

A Personal Vocation

By Simone Rizkallah

He had a name inscribed that no one knows except himself.

Revelation 19:12

There is a lingering experience of anxiety which I believe is a particularly Christian one. It concerns the problem of vocation. Joseph Ratzinger, in one of his Advent homilies, preached:

The movement of becoming a Christian, which begins at baptism and which we have to pursue through the rest of our lives, means being ready to engage in a particular service that God requires from us in history. We cannot of course always think through in detail why this service has to be done by me, now, in this way. That would contradict the mystery of history, which is woven together from the inscrutability of man's freedom and God's freedom.¹

The first point about the "Christian anxiety" is that vocations are mysteries. No one knows or will know God better than he knows himself, and no one knows me better than he does, either. Vocations flow from the dynamics of what is ultimately a mysterious relationship. To further frustrate the problem, the heart of the vocation is the *relationship itself*. Therefore, if we want to execute the work of the call as best as possible, the focus is not to be on "the call" at all but on the One who is doing the calling.

One of the steps we can take to alleviate the anxiety surrounding vocation is to begin dialoguing on the level of the *personal vocation* and, in so doing, reframe our current vocational categories.

The "umbrella" vocation under which all other vocations (even state-in-life vocations) subsist is a personal vocation. Some will argue that the primary vocation is the "universal call to holiness."² The Christian, however, is not called to a vague form of general holiness but to a specific form of personal holiness. There is a difference between intellectually assenting to God's love, friendship, and call and the experience of God Himself saying "I love you" (insert your name here) and I call you my friend (see Jn 15:15) and then engaging actively in service to that friendship.³

The other problematic framework is understanding one's state in life as the "primary vocation." While it is true that callings to priesthood, consecrated life, marriage, or some form of permanent celibacy become the primary *form* a personal vocation takes, it is still unhelpful to refer to a person's state in life as their primary vocational call.

For many people, their state-in-life circumstances are not their vocations. There are those who are unwillingly single either because they have not found the right spouse or religious community, and there are those who are widows and widowers,

divorced and abandoned, etc. Also, except for the priesthood, none of the state-in-life vocations, insofar as the form they took on this side of eternity, are permanent. Furthermore, for most of history, marriage was never referred to as a vocation in the way we conceive and discuss it today in the modern Church. Only a calling from God, a "vocation" would inspire a man or woman to relinquish the natural desires and goods of marriage and family for the sacrifice, value and efficacy of celibacy for the sake of the Kingdom.

The Primary Vocation is the Personal Vocation

The primary vocation is the personal vocation because the primary calling is to be in a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Every other relationship and every other vocation flows from that fact.

John Paul II wrote that "all men and women are entrusted with the task of crafting their own life: in a certain sense, they are to make of it a work of art, a masterpiece."⁴ In other words, the task isn't primarily of doing this or that action but about becoming yourself through the authentic happiness found in a relationship with God manifested in a personal vocation.

In their book *Unrepeatable: Cultivating the Unique Calling of Every Person*, Luke Burgis and Joshua Miller make this point by highlighting the personal vocation of St. Gianna Molla. During a difficult pregnancy, she preferred the life of the baby over hers: "I want them to save my baby." They clarify the fact that St. Gianna Molla did not become a saint because of the heroic decision to save her baby's life. *She became a saint because she became Gianna Molla*. The sacrificial action was a dramatic expression of fidelity to her entire being and personhood. Understanding that a personal vocation is not primarily about what Jesus is asking us to do but who he is asking us to be allows us the freedom to be helped and inspired by the saints but not to suffer the anxiety of comparison. Only Gianna Molla was called to be St. Gianna Molla.

A Culture of Personal Vocation

Cultivating a culture of personal vocations is also helpful for those who have already embraced state-in-life vocations. Priests and nuns still need to refine their personal vocations. The vocational problem isn't solved by taking permanent vows. For a dramatic example, Mother Teresa describes her work in Calcutta as a "call within a call." If she had reduced her vocation to her state in life as a Sister of Loreto, she might have missed her vocation to start the Missionaries of Charity.

One of the most common vocational problems I encounter is with women who are stay-at-home mothers. There is nothing more expressive of the genius of women than motherhood. And yet, I often hear phrases like “I know being ‘just a mom’ is important.” The insecurity is justifiable because the question “who am I?” before God remains, even if the external factors are positively secure. The emphasis on personal vocation helps these mothers consider that their own unique feminine genius flows not from the objective fact of their motherhood, but from their subjective expression of it.

Another common problem is with priestly vocations. Paradoxically, as long as ecclesial culture is dominated by a view that only those with a defined state in life have a “vocation” or that the state in life is “primary,” the myth of the crisis of vocations will persist.⁵ The less neurotic a focus on state in life (and prayers for “more vocations” during liturgy—as if the Divine Initiator has muted himself!) and the more cultivation of a culture of personal vocations, the more the people of God will say yes to the priesthood, religious life, or *whatever He wants*, which is always more apostolically creative and diverse than our tidy categories.

We need everyone—priests included—to continue discerning and reflecting upon their personal vocations for their entire lives. A culture of personal vocation alleviates the temptation to experience the Faith as “mere moralism,”⁶ which reduces it to a list of rules or an ethical system. This reduction results in an ongoing experience of failure of moral coherence as if that were the point of it all. A culture of personal vocation also spares Christians from expecting the Faith to be one of sentimentality or an experience of consistent positive feelings, which Pope Francis calls the reduction of Christianity to “a sort of therapy.”⁷

When the Faith is experienced in these ways, as anything less than a dynamic relationship expressed in a personal vocation, then we can’t be surprised when the symptoms include not only a priest shortage, but also an overwhelming lack of joy for those who are trying. We don’t just want to be Christians, but happy ones! In other words, saints! Not just lots of priests, but joyful priests.

Therefore, once the unpleasant shock that *having one’s state in life settled doesn’t solve the vocation problem* wears off, or the realization occurs that beauty persists even in an undesirable state

in life, only then can we begin to take seriously the reality that a vocation isn’t a problem to be solved, but a question to be lived.

For those who haven’t been called into a state-in-life vocation yet (or who may never hear this call), there is hope because there are as many vocations, *personal* ones, as there are baptized Christians. There is no such thing as a vocational orphan.

A personal vocation is an unfolding drama and also “the means by which we can and will draw others to the Faith most effectively.”⁸ Ultimately, all vocations are vocations for the other: “in a certain sense, one does not become a Christian for oneself at all; rather, one does so for the sake of the whole, for others, for everyone.”⁹

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Endow is a non-profit organization that creates study guides to help women access with ease the rich theological inheritance of the Church to be used most ideally in a small-group community. For more information, please visit www.endowgroups.org.

Notes

¹ Joseph Ratzinger, *What It Means to Be a Christian*, (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2006), 54.

² Second Vatican Council, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium* (November 21, 1964), no.21.

³ Jim Schuster, Rhema Workshop, Catholic Revival Ministries, June 13, 2020, www.catholicrevivalministries.com/rhema.

⁴ Pope St. John Paul II, Letter to Artists (April 4, 1999), no.2.

⁵ Germain Grisez and Russell Shaw, *Personal Vocation: God Calls Everyone By Name* (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor, 2003), 32.

⁶ Ratzinger, *What It Means to Be a Christian*, 47.

⁷ Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation on the Proclamation of the Gospel in Today’s World *Evangelii Gaudium* (November 24, 2013), no.170.

⁸ David Clayton, *The Vision for You: How to Discover the Life You Were Made For*, (Atlanta: Pontifex Press, 2018), 17.

⁹ Ratzinger, *What It Means to Be a Christian*, 54.

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