

General Overview of Church's Teaching regarding Vocations

International Congress on the Pastoral Care of Vocations, Rome

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In the Church of San Luigi dei Francesi there are three paintings by Caravaggio telling the story of St Matthew. I am sure you are familiar with them. The first is entitled 'The Call of St Matthew' and it is an excellent starting point for these reflections on the doctrine of the Church on Vocations.

As with all of Caravaggio's paintings, light plays an important part in their composition. In 'The Call of St Matthew' we see the light of eternity coming from behind the figure of Jesus, flooding into the scene of the taxman, Matthew, at his table. Jesus is summoning him in a call which comes in heavenly light, for it comes from the Father. Jesus' hand of summons is unmistakably the same hand as that of Adam, in Michelangelo's masterpiece in the Sistine Chapel. Jesus is the Second Adam and is calling Matthew to the fulfilment that he alone can give.

This makes so plain the first aspect of the Church's doctrine of vocation: God is the source of every vocation.

Then, in the picture, we see that Jesus is accompanied by Peter. The summons given to Matthew is to become one of the companions of Jesus. The call and its fulfilment takes place in the context of the Church.

Thirdly, Matthew is called in the reality of his everyday life and work. You may recall that the group around the taxman's table are dressed in the clothes of the sixteenth century whereas Jesus and Peter are clothed in the timeless robes of New

Testament iconography. The call of God comes to us as we are, flawed and compromised, in the daily realities of our lives.

These three aspects will provide the structure for this presentation with a fourth section looking briefly at the pastoral implications of this doctrine.

1. **Divine Source of Every Vocation**

(a) In this Year of Mercy, we remember that the first expression of God's mercy is the gift of life with a purpose. Every life has a God-given purpose. This is indeed good news, the foundation of the Gospel message. To open up this truth to people today is a spiritual work of mercy. St John Paul II describes the nature of this common human purpose when he says: 'Love is the fundamental and innate vocation of every human being.'¹ What a mercy in life to know that our basic purpose is to love at all costs rather than to succeed at all costs! This urge to love causes a restlessness in the human heart which finds fulfilment in the love of God. This restless search for God is an absolutely fundamental truth of our human condition. ² Yet, out of respect for his gift of free will, God remains hidden. Pastores Dabo Vobis says this: 'The history of every priestly vocation, as indeed of every Christian vocation, is the history of an inexpressible dialogue between God and human beings, between the love of God who calls and the freedom of individuals who respond lovingly to him.'³

(b) 'In seeking God, we quickly realise that no one is self-sufficient. Rather, we are called, in the light of faith, to move

¹ Familiaris Consortio 11

² Vultum Dei Quaerere, VDQ 1

³ Pastores Dabo Vobis 36.1

beyond self-centredness, drawn by God's Holy Face and by the 'sacred ground of the other', to an ever more profound experience of communion.' This affirmation of 'Vultus Dei Quaerere', reminds us that this experience of communion arises in the call to discipleship, and is a communion both with other people and with God in Christ.⁴ Hence our Trinitarian understanding of vocation: the call has its origin in the will of the Father; it is given expression in and through the Incarnate Word; its dynamism, within this communion, is the work of the Holy Spirit. Furthermore, every vocation has within itself, as we shall see, the dual movement of the Trinity – its inner communion and its outward mission. It is this that makes all of the baptised 'missionary disciples', knowing that discipleship is incomplete without mission and mission is impossible without discipleship. This Trinitarian root of vocation, as both discipleship and mission, shows how the Church's doctrine of vocation is rooted in the Mystery of both God and man. 'Either vocations ministry is mystagogic, and therefore sets out again and again from the Mystery (of God) in order to lead back to the mystery (of mankind), or it is nothing.'⁵

(c) God's merciful call to love finds expression in the vocation to be a missionary disciple of Christ. But this discipleship must now take on a specific shape in the unfolding life of every individual. In a famous passage, Blessed John Henry Newman summarises the meaning of an individual's vocation:

'God has created me to do him some definite service: he has committed some work to me which he has not committed to another. I have my mission – I may never know it in this life,

⁴ VDQ 1

⁵ In Verbo tuo (IVT) 8

but I shall be told it in the next. Somehow I am necessary for his purposes: as necessary in my place as an Archangel is in his. I have a part in this great work; I am a link in a chain, a bond of connection between persons. He has not created me for nothing. I shall do good, I shall do his work; I shall be an angel of peace, a preacher of truth in my own place.’⁶

The Church understands the elements of this ‘definite service’ to be expressed, typically, in one of the states of life commended by the Church and in work.

Firstly, states of life. A Christian expresses his discipleship through living as a consecrated person, an ordained minister or as a lay person, in either the single or married state. The growth in understanding marriage as a vocation is a striking feature of the development of the Church's doctrine in the last 50 years, culminating in the title of the recent Assembly of the Synod of Bishops. In the midst of much debate and controversy, there was perhaps too little reflection on the first word of the Synod's title: ‘The Vocation and Mission of the Family in the Church and in the Contemporary World.’ In parallel with this developing doctrine of marriage and family life as a vocation, we see a growing number of lay faithful, single and celibate, who are vital contributors to the life of the local church. The place of this state of life within the Church's doctrine requires further consideration.⁷

The other key element in a person's definite service is their work. The doctrine of the connection between work and vocation goes back many centuries but the most recent full

⁶ Meditations and Devotion: Hope in God-Creator

⁷ Cf IVT 13a

expression of this doctrine is St John Paul's Encyclical *Laborem Exercens* where he states: 'work constitutes one of the fundamental dimensions of a person's earthly existence and of their vocation.'⁸ Work, as defined by this encyclical, is not only paid employment but also the work of caring for family members, voluntary work and artistic work. The Church values all work as a service to others, whether paid or not.

Yet work is only one dimension of a person's vocation. The recent tendency to identify completely a person's vocation with their work is not part of the Church's doctrine. Historically, the idea of work as defining a whole vocation finds its origins in the teaching of the Protestant reformers.⁹

In contrast, the Catholic doctrine of vocation sees God calling every individual to love through being a disciple of Christ in a particular state of life and working at the service of others. That is their unique and definite service.

2 The Communitarian Dimension of Vocation in the Doctrine of the Church

While each definite service is lived out by an individual, no vocation is found or developed without a community. In a very individualistic culture such as ours, in Europe, some people can unconsciously slide into a narcissistic understanding of vocation: that is only about 'God and me'. Consider for a moment a concert pianist giving a solo concert: she is on stage performing apparently all alone and she alone receives the applause. She could be forgiven for thinking this is all about

⁸ *Laborem Exercens* 11

⁹ Cf. 'The Reformation and Vocation' by David Hoyle in *The Disciples' Call* ed Jamison p.101 (Bloomsbury 2013)

her and nobody else. Yet her artistry is the fruit of the dedication of her parents and teachers, of piano makers and composers. The truly great performers have the humility to recognise this. By contrast, some enthusiastic Christians can think their real purpose is to be ambitious not for St Paul's higher gifts but for religious stardom. As somebody once said of the English: An Englishman is a self-made man who worships his creator.

By contrast, every vocation has a mother, and the mother of our vocations is the Church.¹⁰ This is strong affirmation in the doctrine of the Church. In reflecting upon it, I would suggest that this maternal quality of the Church with regard to vocations is made up of some key qualities.

The first is the praise of God. In fostering an orientation of praise, the Church creates the context in which the ear of the soul is opened to the call of God. Without this, there is no soil, or humus, in which a vocation can be planted. 'The Church is the house of mercy, and its 'soil' is where vocations take root, mature and bear fruit'.¹¹

A further quality which nurtures vocation is that of service. Vocation is a call to selflessness and finds its expression in the service of others. It is therefore nurtured in a community which esteems service, especially the service of those in need.

Thirdly, and here I speak from my own experience, when there is joy in the Church, when priests and religious are full of laughter and fun, then the ground for the seeds of vocation is

¹⁰ *Optatam Totius* 2

¹¹ Message of Pope Francis for 53rd World Day of Prayer for Vocations

especially fertile. The motherhood of the Church, in fostering vocations, then, has these three characteristics: praise, service and joy.

This 'inter-active nature' of vocation is seen at its every stage. For example, the family is the first seed bed of vocations because the family is itself an unfolding of the life of the Trinity – that sharing in life and love which is continuously creative. Family prayer and the celebration of the sacraments of Christian initiation, the acts of mutual service that characterise family life, the sharing of meals, the conversations across age groups, the role of grandparents, all of these and much more are the interactions that constitute the soil of praise, service and joy in which the Spirit plants the seeds of many diverse vocations.

Once a vocation begins to develop in the life of a disciple, its unfolding comes through a discernment which takes place in a context of love. 'The vocational journey is undertaken together with the brothers and sisters whom the Lord has given to us' says Pope Francis 'it is a *con-vocation*.'¹²

The whole community of the Church is invited to 'assume their responsibility for the care and discernment of vocations.'¹³ This means that 'pastoral work for vocations is related to ongoing formation of the person.'¹⁴ The statement *In Verbo tuo* expresses well the community dimension when it states: 'vocational discernment happens in the course of precise communitarian journeys: liturgy and prayer, ecclesial communion, the service

¹² *Ibid*

¹³ *ibid*

¹⁴ IVT 26e

of charity, the experience of receiving the love of God and offering it in witness.’¹⁵

This means that all pastoral work has a vocational dimension. Yet pastors can become discouraged nowadays as they see too few signs of priestly or religious vocations.¹⁶ But it is important that every parish and school, every school and ecclesial movement, every local church, all must have an ear open to the call of Christ in the life of the members of their community. Without putting pressure on people, we need to find new ways to propose vocations to them. This can mean at times suggesting that a man might consider the priesthood. Again it may mean putting to a couple that it is about time they got married. Just a few weeks ago, I was told by a man who had been living with his partner for over thirty years that he was to get married, simply because his grand-daughter asked him, bluntly, why he and grandma were not married! Do children have more courage than we should have?

Of course we are aware of many pressures on people not to make life-long commitments. Yet other testimonies and role models are at hand, and we should use them.

Most of us will have followed the Rio Olympics. You may have noticed that Great Britain did rather well! In particular, the British cycling team did outstandingly well. Two of the most successful cyclists were Jason Kenny and Laura Trott, winning 10 Olympic medals between them. One month ago, after their triumphal return to England, they got married in their local Catholic Church. Laura issued an ecstatic statement saying that

¹⁵ Ibid 27

¹⁶ Ibid 6

her wedding day was by far the best and happiest day of her life, even better than all the gold medals. She wrote: 'Surrounded by my loving family I have just married my best friend and now I can call him "My husband"'. The day after the wedding, Jason posted a photo of Laura, still in bed, with the simple caption 'Good Morning Mrs Kenny!' All vocations should share in that kind of community joy, a joy shared with others, a joy that reflects the joy of the Church, the bride of Christ.

3 Priestly Vocation

So far I have been emphasising the theological and ecclesiological dimensions of vocation as presented in the doctrine of the Church. Indeed, these dimensions reveal for us the truth that the Church community is the seed bed for all vocations and that prayer and love must form the framework and context for all vocational discernment. Now let us look at the Church's doctrine as it describes the distinctive character of the priestly vocation.

(a) First, priestly vocation has a specific Christological character. *Pastores Dabo Vobis* gives us the starting point: 'Christ the Shepherd is the origin and model of priestly ministry.'¹⁷ This is the first and fundamental conformity to Christ required for an authentic vocation to the priesthood. In such a vocation it must be evident that a man wants to be a shepherd who loves, rather than a master who controls. *The Pastoral Guidelines for Fostering Vocations to the Ministerial Priesthood* expresses this clearly when it says: 'If ministerial priesthood does not find its origin in this love, it collapses into being the performance of a

¹⁷ Cf *Pastores dabo vobis* 23

function, rather than the gift of the service of a shepherd who offers his life for the flock.’¹⁸

I add a personal reflection to that. When an experienced English diocesan vocations director was asked recently to describe the qualities he looked for in a candidate for the priesthood, he replied that the first quality is simple: ‘Turn up!’ By this he meant that the man who wants to be a priest must turn up at the time he agreed to meet the vocations director. He must turn up for the events that he says he will attend, because ‘turning up’ is a large part of the life of a parish priest: Turning up on time to say Mass, turning up to visit the sick, turning up to say his office, turning up to meet his brother priests. It may not sound much, but ‘turning up’ is the humble key to much of the priestly life. This simple insight is another way of expressing Christ’s invitation to leave all and follow him with the freedom of spirit needed to fulfil the apostolic mission that he entrusted to the apostles.¹⁹ This simple personal experience reflects the Church’s doctrine of vocation.

A further Christological character of the priestly vocation is expressed in the teaching of the Church that ‘... the priest, as well-attested by the doctrine of the *character* of Sacred Orders, is configured to Christ the Priest who enables him to act in the person of Christ the Head and Shepherd.’²⁰ How might we understand ‘configured to Christ the Head’?

There is no doubt that this is perhaps the most difficult aspect of the calling of the priest. In the tradition of the Church, this aspect of her teaching is a basis for the respect and leadership

¹⁸ Pastoral Guidelines (PG) 6

¹⁹ Cf Presbyterorum Ordinis (PO) 2

²⁰ PG 6

that is granted to the priest. But too often the priest can see this respect and reverence as an affirmation of his own opinions, his preferences, his tastes over those of other people, especially over those to whom he has been called to minister. Yet the entire point of priestly authority, or 'headship', is that it must be that of Christ and only that of Christ. Disputes in a parish or community can only be resolved when they are referred to Christ and to the patterns he teaches us. The pattern of Christ's authority is twofold: it is to do the will of the Father, and to see authority always exercised in humble service. This is the Headship of Christ to which every priest is to conform himself.

(b) A second theological quality of the priestly vocation is its ecclesiological character. Here I quote again from the Pastoral Guidelines of 2012, paragraph 6: 'This first dimension of the Sacrament of Orders, its Christological character, forms the basis of its ecclesiological dimension.²¹ Inasmuch as it is necessary that the Church herself is called together by the Risen Christ, priests are given the ability by the Sacrament of Orders to be effective instruments for the building up of the Church, by means of the proclamation of the Word, the celebrations of the sacraments and guiding the People of God.'²² Without these gifts the Church would lose her identity. Ministerial priesthood is thus the vital and key point for the Church's existence, inasmuch as it is the effective sign of the priority of grace by which the Risen Christ builds up the Church in the Spirit.²³ Thus, the ministry of the priest is always an ecclesial ministry. Its expression in the service of Word and Sacrament, in leadership of the parish community, in obedience to the bishop and, according to the mind of the

²¹ See *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, n. 16:AAS 84 (1992), 681

²² See *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, nn. 4-6 AAS 58 (1966), 995-1001

²³ See *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, n. 15:AAS 84 (1992), 679

Church, in a celibate way of love are significant demands on the life of a man. For this reason, the Church has the right and duty to discern vocations to the priesthood, and has the right and duty to insist on personal qualities necessary for this ministry.²⁴

Here we can add a further element to this ecclesial dimension of priestly vocation. The priest, as servant of the Church, seeks to express the sacramental gift of priesthood in the reality of a life configured to Christ's mission which has become the universal mission of the Church. *The Pastoral Guidelines* puts this well. 'Availability for mission defines the truth of the priest in each of his activities. This means developing an inner structure and a way of being, more than a way of doing, that is distinguished by its courage in going beyond any kind of particularity in order to open one's heart to the needs of the new evangelisation.'²⁵

This emphasis on mission and on 'a way of being' - a very precise phrase - invites me to add remarks taken from the experience of priests in my own country of England.

In the period of the persecution of the Catholic Church in England during and after the Reformation, English secular priests were referred to as 'missioners.' They accepted that name with pride and at their ordination in seminaries, in Rome, Douai and elsewhere, these young men committed themselves to the English mission, knowing that once they arrived in England their ministry could be over in a matter of hours, weeks or months and they would then be arrested,

²⁴ Ibid 8

²⁵ Ibid 10

tortured and in all probability put to death. They knew that in those years of persecution it was an act of treason to be present in England as a Catholic priest. Indeed, it was a state of life punished by the most cruel of deaths. Priests at that time were executed not for what they did, but simply for who they were. Their very 'way of being' carried with it the death penalty. Today, in different circumstances, this same freedom of heart and strong sense of identity enables many priests to be missionaries of a New Evangelisation often in countries far from their homes. For this history and for this present we thank God!

(c) The third theological aspect of the priestly vocation that we must note is that this vocation is deeply rooted in the life of the Trinity: its Trinitarian character. Here we apply directly to the priestly vocation those aspects of the Trinitarian character of vocation which we noted earlier. It is worth to repeat it, then, that every priestly vocation is a call from the Father. Thus, in the heart of the priest is the consolation and challenge of knowing that he has been called by the Father for one sole purpose: that the Father may give him to the Son, as a gift of the Father, to be a companion for Jesus forever in the mission entrusted to the Son by the Father. This, for me, is the deepest meaning of priesthood: that it is the will of the Father that my hands, my voice, my actions, are given to the His Son so that, in the power of the Holy Spirit, they may be channels of God's grace for all to whom I minister. Understanding priestly vocation in this Trinitarian manner makes many things clear, but especially that the purpose of faith, the thrust of grace, is to draw every person into the very life of God himself, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, there to find fulfilment and eternal happiness.

As noted earlier, this Trinitarian dimension of vocation also implies a life in which inner communion and outward mission are integrated. For the priest this is explicit in his daily life of prayer and service. He seeks overtly, in his priestly life, both to be close to the Lord and to be a channel for the work of the Holy Spirit in sacramental ministry and in the service of love, given and received, in his daily ministry. For this to be possible, a man must have been formed in the life of the Spirit before entering seminary. 'Presbyterum Ordinis' states: 'Pastoral ministry for vocations to ordained ministry is directed at generating men of communion and mission, capable of being inspired by the 'new commandment' (John 13:34), the source of the 'spirituality of communion'.'²⁶ This reminds us that the everyday task in the life of the priest is to combine the deepening of that communion in the Lord, in both its personal and communitarian sense, with the energetic engagement with mission, with the proclamation of the faith in word and deed, in every time and place. The faithful priestly vocation is indeed always to the glory of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

These Christological, ecclesiological and Trinitarian dimensions of the priestly vocation constitute the core of the Church's teaching on vocation.

4 The Church's Doctrine of Vocation in Practice

The Church's documents on Vocation and especially on Priestly Vocation contain so much more than this quick overview of her Doctrine has been able to convey. Many attempts are made to express this core doctrine in more accessible terms and to link this doctrine to practice. The

²⁶ Ibid 7

National Vocations Framework for England and Wales is one example. We have copies available for you to pick up at the end of this session. It takes the Church's fundamental doctrine on vocation, as I outlined, and generates an agreed, simple definition of vocation. With that definition as the foundation, it outlines some steps that a diocese or a parish can choose to take in promoting a culture of vocation, knowing that support is available if they want to take those steps.

In the documents of the Church there are many other practical indications about structures, expectations, roles etc., needed for the promotion of vocations. But these are not truly part of the doctrine of the Church, although they are certainly part of her wisdom.

Conclusion

In conclusion, come back with me to the chapel in San Luigi dei Francesi and the paintings of Caravaggio. The second of the three paintings is the 'Inspiration of St Matthew'. Here we see Matthew the Evangelist, writing the Gospel, simply clothed and possessing only a pen. In responding to the call of Jesus, he left behind all the gains and profit of being a tax-collector and brought with him, into the service of the Lord, only his best gift: his pen. We are surely to do the same: give our best abilities to the Lord, in our ministry to his people.

The third picture is the 'Martyrdom of St Matthew'. Following an ancient tradition, it depicts Matthew, now dressed in vestments and celebrating Mass, being slain before the altar. His blood runs into the dark foreground of the painting, interpreted by some as flowing into a baptismal pool, constructed at the foot of an altar according to the detailed

requirements laid down by Charles Borromeo in the Milan of Caravaggio's youth. Matthews' blood mingles, as it were, with the blood of Christ and becomes the source of our rebirth in baptism.

Today it is impossible to see, or imagine, this painting without thinking of Fr Jacques Hamel killed, on 26th July, at the foot of the altar where he had just celebrated Mass.

Here is an image of the fulfilment of the priestly vocation. Fr Jacques, at the age of 85 years, continued to serve in the church long after the age at which he could have stepped down. His love of the priesthood and the love in which he was held by the people, shown so clearly at his Requiem Mass, moved him deeply to continue his ministry, even unto death. The witness of his daily life as a priest life, I suggest, is summed up in the manner of his death: on his knees, before the altar, in the very position he had taken when he was ordained.

Our struggles are different but we too have to fight, each day, to keep fresh the original call and inspiration which brought us to our knees at the moment of our ordination. We too want to bring that dedication to the moment of our death, for death is the final call of our pilgrimage, the final vocation, to which we want to respond with humble integrity and loving trust in the Lord. It is he who calls us to life, to our ministry and through death into his presence forever. That is our enduring hope and it is indeed the joy of the Gospel we proclaim.

I thank you for your attention.

H.E. Cardinal Vincent Nichols
10 October 2016