

Some Definite Service

An edited version of a talk given by Sr Savio Loftus RSM to
the North Staffordshire Circle on June 17th 2010

In the past the word “vocation” was used most often in the church in relation to the call to priesthood or the religious life. Now of course we speak of marriage and single life as vocations too. And the term is used also in relation to certain occupations such as teaching and nursing. Many occupations, however, are far from upbuilding or spiritually nourishing. Does this mean that only some people have a call from God or should we not use the term when speaking of occupations? John Henry Newman wrote “God has created me to do him some definite service; He has committed some work to me which He has not committed to another”.

The call to the religious life

Reflecting first on the call to religious life, there are certain elements which seem to be frequently present and may be present also in the call to marriage or single life. Firstly, God uses very ordinary things and seemingly insignificant events to lead us on the journey towards awareness of His call. Like a woodpecker, God is persistent in tap, tap, tapping. To hear His call we need to have heart-hearing, to “listen like a disciple” as Isaiah says. We need to be reflective people and have listening hearts.

A second element often experienced is reluctance and a feeling of repugnance. With God’s persistence this can become irrelevant and the called one can feel compelled to at least try to answer the call. We can see reluctance in Jesus’ own answering of His call to redeem the world: “Father, if it be possible, let this chalice pass from me”.

A third element of religious vocation is waiting. Jesus himself spent thirty years of His thirty-three years in what we call the hidden life. During this time was He preparing and being prepared for His unique mission? He was able to ponder and understand the fullness of God’s call for His earthly life and in His human nature deepened His relationship with the Father. We know that Jesus spent long periods in prayer and it is by giving time to personal prayer that we deepen our relationship with God. Mary, too, waited on God. Was she not “the handmaid of the Lord”?

Catherine McAuley, Foundress of the Sisters of Mercy, spent many years preparing for a call, of which she could not have dreamed, and after all those years of waiting spent only ten years as a professed religious. Yet God achieved so much through her. She founded a congregation which spread to every continent and became one of the largest in the Church.

Closely linked with the element of waiting is a sense of uncertainty or confusion. We see this uncertainty in Mary: “How can this be since I know not man?” This can be seen as a time of testing. Uncertainty can help us to stretch and become bigger people.

Reaching out to other people is also part of call. So it was for Andrew wanting to share his joy and certainty with his brother Simon. “We have found the Messiah”. Call is not just for oneself. It always means that one reaches out. Through Andrew God called others.

The call to marriage or the single life

The call to marriage and the call to parenthood, which surely is to share in God’s work of creation, is a very wonderful vocation, but it is not an easy one. Of course the essence of marriage is love and the word “love” is used several times during the marriage service. To be “in love” in the early stages is an exciting state but generally not a lasting one. The call to marriage demands a love that binds two people together in the ordinary, mundane times in life, in times of doubt and sorrow. The words “for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health” are not in the marriage service by accident. The hardest thing about marriage is that it depends on two people. One can put one’s whole heart into it but if the other partner is not prepared to make the same effort it is very difficult.

The call to single life is a real one but sometimes its value is undermined in our society. We have an urge to see people paired off. No doubt there are those who are not single by choice. For many, however, it is a deliberate choice or one that is accepted with serenity. It can be a glorious choice if embraced with love. It is a path on which and through which a person can find God and His will in their lives. Vocation to the religious life does involve sacrifice by parents and family as well as by the one who is called. We cannot all serve God in the same way. As Mother Teresa of Calcutta said, “I cannot do what you do, but together we can do something beautiful for God”.

Other aspects of vocation

There may be a vocation within a vocation, such as, for example, a Sister becoming a teacher or nurse under obedience, but what about those in very demeaning, unattractive occupations? Are these too part of God’s call?

Yes of course they are, if we believe that, because God loves each one of us unreservedly, we can trust the call that He has made to us whatever it may be.

One image of vocation is a child with its parents, learning to walk. At the beginning of our lives, or for us as Christians at baptism, Mother Church steadies us on our feet and with faltering steps we start out on our journey towards the Father's loving arms. If we nurture our faith each step is a deepening of our relationship with God and at the end of our lives we will finally fall into His loving arms and know the total union for which we have hungered and yea, perhaps unknowingly, all of our days.

This is what call is about. God calls each person to relationship with Himself and the response to that call is expressed in different ways. Call involves a spiritual journey and it is the journeys that differ. Henry Rohr says that a labourer and monk should actually say the same prayer: "My God help me to live up to my vocation"(One must strive to be a good labourer, the other a good monk).

St Augustine has spoken of our hearts being restless until they rest in God. Whether we are a priest, a religious, married or single, teacher, nurse, street-cleaner, sewage worker the secret is to work with love, since God is love. "Peeling potatoes for the love of God is as great as building a cathedral" says Rohr. In his book *The Prophet* Kahlil Gibran writes: "Work is love made visible" and again "If you cannot work with love but only with distaste, it is better that you should leave your work and sit at the gate of the temple and take alms of those who work with joy. For if you bake bread with indifference, you bake a bitter bread that feeds but half man's hunger".

Our call is simply the path along which we journey to answer our call to deeper relationship. Our journey in relationship with God is not a quiet leafy path. It is a road littered with broken hearts, imperfect lives, people who will need us, may use us, abuse us and through it all we can get to know God better and grow closer to Him. There is something which makes this absolutely possible. We do not walk this road alone. Jesus is with us all the way. He has promised: "I am with you always. Yes, to the end of time".

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