

VOCATION AS WITNESS OF TRUTH

INTRODUCTION

A common question for consecrated people to ask themselves is: “ why are there so few vocations nowadays”? Could it be that the vocational processes are not really adequate? Could it be that the witness and project of religious life no longer attract as they used to in the past? For sure the vocations’ ministry often makes unrealistic statements. It is not the time for a vocations’ ministry that says things, but rather for one that listens to the world of today. Regrettably, young people today are not taught the reality of the great values that direct life in all its expressions.

They say that religious appear to be afraid. Being a witness means that you cannot hide, that you have to go out and complicate your life in order to be able to be in a world that apparently has fallen asleep before God’s values. It calls for a witness that is full of life, that challenges and questions. You cannot expect them to come to you. The call is to seek God and that entails approaching others, going out to sow the seeds. Let us, therefore, prepare our hearts to be “the good earth” to listen, accept and live the Word and thus bear much fruit.

SYNTHESIS

In his message for this day of prayer for vocations, Pope Francis made a very important point to start with: the Gospel message. “The harvest is plentiful but the labourers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest” (Mt 9, 35 – 38). Pope Francis invites us to take the good news to all the people of God, but in order to do that we have to plough, sow and cultivate, so that later, in due course we may reap a plentiful harvest. Thus the prayer that Jesus asks the Church for refers to the petition to increase the numbers of those who are at the service of His kingdom.

He gives us the example of St Paul, who was one of those “co-workers of God”, who worked tirelessly for the cause of the Gospel and the Church, with the awareness of one who had personally experienced to what extent God’s salvific will is inscrutable, and that the initiative of grace is at the origin of all vocation. The Pope also pointed out that the vocation of prophets and Apostles was important as well, that they continue to be valid for our times. So then, we are God’s “property”, not in the sense of possession, which would make us slaves, but in the sense of a powerful bond that unites us with God, and in the case of particular religious communities, with the charisms and spiritualities of the Founders. In the case of our Charism of Hospitality, it is a bond that makes us brothers in Jesus Christ and in the spirituality of St John of God, according to the eternal covenant “for his steadfast love endures forever” (Ps 136)

I have explained the way of belonging to God, through the unique and personal relationship with Jesus, conferred upon us at baptism at the start, at our birth into a new life. It is Christ, therefore, who continues to beseech us with his Word to trust in him, to love him “with all the heart and with all the understanding

and with all the strength” (Mk 12, 33). That is why every vocation, despite the plurality of paths, always requires an exodus from ourselves so that we may centre our very existence on Christ and his Gospel. In married life, just as in forms of consecrated religious and priestly life, it is necessary to overcome ways of thinking and acting that are not in line with God’s will. It is an “exodus that leads us to a path of adoration of the Lord and service to him in brothers and sisters”.

The Pope then turns to those who are well disposed to listen to the voice of Christ that resounds in the Church, so as to understand their true vocation. He invites them to listen to Jesus and follow him, to allow themselves to be transformed inside by his words that “are spirit and life” (Jn 6, 63)

Jesus himself warns us that the good seed of the Word of God is often snatched away by the Evil One, blocked by tribulations, drowned by worries and the lures of the world (cf. Mt 13, 19 – 22). All these difficulties could dishearten us, making us withdraw to apparently more comfortable paths. But the true joy of those called consists in believing and experiencing that he, the Lord, is faithful, and that with him we can walk, be disciples and witnesses of God’s love, open our hearts wide to great ideals, great things. “We Christians have not been chosen by the Lord for trivial things. Go further always, towards great things. Wager your life on great ideals”.

Finally Pope Francis asks bishops, priests, religious, communities and Christian families to conduct vocations’ promotion in this direction, accompanying young people along the paths of holiness, that, being personal, call for an authentic pedagogy of holiness, capable of being adapted to the pace of each person.

TEXT

**MESSAGE OF POPE FRANCIS
FOR THE 51st WORLD DAY OF PRAYER
FOR VOCATIONS
11 MAY 2014 - FOURTH SUNDAY OF EASTER
Theme: Vocations, Witness to the Truth**

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

1. The Gospel says that “Jesus went about all the cities and villages... When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, ‘The harvest is plentiful, but the labourers are few; pray therefore the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest’” (Mt 9:35-38). These words surprise us, because we all know that it is necessary first to plow, sow and cultivate to then, in due time, reap an abundant harvest. Jesus says instead that “the harvest is plentiful”. But who did the work to bring about these results? There is only one answer: God. Clearly the field of which Jesus is speaking is humanity, us. And the efficacious action which has borne “much fruit” is the grace of God, that is, communion with Him (cf. Jn 15:5). The prayer which Jesus asks of the Church therefore concerns the need to increase the number of those who serve his Kingdom. Saint Paul, who was one of “God’s fellow workers”, tirelessly dedicated himself to the cause of

the Gospel and the Church. The Apostle, with the awareness of one who has personally experienced how mysterious God's saving will is, and how the initiative of grace is the origin of every vocation, reminds the Christians of Corinth: "You are God's field" (1 Cor 3:9). That is why wonder first arises in our hearts over the plentiful harvest which God alone can bestow; then gratitude for a love that always goes before us; and lastly, adoration for the work that he has accomplished, which requires our free consent in acting with him and for him.

2. Many times we have prayed with the words of the Psalmist: "It is he who made us, and we are his; we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture" (Ps 100:3); or: "The Lord has chosen Jacob for himself, Israel as his own possession" (Ps 135:4). And yet we are God's "possession" not in the sense of a possession that renders us slaves, but rather of a strong bond that unites us to God and one another, in accord with a covenant that is eternal, "for his steadfast love endures for ever" (Ps 136). In the account of the calling of the prophet Jeremiah, for example, God reminds us that he continually watches over each one of us in order that his word may be accomplished in us. The image is of an almond branch which is the first tree to flower, thus announcing life's rebirth in the springtime (cf Jer 1:11-12). Everything comes from him and is his gift: the world, life, death, the present, the future, but — the Apostle assures us — "you are Christ's; and Christ is God's" (1 Cor 3:23). Hence the way of belonging to God is explained: it comes about through a unique and personal relationship with Jesus, which Baptism confers on us from the beginning of our rebirth to new life. It is Christ, therefore, who continually summons us by his word to place our trust in him, loving him "with all the heart, with all the understanding, and with all the strength" (Mk 12:33). Therefore every vocation, even within the variety of paths, always requires an exodus from oneself in order to centre one's life on Christ and on his Gospel. Both in married life and in the forms of religious consecration, as well as in priestly life, we must surmount the ways of thinking and acting that do not conform to the will of God. It is an "exodus that leads us on a journey of adoration of the Lord and of service to him in our brothers and sisters" (Address to the International Union of Superiors General, 8 May 2013). Therefore, we are all called to adore Christ in our hearts (1 Pet 3:15) in order to allow ourselves to be touched by the impulse of grace contained in the seed of the word, which must grow in us and be transformed into concrete service to our neighbour. We need not be afraid: God follows the work of his hands with passion and skill in every phase of life. He never abandons us! He has the fulfilment of his plan for us at heart, and yet he wishes to achieve it with our consent and cooperation.

3. Today too, Jesus lives and walks along the paths of ordinary life in order to draw near to everyone, beginning with the least, and to heal us of our infirmities and illnesses. I turn now to those who are well disposed to listen to the voice of Christ that rings out in the Church and to understand what their own vocation is. I invite you to listen to and follow Jesus, and to allow yourselves to be transformed interiorly by his words, which "are spirit and life" (Jn 6:62). Mary, the Mother of Jesus and ours, also says to us: "Do whatever he tells you" (Jn 2:5). It will help you to participate in a communal journey that is able to release the best energies in you and around you. A vocation is a fruit that ripens in a well cultivated field of mutual love that becomes mutual service, in the context of an authentic ecclesial life. No vocation is born of itself or lives for itself. A vocation flows from the heart of God and blossoms in the good soil of faithful people, in the experience of fraternal love. Did not Jesus say: "By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (Jn 13:35)?

4. Dear brothers and sisters, this "high standard of ordinary Christian living" (cf John Paul II, Apostolic Letter *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, 31) means sometimes going against the tide and also encountering obstacles, outside ourselves and within ourselves. Jesus himself warns us: the good seed of God's word is often snatched away by the Evil one, blocked by tribulation, and choked by worldly cares and temptation (cf Mt

13:19-22). All of these difficulties could discourage us, making us fall back on seemingly more comfortable paths. However, the true joy of those who are called consists in believing and experiencing that he, the Lord, is faithful, and that with him we can walk, be disciples and witnesses of God's love, open our hearts to great ideals, to great things. "We Christians were not chosen by the Lord for small things; push onwards toward the highest principles. Stake your lives on noble ideals!" (Homily at Holy Mass and the Conferral of the Sacrament of Confirmation, 28 April 2013). I ask you bishops, priests, religious, Christian communities and families to orient vocational pastoral planning in this direction, by accompanying young people on pathways of holiness which, because they are personal, "call for a genuine 'training in holiness' capable of being adapted to every person's need. This training must integrate the resources offered to everyone with both the traditional forms of individual and group assistance, as well as the more recent forms of support offered in associations and movements recognized by the Church" (Novo Millennio Ineunte, 31).

Let us dispose our hearts therefore to being "good soil", by listening, receiving and living out the word, and thus bearing fruit. The more we unite ourselves to Jesus through prayer, Sacred Scripture, the Eucharist, the Sacraments celebrated and lived in the Church and in fraternity, the more there will grow in us the joy of cooperating with God in the service of the Kingdom of mercy and truth, of justice and peace. And the harvest will be plentiful, proportionate to the grace we have meekly welcomed into our lives. With this wish, and asking you to pray for me, I cordially impart to you all my Apostolic Blessing.

From the Vatican, 15 January 2014

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- 1. Vocation comes from an encounter with Christ, perhaps at the most unexpected moment. Jesus goes ahead of the person he wants to call. Do you remember the moment you were called? How did you prepare yourself to listen to that call? How do you think you are maintaining that call?**
- 2. When he says "follow me" Jesus undertakes to trace the way and to support with his divine strength the one who has placed his trust in Him. In the light of your vocational experience, where does the fruit of a true vocation that transforms the inner person grow?**