

## **Christian Vocation in General**

Christians believe in vocation because it stands at the overlap of two things that also matter to us: freedom and purpose. If you do not believe in both freedom and purpose then you will not have much use for vocation. Occasionally, for instance, Christian thinkers have taken a wrong turn over predestination and interpreted it in such a way as to deny human freedom. It is difficult to see how vocation can mean much in this case, since vocation partly rests upon freedom. On the other hand, the secular culture in which we live at the moment stands at the opposite extreme. It celebrates little other than freedom, but has a very weak sense of ultimate human purpose. In this situation, vocation cannot have much place either.

For all this, the word 'vocation' does live on in popular usage, attached to a handful of occupations. They are a kind of opposition movement made up of those who have both a sense of purpose and who have exercised their freedom in choosing a demanding career. These people – teachers, nurses, clergy, carers – are reported to have the highest levels of satisfaction in their jobs. They are fortunate because, in a world where most people float free and devoid of purpose, listlessness is otherwise the rule.

Against this background Christian theology stresses that everyone has a vocation. Each person is given a purpose by virtue of his or her creation. As we will see, those who are united to the mission of the Church in baptism receive a greater vocation still.

### **Vocation and the Two Great Calls**

In order to understand vocation it is useful to start with the word itself. It is derived from the Latin *vocare* and the literal sense is of *being called*. *Vocal* and *invocation* come from the same root. The Bible is full of the language of calling and so is the Christian self-understanding that the Bible informs. In the very beginning God called creation into being from nothing: 'In the beginning God said "Let there be light"'. St John begins his Gospel with the same idea: 'In the beginning was the Word ... and without him was nothing made that has been made'. Creation is already a call.

Here we could perhaps have left it, were it not that the world has gone off the rails

in so many respects. Christians talk of this in terms of sin and the Fall, and it made a second *calling* necessary. The Word, who had made all things, came into the world to put it right. He was ‘made flesh’ and lived among us for our redemption. The Bible describes this as a second calling: ‘[he] has called you out of darkness, into his marvellous light’. God had called us into life in creation and now calls us into new life through baptism. We then take our place in the Church – which, among other things, is described as a ‘congregation’ because Christians are called together as the brothers and sisters of Christ. Christian vocation is simply a recognition of these two callings and all that they entail. Everyone has a vocation from God by virtue of creation. The coming of Christ, and the Christian vocation which follows from it, both completes our human vocation and helps us to understand it more completely.

### **Responding to the Call of Creation**

To understand vocation we must consider what these two callings mean. The first, creation, is the call into being out of nothing. We could also describe it as the gift of being. This links vocation to the recognition of this gift and our desire to make a response. Another way to approach the question of what creation might mean for us is to ask why it was that God created anything at all. One good answer is to say that he created the world in order to display his glory, or to communicate his love. Looked at another way, we can say that God’s reason for creating any particular thing is for it *to be itself*. If this seems a little circular, then it reflects the gratuity of creation. In the same way, many works of art do not seem to have any purpose beyond themselves: they are their own justification, along with the delight we find in them just as they are. It is the same with creation.

All these ideas come together since each thing displays God’s glory, and is loveable, in exactly its own way. As a consequence, a central part of exploring our vocation is the exploration of what it is that we are. We should then seek to be whatever that is to the fullest of our ability. Put another way, God gave us, not only existence, but a certain way of existing – our nature – and that is where our vocation starts. God calls each thing and each person into being, and delights in it, him or her as it is. Our vocation and destiny is to attain to our perfection according to our own way of being.

The idea of having a nature comes together with the sense that creation is a gift in

the notion of a *charism*. This comes from the word for gift in the Greek of the New Testament. Vocation is a discernment of charism. We explore what it means for God to have given us the gift of the nature that we have. From that we wonder how we could make that into a gift for our fellow human beings, for the church and for the world at large.

### **Creation, Vocation and Freedom**

Everyone, and indeed every thing, has a vocation. This is to be and to live out what it is that we are. This probably sounds agreeable, but it might also sound quite fixed or static. It may suggest that there is only one thing that we are and should be. Approached this way, vocation becomes a perilous affair and a task at which we are almost certainly bound to fail: like shooting an arrow at a very small target, where all that counts is hitting the bull's-eye. In fact, vocation is much more open-ended than this and embraces all sorts of possibilities. It is about the overlap of freedom and purpose, and it preserves both.

We are all different and we are all free. There are many possibilities as to what we might be and do. None of them is likely to satisfy us completely. That, in fact, is one reason why we are free. Our ultimate desire is for God, who is unbounded goodness. In the course of living, encountering the possibilities that are open to us, we come across goods that are real but necessarily limited. We are free in face of these many different possibilities because none of them will entirely fulfil us. No one of them can entirely command our will.

It is important to bear this in mind when we make important decisions about the course our lives will take. If we are entering a romantic relationship, it is helpful to do so with our eyes open on this score. Relationships flounder if we have Disney-inspired expectations of perfection on every front. In the same way, this kind of realism is helpful when we think about *embracing* a career or way of life. Following our vocation should be a satisfying thing: it is about finding what it is that would *make sense of us*. Nonetheless, we live in a world of both sin and chance, and so we should not expect a fairy-tale. Besides which, even ideal occupations, roles or relationships are sometimes a chore. In thinking about vocation we should be realistic about the kind of obstacles we might encounter and also remember that there are bound to be many things that are out of our control. Just as this applies to us, it applies also to other people. Consequently, part of a Christian vocation is

to help other people realise their own vocations, especially when they are confronted with hurdles and injustices.

As we have seen, we all receive a vocation in creation. It is the call to fulfil the reason we were given existence and made to be the people that we are. We have all sorts of freedom as to how we do this. Although we each have a certain sort of nature, we also have real openness as to how we work it out. All this said, self-knowledge is a difficult thing. It is probably not entirely obvious to anyone who or what he or she is. Nor might it be exactly obvious how we would find out. And beyond that, what it is that we are is not entirely settled. It is partly established by what we are given in creation and nurture – we have the *raw material* of our *nature* which we mentioned above – but this is to be determined further by choice and circumstance. That is one reason why a sense of vocation, and the choices we make on the basis of it, are so important. Our actions reflect who we are, but our actions also help to determine what we will become.

This talk of *raw material* brings us to the idea of providence, a doctrine that is closely related to vocation in Christian theology. Providence can seem quite a cold idea – the hand of God lying upon history, turning it this way or that – but its closeness to the word ‘provide’ can suggest other possibilities. The providence of God is the way in which he provides all that we need. Providence is God’s gift to us all that we need to live a good human life. (This provision may require sharing on our part, and we are not always good at that.) Providence does not close down opportunities and choices but opens them up. Vocation is about sifting amongst these choices and the actions that go with them. Sometimes people receive what they take to be a clear and definite sign from God concerning the direction their life should take. For most of us, God provides a different compass – as sure but less flashy – in the form of our reason, intuition and the advice our friends, family and community. We should not wait around for a heavenly voice; God has provided us with these guides and it falls to us to take action: to think, to seek advice, to try out possibilities. This is important. As St Thomas Aquinas said ‘when a person omits to do what is in his or her power and only waits for God’s help, he or she appears to tempt God’.

### **Being a Creature Well**

We have found the first of our two foundations for vocation in creation. (The

other is redemption.) Our call in creation is to live as creatures. The first thing that this entails is gratitude. Our first vocation is to be grateful. A large part of the religious impulse, and of our religious duty, is to be thankful to God. We are thankful for a gift that we could not possibly repay. This overflows into gratitude to those people through whom God gave us life and nurtured us. This might include our families, friends and teachers.

Since our vocation is the vocation of a creature, it also suggests the importance of a certain humility – the idea of humility is closely associated with the idea of creation. The root of humility is *humus*, the earth. (The word *human* almost certainly has the same origin.) Humility, then, is not about being a doormat; it is about recognising that we are made ‘from the dust of the ground’ and remembering this when we stand before God and one another. Once this is in place, there is no shame in seeking after greatness. Indeed, to quote St Thomas again, ‘if someone should despise honour to the extent that he would not take care to do what is deserving of honour, this would be blameworthy’.

Another very important thing to see about being a creature is that it involves being part of a great, interconnected whole. In the story of creation given in the first chapter of Genesis, God calls each part of creation good, but the whole, once it is finished, he calls ‘very good’. The ‘good’ of the individual belongs within the ‘very good’ of the whole. The same applies to our vocation. The vocation of a creature is not that of an isolated, individual thing; it is a matter of taking our proper place within the life of the community. However it might be that we work out our vocation, it should take this into account. A good Christian vocation is one that builds up the community. It is one that recognises other people as fellow creatures and gives them the kindness and honour that is therefore their due.

To sum up, when we recognise that we are creatures, called out of nothing, we receive all sorts of guidance as to what we should make of our lives. We see that we should apply ourselves to building up the human community and, beyond that, the wider community of all creatures. We should find ways to express gratitude to God and to respect our fellow human beings as the fellow creatures they are. We should look for a way to express all that we are and to develop individually, within the wider whole, to the full extent of what we can be.

Finally, let us remember that we are made in the image of God. We are thinking for the moment about creation. In other words, God is creative: this is part of the

image we bear. A good human vocation will therefore be expected to have some element of creativity – what that means will differ from person to person. For many it will embrace a vocation to have children and care for a family. Whatever our work may be, it should allow us to communicate God’s goodness to others, just as God communicated his goodness to the world in creation. All this leaves us a great deal of freedom, but it does rule out certain forms of life. It is difficult to see how anyone could have a vocation profit from the sale of weapons, for example.

### **Responding to the Call of Redemption**

The first call comes in creation. It is the vocation to live out, to fill up, all that we are and can be, as a specific individual within a larger communal whole. This vocation is given to us at birth. It is mirrored by a second layer of vocation, which belongs to redemption. This is given to us in baptism, our second birth. We have already considered some words from the First Letter of St Peter: we were called ‘out of darkness into his marvellous light’. The chapter from which these words come describes the identity we are given in baptism – ‘a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people’ – and the first aspect of vocation which follows from this identity – ‘that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light’. Just as gratitude and thanksgiving follow straight on from creation’s call into being, even so praise and proclamation are at the heart of our vocation as God’s redeemed people.

Peter situates this within the language of being a people and a building (‘like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house’). A similar idea is found throughout the writings of St Paul but expressed in the image of a body. This is communal language. Just as vocation is communal even at the level of creation, it is even more a communal matter once our identity is within the Church. It is *corporate* because it is discernment of our place in the body. Creation, we could say, is birth into the *body politic*; baptism is incorporation within the Body of Christ, which is the Church.

Vocation is also corporate in the way it is discerned. Our Christian vocation involves living out, in a way that is right for us, the new identity we have as a brother or sister of Christ within the Church. We are not, however, always the best judges of who it is that we are. As a result, vocation is best discerned within

the context of friendships and by means of discussions with people who know us well. Thomas Aquinas said, rather strikingly, that no human being can know his or her own soul, or at least not directly. The reason is that we are material beings and we know material things in a material way. We *can* know spiritual things after a fashion but only *through* material things. This is the way that we come to know God or our own souls. Although we cannot *see* our own souls, or know them directly, we can come to know our self, our deepest identity, as it is 'reflected' to us in our relationships with other people.

### **Sacramental Character**

Baptism is the first of the sacraments that changes who and what we are. This applies to all the sacraments that are to be received only once. The theological language is that they *impart a character*, which is to say that they give the gift of sharing in the character of Jesus in some particular way. Baptism is the primal sacrament because it incorporates us into the Body of Christ. Confirmation bestows the gift of the Holy Spirit so that we can take a more vigorous part in the active life of the Church. Holy orders entrust a man or woman with the authority to act in Christ's own name in certain important ways, such as presiding at the Eucharist or forgiving sins. Marriage is also this kind of sacrament – although some Christians will allow for the prospect of a second marriage – since it unites two people so that their participation in the life and work of Jesus becomes a joint project. Baptism forms the foundation here: all of these sacraments are about entering into something that has been given to us first in baptism. They are therefore excellent moments at which to think carefully about vocation. A discussion of vocation deserves, for instance, to be an integral part of confirmation preparation, not least with young people.

### **What is the vocation of the Christian?**

First of all, the vocation of the Christian is still to be a person, to be a creature. What we receive specifically in being a Christian does not erase our identity as a human being. The Christian life is a way to be a person and a creature and a way to do it well. Being a Christian does not stand at odds with being a human being: 'grace does not abolish nature but perfects it'. Consequently, all that we have said about creation applies, with all the more force, to the Christian.

After that, the Christian call is to live out all that our baptism means: that new, second beginning and call. The baptismal liturgy is therefore a great place to start. As a first checklist (from the *Common Worship* baptism service), we find that we are to

- reject the devil and all rebellion against God
- renounce the deceit and corruption of evil
- repent of the sins that separate us from God and neighbour
- turn to Christ as Saviour
- submit to Christ as Lord
- come to Christ, the way, the truth and the life

And then we are to

- worship and serve God.
- continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers
- persevere in resisting evil, and, whenever [we] fall into sin, repent and return to the Lord
- proclaim by word and example the good news of God in Christ
- seek and serve Christ in all people, loving [our] neighbour as [ourselves]
- acknowledge Christ's authority over human society, by prayer for the world and its leaders, by defending the weak, and by seeking peace and justice

We continue to explore, our whole life through, what form these general callings are to take in our own particular case. As we do this, it is very useful to have a spiritual director – someone we see regularly for spiritual counsel. We should see our conversations with him or her as an ongoing, joint discernment of vocation.

### **Work, Relationships and the Church**

Three areas where discernment of vocation is particularly important are work, relationships, and our role within the Church. Each of these deserves a leaflet of its own, but we can touch on each of them quickly here.

Work is a good and important part of human life. For most people it is a highly



significant part of their identity. Obviously this can go too far, and work in fact becomes pointless when it becomes its own end. We should recognise that we have a vocation beyond work. This done, work can be an important and satisfying aspect of our journey to that goal.

As a useful guide to what sort of work might or might not be part of our vocation, we should consider what work is for. It is for building the human community and to enable us to provide for ourselves and for others. Within this there is a kaleidoscope of possibilities. Vocation involves working out who and what we are and making something of it. If, therefore, we have particular gifts, it is good to find some way to express them in our work, whether that is as a teacher, a scientist, a youth worker, or any other activity that suits our skills. Having said that, most of us have many facets and not all of them will be realised fully in our work. It is therefore important that we have other outlets and activities alongside our paid occupation: hobbies, community involvement and service of the Church, for instance.

Sadly, plenty of work touches on even fewer of our capacities than we might like or expect. The Church is committed to the idea that there should be work for everyone, and work that is properly engaging, but the fact is that such work is not around for everyone. Dorothy L Sayers wrote that it was a scandal that for so many people work could not be 'a way of life in which the nature of man should find its proper exercise and delight and so fulfil itself to the glory of God'. Sometimes then, or even often, the work we have to do is less intrinsically satisfying than we might like or deserve (and here Christians need to be campaigners for things to improve). Even this sort of work can be an aspect of vocation, as a means if not an end. Work, even work we do not enjoy as much as we would like, is a way to fulfil our vocation to support ourselves and our families, and do something which contributes to the wider society. In other words, it is not inconsequential that a job allows us to earn a livelihood. The money we earn allows us to do good. Nonetheless, Christians have rightly distrusted occupations where the making of money becomes an end in itself.

Concerning relationships, we should seek to understand ourselves, and be open to the risk that a relationship with another person involves. Not the least part of this risk is that we come to see ourselves in a new and different light. Relationships, as we have seen, are an integral part of the context in which we discern our identity and our vocation. For most people, a romantic and sexual relationship is one of

the most significant, even glorious, ways in which they live out what it means to be a creature, called by God, by love for love. It is also the area of vocation where people often experience the greatest perplexity (is it right that I should marry this person?) and disappointment (I am sure that my destiny belongs with this person, so how can it all go so wrong?). The suggestions that have been made above apply here too. A relationship should allow us to make a gift of ourselves to someone else; it should provide an environment in which we can make the most of the nature we have been given and develop into the best sort of person that we could be. A romantic relationship is obviously an example of us going beyond ourselves to relate to the wider whole – and it should be something which opens out the community around us, and its needs, rather than sealing us off.

Romance, of course, is not everything. There are also our relationships with family, neighbour, work colleagues, country and so on. We might call these ‘given relationships’, and the Christian vocation is worked out here too.

As to the role of a Christian within the Church, the principle is very clear: every Christian has vocation to a ministry in the church, not only the clergy. The nature of our vocation reflects the vocation of the Church itself. It is a community, an organic whole, and yet at the same time it has a mission and it lives also for those who are outside its bounds. In the same way, the vocation of every Christian is both to a role which builds up the common life of the Church and to a part in its outreach or mission. We build up the Church by participating in the weekly pattern of worship and by giving our time, talents and financial contributions to the practical needs of the parish. We take part in the outreach of the Church through parish missions, by inviting people to Church, especially at Christmas and Easter, and by bearing witness to Christ in the places we live and work.

## **Conclusion**

Our calling is nothing less than to play our part in the drama of the Church, our part in its life and purpose. In the words often attributed to St Augustine of Hippo, this is to carry forward the purpose and work of the Incarnation.

God has called us out of nothing and called us out of the darkness of sin. The Christian’s vocation is to discover and to live out all that this entails. Part of the mission of the church, to which we are called, is to awaken such a sense in others. It is to hold before them the good news that God has both made us for a purpose

and that God has made us free.

## References

### Vocation and the Two Great Calls

In the beginning God said “Let there be light” – Genesis 1:3

The Word, who had made ... was ‘made flesh’ ... for our redemption – John 1

[He] has called you out of darkness – 1 Peter 2:9

### Creation, Vocation and Freedom

when a person omits to do what is in his or her power – St Thomas Aquinas,  
*Summa Theologiae* II-II.53.4 ad 1.

### Being a Creature Well

we are made ‘from the dust of the ground’ – Genesis 2:7

if someone should despise honour – *Summa Theologiae* II-II.129.1 ad 3.

he calls ‘very good’ – Genesis 1:31

### Responding to the Call of Redemption

the First Letter of St Peter – references are from chapter two.

no human being can know – *Summa Theologiae* I.87.1

we are material beings – *Summa Theologiae* I.84.7

### What is the vocation of the Christian?

grace does not abolish nature – *Summa Theologiae* I.8 ad 2

### Work, Relationships and the Church

a way of life in which the nature of man – Dorothy L. Sayers, ‘Why work?’ in *Creed or Chaos* (London: Methuen and Co. Ltd) p. 47.

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