



PASTORAL WORK FOR VOCATIONS IN THE LIFE OF THE CHURCH
His Eminence Alberto Cardinal Suarez Inda

Wednesday, 19 October, 5:00 p.m.

Fraternal greetings to all here present.

I thank His Eminence, Beniamino Cardinal Stella, Prefect of the Congregation for the Clergy, as well as his coworkers, for the kind invitation to speak on this topic related to the pastoral work for vocations.

I would simply like to share some reflections as someone, who, like yourselves, has been called to accompany others on the journey of their vocation.

I do this fully aware that there is no such thing as two identical vocations, but that there are, however, some essential elements to a vocation, which we have all experienced. I have come up with a simple outline highlighting the points that a journalist must have in mind when redacting news about an event.

Because a vocation is, above all, a life event, an event in the life of a person, we must approach it without preconceived judgments, and with an attitude of respect and openness to the unforeseeable.

Some questions are fundamental for whoever wishes to relate an event.

- What happened?
- Who were the main protagonists and the others?
- Where or in what context did the event take place?
- When or at what time did it happen?
- What behaviors must be assumed by those who act as mediators?

I. What happens when a vocation comes about?

In order to identify or qualify the event of a vocation, it would help us to refer to the phrase "*Miserando atque Eligendo*"; a phrase proposed as inspiration for this Congress and the motto of the Episcopal coat of arms of Pope Francis. It is an expression termed by St. Bede the Venerable in his homily regarding the gospel passages that describe the call of Matthew.

The gospel text tells us that, "Jesus saw a man named Matthew sitting at the customs post. He said to him, "Follow me." And He got up and followed him" (Mt 9, 9). St. Bede Comments: "He saw him with the internal look of His love more so than with His bodily eyes. Jesus saw the tax



collector, thus making him the object of His mercy and choosing him, He said to him: follow me, which translates into: imitate me. Jesus told him to follow Him with more than just his steps; in his works. Because He who claims to be always with Christ must continually act like He did” (cf. Homily 21). Immediately after remembering the precious instant of his calling, Matthew narrates the dinner that took place in his house, which Jesus attended as one of his guests, as well as the scandal that this provoked amongst the Pharisees, who asked “why does he eat with tax collectors and sinner”...to which Jesus responded: “I did not come to call the righteous but sinners” (Mt 9, 13). What some translate as “making him the object of His mercy” is summarized in the neologism Pope Francis uses in his motto: “by having mercy, by choosing him”.

It is worth noting that St. Jerome’s commentary reads: “Out of honor and respect for Matthew the other evangelists did not want to name him by his commonly known name so they said ‘Levi.’ The apostle called himself ‘Matthew’ and ‘tax- collector’”, following the precept of Solomon, which says: ‘the righteous man accuses himself at the beginning of his speech’ and then again, ‘he confesses his sins in order to be justified’. By this he wanted to show that he was converted to a better life. He himself had suddenly been transformed from a tax collector into an apostle.” (Commentaries on the Gospel of St. Matthew).

In the vocation a change takes place, a conversion of the person, a dramatic event in his life, yet the one who is called is still the same person. He builds his future based on his past, without denying it but rather owning up to it, thus allowing for the grace and mercy of God to shine all the more. In a few words, we can say that a vocation is the work of Divine Mercy. In this sense, St. Paul’s testimony is impressive: “I am grateful to him who has strengthened me, Christ Jesus our Lord, because he considered me trustworthy in appointing me to the ministry...this saying is trustworthy and deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinner. Of these I am the foremost” (1 Tim 1, 12-16).

Another essential aspect of a vocation is that it deals with the encounter of two freedoms: the freedom of the one who calls and the freedom of the one who responds to the calling. The fact that St. Matthew reminds us that Jesus “chose him...and that he, in turn, got up and followed him” underscores the contrast with which, in his gospel, he remembers the rich young man to whom Jesus said: “come and follow me but he went away said, for he had many possessions” (Mt 19, 21-22)

We must underscore, first and foremost, the freedom of the one who calls, as presented, magisterially, by St. John Paul II in *Pastores Dabo Vobis*: “Every Christian vocation finds its foundation in the gratuitous and prevenient choice made by the Father, who chose us in Christ” (n. 35). Pope Francis would translate this by saying that God “chooses us first”. *Pastores Dabo Vobis* continues by reaffirming that, “first of all, indeed in a prevenient and decisive way, comes the free and gracious intervention of God who calls...God’s free and sovereign decision to call man calls for total respect. It cannot be forced in the slightest by any human ambition, and it cannot be replaced by any human decision. Vocation is a gift of God’s grace and never a human right” (n. 36).

However, this initiative of God who “has mercy” and who “chooses” is not in opposition with the freedom of man but rather presupposes it. It is a challenge for the one who is called (cf. *PDV*, n. 36). The freedom of man is also essential for a vocation since it demands a positive response and a personal and profound adherence. Blessed Paul IV said that there cannot be vocations unless they are free, that is, unless they are a spontaneous offering of one’s self, consciously, generously, totally. The foundational root of freedom is an oblation, generosity, and sacrifice” (Message for Word Day of Prayer for Vocations, 1968).



In our present day, more so than before, we are faced with a cultural atmosphere that can dumb down this aspect of a vocation, I refer to the way in which human freedom is understood and lived out. The first chapter of *Pastores Dabo Vobis* points this out as a great challenge: “In the case of some young people...freedom is lived out as blind acquiescence to instinctive forces and to an individual’s will to power...it is difficult to recognize that the significance of life consists in a free and responsible giving of oneself to others” (n. 8). However, today the “Church feels that she can face the difficulties and challenges of this new period of history and can also provide, in the present and in the future, priests who are well trained, faithful and generous servants...we are not unmindful of difficulties in this regard; they are neither few nor insignificant. However, to surmount these difficulties we have at our disposal our hope, our faith in the unfailing love of Christ, and our certainty that the priestly ministry in the life of the Church and in the world knows no substitute” (n. 10).

The inquiry regarding freedom, about which the candidates are repeatedly questioned during the Rite of Ordination, is not a simple formalism but rather the public and solemn manifestation of the commitments that are assumed voluntarily.

II. The protagonists and others who intervene

We have already practically answered, albeit unconsciously, the second question regarding those involved in the event of a vocation: God, man, and the Church.

-**God** calls, but He is not an impersonal God who conditions the destiny of His creatures, but rather God the **Father** who dialogues with His Son, God the **Son** who responds to the Father and invites us to participate in His filial condition, God the **Holy Spirit** who enlightens the mind of the person that is called and strengthens him in order to make him capable of giving himself over and to remain faithful.

-He who is called is a **man**, a person, not an isolated individual but someone who is part of a family, a people, a community, a member of the Church.

-The mediation of the **Church** in the Pastoral Work for Vocations is not something accidental but, rather, a part of the essence of every Christian vocation and something that is connatural to the Church. “Vocation, in a certain sense, defines the very being of the Church, even before her activity. In the Church’s very name, *ecclesia*, we find its deep vocational aspect” (*PDV* 34). The Church is assembly of those who are called and who, at the same time, call others. Vocations are generated in the Church, must mature and be educated in the Church, and must be oriented toward their end: service for the edification of the Church.

The Second Vatican Council gives us a new perspective on the theology of the vocation. The Constitution on the Church (*Lumen Gentium*) situates specific vocations to the ordained ministry (Chapter III) and to lay life (Chapter IV) after having spoken about the People of God (Chapter II) and before treating the Universal Call to Holiness (Chapter V). This order is extremely meaningful and we see it reflected in the following post-conciliar magisterium.

For example, the documents of the General Conferences of the Latin American Episcopate also show us this new focus. Although the document of Rio de Janeiro, prior to the Second Vatican Council, granted extreme relevance to the topic of priestly vocations, the clergy, and religious, dedicating the entire first chapter to them, it treats the subject as a different topic, before referring to pastoral work or “care for souls”. That was the pre-conciliar hierarchical vision.



From Medellin onwards, pastoral work for vocations is framed within the context of the entire action of the Church. I would like to cite Number 23, which affirms: “All the Christian community, united and guided by the Bishop, is, in solidarity, responsible for the development of vocations.”

The Conference of Puebla treats the topic of Pastoral Work for Vocations with great amplitude (nn. 850-868), reaffirming that it is “the task of the entire Church” and that it must be “an incarnated and differentiated action. Which is to say, that it must respond to the problems of every nation and reflect the unity of that diversified body whose head is Christ”.

Santo Domingo defined pastoral work for vocations as “a priority”, pointing out facts from reality and different criteria to promote it within dioceses.

The Aparecida document, in number 315, says: “Fully integrated into the realm of ordinary pastoral ministry, pastoral work for vocations is the fruit of a solid joint pastoral ministry”. Prior to that, in a very ample perspective, it points out that: “insofar as regards the formation of the missionary disciples of Christ, pastoral work for vocations occupies a particular position, which carefully accompanies all those whom the Lord calls to serve the Church in the priesthood, consecrated life, or in the lay state” (No. 314).

-The bishop of every diocese knows that “the first responsibility for pastoral work, oriented towards priestly vocations, lies with him, and that he is called to live it out in first person” (PDV 41).

St. Rafael Guizar y Valencia, Bishop of Veracruz, often said that: “A bishop can do without a mitre, a crosier, and even a cathedral, but never without a seminary”. In times of religious persecution in my home country, between 1920 and 1940, in clandestine form, the formation of generous young men never ceased. They, encouraged and sustained by bishops such as St. Rafael Guizar, had the opportunity to become priests, with a solid spiritual formation and apostolic zeal.

Therefore, the work of animating the pastoral work for vocations belongs to the Bishop, as does seeing to the formation of the candidates, and, in the end, discerning their suitability. Although a vocation is “an act of mercy” it also demands, as Paul indicates to Timothy and Titus, a maturity and a series of virtues that give certain hope that those ordained will be worthily exercising their ministry (1 Tm 3, 1-7. Titus 1, 5,9). The warning of the Apostle will always be useful to the Bishop: “Do not lay hands too readily on anyone” (1 Tm 5,22), even in cases of scarcity of priests, avoiding, of course, an attitude about the matter that is either too scrupulous or too rigorist.

Let us remember that the bishop as well as those who inform him about the candidate are not infallible and, therefore, risks are always taken, since we do not only receive a vocation “to the priesthood” by receiving the grace of ordination but, rather, it demands, from each one, “a response that must be expressed anew and reaffirmed through the years of his of priesthood...In this sense, one can speak of a vocation *within* the priesthood” (PDV 70)

After admitting the candidates to holy orders, it is up to the bishop to accompany them in their ongoing formation, as a response to the gift received through the imposition of hands and as a need to enliven grace throughout all the days of their lives.

I would like to share with you that, throughout the 31 years of my episcopacy, God has allowed me to experience the joy of ordaining more than 300 priests, as well as the sadness to see approximately 20 of them leave ministry, and another 10 pass away, two of which were assassinated deliberately.



-“**All priests** are united (with the Bishop) in seeking and fostering priestly vocations...their very life...unconditional dedication...witness of loving service...fraternal unity...are the first and most convincing factors in the growth of vocations” (*PDV* 41). Their work in parishes and groups is irreplaceable. It is not enough to have just one “in charge of pastoral work for vocations”.

-**Seminarians**, with their joy, youth, and creativity are also very important agents in the pastoral work for vocations.

-**The family**, as the domestic Church, will always be the first institution that favors vocations, forming children in authentic freedom, in order to make them capable of making generous choices in life. As teachers of the faith, the family will be the mediator that allows a young man to listen to God’s calling (cf. *PDV* 41). The reality is that many of today’s seminarians come from fractured families and they feel this deeply.

-**The school**, supporting the family in the educative task, must allow students to discover the vocational dimension as a proper and fundamental value of the human person. (Ib. 41)

-**Apostolic groups**, of families and of young people, can be of great support and motivation in the Work for Vocations.

III. Place or context of the event

Moving on to the “where”, I would like to refer not so much to geographic places but rather to cultural contexts.

I think two of the events regarding the origins of my own Diocese are very meaningful. The first Bishop of Michoacán, the Servant of God Vasco de Quiroga, 480 years ago, prior to the Council of Trent, founded the College of St. Nicholas where indigenous and creoles lived together and received an education, sharing their language and experiences. Despite the fact that priestly ministry was inaccessible for indigenous men, he took an important step in conferring “minor orders” on them. At around the same time, a remarkable missionary, Jacobo Daciano, having renounced his privileges as Prince of Denmark, became a Franciscan Friar. He was sent to New Spain, to the lands of Michoacán, where he affirmed that: “There will be no Church according to the Holy Spirit until there are indigenous ordained ministers.”

The Conference of Santo Domingo exhorts us to “procure the increase of vocations that come from all the cultures present in our particular churches. He, [John Paul II], has invited us to pay attention to indigenous vocations” (n. 80).

In the Universal Church there is an enormous diversity of situations that change and favor or disfavor the flourishing of vocations. We will always have to trust in the grace of God, who never abandons His Church (cf. *PDV*, 1), but, at the same time, we must pay attention to the discernment regarding the motivations and the rectitude of intention. This is due to the fact that, unconsciously, the desire and haste for social promotion may infiltrate itself into the desire to become a priest. There can also be, in a supposed availability to serve the Church in other countries, the temptation to leave behind a reality of impoverishment or adversity.

We must always depart from the catholicity of the Church and consider the gift of vocations as a great sign of communion. The Conference of Puebla affirms, as regards Latin America: “it is true that we ourselves need missionaries. However, we must give from our poverty”, with the criterion to offer our best for the missions.



IV. The time in which the vocation comes about

Referring to time, let us remember, firstly, the parable of the laborers in the vineyard (cf. Mt 20, 1-16). I am convinced that there are neither late nor premature vocations; rather, each one comes about in the moment of the *kairos*, which is to say that God calls when He wills.

It is true that “adolescence is a privileged time, although not exclusively, for a vocational choice. Therefore, youth ministry must, at the same time, be vocational ministry” (Puebla 865). However “equal attention must be given to those who, at an adult age, receive the call from the Lord to a specific Christian vocation” (Puebla 868). I can bear witness to some cases in which men who, having been ordained at 40 or 50 years of age, are good priests.

The seeds of a vocation, present throughout childhood and adolescence, must not be undervalued. The case of Jesus Himself is exemplary. He, at 12 years old, under the umbrella of what was considered, during his time, legal age, had the lucidity and courage to affirm: “I must busy myself with the things of my Father” (Lk 2, 49-50), followed by the surprise and consequent incomprehension of Mary and Joseph.

In minor seminaries, “profoundly renewed...we must make sure that the young men do not lose touch with reality nor withdraw from their social context” (Puebla 870, 871).

The day and the hour signaled by the Apostle John in his Gospel is very punctual as regards the decisive dialogue with the Teacher, Who asks two of the Baptist’s disciples: “What are you looking for?” to which they responded with another question “Rabbi, where do you live? Come and you will see. So they went and saw where he was staying and stayed with him that day. It was about four in the afternoon” (Jn 1, 38-39). It was something that remained engraved in their memory.

I am sure that each one of them could give their personal testimony as to the moment in which they received a manifestation of grace, not necessarily in extraordinary circumstances. That is the way Pope Francis has talked about it, fondly remembering the day in which he went to confession to a priest in Buenos Aires. It was there that he understood, clearly, that God was calling him to the priesthood.

V. Attitudes of other protagonists

Finally, I would like to highlight some attitudes that must be possessed by every agent involved in Pastoral Work for Vocations; the Vocations Director, the spiritual director, the priest, the bishop, and in some way the teacher, the parent, the teacher, the animator of a group. They are not simple spectators but rather true actors.

I hereby transcribe some indications given to us by Pope Francis in his Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium* (nn. 169-173), regarding the *personal accompaniment in the processes of growth*.

“Ordained ministers and other pastoral workers can make present the fragrance of Christ’s closeness and his personal gaze. The Church will have to initiate everyone...into this ‘art of accompaniment’...the pace of this accompaniment must be steady and reassuring, reflecting our closeness and our compassionate gaze which also heals, liberates and encourages growth in the Christian life” (169).



“Spiritual accompaniment must lead others ever closer to God, in whom we attain true freedom” (170).

Pastoral agents must be “familiar with processes which call for prudence, understanding, patience and docility to the Spirit...we need to practice the art of listening, which is more than simply hearing...an openness of heart which makes possible that closeness without which genuine spiritual encounter cannot occur...only through such respectful and compassionate listening can we enter on the paths of true growth and awaken a yearning for the Christian ideal: the desire to respond fully to God’s love...but this always demands patience...”A pedagogy that leads people, step by step, to the full assimilation of the mystery” (Ecclesia in Asia, 20)...so that individuals can make truly free and responsible decisions calls for much time and patience” (171).

“One who accompanies others has to realize that each person’s situation before God and their life in grace are mysteries which no one can fully know from without...someone good at such accompaniment does not give in to frustrations or fears...our personal experience of being accompanied will teach us to be patient and compassionate with others, and to find the right way to gain their trust, their openness and their readiness to grow” (172).

“Genuine spiritual accompaniment always begins and flourishes in the context of service to the mission of evangelization...which takes place in the midst of apostolic activity” (173).

In decalogue form, I would like to point out some characteristics that must distinguish the Vocations Director, the parent, the teacher, the seminary formator, the spiritual director, the bishop, and anyone who accompanies a young man on his journey of search and discernment.

1. Closeness that awakens trust.
2. Intuition to discover his veiled expectations and to perceive his request for help, often not expressed.
3. Being a credible and attractive witness through his own coherence of life, joy, and self-giving.
4. Being flexible with time and always available to listen.
5. Respect before him in whom the grace of an Almighty God manifests itself and from whom a free response is expected.
6. Clarity in exposing the demands of a vocation without ambiguities.
7. Patience in order not to pressure or hurry the other in his process, which may be slow.
8. To go out in search of him and to facilitate an encounter without harassing him.
9. To console him in challenging moments.
10. To pray to obtain, in his favor, the grace of the vocation and light in his discernment.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that the Pastoral Work for Vocations is a fount of joy and hope which requires preparation, but above all, is a mysticism and a spirituality, a docility to the Spirit and a trust which knows that “neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God, who causes the growth...for we are God’s co-workers; you are God’s field, God’s building” (1 Cor 3, 7-9). “Whoever sows bountifully will also reap bountifully” (2 Cor 9,6).

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