

A VOCATION REQUIRES MINDFULNESS ¹

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Anyone who is restless and desires to follow Jesus more deeply will attempt a way of life that is risky as well as fascinating. Such an undertaking will be successful only if one carefully pays attention to certain markers along the way. Mindfulness and care of a vocation will allow one's ascent - or, as the case may be, one's descent—with God.

A Vocation is a Dialogical-Dramatic Event

Many people repeatedly find themselves stymied by a rigid and “monolithic” image of God: A God who has a fixed plan for this world and for every person in it. According to those who cling to this view of God, life finally comes together when one uncovers that previously determined divine will and fashions existence in accordance to it. The fate is not pleasant of those who, to their detriment, err even once in discerning God's will or consciously fail to heed it. In those cases, God merely watches and tolerates the way of life chosen by such an unfortunate individual. However, does this accurately describe God's way of being? Rather, is not the God of Jesus Christ the One who accompanies us at our side along the way? Indeed, he walks at our side, he tries to win us over to himself, he offers signs that do not diminish our freedom, and he awaits our response. History emerges

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out of the dialogue between God and God's creation, regardless of whether a human being fosters or shuts it down. This expresses the level of drama or seriousness that exists in any personal vocation story and in what takes place in the totality of human history. Karl Rahner similarly formulates this truth in the following beautiful text of his:

God's activity in the course of saving history is not a kind of monologue which God conducts by himself; it is a long, dramatic dialogue between God and his creature, in which God confers on man the power to make a genuine answer to his Word, and so makes his own further Word dependent upon the way in which man does in fact freely answer. God's free action never ceases to take new fire in the activity of man. History is not just a play in which God puts himself on the stage and creatures are merely what is performed; the creature is a real co-performer in this human-divine drama of history. And so history has a real and absolute seriousness.²

Dialogue Prospers through Vigilance

God's activity tends to be silent and to promote human freedom. Only the faithful will hear God's word; only someone who is paying attention will notice the markers along the way. One's personal relationship with Christ, without which any vocation is impossible, is unquestionably decisive.

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Therefore, vigilance should be the first response to any living relationship with the Lord. Failure in this regard, as I have amply verified, means the faithful's chosen way of life becomes a capricious and interminable monologue. Simultaneously paying attention to all of the diverse markers that may emerge from every flank, therefore, becomes necessary: markers, in other words, that can come forth from oneself, one's family, friends, community, superiors, etc. In order to recognize a vocation and, once such a decision has been

made, in order to maintain and renew it ceaselessly, this attention we speak of is as important before as it is after making a choice.

Looking for Right Intention

Pondering one's true objective and interior personal motions while considering other alternatives is important before making any decision. Once a decision has been made and after many years have elapsed in one's chosen vocation, right intention can protect us from unnecessary disappointments. If my life is truly oriented both toward God and my neighbor, then my life's significance no longer depends upon its success. Over and over again I should ask myself: What am I looking at? What am I looking for? As Heinrich Spaemann reminds us, "we are configured by our intentions and we thus become what they depict; we will eventually arrive at that place that is currently the center of our gaze." Thus, if my eyes are fixed upon Christ, then my heart will conform to his. In other words, who or what I allow entrance into my soul through my eyes is never a neutral event devoid of consequences.

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Paying Attention to Integrity and Consistency

Some only appear to begin their vocational journey. In reality, they fail to pay attention to entire areas of their personality by repressing them. "It should not therefore surprise us," notes an inquisitive vocational text, "that one day they discover that they are really meant to live their lives quite differently" (Ives Raguin, SJ). The one who fully lives a vocation and gives of him- or herself to others is completely immersed in what he or she is doing, embraces from the beginning the implications of his or her chosen way of life, and truly sends him- or herself on pilgrimage rather than just an automaton. In addition, the existence of harmony between a person's nature and his or her exteriorly received calling, that is to say, the absence of excessive tension between them, is decisive.

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Paying Attention to the Growing Freedom from "I" towards "Thou"

Ordinarily, any concerted effort to understand with precision one's interiority has the danger of leading to a vicious cycle that orbits endlessly around the self. One's interior field is ploughed repeatedly without end and, to use another image, the tuning of the musical instrument, as an end in itself, replaces the playing of music. To proceed down this road means that, when it comes to that interior field, one forgets to plant the Gospel's seed of service to others; as far as the musical instrument is concerned, one fails to play it for the benefit of others. A vocation comes together when a person is free to serve others, when he or she experiences a growth toward God who is now seen as "Thou" and when he or she also experiences his or her neighbor as "thou". When a young man or woman begins to pray by saying, "not my will but yours be done," the seed of a Christian vocation is already budding forth. Indeed, the human person "is created to praise, reverence, and serve God our Lord" (*SpEx 23*), not to become interminably busy with him- or herself. For his part, Francis of Assisi, at least as told in one of his first biographies, encourages Brother Leo to overcome the sadness he felt over his own imperfection by, instead, finding joy in God's grandeur and perfection.

Paying Attention to a "More Radical" discipleship

God yearns for every human being to be bound to Him ever more closely and for every person to give of him- or herself ever more selflessly in the service of others. What this "more" means specifically will be different in each case. This "radical more", following that etymology which links it to Christian roots, refers to every reality and situation in which a person can love ever more fully. This is what one must choose; this is the objective against which we can renew ourselves as we make our way through our vocation. Holy Scripture considers tepidity to be one of the greatest obstacles opposing God. Frequently, the hearts of the great saints are represented as if on fire precisely because their passion is ablaze! Such passion, for example, was clearly visible in what a New York City Fire Department chaplain did when faced with a situation of extreme danger; rather than saving himself, he ran inside the World Trade Center in order to save others as the massive

structure began to crumble under its own weight. Apparently, the Lord says to many people, "Come as you are and serve me with whatever you can and have!" However, some are further moved to embrace an even more radical abandonment and offer themselves without hesitation or conditions to the Lord's service. Every way of life contains a "more" that is linked to the realization of God's message. Vigilance is hence necessary to avoid becoming stuck midway. "If you desire to realize fully your vocation in this life," says Saint Francis Xavier, "you must become a pilgrim who, at a moment's notice, is prepared to go wherever a greater service to God our Lord can be rendered."

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The Heart must "Remain Ablaze"

Along the way, excessive work or simply the daily routine can cause a vocation to experience a considerable, emotional chilling effect. The interested party must once again be mindful along with his or her superiors in order to identify a rhythm of life that does not lead to mere "political activism", to "unbridled worries" or to a frigid heart. Instead, one's heart should be kept alive and fertile: living our lives and facing life's tasks in such a way that keeps our hearts ablaze!

Jesus Christ, my Life's Friend

"Whoever has found You has found his life's strength and victory," prayed my Jesuit brother Karl Rahner. United to Christ, everything appears under a new light; when in dialogue with Him, the "descent" of our spiritual life is somehow fulfilling (cf., John 3:30: "he must increase, but I must decrease"). In Christ, moreover, our crises are overcome: "Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life" (*John 6:68*). I would thus like to address all those who will soon take charge of spiritual or pastoral responsibilities by reminding them of the following words found in the First Letter of Peter: "In your hearts sanctify Christ as Lord. Always be ready

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to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you" (*1 Peter 3:15*).

*Translated by
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¹ Josef Maureder, S.J., *Wir kommen, wohin wir schauen. Berufung leben heute*. 2004 Tyrolia – Verlag Innsbruck – Wien, Austria. Chapter 1, pp.18-24. The book has been translated into Cheque, Hungarian and Spanish.

²Karl Rahner, "Theos in the New Testament," in *Theological Investigations Volume I* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1969-reprint), 111.