Remaining in the Calling in Which You were Called

by Roger Ruston, O.P.

One of the Christian notions that has been offered a new lease of life as a result of the twentieth-century renewal of ecclesiology has been that of vocation. It no longer ought to be possible to write an article entitled 'vocation' in a Catholic encyclopedia and go on to deal exclusively with the call to the priesthood or the religious life. Even when an author has the intention of dealing with these topics, he should nowadays feel obliged to begin with remarks to the effect that all Christians—and, indeed, all men—share in the same vocation to the kingdom of God. It is the sacrament of baptism that is the seal of a vocation before ever there is a question of an ordination or a religious profession. Just as the notion of the 'Church', once confiscated by the clergy, has had to be handed back to the baptized, who all begin and mostly remain as lay people, so has the notion of 'vocation'. A vocation from God is something which every Christian must learn to detect and act upon, whether or not he remains a layman all his life. One hopes that children in Catholic schools run by religious orders are no longer led to believe that there are just two major possibilities in their lives: either that of having a vocation or, if they do not have this, of getting married. (Not that I am going to spend time in this article in setting up marriage as an alternative vocation; rather the reverse, as we shall see.) The confiscation of the notion by the few, besides giving them a false sense of status in the Church, has done immeasurable harm to the Christian lives of ordinary people. It has more or less discouraged them from that continuous conversion and change of life-style that is the right and duty of all the baptized, not merely of those in the cloister. In a Church in which infant baptism is still the rule, the restoration of the dynamic idea of vocation will raise problems. But these will be the kind of problems that will make both religious and lay people think again about the ways they have hitherto justified their state of life, and search for conversion.

How did the Catholic notion of vocation come about, and what has happened to it since?

1. *The 'Second Baptism'*

For most people in the Church of the first three centuries the acceptance of the Christian call would have coincided with baptism itself. One might be forced to give this call the ultimate witness of martyrdom, but the change of life in becoming a Christian would have been sufficiently radical to give substance to the idea of being 'called out'. It was sufficient to be a lay Christian to be a candidate for the sword, and becoming such a candidate would normally have

been the consequence of an adult decision. The growth of infant baptism however, 'had for consequence the constitution of a society which, theoretically, is Christian, and in which, consequently, the baptized no longer had to take up a position so clearly as before against the "world", in the sense in which this word refers to a state of human society which is not Christian and which often persecuted the Church more or less violently. This fact seems to have attenuated considerably the psychological importance given to baptism. Baptism is not even a memory, since it has been received before the awakening of that faculty, and it no longer obliges a person to the same kind of conversion, to a change of life which had been desired after the long reflection of the catechumenate.'[1]

The growth of monasticism may be partly understood as a response to this loss of baptism as a conversion experience. Among the first Egyptian monks there was originally no rite of profession, for among these men baptism was still effective as a promise to give up everything and follow Christ. In Syria and Cappadocia during the fourth century it was still baptism which continued to function for many as the beginning of a life of renunciation. The adoption of the monastic life often coincided with it, as with Gregory of Nazianzus and John Chrysostom, for example. But baptism delayed for many years, even for children of Christian parents, was a curious characteristic of the fourth-century Church, Christian mothers often wishing 'to wait till their children had gone through the strains and stresses of youth before they submitted them to the rigorous moral claims of the Church'.[2]

However, it was a gradual shift of attention to monastic conversion well after baptism, which latter increasingly became an affair for the newly-born, that would eventually prompt men such as Jerome to call the monastic life a 'second baptism'. They understood it to mean, not a second sacrament of salvation, but a logical consequence of the original baptismal promises. The assimilation of martyrdom to the ascetical life was, of course, another important influence. Thus, the first baptism itself, instead of making one a candidate for the martyrdom of blood, made one a candidate for the 'martyrdom' of the monastic life. It may have been the penitential aspect of that life which allowed the expression 'second baptism' to be used, since the unique post-baptismal sacrament of penance was naturally thought of as a 'second chance'. It was only later, in the sixth century, with the appearance of special rites of profession and of vows, that the expression came to be applied, not to the state of monastic life as such, but to the act of commitment to that life. As profession rites became more and more like the baptismal, so were their effects identified: illumination by the Spirit and remission of

[1]Dom Jean Leclercq, *La tradition: baptême et profession: genèse et évolution de la vie consacrée*, in *Aspects du monachisme hier et aujourd' hui*. Paris, 1968.
[2]Joachim Jeremias, *Infant Baptism in the First Four Centuries*. London, 1960.

sins. Right up to modern times it has still been generally held that the act of solemn religious profession is sufficient to wipe away all post-baptismal (venial) sins and to make satisfaction for all former sins. And as for illumination: 'Whilst spiritual understanding previously consisted above all in passing from the Old Testament to the New, that is in access to the Christian faith, it will henceforth consist more and more, amongst a believing society where the faith co-exists with secular mores, in undergoing the *conversio morum*, the passage from the sinful life to the virtuous, from the mediocre to the spiritual, or more precisely, from the "world" to "religion".[1] For Denis and many another monastic writer of these times what the monastic life led to was *perfection*—the achievement of unity with God and unity in oneself. In the eleventh century with Peter Damien, 'the convert is no longer the man who passes from error to truth, from paganism or judaism to the Gospel: he is the man who renounces the world for the cloister. The Christian life seems thus to have found its veritable conclusion and most complete expression only in the monastery.'[2]

It seems therefore that the monastic theology—the foundation of all later theology of the religious life—is the origin of that restriction of the notion of vocation which has marked the Church up to recent times. It is not difficult to show, moreover, that just as the theology of the call to Christian perfection was annexed to the religious life, so were the scriptural foundations of it: in particular, what became formalized later as the 'evangelical counsels'. A great division in the Church—that between religious on the one hand (and priests as they became more and more subjected to the monastic ideology) and laity on the other—has been for centuries supported by the formal distinction between precepts and counsels. Whereas the precepts were to be obeyed by all, as the minimum requirement of being Christian, the counsels were for the few who felt themselves called to a life of 'perfection'. Thus were a number of central themes in the preaching of Jesus 'confiscated' from the ordinary Christian and reserved for those with 'vocations'.[3]

2. *Luther and vocation*

It was, of course, a major part of the Reformers' programme to hand back to ordinary Christian folk the gospel and with it the idea of a Christian calling for all the elect. Indeed, it is with Luther's notion of *Beruf*, *vocatio*, or calling, that there begins a long and progressively secularized history of the term, ending with its passing into the everyday usage which is so familiar. Even Catholics have not hesitated to use 'vocation' of secular professions or special aptitudes, even while they simultaneously preserve the medieval

[1]H. de Lubac, *Exegèse médiévale*, Paris, 1959, quoted in Leclercq, *op. cit.*, p. 83.
[2]Leclercq, *op. cit.*, p. 86.
[3]I hope to deal in a later article with the present-day assessment of the evangelical counsels.

usage of the term for the priesthood and the religious life. Now it is the secular usage which has greatly influenced the modern Catholic attempt to extend the notion of vocation to all Christians so we must ask ourselves exactly what was behind the Lutheran recasting of it. In particular, we must ask whether Luther succeeded in handing back to the ordinary Christian the true, biblical notion, or whether it was something else he handed back.

It is to the sociologist Weber, in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*,[1] that we owe the exposure of the origin and development of the Protestant doctrine of calling. At its source is Luther's own particular interpretation of a passage of St Paul in 1 Cor. 7, 17-24. So important is this text for the later understanding of vocation that it must be given in full:

> Only, let everyone lead the life which the Lord has assigned to him, and in which God had called him. This is my rule among all the churches. Was anyone at the time of his call already circumcised? Let him not seek to remove the marks of circumcision. Was any one at the time of his call uncircumcised? Let him not seek circumcision. For neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision, but keeping the commandments of God. Everyone should remain in the calling in which he was called. Were you a slave when called? Never mind. If you can gain your freedom, make use of your present condition instead. For he who was called in the Lord as a slave is a freedman of the Lord. Likewise he who was free when called is a slave of Christ. You were bought with a price; do not become slaves of men. So, brethren, in whatever state each was called, there let him remain with God.

It is Luther's interpretation of the Greek work *klesis*, calling, and its associates in this passage as the *position or status in which a man finds himself in society* that has become so firmly established as to have influenced every subsequent reading of the passage. Under its influence, St Paul is understood to recommend that every man is called to work out his salvation in this or that state of life to which God has assigned him, be it high or low, rich or poor, peasant or noble or, one might add, wage-slave or company-director: that a man can be truly said to be *called to* one of these by God. Luther did, indeed, develop a doctrine of this kind. On the one hand it was meant as an attack on the monastic theology with its two classes of Christians. In Luther's mind, 'the monastic life is not only quite devoid of value as a means of justification before God, but he also looks upon its renunciation of the duties of this world as a product of selfishness, withdrawing from temporal obligation. In contrast, labour in a calling appears to him as the outward expression of brotherly love. . . . It and it alone is the will of God, and hence every legitimate calling has exactly the same worth in the sight of God' (Weber, p. 81). On the other hand, however, the religious notion of calling thus interpreted became a powerful support for the

[1]Quotations taken from the English translation by Talcott Parsons. London, 1930.

stability of society against those—such as the fanatics and peasants of Luther's movement—who were out to overturn the social order. It seems that Luther originally held that secular occupations, while equal, were indifferent with regard to the realm of faith and salvation. However, in reaction to the left wing, he became more and more inclined to place a positive evaluation on the position in which an individual is placed in the world-order. It was the revolutionary forces unleashed by his movement which prompted him to a 'more and more intense belief in divine providence, which he identified with absolute obedience to God's will, with absolute acceptance of things as they were' (p. 85). And so the ethical principle emerged that 'the differentiation of men into classes and occupations established through historical development . . . was a direct result of the divine will. The perseverance of the individual in the place and within the limits which God has assigned to him was a religious duty' (p. 160). It is easy to see how the verification of this outlook could be made to hinge on the special interpretation given by Luther to 1 Cor. 7, 17ff, which was to become the norm from this time onwards among Protestants. The Lutheran notion of calling has passed into German and English and all the languages of the Reformation, gradually becoming divested of its religous framework.[1] It is important to bear in mind that 'vocation', 'calling', etc., were originally Christian religious terms from which *all* secular usages derive. In its original Lutheran form the notion of calling did not suggest that a man could actively save his soul by making a success of his calling in this world. Development along these lines came later at the hands of Calvin and the Puritans and by it—according to Weber—the doctrine became the inner spirit of capitalism. But with this development I am not concerned. It has been my object only to expose the Lutheran bias of all superficial readings of Paul's passage in 1 Corinthians. So influential has this been, that it is almost impossible even now to read it in any other way. Thus we tend automatically to read 'the state *in* which he was called' as meaning 'the state *to* which he was called,' when we bring our prior understanding of calling to this passage.

What then can we make of this first attempt to restore the sense of vocation to all the Christian people? Is it a correct interpretation of the New Testament notion of calling which St Paul shared with the other first Christians? Is it theologically justifiable to maintain that God calls every Christian to some sociologically-defined 'state of life' which will be for him the expression of God's will? (For to be sure, any recognizable state of life, no matter how genetically based,

[1]Weber held that 'neither the predominantly Catholic peoples nor those of classical antiquity have possessed any expression of similar connotation for what we know as a calling (in the sense of life-task, a definite field in which to work), while one has existed for all predominantly Protestant peoples' (p. 79). In fact, it seems that such a usage entered French around 1850, perhaps by an independent transference from the standard Catholic usage.

or no matter how religiously meaningful, will be liable to sociological definition.)

3. *The Pauline notion*

It is certainly true that, in the 1 Cor. passage, Paul is advising every Christian to remain in the state of life in which he was when the Christian call came to him. This is the general message of the chapter, and Paul gives special reasons for this advice, as we shall see. But it is not true that he refers to the state itself as a calling, nor that he gives it any religious significance of a positive kind. Rather the reverse, in fact. All states, including even marriage and virginity, are to be relativized from a religious point of view, and the reason is the imminent return of the Lord. It is that 'in view of the impending distress it is well for a person to remain as he is' (v. 26). St Paul, above all the New Testament writers, looked forward to the second coming of Christ and the transformation of this world. His scheme does not comprise the two worlds of later, Hellenized spirituality, but is in direct continuation with the Jewish apocalyptic scheme of two *ages*, the one to succeed the other on the initiative of God. St Paul's Christianity was of the 'prophetic' rather than the 'spiritualizing' kind. In his mind a cosmic transformation was coming which could already be discerned in the day-to-day life of the Church. There was no question of being stoically 'apathetic' about the present dispensation while taking flight to the higher realms of reason or spirit. On the contrary, the days of this dispensation were numbered, together with its old sociological, religious and even biological categories. There was to be neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female in the kingdom. The overcoming of that most persistent and damaging of barriers between men—that between the circumcised and the uncircumcised—which had already been partly realized in the Christian congregations, was the beginning of a new order which God would consummate in Christ. The Next World now showing itself for all to see in the unity of the Church, the *peace* now established between those previously hostile divisions of mankind, would be brought to completion by God himself—though not without 'distress'. Although this apocalyptic belief is far more in evidence in the earlier first letter to the Thessalonians, its influence is still clearly felt in 1 Corinthians. The consequences of this for the status of marriage and virginity in the Church—the main preoccupation of chapter 7—are worth a special study. But here it is sufficient to establish that Paul cannot, according to his prophetic outlook, be advocating a positive estimation of states of life as Christian vocations.

That this is clearly not the case can be shown from an examination of the significant word *klesis* and its associates. Leaving aside the passage which we are discussing, it nowhere in the epistles means anything other than 'the calling of the elect into the kingdom of God'. It has the status of a Christian technical term. Its fullest statement is

that of 1 Tim. 2, 9: 'God who saved us and called us with a holy calling, not in virtue of our works but in virtue of his own purpose and the grace which he gave to us in Christ Jesus ages ago. . . .'. Or, confining ourselves to 1 Cor.: 'To the Church of God which is at Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints. . .'; '. . .but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God'. . . . 'For consider your call, brethren. . .'. Moreover, in the period after the New Testament, calling continued to be used in no other sense than this, and a different meaning does not appear until, as we have seen, baptism becomes separated from the experience of conversion. Therefore we must be justified in saying that 'calling', when it appears in chapter 7, has the same restricted meaning. We could therefore paraphrase the most difficult sentence as follows:

> 'Everyone should remain in his calling of saint, to which he was called, by keeping the commandment of God (previous verse), which is to love his neighbour as himself regardless of his status or origin, which now counts for nothing since the call is to be one body in Christ. In view of the shortness of the time, this is the first priority, rather than causing further needless distress by trying to change one's status.'

Thus one's status in life was to be maintained, not because it was the calling of God, but for quite another reason which depends wholly on expectations of the end.

This interpretation is reinforced by v. 15b: 'For God has called us to peace'. 'Peace' here—although referring to mixed marriages—must have something of that strong ecclesial meaning which it has in the letter to the Ephesians, where it symbolizes the union of Jew and Gentile in the Church. Indeed, this letter, in language very similar to that of 1 Cor., urges Christians to continue 'walking in the calling to which you have been called'. It can mean nothing else in this context than maintaining the unity of the Church in faith, hope and love (4, 1ff). It then goes on to speak of *love* as the final aim of the calling (Eph. 4, 16; cf. 1 Cor. 13, 1-14, 1). Members of the Church are to use the special gifts of the Spirit to build up the body of the Church so that each man comes to maturity or 'perfection' in loving his neighbour and in speaking the truth to him. Among the Corinthians at least there had been a tendency to regard the special gifts and offices in the Church as personal honours and ends in themselves rather than as means of loving. So they had become divisive instead of uniting. The letter to the Ephesians presents a précis of the doctrine first worked out by Paul in answer to the Corinthian Church: one in which 'calling' is given its richest and most precise context. These parallels do more than anything to confirm the opinion that the expression is being used in 1 Cor. 7, 17ff in its normal technical sense. An accepted and perhaps pre-Pauline theology of faith, hope and

love may stand behind it, and the use of the expression may have been immediately understood by them in the normal way.

Hence the function of the passage in the chapter as a whole is perhaps this: If circumcision, and uncircumcision, or slavery and freedom, are irrelevant when it comes to realizing the calling of unity in the Church, then so, *a fortiori* are marriage and unmarriage. The Corinthians are mistaken in their highminded ambition to adopt the only perfect way of life in abstinence from intercourse or in celibacy or separation. These preoccupations—like the over-conscientious exercising of their freedom with regard to idols—could well be an obstacle to the true Christian calling which is Peace in the one body of Christ. The Corinthians imagine they are being truly spiritual whereas they are in danger of ignoring the true life of the Spirit and the only real vocation, which is love. This is the life which God has assigned to the Christian, not a life determined by any socio-religious category, but precisely a life which overcomes these categories and their normal enslaving effects.

It must now be more than ever apparent that the notion of vocation restored by Luther to the ordinary Christian, in its developed form at least, was somewhat distant from the original. This finding should make us wary about more recent Roman Catholic attempts to extend the notion of vocation to the laity in the hope of thus giving them in their own way something which has always been claimed by priests and religious. When we admit that all Christians have a vocation, we must not intend this to mean that each one has been called by God to the state of life in which he finds himself—or for which he is preparing himself—even when this is a question of the married or celibate state. It may be the will of God that he should remain there while life lasts, but it cannot be true that God has called him there, at least, not if we are to confine ourselves to the biblical notion of calling. And it can only be true that he should remain there in the measure that the dynamic call to the kingdom can there be realized.

4. *Two senses of vocation*

Is there then any room for difference in 'calling' in the Church. I believe there is, but not in the way in which it is often explained.

In the first place, Paul does, indeed, talk of the 'perfect' (*teleios*) but it is always in contrast to 'children'.[1] 'Brethren, do not be children in your understanding; be babes in evil, but in understanding be perfect' (1 Cor. 14, 20). So perfection is the normal state to which every Christian is called. It is the state of being adult, or mature. More precisely, as we can tell from chapter 13 of this letter, it is the state of having moved on from the childish life of the simple convert, possessing the gifts of the Spirit but hardly knowing how to use them,

[1]Cf. S. Lyonnet, *La vocation chrétienne à la perfection selon Saint Paul*, in C. Colombo *et al.*, *Laics et vie chrétienne parfaite*, t. I. Rome, 1963.

to the adult life of love. The difference between Christians, when there is any, is always between those who are still children and those who show signs of being adults in their ability to love, never between those who are called to perfection and those who can content themselves with obedience to the law. Those who think they can do this are not Christians at all in Paul's estimation, having abandoned the freedom which comes through seeking perfection at all times. Perfection or adulthood is for all without exception. There are no greater or lesser ways in the Church.

But, dismissing any ideas of greater or lesser ways, is there any sense in which a man may have a Christian vocation which is different from that of others? We have to account for the fact that Paul says on several occasions that he was called to be an apostle. It is very doubtful, however, whether this can be used to tell us anything about ordinary Christian calling. Paul was very concious of the fact that his call to be an apostle of the Gentiles was unique, a very special ministry of reconciliation, ordained for him by the risen Christ in person. And, as we can further deduce from the hymn to charity in 1 Cor. 13, he would have relativized even this exalted role along with the lesser offices of the Church to the 'more excellent way' of love.

When Paul wishes to speak of variety in the Church, he speaks not of different callings, but of different *gifts*. And, in the first place, this means not so much gifts to individuals as gifts to the Church: 'for building up the body of Christ' (Eph. 4, 12).[1] What one is called to is not to *be* this or that, apostle, prophet, teacher, healer, presbyter, etc., but, these things being given, to take part in the upbuilding of the body in love. This might seem sometimes to be a rather minor and even unhelpful point to be making—especially at such length—but I believe the distinction to be an extremely important one. I also believe it to be close to the main purpose of St Paul in writing 1 Cor., that essential document for all later ecclesiology. It makes all the difference between a church in which there are a limited number of categories of participation to one of which a person ought to try to conform himself, and a church in which, the goal being unity and love, there are an *infinite* number of ways of participating. It makes all the difference moreover between a church in which Christians are tempted to find status in belonging to this or that group, set apart, following a 'more perfect way', etc., and one in which *all* have the opportunity and the right to the perfection of the gospel. The setting apart of special 'vocations' has the double effect of inducing a false sense of superiority and complacency in the few, and of inducing

[1]I think there would still be much sense in using the notion of vocation for deacons, priests and bishops in that they are called *by the church*, by the people of God themselves, to mediate to them the communion, the word and the forgiveness of God. The sooner we return to the idea that God calls men to the ministry *through the voice of the faithful*, the better. But this is another question from the one we are discussing.

the many to be content with a mediocre Christianity which causes no real change in their lives.

The attempt to remedy this by granting that, say, there is also a vocation to marriage in the Church, has other effects which are equally unacceptable. It is misleading because it once again risks mistaking a temporary dispensation for the unalterable will of God. It induces Christians to try to fit themselves into the limited number of socially determined choices offered to them at any given epoch. It is as a result of this 'essentialist' concept of vocation that many a bad 'theology of the laity' has been put forward in recent times. They nearly all find themselves in the impasse of having to define the lay person (normally assumed to be the married person) as being neither a priest nor a religious. After that the ideas tend to run out, because in fact there can be no such thing as a vocation proper to the laity, unless we mean by 'laity' all the baptized. Moreover, it can be no one's vocation to subordinate his or her unique gifts to a uniform pattern, whether this be the uniformity of the 'priest', the 'nun' or the 'middle-class housewife'.

It is, on the contrary, everyone's vocation to contribute to the building of the Church by becoming perfectly *himself* in it, rather than anyone else. No one who is not perfectly himself is perfect in any Christian sense. The kingdom of God—and the Church in so far as it realizes the kingdom—is the place in which the liberty to be oneself is granted. Christianity is concerned with releasing people from categories, not confining them to categories.

A further unacceptable effect of the indiscriminate use of 'vocation' is to induce people to believe that, because they may have failed at marriage, at the priesthood, at the religious life, they have therefore failed at Christianity. How many men and women have given up in despair because they falsely identified their final calling with success in the narrowly-defined roles they were offered by society or by the Church?

This is not to say that a human society or a church can exist without a limiting number of categories. But the call of the gospel is to move through and finally, out of, these. To use a simile of Bernard Besret in *Libération de l'homme* when speaking of marriage and celibacy, these things are like different languages which a man may assume in order to express his life to the world, and the one is not more valuable in the eyes of God than the other, since God only judges us on our love. One may further add that, like all languages, they must remain transparent to their meaning—the various modes of love—and flexible enough to express entirely new meanings when required. In the end, there are as many different vocations as there are men and women in the Church.