with a human “choice” but with a divine “call”—profoundly respectful of the human freedom of its recipient, yet one whose urgency and authoritative nature demands a response. Jesus’ call to discipleship is simultaneously an invitation to intimate friendship with him, and no less, to a share in his mission of redemption. At the same time, it requires in those who respond positively to this invitation a rupture with the past—and hence, a commitment to *metanoia*, that is, to ongoing conversion of heart and mind and life.

Church engaged with culture

To promote such a radical response to the Gospel has never been an easy task. But it has perhaps never been quite so counter-cultural as it is in contemporary North American culture. In the pre-congress gatherings, which drew the participation and written input of over 10,000 Catholics from all over North America, negative cultural factors—expressed variously as “materialism, consumerism, secularism, individualism, pluralism, moral relativism, religious indifference” (or in the phrase made popular by Pope Benedict XVI, “the dictatorship of relativism”) – were ranked first among the major obstacles to the fostering of a “vocation culture.” Thus, it becomes essential to attend to the deeper issues of cultural and ecclesial transformation which the expression “vocation culture” evokes: the paradigm-shift from a model of “*success*” (as defined by external achievements, wealth, and social or ecclesiastical status), to a model of “*fidelity*.” In the fidelity model, I am faithful to the call I have received, to my relationships and my commitments, and ultimately to God, to the identity and call God has placed deep within me.

The need for cultural and ecclesial conversion is great. At the same time, chapter 2 of the congress pastoral plan (“The field is the world”) invites us to forego two opposing temptations in our treatment of the cultures in which we live—uncritical acceptance and outright condemnation—in favor of a *via media*: the “*critical engagement*” between church and culture. To remain in either of these extremes is to fail to penetrate the depth of our culture, and hence to miss tremendous opportunities for a genuine encounter between our culture and the Christian message. This requires of the church a capacity and a choice: that of “entering into honest dialogue with it, becoming familiar with its language and symbols, learning to name and assess its virtues and vices, its areas of insight and oversight. Above all, engagement requires that we learn to ex-

plot that culture's life-giving potential in the light of the Gospel." (CDM: 25)

Sweeping judgments—whether positive or negative—of our ambient culture are rarely helpful. At the congress, Marie Chin, RSM called for a “contemplative discernment” of culture as “our sacred dwelling-place,” one requiring of us “a long, loving look at the real.” Positively this means being able to identify in the stories, symbols, language, and affective commitments of our prevailing culture “a seedbed for the Gospel”— while recognizing that we are increasingly “pluricultural,” both in church and in secular society. Negatively there is also the need for a “critical distance” from our culture(s): capable of questioning our

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cultural assumptions, unmasking our illusions, being open to the transformation of our perceptions, frames of reference, and indeed our entire consciousness in the revealing light of the Gospel of Jesus. More typically, the church calls the culture to conversion. But there are also instances—we need only think of the terrible tragedy of the sexual abuse scandals, compounded by episcopal cover-ups, ecclesiastical scapegoating, and a culture of secrecy within the church—in which elements within the culture call the church to a salutary and necessary conversion.

One positive example of “critical engagement” between the church and culture was presented at the congress by Mary Johnson, SNDdeN⁴ (CDM: 34-36). Drawing on in-depth sociological and theological research into the *spirituality* of today's young adults, their sense of Catholic *identity*, their desire for *community*, and their participation in the *mission* of the church, she identified key positive elements in youth culture—their continued belief in the core tenets of Catholic faith, their commit-

ment to prayer, their belief in Christ's presence in the sacraments, their support of the church's mission to promote justice and peace. She also noted some of its shortcomings and weaknesses: a very diffuse sense of Catholic identity, limited knowledge of the Catholic tradition, an individually self-constructed faith marked by syncretism and relativism, lack of commitment to sacramental practice and to membership in a concrete community of faith. Taking both the positive and negative elements into consideration, she advances a series of concrete ways in which the church can reach out to young adults, tapping into their genuine desire for community, for experiences of prayer, for vibrant worship, for active participation in projects, for ongoing education in the areas of Scripture, Catholic doctrine, history, and the social mission of the church. Vocational efforts which do not take seriously the reality of the world in which young adults live, their hopes and aspirations, their fears and hesitations, are not likely to bear abundant or lasting fruit.

These more “scholarly” perspectives were echoed in a dramatic way in the enthusiastic participation of the 150 young adult delegates at the congress, and in the declaration they presented to the assembly on the final morning of the congress.⁵ Undoubtedly the most frequently cited and reproduced section of the pastoral plan, the Young Adult Statement allowed the committed young Catholics present at the congress to sum up their vision of their place in the church. They express their desire for a covenant relationship with the church, rooted in mutual prayer and discernment. They ask their “elders” for authentic and joyful witness to their way of life, asking for their visibility and availability as “mentors, wisdom figures, and spiritual guides” to them in their journey, for their assistance in taking on more fully their Catholic identity. They call for open dialogue and mutual accountability in the church, as a place where sin and brokenness can be healed and reconciled. They ask for objective spiritual guidance in the ongoing discernment of their own vocations, inclusive of all states of life, and for supportive church communities in which they can be helped to become “leaders and risk-takers for the sake of God's Kingdom.” They pledged that all they ask of the church, they will offer in return, asking for prayer and support so as to embrace their vocation as “saints of today and saints for the next generation.”

Let us now return to those three key expressions—“conversion,” “discernment,” and “mission”—at the heart of the congress pastoral plan. Each of these, as we will see, has something to say to the church as a

whole, and to those specifically engaged in the work of vocation ministry.

2) Conversion

When we speak about the “conversions” to which the congress called us, what exactly do we mean? Here, the vision of conversion proposed by Canadian theologian Bernard Lonergan sheds some important light on the subject:

“Fundamental to religious living is conversion. It is not merely a change or even a development; rather, it is a radical transformation on which follows, on all levels of living, an interlocked series of changes and developments. So great a change in one’s apprehensions and one’s values accompanies no less a change in oneself, in one’s relations to other persons, and in one’s relations to God. Though conversion is intensely personal, utterly intimate, still it is not so private as to be solitary. It can happen to many, and they can form a community to sustain one another in their self-transformation ... Finally, what can become communal can become historical. It can pass from generation to generation. It can spread from one cultural milieu to another. It can adapt to changing circumstance, confront new situations, survive into a different age, flourish in another period or epoch. When conversion is viewed as an ongoing process, concrete and dynamic, at once personal, communal, and historical, it coincides with living religion.”⁶

Lonergan gives theological expression here to the insights expressed at the congress by Donald Senior on the biblical notion of *metanoia*, and by Marie Chin on our need for a “transformation of consciousness” leading to a “radically different way of knowing, hearing, seeing, judging, and acting.” This conversion needs to be both cultural and ecclesial: it demands a new openness in North American society to the radical nature of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, but no less, a church open to questioning some of its own presuppositions, to reconsidering certain well-worn structures, in order to meet the challenge put before us at Vatican II of “reading the signs of the times and interpreting them in the light of the Gospel.”⁷

The central recommendations of the pastoral plan, contained in its fourth chapter, express necessary elements for sustaining and structuring this journey of conversion in ecclesial life. Echoing a recommendation endorsed by the congress delegates, the pastoral

If the church’s future mission in North America is to bear fruit, if ordained ministry and consecrated life are to survive as vital life-choices for a new generation of Catholics, significant financial, human and spiritual resources need to be invested in **presence to** and **direct pastoral work with** young Catholics. This need is urgent and pressing. Responsible stewardship of the temporal, moral, and spiritual goods of the church requires it. (CDM: 61)

plan endorses “**a preferential option for the young**” as a concrete expression of ecclesial conversion.

What are the implications of the so-called “preferential option for the young” for *the church as a whole*? First, we need to specify that this pastoral option in no way detracts from the “option for the poor” as a core element of Catholic social teaching. Rather, it is its pastoral application to a particular ecclesial context. At this time in the history of the North American church, decision-making power and influence—especially in what regards priesthood and consecrated life—is largely concentrated in the over-55 age group. Consequently, “even with the best of intentions, the voices of younger Catholics are easily muted, their perspectives marginalized, their life-experience overlooked.” (CDM; 61) If young adults are to be the hope of the future of the church, they must be taken seriously in the present. At the congress, they asked for opportunities to deepen their knowledge and love of the Catholic tradition, for individual and communal spiritual guidance, for retreat opportunities and missionary experiences, and most of all, for parishes and local communities that will welcome and make room for their idealism, their talents, and their considerable energy.

This request needs to be taken seriously. At the level of parish and diocesan life, such a pastoral option invites a shift away from the “maintenance model,” in which the focus is on the “already-converted”: regular churchgoers, senior citizens, and the provision of catechism and sacramental initiation of pre-school and school-age children. Without neglecting the needs of these important constituencies, significant energies and resources would be shifted to programs focusing

on *outreach, mission, and evangelization*, particularly with teenagers and young adults. In many local churches, such efforts have been underway for many years, and have indeed already begun to bear fruit. In others, the glaring absence of active membership in the 18 to 40 age group is an occasion for grave concern.

If the proportion of young people active in our liturgical celebrations and parish communities is a cause for concern, *a fortiori* is it so with respect to the future of vocations to religious life and priesthood. In a 1999 article, Marist Brother Sean Sammon urged what seemed to many congregations a shocking imperative. He said that in order to continue to respond to the needs of the church into the third millennium—and to survive as an institutional entity in that church—every religious community should invest at least 20 percent of its time, talent, treasure, personnel and passion into vocation ministry and youth outreach and evangelization. The alternative, he argues, is institutional demise, and a growing irrelevance to the needs of the contemporary church and world. Again, although at the time of its publication a number of religious communities “sat up and took notice,” for many there has been a return to “business as usual.” The congress pastoral plan provides a renewed invitation to take up this challenge anew: in our religious communities, secular institutes, societies of apostolic life, and the emerging new forms of religious life and ecclesial movements.

In my own diocese of Montreal, one particularly effective way of realizing this “preferential option for the young” has come about as a cooperative effort bringing together the diocesan youth ministry office, two local parishes, and several communities of religious women. (See the article about this on page 13.)

3) Discernment

The congress invited the entire North American church to another important paradigm-shift: from an understanding of vocation ministry as “recruitment” to a vision based primarily on “discernment.” What do we mean by such a shift, and what are its concrete implications for the church as a whole and for religious life in particular?

For many years the dominant paradigm in vocation ministry was the *recruitment* or *promotion* model. Potential candidates were sought out—usually in the parochial, social or educational networks where priests and religious were already in contact with young peo-

ple. “Promising” candidates were personally identified and actively invited to consider the possibility that they were being called to priesthood or to consecrated life. This paradigm implicitly presupposed a number of basic elements: a strong sense of Catholic identity, rooted in knowledge gleaned from solid catechesis and in faithful practice of the church’s sacramental and devotional life; a stable family context in which religious vocations were not only discussed, but encouraged; and perhaps most importantly, personal knowledge *of* and exposure *to* the life and mission of priests, sisters, and brothers.

This church—with the possible exception of smaller tight-knit ethnic communities in which Catholic identity has remained strong and relatively “untouched” by competing world-views—for the most part no

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longer exists in North America. For better or worse today’s young Catholics “live and move and have their being” in a very different world: one marked by constant change, familial and economic instability, a prolonged adolescence, and a more diffuse sense of Catholic identity and belonging.

At a time when many local churches are desperately short of candidates for the priesthood, and where many religious congregations have not had a candidate enter and persevere to final vows for years, or even decades, it can be a temptation to focus on our own institutional survival: placing our hope in aggressive “recruitment” techniques, supporting them by an effective marketing plan highlighting the community’s mission and charism. Obviously we need to make intelligent use of the resources at our disposal to make visible and

known our way of life—in a way that young people can relate to and find attractive. This work of “promotion and recruitment” needs to be part of the picture, but it can no longer be the only or even the main element of our vocation ministry.

What might a model of vocation ministry based on “*individual and ecclesial discernment*” look like? First, it takes seriously what was identified at the 1997 European Vocations congress as an adequate “pedagogy of vocation.” In this model, the methodology of Jesus with his disciples becomes the model for all involved in vocation ministry. Central to Jesus’ mission was not the survival and effective operating of an institution, but a personal invitation to discipleship and to a share in the mission of preaching the Gospel,

This universal vocation, made personal and concrete in the unique call of God to each individual, becomes the necessary foundation on which all “particular vocations” in the church can be identified.

of announcing the coming Reign of God. In this view, the primary task of vocation ministry is not immediate promotion or recruitment, but fidelity to a long-term process: initiated by the free and expansive sowing of the seed of vocation, unfolding in experiences of education and formation, of specific accompaniment and discernment, and of courageous and timely invitation, so that the real and effective choice of a permanent “state of life” in the church can be rooted in a solid foundation.⁸

Implicit in this conversion is the widening of the concept of vocation from a category primarily related to priesthood and religious life, to one which includes and embraces all Christians, called to holiness, discipleship, and a share in the mission by virtue of their baptism. This universal vocation, made personal and concrete in the unique call of God to each individual, becomes the necessary foundation on which all “particular vocations” in the church can be identified, discerned and given a generous and full response.

Faithful to the missionary needs of the church here and now, and to a “pedagogy of vocation” respectful of the dynamics leading from initial conversion to permanent commitment, the pastoral plan presents an integral and comprehensive approach to vocation ministry summed up in a five-point action plan, summarized in Chapter 4 of the pastoral plan:

“To create a vocation culture at this time in the history of the church in North America, pastoral activity (and especially, the pastoral care of youth and young adults) should focus on the five following actions: 1) *to pray*; 2) *to evangelize*; 3) *To experience*; 4) *to mentor*; 5) *to invite*.

The pastoral plan develops each of these points in detail. For our purposes here, it will be sufficient to briefly recall the principal recommendations linked with each of these five actions:

1) **To pray** not only to “pray for vocations,” but to become “people of prayer” ourselves, to invite young people to share our spirituality and our life of prayer, to create households and local communities and parishes which become “schools of prayer and holiness.” It is to become, in the words of Ronald Rolheiser, OMI, “saints who can radiate to the world a reality that is drenched with the grace of God.”

2) **To evangelize** to build communities rooted in the Gospel, where faith is nourished and sustained by exposure to Scripture and the church’s rich theological and spiritual tradition. It means to make vocational awareness—in its “universal,” “state of life,” and “personal” dimensions—an essential component of catechesis and faith formation at every stage of development. Also, it calls us to develop credible, relevant programs for education and faith formation, geared to the questions and concerns of young adults, to their language and culture.

3) **To experience** in a series of consultations led by NRVC in the late 1990s, the consistent message of young adults was that they “cannot choose what they do not see or know;” their parents, in turn, maintained that they “cannot encourage what they do not understand.” Thus, in ways appropriate to their age, temperament, and level of personal and spiritual maturity, young people need to be provided with concrete, hands-on experiences of the life and mission of the church. Not just “experiences for experience’s sake,” indiscriminately and randomly accumulated, but well-chosen, reflected-upon experiences that become “data for discernment,” leading them ultimately to a discerned choice of a way of life in the church and in the world. These experiences will include:

- *Leiturgia*: liturgy and prayer
- *Koinonia*: community and belonging
- *Diakonia*: service and charity
- *Martyria/Kerygma*: witness and proclamation

An integral vocation ministry reflects a balance between all four of these fundamental dimensions of the church's life and mission. It approaches that focus on only one of these, to the exclusion of the others, risk leading to a skewed vocational discernment, from both the candidate's and the community's point of view.

Invitation is rendered difficult by a twofold hesitation: that of potential candidates to “get off the fence” and make the commitment to enter a process of formation, and that of inviters, who may be more or less convinced of the value of their own calling.

4) **To mentor** in other words, to accompany, guide, model, and witness. This was perhaps the most important element of what the young adults at the congress asked of priests, religious, and lay ecclesial ministers: to be authentic and joyful in our own way of life, to openly “share our excitement and deep love of Christ and the church,” including the struggles as well as the joys. They invited us to make ourselves available to them as “models and mentors, spiritual guides and wisdom figures.” This desire, authentically expressed, is largely unrealized. The vast majority of young adults claim to have received little or no spiritual mentoring—and significant personal contact with a priest or religious is a virtually *sine qua non* condition for a young man or woman giving a positive response to a call to religious life and persevering in that call. “The most effective way to promote ordained ministry and consecrated life as viable and attractive ways of life is still to put forward happy, healthy, holy, Spirit-filled witnesses to these vocations whose very existence bears testimony to the beauty of a life lived well.” (CDM: 81)

5) **To invite** to discernment, to choice, to commitment.

In her memoir, *The Cloister Walk*, Kathleen Norris relates the following conversation concerning her decision to become a Benedictine Oblate: “I can’t imagine why God would want me, of all people, as an offering. But if God is foolish enough to take me as I am, I guess I’d better do it.” The oblate director, a wise old monk, smiled broadly and said, “You’re ready.”⁹

Here we find ourselves in the specific area of those charged with the promotion of vocations in dioceses and religious communities: bridging the gap between accompanying and inviting, between discernment as a *process* and discernment as a *decision to commit* oneself to a way of life. Invitation is rendered difficult by a twofold hesitation: that of potential candidates to “get off the fence” and make the commitment to enter a process of formation, and that of inviters, who may be more or less convinced of the value of their own calling, and thus of encouraging a young person to follow in their footsteps. At the congress, Ron Rolheiser issued a wake-up call to those of us who serve as priests or religious: that each of us is called to “become” fire, that is, to integrate passionate commitment to personal holiness and the promotion of justice, giving ourselves totally over to the Lord, so that “with credibility and conviction, we might say to the next generation, ‘God asks for your whole life. Give it!’” (CDM: 13-14)

Obviously, this call to holiness and passionate service cannot be the sole responsibility of the vocation director. It serves as a challenge and invitation to the vocation and formation teams, to the congregational leaders, and indeed to every member of the community. Although the vocation minister keeps this vision alive and brings it regularly to the attention of his/her colleagues, all members of the community are called to be:

- Sowers of the “good seed” of vocation;
- Companions on the vocational journey;
- Educators who share our faith and experience;
- Formators who build up the human and Christian attitudes necessary to foster a full response to God;
- Discerners of a gift and vocation which comes from God. (CDM: 84-87)

(See page 14 for a description of a discernment program that incorporates all five of these pastoral priorities.)

This article has concentrated on three main points of the pastoral plan that flowed from the North American congress. We've reviewed the essential ingredients of vocation culture, conversion and discernment. A fourth main point in the pastoral plan—mission—is the topic of a future article for HORIZON (slated for the summer 2006 edition). That article will also look at the elements that must be in place for vocational renewal in religious life. It is my hope, however, that this review of our conclusions from the North American congress will support and inspire you as vocation ministers to hold high the flame as you build the future of religious life. I close with the words of the theme song from the North American congress:

Oh Jesus is my Savior, He gives me every day
The gift of my vocation, I'll never throw away.
So here I stand before Him—and offer Him my vow
He calls me on a mission to reach out—reach out.

We are called on a mission on a mission to love and
serve the Lord
We are called on a mission. ✚

1. Ottawa: CCCB Publications, 2003. A Spanish translation of the “executive summary” of the pastoral plan is available through the USCCB. Because Mexico participated in the “Latin American” Congress of 1994, the North American Congress focused on the situation in Canada and the U.S. However, delegates from Mexico, the Caribbean, CELAM, Europe, Australia, and the Holy See were invited to be present.
2. Russell Shaw, “What vocation shortage?” *America* (March 29, 2004).
3. Herbert Alphonso, SJ, *Discovering Your Personal Vocation: The Search for Meaning Through the Spiritual Exercises*. (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 2001). See also Dennis Linn, Matthew Linn, Sheila Fabricant Linn, *Healing Your Purpose In Life* (Mahwah, NJ, Paulist Press, 1999).
4. See also Hoge, Dinges, Johnson, Gonzalez, *Young Adult Catholics: Religion in a Culture of Choice* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001).
5. *Gaudium et Spes* #4, cited in the Young Adult Statement, CDM: 116.
6. Bernard J.F. Lonergan, SJ, “Theology in its New Context,” *A Second Collection: Papers by Bernard J. F. Lonergan, S.J.* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996, first edition 1974) pp. 55-67.
7. Sean Sammon, FMS, “Last Call for Religious Life,” *Human Development* 20 (Spring, 1999) pp. 12-27.
8. See Part IV of *New Vocations for a New Europe*, pp. 81-105, especially pp. 82-85.
9. Kathleen Norris, *The Cloister Walk* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1996) p. xviii.

Young adult communities and a year-long discernment program: these are just two examples of creative ministry aimed at fostering a vocation culture.

Two programs that further a vocation culture

by Father Raymond Lafontaine

Following are outlines of two programs used in the Canadian church to further a vocation culture. Both programs were formed following the 2002 North American Congress on Vocations to Ordained Ministry and Consecrated Life.

La Bande FM

*La Bande-FM (Faith and Mission) was founded in 1998 by a newly-ordained priest, Father Alain Mongeau. Having worked in journalism and broadcasting before his seminary studies, and drawing on the energy and enthusiasm of the new ecclesial movements he encountered while studying in France, he was assigned as pastor of St-Louis-de-France parish in the Plateau Mont-Royal neighborhood of Montreal. Although the trendy neighborhood is a haven for university students and a highly mobile young adult population, virtually all of the parishioners were over 60 years old. Inspired by the programmatic description of the early church community (Acts 2:42-47), *La Bande-FM* was initially established as an outreach to young adults on the *Plateau*, but eventually became a gathering-place for young adults from across the diocese. It provides various levels of belonging and involvement:*

- An initial exposure to evangelization and formation of community bonds, in a large-group setting, with big-name speakers from either the church or popular culture providing input on a subject related to Catholic faith and praxis;
- smaller discussion and faith-sharing groups, allowing more in-depth study of such topics as Scripture, ethics, mission and justice;
- “Jesus-Cool” retreat weekends, held twice-yearly in a country setting, at a center provided free of charge by a new religious community;
- involvement in a variety of parish ministries—liturgy, music, children’s catechesis, helping at the youth drop-in center in the parish basement;
- “Fraternities” after an initial period of involvement, the possibility of an experience of community life for students and young working singles (a yearly, renewable commitment) in a setting propitious for vocational discernment (shared life, prayer, house duties, Eucharist, spiritual guidance) without being a formal “discernment house”;
- “Households,” after experiencing life in the fraternities, many of the *Bande-FM* members move into their own (or share) apartments, but continue to meet once a week for prayer and fellowship: they are intentional young adult Christian communities.

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In highly secularized Montreal, where alienation from the church has created a whole generation lost to the church, *La Bande-FM* has made modest but significant inroads. It has worked because of the

commitment of both the diocese and a men's community to provide a talented and energetic young priest for this mission; the willingness of three parishes to become far more youth-friendly, both in terms of making space for the young people and their ideas in liturgy and parish life, and in making their rectories available as living quarters for the "fraternities;" the commitment of a large women's community to convert one of their underused convents into a residence housing 10-12 young people and to help subsidize the rents. At most recent count, several hundred young adults are reached through the bi-weekly large-group gatherings; 100 or so participate in the smaller programs, and roughly 30 are living in community in the fraternities. All this happens in a part of town where

The active support and presence of the auxiliary bishop, who gave the opening retreat weekend on "human and Christian identity" and made himself available for questions and discussion, has had a very positive effect.

10 years ago the church was considered as good as dead and where the sanctuary run for the last 100 years by the Blessed Sacrament Fathers has just been given over to a semi-monastic community from France, *les Fraternites monastiques de Jerusalem*. The French community has an average age below 35 for the six monks and 11 sisters in the new Montreal foundation! This is one example of what "a preferential option for the young" can do to revitalize a local church, through the cooperative efforts of diocese, parishes and religious congregations, both traditional and new.

Duc in Altum: A Year for Your Future

What might a vocational discernment program look like that incorporates all five of the pastoral priorities determined at the North American Congress (pray, evangelize, experience, mentor, invite)? Here in Montreal, as a follow-up to both the vocation congress and World Youth Days, a program was launched jointly by the Diocesan Youth Ministry Office, the Office of

English Pastoral Services, and the Salesian Sisters Youth Outreach in September 2005: *Duc In Altum: A Year For Your Future*.

Inspired by a program in Italy, *Duc in Altum* ("Go out into the deep") extends Jesus' invitation to the first disciples to "cast their nets into deep waters" (Luke 5:1-11) to his young disciples today. Invitations were sent to a number of committed young adults: World Youth Day participants, parish youth group leaders, members of the COR and CHALLENGE retreat movements, and recent graduates of the Youth Ministry's leadership training sessions. Participants knew that the focus of the program would be explicitly *vocational* discernment: "What is God calling me to do with my life?" It was stressed that the program was open to *all* young people discerning their call in life: in other words, not only to those thinking about priesthood and religious life, but also those exploring marriage or remaining single. Also, the three dimensions of "vocation"—the universal call in baptism, the state of life in the church, and the "personal" vocation, revealed in the unique gifts and talents and deep personal identity given by God—were presented as equally important elements of the process of vocational discernment. Potential participants were asked to commit to attending full-day group sessions on a monthly basis, and to a monthly personal meeting with a member of the leadership team or a trained spiritual director.

The group leaders put out the invitation, did some follow-up phone calls, held their breath, and waited. Based on previous experience, the organizers would have been happy with six or seven committed participants. In the end, 21 young adults came to the first gathering—and miraculously, 19 have stayed on for the year! They range in age from 17 to 35; there are seven men and 12 women. The active support and presence of the auxiliary bishop, who gave the opening retreat weekend on "human and Christian identity" and made himself available for questions and discussion, has had a very positive effect. In particular, he helped many of the young adults to a more adequate understanding of "the will of God." To his surprise, he discovered that even today many young people still think that it exists "somewhere out there," and that if you "get it wrong" your life will be somehow ruined. His patient unraveling of the mystery of the way of God as it makes itself known in our unique personal history—and the open atmosphere of dialogue and confidence—got the group off to a wonderful start.

Subsequently the group has met monthly for a full-day workshop on some dimension of vocational discernment. Received with gracious hospitality by a welcoming local community of Salesian sisters—who ensure that the young people are not only comfortable, but regularly “fed and watered!”—each workshop day seeks to incorporate elements of personal and communal prayer, liturgy, quiet time, witness talks, formal teaching, shared meals, panel discussions, and small group sharing. Over the course of the year, the topics of discussion have included some of the following:

- human maturity and Christian identity;
- initiation into different forms of prayer (the Liturgy of the Hours, Ignatian prayer, *lectio divina*, Christian meditation);

Young people are coming out of this experience with an explicit desire to making “the will of God,” as it reveals itself in their lives, the focus of their life choices and commitments.

- “Money, Sex, Power: A Catholic Perspective” the evangelical counsels (poverty, chastity, obedience) and their application to Christians in all walks of life;
- human sexuality in the light of Pope John Paul’s theology of the body;
- reconciliation as a social, ecclesial, and sacramental reality.

It is too early to tell what the end result of this effort will be. Several of the young men are actively considering diocesan priesthood. More quietly, a few of the young women are exploring the possibility of religious life—often against significant family and cultural pressures. On a different note, another young woman mentioned that just because she was 30 and not married, it did not mean that she was necessarily called to be a sister! One engaged couple participates regularly. They want their marriage to be a full response to a call from God.

Indeed, it would be a mistake to evaluate the success or failure of *Duc in Altum* purely on the number of priestly or religious vocations this group “produces.” The important thing is that the young people are coming out of this experience with an explicit desire to making “the will of God,” as it reveals itself in their lives, the focus of their life choices and commitments. They have found a support network that encourages them in this counter-cultural path—in the organizers and presenters, but perhaps more crucially in the friendships formed. The young men meet as a group on a monthly basis at the McGill Newman Centre; those who live in the same area of town get together socially and work together to help organize retreats and youth programs in their respective parishes.

They come together to pray, to evangelize and to be evangelized, to experience the essential dimensions of the church’s life and mission, to receive mentoring in an individual and a group context. They are willing to engage in vocational discernment, “a process of coming to an informed decision, made before God, about what I should do here and now.” They are in the process of opening their hearts, minds and lives to God, and to God’s invitation to a life of deep, personal, and permanent commitment. We can only hope and trust that some of these, inspired by the example of the passionate and faithful witnesses they have encountered, will be called to publicly profess celibate chastity, poverty and obedience, and to share community and ministry in the context of vowed religious life. ✚

Call and response lie at the heart of liturgy. In that respect, and others, liturgy and vocation have much in common.

Theology of vocation from a liturgical perspective

by Gil Ostdiek, OFM

God calls each person to a particular way of life, and that truth is and can be reflected liturgically. In this essay I hope to examine this theme, asking: Is there an underlying vocational theme in the very structure of Catholic liturgy? How can the notion of vocation be raised up liturgically and made integral to being Catholic?

Not too many decades ago, the idea of vocation was very clear and specific. Vocation simply meant a call to the priesthood or religious life. That usage goes back a millennium and a half. It still persists, for example, in an organization which promotes “Adoration for Vocations” to the priesthood and religious life.

In recent years, however, a subtle change in our Catholic usage has been taking place. The word “calling” has entered our vocabulary alongside the word “vocation.” The two words are literally the same. Both come from the Latin, *vocare/vocatio*, and its English translation, “to call”/“a calling.” Though the precise meanings of the two words has not yet become fixed, one can detect a subtle difference between them. As in the past, vocation usually refers to the ministry/service and state of life of priests and religious. By contrast, calling often denotes an understanding of vocation broadened to include other states in life and forms of service in the church or world.

Efforts to hold these two meanings together can also

be detected in current usage. Liturgy provides two examples. On the fourth Sunday of Easter, called “Good Shepherd Sunday” because of the Gospel passages assigned for that day, the church observes a “World Day of Prayer for Vocations.” In last year’s message for that day, Pope John Paul II said: “This is a special occasion for reflecting on the vocation to follow Christ and, in particular, to follow him in the priesthood and the consecrated life.”¹ Homilies and the prayers of the faithful on “Vocation Sunday” often wrestle with the difficulty of interweaving the two meanings. Similarly, the *Sacramentary* of Paul VI currently in use recognizes the lay state of life by including a Mass for the laity alongside those for priests and religious among the “Masses for various needs and occasions.”² Yet there is no Mass for lay vocations, as there are for both priestly and religious vocations.

The immediate impulse for broadening our understanding of vocation lies in what the Second Vatican Council had to say about the universal call to holiness. It stated that “... all Christians in whatever state or walk in life are called to the fullness of Christian life and to the perfection of charity, and this holiness is conducive to a more human way of living even in society here on earth.”³ Just a few paragraphs earlier the Council had noted that the baptized are given a share in the threefold office of Christ and are to carry on his mission in the church and in the world.⁴

Biblical scholars have provided a fuller background for understanding vocation as calling.⁵ Both testaments abound in “calling” stories. Stories of how Jesus called his followers set the tone for us. At the outset of his ministry he called people to repent (*metanoia*) and to believe the good news (Matthew

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4:17; Mark 1:15). The stories of how he called the Apostles and later the 72 are especially helpful. In a nutshell, Jesus called them to follow him (Matthew 4:18-22; Mark 1:16-20), to be with him as he preached and healed, and then to be sent to preach and heal as he had done (Matthew 10:5-8; Mark 3:13-15, 6:7-13; Lk 9:1-6, 10:1-11). The call is personal, by name, yet it is a calling to become part of his band of followers. It requires faith and conversion, being united with him, and taking up the cross in imitation of his self-giving love. And, finally, discipleship inevitably leads his followers into mission, as it did the disciples at Emmaus who went back to tell the others about the one they had recognized in the breaking of the bread (Luke 24:13-35) and the Samaritan woman who went back to tell the townsfolk about the one she had encountered at the well (John 4:28-30, 39-42). In a biblical perspective, then, a calling is not first to a particular role. More fundamentally, it is a calling to a Christian way of life, to a life of discipleship, faith, and conversion, which then issues into witness and work for the coming of God's reign.

A liturgical perspective

Is that broad, biblically-based sense of vocation/calling embodied in the liturgy? Does a vocational theme underlie the very structure of the liturgy? In a recent document, the bishops of the United States have written: "God calls. We respond. This fundamental, essential pattern in the life of every believer appears throughout salvation history."⁶ That is pre-eminently true of the liturgy. Call and response lie at its heart. That can be illustrated by three reflections.

1) **Liturgical Year.** In the *General Norms for the Liturgical Year and Calendar* we read: "The whole mystery of Christ, from his Incarnation to the day of Pentecost and the expectation of his coming again, is recalled by the church during the course of the year" (no. 17).⁷ To re-call these mysteries week after week in the proclamation of the Word has a subtle formative effect. Not only are the mysteries recalled; those who listen in faith to the readings are also recalled, i.e., called anew, to the faith and conversion to which Jesus summoned those who would follow him.

2) **Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults.** In the *Rite of Election* the bishop addresses the catechumens in these words: "The church in the name of Christ ... calls you to the Easter sacraments. Since you have already heard the call of Christ, you must now express your response to that call clearly and in the presence of the whole

Church" (RCIA no. 132). The catechumens voice their assent, and then in a highly symbolic act they come forward to have their names enrolled. The pastoral introduction to this rite notes: "This step is called election because the acceptance made by the Church is founded on the election by God, in whose name the Church acts" (no. 119). The message to the catechumens is clear. The growth in faith and in the Christian way of life that has taken place during the period of the catechumenate is the gift of God. It is God who has called and chosen them. The Lenten season is a time for them to bask in the gift of that calling and the working of God's grace in them. As the *Rite of Election* is celebrated in the community year after year, the message to all the baptized is also clear: they, too, have been gifted with that same calling, and Lent is to be a time of spiritual renewal.

The bishops have written: "God calls. We respond. This fundamental, essential pattern in the life of every believer appears throughout salvation history." That is pre-eminently true of the liturgy.

3) **Eucharist.** The weekly celebration of the Eucharist is the privileged place where God's people are formed in their calling. It deserves a fuller reflection.

"Introductory Rites" are too bland a way to name fully the inner meaning and power of these few moments at the beginning of the celebration. It starts with a gathering of the community. The entrance procession is only the final, formal moment of the gathering that began in their homes and daily life. Their coming together is not happenstance. They come together as *ecclesia* (Latin transliteration of the Greek *ekklesia*, from *ek-kaleo*, "to summon"), as church (from the Greek *kuriakos*, "belonging to the Lord"). They have been summoned by God to come together to share the twofold table of Word and Sacrament. In the entrance procession a cross, candles, and a book are carried through the midst of the assembly. The cross sums up the story of Jesus; it is also the cross his followers are called to take up (Matthew 10:38; 16:24). The candles carried through their midst sums up their stories as well. Jesus, the light of the world, called his disciples to be

light for the world and to let their light shine before others (Matthew 5:14-16). The opening sign of the cross names the assembly as those who belong to Father, Son and Spirit, in whose name they gather. The opening prayer brings the entrance rites to a close. By addressing God, it assumes that God has already called the community into a covenantal relationship.

The formative power of the liturgy of the Word in the course of the liturgical year has already been noted. A further reflection from the perspective of the homily can now be added. Proclamation of God's Word in the assembly assumes that it is addressed to God's people not only in the past, but here and now. The first words Jesus spoke after reading the passage from Isaiah in his hometown synagogue model what every homily should be about. "Today this scripture passage is fulfilled in your hearing" (Luke 4:21). The Word is to be broken open so that people can once again hear how God is calling them, how the passage tells the story of their lives. The exchange between the Risen Lord and the two disciples on the road to Emmaus illustrates that wonderfully (Luke 24:13-35). First the stranger listened to their story of what they had experienced in Jerusalem and how they had lost all hope in him. They had thought he was the one who would save Israel. His death, they thought, had put an end to their calling to be his disciples and to share in his mission. Then he retold that same story, opening up what Moses, the prophets, and all the Scriptures had said about him. His version of the story had a completely different ending: the Messiah's entrance into glory. When their eyes were opened in recognition and Easter-faith at the supper table, they knew their calling to discipleship and mission was still in effect. They got up and returned to Jerusalem to rejoin the band and tell them what had happened on the road.

Dialogue of the gift

The liturgy of the Eucharist is also built on a rhythm of call and response. That rhythm can be transposed into what one author has called a "dialogue of the gift."⁸ It begins with the presentation of the gifts. Two beautiful prayers accompany the presentation of the bread and wine. These simple elements, the prayers tell us, are caught up in a long cycle of giving and receiving. They are named, first as gifts we have received from God's goodness, then as gifts received from the earth, and finally as gifts given to us through human labor. A further transformation is yet to come, the prayers say. These simple gifts will become the bread of life and cup of salvation. The point to note

here is the spiritual significance of presenting the gifts. They express, first, a dialogue of giving and receiving in which we are called to be co-workers with God in drawing food and drink from the earth. Second, these elements are the work of human hands. They are condensed symbols of the labor of all those who have had a hand in their production—farmers, truckers, millers, bakers, store-keepers In effect, they are the symbols of all human life and endeavor. So what is presented at the Lord's table are not just the physical elements of bread and wine, but the sum and substance of our lives. Just as in the entrance procession, so too as

Just as in the entrance procession, so too as the gifts are brought up all in the assembly are called to walk in the procession in spirit, to carry up the gift of their lives and place them on the table. God's call and our response are now expressed, not in words, but in the symbolic act of giving the gifts.

the gifts are brought up, all in the assembly are called to walk in the procession in spirit, to carry up the gift of their lives and place it on the table. God's call and our response are now expressed, not in words, but in the symbolic act of giving the gifts we have received from God and the hands of others, the gift of our lives and our world.

The "dialogue of the gift" continues in the Eucharistic Prayer. It begins with the presider's call to give God thanks and praise, and then it recalls highlights of the story of all that God has done for us in the works of creation and salvation. The recital reaches its climax in the narrative of the Last Supper, which summed up Jesus' entire life of self-giving love in bread broken and cup poured out. In these sacramental signs we recognize once again the gift of new life which God has given us through Christ's gift of himself. Mindful of all this, the Eucharistic Prayer then leads us into the response we are called to make. "Father, calling to mind ... we offer you in thanksgiving this holy and living sacrifice ... May he make us an everlasting gift to you" (Eucharistic Prayer III). This is indeed an awesome moment. *The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*

says: "The Church, therefore, earnestly desires that Christ's faithful, when present at this mystery of faith, should not be there as strangers or silent spectators ... they should give thanks to God; by offering the immaculate Victim, not only through the hands of the priest, but also with him, they should learn to offer themselves as well; ..." (no. 48). What the assembly has to offer is not only Christ's gift of himself, but also the gift of their lives presented with the bread and wine for this moment of offering a "holy and living sacrifice" (early Christian shorthand for one's life of discipleship). So that our lives may be transformed into an acceptable offering, we immediately ask God to "gather all who share this bread and wine into the one body of Christ, a living sacrifice of praise" (Eucharistic Prayer IV).

The giving and receiving of communion brings to completion the "dialogue of the gift" unfolding in the celebration. Note carefully that the words, "The Body of Christ," have a double meaning. What is given is the Risen Lord who is present in the eucharistic elements. But St. Paul also used that phrase to name the church. "Because the loaf of bread is one, we, though many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf" (1 Corinthians 10:17). In a homiletic reflection on these words to the newly baptized, St. Augustine commented that we receive what we are, we become what we receive. We respond "Amen" not only to Christ given for us, but to the Body of Christ into which this holy meal transforms us. The "dialogue of the gift" does not end here, however.

As with the opening rites, the "concluding rite" is too bland a phrase to capture what the dismissal means. Listen to what Cardinal Joseph Bernardin had to say: "The dismissal of the assembly is like the breaking of the bread. We have become 'the bread of life' and the 'cup of blessing' for the world. Now we are scattered, broken, poured out to be life for the world."⁹ The "dialogue of the gift" is to spill out beyond the celebration and continue in lives that are poured out for others in self-giving love in imitation of Christ. It is that mission to which we were called in baptism and to which we are now sent into the world.

A theme of calling does indeed underlie the very structure of the liturgy. The liturgy of the Eucharist embodies it most compellingly as a mutual and ever widening cycle of the mutual receiving/giving of the gift of self. The calling of Christians is to follow Christ along that path of self-giving in service of others and the reign of God.

Liturgical life: seedbed for vocation

How can this notion of vocation be raised up liturgically and made integral to being Catholic? Literature on vocation ministry often notes that the family is a powerful formative factor in attuning young people to hear God calling them to religious life or priesthood. The family undoubtedly plays an immediate and crucial role. The intent of this essay has been to suggest that the liturgical life of the church plays an equally important, though perhaps less immediate role. If family life nurtures the discernment and growth of the seed of a vocation to priesthood or religious life, might we not call the liturgical life of the church the seed bed

If family life nurtures the discernment and growth of the seed of a vocation to priesthood or religious life, might we not call the liturgical life of the church the seed bed where God readies the ground for that planting?

where God readies the ground for that planting? It is there that God's call to all the baptized to give themselves in service of God and others in every way of life is issued again and again, in the Word proclaimed and in the sacraments that remember and celebrate the love God has shown us in Christ.

The liturgical life of the Church can be that seed bed on two conditions. First, great care must be taken to prepare and celebrate liturgies that are prayerful experiences in which the presence and call of God shine through. All the liturgical ministers need to hear that call themselves and to echo it to the assembled faithful. Second, and in particular, presiders, homilists, and catechists need to be attentive to and seize the "mystagogical moments" available both within the liturgical celebration and in so many forms of catechesis. And what of the role of vocation ministers? More than other ministers, they have an abiding awareness of the connection that can be made between vocation in the traditional sense and the broad understanding of calling now taking root in the church. They are thus in a position to promote that connection in their literature and contacts, calling on the local faith communities they visit to nurture a strong liturgical life. It is there, Sunday by Sunday,

that people learn to listen to how God is calling them to live as faithful disciples of the Risen Lord. ✚

1. "Message of His Holiness Pope John Paul II for the 42nd World Day of Prayer for Vocations, April 17 2005 – Fourth Sunday of Easter" no. 1. Online at http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/messages/vocations/documents/hf_jp-ii_mes_20040811_xlii-voc-2005_en.html.
2. *Roman Missal* of Pius V contained only a votive Mass for "vocations for the church," with priests and religious in mind.
3. Vatican Council. *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (Lumen Gentium)* no. 40. In *Vatican Council II: Constitutions, Decrees, Declarations*, ed. Austin Flannery. (Northport, NY: Costello Publishing, 1996).
4. *Ibid.*, no 31.
5. Among the many fine resources, see Michael D. Guinan, Barbara E. Bowe, and John Manuel Lozano. "Call/Vocation." In *The Collegeville Pastoral Dictionary of Biblical Rheology*, ed. Carroll Stuhlmueller, pp. 113-119. Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1996. See also Donald Senior. "The Biblical Heritage and the Meaning of Vocation." *Origins* 31/46 (May 2, 2002) pp. 760-766.
6. United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. *Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord: A Resource for the Development of Lay Ecclesial Ministry* no. 7. (Washington: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2005).
7. See also the *Lectionary for Mass Introduction* no. 3. These documents can be found in the front of the *Sacramentary* and the *Lectionary*.
8. Eugene C. Miller. "Presentation of Gifts: Orthodox Insights for Western Liturgical Renewal." *Worship* (1986) pp. 22-38.
9. Joseph Cardinal Bernardin. *Guide for the Assembly*. (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications), no. 79, 1997.

The stories of Moses, Deborah, Jeremiah and Esther reveal much about how and why God calls human beings.

“Here I am!” Call in the Old Testament

by Dianne Bergant, CSA

Webster defines vocation, a word that comes from the Latin *vocare* (to call), as a summons from God to an individual or group to undertake the obligations of a particular task or function in life; a divine call to a place of service to others in accordance with the divine plan. This definition concurs with the biblical tradition in identifying several different aspects pertinent to this consideration of vocation in the Old Testament. They include: call, task or function, service, and divine plan. The stories of four prominent Old Testament figures—Moses, Deborah, Jeremiah, and Esther—will be analyzed in order to discover if these aspects are present therein, and if so, how they might have functioned in the original stories. Before we do this, we should reflect on the role biblical theology plays in influencing our lives today.

Biblical theology today

In one of its pivotal theological outcomes, Vatican II revitalized biblical theology. While this turn to the Bible continues to manifest itself in many ways, one of the most significant has been the search to discover the biblical foundation or justification of some current concern. This search has resulted in the retrieval of much rich theological, pastoral and spiritual tradition. It has also provided the church with an appreciation for the ongoing presence and direction of the Spirit of

God and insight into the theological development that it has brought forth.

We should be aware of the limitations of whatever methodological approach is used in any search for the biblical foundation for these concerns. In some circles what is called biblical theology is really a use of biblical passages as proof-texts to legitimate a predetermined theological conclusion. This technique fails to read the biblical material within its own literary or historical contexts and, consequently, does not accurately deal with the varied theological meanings that the text itself might yield. In more critical circles, the approach most often used today is some form of historical-criticism. This approach can be very helpful in our search for any historical precedent. However, looking for precedents or biblical foundations is both enhancing and limiting. History is an important factor in our tradition, and precedents can ground our current understanding. However, the on-going presence of the Spirit frequently brings forth realities that are new. Precedent alone can too often proscribe and limit.

The Bible does indeed contain many narratives describing God’s call of someone either to enter into a new way of life or to launch out into some form of service. However, the communities from which these narratives originated had their own cultural limitations, and we must neither ignore them nor replicate them. For example, we find stories of the calls of Moses (Exodus 3:4) and Jeremiah (Jeremiah 1:4), but there is no comparable call account in the Deborah or Esther traditions. This does not mean that these women were not called by God as the men were. It may well mean that the male gender-bias of the culture did not consider the women’s call important enough to record it in

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the same way. The challenge of contemporary biblical theology consists in moving beyond such cultural biases found in the stories and uncovering the revelatory message contained there.

The biblical call narrative consists of the call itself, a commission from God, hesitance on the part of the one called, assurance that God will be with that person, and a sign to verify the legitimacy of the commission. Not all of these elements will be found in the passages under consideration. Possible reasons for this will be suggested. Still, a careful reading will show that the themes found in these passages have much to say to us today about vocation.

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"God called out to him from the bush"

(Exodus 3:4)

The story of God's call to Moses from the fire in the midst of the bush (Exodus 3:1-12) has long been a favorite in both the Jewish and the Christian communities. There is the actual call: "Moses! Moses!" (v.4); the commission: "I will send you to Pharaoh to lead my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt" (v.10); hesitance: "Who am I...?" (v.11); assurance: "I will be with you..." (v.12); the sign: "and this will be your proof that it is I who have sent you: when you bring my people out of Egypt, you will worship God on this very mountain" (v.12).

Moses' call came to him while he was engaged in the normal events of his life. He was working for his father-in-law, tending the sheep. He came upon a bush, probably the kind that was common in that area. However, there was something quite extraordinary about this particular bush. He saw a fire in its midst, a fire that flamed out of the bush, but that did not consume it. Fascinated by this phenomenon, Moses investi-

gated. It was then that he received his call. His experience was a revelation *of* God, not only a revelation *by* God. First, fire is a standard symbol of God. It is one of the four basic elements. Its dancing flames are illusive; its fiery fury purifies, its insatiable hunger consumes. Here, the fire neither consumes nor purifies, but it certainly is mysterious. God's words also reveal something about God's nature. God seeks to deliver the oppressed people from their affliction.

Moses is called to be the agent of this. "I have never been eloquent, neither in the past nor recently..." (4:10). He knows that he is not equal to the task. However, God prevails and promises assistance. This is, after all, the God who has control over the elementary forces of the universe (fire that flames, but does not consume). Called and commissioned, Moses can only trust that God's plan of deliverance will be accomplished through him.

This account is more than a story in the life of this unusual person. In the way it has come down to us, it leaves no doubt in anyone's mind as to the origin of Israel's deliverance. Moses is not the liberator; God is. Moses is a simple shepherd, chosen by God to accomplish an extraordinary feat. Quite simply, this is the truth of his vocation.

"This is what the Lord, the God of Israel commands" (Judges 4:6)

The story of Deborah (Judges 4-5) does not contain the elements of the technical call narrative. This is no call from God, no commission, no hesitancy and no reassurance. However, it certainly does conform to the rest of Webster's definition of vocation. It describes how this remarkable woman undertook the obligations of a particular task of service to others in accordance with the divine plan. Deborah is identified as a prophet and described as a judge (4:4), two very important offices in ancient Israel. As a prophet, she speaks the word of God: "This is what the Lord, the God of Israel commands" (4:6). In addition to this role, "the Israelites came up to her for judgment" (v.5).

She was probably called by God, as were the other prophets. However we have no record of that call. In this biblical book, the judges were also military commanders. We see her exercising this role as well: "[I] will deliver them into your power" (v.8). We have no record of God commissioning her for either role, but we see her carrying out the responsibilities of both the prophet and the judge. The people would not have ac-

cepted her functioning in these roles if they did not believe that she had been chosen by God to do so.

The picture of Deborah found in this passage is uncharacteristic of the biblical portrayal of women. In literature with a decidedly male bias, most women are identified in relation to their husbands. She, on the contrary, is considered significant enough to be named as an individual. Though she is also identified as the wife of Lappidoth, this relationship plays no part in the roles she fulfills. If people come to her for judgment, it

Deborah's character demonstrates how God chooses those whom the society least expects to accomplish great things for God and for God's people.

is safe to presume that she is known for her wisdom and fairness. Barak, the military leader to whom she delivered a message from God (v.6-7), lacks courage and refuses to heed God's command unless Deborah accompanies him (v.8). Deborah, on the other hand, appears to be fearless. This does not mean that women are more courageous than men. Biblical characters are sketched in ways that underscore religious or theological meanings. In this narrative, Deborah's character demonstrates how God chooses those whom the society least expects to accomplish great things for God and for God's people.

"Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you." (Jeremiah 1:5)

The call narrative in the story of Jeremiah includes a quite personal element. The very first words suggest that the prophet had been chosen even before his conception. This opening passage continues with the commission designated by God: "a prophet to the nations I appoint you" (1:5). In keeping with the traditional pattern of the call narrative, Jeremiah advances a reason why he should not be expected to accept this commission: "I know not how to speak; I am too young" (v.6). Despite Jeremiah's hesitation, God will not be deterred: "Have no fear before them, because I am with you to deliver you" (v. 8). These words of assurance

are almost identical to those found in the Moses tradition ("I will be with you" [Exodus 3:12]). In both cases, it is the power of God that will accomplish God's plan, not the proficiency of the person called, regardless of what this proficiency might be. Although the account of Jeremiah's call does not include explicit mention of a sign that might verify the legitimacy of his commission, it does state that God touched the man's mouth, saying: "See, I place my words in your mouth" (v.9).

The words that Jeremiah spoke to the leaders of the kingdom of Judah of his day were harsh and upsetting. He was told by God to deliver words that would "root up and ... tear down ... destroy and ... demolish ... build and ... plant" (v.10). These words challenged the religious and social practices of his day, practices that were not faithful to the covenant bond that joined the people to God. However, as harsh as this message might have been, it also promised the possibility of a new life (build and plant). Once again, it would be up to the people to decide by their commitment whether their fate contained only destruction, or might also include transformation and rejuvenation.

We know from the book that bears his name, that Jeremiah was not happy with his prophetic role. He admits that he decided: "I will speak in his [God's] name no more." However, he was unable to keep the message to himself: "...it becomes like fire burning in my heart, imprisoned in my bones" (20:9). The vocation to serve God by serving God's people could not be denied.

"I beg you that you spare the lives of my people" (Esther 7:3)

The story of Esther is one of "rags to riches." The setting of this tradition is the royal court of the Persian empire. Though Cyrus the Persian ruler had decreed that the Israelites could leave the land of exile and return to their own homeland, many faithful Jews decided to remain in Persia and build a life there for themselves and their children. The family of Mordecai, a man from the tribe of Benjamin, was one such family. Mordecai had a young relative named Hadasah, whose beauty caught the attention of the royal attendants. They brought her before the king, who chose her to be his queen. She was henceforth known by her Persian name Esther, a form of the name of the goddess Ishtar. When a plot was devised to eradicate all of the Jews of the realm, Esther was in an ideal position to speak on their behalf. However, one could not come

before the king without being summoned. To do so would place one's life in jeopardy. What was Esther to do?

No call narrative is found in this tradition. However, one cannot deny the role that Esther played in saving her people from extinction. She used the privilege bestowed on her, because of her beauty and her subse-

It is very clear that the deliverance through Moses, the direction from Deborah, the message of Jeremiah, and the salvation that resulted from Esther's plea are all examples of how God works through individuals who of themselves are limited and who might also be afraid of what they are asked to do.

quent elevation to queenship, to plead for their survival, and she did this while placing herself in grave danger. If the king had determined to execute all of the Jews, then revealing her ethnic background could have cost Esther her life.

Many today might find several details in this story quite troubling. In the beginning of the story, Queen Vashti was deposed because she refused to flaunt her beauty before the inebriated king and courtiers. Esther, on the other hand, complied with the standards of beauty that were in vogue. At the end of the story, those who opposed the Jews were themselves slaughtered. Without justifying such behavior, we must remember that these stories came from societies that lived by standards different from ours. We must always be wary of any judgment that does not take into consideration the distinctive values and traditions of other cultures. Esther might have gained her privileged position in a way we question, but she did not cling to it selfishly when her people needed her help.

Old Testament vocations, then and now

This brief examination of vocation as found in these four passages reveals several points that continue to be

important for us today. Without feeling that we must pattern our lives after the lives of those depicted in the Bible, we can still embrace some of the values found there and express them in ways that are relevant to our time. First, the call from God to place oneself at the service of others is made known through the circumstances of ordinary life. It might occur while one is at work (Moses), or simply caught up in the circumstances of one's state of life (Esther). It might be that the one's natural abilities are called upon as avenues of service (Deborah), or that the desire to serve is placed in one's heart from the very beginning (Jeremiah). In each case, the one called made a life-changing decision in responding to that call.

Second, as the stories are told, it is very clear that the deliverance through Moses, the direction from Deborah, the message of Jeremiah, and the salvation that resulted from Esther's plea are all examples of how God works through individuals who of themselves are limited and who might also be afraid of what they are asked to do. The wondrous feats were God's victories, not theirs.

Finally, it is important to note that these individuals were not chosen for their merit. Nor was their call meant for their own enrichment or enhancement. They were called for the sake of the community. The kind of individualism that plagues many Western societies today was unheard of in the ancient world. This does not mean that individuals were sacrificed for the group, but that individuals had a keen sense of group identity, group solidarity and group responsibility.

These stories prompt us to be open to God in the circumstances of our lives, to acknowledge that we are merely earthen vessels of divine power or instruments in God's hands, and to offer ourselves for the service of others. If we can do this, who is to say that God will not accomplish through us feats that match what God accomplished through Moses, Deborah, Jeremiah and Esther? ✚

Call and commission in the New Testament

by Jerome H. Neyrey, SJ

What were they talking about?

“Vocations” in the New Testament? No, and yes. There is no lexical term in Greek for this phenomenon, although many instances of the phenomenon can be found. For example, individual New Testament characters say of themselves or others that they are “sent” (Matthew 10:5; Mark 1:1; John 3:17), “called” (Matthew 4:21; Galatians 1:15) “set apart” (Acts 13:2; Romans 1:1; Galatians 1:15), “received grace and apostleship” (Romans 1:5; Galatians 2:8), “called by the will of God an apostle” (1 Corinthians 1:1; 2 Corinthians 1:1; Ephesians 1:1), and “chosen as apostle of God and servant of Christ Jesus” (Titus 1:1; 2 Peter 1:1). Moreover, the Jesus groups are also “called”: “called to be saints” (Corinthians 1:2) and “[to] those who are called, beloved in God the Father and kept for Jesus Christ” (Jude 1). Thus “vocation” refers to individuals whom God authorizes for a specific task and to groups who are gathered and groomed by God. The writers of the New Testament emphatically state that mortals should never presume to take these honors to themselves (Hebrews 5:4), but are clients of a generous God who alone can ascribe such honors. The grace to “call” or “chose” is God’s alone to bestow.

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Jesus’ vocation

Jesus, too, experienced a “call” which tradition identifies as his “baptism.” A pious person like Jesus heard of a prophet who was mighty in word and deed: “Why then did you go out? To see a prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet” (Matthew 11:9). Jesus joined others and made a pilgrimage to the Jordan to hear John. All of these pilgrims separated from their families and homes to enter into a liminal process typical of status transformation rituals. We assume that Jesus and many others remained with John for some time, during which they heard him “preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins” (Mark 1:4) and proclaiming, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Matthew 3:2). John was distinguished for purificatory rites, which took the place of sin offerings in the Temple. Like all prophets, he could read hearts and see through hypocrisy (Matthew 3:7-10). We assume that Jesus observed all of this, and in doing so he himself learned to be a prophet, which in ritual studies is called the liminal state leading to a status transformation. At the appropriate time, Jesus presented himself to John, his mentor, for some conclusion of his stay. John declared that “baptism for the forgiveness of sins” was not appropriate for Jesus, the initiand. Jesus, like all those coming to John, is unlike them because he is fundamentally pious and reverent. Nevertheless, he enters the waters, which John poured over him. At this moment, Jesus ends his initiation, for God speaks to him, giving him a new role and status: “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased” (3:17). God, who is the premier reader of hearts, knows the stuff Jesus is made of. Hence of Jesus God says that he is God’s “beloved” one, of whom God is “well pleased.” Since

this event at the Jordan is the first narrative about Jesus in public, minimally we think of Jesus now beginning his life as an elder (30 years old), who now is graced with a prophetic call from God. God's voice and the descent of the Spirit set Jesus apart for a new role ("prophet mighty in word and deed," Luke 24:19) and a new status, highly God-favored ("beloved son ... well pleased"). His role, moreover, is that of a warrior or champion. Since the descending Spirit is "clean" and "holy," Jesus is empowered to war on the "unclean" spirits, especially those who harm and injure God's people. He is then, a warrior liberating God's people. His "baptism," then, may be seen as a

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status transformation ritual whereby this pious person was taught to be a prophet and finally established as a God-favored person with heavenly power to battle evil and Satan.

Volunteers?

Recall the pattern seen earlier that God calls, blesses, sets apart, etc. Honor in this case, moreover, is bestowed by God as grace. Those called are passive recipients, because in terms of "call," it would be presumptive and thus shameful to anticipate God's pleasure. But may one volunteer? No, it was shameful to do so! Why? What's at stake here? The answer lies deep in the culture of the New Testament world, which was dominated by the value of "honor." Honor refers to the reputation, respect, or worth of a person. The sources of honor are basically twofold: honor is either bestowed or earned. Regarding bestowed honor, persons born of noble families automatically enjoy the respect and reputation of their tribes and clans. Similarly, people are authorized by superiors for special tasks, such as the procurator whom Caesar sent out to Palestine.

Some people experience the laying on of hands, authorizing them for a task. This "honor" is bestowed on individuals, not earned. This bestowed honor describes both the variety of people "called" and even Jesus, set aside by God. Yet others earn their reputation the old fashioned way: they work for it. Prowess was always honored, prowess from military, athletic, aesthetic and dramatic achievements. Finally, people earn honor by challenging others and taking it from them, either by putting them in one's debt or diminishing them in the eyes of others.

No one in the New Testament volunteers, and those who try are dismissed. Take, for example, Matthew 8:18-22 where two people come to Jesus and offer their services. To the person who volunteers "to follow you wherever you go," Jesus says that, unlike the birds, he and his followers have no place to lay their heads, i.e., no family, no home. A second volunteer wants to follow, but begs time to attend to his family and home, i.e., to bury his father, the kind of thing for which Jesus warned off the first volunteer. Jesus demands that he turn his back on his family and follow Jesus. Both volunteers fail, but why? Volunteers belong to the same class of people who compliment someone, make requests of them, or proffer gifts to them. The ancients interpreted these actions as seeking to impose on someone, to get something from him, to put him in their debt, and so find some social advantage. Jesus refuses the compliment, "Good teacher" (Matthew 19:16-17); people endlessly make requests of him, many of which he refuses (Mark 7:27; 10:35-38; John 4:47-49). There are no narratives of people offering Jesus gifts (i.e., bribes). But as we all know from our lobbyists' scandals, such people surely expect something in return, maybe not right now, but later. Volunteers are the same. Jesus is put on the spot; does he care to have such people as his disciples? After all, he seems quite selective of his closest disciples (Matthew 10:1-4). Volunteers, then, challenge Jesus in a positive way, not to embarrass him or send him packing in shame. But they are putting him on the spot, trying to get some advantage from him. Jesus dispenses the honor and grace to his discipleship; they will not earn respect and reputation at his expense. In the ancient world, then, volunteering does not measure up to the premier criterion of a vocation, namely "being called" as "given a gift." Volunteering presumes a role and status (Hebrews 5:4), which dishonors Jesus and his Father.

The rich (young) man.

As Jesus travels “on the way” to Jerusalem (directional), he teaches “his way” of thinking, acting and valuing (spiritual “way”). The episode of the rich man occurs in this context as Jesus repeatedly teaches the “way of non-honor,” that is, of being least, last, non-honored by others. The rich man comes to Jesus, itself a significant point. He makes no request, but he begins praising Jesus (“Good Teacher”), a compliment which Jesus rejects: “No one is good but God alone” (Mark 10:18). The man’s question is self-evident: “What must I do to be saved?” Jesus repeats “the way” of Israel, the Ten Commandments, which all should know. Confessing that he has kept them all from his youth, the man gave cause for Jesus to “love” him. Here is a very good man, who is observant, loyal, faithful, evidently a paragon of patriarchal virtue. Thus far, there is no “call” nor is the man a volunteer. But Jesus’ next words are an invitation to walk in his own way, that is, the “non-honor” achieved by the shedding of one source of honor: wealth. But the man left sorrowful, because he had great possessions.

A vocation story? On the one hand it confirms one of the critical criteria for discipleship, namely, freedom from family and land, a key aspect of “the way of Jesus.” On the other hand, he came to Jesus and asked the question of questions: “What must I do to be saved?” He is no volunteer but a person in search of wisdom and grace. Jesus “calls” him to belong to his group: “Go, sell what you have ... and come follow me” (Mark 10:21). This is a “call” to discipleship; nothing is said about a new role. He indeed hears Jesus’ invitation to join his group, but the cost proves too dear.

Therefore, let us put the story in context as one of the many aspects of Jesus’ “way.” That way turns from honor as the world defines it to “non-honor” as a disciple, who foreswears the honor games played in the village and the honor value given to land, family, wealth, etc. This becomes clear in the following discourse between Jesus and Peter over wealth and the “honor” that comes from giving up all to be Jesus’ disciple. As such, the rich man is asked to do what all the disciples have done: leave family, lands, wealth. His call to discipleship is refused.

Jesus calls others

Whom does Jesus call? The synoptics narrate that Jesus first called Peter and Andrew and gave them a new

role, to fish for people to join his group (Matthew 4:18-22). Similarly the brothers, James and John, followed him. The evangelists consider this an important narrative because they situate it at the start of Jesus’ public career. We note that both pairs of brothers “immediately” responded, suggesting an ideal response for the encouragement of the audience. Moreover, they seemingly separated from their families, their wives, their parents, and their trade or livelihood. This identifies them as special people who put everything else in second place, to gain the prize of being Jesus’ disciples.

Is it likely that Jesus just showed up and called strangers who responded positively? Some describe the

Most people who are called in the Gospels are recruited by people who know them already. “Follow me” is but the latest, albeit the most powerful, thread in the tapestry.

situation this way. Jesus, a worker in wood, came to the place where his skill was needed. Fishermen fish from boats which are made of wood (although very little else was made of wood). So, Jesus presumably had prior acquaintance with the two sets of brothers. Hence, when Jesus “calls” them, they already have many strands of attachment to him. What seems important here is that most people who are called in the Gospels are recruited by people who know them already. “Follow me” is but the latest, albeit the most powerful, thread in the tapestry.

This is by no means far fetched, for the same pattern is repeated in the fourth Gospel (1:35-51). First a brother calls his brother: “Andrew first found his brother Simon and said, ‘We have found the Messiah.’” We do not know who recruited, but there is a definite geographical connection: “Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter” (1:44). Finally, Philip called Nathanael, whom we learn later is from Cana in Galilee (21:2). There seem to be many kinds of ties binding these figures: kinship (brothers); social (same town and same area). They are not strangers to each other,

which facilitates how and why they contacted one another.

The fourth Gospel, moreover, describes a type of liminal process that initiands go through. First, they are all separated from their previous place and tasks: "Come! See!" Second, they are instructed about Jesus in a statement of his role and status, which instruction is characteristic of transformation rituals. Third, proof of their transformation to the role and status of disciple

"God revealed his Son to me" (1:16), causing Paul to change his mind about Jesus, now acknowledging Jesus as "Son" (and Christ, Lord). We note the important elements of a "vocation" here: divine favor and grace.

rests in Jesus' word to each, indicating that the liminal process succeeded. Andrew heard the word from John, his old mentor, "Behold the Lamb of God"; he separated from John and attached himself to Jesus, whom he labeled "Rabbi." His liminal period was "they stayed with him that day" (1:39). Jesus' own invitation to Andrew to "Come! See!" succeeded and Andrew became a disciple, proof of which is found in his catechizing Peter. Andrew announces a discipleship word ("We have found the Messiah") and invites Peter to separate himself and enter a liminal period, after which Jesus proclaims his transformation to a new role: "You will be called Cephas (which means Peter)." Philip, whose recruitment is difficult to discern in 1:43-44, proves that he is an insider by telling Nathanael, "We have found him of whom Moses in the Law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus of Nazareth" (1:45). But now we meet resistance: the man from Cana looks down on Nazareth, thus putting an obstacle in the way. But his very struggle becomes his badge of honor. "Come and see," said Philip. Nathanael separated himself from the "fig tree" and came to learn of Jesus, for which he is praised by Jesus, a distinction bestowed on no one else. And in a reversal of the recruitment process, he acknowledges Jesus as "Son of God, King of Israel." Jesus confirms him as an

insider by promising that he will see "greater things than these" (1:50). Thus "vocation" or recruitment is initiated by persons who are already believers, who inform close associates about Jesus under some title and invite them to "Come and see." The invitee experiences a status transformation by separation from ordinary life and by entrance into a liminal period of development. Jesus acknowledges this change in a face-to-face exchange during which he names the person anew or bestows praises and promises.

Saul/Paul

Paul wrote his own version of his call in Galatians 1-2, which we will use for this article, instead of Acts 9, 21, 26. The form of Paul's narrative derives from the encomium, the genre which instructs authors how to praise someone and whence to find the grounds for praise. The encomium contains five basic topics: 1. origins, 2. nurture and training, 3. achievements, 4. deeds of the soul, and 5. death. The first four are in view in Galatians 1-2. People's origins speak to their status. Geography looks to ethnos or homeland: Greeks are more noble than barbarians; city folk superior to country folk. While Paul comes from "a no low-status city" (Acts 21:39), Nathanael knows that nothing good can come from Nazareth (John 1:46). Generation looks to descent from a noble family, tribe or clan, and Paul enjoys an honorable pedigree: "of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews" (Philippians 3:5). Yet even in this orthodox matrix, God had already "called" Paul: God had "'set me apart' before I was born, and 'called' me through his grace" (Galatians 1:15). From before he was born, then, he had a "vocation" from God. As regards his training, Paul was brought up as a Pharisee's Pharisee: "I advanced in Judaism beyond many of my own age, so zealous was I for the traditions of my fathers" (1:14; see Philippians 3:6). As regards deeds, he was convinced that he served God most faithfully when he persecuted the deviant followers of Jesus: "I persecuted the church of God and violently tried to destroy it" (Galatians 1:13). But God changed him. Consistency was the great virtue of noble folk; change was not desirable or expected. In general, change is taken as a weakness or a fault. However, in Paul's case, God instigates the change by illuminating Paul with favored knowledge. Previously Paul considered Jesus as a maverick, a sinner whose poison in Israel he must expel. But "God revealed his Son to me" (1:16), causing Paul to change his mind about Jesus, now acknowledging Jesus as "Son" (and

Christ, Lord). We note the important elements of a “vocation” here: divine favor and grace. This means a change of theology, and a commissioning—all worked by God. Paul states the purpose of God’s revelation, “In order that I might preach him among the Gentiles” (1:16), a role which the Jerusalem church ultimately acknowledged (2:7-9). Paul’s experience is often called a “conversion,” but he does not change from being zealous for God; conversion, the experts tell us, means moving loyalty from one god to another. Paul had no such “conversion.” God shows him that his zeal should now be directed to proclaiming Jesus as holy, kosher, etc. Thus it is better to say that, than that he was “converted.” God chose him, revealed his son to him, changed him and commissioned him. As such, then, Paul’s account of his vocation coheres with all the data seen above: it is God who “calls” Paul, who sets him apart, and who freely pours his spirit on Paul.

The risen Lord and the disciples

Finally, let us examine the commissioning of the disciples. Although Mark reported no appearances of the risen Jesus, the other evangelists do. When the risen Jesus appears, these appearances function to commission those to whom he appears. It is our good fortune that scholars have examined the “call narratives” in the Bible, which typically structure the call and consecration of people who are set aside for sacred duties; they contain: 1) an introduction, 2) confirmation, reaction, and reassurance, 3) a commission, 4) an objection, reassurance, and sign, and 5) a conclusion. This form splendidly interprets the commissioning of Moses (Exodus 3:13-4:9), Gideon (Judges 6:11-35); Jeremiah (Jeremiah 1:1-10); and the disciples of Jesus.

Introduction Who is standing where, doing what, when?

Confirmation-reaction-reassurance When the heavenly world enters ours, it typically occasions fear and terror, which the appearing figure removes by asserting the benign nature of the visitation: “Peace be with you.”

Commission Moses is sent to Egypt; Gideon to battle the Philistines; and Jeremiah to build up and tear down.

Objection-reassurance-sign Yet Moses objects and suggests that Aaron go; Gideon objects that a mere 300 Israelites can battle thousands of Philistines. God *reassures* with another “Peace be with you.” A heavenly *sign* solves the objections: Moses does tricks with his rod; Gideon plays games with the fleece. Thus do the people of the Bible narrate divine commissionings.

Apropos of the resurrection stories in the New Testament, this “call narrative” form serves as an indispensable tool for interpreting the appearances of the risen Jesus.

Introductions This varies. Jerusalem or Galilee? Same day or later? To male disciples or female ones?

Reaction-Reassurance when Jesus appears, he says, “Peace be with you”; nevertheless they were “startled and frightened, and supposed that they saw a spirit” (Luke 24:36-37).

Commission Immediately following the climax of the appearance they are commissioned by Jesus. To the disciples, Matthew’s Jesus commands: “Go, make disciples of all nations, baptizing ... teaching all that I

Thus it is better to say that Paul enjoyed a vocation, a grace and favor from God, than that he was converted.” God chose him, revealed his son to him, changed him and commissioned him.

have commanded you” (Matthew 28:19-20). After teaching the disciples how to read Scripture, Luke’s Jesus authorizes them: “You are witnesses of these things” (24:48). John’s Jesus likewise commissions the disciples: “As the Father has sent me, even so I send you.... If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained” (20:23). There are objections: Jesus has to eat before Luke’s disciples to acknowledge that he is no spirit (24:41-43). But Thomas voices the premier objection: “Unless I see in his hands ... place my finger ... place my hand” (20:25). Jesus answers this insulting objection by appearing before Thomas and inviting him to do what he demanded of Jesus (20:27). The point is that most of the resurrection appearances by the risen Jesus function to commission certain select people to tasks both outside the group and inside it too. This pattern would be true of the commissioning of Peter in John 21:15-18 and, I believe, of Paul according to 1 Corinthians 15:5-10. Thus what the ancients describe as a “call narrative” is an excellent illustration of what we understand by “vocation.”

Summary

Roles To what roles are people set aside and commissioned? As Jesus was sent, the primary role is that of apostle, i.e., one who is sent. The duties of this role are directed both outside (preaching the gospel about Jesus) and inside (administering a church gathered in Jesus' name, e.g., release/retain sins). Paul was sent not to baptize, but to preach (1 Corinthians 1:17), which means that he recruited the Corinthians by his word and continued to instruct the growing church. Although mandated by Jesus to serve tables (Luke 22:27), the apostles authorized a new arrangement. They declared that they would now "devote ourselves

A true apostle is authorized by God and sent by Jesus; this is always a commissioning, a grace, a role given them.

to prayer and to the ministry of the word" (Acts 6:4), while others were picked by the church to serve the tables (6:3). If this is accurate, the apostles changed the instructions of Jesus. Apostle is only one role to which people were called and commissioned. The Twelve were sent as prophets: to preach the kingdom and to work wonders (Matthew 10:5-15). But a true apostle is authorized by God and sent by Jesus; this is always a commissioning, a grace, a role given them.

Role of the church We do not know how people became "prophets and teachers," but of their number the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them" (Acts 13:2). After the church's fasting and prayer, others "laid their hands on them and sent them off" (13:3). The church acknowledges and confirms what God has started. Were there "lone rangers" who set out on their own? Evidently, yes, as we find in the Pastorals and the Johannine epistles. But there is always a debate over their legitimacy.

God calls, but we recruit God declares people like Paul to be prophets and/or apostles. But the disciples recruit others to join them. We are passive recipients

of God's call, since God is bestowing a grace and showing a favor by this call. Conversely, those recruited must voluntarily accept this task, unlike Jonah who fled from God's call. Paul cites both his call and the election of the Galatians as examples of God's pervasive grace and favor. Since the calls are generally to labor in bringing others to insight, wholeness and holiness, those called become brokers of God's benefaction. God, of course, is the patron and benefactor; the church is his client, a typical relationship understood throughout antiquity. But brokers abound. Jesus was the primary broker, mediator, intermediary, priest between God patron and the clients of God. Hence all who are called and set aside for sacred duties assume a broker's role, including Peter, Paul, and the Twelve.

Status transformation rituals The recruitment scenes in the New Testament are structured as transformation rituals: separation, liminal period (a time of learning, discipline), ritual of change and acknowledgment of the new role by others. Paul's experience in Acts 9 is told in such a way as to appear as a transformation ritual. Moreover, when the risen Jesus commissions the Twelve, it would appear that the liminal period of his arrest, trial, crucifixion and burial are the moments of learning, praying and practicing humility and lowliness which equip them for their commissioning as Christ-bearers.

Clearly, the New Testament clearly has much to say about vocation and call. May our study of these themes in the ancient world enrich and inspire our efforts to build a future for religious life in the contemporary world. ✚

As the church and culture have changed, so, too, has the way we've understood "vocation."

Theology of vocation through the centuries

by Paul D. Holland, SJ

In traditional Christian usage, vocation refers to a divine call to undertake a particular activity or embrace a particular "state of life" on behalf of God or the community. Popularly, the term often became attached more or less exclusively to calling to priesthood or religious life, although theologians also were careful to treat marriage and the single state outside of religious community as genuine vocations. They also stressed that, prior to a call to a particular state of life, there is a universal vocation to salvation and holiness. Since Vatican II, out of sensitivity to ecumenical concerns some writers have described this universal vocation as a call to "self-actualization," "self-transcendence," "freedom," "openness to others and to God."

Vocation in Scriptures

The Old Testament is replete with the stories of individuals whom God called upon to fulfill the divine plan. God sent Abram out of Ur (Genesis 12); sent Moses to Pharaoh (Exodus 3); chose Joshua to lead the people into the Promised Land (Joshua 1); selected first Saul (1 Samuel 8), then David (1 Samuel 16) as king. God called Isaiah and Jeremiah to be his prophets; their calls were deemed predestined "from the womb" (Isaiah 49:1, Jeremiah 1:5). Israel itself was corporately called to be God's covenant partner, to acknowledge him as God and to be God's people (Genesis 17, Deuteronomy 11).

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New Testament writers describe Jesus as coming to call sinners (Matthew 9:13) to repentance and faith (Mark 1:15). He also called particular individuals to discipleship (Matthew 10:1, Mark 3:13; 6:7), teaching them specially (Mark 4:33) and bestowing on them authority to imitate his ministry of healing and exorcism (Luke 2:1).

The early church continued to experience certain individuals, notably Paul (Galatians 1:15) and Barnabas (Acts 13:2), as divinely called to particular ministries. It also interpreted conversion to Christ as a call (1 Corinthians 7:17) whereby God joined Christians to his Son (1 Corinthians 1:9), destined them for peace (1 Corinthians 7:15), liberty (Galatians 5:13), holiness (1 Thessalonians 4:7) and eternal life (1 Timothy 6:12), lived out amongst all "the saints" (1 Corinthians 1:2), so they might share the glory of the Kingdom (1 Thessalonians 2:12). The New Testament asserts that Christians have been called out of darkness to God's own light (1 Peter 2:9) and so must live lives worthy of their call (Ephesians 4:1).

Patristic period

The post-New Testament church witnessed the transition from a plurality of ministries to a relatively uniform and fixed structure of official ministry, though the actual process of selecting candidates for such ministry is unclear, the community and its leaders called *episcopoi*. ("He who governs all should be selected by all," Gregory the Great; "It comes from divine authority that a bishop be chosen in the presence of all the people before the eyes of all, and that he be approved as worthy and fit by public judgment and

testimony,” Cyprian); and those chosen had to accept the office freely. Occasionally monks, like Gregory of Nazianzus (330-390), were made bishops by popular acclaim against their will; and Ambrose was only a catechumen when the crowds in Milan made him bishop. Though the selection was the community’s task, this selection was understood as an expression of divine call.

At the same time, with Anthony of Egypt (250-356) and more properly with Pachomius (290-346), an intensely ascetical way of life, embracing the “evangelical counsels”—poverty, chastity and obedience—emerged for the laity. Anthony’s own religious

For Thomas Aquinas, the individual in the religious life realized a higher perfection by accepting the counsel to renounce all so as to live for God alone.

experience became paradigmatic for the movement: he heard the Gospel words, “If you would be perfect, sell what you have, give to the poor...and come follow me,” Mark 10:21; determined that these words were addressed specifically to him; and complied. Both this “religious life” and martyrdom grew out of early Christianity’s eschatological orientation; with the peace of the church (312), the way of the counsels (particularly virginity) came to be regarded as an unbloody or “white” martyrdom, now continuous and perpetual.

The Fathers generally held that this life of the evangelical counsels was open to all and could be urged upon all Christians. (See Chrysostom, “On Virginity”; Ambrose, “Concerning Virgins”; Augustine, “On Holy Virginity”) Those aspiring to live the counsels did not need any extraordinary religious experience beyond a desire to follow Christ. Though regarded as a more perfect way of Christian life, no individual was morally bound to embrace the counsels. (See Basil, “On Virginity”; Chrysostom, “On Virginity”; Cyprian, “On the Habit of Virginity”; Ambrose, “On Widows”).

However, once an individual had decided upon this way of life, the Fathers urged as little delay as possible (Basil, Monastic Constitutions; Chrysostom, Homily 27 on Matthew; Gregory the great, Pentecost Homily) lest temptations or worldly concerns deter the individual from the decision.

Medieval church

In the patristic era, religious life had been governed by the rules written by Pachomius, Basil, Cassian and, quintessentially, Benedict. As religious life became more formally organized, the question of vocation increasingly assumed a legal cast. (Indeed the concept of a permanent “state of life” derived from Roman civil law; a person incurred obligations from which dispensation were required.)

The Gregorian reforms (G. 1025?-1085), and Gratian’s 12th-century organization of canon law raised questions about the nature of the vows and the status of the vowed individual in the church. It was at this time that the distinction between “secular” and “religious” clergy first appeared. Monks, religious clergy and virgins now were seen as forming a common state (von Hertling).

The new vigor of the mendicant orders promoted the practice of, and reflection upon, religious life and the vows. But Scholastic speculation on the Christian states of life suffered from its attempt to express patristic spirituality in Aristotelian philosophical categories. Gradually Scholastic theology articulated more clearly the distinction between the life of the counsels, as an ecclesial vocation (that is, as having the church as its source), and priesthood, as a divine vocation (instituted by Christ) to administer the sacraments. The first mention of the three vows of poverty, chastity and obedience is in the twelfth-century, *Rule for the Hermits of St. Augustine*. It was Innocent III (1202) who termed those vows “essential to monastic life.”

St. Thomas Aquinas

For Thomas, the “states” are those ways of Christian life within which the individual can realize the “particular perfection” proper to each state. And so each Christian, living in the “state” of supernatural grace, realizes perfection by obeying the command of loving God and neighbor. The individual in the religious life realized a higher perfection by accepting the counsel to renounce all so as to live for God alone. Episcopacy is also a state of perfection, realized in the

pastoral responsibilities bishops undertake. "Hence one is said to be properly in the state of perfection not because he performs a perfect act of charity, but because he has obligated himself forever and with some solemnity, to those things that pertain to perfection" (S. Th., I-II, 184, a.4).

For Thomas, vocation to religious life had both an external source (Scripture, the example of Jesus and the apostles) and an internal one (the impulse of grace). The external call predisposes the individual to hear Christ's words; but that external call is not efficacious without an internal grace or call. This internal grace is only given to those whom God has predestined for the

The Protestant Reformers stressed that the call of God was most particularly answered by performing the duties of ordinary secular life.

life of the counsels. At the same time, no one is bound under pain of sin to embrace religious life since vows are counsels, not commands.

Luther and Calvin

The Protestant Reformers stressed that the call of God was most particularly answered by performing the duties of ordinary secular life. In place of evangelical counsels, the Reformers sought to inculcate the virtues of business and family life. Calvin declared that, "every man's mode of life...is a kind of station assigned him by the Lord, that he may not be always driven about at random" (Institutes, book III, chapter X, sect 6). One is bound to walk in this path as God had determined it. Such an approach raises the importance of all "mundane" activity; but it also curbs ambition and social mobility, for "free from the impulse of rashness, [the Christian] will not attempt more than his calling justifies, knowing that it is unlawful to overleap the prescribed bounds" (ibid).

Luther reversed the usual Scholastic arrangement of the life of counsels as higher than the life of fulfilling

the precepts. Instead, Luther argues, "...because God's command is there, even [housework] must be praised as a service of God far surpassing the holiness and asceticism of all monks and nuns. For here there is no command of God. But there God's command is fulfilled, that one should honor father and mother and help in the care of the home" (works, Erlanger ed., vol V, p 102).

Generally, Luther agrees with Calvin on the Sacred value of faithful performing secular tasks. Since such duties are only vocations in the strict sense if undertaken as genuine service to others, Luther must encounter difficulty in assessing the purity of that internal disposition. Furthermore, Luther's distinction of law and Gospel raises the problem of how grace could operate through law in various secular vocations.

Catholic Reformation

After the Council of Trent, much of the Catholic reformation effort focused on abuses among the clergy and religious. Spiritual writers increasingly attacked what came to be termed the "external vocation theory," which held that the call was general and external and hence requiring neither special internal signs of divine call, nor any serious discernment on the part of the individual. There grew up a universal condemnation of the practice (praised by Aquinas, among others) of sending children to the priesthood as an oblation for parents. Instead these writers, following the lead of St. Alphonsus Liguori, asserted that only those who knew themselves truly called by God should be ordained. This special internal call was now deemed to constitute vocation properly speaking; without it there was no licit ordination. At the same time, a called individual has a grave obligation to respond to such a call; ignoring such a call certainly risked rejecting the graces of God and could imperil one's salvation.

This new theory (later termed "attraction theory") went on to articulate the signs whereby one could detect the presence of such a predestining call to priesthood, sanctity of life, purity of intention, sufficient education and ability to charge the duties of ministry. Bishops were to be charged with the responsibility of investigating those signs, and declaring if God has called the candidate to priesthood. One final element introduced to the theory was the presence in the soul of a strong and relatively permanent attraction to ordination, admitting of no serious doubt that such was God's will for the individual. Catholic writers continued to stress the voluntary nature of religious life, due

to its ecclesial source and its nature as response to counsels rather than obligating precepts.

Lahitton

In 1909, a French canon, Joseph Lahitton rejected this internal attraction theory as too mystical and unverifiable. In particular, he claimed that someone could demand ordination on the grounds that we would risk damnation if he failed to follow God's will-as revealed in his attraction to priesthood; and the church would be obliged in justice to ordain him. But, Lahitton objected, no one has a right to ordination. Further, he asked, what of those priests who never felt such an internal call; were they not really ordained?

Lahitton maintained that vocation has a material element (the presence of the aptitudes and right intentions the older theory rightly demanded) and a formal element (the call of the ordaining prelate).

Lahitton instead maintained that vocation has a material element (the presence of the aptitudes and right intentions the older theory rightly demanded) and a formal element (the call of the ordaining prelate). Thus, only those whom a legitimate ecclesial superior calls to priesthood in fact have a vocation. Hence, merely having the material element bestows no "right" to ordination: only a hierarchical act of ecclesial authority does that. And such an act bestows valid and licit ordination, without regard to any quasi-mystical attraction or religious experience of locution or internal movement of the Holy Spirit.

A papal commission, under Cardinal Secretary of State Mery de Val investigated Lahitton's book and in 1912 gave it qualified support. It agreed that no one had a right to ordination, and that those validly ordained could be assured that they had thereby received a vocation from God.

Thomistic Revival

Lahitton's objections to the popular theology of vocation forced theologians to reexamine their assumptions about divine call and the role of the church in vocation. Coordinate with a general revival of interest in Thomism, a number of theologians in the 1930's and '40s returned to Thomas to mine anew his approach to vocation. Generally, they agree that vocation consists of both the external call of the Scriptures and an interior grace by which God moves a particular individual to respond to that call. The question then debated was the nature of this grace, was it efficacious antecedent to the individual's response, or consequent upon one's free acceptance of the call? (Such a discussion in fact was a replay of the debates of the Dominicans and Jesuits of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries on the relationship of predestination and free will.) Most theologians agreed that church authority discerns and confirms the presence of that grace and the authenticity of the response. These authorities increasingly made use of medical and psychological tools as part of this investigation.

Vatican II

The Second Vatican Council urged religious communities to renew their foundational charisms; but it paid greatest attention not to religious life but to the laity. The council grounded its meditation on the laity in the supreme reality of the nature of Christian baptism. It held that all Christians have a vocation to serve the church's mission in the world; and they have this, not by derivation or concession of the hierarchy, not by particular religious experience, but by virtue of their baptism. The council left behind all the discussion about the nature of auxiliary grace, in order to assert that vocation was not the province of the few in the life of religious vow or in order, but the duty of all who belong to Christ.

Personalism

In the aftermath of Vatican II, greater ecumenical sensitivity made spiritual writers aware that their notion of vocation had ignored most of the world. Did God only speak to Christians? If God called to non-Christians, was God's only word to them, "convert-become Christians"? If there is a universal vocation to salvation, how does God address that call to most of humanity? Through the ontological structures of their self-transcendence (Rahner)? Through their own relig-

ions (Kung)? If God does not demand that all be Christian, then does God demand a particular way of life for any given individual?

Personalism maintains that the traditional notion of the “will of God” or a specific plan for one’s life violates human freedom, now seen as the chief characteristic of human life. Rather than having such a plan, God instead ratifies all good choices and works all of them together for the Kingdom. Everyone has a vocation to refer all creation back to God in praise and thanksgiving; but then to embrace one’s freedom, live Kingdom values of justice and truth, and God will endorse all that is good, and reshape all that is inadequate, for the coming Kingdom.

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Contemporary view of vocation

The present discussion of vocation has frequently been subsumed under the larger question of the nature of ministry: the uniqueness of ordained ministries, their relationship to lay ministries, to religious life, and to the mission of the church. But the general theological presumptions on which that discussion is based is well expressed by the bishops meeting in Puebla in 1979; “According to God’s plan, all of us Christians are to find fulfillment as human beings. This is our human vocation. We are also to find fulfillment as Christians, living out our baptism and its summons to be holy (communion and cooperation with God), to be active members of the community, and to bear witness to the Kingdom (communion and cooperation with others.) This is our Christian vocation. Finally, we must discover the concrete vocation (as lay person, consecrated religious, or hierarchical minister) that will enable us to make our specific contribution to the construction of the Kingdom. This is our specific Christian vocation. In this way we will carry out our evangelizing mission in a full and organic way. ✚

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Here is a program that helps high school students develop spiritual depth for making prayerful decisions.

Ready? Set ... GOD!

Introducing high school students to prayerful discernment for life choices

by Pat Dorobek, SND; Leanne Kerschner, OSF; Sandra Sherman, OSU; Randall Kin, OFM Conv.

“Ready? Set...GOD!” (RSG) was born out of the desire of several vocation directors in the diocese of Toledo, Ohio, who saw the need to create a “culture of discernment,” as suggested by theologian Tom Beau-doin at the National Religious Vocation Conference’s Convocation 2000. At this time the writers of the program are ready for publication, and a complete package of “Ready? Set... GOD!” will soon be available from National Coalition for Church Vocations.

This program takes students through a week-long process that helps them identify their gifts and realize the importance of prayer and God in every good decision. With appropriate decision-making skills, our young people can clarify vocation or life choices, as well as career choices.

We have found that high school juniors are the prime group for RSG. The earlier in the school year they are exposed to discernment skills, the better, since by sec-

ond semester they will have already begun the process of choosing a college and/or career.

It is important that the RSG program not be looked upon as just another class but as a workshop. All materials need to be prepared prior to the sessions. The students are placed in groups of five to seven. We encourage them to participate by having the facilitator avoid making judgmental comments and make great efforts not to mention grading. Each student receives a folder with items for the day to which they can add as the week progresses.

Day One

The goals are to give the young people an introduction to discernment and lead them toward better self-knowledge.

We give them nametags so that they can be called by name. Students are also given a logo for their folders. The significance of the logo will be explained later in the article.

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RSG uses a song as its theme and opening prayer for each day of the workshop. We use “Hold It Up To The Light” as our theme song because it is easy to sing, and the lyrics contain many of the principles of living in discernment. (See the lyrics at: <http://www.christianrocklyrics.com/smalltownpoets/holdituptothelight.php>.) The song’s upbeat melody is a positive way to begin each session, and its hope-filled lyrics are a teaching tool. Next we introduce the stu-

dents to the *Knowing Me* worksheet, which has several sections. Each section moves the student deeper into who he or she is; i.e., his or her likes and dislikes, etc. When students realize how important it is to know who they are, *the better off in life they will be*. If you don't know who you are, it will be hard to find out who you want to be or what you want to do in life. This sheet also helps students talk with each other in a non-threatening way.

Continuing with the theme of self-knowledge, the students are asked to create a clay expression of themselves, taking into consideration their God-given gifts and talents. It may be helpful to give some examples, such as, "if you are versed in music, you may want to shape a musical instrument or a musical note; if you like a certain sport, you may want to create some object of that sport." Students are then asked to share the meaning of their clay images in their small groups. One student from each table is asked to share the meaning of his or her clay image with the entire group. These images are collected so they can be included during the prayer service at the end of the workshop.

Over several days of the *RSG* discernment program, participants complete pieces of a page named *Circles of Discernment*. There are six interlocking circles. The circles relate to a life of discernment and prayer. The center circle reads *GOD*, and all the other circles interlock with the *GOD* circle. The purpose of this page is to affirm that God is the center of our lives. This page also helps participants understand that many parts of our lives overlap and interlock with one another, and at the same time these same parts have a distinction of their own. The facilitator tells the participants that there is an assumption that everyone participating in the program desires or already has a foundation of prayer and a relationship with God.

The students are assigned as "homework" the bottom two circles from the *Circles of Discernment* worksheet: *How do I pray?* and *What things in my life lead me to prayer?*

Day Two

The theme is image of God and the importance of prayer. The objectives are to reflect on the place of prayer in one's life and to consider one's images of God.

The "homework" is discussed. The students are encouraged to share at their table and, time permitting,

some might share with the entire group their responses to Circles 1 and 2 of the *Circles of Discernment* worksheet: *How do I pray?* and *What things in my life lead me to prayer?*

The facilitator shares his or her image of God and its importance to prayer, after which a song expressing various images of God is played. (We suggest Avalon's "By Heart By Soul," album). This helps the students visualize their image of God. We all have images of God, and they change throughout life. As students or adults, we have an image of God that helps, or

When students realize how important it is to know who they are, *the better off in life they will be*.

in some cases, hinders us when we are praying, thinking, or wondering about God. In times of great joy we may see God as loving and understanding; in times of loss we may see God as a God who looks the other way by letting something bad happen. Finding and having a positive image of God is very important to our spiritual life. The students are asked to name the image of God they hear in the song.

The students then continue the concept of the interlocking and overlapping aspects of our lives by completing a collage, which has two overlapping circles. The circle sections are *Me*, *God* and *God-In-Me*. Participants use words and pictures from magazines. The completed collages of each group are then stapled together in an "album," suggesting that all of us are connected, and that we get to know God, one another and ourselves in communion with one another. These albums are included in the concluding prayer experience on the final day of the program.

Day Three

The objective is to recognize particular steps of discernment through the use of concrete examples in film clips.

Some films illustrate that discernment occurs in a natural context of the Christian life. Finding an appropriate film is a challenge to the facilitator. Make a concerted

effort to present a scene that involves choosing between *two good choices*. Choose a contemporary film. We use *The Rookie* (© 2002, rated G, Disney Paramount, starring Dennis Quaid). We have selected two scenes: 1) The coach being challenged by his players to try out for major league baseball. Purpose: looking at the pros and cons; finding help from those we trust and respect; recognizing the importance of the dream already within you. 2) The conversation of the coach and his wife when he tells her he is coming home. Purpose: same as above, with an emphasis on the importance of following your dream and knowing the decision is finally up to you.

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Students are then asked to fill in Circle 5: *My Treasures* at the top of the *Circles of Discernment* worksheet. The facilitator prompts them by asking them to think of special gifts they use when situations come along, such as being a good listener when a friend needs that.

The facilitator then assigns Circle 3: *Name things or people that help me become a discerning person* and *Name obstacles that prevent me from becoming a discerning person*. Students are encouraged to be *very specific* in their examples.

Day Four

The objectives are that the students name helps and obstacles to discernment, reflect on the discernment of some of the Apostles as seen in Scripture, and name for themselves the steps of the discernment process.

The students are asked to share at their table and/or with the entire group their responses to Circles 3 and 4 of the *Circles of Discernment* worksheet: *Name things or people that help me become a discerning person*, and *Name obstacles that prevent me from becoming a discerning person*.

A choral reading of the call of the disciples from the Gospel of John is read. We use the translation from *The Message* by Eugene H. Peterson, re-written for the parts of narrator, John the Baptist, Jesus and the disciples. It is treated with the same solemnity as at liturgy.

After the reading, the facilitator directs the students to close their eyes and listen to a guided meditation based upon the Gospel reading. The meditation follows each disciple's call and asks the students to reflect upon:

- Who are the people who point me in the right direction?
- In spite of what others say, how do I know if something is right for me?
- Who invites me to my future?
- How do I feel changed when I've made a choice?
- Do I take time to listen to how Jesus might be inviting me?
- Do I take the time I need before jumping into a decision?
- Do I have a relationship with God that helps me make the decision?

The students are then invited to reflect on what they have heard and shared over the last three days. The participants use this reflection to develop their own *process of discernment*. The facilitator gives some guidance to assure that certain elements of discernment are included in the final process. Developing the process themselves and using their own words are important pieces of this program. The purpose of this discernment program is to give the participants a tool that will help each person when discerning life choices. Since the participants create the process, they will be more likely to use it, as it is dynamic and personal.

Transitioning the students into the process, the facilitator tells them, "The Good News is still going on. We are part of the Gospel story. Today **you** are going to tell me the discernment process."

The students organize all their handouts from their folder in reverse order, from the bottom up: Theme song: "Hold it Up to the Light."

- Scripture Reading: “Come, See for Yourself”
- *Circles of Discernment* worksheet
- *Movie Clips and Discussion* paper
- Image of God song: “By Heart by Soul
- *Knowing Me* worksheet

The process is recorded on a large sheet of paper as the students articulate it.

A sample process might look like this:

- 1) Know myself: what I am good at, what my values are, what my weaknesses are.
- 2) What is my idea of God—have space for *silence* and *solitude* in my life.
- 3) List and weigh the pros and cons of each decision; do my “homework” for the decision.
- 4) Go to those I *trust* and *respect* for advice: parents, good friends, mentors, experts.

After seeing the logo on their folders over several days, they unconsciously internalize its meaning: Stop and prepare for a life decision (red). Take your time (yellow). When you have included God in your decision, you can go ahead with faith and confidence (green).

- 5) Recognize my dream and deep passion.
- 6) Pay attention to my *feelings* throughout the decision.
- 7) Imagine myself in one of the choices—now, five years from now, 10 years from now.... Imagine myself in the other choice—now, five years from now, 10 years from now.
- 8) Make *my* choice—in freedom.
- 9) Feel *peace of mind and heart* in the decision.

Before the concluding prayer service, held during the last session, the students’ articulated process should be typed and printed on special paper, one for each participant.

Day Five

On the final day, a closing prayer ritual is celebrated, placing everything within a sacred context. Before beginning, students are asked to offer their ideas of what the logo means. After seeing it on their folders over

several days, they unconsciously internalize its meaning: Stop and prepare for a life decision (red). Take your time (yellow.) When you have included God in your decision, you can go ahead with faith and confidence (green.)

Closing Prayer Ritual

Participants respond with a kind of awe during the closing ritual. During the closing prayer ritual, they experience the coming together of all the pieces of the previous days. They feel honored and respected in themselves. They also experience a deepening of their relationship with God and with each other. The response of the participants during the closing ritual is one of understanding, reverence and delight. During each closing ritual, young people and adults alike participate and respect the balance of silence and activity. After the ritual, most participants are very quiet and many of them express their genuine gratitude to the facilitator.

It is preferable to hold the service in a space other than the classroom. A sacred space or altar is set up with cloth, candles and Scripture. Small pre-lit candles or tea lights are also ready for each student. The students’ clay images are placed on chairs (arranged in a circle) to indicate seating. One person from each small group is given the pages of the Images of God collage.

Hearing Genesis 1:27 reminds the students they are made in the image of God. They are then reminded that the clay image created on Day One represents themselves. Students are invited to come forward and present themselves in the form of their clay images. The facilitator and students affirm the student by name saying, “(~), we thank God for you.”

Next, Matthew 6:6, about prayer, reminds the students of their relationship with God. Everyone who contributed a page to a photo album comes forward, and each student describes one of his or her images of God. As the last student places the album in the sacred space, everyone says, “Give praise and thanks to God.”

Finally, Paul’s words to Timothy (Timothy 1:6) remind the students of the call to use their gifts. Students again come forward, one at a time, to receive the discernment process and a candle. Students are addressed by name and told, “~, receive the process of discernment and hold it up to the light.”

After all have returned to their seats, the facilitator reads through the process and suggests that the stu-

dents take it home and keep it in a special place to use whenever needed.

Intercessions are said for the participants, graduating seniors who are making choices, parents, teachers, coaches, counselors and those who give advice, couples preparing for marriage, individuals considering a committed single life, and women and men discerning a call to consecrated life or priesthood. Time is given for spontaneous prayers, after which the *Our Father* is said. Then for the last time, the theme song is sung as the candles are symbolically held up to the light.

The closing prayer ritual brings the whole program together. We emphasize it because we want to help the students understand that we bring all that we do to prayer and to God. No real life decision should be made without asking God, "Is that what I should do?" As Catholic Christians, we believe that God is working in everyone's lives, even if we don't acknowledge it or understand how.

A few final reflections

The completion of each session of this discernment process gives us hope. We are awed at the participants' willingness to engage in the process, many with great depth of response. We feel touched that young people pray and believe prayer and a relationship with God are significant in their lives. We really believe these young people will use the discernment process because they are concerned about their own lives and desire to use whatever means to help them be the best persons they can be.

Our lives are about relationships. Our relationships with God, with other persons, with ourselves, with the earth, and with the universe interlock and overlap with one another constantly. This discernment program enhances these relationships. We believe in this discernment program and its process of relationship. We are privileged to be part of helping to facilitate any of these relationships.

We love working with young people because they are open to the possibilities that life has to offer. The RSG program gives students a chance to look at life through a Christian lens: to take a week in their high school life of running here and there to actually STOP, LOOK, and LISTEN to what God is calling them to do, rather than simply following the path that helps them make the most money. God *is* calling people to religious life and to life as Christians, but not everyone

is on the same page or has the same channel on their TV or radio. There is much noise in the world, and we have to be quiet once in a while to hear God speaking to us. Finally, we believe RSG helps young people see religious men and women working in the church in a positive way. ✚

A resource kit of "Ready? Set ... GOD!" is scheduled for release in late fall 2006. For details about purchasing it or to pre-order a copy, contact National Coalition for Church Vocations at (773) 955-5453 or www.nccv-vocations.org.