
WE CARRY ON ASKING THE LORD OF THE HARVEST

INTRODUCTION

On the occasion of the World Day of Prayer for Vocations, the Holy Father, St John Paul II, proposed the theme: youth ministry and vocations' promotion are complementary. Alongside this prayerful reflection he stated that it was with joy that he thanked the Lord for the ten years' commemoration of World Youth Year, proclaimed by the United Nations Organisation ten years earlier in 1985, the International Year of Youth. He recalled what was said to the young people of the world on that very important occasion, to invite them to an annual meeting – World Youth Day. This initiative filled young people with hope and so, on the occasion of the next World Day of Prayer for Vocations, urged them all to reflect on the close link between youth ministry and vocations' promotion. It also invited all young people all over the world to meditate upon the conversation Christ had with the young man (cf. Mt 19, 16 -22; Mk 10, 17 – 22; Lk 18, 18 – 23) and emphasised that “ youth attains its true richness when it is mainly lived as a time for vocational reflection”. “Ask the Lord of the harvest to send more labourers to his harvest” (Mt 9, 38).

SYNTHESIS

The Holy Father's invitation to know the text of Christ's conversation with the young man, meditate upon it and make it live through prayer, enables us to understand the question: “What should I do to attain eternal life? It is a transcendental question that reveals youthfulness itself, an inner state where one queries and questions with a view to the future. As an inner state of being, youth is aware of a strong desire to confer meaning upon its existence, hoping for the unexpected and is therefore anxious to do something to give life meaning. A meaning which is provided by actual encounter with the Lord: “what is God's plan for my life? What is His will?”

The question put by the young man required an immediate answer from Christ, although it was not exactly what he expected to hear, because it contained conditions, since he had replied with another question. The dialogue that springs from the questions is exploited by Jesus to reveal the love God gives to those who are capable of asking themselves about the future from a vocational point of view. “Jesus, looking at him, loved him” To live is a great vocation which is configured with an option for life, and whoever lives vocationally based on an option for life, finds in Christ's heart an attention full of tenderness. Shortly afterwards Jesus also revealed God's answer to whoever lives his youth as time for spiritual orientation. The answer is: “Follow me!” It is by following Jesus that youth reveals all the richness of its potential and acquires fullness of meaning. (Mt 19, 16 – 22).

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It is by following Jesus that young people discover the meaning of life lived as a gift of self, and experience the beauty and truth of growing in love. It is by following Jesus that they feel called to communion with Him as the living members of the same body, that is the Church. It is by following Jesus that they will be able to understand their personal vocation to love, in matrimony, consecrated life, ordained ministry or in mission ad gentes.

Prayer, for young people, means to reflect and to ask, for their hopes, their future, to make the right choices in their lives, so that their lives might have true meaning. Christ offers the option to seek an encounter with Him and remain with Him; to seek Him out in the midst of all the world has to offer, in the midst of difficulties and uncertainties. In the same way, therefore, prayer means asking that these young people encounter Christ in a Church involved with the new challenges of the world, that knows how to reply to the many questions that the young ask. A Church that will teach them to love the Gospel and the Eucharist, that will accept them without prejudices and moralisms, that will give them the right opportunity to make a vocational option, such as to live the commitment of faith in the service of others in the Christian community. The chance to consecrate their lives to the profession of the evangelical counsels, or the ordained ministry in, for and from their Church, and that the Church know how to accompany them adequately, to strengthen the meaning of their existence, their hope and vocation, so that it may grow and mature unhurriedly, taking the time they need.

The end purpose of a youth ministry project has to be for the young man or woman to mature in deep, decisive personal dialogue with the Lord. The vocational dimension is consequently an integral part of youth ministry, so that, to sum up we could say that vocations' ministry finds its living space in youth ministry and youth ministry is complete and effective when it is open to the vocational dimension.

TEXT

MESSAGE OF HIS HOLINESS POPE JOHN PAUL II FOR THE XXXIII WORLD DAY OF PRAYER FOR VOCATIONS

Venerable Brothers in the Episcopate,

Dear Brothers and Sisters throughout the world!

1. Vocations in the Christian Community

Just as the seed produces abundant fruit in good soil, so vocations arise and mature in good number in the Christian community.

It is indeed in the Christian community that there is made manifest the mystery of the Father who calls, of the Son who sends, and of the Spirit who consecrates: "The vocation, the call of God, is born in an experience of community, and generates a commitment to the universal Church and to a certain community" (Final Declaration of the First Latin American Continental Congress on Vocations, n. 24).

It is necessary, therefore, that on every level there be manifest, that there develop and grow a deep sense of the Church, a generous openness to the pastoral needs of the People of God, a mutual and honest

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collaboration between diocesan and religious clergy, in order to support the journey of faith of the men and women who decide to follow Christ, consecrating themselves to him with undivided heart.

2. "And like living stones let yourselves be built into a spiritual house" (1 Pt 2:5)

We must begin again with the communities in order to prepare the fertile soil in which God's action will be able to expand with power and his call be welcomed and understood. "Without doubt a mending of the Christian fabric of society is urgently needed in all parts of the world. But for this to come about what is needed is to first remake the Christian fabric of the ecclesial community itself"(Christifideles laici, n. 34.).

Truly, the vast field of pastoral action for fostering vocations has yet to be fully appreciated in some of its aspects, even though there is a greater awareness of this dimension of the Christian life and a greater number of initiatives in its regard. The discovery of one's own vocation, whatever it may be, cannot leave one unaware of the other evangelical choices necessary for the Church's identity as instrument and image of the kingdom of God in the world.

Only living Christian communities are able to carefully welcome vocations and then accompany them in their development, as mothers attentive to the growth and happiness of their offspring. "The pastoral work of promoting vocations has as its active agents, as its protagonists, the ecclesial community as such, in its various expressions: from the universal Church to the particular Church and, by analogy from the particular Church to each of its parishes and to every part of the people of God"(Pastores dabo vobis, n. 41).

Our communities, however, must have a stronger belief in the importance of various plans of Christian life and of ecclesial roles, ministries, charisms, which are stirred up by the Holy Spirit throughout the centuries and recognized by the Pastors of the Church as legitimate and authentic. Even now, while society is undergoing rapid and profound transformation, in the community of believers the proposal of the Christian way of life must conquer every kind of passive resignation, and with confidence and courage give full meaning to existence by announcing the presence and action of God in the life of human persons.

Today, in the face of the challenges of the contemporary world, a greater amount of evangelical boldness is needed in order to arrive at the commitment to promoting vocations in accordance with the Lord's injunction to ask ceaselessly for labourers for the spread of the kingdom of God (cf. Mt 9:37-38).

3. "Once you were no people but now you are God's people" (1 Pt 2:10)

The Christian vocation a gift of God is the heritage of all. Whether married or ordained, priests or religious, all are chosen by God to proclaim the Gospel and to communicate salvation; not alone, however, but in the Church and with the Church. "The work of evangelization is not an individual activity; it is essentially ecclesial" (Evangelii nuntiandi, n. 60). Along with God's universal call to live and witness to the proclamation of salvation there are particular vocations with specific responsibilities within the Church; these are fruit of a special grace and require an additional moral and spiritual commitment. They are the vocations to the priesthood, the religious life, to the work of the missions and to the contemplative life.

These particular vocations call for respect and acceptance, for the full availability of bringing one's own existence into play, for an unremitting prayer of petition. They also presuppose a loving attention to and a wise and prudent discernment of the seeds of vocation present in the hearts of so many children and young people. "There is an urgent need, especially nowadays, for a more widespread and deeply felt conviction that all the members of the Church, without exception, have the grace and responsibility to look after vocations" (Pastores dabo vobis, n. 41).

Some think that because God knows whom to call and when to call, there is nothing more for us to do than to wait. But they forget that the sovereign divine initiative does not dispense man from the task of

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responding to it. In fact, many who are called arrive at the awareness of the divine choice by means of favourable circumstances, determined also by the life of the Christian community.

In many young people, disoriented by consumerism and by the crisis in ideals, the search for an authentic life-style can mature, if it is sustained by a coherent and joyful witness of the Christian community in its openness to listen to the cry of a world thirsting for truth and justice. In this case, it is easy for the heart to open itself to welcome with generosity the gift of a consecrated vocation.

4. "Brothers, consider your call" (1 Cor 1:26)

The Church must show its proper and authentic face in the daily striving for fidelity to God and to men. When it accomplishes such a mission with profound consistency, it becomes the favourable terrain for the birth of courageous choices of unreserved commitment for the Gospel and for the people of God.

By means of the special vocations the Lord assures the Church's continuity and strength and, at the same time, he opens it to the old and the new needs of the world, so that the Church can be a sign of the living God and contribute to the building of the city of man as the "civilization of love".

Every vocation is born, is nourished and develops in the Church and is linked to the Church in its origin, growth, purpose and mission. For this reason diocesan and parish communities are called to strengthen their commitment to vocations to the priesthood and the consecrated life, especially with the proclamation of the Word, the celebration of the sacraments and the witness of charity. They should also keep in mind some of the necessary conditions for an authentic pastoral care of vocations.

In the first place, one condition is that the community know how to listen to the Word of God in order to receive the divine light which gives direction to the heart of man. Sacred Scripture is a sure guide, when it is read, welcomed and meditated upon in the Church. Coming to know the events involving the major figures of the Bible and, above all, the reading of the Gospels provide moments of unexpected insights and permit radical personal choices. When the Bible becomes the book of the community then it is easier to hear and comprehend the voice of God who calls.

It is necessary, furthermore, that communities know how to pray intensely for fulfilment of the will of God, accenting the primacy of the spiritual life in daily existence. Prayer offers precious energies towards giving a positive welcome to the Lord's invitation to put oneself at the service of the spiritual, moral and material good of humanity. Liturgical experience is the principal way to educate for prayer. When the liturgy remains isolated it risks impoverishment; but if it is joined with prolonged periods of personal prayer and silence, passed in the presence of the Lord, it becomes the high road which leads to communion with God. The liturgy must become the centre of Christian existence, in order that through it there be created an atmosphere favourable to the making of important decisions.

The community should also be sensitive to the missionary dimension, taking upon itself the burden of the salvation of those who do not yet know Christ, the Redeemer of mankind. In a living and widespread missionary sensitivity there is found another basis for the coming to be and the strengthening of vocations. If the community lives intensely the Lord's commandment "Go, therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Mt 28:19), there will not be lacking within it generous young persons who will offer to take upon themselves the task of proclaiming to the people of our time, not infrequently disheartened or indifferent, the proclamation of the Gospel which is old and yet ever new.

Finally the community must be open to the service of the poor. In presenting the most authentic face of the Christian community committed in all its members to helping brothers and sisters who are tried by need

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and by suffering, a style of humility, of self-denial, proper to a choice in favour of the poor, contributes towards the creation of an environment particularly favourable to welcoming the gift of a vocation. In fact, "the service of love is the fundamental meaning of every vocation... Consequently, an authentic pastoral work on behalf of vocations will never tire of training boys, adolescents and young men to appreciate commitment, the meaning of free service, the value of sacrifice and unconditional self-giving". (Pastores dabo vobis, n. 40).

5. "As the Father has sent me, so I send you" (Jn 20:21)

Pastoral work on behalf of vocations involves all members of the Church. First of all, the Bishops, who make the Lord Jesus present in the community by means of their ministry as Pastors, and who are the guarantors of the authenticity of the gifts of the Spirit by means of the discernment of charisms. It is their role to promote every appropriate action on behalf of vocations, reminding all the faithful of this fundamental commitment, the principal expression of which remains prayer. In the Church, which is the memorial and sacrament of the presence and the action of Jesus Christ who calls us to follow him, let the Bishops announce, in preaching and in other acts of their teaching, the grace of the ordained ministry and of the various forms of consecrated life; let them invite all the faithful to respond to their particular calls with generous docility to the divine will; let them maintain alive the spirit of prayer and urge the joint responsibility of persons and groups; let them sustain, guide and co-ordinate, by means of the work of the diocesan Directors and other competent persons, the diocesan Centre for the pastoral work of promoting vocations.

Alongside that of the Bishop, the role of priests, diocesan and religious, is of primary importance. Animating the ecclesial communities, there is much they can do in arousing and guiding vocations by means of spiritual counsel and a life joyfully given on behalf of others. To them is often given the delicate task of encouraging girls and boys whom God is calling; these young people must be able to find in them sure and competent spiritual guides as well as authentic witnesses to a life given completely to the Lord.

Important also is the work of catechists, who often have direct and prolonged contact with children, adolescents and young people, above all during their preparation for the sacraments of Christian initiation. To these also is entrusted the task of explaining the value and importance of the special vocations in the Church, thus helping to bring it about that believers live fully the call which God is addressing to them for the good of all.

I wish, finally, to address you, dear young people, and to repeat these words to you with affection: be generous in giving your life to the Lord. Do not be afraid! You have nothing to fear, because God is the Lord of history and of the universe. Let grow in you the desire for great and noble projects. Nourish a sense of solidarity: these are the sign of the divine action in your hearts. Place at the use of your communities the talents which Providence has lavished on you. The more ready you are to give yourselves to God and to others, the more you will discover the authentic meaning of life. God expects much of you!

6. "Pray the Lord of the harvest..." (Mt 9:38)

I conclude my reflections, inviting you, dear brothers and sisters, to commit your communities to the Lord in prayer, so that united according to the example of the first Christian community in an assiduous listening to the Word of God and in the invocation of the Holy Spirit, with the aid of the Virgin Mary, they may be blessed with an abundance of vocations to the priestly and religious life.

To the Lord Jesus I raise my fervent prayer to obtain the precious gift of many and holy vocations:

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Lord, you have willed to save men
and have founded the Church as a communion
of brothers and sisters united in your Love.
Continue to walk in our midst
and call those whom you have chosen
to be the voice of your Holy Spirit
and leaven of a more just and fraternal society.
Obtain for us from the heavenly Father
the spiritual guides which our communities need:
true priests of the living God who,
illuminated by your Word, will be able to speak
of you and teach others to speak with you.
Make your Church grow by means
of a flourishing of consecrated persons,
who will give all things over to you
so that you might save all.
May our communities celebrate the Eucharist
in song and praise, as thanksgiving to your glory and goodness,
and may they know how to walk the paths
of the world to communicate joy and Peace,
precious gifts of your salvation.
Look, O Lord, upon the whole human family
and show your mercy to the men and women who
in prayer and righteous living seek you without
yet having encountered you:
show yourself to them as the way
which leads to the Father, as the truth which makes us free,
as the life which has no end.
Grant to us, Lord, to live in your Church
in a spirit of faithful service and of total gift,
so that our witness will be credible and bear fruit. Amen!

To all I send with affection a special Apostolic Blessing.

Castel Gandolfo, 15 August 1995, Solemnity of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- 1. What can we do to make our religious communities, and in particular the Hospitaller Order, a witness to the life of Prayer, and a witness to a Church that accepts and makes sure that it will always remain young?**
- 2. How can we combine the forces of Prayer, youth ministry and vocations' ministry to make them true schools of formation and hospitality for young people?**
- 3. Do we know how to captivate young people with our answers, as Christ did, and lead them down a true path that will meet their expectations and give meaning to their existence? How can we make the Charism of Hospitality an option for the young?**