

expression and a principal source. Without this progressive deepening in which mental prayer has such an important role, our liturgical prayer will remain exterior and shallow. A few decades ago, in face of the revived interest in mystical theology and interior prayer, the liturgical movement appeared to many as something concerned primarily with the externals of worship. In recent years, the situation has altered considerably, and it is realized more and more that the liturgical movement is concerned with things that vitally affect the spiritual life, not only of a few souls, but of all Christians. The Encyclical *Mediator Dei* has set its seal on the liturgical movement as primarily a spiritual issue. But *Mediator Dei* also warns us of the danger that the liturgical revival may be impoverished through lack of interior life and depth; and lack them it will, if it leads in any way to a neglect of mental and contemplative prayer, and of the revived appreciation of traditional teaching upon them which was mentioned above. It is essential to consider liturgical prayer and mental prayer, not as competitors, still less as alternatives, but as two indispensable expressions of a single life of prayer *in Christo*, accepting their diversity not as a tension or a problem, but as an enrichment, convinced of their mutual dependence and of their power to deepen each other indefinitely.



## VOCATIONS AND THEIR RECOGNITION—I

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**H**OW often people put, rather anxiously, the question: How do I know if I have a vocation? It is not easy to answer, and part of their anxiety comes from the fact that, as likely as not, they are looking for a cut-and-dried answer that can seldom, in the nature of the case, be given. The following of a vocation is a venture of faith. But it still remains true that the venture ought to be made with prudence. My aim in these articles is to examine first what a vocation is, and secondly what kind of answer can be given to the question just put. It is, after all, a question that many, besides those who feel themselves drawn to consecrate their lives to the service of God, may be called upon to

face. Parents and priests and teachers may have to help solve it. And experience shows that all too often they have but the vaguest idea how to set about it.

For my present purpose I wish to extend the term 'vocation' to include every type of religious life, not merely the vocation to priesthood; but I do not use it in the much more general sense of any vocation in the lay estate, or to marriage, seen as God's will for each Christian individual.

A recent *Constitutio Apostolica*<sup>1</sup> will serve as a useful point of departure. This papal document has, as its expressed aim, 'to give the principles and approve general norms by which those who are called to embrace the state of seeking religious perfection and those who teach them are to be formed and guided'.<sup>2</sup> Its scope is narrower than that to be considered here; it deals only with vocations to the combined religious and priestly life, and not with those, for example, of religious women, of laybrothers, or of teaching or nursing brothers. But it does incidentally establish certain important principles, and make distinctions, that are essential to any treatment of these matters.

I have also to acknowledge my debt to the volume of essays by various French authors, translated under the title *Vocation*.<sup>3</sup>

The Holy Father first insists that the very fundament of priestly and religious life is the divine call, *vocatio divina*. There are within this call two essential elements, which he terms the divine and the ecclesiastical. The divine element is God's invitation to the soul. The ecclesiastical element is that touched upon by the Roman catechism when it describes those as having a vocation 'who are called by the legitimate ministers of the Church'.

It will help, I think, a clear focussing of our question, if we consider these two elements of a vocation separately, and add to them a third consideration, namely of those gifts and qualities which need, as the Pope says, to be found upon the part of the aspirant. The latter do not themselves constitute a vocation, but are rather the necessary conditions for its reception upon the side of the one who is called. The habit of speaking of a religious or priestly vocation and meaning ambiguously any one of these three aspects, or all of them together, without distinction, can only engender

1 *Acta Apostolicae Sedis*, 31st May, 1956.

2 *A.A.S.*, cit., p. 000.

3 *Vocation*: being a translation by Walter Mitchell (Blackfriars Publications, 1952) of *Le Discernment des Vocations de Religieuses*.

confusion. They are all important, but they are different.

My articles will therefore fall into a threefold division, dealing first with the divine call proper, then with the ecclesiastical call, and finally with the necessary qualities in the person called. But I shall first make two general remarks.

The first is that, as the Holy Father reminds us in the *Constitutio* referred to, a vocation is something that develops gradually. This, as I hope to show, is a remark that applies to every one of its three aspects. To quote the Pope's words: 'The germ of a divine vocation, and the qualities necessary for it, when present, must evidently need training and formation. For nothing, at its first birth, comes upon the scene perfect from the outset; it comes to perfection by gradual progress. In directing this development account must be taken of everything that concerns the one who is divinely called, and also his period and setting.'

My second remark is a reminder of a distinction made by theologians, the distinction between God's 'signified will' (*voluntas signi*) and his 'will of good pleasure' (*voluntas beneplaciti*). Simply and absolutely the act of willing can be predicated of God only in the latter sense. Whatever in fact happens is God's will, since nothing that happens escapes that creative or permissive influence; and conversely, whatever God wills, occurs as he wills. This is his 'will of good pleasure'. But there is much that, from our creaturely point of view he is said (in a different sense) to will, that does not happen. When St Paul says, 'This is the will of God, your sanctification' (1 Thess. iv, 3), he does not mean that we cannot fail to be saints. When we are told to do the will of God, there is no foregone result. The act of willing predicated of God in this second sense applies to him only metaphorically, upon the analogy of our purely human behaviour. Willing is predicated of God, in this case, in a way parallel to that in which anger or remorse is predicated of him. More explicitly, we find, within our human scene, divine treatment of us, e.g. punishment, or change of mind, or an expression of command, which would be significant, in human beings, of the emotions of anger, or remorse, or of a merely limited ineffective human will. If human beings were the agents these forms of treatment would be so many *signs* of anger, remorse, will. When therefore we find apparently similar effects produced by God, we take them to be signs of 'anger', 'remorse', 'will' on his part. We thus come to speak of him (improperly but

by a metaphor calculated to impress our human understandings), as being angry, or repenting himself, or willing; the latter is his 'signified will' (*voluntas signi*). It is evidently important to be careful to know which we are speaking of when we are speaking at any time of God's will. I think it is true to say that our most frequent use is the metaphorical one. This distinction will be important for us when we speak of a vocation being God's will for us, or the following out of his will.

We may now return to the threefold aspect of a vocation. The first essential element was the invitation of the soul by God himself. The Holy Father says: 'This call by God to enter the religious or priestly state is so necessary that, should it be absent, the very foundation itself upon which the whole edifice is reared must be said to be lacking'. The divine invitation, let us note, may be to the priestly life alone, as with secular priests; or to the religious life alone, as, for example with sisters, and brothers; or to the religious life combined with the priestly life. It is essential that every one of these vocations be appreciated as, each in its own manner, a vocation to perfection. Every Christian is called to perfection, but not every Christian by the same route. The route for the majority is as laymen and laywomen. The route for some is by way of the priesthood alone; they are called to be his ministers, to be fishers of men, workers in his harvest. The way of others is by entering upon the state of perfection outlined by the counsels of evangelical poverty and obedience: 'Deum unice requirentes eique adhaerentes'; these are the religious. The way for yet others is by a combination of both this religious state and the priestly ministry. Whatever way God invites a man or woman to walk, must be respected. But there is sometimes a temptation (exactly opposed to such respect) to think that there is one standard vocation, the priestly one, from which there may be a rather diluted derivative (for those who cannot make the grade) of, say, being just a laybrother; or a standard vocation which is the religious one, from which there may be the second best of being 'only' a secular priest.

That is all wrong. We must know that each one of these ways is a special way to perfection, as is also the lay state, to which God differently invites different souls. It has to be the care of pastors and advisers always to follow, and never to try to impose or improve upon God's leading. The Pope is emphatic about this:

'Let no one ever in any way force or allure or admit to the priestly or religious state anyone who does not truly show the signs of divine vocation. Let no one be pushed into the clerical ministry if he shows clearly that he has received from God only a religious vocation. Let no one who has received, besides, a religious vocation also be forced or turned aside into the secular clergy. Let no one be deflected from the priestly state who may be judged by sure signs to be divinely called to it.' Most people with experience can recall cases where these warnings would have been salutary. How often one is tempted, perhaps in his own group interests, to disregard them. I have certainly known religious who tried to capture vocations indiscriminately; I have known at least one secular priest who attempted to deflect a boy from entering a religious order; and more than one priest who has denounced as undemocratic and unworthy of our day the vocation of a lay-brother.

No, whether the vocation be priestly, or religious only, or both, it is essential that the initiative should be seen as coming from God. Our Lord said to his apostles: 'You have not chosen me, but I have chosen you' (John xv, 16). Of the priesthood, even under the old law, the epistle to the Hebrews tells us: 'Neither doth any man take the honour to himself, but he that is called by God, as Aaron was' (Heb. v, 4); therefore at ordination priests are bidden 'cum magno quippe timore ad tantum gradum ascendendum'. As for the evangelical counsel of purity, our Lord himself tells us: 'All men take not this word, but they to whom it is given' (Matt. xix: 12).

In a word, without the divine element in a vocation to the priesthood or religion, there is no true vocation. But to be so called is evidently, in the Pope's mind, to receive divine grace in a special modality. He says: 'For if God does not call a man, his grace does not move him nor help him'. Now grace can be considered either as being in God himself, identical with him, or as being created grace in the creature. According as we consider the grace of vocation from one or other of these two angles, two problems present themselves. From the point of view of its being in God himself, his loving will for a man, we may ask whether a man be free or not to stand out against it. From the point of view of its being created grace in a man's soul, we may ask how to decide upon its presence. Both are questions of considerable prac-

tical importance. The second question will be dealt with in a second article.

Obviously, the first question, whether a man is free to stand out against the divine call taken as God's loving will for him, cannot concern God's *voluntas beneplaciti*, which is irresistible, but his *voluntas signi*. May a man resist God thus offering him grace, or is it sinful to do so?

This is an extremely difficult question to answer with the delicacy required. Quite one of the best essays in the book on Vocation already referred to is by Père Motte, O.P., on this particular point. I cannot do full justice to his finely balanced arguments in the space here available: it will suffice to give their gist, within the context of my own approach.

It is already misleading to ask the question in the way just now put. To speak of *resisting* God's will is to beg the question at once; of course we may not, without sin, resist his will. But this is a matter, as we have said, of his *voluntas signi*. Now the will of God is shown to us not only in the form of commandments and prohibitions, though these are indeed the chief signs; but it is shown also by actual circumstances which declare his intention behind them, and also by the counsels. It is a mistake, as Père Motte points out, to suppose that the only ground of moral obligation is divine precept or prohibition; this is a concept of morality which turns every moral act into one of obedience to law. In a loose sense of obedience it is true that the moral life is all obedience because it is nothing but conformity to the thought and will of God. But in the strict sense, obedience is the counterpart to a command as such; there is much more to morality, particularly to Christian morality, than obedience in this strict sense. Outside the sphere of command and precept, or rather within their framework, there is room to move about freely, room to exercise personal responsibility with prudence, room where God has given us not the *diktats* of commandment but the directives of his general advices and counsels. The purpose of the commandments is most certainly not to dispense us from the need of using our talent for understanding and generosity in submitting ourselves to God's will, not to encourage a mental laziness and machine-like passivity in our pursuit of eternal life; their purpose is rather to channel our minds and wills in that direction, and to provide the room wherein we may exercise our free responsibility. And when we come to this, as it were,

living-space of freedom, we are not to consider ourselves as now exempt from all duty, with no account to render, plunged into a sort of moral void. Here there *is* obligation, but the obligation to shape our lives with supernatural prudence; it is not obligation *ex vi praecepti*, with the compulsion of commandment.

It is therefore false to say, as is often said, that because a vocation is not a matter of commandment, but only of counsel, it does not, therefore, oblige. Certainly, as St Thomas holds, 'precepts create necessity, whereas counsels are left to the choice of the people to whom they are given' (I-II, 108, 4). Certainly, therefore, we cannot say that a vocation obliges *ex vi consilii*, by force of counsel. But when we are counselled, as opposed to commanded, what the counsel can bring to bear upon us of obligation in its own right as counsel is that we should at least consider it, and consider it the more seriously as it comes from the more or less qualified counsellor. And this even though there is no obligation, as there is with a command, to put the recommendation into effect. The obligation falls not so much upon what I am to do, but upon the deliberations preceding my decision. It is an obligation in the line of the virtue of prudence.

So we may so far conclude that whilst failure to follow a vocation is not necessarily innocent, even though a vocation is not a matter of precept, it is also not necessarily, in itself, a matter of guilt; for it may be prudent not to follow God's *voluntas signi* when it is given by way not of command but of counsel. This is not to say that to turn down a vocation by disregarding God's counsel is never a sin, but only that it is never a sin of disobedience (except in the rare cases which may occur, where God makes the following of the counsels a matter of particular precept to a given individual, by some unusual and clear manifestation of his will). When it is a sin the sin is one of imprudence.

*To be continued*