

The Call to Holiness

In the Church not everyone marches along the same path, yet all are called to sanctity and have obtained an equal privilege of faith through the justice of God. {"Dogmatic Constitution on the Church," Documents of Vatican II, (item # 32)

The expression "to be called" closely resembles the notion of vocation. Most seem to understand the expression as something clerical — calling implies an attraction to priesthood or religious life. The laity are not blessed or burdened with such inclinations. When Vatican II refers to "the call to holiness," it assures us all Catholics possess a call when baptized. In that sense, all the baptized have a vocation. The prophet Isaiah writes more specifically, "I have called you by name" (Isaiah 45, 4). Not only called, we are called by name — individually. Names suggest a unique, a particular identity. Each one has a particular calling in this journey toward holiness. But if called particularly, then addressed within the context of our own personality. Individuality plus holiness find a Liturgical basis in the Feast of All Saints. Saints' lives set an example for how Gospel values are best lived. But their lives show some were tall and some short, some lived long and other died young, some preached all over the world and some never left their monastery or convent. One characteristic notices: they were all different. The call to holiness may go out in general but specifically to who we are. We are called to transform our personality so as to grow more Christian and more closely a follower of Jesus.

The Council sees those who serve the Church as answering a calling. That response originates somewhere more deeply found than mere generosity, merely helping out. If not exactly the same, such an attraction rubs shoulders with those called to priesthood or religious life. The laity may feel called more temporarily but no less sincerely or less needed. To offer oneself for Church leadership, as in worship ministries, implies a serious step. A new social identity is in progress, one in which one's faith becomes public. As a result, expectations by the worshipping community jump to another level. Assumptions directed toward priests and religious become in some way applied toward those who occupy some role in the workings of the Church. Faith witnessing by life style becomes part of the job.

Call and response runs throughout the Bible. Abraham was called, Moses was called, Jesus called his Apostle. It continues as a reminder of the initiation created by the Lord to reach out to those whom he has designated for some special mission. The dynamics of the Church echo the dynamics which formed the people of Israel. The word "church" derives from the Latin word "ecclesia" which in turn comes from the Greek, formed by two words: ek and clesis, It means to be called (clesis} but called apart (ek). Israel was called apart from other nations. They became a chosen people called to occupy a specific land. This land to which Israel had been called was one given by God. That gift became a Holy Land, a land given by Divine Holiness. In return, Israel was called to become a holy people living in a Holy Land. The communal response to this holy gift

was to live differently. That difference shown by their communal response to the Ten Commandments which God gave Moses to guide them. That was the trade-off in the covenant struck on Mt. Sinai. The commandments were Israel's special response. "Therefore, if you hearken to my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my special possession, dearer to me than all the people, though all the earth is mine" (Exodus 19, 5) The first books of the Bible tell the story of how that relationship worked out. The narrative contains the committed concern of the Lord but fickleness among the people. They found themselves tempted by life lived by Gentile nations surrounding them. Which indicated why they needed reminders of the Covenant and the Presence of God in their midst. They needed wake-up calls along the way to keep the original call alive, fresh, and consistently lived out. Worship offered that needed reminder of their unique identity.

The Church adopted a similar model but with obvious exceptions. Christian also were called apart but spiritually and not literally. From the beginning, there were less attempts to isolate themselves from Gentile nations. On the contrary, Apostles and their followers were sent out as witnesses to the Jesus message to anyone who would listen. They were called apart but also sent out. As the Father had sent Jesus, so now he would send out his Apostles. St. Paul in particular represents an emphatic example of being called apart but for an outward reach. In his travels he considered himself specifically sent to minister to the Gentiles and defend vigorously their rights as fellow citizens called also to the Christian community.

The call to ministry absorbs the call to holiness and moves it a step further. Some are not called merely for Church membership. They may be drawn to express their faith in Church ministry. Some feed the poor or support the causes of peace and justice. Others concentrate on being a good mom or dad. Liturgical ministry involves a specific call to holiness, one that serves the Church in a more public yet prayerful way. This entails witnessing one's faith through liturgical service. Through participating in worship, ministers feed the soul. Such a role implies Church leadership. Those who invest in the sanctuary occupy a highly visible expression of their own faith life. For that outward statement, they may be held more accountable. The call to holiness and faith-witnessing join together in a public way to build the faith of the worshipping community. Leadership in liturgy that displays no major contradiction in life style. Those sharing their faith in the sanctuary set an example. Expectation arise for those appearing in the sanctuary. Willing or not, those of us who serve the Church in more public ways are also called to become witnesses to Gospel values. The challenge comes in living out those values whether we are inside or outside The worship space.

Next week I wish to offer two examples of call and response, two Biblical figures whose calling changed the course of Judeo-Christian history. Their eventual greatness also had a beginning. That beginning involved a Divine intervention, a Divine calling. The first will be the Old Testament prophet Samuel. The second will be the New Testament Apostle St. Paul. One called as a child and the other as a grown man. Both were dramatic experiences. Their responses altered the world around them.

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