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The Vocation of a Catholic University: “a Conversation”
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This volume contains a collection of essays on Vocations

The Vocation of a Catholic University: “a Conversation”

Vol. I, No. 1 — Summer 2010

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# The Vocation of a Catholic University: “a Conversation”

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In January of 2003 Seton Hall University received a prestigious $2,000,000 million grant from the Lilly Foundation, later increased by an additional $500,000. This was the largest single grant ever given to Seton Hall up to that time. The grant funded the Center for Vocation and Servant Leadership at Seton Hall, a center dedicated to fostering “theological reflection on vocation.” The articles in this volume are examples of that theological reflection during the intervening years. Of course, they are not the only such examples. Theological reflection on vocation has gone on in innumerable other ways, such as through faculty seminars—many co-sponsored with the Center for Catholic Studies—public lectures, student essays, workshops, etc. during this time.

As someone involved in the early conception and planning of the Lilly grant, I am happy to write this short introduction to these essays on vocation, and to reflect on why a major American foundation would be at all interested in fostering “theological” reflection on the notion of vocation among faculty and students at some 80 universities in the United States. After all, in American universities there is a great deal of reflection, but very little of it is explicitly and avowedly theological. Recent decades have seen some interest in “religious studies” in American academia, but little explicit interest in “theology.” And yet, as the historian Arnold Toynbee has said, theology can indeed be very powerful; in one way or another it enters into any reflection on the human condition.

There is, indeed, no limit to the commitment incurred by the inquirer who ventures to be a student of human affairs, for, whether he has foreseen this or not, he has committed himself, in the act, to becoming a theologian too. In consternation he may try to beat a retreat from this perilously exposed position into the dead ground of “comparative religion,” in the hope that he can escape from theology under the scientific camouflage of anthropological research. But theology is an incubus that a humanist can never shake off. He may seek refuge from theism in atheism or from animism in materialism. But after each desperate twist and turn he will find himself committed to some theological position or other. Theology is inescapable, and it is dynamite. It will betray its identity through the camouflage by exploding in the end.1

So what is theology and how does it differ from religious studies? Bernard Lonergan once described the distinction in this way.

Religious studies and theology are not identical but distinct. The theologies tend to be as many and diverse as the religious convictions they express and represent. In contrast, religious studies envisage all religions and, so far from endeavoring to arbitrate between opposing religious convictions, commonly prefer to describe and understand their rituals and symbols, their origins and distribution, their history and influence.2

Theologies, as Lonergan puts it, “endeavor to discern whether there is any real fire behind the smoke of symbols employed in this or that religion.”3 In the case of reflection on “vocation,” for example, Christian and Catholic theology seeks to discern the reality behind the symbols of “calling,” “divine calling,” “hearing the call,” “the diversity of calls,” “the one who calls and the one who is called,” etc. Theology asks: Who is the One behind the symbols of “call” or “vocation” and how does one hear the call?
Obviously, various theologies have diverse “takes” on the meaning of these terms, reflecting diverse religious orientations. Think of the “callings” of the Buddha, Moses, Abraham, St. Paul, St. Augustine and Mohammed. Although most of the reflections on vocation in this book are from a Catholic theological point of view, theological reflection obviously need not be so limited. Theological reflection can take place from a Presbyterian, Methodist, Baptist, Jewish, Islamic, Hindu, Buddhist, or other point of view. Theological reflection reflects “a people’s” point of view.

Certainly, there has been a traditional usage of the term “vocation” among Catholics, as in prayer for “vocations to the priesthood and religious life.” Such usage reflects a whole tradition of reflecting on calling, from the Scriptures themselves, to the saints and theological writers, to the official declarations of the Church. But such reflection has developed and the documents of the Second Vatican Council evidence a developing understanding of vocation, much of it influenced by reflection on Saint Paul’s emphasis on the common gift of the Holy Spirit to all the baptized, along with “the diversity of gifts” in the Christian community.

There are different kinds of spiritual gifts but the same Spirit; there are different forms of service but the same Lord; there are different workings but the same God who produces all of them in everyone.

To each individual the manifestation of the Spirit is given for some benefit. To one is given through the Spirit the expression of wisdom; to another the expression of knowledge according to the same Spirit; to another faith by the same Spirit; to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit; to another mighty deeds; to another prophecy; to another discernment of spirits; to another varieties of tongues; to another interpretation of tongues. But one and the same Spirit produces all of these, distributing them individually to each person as he wishes. (I Cor. 12, 4-11)

Such wider Scriptural perspectives on vocation have been retrieved by Catholics since the Second Vatican Council and such a notion has even been broadened to include all Christians and their sense of being called to particular works and ministries. The experiences of “calling” is prominent in the Scriptures and in the Christian tradition.

It was after the encounter with the Holy as he stood before the burning bush that there came to Moses the purpose and power to lead the Israelites out of Egypt. It was following a long illness that ecstatic experiences in the country inspired St. Francis of Assisi to desert wealth and ambition and begin his unique career. It was his famous mystical experience of November 23, 1654, which turned the great mathematical genius Pascal toward an intense concern with religion. St. Theresa of Avila apparently was little more than a hysterical hypochondriac before her first vision at the age of forty-three transformed her into one of the most effective administrators and reformers of her day.

But Christian theological reflection on vocation can even move beyond Christianity to discern a sense of vocation or calling in other religions as well. Here theological reflection and religious studies can complement one another.

Theology and religious studies need each other. Without theology religious studies may indeed discern when and where different religious symbols are equivalent; but they are borrowing the techniques of theologians if they attempt to say what the equivalent symbols literally mean and what they literally imply. Conversely, without religious studies theologians are unacquainted with the religions of mankind; they may as theologians have a good grasp of the history of their own religion; but they are borrowing the techniques of the historian of religions, when they attempt to compare and relate other religions with their own.
An example from Hinduism strikes me. Among the teachings of Hinduism can be found an emphasis on “good work.” As the dye-maker’s hands are colored by the dye, so a person is deeply affected by his work. Evil work affects a person adversely; good work affects him or her for the better. We ourselves are influenced and shaped by what we do. As Vivekananda Kendra Patrika says:

…we must do good; the desire to do good is the highest motive power we have, if we know all the time that it is a privilege to help others. Do not stand on a high pedestal, and take five cents in your hand and say, ‘Here, my poor man,’ but be grateful that the poor man is there, so that by making a gift to him you are able to help yourself. It is not the receiver that is blessed, but it is the giver. Be thankful that you are allowed to exercise your power of benevolence and mercy in the world and thus become pure and perfect ….

Similarly, theological reflection on vocation can move out beyond the specifically religious towards employing other psychological and philosophical kinds of reflection. For example, in my experience a number of university faculty members without any religious affiliation speak of having “a sense of destiny” about their work - teaching mathematics, for example. Here theological reflection can ask: When did that “sense of destiny” to a particular path first dawn on you? Was it through the encounter with a particular person? A teacher? A mentor? Jerome Miller vividly captures this dawning of vocation when “Reality” calls one along a particular path in life.

One look through the eye of a telescope may be all it takes for a child to become an astronomer in her heart – if the glimpse of the stars it offers her makes her feel like she has been given access to an inexhaustibly fascinating world in comparison with which her ordinary world suddenly seems not just uninteresting but insubstantial.

Have all of us had such experiences – though perhaps hardly noted? Are there such “peak experiences” in our lives that, if followed, might add up to “a sense of vocation?”

In a manner of speaking, we are falling in love at every turn of the road, with a fold in the hills, the mist over the lake, the stars tangled in the bare branches, the yellow chair in the sunlight, an old song at the peasant's fireside, a new thought flashing from the pages of a book, a lined face on a hospital pillow, a hair ribbon from Ur of the Chaldees.

All of which can be put into more general categories. There is a plasticity about the human infant that is not found in other animals, an openness allowing for infinitely more learning than all the other animals. At birth we are among the most helpless because our fingers and our limbs are not fixed into set patterns. Such plasticity – in one’s fingers, for example – allows one to grow and to learn to play the piano. This basic openness to being will be shaped by multiple social, cultural and historical elements, and it will also allow for a growing awareness of being drawn by longings for meaning, for truth, for reality. One can even come to understand one is “called by God.”

And so we ask, where are we being “called?” Within an evolutionary universe of ancient nebulae and the upward orientation of sensitivity toward intellectual consciousness there is what Bernard Lonergan calls a “vertical finality” by which lower levels of being not only prepare the way for higher levels but even enter into them. Why these “intimations of immortality,” as the poet called them, in our very body? Where is the universe as a whole calling us? Is there a Person with, analogously, a Mind and Heart, behind it all? – beneath and ahead of us?
Vertical finality is obscure. When it has been realized in full, it can be known. When it is in process, what has been attained can be known, but what has not, remains obscure. When the process has not yet begun, obscurity prevails and questions abound. Is it somehow intimated? Is the intimation fleeting? Does it touch our deepest aspirations? Might it awaken such striving and groaning as would announce a new and higher birth.

All of which brings Christian theological reflection full circle. In following out our destiny are we responding to something like the call of Jesus to his disciples: “Come, follow me!” And is that following a participation, even now, in the inner life of God? Is our searching and learning a participation in the procession of the Word from the Father? And is our response to love in this world a participation in the procession of Love, the Holy Spirit, within the life of God? And is that divine knowing and loving reaching out to encompass the whole world?

These are just a few thoughts on why theological reflection on vocation could have touched such a chord in the bosom of the Lilly Foundation as to spark this tremendous program among so many universities in the United States - among them, Seton Hall University. Hence the theological reflections on vocation from so many rich and varied directions in this volume published by the Center for Vocation and Servant Leadership. Gary Bouchard, for example, author of “An Assistant to the Great Physician” is a Roman Catholic who sees his profession of physician’s assistant as a means of participating in the healing ministry of Jesus. His purpose is to highlight the spiritual dimension of health care for all caregivers. “Spirituality and religion matter to the majority of our patients, and it should matter to us even if only for that reason.”

Similarly, Nancy Enright’s essay on “St. Augustine’s Confessions and the Call to be a Professor of Literature and Rhetoric,” notes that the key to Augustine’s spirituality is that Christ will “love through me,” however dispirited I may be. Acknowledgment of this reality permits the academic vocation to always be a “potential vehicle for the working of God’s grace.” Her own religious conversion gradually returned her to the practice of her Catholic faith and helped her recover her childhood identity as a “good student.” A love of literature followed and college teachers, wonderful role models, launched her on the path as a professor of English literature.

In Zeni Fox’s “A Sense of Calling: Vocation in the Academic Life” the Biblical symbol of the Kingdom of God encountered in young adulthood provided a framework for understanding of God’s desire for everyone, a touchstone for judging life’s events, both personal and societal. She sees this symbol as a way of providing “a framework for understanding the collectivity of vocations in a university.”

Ines Angeli Murzaku’s “The Vocation I Choose to Follow” marvels at the journey her own life has taken, from a young adult, born and educated in Communist-controlled Albania, to an education by the Jesuits in Rome, and finally to becoming a church historian. Leaving Albania with a B.A. in history and philology, she earned her master’s from the University of Calabria in languages and literature; and received a licentiate and doctorate in ecclesiastical history from the Pontifical Oriental Institute in Rome. Her journey took her through three contrasting educational systems, each of which, despite their incongruities, contributed to her vocational path.

Gregory Glazov’s “How Fairy Tales and Scripture Give Meaning to and Sustain Vocation” takes its bearings from Tolkien’s modern folklore and from the Scriptures. Using The Hobbit and Lord of the Rings, Glazov weaves a tapestry that incorporates fairy tales and the Scriptures into a commentary on the Lord’s Prayer. In his vision vocation is a reality consequent to the fact that all of us have fallen into a
great tale, within which each of us may play a role. The trick is to have the wisdom to discern the importance of seemingly minor roles. Perseverance hinges on the belief that we are in a good story and the breakthrough to success hinges on little acts, such as those of pity or mercy. In the end everything hinges on having the attitude of a child.

In Ki Joo Choi’s “The Vocation of the Catholic University: Reconsidering Christian Humanism and the Role of the Arts,” Rahner’s Christian humanism provides a conceptual framework for a pluralistic discourse that reframes the academic vocation of universities away from the valuational neutrality of political liberalism to the prophetic. If questions of the good life are bracketed from our studies, teaching and research and consigned to the domain of the personal and the private, then knowledge is subject to one’s own valuations. Catholic universities need to engender what one could call “Christian aestheticism.” “By Christian aestheticism I mean to propose a privileged place for the arts in the academy and a retrieval of beauty.”

Robert Di Pede, a former adjunct professor at Seton Hall University, summarizes his contribution in “Imagining St. Benedict in Greenwich Village: Vocational Fragility and the Culture of Authenticity.” He states: “The point I want to argue is that there is an unarticulated background at work with what some people are calling fragility, and that the picture changes when the background is brought to the fore. The picture puts us in view of the humanity of the other and provides us with a basis for ethically underpinning social interaction.” In order to bring this background into view, Di Pede draws from Charles Taylor’s work in Sources of the Self and The Malaise of Modernity. Taylor sees questions of identity or selfhood in connection to a set of moral requirements arising from the standard of being true to oneself: that is, the ethic of authenticity. For religious people, Di Pede suggests a logic of strengthening the viability of vocational commitment as a personal response to an ideal given by Christ, lived in community, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

My essay on “Research as Conversion,” reflects on how it is that research itself can be a “call” to be open to “changing one’s mind,” that is, a type of conversion. Following Bernard Lonergan, I reflect on “the intelligibility of being” that is, the fact that the universe responds to our questions. I give several examples of such “changing one’s mind,” among which the witness of the great researcher on American cities, Jane Jacobs.

Rev. Paul Holmes, a co-writer of the grant proposal to Lilly, discusses the commonality shared by Catholic institutions of higher education. In “Speaking with One Voice: The Vocation of a Catholic University” he proposes markers of identity and praxis that describe goals which all Catholic institutions of higher education might try to accomplish. In doing so, he says that “…we set ourselves apart on the landscape of American higher education.” It is his hope that these “…’untested’ claims about what all Catholic colleges and universities actually do might invigorate a national conversation about what our ‘vocation’ as Catholic institutions might be, and, as well, what the future of Catholic higher education might look like.”

Finally, David Foster, the first Director of the Center for Vocation and Servant Leadership, begins our conversation describing “The Structure of Every Vocation.” With a philosopher’s clarity, his interest is the essential nature of vocation, and its various aspects. “In the article that follows I do four things: offer a definition of vocation, suggest a basic dynamic to vocations, find in the Scriptures three essential parts of any vocation, and suggest why vocations are often unclear to us.” His discussion is filled with references to the ordinary, and gently leads us to appreciate the extraordinary in our individual “calling.”
I.

THE NATURE OF VOCATION
The Structure of Our Vocations

David R. Foster

I believe that our lives are more like Tom Hanks in Saving Private Ryan than like Kramer, Jerry Seinfeld’s neighbor; more like Frodo Baggins, in Lord of the Rings, than like Elaine or George. By this I simply mean that to view life in terms of a call from God is to realize something profoundly true about our lives. God does have a part for us in His plan and He calls us to it.

The Lilly Endowment, by its grant making, began encouraging students to consider their life in terms of a calling, and academics to consider the meaning of “vocation.” The Endowment’s efforts received a strong response in part because the topic is so timely for college students.

I have worked for Seton Hall University’s Center for Vocation and Servant Leadership for the last seven years and I would like to add my reflections to the vocation discussion. As a philosopher, I am particularly interested in discerning the essential nature of vocation. In the article that follows I do four things: offer a definition of vocation, suggest a basic dynamic to vocations, find in the Scriptures three essential parts of any vocation, and suggest why vocations are often unclear to us.

In Saving Private Ryan, Tom Hanks is sent by his commander on a mission to save the last remaining Ryan brother on D-Day plus one. In Lord of the Rings the diminutive hobbit, Frodo Baggins, is given the mission of carrying the one ring that can bind all rings to its destruction, lest it be captured by the Dark Lord of Mordor. I do not suggest that our lives could or should have an equal number of battles, but I do believe that like them we have been given a mission, that our lives serve a higher purpose, and that, like the hobbits, there is more to us than meets the eye. At some point in life, many people experience a sense of being called, of being bidden to do a task by a higher power. If it does not happen, they begin to wonder if they have missed their calling.

Allow me to start my explanation with an objection posed to me. Shortly after becoming the Director of the Center, I had the occasion to explain to a group of prominent alums that our Center made students more aware that each of them had a personal vocation. Afterwards, one of them took me aside to object: he had had a successful career selling insurance, yet he did not feel that he had a calling to that. Moreover, it seemed fatalistic or at least an infringement on free will, to have such a life assignment. At the time, I did not have a good answer for him; I think I have a better one now that I will share with you.

First, a definition: by vocation I mean each person’s invitation from God to play a part in His plan for the salvation of the world. Vocation by this definition has four aspects. First, it is an invitation or call. “To call” is the literal meaning of the Latin word Vocatio. The English “calling” is an appropriate synonym. Now a “calling” implies two persons and that gives us the next two parts of our definition.

The second aspect is the One who calls, which implies a caller. What puts the zing and the sting in calling is that God is asking us to do something—a vocation is a call from the One who above all has the right to call us—our Father in heaven. It is rarely a dramatic experience like that of St. Paul or Joan of Arc; it often comes from a small inner voice or is recognized only in retrospect. Yet, we recognize it as something being asked of us and not simply equal to what we want. This is only true, however, until we discover our deepest desires and realize that God’s call is consistent with them.
The third aspect is the person who is called. A vocation entails a personal call to each of us individually—even the Blues Brothers in a comical way took this seriously. God calls everyone to play a part in His plan and every call from God in some way calls one person to help another, even though the help may be an unseen sacrifice. It is not just about me. A calling must not be reinterpreted as me deciding what my passion is, or for that matter, what the world needs from me (though, rightly understood, both questions have an important part in discerning a calling).

Finally, the call is important because it serves God’s ultimate purpose of gathering the whole human family home for celebration without end. We sense that, as small or ordinary as our call may be, it is the most important thing for us to do, and if done, then we can be at peace.

We are persons who are called by God individually and collectively. The right way to look at life is to see it as a calling. Since God is real, to consider life in light of His call is the truest picture of our reality. A calling is in turns thrilling, annoying, comforting, and daunting. Thrilling: imagine the president calling you up to say he has a job that only you can do. Annoying: recall the prophet Jonah who wanted no part in God’s plan to bring the Ninevites to repentance. Comforting: it is a relief to know that our life has a purpose. Daunting: consider how David may have felt when he first saw Goliath, or sympathize with Jeremiah, who, when called to be a prophet, replies “O Lord, I am too young.”

Can a vocation be missed or ignored? It probably happens frequently and for all sorts of reasons. We get involved in trying to make our way in the world; we put off the question; we would rather that our call not be our call. The experience of a “mid-life crisis,” popularized by Gail Sheehy’s 1976 book Passages, is perhaps a secular recognition of this reality.

Our calling may seem like the last thing we want to do. Yet, our faith is that, deep in our heart, it is this call that will best satisfy our heart’s deepest desires. The good news is that it is never too late to respond in this life. We may not be sure just what our calling is, but we can be sure that a desire to do God’s will is part of our calling.

In order to reach a Christian understanding of vocation, we naturally turn to the Bible, which is full of examples of God calling an individual to fulfill a particular part of His plan. Abraham is called away from his home to become the father of a new nation. Moses is called to lead the Israelites out of Egypt. David is called away from his sheep to be a shepherd for all Israel. Isaiah is called to console the Israelites in exile and Jeremiah is called to prophesy a rebuke.

In the Bible there is also evidence of a less dramatic call. It is a common Christian belief that the God who has numbered the hairs on our head also has a part for each of us to play in His plan. “Vocations” are not for the few but for “all who have ears to hear.”

The simplest structure occurring in vocations is a simple two-step dynamic: you need to come close to go far. The structure of a calling shows two basic parts: the first is a call to draw close and learn; the second is a call to go forth. This reflects the experience of the apostles with Jesus; first, Jesus calls them to spend time with him, to learn from him; secondly, he asks them to go out on mission.

The first part of a calling is not hard to discern, it is in a sense the same for all. It can be hard to accept since it involves surrendering our self-centeredness and putting God first in our life. We may well know people who have taken this step of coming to Jesus; yet, there is an ongoing need in Christian life to continually renew this commitment.
The second part of our calling, the going out, is different for each of us and creates a need for discernment. This explains why even people who pray struggle to understand what God is calling them to do. God is clear but also respectful; he wants to invite us, not force us. Often there is a period of “spiritual dialogue” with God that becomes clear only in retrospect.

A second characteristic of this same simple dynamic structure, which is often remarked on by writers on vocation, is that our vocation begins with the universal and moves toward the particular. There is a universal call to holiness that is at the center of every vocation; then there are aspects of our vocation that we share with others, e.g., a call to married life or to a profession; finally there are those aspects that are uniquely our call from God.

While each call is unique, I think there are three aspects common to every vocation. They are to nurture and guard life, to serve the common good by the work of our hands, and to enter upon a spiritual journey. This can be considered a structure or foundation common to every vocation. In short, we are all called to be guardians, gardeners, and pilgrims; in other words, to nurture life, to serve with our work, and to not settle here. As the author of the Letter to the Hebrews reminds us “here we have no lasting city.” (Hebrews 13:14)

The first aspect of vocation for all of us is to nurture life. The most fundamental instance of this is the bearing and raising of children. This is the first “call” of God to Adam and Eve in Genesis; “God blessed them, and God said to them ‘be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth’ . . . ” (Gen. 1:28). It is fitting that this first vocation is part of the creation story, for by parenting we cooperate with God in the most profound act of creation.

For most people, parenting is the most meaningful thing they do. Even people in powerful or glamorous professions, usually discover that raising children is the most rewarding thing they will do. It is an awesome responsibility to love, protect, educate, and liberate a child. It is the source of our greatest joys and deepest sorrows. The call to nurture life, however, is not only fulfilled by being parents, but also as aunts and uncles, friends and neighbors, brothers and sisters, teachers and nurses.

The second aspect of vocation also is found in the early chapters of Genesis. It involves the work of our hands. In Genesis, Chapter 2, it says that God settles Adam in the Garden of Eden to “cultivate and care for it” (Gen. 2:15). By referring to this aspect of vocation with the traditional phrase “the work of our hands,” I intend to include all the work we do with our hands, head, and back. We are called to be the stewards of creation, the caretakers in God’s garden. We have the responsibility to maintain a fit habitation for the human family and to even make improvements with the patience shown by a good farmer.

This same aspect of vocation is what most of us think of, when we think about a calling in life. and it encompasses all the different careers that serve the common good. There is a bewildering number; consider not only the butcher, baker, and candlestick maker, but also the physicist and pharmacist, riverboat captain and airline pilot, the bell captain and zoo keeper. All these serve the common good and make this world a more fit place for the human family.

The third aspect of vocation is to enter upon a spiritual journey, which is succinctly expressed in the simple invitation of Jesus: “Come follow me.” The main way to progress on this pilgrimage is to help others on their spiritual journey. It is the paradoxical logic of the gospel that we only advance on our spiritual journey by helping someone else on theirs; we find our life by losing it, and we reach heaven only by helping others reach heaven.
We all have a vocation to say, as Socrates did to the jury, that it is more important to care for the health of our soul than for the health of our body. We all share in the vocation of Moses, who God called to lead His people out of bondage in Egypt and into the Promised Land. What Moses did in a human way foreshadowed what Jesus would do in an eternal way. Jesus leads us from the city of man to the City of God.

The temptation will always be to mistake this life as the place to build our lasting city. We are tempted but mistaken to think that a fortune here is better than pennies in heaven. This aspect of vocation is exemplified by the priests, ministers, rabbis, and lay ministers who dedicate their lives to helping the rest of us on our spiritual journey.

There are several advantages to understanding every vocation as having three aspects. First, this division puts vocation in balance by including the calls to nurture and spiritual journey. It is an imbalance to think of vocation only in terms of career. This is a common mistake, especially in the professional education environment where the focus is on career.

A calling should not simply be equated with career. It is a particular temptation in higher education to think of calling strictly in terms of doctor, lawyer, banker, and such. In God’s eyes, the primary calling of a lawyer or doctor may be as a parent or spouse and the public career secondary.

Second, this balanced view of vocation helps to show that “having a vocation” does not mean we must imitate Mother Theresa’s vocation. Her service to the poor is remarkable but it is not the vocation of most people. Consider that our society needs insurance salesmen, bankers, teachers, nurses, auto mechanics, and a thousand other services. Would that we all had Mother Theresa’s compassion, but if we all had her vocation, who would mend our bones or fix our car?

Third, this view allows one aspect of vocation to be understood as primary without dismissing the other two parts. This is our usual experience and helps us to understand our lives. One’s vocation may be primarily to be a parent, while also involving a call to serve the common good and enter upon a spiritual journey. Another person’s vocation may be primarily to make the world a healthier place, which is the second aspect of vocation. They might do this through providing safe drinking water for the many that lack it, or discovering a cure for cancer. Each of us has one aspect as primary; all of us have the third aspect (following Christ) as fundamental.

These advantages allow me to answer the objection of the alumnus, who doubted that everyone has a vocation. Recall that, in his experience, he did not believe he had a call to sell insurance. This salesman, now retired, has a successful marriage and is a father and grandfather of well-adjusted children. The family has been generous to a number of good causes. His mistake was to think of vocation only in terms of career. I suspect his primary calling was to be a good husband and father, that the job he did was a secondary aspect of his calling and might have been satisfied as well by a different job. He also had the calling to help others on life’s spiritual journey. I suspect he and his wife did this first and foremost with their children and then in other ways with family, friends, and clients. In his retirement he has used his time and savings to support a number of charities.

Another advantage of seeing our calling having these three aspects is to understand how the first two find their full importance in the third. Thus our call to nurture life, and work for the common good, find their ultimate purpose in the goal of our pilgrimage, the good of everlasting light and life in community with our Father in heaven.
The final part of our reflection on vocation is to answer the question: Why is it so hard to know what God wants? If God wants to tell me something, why doesn’t He do so clearly? Why must I work so hard to know my calling?

There are two reasons for this seeming contradiction. First, God does speak clearly but has chosen to do so softly so as not to overwhelm us. Second, we may have never kept still long enough to listen.

It is God’s usual modus operandi to speak softly so as to invite our response out of love and not out of fear or awe. Consider the humility of Jesus’ birth or the fact that His miracles are careful to teach and not to overwhelm. He accepts death on a cross and asks faith in His resurrection.

God’s word comes more often like a gentle breeze than a thunder clap. This approach respects our freedom. God does not want to force a response by His might, but to invite a free response. When you love someone, you only want them to say “yes” out of love, not out of fear or obligation.

That raises the question of how willing am I to listen? How often am I quiet and wanting to listen? How many times do I even drive without the radio? Maybe I want to hear something else? Naturally enough, I want to go where I want to go. Yet, even a desire to know His will, is itself, a first response to His invitation.

In sum, God should not be omitted from our understanding of vocation to satisfy contemporary sensibilities, since it is that God is calling that makes it important. Every vocation has a basic pattern in which God calls us first to come close and learn from Him that He may later send us on mission. Every vocation also has aspects of the three basic calls in Scripture: 1) to nurture life, 2) to serve the common good, 3) to seek God and thus enter upon our spiritual journey.

Although a vocation is deeply personal and can only be answered by the one called, the community benefits from the discussion of such a possibility. We could all benefit, I believe, by reflecting on how we are called to be a guardian, a gardener, and a pilgrim. I look forward to helping you, and being helped by you, along our pilgrim way.
Imagining St. Benedict in Greenwich Village: Vocational Fragility and The Culture of Authenticity

Robert Di Pede

When we think of monks and nuns, i.e., those whom we call by the title Sister and Brother – we are often referring to a category of men and women, predominantly in the Catholic Church, who according to an ancient tradition have dedicated themselves to God by publicly professing vows. The vows are familiarly (not necessarily) three: poverty, chastity, and obedience. In the Catholic tradition the manner of life that comes with the public profession of these vows is called Consecrated life or Religious life, and its most familiar institutional form is Religious Orders. The members of Religious Orders are commonly referred to as Religious, and Religious may be distinguished according to specific affiliations: Benedictines (abbreviated: OSB), Dominicans (OP), Franciscans (OFM), Jesuits (SJ), and Salesians (SDB), to name but a few prominent exemplars. One of the most striking features of these groups is their commitment to live a common life, such that goods and meals are shared, and prayers recited together with regularity and formality.

Some of the men within Consecrated life may also receive the sacrament of Holy Orders, and for this reason, it is not uncommon to know deacons, priests, and bishops (members of the ecclesiastical hierarchy) who are also Religious. Moreover, some of the tasks undertaken by the ecclesiastical hierarchy, such as spiritual counselling, distributing Holy Communion, visiting the sick, working in departments of the Roman Curia, are shared with Religious, be they men or women.

Consecrated life distinguishes itself from other ecclesiastical institutions on the basis of its form of life, as described above, and the ends to which this form is directed. The first end is evangelical: to model concretely the life of Jesus, who was poor, obedient, and chaste, and by this means to remind the Church that the way of life taught by Jesus is a paradigm for yesterday, today, and forever (cf. Heb.13, 8). The second, following from the first, is eschatological: Religious are meant to be signs or pointers of the Kingdom of Heaven, toward which everyone is destined.

My purpose in the following pages will be to address the problem of vocational fragility in Consecrated life, particularly in the early stages of commitment. I am writing from the standpoint of one who is well acquainted with Religious Orders, with the contemporary issues facing Consecrated life, and with the conviction that Consecrated life is an indispensable facet of the Church’s life. I am equally convinced of the role and importance of institutions in perfecting masters and training novices in the tradition of a community. The concern I wish to bring to the table, in light of these convictions, is the increased fragility of Consecrated life relative to the rapid expansion and steadfast commitment for which it was known only a few decades ago.

Fragility literally describes something as breakable and implies need of special care. In recent times, predominantly in the modern West, the term has been used by spiritual directors and seminary personnel to characterize lifelong commitments (e.g., marriage, priesthood, Consecrated life) which have been marked by high levels of indecision and impermanence. More specifically, fragility has been presupposed of a large number of young Religious who leave their Orders, or in cases which, while not resulting in defections, seem troubled by uncertainty or straddled between different options.
In identifying the causes of fragility, three accounts have come to dominate: theological, psychological, and sociological. These accounts have proffered a scientific way of calibrating the problem with recourse to hard data: gesturing at various kinds of spiritual negligence, psychological limitations, and shifting social trends. And these data often have been used to buttress certain critiques of modern Western society, such as those which claim that today’s young people are sloughing off responsibility, obligations, and commitments once held sacred. But while the tune of these critiques is by now familiar (perhaps not entirely without justification), it would be a mistake to think that they, or the hard facts, tell the whole story of fragility. The problem with recurring to scientific accounts alone – that is, in viewing fragility from the standpoint of the spectator looking upon the world – is that the picture of today’s vocations risks being totalized and depersonalized. The human person is sacrificed to the “they” who are critiqued, and the individual is evacuated of anything remarkable or “traumatizing” that would make him or her also the object of admiration, the breath (spiritus) of new life in the institution.\(^1\)

The point I want to argue is that there is an unarticulated background at work with what some people are calling fragility, and that the picture changes when the background is brought to the fore. The picture (not of fragility!) puts us in view of the humanity of the other and provides us with a basis for ethically underpinning social interaction within and administration of ecclesiastical institutions. As long as this background remains unarticulated, the story of fragility results as incomplete and what we say and do about it risks being misconstrued.

In order to bring this background into view, I will draw from Charles Taylor’s work of retrieval in *Sources of the Self* and *The Malaise of Modernity* through which the importance accorded to questions of identity or selfhood are seen in connection to a set of moral requirements which arise from the standard of being true to oneself: i.e., from the ethic of authenticity.\(^2\) Taken from this angle, a background should emerge for understanding fragility as a tension arising between the moral ideal of what it means to be true to oneself, on one hand, and the requirements incumbent on an institution (e.g., Religious Orders, the Church, marriage and family) for discharging its proper functions in society, on the other. By way of conclusion, I hope to offer some lines of thought concerning the conditions necessary for mediating these competing areas of interest and investment, and thus suggest a logic for strengthening the viability of vocational commitment as a personal response to an ideal given by Christ, lived in community, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

The synoptic Gospels offer an obvious starting point for framing vocational fragility.\(^3\) In the story of Christ’s meeting with the young man, when the answer to the question: “What must I do to merit eternal life?” results in Christ’s instruction: “go, sell everything you have, and give to the poor … ; and come, follow me,” we learn that the man goes away sad and heavy of heart; for he was rich and could not bring himself to part with everything he owned (Mk 10:17-22, Mt 19:16-22, Lk. 18:18-23).\(^4\) We hear of others who wish to follow Jesus, but who seek at the same time to maintain the standards of everyday comfort, or to fulfill cultural obligations, or to maintain familial ties. The cost of discipleship, in Christ’s own words, is unequivocal: “No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God” (Lk. 9:57-62). Indeed, leaving behind one’s treasure in order to follow Christ – be it houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or lands (Matt. 19:29) – seems to be the standard test of discipleship. And the standard response of the disciples whose faith it put to the test tends to be tepid and timorous – as we find with Peter’s denial (Matt. 26:69-75, Mk. 14:66-72, Lk. 22:56-62, Jn. 18:25-27), the disciples’ inability to keep watch in the Garden of Gethsemane (Matt. 26:40, Mk. 14:37-41, Lk. 22:45-46), and Thomas’ notorious doubt (Jn. 20:27).
While Sacred Scripture warns that the divine calling to discipleship may be submitted to verification – “as gold that is tested by fire” (4Exra.16; cf Sir. 2) – and while pusillanimity and humiliation are often more the outcome than courage and heroism, the lesson which has repeated itself through the ages – to the ancient Israelites and then to the disciples of Jesus – has been unequivocally to trust in God’s mercy, to derive strength from one’s trials, to hope beyond hope that all might be redeemed and remade according to God’s plan of salvation. (This puts me in mind of a vision of Julian of Norwich in which the Lord says: “Sin is needful, but all shall be well. And all shall be well. And all manner of thing shall be well…”)

Doubt, fear, faltering, even sin do not offer a sufficient basis for abandoning the call of discipleship. Rather, the urgency of evangelization, the *kerygma* itself, demands that efforts be made to shore up commitment and resolve.

With this lesson in mind, a strict correlation could not be made between the temptation to look over one’s shoulder in longing for the life one has left behind and actually lacking the requisite aptitude for Consecrated life. This is certainly the perspective taken on defections in *Religiosorum Institutio* (1961); however, in the historical context in which this document was drafted, the matter of imputing moral culpability for defections on major superiors and formation personnel was of far greater interest than examining more deeply the possible causes. Defections were seen plainly as a matter of spiritual negligence: either there was no vocation to begin with, or if there had been, someone was to be held accountable for its floundering. On this account, recurring causally to fragility might have seemed a ruse of moral lassitude, or an incomprehensible trivialization of the indispensable process of verification which allowed that some people would justifiably leave, whether by their own reckoning or by proactive instruction of their superiors.

The possibility of interpreting one’s vocational crisis otherwise, say through the lens of fragility, required that social and human conditions be taken into account in such a way as was only prepared for by The Second Vatican Council and particularly by *Gaudium et Spes* (1965). With *Gaudium et Spes* the fact was fully acknowledged that the conditions for Religious belief and practice no longer obtained as before. After years of entrenchment against modernism (marked by interdicts, censorship, and excommunications), the Church turned a sympathetic regard on the “troubled and perplexed” condition of the modern world and adopted a stance of “solidarity and respectful affection for the whole human family.” With the Gospel in hand, the Church invited itself to become a partner in dialogue with humanity about all the different problems and questions concerning “current trends in the world, about [man’s] place and […] role in the universe, about the meaning of individual and collective endeavour, and finally about the destiny and nature of man.” On this account, it made sense to talk about fragility as a matter of concern not only in relation to Consecrated life and priesthood, but in relation to the value of the human person, the sanctity of marriage, the role and importance of the family, indeed, of the Christian calling itself.

In light of the Church having achieved this compassionate regard *en face* of the modern predicament, subsequent endeavours to adapt Consecrated life, initiated under the decree *Perfectae Caritatis* (1965), “in accordance with the needs of our age …, animated by a renewal of spirit,” soon came to regard the problem of defections differently: modern social and psychological circumstances were brought to bear on the exigencies of Religious life, and the force of seeing the problem of defections through the lens of *Religiosorum Institutio* – solely as one of moral negligence and irresponsibility (on whatever side this might fall) – was lessened.
By contrast, *Renovationis Causam* (1969), in harmony with the compassion of *Gaudium et Spes*, recognized that “[t]he youth of today who are called by God to the Religious state are not less desirous than before, rather they ardently desire to live up to this vocation in all its requirements, provided these be certain and authentic.”

So, if the burgeoning vocation crisis was to be addressed with any greater precision it would be in terms of appreciating fragility as a bi-product of new social pressures. But it was not just that the cultural revolution of the 1960s — sex, drugs, and rock and roll — made it more difficult to cultivate and care for vocations (even after vows!), but that, at the level of freedom and responsibility, a proper grounding was lacking for youth to face these pressures with equilibrium. *Renovationis Causam* framed the problem in terms of maturity: “Most of the difficulties encountered today in the formation of novices are usually due to the fact that when they were admitted they did not have the required maturity.”

On this account, instead of turning vocations away, the entire formation cycle was to be adapted to the “mentality of younger generations and modern living conditions,” facilitating the attainment of human and spiritual maturity in stages. This did not necessarily demand that “the candidate be … able to measure up immediately to all the demands of the Religious and apostolic life of the Institute”; but there had to be a sufficient basis for expecting that the demands of Religious life could be taken up eventually after some initial guidance with serenity.

Restructuring initial formation to provide personal guidance meant thinking in terms of categories such as Christian Formation (meeting Jesus of the Gospel), Social Adjustment (preparation for the vows and community life), and Development of Human Values (addressing the human and emotional maturity of the candidate). The specialized nature of these tasks, particularly the third (concerning psychological maturity), could not be met entirely in-house by formation personnel, or naively presumed of the community, or seen as contingent on the agreeability of the environment and its distance from “metropolitan temptations”—the avoidance of which had been the motivation for situating novitiates in the countryside. Thus, the human psychological sciences were sought more regularly and with less prejudice—at least officially.

Today, most if not all Religious orders and dioceses state in their official formation guidelines that psychological resources, where necessary and deemed helpful, be drawn upon to assist with the needs of formation, be this in the initial stages or afterward. The degree to which this leads to an aptitude for Religious life varies from case to case. And thus, some people may be deemed unsuited on a psychological basis. In order to facilitate assessments at this level, a number of Orders, with the help of psychologists, have developed a checklist of positive and negative criteria or counter-indications, which, being adapted to the requirements of different apostolates, identify situations and attitudes which raise questions or doubts regarding vocational suitability or exclude the possibility of Consecrated life.

But the assessment of the candidate’s affective and emotional maturity presupposes an immanent framework of intricate psychological influences, such as family relations or exposure to violence and sex or the circumstances of childhood rearing. On this account, the constitutive background of one’s personal history determines where the question of adaptability to Consecrated life may be problematic, and can be weighed with a view to anticipating the likelihood of psychological integration and the chances of success.

And yet, a condition of fragility persists. This is known statistically. It is known also from reports given by the major superiors of Religious Orders. Indeed, the very fact that the term fragility (or its equivalents has entered common reflection on the pastoral care of vocations, gestures at its validity also prior to statistical research: fragility captures what spiritual directors, seminary rectors, and novice masters have commonly come to regard as characterizing the condition of a new generation of young
Religious. The worry expressed here is not over the small percentage of Religious who leave on account of having verified through experience that their vocations genuinely lie elsewhere. This has always happened. The cases crying out for an account are of another type: those in which the conflicted discernment of the young person shows up as an anomaly against the positive signs of a vocation. This is what formation personnel have been trying to explain by recurring to an immanent psychological background; and that is why one response to the anomaly of enduring fragility has been to tighten the screws on the initial assessment. The puzzle is that while the maturity of the Religious may be consistent with the requirements of Religious life, and the positive signs of a vocation be amply present, a state of fragility still characterizes the vocation. Why? Moreover, there is a limit to how far any assessment can be taken in the first instance (be it psychological, spiritual, physical, or otherwise) before it becomes virtually impossible for anyone to enter a Religious Order — and everyone recognizes this.

In order to find a way of completing or mediating the psychological picture of fragility, some have looked for its roots in the dominant social and cultural ideologies of our time. An early articulation of this attempt can be found in *Gaudium et Spes*, where the predicament of human beings in the modern world (viz., at grips with questions of identity, the meaning of suffering and evil, the nature and destiny of man, the purpose of human existence) is understood in light of the speed of progress, patterns of consumption, the abandonment of older lifestyles, etc. In other words, the conditions which obtain for Religious belief and practice (including the sources of atheism and secularism) are explained in relation to exogenous factors which shape mentalities, moral attitudes, and self-understanding. On this account, fragility is no longer understood *only* in terms of one’s immanent psychological background, such as one’s troubled family background. Rather, the breakdown of the family is on the same level as vocational fragility; and the sources of both can be understood in terms of social change. The social sciences have become pivotal to how Religious Orders frame fragility and in what they see themselves as being able to do about it.

In a recent letter on vocational fragility, Rev. Francesco Cereda, SDB, General Councillor for Formation of the Salesians of Don Bosco, frames fragility according to a familiar characterization of social change which he labels *postmodernity*. The dominant individualist, consumerist, relativist culture of today — marked by constant transition and rapid change, eroded from tradition, lacking a common moral grounding, and enjoying the security of affluence — has had a concomitant effect on clear thinking, self-giving, Religious faith, the acceptance of responsibility, and, ultimately, vocational perseverance. The problem of vocational fragility (or the breakdown of the family), finds its roots in a state of affairs where people, especially young people, “live in a way that is disjointed or conditioned by what is in fashion; this weakens them and leads to even more inconsistency, incoherence, dissatisfaction, instability, superficiality.” This position is strengthened all the more when held against other contemporary societies (e.g., Africa, India, and Islamic societies), on one hand; and an earlier, more exigent age (e.g., the era before World War II), on the other.

Now the tune of Cereda’s concern, audible in other quarters of the Church, is by no means the lament of a Catholic outlook alone. Allan Bloom’s *Closing of the American Mind* sounds the same alarm. The crux of the argument assumes that today’s youth are under the spell of a facile relativism — rooted in a kind of individualism — which amounts to: (i) the right to choose for themselves their own pattern of life; (ii) the right to decide in conscience what convictions to hold; (iii) the right to determine the shape of their lives in a whole host of ways that their ancestors could not control. A culture defined along these lines is worrisome to Cerea and Bloom (and many others besides) for fear that individualism (self-centeredness and the lack of shared values) will keep young people from “an awareness of greater issues which transcend the self” and that this will result in dire consequences for institutions. Even where
exception to this rule is taken by the generosity of many young people who invest themselves in peace-and-development projects (e.g., The World Youth Alliance, Doctors Without Borders, and L’Arche), or who participate in enthusiastic spiritual movements (e.g., World Youth Day, Communion and Liberation, Campus Crusade for Christ); or who follow exigent spiritual paths (e.g., Opus Dei, Regnum Christi, the Tridentine Liturgy), the force of the argument suggests that “there is no moral ideal at work here, or if there is, on the surface, it is a screen for self-indulgence.”30 As Cereda puts it in reference to the present generation of young Catholics: in their search for novelty, marked by emotions such as “I feel” and “I want,” it follows that

Religious experience … becomes the search for the feel-good factor about oneself and for highly emotional experiences. In general Religious formation makes little impact and does not involve the person in the depth of his being. Each one remains self-centred, convinced that everything can be easily achieved on the basis of personal prestige and possessions, and not with effort and perseverance. Then, as a result of ethical relativism, shared values do not exist.

This has a knock-on effect on civil, ecclesiastical and Religious institutions, which, in addition to being weak and not very attractive because of changed times, are no longer popular nor appreciated, not trusted nor referred to.31

With all that might be said about the rise of new Religious Orders and the fervour of Lay Movements, on one hand, there is the worsening problem of ongoing discernment and unsustained commitment, on the other. Thus, it is not inconceivable that Cereda’s harsh critique of modern Religious experience captures some – even much – of what may be going on. It also seems that his social-scientific version of post modernity does not take into account its moral sources; and for this reason Cereda’s story is unable to posit an outcome other than the slide to subjectivism and atomism it criticizes. But I want to argue that the slide is not ineluctable; that there is an alternative. A consideration of the sources of post modernity reveals that there is a background picture, a moral ideal, so far unveiled, which motivates young people to take up the exigent paths of Religious life and experience that they do.32 Subjectivism and atomism are its debased forms; but the moral ideal itself is precisely what needs to be taken into account if (a) we are to have a fuller appreciation of vocational fragility, and if (b) we are to consider the future and viability of Religious institutions in light of that to which the ideal enables them to aspire.

What is the basis for invoking a moral ideal at this point? In other words, in what sense is a moral ideal unaccounted for in the story of fragility given above according to Sacred Scripture, or the human and social sciences? To some extent, the occurrence of a background prior to and informing one’s choice and action is already presupposed in the other accounts. This background is explained in terms of supposedly harder facts. As we saw above, these are: (a) showing recalcitrance before the Divine Calling, (b) shouldering the burden of psychological baggage, and (c) being driven ineluctably by social forces. And, of course, where the opposite holds, the basis for the positive criteria emerges: (i) docility before the Divine Calling, (ii) psychological maturity, and (iii) immunity from the tainting effects of post modernity. Now, none of these is to be excluded from a full account of fragility, nor should any one operate in an exclusionary way without the possibility of overlap. But even so, these accounts do not explain how a vocation can find itself struggling to maintain higher ground over another calling, a good, demanding recognition – the demands of which are felt on the same level as those of the vocation.

To be sure, the conflict experienced between two perceived goods is as old as the fall from innocence itself. What is new today is that people no longer approach this tension with the worry of divine retribution, or any other category through which it would be considered better to err in fidelity to the
vocational commitment than to err in pursuit of some other possibility or goal that is in some sense authenticating. What is new today is that the decision comes to be based on an inner sense of what it is more right to do, i.e., in terms of what one feels called to do. This holds true for other vocations as well. Taylor observes: “it is not just that people sacrifice their love relationships, and the care of their children, to pursue careers. Something like this has always existed. The point is that today people feel called to do this, feel they ought to do this, feel their lives would be somehow wasted or unfulfilled if they don’t do it.”33

When Taylor considers the sense of calling behind these choices, he uncovers a moral ideal. By moral ideal he is underscoring the standard by which people evaluate what is better or higher, and presuppose what is more desirable. This ideal is the ethic of authenticity: referring to decisions which are based on some sense of what it means to be true to oneself. Authenticity is what is being invoked when we say we are called to follow certain paths. At the same time, many examples of abandoned commitments today are representative of a debased form of this ideal. But it need not be the case that individualism in its strivings for authenticity narrow its capacity to think beyond itself.34

In other words, I want to suggest that the slide into atomism is not the only way the importance we place on the individual has to end; that authenticity is the valid form of this consideration; and that it should be taken seriously because it makes a difference to vocations and to the viability of institutions.

In order to make this point, it is important to appreciate how today our decisions and actions have come to rest on the axis of choice, and that for our premodern ancestors this was not so. Our premodern ancestors had little say in how their vocations were decided. One was either born into one’s station (knight, labourer, nobleman, etc.), or otherwise one was given by one’s parents to a monastery in exchange for a divine favour, or sometimes one was inducted into clerical life to be schooled. The exceptional cases in which one did break from the pre-established order in order to follow a Divine Calling was not tantamount to challenging that order; nor would it have been entirely comprehensible in our modern sense of acting from personal conviction. By way of example, St. Francis of Assisi divested himself of his aristocratic heritage (quite literally) in order to don the garb of poverty not from a gradually acquired sense of what was more meaningful for him; rather, his action was a matter of conversion (metanoia), falling quite suddenly on the heels of Christ speaking to him from the crucifix in San Damiano. The Divine Calling for St. Francis was not the result of an unarticulated inner sense of what obtained for deciding and acting (which is what we invoke in vocational discernment today); it was a command he received from Christ.

To the extent that it is not entirely disconcerting for us to think of a vocation as a matter of obedience to a God-given command, it is in fact still possible to use this phraseology even today. Kierkegaard, a man less modern than ourselves, still shuddered at the thought of it in Fear and Trembling, and could not fathom its possibility without first eulogizing the dreaded drama of Abraham offering his son Isaac on Mount Moriah. Similarly, we today are a long way off from Anselm’s credo quia absurdum est on matters of vocational discernment. There is a crucial difference which has to be appreciated if our modern culture of discernment is to be seen in its connection with vocational fragility; or if that which appears to be the lack of resolve or the fear of self-denial in today’s young people is to lead to framing the challenges facing Religious life with greater clarity. The resoluteness of our premodern ancestors, described above, arises before “the growth of a rich vocabulary of interiority, an inner realm of thought and feeling to be explored. This frontier of self-exploration has grown through various spiritual disciplines of self examination, through Montaigne, the development of the modern novel, the rise of Romanticism, the ethic of authenticity, to the point where now we conceive of ourselves as having inner depths. We
might even say that the depths that were previously located in the cosmos, the enchanted world, are now more radically placed within.”

This appeal to inner depths carries us out of the world where what obtains spiritually derives from “purposive forces already in nature,” into a context that “puts a premium on constructive action, on an instrumental stance towards the world.” The emphasis in Christianity, then, begins to crystallize around ordinary life – the life of production and reproduction, work and love. Ordinary life inculcates new disciplines which, in the context of the present discussion, are seen in a variety new ecclesial movements which bring together laity and Religious, families and celibates, men and women, contemplatives and actives under one roof to live the Gospel in some manner of shared experience, with accents on family spirit, spiritual friendship, and social outreach. The thought of the monastic ideal becoming incarnate in ordinary life, as a leaven of Christian hope and love, holds remarkable appeal for young people today.

It brings one to posit the wild analogy of St. Benedict in Greenwich Village.

How does all this change the story of fragility? It places a great deal of importance – from the very first moment of discernment – on a personal sense of fulfillment. This ideal survives today as the legacy of a certain Romantic expressivism in which moral importance was accorded to the idea that each person was the artist of his or her own life. Today the ideal comes to us in the ethic of authenticity and takes the following formulation: “Being true to myself means being true to my own originality, and that is something only I can articulate and discover. In articulating it, I am also defining myself. I am realizing a potentiality that is properly my own.”

Expressivism today means listening to one’s inner depths in order (a) to recover what corresponds in thought and action to one’s personal sense of self, and (b) to bring this into some kind of embodiment, to externalize it for all others to see and recognize. We do not need to recur to Walt Whitman in order to find this ethic at work. To a great extent, in the popular imagination, it has been attributed anachronistically to St. Francis of Assisi (although we are now in a better position to see the limits of this reading, as well as to anticipate the debased forms and fragmentation into which this ethic can slide). Every ideal has its debased forms; but there is no sense in which fear of these dangers should preemptively exclude expressivism from modern embodiments of Catholic Christianity. It is a powerful ideal in the spirituality of young people today on which even Pope John Paul II draws when considering the pastoral care of vocations:

This is what is needed: a Church for young people, which will know how to speak to their heart and enkindle, comfort, and inspire enthusiasm in it with the joy of the Gospel and the strength of the Eucharist; a Church which will know how to invite and to welcome the person who seeks a purpose for which to commit his whole existence; a Church which is not afraid to require much, after having given much; which does not fear asking from young people the effort of a noble and authentic adventure, such as that of the following of the Gospel.

Expressivism and the accent on ordinary life have become part of the way modern Catholic Christianity represents itself to itself, both in lay movements and in a variety of new embodiments of Consecrated life. Even more striking is the fact that a whole slew of recently canonized saints captivate the imagination not only for their virtue and miracles, but for the ordinariness of their lives (e.g., think of Pier Giorgio Frassati’s alpine skiing or Mother Teresa’s temptations to atheism).

Thus, authenticity is a moral ethic with a definite consequence on vocational discernment and on modern Religious belief and practice. To this end, Taylor is perhaps right: “What we need is neither root-and-branch condemnation nor uncritical praise; and not a carefully balanced trade-off. What we need is a work of retrieval, through which this ideal can help restore our practice.” I have felt the better part of this retrieval in the more capable hands of Professor Taylor. What I have tried to suggest is that the retrieval in question anticipates a logic by which to safeguard the role and importance of institutions,
on one hand, and the means by which the ethic of authenticity can take shape, as an animating principle without fragmentizing community or the mission, on the other.

The role and importance of Religious Orders is to help accomplish the work of salvation in the world.41 This goal depends on the flourishing of its members. In the past, when tension arose between the individual and the institution, it was wondered whether this flourishing was best achieved by heavy handed governance or by unrestrained freedom. Neither of these has proven to be helpful as a viable logic for flourishing. It seems a third possibility has yet to be explored where both governance and freedom abide as co-principles, but where the limit of either one or the other requires a mediator. Here there is need of further philosophical enquiry. The sources of Consecrated life recovered at the Second Vatican Council can only realize their potential within the culture of authenticity if there is (1) a recovery in ethics of a shared moral sense of the good, a common object of love, in relation to which members of a community recognize themselves and generate self-understanding, and (2) a willingness to consider what it means to place oneself in ethical relation to the other person in light of this love-generating object before pressing forward with pragmatic exigencies – even when these exigencies are tied to the urgencies of evangelization.42 On the theological plane, a constellation of questions and challenges arise from these two points concerning how to organize the relationship between the institutional Church and the charismatic element within the Church, which will likely keep theologians occupied for years to come.

Still, some guiding principles are already within view. In an article on the relationship between “institution” and “Spirit” (i.e., the hierarchical and the pneumatological elements in the Church), Josef Ratzinger (Benedict XVI) cautioned against too great an emphasis on pastoral planning and organization en face of the renewal of the Church represented in ecclesial movements and new orders. Ratzinger’s caution in fact mirrors my own apprehension about shaping religious orders around exigencies rather than the gifts of the Spirit embodied in the men and women who are the life by which they live. The point I wish to underscore from Ratzinger’s article is the dual importance of an individual’s participating in the forms of life of a community, on one hand, and the community’s remaining opened to new forms of life proposed by the Spirit, on the other. Ratzinger’s words, quoted below, are directed to the movements; but they can easily be extended to new orders, and, on my view, to young members of religious orders and their superiors. He writes: “While it is necessary to remind the movements that – even though they have found and pass on the whole of the faith in their own way – they are a gift to and in the whole of the Church and must submit themselves to the demands of this totality in order to be true to their own essence. But the local churches, too, even the bishops, must be reminded to avoid making an ideal of uniformity in pastoral organization and planning. They must not make their own pastoral plans the criterion of what the Holy Spirit is allowed to do: an obsession with planning could render the churches impermeable to the Spirit of God, to the power by which they live.”43

As it is evident from Ratzinger’s caution that there is need of further theological work in the moral shaping of the Christian community. Perhaps this can be profitably accessed anew by turning to friendship—a long neglected theme of theology;44 for friendship, a central principle of Christianity – reflected in the Trinity, the Communion of the Saints, the history of the early Church, and in the intrinsic structure of being, namely, reciprocity – is equally crucial to the ethic of authenticity. In Taylor’s words, “in the culture of authenticity, relationships are seen as the key loci of self-discovery and self-confirmation. Love relationships are not important just because of the general emphasis in modern culture on the fulfillment of ordinary life. They are also crucial because they are the crucibles of inwardly generated identity.”45 Some of what Taylor is gesturing at, is already acknowledged in the renewed
emphasis on community life expounded with exemplary eloquence in Fraternal Life in Community and Vita Consacrata. With friendship ethically underpinning human relations – be it by fostering relations of the heart (cf. St. Augustine, J. H. Newman), or by ‘seeking the face of the other’ (cf. Levinas) – one is well removed from the standpoint of the spectator looking upon the world; one is much better positioned to recognize through the particularity and incommunicable depths of the other person the Spirit moving through and renewing – not sacrificing – institutions.

In the future, perhaps the dreams, hopes, and desires of young Religious and the personal gifts with which the Holy Spirit has endowed them, on one hand, and the role and importance of the institutions and the structures of authority, on the other, may be seen less in tension, and more as overlapping. Weighed down by the pragmatic exigencies of older structures and the dwindling number of Religious and clergy, it is a possibility we have only begun to explore. *Veni Sancte Spiritus* …


3. The Old Testament offers similar examples, too many to innumerate here. I offer a few New Testament examples instead, given that consecrated life, characterized most distinctly by the vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience, is patterned specifically on the life of Jesus who was poor, obedient, and chaste.

4. Citations are from the *Revised Standard Version*.


7. In §1.13 the document addresses these words to Superiors: “Superiors should see to it that they be not responsible for the mistakes or errors of those in charge of selecting and training young men. This will be the case if they are culpably uninformed of the norms laid down by the Church, or ignore them, or apply them carelessly; if, ignoring the necessary discernment of spirits, they admit into Religious life and allow to remain therein those who have not been called by God, or if they neglect to give proper formation to those who are evidently called and to safeguard them in their divine vocation. Therefore, this Sacred Congregation regards it as its duty to exhort superiors most earnestly always to keep before their eyes the norms herein set forth, being mindful of the grave warning of this Sacred Congregation in its Instruction, *Illud Saepius*, of August 18, 1915 […]”

8. The causes of defection identified in *Religiosorum institutio* were: §1.6. Undue Family Influence; §1.7. Undue Influence Of Superiors And Directors; §1.8. Ignorance Of Obligations And Lack Of Liberty In Accepting Them; §1.9. Fear Of An Uncertain Future; §1.10. Difficulty With Chastity; §1.11. Loss Of The Religious Spirit. After enumerating these points and briefly discussing each one, the following judgment is passed: §1.12 “Unfortunate Religious priests bring forth these and other similar arguments, at times even attempting to make the Church responsible for their deplorable condition, as though the Church, through her ministers, had admitted them to the Religious and priestly life without the necessary qualifications, or did not know how to train and protect them once they had been called unto the portion of the Lord.”


11. Ibid, §1.3


15. Ibid, §4


17. Ibid. In a letter concerning the purpose and structuring of formation in the formal period preceding novitiate (pre-novitiate), the Master of the Dominicans, the V. Rev. Damian Byrne, O.P., wrote: “As part of [the process of training] a number of provinces engage the help of those qualified in psychology. This is a delicate matter and the rights of the individual must be carefully respected, (cf. Can. 646, 220). Such help can be extremely useful in guiding candidates in their future growth as human beings and Religious and in guiding the admissions board - the right of admitting candidates remains with the province LCO 171.”


21. See especially §1.10

22. Founded by St. John Bosco and approved by the Holy See in 1865, the Salesians of Don Bosco (officially: the Society of St. Francis de Sales) are one of the largest and most global Religious Orders in the Catholic Church. Statistical data in the Salesian Annuario reports that for December 31, 2005 there were 560 novices and 2, 792 seminarians; while the total number of Salesians was 16, 568. Source: http://www.sdb.org/sdb2006/index.asp?Lingua=2&MySet=1&MySetSez=4&MyDetSetSez=1&FileCentro=2_9_4_1_asp (accessed December 4, 2007).

23. Francesco Cereda, “Vocational Fragility: Initiating Reflection and Suggesting Action” in Acts of the General Council, no. 385: You will be my witnesses even to the ends of the earth (Rome: Direzione Generale Opere Don Bosco, 2004), §1. To be sure, Cereda’s definition of postmodernity is extremely broad, and spills over into other categories. By way of comparison, Terry Eagleton offers a more harnessed definition in his critique: “Postmodernity is a style of thought which is suspicious of classical notions of truth, reason, identity and objectivity, of the idea of universal progress or emancipation, of single frameworks, grand narratives or ultimate grounds of explanation.” See: The Illusions of Postmodernism (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996): vii.


25. “In our day, the problem needs to be posed from a new angle: Is there a single phenomenon here, or do we need to speak of ‘multiple modernities’, the plural reflecting the fact that other non-Western cultures have modernized in their own way and cannot properly be understood if we try to grasp them in a general theory that was designed originally with the Western case in mind.” See: “multiple modernities” in Charles Taylor, Modern Social Imaginaries (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2004) 1-2. Cf. secularism defined in the West, North-west, North Atlantic (vs. Islamic countries, India, Africa) in Charles Taylor, A Secular Age (Harvard University Press: Cambridge, MA, 2007), 1.

27. Charles Taylor, *The Malaise of Modernity*, 2. In addition to *individualism* – the first source and aspect of the modern malaise which Taylor identifies – there are two others: a) the recurrence to instrumental reason, and b) political and social atomism. See: The “The Three Malaises” in *The Malaise of Modernity*, 1-12.


31. Francesco Cereda, “Vocational Fragility: Initiating Reflection and Suggesting Action.” (Italics in the original)


36. Ibid, 541.


43. Joseph Ratzinger, “The Theological Locus of Ecclesial Movements” in *Communio* 25 (Fall 1998), 480-499; 499. Emphasis mine. The rich content of this article, not to mention the technical rigour and elan with which it addresses some quite difficult ecclesiological questions makes it valuable reading for anyone wishing to enter more deeply into current enquiry concerning ecclesiastical renewal.


How Fairy Tales and Scripture Give Meaning to and Sustain Vocation

Gregory Glazov

This essay aims to take some bearings from Tolkien’s modern folklore and from Scripture to identify principles that inspire a sense of a divine calling to a mission in life, which is how I understand “vocation,” give this mission meaning, and sustain it in difficult times.

Why Tolkien? Because vocation, theologically speaking, is a mystery, a profound truth; inklings of it are often best expressed in story form by myths and fairy tales and Tolkien, being a master “Inkling,” was an expert at exploring and communicating these inklings. The bearings in particular I will take from two snippets of his writings, one from *The Hobbit*, the second from the *Lord of the Rings*. I will then proceed to take more bearings on the subject from the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures by focusing on commentaries on the Lord’s Prayer. By comparison and contrast, I hope to elucidate some of the ways in which Scripture inspires a sense of vocation, gives it meaning and sustains it.

1. The Stories that Really Matter – Bearings from Folklore.

The hero of the *Hobbit* is Bilbo Baggins, a half-sized human, a “halfling,” and scion of the home-loving Bagginses and the adventure-loving Tooks. The book begins with Gandalf, a wizard, knocking at his door to call him to help a group of Dwarves steal back their treasure from Smaug the Dragon. Hobbits, we are given to understand, given their padded feet, size, endurance and other qualities, have great talents for burglary. Particularly enjoyable is Tolkien’s portrayal of how Bilbo’s home—and adventure—loving tendencies play up in his response to Gandalf’s call:

“... I am looking for someone to share in an adventure that I am arranging, and it’s very difficult to find anyone.”

“I should think so – in these parts! We are plain quiet folk and have no use for adventures. Nasty disturbing uncomfortable things! Make you late for dinner! I can’t think what anybody sees in them.” ... Then he took out his morning letters, and began to read, pretending to take no more notice of the old man... till Bilbo got quite uncomfortable and even a little cross…”

So much for the Baggins side. The Tookish side is stirred up once Gandalf introduces himself:

“Gandalf, Gandalf!... Not the wandering wizard... who used to tell such wonderful tales at parties, about dragons and goblins and giants... Not the man that used to make such particularly excellent fireworks! I remember those! Old Took used to have them on Midsummer’s Eve. Splendid!... Not the Gandalf who was responsible for so many quiet lads and lasses going off into the Blue for mad adventures... Bless me, life used to be quite inter - I mean, you used to upset things badly in these parts once upon a time. I beg your pardon, but I had no idea you were still in business.”
“Where else should I be?” said the wizard. “All the same I am pleased to find you remember something about me. You seem to remember my fireworks kindly, at any rate, land that is not without hope. Indeed for your old grand-father Took’s sake, and for the sake of poor Belladonna, I will give you what you asked for.”

“I beg your pardon, I haven’t asked for anything!”

“Yes, you have! Twice now. My pardon. I give it to you. In fact I will go so far as to send you on this adventure. Very amusing for me, very good for you and profitable too, very likely, if you ever get over it.”

The reader may easily identify with the struggles in Bilbo’s soul here and on subsequent occasions for, notwithstanding the fact that the Tookish side wins here, Bilbo will have many occasions to wish to be done with adventures and return to the womb-like safety of his Hobbit-hole. Once on the road, however, there is no going back again, save by completing the quest.

In the course of his adventure, he gets lost in some underground caverns where he chances upon a magic ring that grants its wearer invisibility and longevity. As we discover in time, the ring also corrupts the wearer’s character. This is evidenced by Gollum, the creature who treasured the ring for hundreds of years earlier and used it to spy and hunt, and who speaks interchangeably of himself and of the ring in the third person as “the Precious.” His name comes from the swallowing noise with which he frequently finishes his sentences: *gollum, gollum*. Thanks to the ring, Bilbo escapes from his clutches. Gollum survives thanks to a surge of pity that wells up within Bilbo at a crucial moment, and overcomes his temptation to kill the creature. This pity and Gollum’s survival become foundational for the sequel trilogy-epic *The Lord of the Rings*.

This epic begins with Gandalf’s identification of Bilbo’s ring as an evil creation of Sauron, an incarnate demon. The reader learns that, in addition to granting invisibility and longevity, the ring also grants its wearer power over the wills of others. The catch, however, is that it is, in that process, designed to subject the will of the wearer to Sauron’s, containing as it does a part of his life-force. The temptation to wearing the ring being so great, but its effects so corrosive, that victory over Sauron requires the ring’s destruction in the volcanic fire of Mount Doom, deep in Sauron’s kingdom of Mordor. As humility is the prerequisite for safe handling of the ring, Gandalf discerns hope in entrusting the mission of its destruction to hobbits, namely to Bilbo’s nephew Frodo, his gardener Sam, and a fellowship of friends, including himself, to guide and help him on his way.

Midway through their journey, they begin to be tracked by Gollum, at which point Gandalf narrates his story to Frodo. When Frodo exclaims what a pity it was that Bilbo didn’t kill him, Gandalf corrects him by explaining that, on the contrary, this pity is crucial and foundational to their success. This “pity” “has to do with everything.” “Even Gollum,” he asserts, “may have something yet to do.”

This turns out to be the case and in more than one way. For a start, once Frodo and Sam split off from the Fellowship due to internal divisions and enemy attack, it is Gollum who guides them into Mordor. Gollum’s attitude to Frodo see-saws between loyalty and treachery. The first is strengthened by Frodo’s acts of kindness and pity to him, the latter by Sam’s brusqueness. The treachery finally takes the upper hand but it too turns out to be providential, for when Frodo finally reaches the fiery pit where the ring is to be destroyed, he succumbs to the temptation to wear the ring, and would have jeopardized
his mission had it not been for Gollum, who reappears at this moment, grapples with him, bites the ring off his finger, and losing balance in the process, totters over the precipice, thereby bringing Frodo’s and the Fellowship’s task to success. Thus, in spite of Frodo’s ultimate failure before the overwhelming power of the Ring’s temptation, the story is brought to a good ending. In this way, Gandalf’s wisdom and hope is realized. Salvation hinged all along on Bilbo’s and Frodo’s pity for Gollum. But for those acts of pity, evil would have triumphed. Thanks to those acts of pity, all things are wondrously turned to good.

Frodo and Sam anticipate this wondrous resolution in a conversation at the entrance into Mordor. This conversation illustrates Tolkien’s insight into the power of fairy tales to grant escape, spiritual exodus from the drab and grey of this world, and sustain the soul with hope and consolation:

“I don’t like anything here at all,” said Frodo, “... Earth, air and water all seem accursed. But so our path is laid.”

Yes, that’s so,” said Sam. “And we shouldn’t be here at all, if we’d known more about it before we started. But I suppose it’s often that way. The brave things in the old tales and songs, Mr. Frodo: adventures... I used to think that they were things the wonderful folk of the stories went out and looked for... because they were exciting and life was a bit dull... But that’s not the way of it with the tales that really mattered, or the ones that stay in the mind. Folk seem to have been just landed in them, usually – their paths were laid that way, as you put it. But I expect they had lots of chances, like us, of turning back, only they didn’t.... We hear about those as just went on – and not all to a good end, mind you; at least not to what folk inside a story and not outside it call a good end. You know, coming home, and finding things all right, though not quite the same – like old Mr. Bilbo. But those aren’t always the best tales to hear, though they may be the best tales to get landed in! I wonder what sort of a tale we’ve fallen into?”

“I wonder,” said Frodo. “But I don’t know. And that’s the way of a real tale. Take any one that you’re fond of. You may know, or guess, what kind of a tale it is, happy-ending or sad-ending, but the people in it don’t know. And you don’t want them to.”

The first of many points in this dialogue that all resonate with Scripture and what it tells of human vocation is the observation that our earth, air and water all seem accursed... and that we shouldn’t be here at all. This is true inasmuch as, following the way Scripture would have us re-imagine things, God created the world very good, rather than accursed, and intended human beings to live in communion with, not in exile from, Him. To this extent, Sam’s words apply to each of us. We, too, shouldn’t be here at all, but we are, and there is no crawling back into the safety of the womb or hobbit-hole until the quest is achieved.

The second point clarifies what makes an adventurous story one that really matters. Very simply it is a story that stays in the mind, i.e., that gets remembered. But more interestingly, we may note that the story that gets remembered results not from its hero’s power of will to make it happen, but from his landing or falling into such a story and persevering in it without turning back. As may be corroborated via Abraham, the adventure into personhood begins with a response to a call. What distinguishes a story worth telling, a story that matters from one that doesn’t, however, is the hero’s not turning back, perseverance, “character.” Is it not this that distinguishes the “truly important” stories of the Bible, inasmuch as it is full of characters who “fell” or “landed” into stories that were not of their choosing, but got stuck in
them by staying and not turning back, often not by their own works, but through holy counsel, and so made those stories “really important?” Falling, in the most general sense, is reminiscent of Adam’s Fall. In this sense, all of us have fallen into Adam’s story and have, as a consequence, little choice as to our starting point. If we are called to fulfill a destiny, we start with a “lot” regarding which we have little choice. What we are given repeatedly, however, are chances to not turn back. It is to be inferred that perseverance will make the story of our life one that “really matters,” one that’s memorable, and worth retelling. It is crucial to know that there will be moments when the pressure of evil may prove too much and break us down, physically and morally, as happened to Frodo. But for such occasions it is also crucial to remember the extent to which pity and loyalty have been the pivot of a person’s life, the expression of their true character. The anniversaries of his victory will prove bitter sweet and painful to Frodo, but the story’s final end promises a divine healing to him.

The third point is that ignorance of how one’s own story ends is the way of a real tale that people are fond of. Clearly, such ignorance is essential to the makeup of a good story. The reason must be that ignorance of this sort stirs up wonder about the end, and establishes the conditions for the end to be wonder-full. This is why Sam wonders how their own story will turn out and whether or not it will be retold. The ending of course is wonderful inasmuch as a sense of awe arises in the reader, as it must have in the author, in contemplation over the way in which so many elements, seemingly discordant with jarring to the sensibilities of the story’s protagonists and readers and author, have been so harmoniously integrated. It is significant that this reflection, which reflects much of what Tolkien has to say about stories, is placed on the lips of Sam, the character who repeatedly shows himself to be a lover of stories, and who himself “lands” and “falls” into his adventure because Gandalf catches him eavesdropping on his conversation with Frodo, and pulls him in through the window by his “ears.”

Fourthly, ignorance of how one’s story will end is, in Frodo’s and Sam’s case compounded with ignorance of the consequence of acts such as the sparing of Gollum. To have mercy on someone and let them go is to renounce the temptation to exercise control and power over them. Consequently, ignorance of the outcome of one’s good choices is essential to making them more than interesting and surprising, but really or doubly good and wonderful and thereby somehow interconnected with the longer and ultimate story of the battle between good and evil. This point emerges in the conclusion of Frodo’s and Sam’s recollection of the tale of Beren and Luthien, (a key tale in their world, narrated in Tolkien’s Silmarilion, about a man and an elfin maiden who, for love of each other, descended into Hell to wrest a jewel of living light (a Silmaril) from its dark Lord), and realizing, to his amazement, the continuity between their stories:

“No, sir, of course not. Beren now, he never thought he was going to get that Silmaril from the Iron Crown in Thangarodrim, and yet he did, and that was a worse place and a blacker danger than ours.... And why, sir, I never thought of that before! We’ve got – you’ve got some of the light of it in that star-glass that the Lady gave you! Why, to think of it, we’re in the same tale still! It’s going on. Don’t the great tales never end?”

“No, they never end as tales,” said Frodo. “But the people in them come, and go when their part’s ended. Our part will end later – or sooner.”
“And then we can have some rest and some sleep,” said Sam. He laughed grimly. “And I mean just that, Mr. Frodo. I mean plain ordinary rest, and sleep, and waking up to a morning’s work in the garden. I’m afraid that’s all I’m hoping for all the time. All the big important plans are not for my sort. Still, I wonder if we shall ever be put into songs or tales. We’re in one, of course; but I meant: put into words, you know, told by the fireside, or read out of a great big book with red and black letters, years and years afterwards. And people will say: “Let’s hear about Frodo and the Ring!” And they’ll say: “Yes, that’s one of my favourite stories. Frodo was very brave, wasn’t he dad?” “Yes, my boy, the famousest of the hobbits, and that’s saying a lot.”

The book with red and black letters recalls to us our Bible and may serve to prompt us to wonder whether we shall ever be put into its songs or tales. The preceding argument suggests that this will happen if we, however “half-size” in the eyes of the world we may be, nurture a love and a wonder for the stories that matter, and practice pity and perseverance. The narrative aids this understanding by disclosing that Sam is the story’s chief unsung hero:

“It’s saying a lot too much,” said Frodo, and he laughed, a long clear laugh from his heart. Such a sound had not been heard in those places since Sauron came to Middle-earth. To Sam suddenly it seemed as if all the stones were listening and the tall rocks leaning over them. But Frodo did not heed them; he laughed again. “Why, Sam,” he said, “to hear you somehow makes me as merry as if the story was already written. But you’ve left out one of the chief characters: Samwise the stouthearted. “I want to hear more about Sam, dad. Why didn’t they put in more of his talk, dad? That’s what I like, it makes me laugh. And Frodo wouldn’t have got far without Sam, would he, dad?”

“Now, Mr. Frodo,” said Sam, “you shouldn’t make fun. I was serious.”

“So was I,” said Frodo, “and so I am. We’re going on a bit too fast. You and I, Sam, are still stuck in the worst places of the story, and it is all too likely that some will say at this point: “Shut the book now, dad; we don’t want to read any more.”

“Maybe,” said Sam, “but I wouldn’t be one to say that. Things done and over and made into part of the great tales are different. Why, even Gollum might be good in a tale, better than he is to have by you, anyway. And he sued to like tales himself once, by his own account. I wonder if he thinks he’s the hero or the villain?... “Gollum!...Would you like to be the hero – now where’s he got to again?”

What a marvelous passage! The clear laugh from his heart illustrates the consolatory power and purpose of good tales. They grant spiritual escape from this world and sustain one who recognizes by their power of being stuck in the worst places of the story with hope on account of the knowledge that things done and over and made into part of the great tales are different, so different as to make those of us who are like Gollum... good in the tale. All this illustrates the necessity for us too, when reflecting on our vocations, to re-imagine how our own stories can be made part of the tale that really matters, the one with the red and black letters, for such imaginings have the power of clearing the heart, and allowing us to laugh, even in the worst of places.

As for Gollum, the question of his redemption and the extent to which he was “good” in the story occupied Tolkien to no end. It is clear that Gollum’s betrayal of Frodo might have been averted had Sam been kinder to him. This is the point in the story where Gollum has skulked off to set up his betrayal. It is ironic then that it is also the point at which Sam finally turns to offer him some dignity: “would you like to be the hero?” Goading questions of this sort echo some of the crucial questions by
which God goads biblical characters: “Adam, where are you?,” “Who told you that you were naked?,” “Where is your brother?,” “Do you do well to be angry for the plant?... and should I not pity Nineveh... (full of) people who do not know their right hand from their left, not to mention the animals?,” “O my people, what have I done to you? In what have I wearied you? Answer me,” “Will you condemn me that you may be justified?,” “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?...” Crucial to fulfilling one’s vocation is the desire to stay close to the source of such questions, so as to hear and answer them, for they are wonderfully powerful in transforming us and giving us new faces:

But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. For if any one is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who observes his natural face in a mirror; for he observes himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like. But he who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and abides (parameino = abide, stay, continue, persevere) being no hearer that forgets but a doer that acts, he shall be blessed in his doing. (James 1:22-25)

In sum, the vocational aspects which these points stress seem to be the following:

First, vocation is a reality consequent to the fact that all of us have fallen into a great tale, which never begins or ends, within which each of us may play a role. The world’s indeed a stage. Ironically, however, because of the fall, it is our lot to begin in places “where we shouldn’t even or really be” (by destiny).

Secondly, just as Bilbo sets off on his journey through the arousal of his sense for adventure, and as Sam is drawn into it by his ears, so our landing in this story turns on our aptitude for wonder, our interest in and desire for heaven, for inheritance of good things, and therefore on our discernment of the call to these. “He who has ears to hear, let him hear.” The trick is to have the wisdom to discern the importance of seemingly minor, “halfling” roles. Quite often, it is our own smallness, in particular, that may prove quite crucial and be the ingredient to make the story interesting and wonderful. “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven; blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.”

Thirdly, what differentiates a story-worth telling is staying in it and not turning back, even in the seemingly “worst places of the story.” “He who perseveres to the end shall be saved.” This perseverance hinges on the belief that we are in fact in a good story which, when “over and done” will make things different, i.e. good. Perseverance thereby depends on a thirst for goodness – “blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness...” – and on faith: “the just by faith will live.”

Fourthly, the breakthrough to success hinges on little “halfling” acts, such as those of pity or mercy. To pity someone and give them mercy is, in fact, to renounce the temptation to exercise total control over them and the outcomes of their actions and hence to practice giving “beforehand,” i.e. forgiveness: “If you forgive, you will be forgiven, if you do not forgive, neither will your heavenly Father forgive you.” Pity and mercy are also grounded upon a value, the commitment to goodness in the world’s creatures, and hence on the perception of their value and on the capacity to mourn as tragic the occasions when it fails to be recognized: “Blessed are those who mourn...;” “Blessed are the merciful,” “Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God.”

Fifthly, the temptation to exercise control over everything hinges on having the attitude or character of a “half-ling,” a child, thanks to which one can laugh at oneself, delight in one’s role in things, and
wonder about how one’s deeds are to be fitted into the larger drama by its author and creator. Consequently, what some, for failure to see that greater picture, might regard as defeat, may prove to be the hinge of victory in the final and intended scheme of things: “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake... Rejoice and be glad when people abuse you for my sake, for yours is the kingdom of heaven.”

2. The Vocational Import of The Lord’s Prayer.

Being the cumulative focal point of The New Catechism of the Catholic Church, following the Creed, the Sacraments, and the Ten Commandments, the Lord’s Prayer is an inspiring Biblical reference point for discussing the theology of vocation. My reflections on it draw on those of Vladimir Solovyov, Romano Guardini and Jean Marie Cardinal Lustiger.

According to the Gospel of St. Matthew 6:9-13, the Lord’s Prayer seems to have two parts, describing by means of three and then four petitions, the conditions in heaven and on earth respectively:

Our Father who art in heaven,
Hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come.
Thy will be done,
On earth as it is in heaven.

* 
Give us this day our daily bread,
And forgive us our debts
As we also have forgiven our debtors
And lead us not into temptation,
But deliver us from evil (or “the evil one” - poneros).

Heaven seems to be the place where God’s name is hallowed, where His kingdom stands and His will is done. But what is the hinge of this transformation? Its impediments are identified in part two which speaks of needs: the needs for bread, forgiveness from debts, guidance in temptation, and delivery from evil. The last petition might summarize everything but it could also allude to another impediment to attaining the Kingdom, the one that gives evil its mystery, namely demonic opposition. The word for evil here, poneros, could, as in Slavic translations, designate “the evil one.” In His interpretation of the parable of the sower, Jesus used the same word to describe the devil. (cf. Matthew 13: 38, 39)

By means of this final petition, the prayer teaches that conquest over evil is beyond us. But while making “evil” the last word, the Prayer does not give it the last word. That word is reserved for the first word, Our Father, and the prayer is indeed sustained by faith, hope, love, and praise of Him. This confidence or faith requires explanation. On what does it hinge?

In His parable of the Sower in the Gospel of St. Luke, Jesus explained that such faith originates in a word of God which enter the heart as seed enters soil:
...the parable is this: The seed is the word of God. Those by the way side are they that hear; then cometh the devil, and taketh away the word out of their hearts, lest they should believe and be saved. They on the rock ... receive the word with joy; and... have no root... and in time of temptation fall away. And that which fell among thorns are they, which...are choked with cares and riches and pleasures of this life, and bring no fruit to perfection. But that on the good ground are they, which in an honest and good heart, having heard the word, keep it, and bring forth fruit with patience. (Luke 8:11-15)

Accordingly, our faith derives from some divine word which was received with joy when first sown in our hearts, but whose flourishing temptation and hardness of heart presently impede. The parable underscores that capitulation to temptation ruins the soil of our heart and prevents the divine word from bearing fruit in it. St. Paul, a friend of St. Luke, memorably describes this tragedy in his Letter to the Romans. It would have been interesting to hear them compare notes on the subject:

I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin which dwells within me. So I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God, in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin which dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? (Romans 7:18-24)

St. Paul here possibly identifies the existential point at which the Lord’s Prayer begins: in a cry for deliverance. He also corroborates that evil and temptation are a mystery infecting us from within. It would be easier to conquer evil were we to avoid temptation altogether. It would also be easier to avoid temptation had it no hooks to attach or ability to bind itself to us and within us. As things stand, it is dangerous to pretend that anything but the most difficult of scenarios obtains. External evil has power over us because it exercises power within us. The kingdom of God must then require the contrary. But how is this to be achieved? How is one to reach this goal if even willing the good is compromised by temptation dividing the will? Integration and strengthening of will must be the hinge. But how?

To return to the dire picture just painted, the problem is that evil has a foothold within us. Our loyalties are divided. In this state, it is easy for religious people to cause offense and distress. A strong example of such distress is furnished by the parable of the unforgiving servant who failed to reciprocate the forgiveness of debt he received from his Master. (Mt 18:29-31) According to biblical and Jewish idiom, evil doing by people claiming to be religious prompts their victims to curse them and their actions, their principles, their religion and thereby to “blaspheme God’s Name.” When the contrary occurs, when godly deeds are witnessed, those who experience them are prompted to bless their principles, religion and God. Leviticus 22:31-32 is the classic text illustrating that this is the biblical meaning of sanctifying and blaspheming God’s name:

You shall keep my commandments and do them: I am the LORD. And you shall not profane my holy name, but I will be hallowed among the people of Israel; I am the LORD who sanctify you.
Consequently, the petition that God's name be hallowed turns out to be a request to God to help one keep His commandments (do his will), in such a way as to bear fruit and be of benefit for other people, so as to prompt them to bless God as their ultimate source or Father. The passive form of the petition underscores that we do not presume but hope to attain this goal, with God's help, by cooperating with Him, and in His good time. Given the reality of temptation and the acknowledgment of the power of evil over us, the petitionary form of the first part of the prayer constitutes the first and honest stage towards preparing for God's Kingdom. Prayer of this sort is therefore the first step in its realization, the step that serves to enliven prayer and strengthen our faith in God. This must be why, when it comes to temptation, Christ advises us first and foremost to be on our guard and to pray:

And he came to the disciples and found them sleeping; and he said to Peter, “So, could you not watch with me one hour? Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation; the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.” (Mt 26:40-41)

The good news that God’s kingdom is coming to earth will strengthen our hope that evil may be conquered, but we will get closer to conquering evil in our own lives when we begin to resist evil ourselves, even if only by praying for the coming of God's kingdom, for such prayers will make God reign not just over us, from heaven only and by constraint or threat, but in us, in our earthly selves, on earth, by our cooperation and will.

The call that we should prepare for God’s kingdom (Mt 3:2; 4:17; Mark 1:15) corroborates that our will can indeed resist its arrival and highlights again that the will is the problem. On the other hand, the good news that the kingdom is coming towards us and that Christ instantiated it in our midst—in light of the understanding of the gulf that He has crossed to do so, the gulf between His Will and ours, His love and our hard-heartedness, a gulf between Heaven and Earth—serves to define the distance He has traveled and to give it a measure, the sorrowful measure of His unrequited love, as expressed by St. Paul in Romans 5:8: “But God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us.” (cf. Gal 2:20-21) Empathetic reflection on this love and its measure will help us requite it and prepare for His coming by praying that His will be done more sincerely.

Sincere desire makes it possible for the kingdom to begin to work in us but this work requires actual conditions: our spirit and flesh must today be strengthened and tamed, and the hold of past sins disabled to enable us to sidestep future temptations so as to be delivered from evil. Strengthening the body and soul by physical (quotidian) and spiritual (supersubstantial) bread serves to assist the renunciation of past evil choices which, in turn, provides inoculation against future temptation. By asking Our Father to forgive our past trespasses, we are reminded of His identification with our neighbor in the Law: “You shall not take vengeance... you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD.” (Lev 19:18) By making forgiveness of others the condition to receiving forgiveness from God, the Lord’s Prayer suggests that the practice of forgiveness, pity and mercy is the instrument of the realization of the kingdom. It will be when we forgive as God forgives that God’s name will be hallowed, His kingdom will come and His will will be done on earth as in heaven. The measure of divine forgiveness turns out to be astonishing:

Then Peter came up and said to him, "Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?" Jesus said to him, "I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven. (Mt 18:21-22)
As defined by Jesus, the measure encompasses the mythical measure of retribution governing the earth from the times of Cain’s descendant, Lamech:

Lamech said to his wives: "Adah and Zillah, hear my voice; you wives of Lamech, hearken to what I say: I have slain a man for wounding me, a young man for striking me. If Cain is avenged sevenfold, truly Lamech seventy-sevenfold." (Genesis 4:23-24)

The kingdom of heaven is therefore scheduled to come not just when we are forgiven “seventy times seven,” but also when we forgive so. Surely, the D-Day of its instantiation, in both senses, was made manifest by Jesus in His death, as grasped and highlighted by St. Luke:

And Jesus said, "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do." (Luke 23:34)

And he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” And he said to him, "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise." (Luke 23:42-43)

And, perhaps, this is the nature of the baptism through which He means to reveal the glory of God’s love and infuse it deep into our hearts:

I have a baptism to be baptized with; and how I am constrained until it is accomplished! (Luke 12:50)

He said “it is accomplished.” (John 19:30)

The corroboration that forgiveness is the effective sign and instrument of the coming of His kingdom, and the essential concomitant of prayer, is supplied by what seems to be St. Mark’s version of the Lord’s Prayer, boiled down to one verse:

And whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against any one; so that your Father also who is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses. (Mark 11:25)

Forgiveness must be pivotal, because by renewing our ties with God and neighbor it brings us closer to the goal of our existence – to know and love God who is the reason of all that is and in Whom all are one. (1 Cor. 15:28, John 17:21) By attaining such love and cleaving to God by it, we will be delivered from evil, the irrational force that aims to fragment, isolate and destroy our reason for being. To resist it, demands allegiance to God and preparing for temptation:

My son, if you come forward to serve the Lord, prepare yourself for temptation. Set your heart right and be steadfast, and do not be hasty in time of calamity. Cleave to him and do not depart, that you may be honored at the end of your life. (Sirach 2:1-3)

Let no one say when he is tempted, "I am tempted by God;" for God cannot be tempted with evil and he himself tempts no one; but each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin; and sin when it is full-grown brings forth death. (James 1:13-15)

As in the first part of the prayer, so in this part, preparation for resisting temptation begins with following Jesus’ example, and praying to not be led into temptation:
And he came to the disciples and found them sleeping; and he said to Peter, "So, could you not watch with me one hour? Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation; the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak." Again, for the second time, he went away and prayed, "My Father, if this cannot pass unless I drink it, thy will be done." (Matt 26: 40-42)

In this way, the Lord’s Prayer maps out the stages of the spiritual journey and answers clearly the questions with which the last section ended: Where is God? Why is He not on earth as He is in heaven? When and where will He and His kingdom come here? How does Scripture sustain a Christian sense of vocation in the face of evil? What is our key calling in life? We may note that the hinges and pivots of success turn on the integration of the will, the faculty that God will not constrain, and which can resist Him. Conversely, success depends on the integration of one’s will with His will, on the purification of the heart and its desire, on “wanting to.”

**Synthesis**

There are remarkable resonances between the spirituality of Tolkien’s tales and Jesus’ Prayer. One important common motif, whose presence I failed to stress in Tolkien’s tales, is that of temptation and division of loyalty and will. Perhaps it was too obvious to be noted and commented on, but it is clearly crucial to reflection on what needs to be thought about in discerning and sustaining vocation. The sequence of petitions in the Lord’s Prayer reveals a deep spiritual logic explaining why temptation is a serious threat and how it is to be avoided: body and soul need to be strengthened and past sins forgiven via the practice of forgiveness and active love, if temptation is to be withstood and fragmenting senseless evil conquered.

Tolkien’s works inspire the reader to imaginatively experience the coherence, wisdom and power of the Beatitudes as stages of the spiritual journey, and instruments by which evil is to be conquered. The clarification, from the discussion of the Lord’s Prayer, that “evil” is better rendered as “the evil one” is worth drawing to emphasize another point we failed to stress in Part 1, namely, that evil is not just absence and privation of good but a mysterious personal intelligence and force. Most probably I failed to stress it on account of Sauron’s “mythical” character in the epic, but the Lord’s prayer suggests that what is said about Sauron by Tolkien is an inkling of what Christ says about the real universe. Naive disbelief in “the evil one’s” reality stands to blind one as to the source of many temptations and bouts of despair that one will encounter in life. The stakes involved are highly personal, for him/her/it and us.

The pivotal role attributed to forgiveness in both writings may surprise those who may be tempted to believe that vocation turns on the discernment and nurturing of talents. Nothing said above has minimized the importance of talents. But both parts of the discussion emphasize that, evil being personal and bent on subduing us by latching on to our self-love, victory over it pivots on conjoining prayer with acts of pity-forgiveness. The reason for this would seem to be that pity-forgiveness is grounded on a belief in the goodness of creatures and on trust in its eventual triumph. To forgive is to surrender the desire to control everyone and everything, and to give precedence to faith in God’s providence. Also implicit in this faith is a predisposition to wonder, laugh and rejoice in the roles He has in store for us.

Like Tolkien’s tales, the Lord’s Prayer pinpoints the fundamental problem as the realization of the kingdom and the understanding that one’s vocational role in it has to do with the will. Willful opposition to God’s will is not something that God will resolve through force or constraint. If then, division of the will is the chief impediment to accomplishing one’s vocation, the secret of success must reside in
its integration, in stirring up the secret fire of the heart for God’s own will and kingdom. We thus return to stressing the motif with which we began, the importance of Bilbo’s Tookish penchant for adventure and Sam’s sensibilities for persevering and not backing out even in the worst parts of the story. His use of the word “over” in the statement: “Things done and over and made into part of the great tales are different,” suggests that the use of this word in Gandalf’s statement to Bilbo: “Very amusing for you, very good for me and profitable too, very likely, if you ever get over it” carries an inkling of God’s own attitude to our role in the grand tale He has scripted for us, the one written in red and black letters, which never ends.
II.

THE VOCATION
OF ACADEMIC LIFE
An Assistant to the Great Physician

Gary J. Bouchard

The great Physician now is near,  
The sympathizing Jesus;  
He speaks the drooping heart to cheer,  
Oh! hear the voice of Jesus.  
- William Hunter

Christology introduces us to many iconic images of Jesus. Even a cursory reading of Scripture leads to encounters with the infant in the manger, the Good Shepherd, the Teacher, the Suffering Servant, and Christ the King reigning at the right hand of the Father. One such enduring and inspiring image is that of Jesus Christ as healer. We see Christ involved not just in his followers’ spiritual health but in the restoration of physical health as well. Indeed, His mission was often explained by making an analogy between the two types of healing: “It is not those who are healthy who need a physician, but those who are sick; I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners.” (Mk 2:17) Men and women of faith are often inspired to enter the health professions by this iconic image of Christ as healer.

I have been a Physician Assistant since 1987, and I have also been a faculty member of a number of physician assistant programs since 1990. For many years, I have been honored to educate and graduate new practitioners who are, for the most part, enthusiastic, optimistic and eager to begin their professional life. Thankfully, my program, and hundreds of similar programs across the nation, have sent forth graduates into a favorable employment market for several years now. We have often seen our bulletin boards filled to overflowing with job opportunities. Despite this boon, I advocate leaving one small corner of the “Positions Available” bulletin board available for one more advertisement: The Great Physician is in need of an Assistant. Not just “physician assistants” by title, not just those licensed and board certified professionals carrying the specific credential of “PA-C.” These “assistants” to whom I refer can be other allied health providers, nurses, aides, orderlies, clerical workers, volunteers . . . and great physicians, as well.

That is not to say that anything is insufficient or lacking in the healing mission of Jesus Christ; it is merely still in progress, and human hands are the tools of His trade and His medical practice. This Great Physician would love to see that practice expanding. Imagine such a practice, if you will; the largest, most comprehensive health maintenance organization ever created. It would have satellite offices in every city, town and village, in every nation, across every continent. It would be free to all the physically and spiritually ill and injured, and would require no insurance co-payment or deductible. Every employee under its roof would be devoted to the physical and spiritual well-being of its patients.

Such a medical practice does not exist in this realm, and, if it did, I imagine it would soon be spoiled by earthly bureaucrats and politicians. It is a noble ideal resembling the concept of the Church Militant on earth which is separated from, yet united to, the Church Triumphant in heaven. Health care providers should aspire to this ideal of a sort of “Clinic Triumphant.” The health care worker, if animated by a truly Christian spirit, becomes aware of the missionary dimension of the work. The work demands love, availability, attention, understanding, sharing, benevolence, patience and dialogue (Charter for Health Care Workers, 1995).
For the Christian, it is a team approach to health care such as I have described that most completely allows humankind to fulfill its calling to become the healing hands of Christ on earth. Those from other faith traditions, even those who are not particularly religious or spiritual, also have an abundance of the love, attention, and understanding that is needed and they also feel moved, inspired, or even “called” to enter the healing professions. “There are many gifts, but the same Spirit” (1 Cor 12:4 – 12); likewise there are many job titles, disciplines and career paths, but one calling to help and to heal.

Assisting The Great Physician

For two decades as a physician assistant, I have felt great reward in responding to a vocation to “assist.” My chosen work is a manifestation of true diakonia. I have heard that vital word translated as “ministry” or “service.” It is the source of the word “deacon.” One spiritual advisor who knew my career path chose to define diakonia for me as “assistant,” one who does work that benefits someone else. That slightly non-traditional definition of a single Greek word has been a source of strength for me throughout my career.

The reward is felt not merely in my role as an assistant to any one specific medical doctor but, in a broader sense, in assisting wherever I can to increase and maintain the health of others. On one occasion, I recall reading my business card silently to myself. I smiled at seeing the two phrases “Physician Assistant” and “Assistant Professor” in such close proximity to each other. At that time, in my two chosen professions of medicine and academia, I seemed to be twice removed from the seat of ultimate authority. I was comfortable in the knowledge that, in the end, there is only one such seat to be had, and it will never be mine, nor any other person’s. One day, I may hear a voice say “Friend, move up to a better place,” as the humble dinner guest was eventually exalted in Luke’s gospel (Lk 14:10-11). That will be the closest that any of us gets to the seat of ultimate authority, despite what some of my more self-aggrandizing supervising physicians have believed.

There is a combination of humility and a deep sense of purpose in pursuing a career with the modifier “assistant” placed so prominently in your title. Physician assistants by definition possess a sense of humility in that we strive to do our very best work each day largely for the greater glory of another – our employer, our supervising physician, and for many, our God. Recently, physicians have been known to say that the prestige and financial rewards of practicing medicine are not what they once were. Physician assistants can expect even fewer of these perks than doctors expect. Even some physicians admit that, if they had to do it all over again, they would seriously consider a career as a physician assistant: all of the healing, with significantly fewer tension headaches. Yet PAs that I have known and have educated show great career satisfaction, with an unmatched sense of purpose in studying and practicing medicine simply to know, to help, and to heal. That is diakonia.

Two Aspects of the Gospel Ethic

Father John A. Hardon describes two sides to Christian ethics. The first and earliest aspect of Christian ethics involves removing obstacles, overcoming temptations and obeying commandments. This is manifest as “law” and has been revealed to believers in the Decalogue, or Ten Commandments. The second and more evolved aspect involves turning one’s self over to God. This is the expression of true Christian love and responsibility, and has one of its most clear descriptions in the Beatitudes. Hardon calls the eight Beatitudes “the Magna Carta of Christian perfection,” so central are these Gospel values to a Christian life.
All students of the health sciences should heed the message in the papal encyclical *Faith and Reason*: “The Church remains profoundly convinced that faith and reason ‘mutually support each other’; each influences the other, as they offer to each other a purifying critique and a stimulus to pursue the search for deeper understanding” (*Fides et Ratio* 1998, 100).

Physician assistant training programs, and other health education programs, have excelled at the “reason” half of the equation. It is hoped that more men and women who are capable of presenting the “faith” half of the equation will follow their calling to enter academic medicine. When faced with controversy, students need the sage advice and role modeling of mentors who will help them feel comfortable giving voice to Catholic concerns. In the classroom, in the clinic, and in all public discourse, this voice should not be silent. Hardin’s formulation of both Christian law and Christian love will contribute immeasurably to the formation of a complete health care practitioner, for whom faith and reason are truly mutually supportive.

**The Decalogue: Christian Law and Health Care**

The Decalogue provides clear imperative statements of how humans ought to conduct themselves. Which of these pertain to the practice of medicine? Using very broad strokes, each commandment can be defined in such a way as to carry implications for health care. These basic Judeo-Christian tenets have been incorporated in most codes of medical ethics, from traditional versions of the Hippocratic Oath to its modern revisions. After sufficient reflection, the commandment “You shall not commit adultery” becomes the normative proscription warning practitioners to keep patient relationships professional. Likewise, “You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor” can be construed as an obligation to truth telling, and so on.

The conflict between faith and scientific inquiry frequently draws its front line in the interpretation of one single imperative of the Decalogue: “You shall not kill.” Definitions of ‘life’ are rewritten as science pushes the margins of viability outward at each end of the lifespan. The very beginning of life is at issue in debates concerning abortion, contraception and embryonic stem cell research. The natural end of human life is obscured by euthanasia, capital punishment, and issues arising from warfare. Between birth and death lie issues which are just as challenging: the ethics of research involving human subjects, and the just allocation of scarce medical resources. Many pressing moral issues of the day require the expertise of medical professionals, in addition to theologians, philosophers, and politicians.

This is a compelling reason for men and women of faith to follow their vocation into medicine and the health professions. If the health sciences are staffed with no one but atheists, agnostics and secular humanists, then religious adherents have ceded their ground without even so much as a healthy debate. Many individuals, especially those in scientific fields, often feel uncomfortable airing religious views in the public square. It can be a result of external pressures such as an accusation of imposing one’s religious views on another. Legal scholars such as Robert Bork have discredited this idea. “The fear of religion in the public arena is all too typical of Americans, and particularly the intellectual class, today. Religious conservatives cannot ‘impose’ their ideas on society except by the usual democratic methods of trying to build majorities and passing legislation. In that they are no different from any other group of people with ideas of what morality requires. All legislation ‘imposes’ a morality of one sort or another.” (Bork, 1996).

If Bork is correct, the full vetting of any issue must include input from religious adherents. Christian health care practitioners can build coalitions and enlighten legislators within the democratic process,
just as any other interest group can. They need not be absent from or remain silent in policy debates concerning vital issues such as embryonic stem cell research, abortion, and euthanasia.

If the task is “building majorities and passing legislation,” it is incumbent upon religiously inclined scientists and health care providers to find their strength in numbers. Organizations such as the Catholic Medical Association (CMA) and the Fellowship of Christian Physician Assistants (FCPA) count among their membership health care providers who seek to put their faith into action. The FCPA, specifically, seeks to “share our faith, [Christ’s] strength, and our common concerns; to provide a network of support for Christian PAs; and to encourage members to let their lives demonstrate Christ’s love in the home, in clinical practice, and within the profession” (FCPA, 2008). It is certainly reassuring to sail one’s ship into this safe harbor on occasion, and enjoy the dialogue and fellowship with like-minded practitioners. The respite should be brief; then, each member is needed as we all take part in a vigorous dialogue in the public square.

The Beatitudes: Love and Health Care

Harden places a great value on the Beatitudes of the Gospel of Matthew as a classic description of Christian love in action. The fifth Beatitude is the one most often placed in the context of health care: “Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy.” This obliges the Christian to the corporal works of mercy: namely; feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, clothe the naked, house the homeless, visit the sick, ransom the captive, and bury the dead. Indeed, those in the healing professions undertake such corporal works of mercy to the extreme. They not only visit the sick, they spend their entire working day trying to ease their burden. For following their vocation of mercy, “they shall obtain mercy.”

At some point in their lives, all Christian men and women are asked to take up their personal cross and follow Jesus. Personal crosses to bear include pain, suffering, loss, and death. Although theologians maintain that suffering is necessary and salvific, we as caring human beings are still moved to compassion. Health care workers are uniquely positioned to become Simon of Cyrene for the suffering; helping the sick by making their necessary burden as light as possible.

Humankind suffers in many varied ways, not all of which can be diagnosed and treated by the specialties of medicine. In recent times, much end-of-life suffering is done in impersonal, public, institutional settings. Individuals often suffer in dispersed and disconnected ways. In contrast, a hospital ward full of sick, injured, and dying people concentrates suffering in a way that is seldom seen in other settings. This can present unparalleled opportunities for communion and solidarity (Salvifici Doloris 1984, 8). In addition to corporal works of mercy, two of the spiritual works of mercy will surely come into play in such a setting: Comfort the afflicted. Pray for the living and the dead.

Intercessory prayer itself has been the focus of recent research and heated debate in the medical community. One of the most recent, and largest, studies to date involved intercessory prayer for cardiac bypass patients. A random controlled study was attempted in the following way:

Randomization assignments (serially numbered, opaque, sealed envelopes) were stratified by center using permuted blocks of size 9, 12, and 15 presented in random order. The envelope message for patients in groups 1 (uncertain, with intercessory prayer) and 2 (uncertain, no intercessory prayer) stated that they ‘may or may not be prayed for.’ The message for patients in group 3 (certain, with intercessory prayer) stated that they ‘will be prayed for.’ (Benson et al. 2006).
Benson and his colleagues are to be commended for undertaking this study in a way that is not hostile to the notion of prayer. However, there are major limitations to the research design. One critic pointed out that the aim of intercessory prayer is not always a medically desirable outcome. “Even the assumption that standard clinical outcome measures are appropriate end points for studies of prayer must be carefully examined; for instance, many prayers for the sick contain the implicit objective of easing the passage of the spirit out of the body, an outcome which, by Society of Thoracic Surgeons definition, would be coded as death.” (Krukoff 2006).

A second critique of the study design is that prayer is not simply a ‘wish list’ presented to God for the granting. This view begins to resemble “a glorified version of the 5-year old deciding Santa Claus doesn’t exist because she didn’t get the pony that she wanted for Christmas. It reflects a juvenile (literally) attitude toward prayer that is common among preschoolers but replaced with a more nuanced understanding as faith development and abstract thinking mature during the preteen years. Such a proposed test of God’s existence is . . . petty and insulting.” (Powell 2007). The prayer of a Christian with a mature faith looks more like Christ in Gethsemane: “Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done.” The effect of such a prayer becomes infinitely more difficult to measure in a scientific study.

I would add a third concern to these published critiques. The methodology was flawed in that there was intercessory prayer for the patients in the control group, even though Benson’s prayer group did not pray for them by name. I make this claim because the sick and the suffering are always the subject of intercessory prayers, whether it occurs within daily Mass, within the Liturgy of the Hours, or in another less formal prayer group. The sick and the suffering are often not named specifically in such settings; however, a benevolent God is not listening for the number of times a name is mentioned in the answering of prayers. (I have been thankful for this realization when, as a Lector, I mispronounced terribly the name of the person being remembered in a given Mass. A kind priest comforted me, saying, “Don’t worry, it still worked.”)

A God who “knew us before he formed us” will hear all heartfelt yet generic, non-specific prayers for health and healing such as in Eucharistic Prayer I, in which presiding priests “pray to you, our living and true God, for our well-being and redemption.” “Our well being” includes all of us – no names required.

Some critics of prayer studies are downright hostile and absurdly confrontational. Gil Gaudia proposed a hypothetical experiment, “the results of which would leave little or no doubt about the effectiveness of intercessory prayer.”

All that would be required is an adequate sample of amputees as subjects and a sizeable number of believers who will earnestly pray over them. These should not be hard to locate. The investigators could use as many universities and people as possible -- all the willing believers in the country if necessary to pray every day for a year that at least one amputee would have a limb re-grown, and then, at the end of that year, examine all the thousands of amputees for signs of regenerating limbs . . . When a single limb has thus been observed to have been regenerated, then we will have seen unequivocal evidence for the power of prayer. This would be a real test to put before the immovable object, the irresistible force, the ultimate omniscience, the omnipotent, omnipresent supremacy of all that the believers in a supernatural being endow that Master Architect with. The creator of the entire universe should have no problem recreating a limb. (Gaudia 2007)
This is the hostile and almost mocking tone of a few members of the medical community when confronted with religious beliefs. I was immediately inclined to remind Gaudia that “you shall not put the Lord, your God, to the test.” Then I realized two things: 1) such scripture quotations would probably not move him to a greater understanding of my position, and 2) he has a point. “Putting God to the test” is exactly what studies of the effectiveness of prayer are trying to do. So, Gaudia can be forgiven for his uncharitable rhetoric in light of that one insightful observation. We might be better off refraining from subjecting the existence of God to the (statistical) test.

Some have recommended that research concerning prayer be limited or ended altogether, due to the inherent difficulties in establishing a firm theoretical base in this area (Masters, Speilmans and Goodson, 2006). By extension, are such inquiries trying to prove or disprove the existence of God? I would prefer to see the therapeutic effects of prayer investigated rather than diminished or ignored. Who should undertake such research? My preference would be individuals who are receptive to the idea that something greater may be at play, individuals who are comfortable not knowing the unknowable. These people would be faith-filled individuals who understand that we exist in this realm, that there is a realm beyond us, and there is little if any scaffolding between. We may never prove precisely what goes on where theory and theology meet, but it will require investigators who “do not abandon reason, (but) merely recognize its limitations.” (Buckley 1998)

Other Faith Traditions

The Decalogue and the Beatitudes are meaningful touchstones for a great number of spirit-filled health care providers. However, my discussion of faith and reason working in concert is meant to be extended to others beyond the Judeo-Christian tradition. Rachel Spector, in her book “Cultural Diversity in Health and Illness,” occasionally spells the word “health” using all capital letters. When HEALTH is written this way, Spector wishes to convey a broader meaning, “the balance of the person, both within one’s being – physical, mental, spiritual – and in the outside world – natural, familial and communal, metaphysical.” Her textbook is in common use in health professions education and has served as an excellent summary of multicultural health care for my students.

In a chapter of the same book, entitled “Healing-Magicoreligious Traditions,” Spector admits that that “there are far too many religious beliefs and practices related to health to include them all.” She dutifully documents the response of selected religions to important medical dilemmas such as abortion, autopsy, euthanasia, and controversial healing practices. She recounts the beliefs of Roman Catholics which always seem familiar from repeated telling in the media. However, Spector also lists the commonly held beliefs of many other faith traditions: Baha’i and Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam, Mormonism and Unitarian/Universalism. Despite Spector’s detailed research, even the most well-intentioned effort in the most all-inclusive book will be lacking in some significant way.

The crux of this essay is not necessarily to advocate for a greater Roman Catholic presence in health care, but to make all caregivers mindful of the spiritual dimension of the entire enterprise of health care. Spirituality and religion matter to the majority of our patients, and it should matter to us even if only for that reason. I have long believed that I have more in common with, for example, a devout and actively practicing Buddhist than I do with a lapsed Catholic challenging many articles of the faith. The medical community should be more tolerant of adherents to all faiths. It is hoped that spiritual people of all faiths will follow their call to heal; both their co-religionists and the population at large will benefit. After all, William Hunter’s 1859 spiritual continues to speak directly of vocation, in a later verse of “The
Great Physician,"

The children too, both great and small,
Who love the Name of Jesus,
May now accept the gracious call
To work and live for Jesus.

That passage helps to conclude my reflection as it began, in a fashion more spiritual than scholarly, more anecdotal than annotated, and more personal than professorial. My vocation to become first a PA and then a PA educator was not a single, past event that set an immutable course. Steering in a straight line requires innumerable minor adjustments to the wheel; the vocation I feel is a call to continual renewal and recommitment, and the journey is far from over.


St. Augustine’s *Confessions* and the Call to be a Professor of Literature and Rhetoric

Nancy Enright

After St. Augustine’s famous conversion experience in the garden, in which he “took and read” St. Paul’s letter to the Romans and was transformed forever through that experience, he felt called upon to give up what he referred to as his “chair of deception” as professor of rhetoric in Milan. In fact, throughout *The Confessions*, Augustine refers to the profession of teaching either literature or rhetoric in the most disparaging terms. Whether he is referring to his own experience as a student, the conduct of his masters, or his own teaching of the difficult students of Carthage, Rome, and, finally, Milan, in each instance, human pride and hypocrisy were mingled with the study of literature and rhetoric to such an extent that, to Augustine it seemed the only course left after conversion was to abandon the whole profession, and go on to a life dedicated to single-minded service of God in full-time ministry and communal living.

In light of these facts, how can *The Confessions* speak to a professor of either literature or rhetoric meaningfully about her career? Is it possible for St. Augustine to offer guidance to an English professor who views her calling as, in fact, a “vocation” in connection with the overall Christian calling to love God and to love one’s neighbor?

In order to explore these questions, I recall my own personal conversion and developing sense of “vocation.” At sixteen, I attended a youth-oriented concert at a local protestant church, where a Christian folk group offered the gathered young people the opportunity “to receive Christ as Savior.” I, among many others, went up to the front of the room and invited Christ into my life. The date was March 5, 1972, and I found that I was different from that point on. My priorities gradually changed – not in a legalistic attempt to adhere to church laws, but as a result of now feeling somehow “free” to live a new kind of life. If I were as honest as Augustine, I could list those things I gave up, but anyone who lived through the 70s as a teenager or knows anything about them can easily imagine the kind of transformation I underwent. There were many of us converting to Jesus at that time, “Jesus freaks” as we were called, who had found in Christ the answer to all that the hippy movement of the 60s promised and all that seemed missing in the hedonism and lack of direction that characterized the 70s. Though my conversion changed me only gradually, by the time I went to college in 1975 (after a year and a half of working at various jobs and dabbling for a semester in painting), I was a deeply committed Christian, though not yet having returned to the Catholic faith.

As a college student, I found that my conversion had awakened my love of knowledge in general and of literature in particular. No longer trying to be either cool or hip, as I did in high school where cutting classes and heading to the smoking area were regular activities for me, I found that I was free to enjoy learning in a way that recovered my childhood identity as a “good student.” Even math, I found, once I prayed about it, was not only do-able (I got an A!) but even somewhat enjoyable. I loved my literature class so much that I actually “fasted” a class once (not attending one time and offering the sacrifice to God) – so different from my earlier habit of ditching classes for pleasure. I liked writing and, at that time, saw myself as a potential journalist, who would write Christian articles or other more general features, with a Christian slant. I continued to attend a protestant, evangelical and Pentecostal church, though I occasionally visited the Catholic Church and Catholic charismatic prayer meetings. Eventually, in my late twenties, I would return to the Catholic Church, after some graduate study in historical theology and a longing for a more sacramental experience.
Meanwhile, in the latter part of my college career, I got a job as a writing tutor, working one-on-one with students and assisting professors in the classroom. I began to realize that I loved teaching and could see myself in the role of a professor. Two role models, wonderful teachers – Dr. Dan O’Day and Prof. Mary Scotto (both of Kean College, now University, in Union, NJ) -- inspired me with the joy possible to this profession. As I look at Augustine and his academic experience in comparison with mine, I see a large difference resulting from the fact that he converted after years of serving as an academic in his pre-converted state and dealing with almost all pagan role models. For me, the discovery of my vocation as an academic was linked to my conversion, and in fact, was made possible by that conversion. Augustine’s criticism of the professors of his day, though sadly relevant to much of the academic world today, was not applicable to my initial experience of the vocation of being a professor, neither personally nor in those professors I was lucky enough to have as role models. Therefore, I was able to develop a vision of myself as a professor of English that was not informed by the selfishness and ambition that Augustine recalls as characterizing his own career. However, as I have taught in the field for over twenty-five years, I have seen, at times, nearly all the things criticized by Augustine, in myself as well as in others. Acknowledging this reality does not negate my early idealism or my sense of my career as a vocation. Instead, Augustine’s critique of the professors of his time serves as a chastening and enlightening reminder that even very good things, like teaching young people the joy of great literature and writing about it, can be corrupted by selfish motivations and misguided practices.

What things specifically does Augustine criticize? Well, first and most important is the sin of pride. His masters and he himself, once he joined their number, indulged in a false sense of self-importance based simply on the fact that they were better educated than their peers and excelled in the field of their expertise. Augustine specifically talks about this arrogance and inverted value system in The Confessions. He recalls, “It is not surprising that I was swept along in folly away from you, my God, and wandered abroad, when the role models I was given were ashamed if they were caught describing their own good behavior in ungraceful or ungrammatical terms, but luxuriated in men’s praise if they could describe their vicious acts in choice words well fitted together, flowing with easy and elegant phrases” (Book One, V, section 25). There was no sense of serving others in Augustine’s goals nor, apparently, in the practice of any of his teachers or colleagues. A brilliant young man, aware of his own potential, Augustine sought to outshine others in his field and make a name for himself. “Let me say, my God,” he confesses, “something of the talent, your gift, that I dissipated on various forms of nonsense,” referring specifically to a literary contest he won involving a translation from a passage from The Aeneid (Book One, V, section 27). Coming from a proud but not a rich family, he was sent to school at great expense by a father who could ill afford it, and who had to remove his son from school in Carthage for a year because he could not pay the tuition (Book Two, I, section 5). As a professor himself, though he enjoyed the comraderie and perhaps even the adulation of brilliant students who became close friends, he was quite impatient with the typical students of his time, an apparently unruly and hard to handle group of young men. When the students at Carthage proved difficult to manage, Augustine moved to Rome, and then – when these students disappointed him by their practice of dropping their professors before having to pay them – he moved on to Milan (Book Five, VI and VII, sections 22-23). Overall, in Augustine’s references to his interactions with his students there is almost no sense of loving service.

So, the first lesson to be learned from Augustine’s negative experience as a professor is to replace (not once, but over and over again) any tendency toward pride with an attitude of loving service. This attitude must be reinforced continually, as the years can jade one’s original infatuation with being able to teach the subjects one loved in college, leading to a sense of frustration with students who don’t seem to “get” it. As students seem younger and we get older, a distance can develop, unless we are careful always to bridge the developing age gap with an active sense of empathy and compassion. Our students are
human beings first, students second. This statement may seem to be pointing out something terribly obvi-ous, but it is worth making, for remembering it is at the heart of keeping our interactions with our stu-dents loving and humble.

A second lesson involves another danger: we must avoid focusing on the trivial at the expense of the meaningful. Augustine would most likely consider this fault yet another aspect or symptom of pride, but he mentions it so specifically that it is worth looking at as a separate phenomenon. One example of this fault that he recounts involves the rhetoricians’ function in the realm of law. In Augustine’s time professors of rhetoric also served as lawyers, and many used their rhetorical competence to gain a verdict of guilty for an innocent person. He rails against those masters who, while condemning a human being in this way, unjustly and without any concern, at the same moment express great distress at having mispro-nounced the “h” sound in the word “human.” The irony of this upside down value system horrifies the converted Augustine (Book One, V, section 29).

While Augustine’s critique of this kind of extreme emphasis on the trivial at the expense of the truly important may seem irrelevant in today’s academic world, I find a lesson in it that applies to anyone grading a stack of papers, feeling increasingly tired and impatient, and all too ready to write a cryptic, cut-ting remark, or – worse – merely slap on a low grade with no explanation, with no thought about the person receiving the remark. As a writing program administrator as well as a teacher, I try to cultivate in faculty a deep awareness of the fact that any communication with a student, whether verbal or written, should always be informed by a sense of that student's humanity and a deep respect for him or her as a person, no matter what the grade turns out to be, nor should there be grade inflation out of false kind-ness either. True respect for a student involves an honest appraisal of his or her work, conveyed with a deep sense that there is something more at stake than that student’s performance. Though a student may forget the grade she receives in a class, she may always remember the look or voice of a teacher in con-versation, or the tone of a written comment for the rest of her life. We must be careful never to sacrifice the human for what is relatively trivial.

Furthermore, Augustine warns against an emphasis on learning as opposed to wisdom, with edu-cation seen as an end to itself or merely a means to lesser, selfish and empty goals. As part of this dan-ger, he criticizes the false following of the “famous” among fellow academics, as in the case of the orator to whom the unconverted Augustine dedicated his book *Beauty and Decorum*, hoping by doing this that the man “should notice me and my book.” In words that ring true in today’s world of academic scholarship, Augustine remembers that he “admired him because men praised him and not because of the qualities they were praising.” He admits, “I would have glowed had he praised [my book], but his disapproval would have struck me to my heart, empty as it was…” (Book Four, V, section 23). The world of Augustine’s profession was filled with status-seeking, arrogance, and hypocrisy. And speaking honestly, we have to admit that these qualities, while perhaps not dominating, are all prevalent in today’s academy. Competitiveness, an empty emphasis on external credentials to the detriment of less easily defined but more important qualities (like compassion, insight, wisdom), and a false desire to impress others, all join together as temptations for an academic. A constant turning of the heart toward love, toward God and others, in humility and honesty is essential if one is to avoid these pitfalls. The contemporary English professor (and, in a sense, any academic) has much to learn from Augustine’s critique of the professors of literature and rhetoric of the third and fourth centuries. In fact, his criticism of himself and his peers can help one view the teaching of either of these subjects, or possibly any academic subject, as a potential vehicle for the working of God’s grace.
Along with the cautions offered through Augustine’s negative experiences in the academic world, *The Confessions* also offers positive guidelines for anyone seeking to serve God and others through teaching on the college level. Clearly, for Augustine, a key consideration for any activity is motivation. What honestly motivates the professor of literature or rhetoric? This is the question we must continually ask ourselves. Augustine criticizes his own faulty motivation as an unconverted professor when he recounts an encounter with a drunken beggar: “I had no real ground for putting myself above him. Was it because I was better educated? My education gave me no joy. I was using it to flatter others, not to instruct them, just to flatter” (Book Six, III, section 9). Augustine, like his earlier masters, lacked the necessary motivation that makes any activity valuable. As St. Bernard of Clairvaux once said, pride or curiosity or desire for money does not qualify as an acceptable motive for any teacher:

There are many… who seek knowledge for the sake of knowledge: that is curiosity. There are others who desire to know in order that they may themselves be known: that is vanity. Others seek knowledge in order to sell it: that is dishonorable. But there are some who seek knowledge in order to edify others: that is love [caritas]….

The only appropriate motivation for the Christian teacher of any subject, and certainly of literature or rhetoric, is love. Love of God and of neighbor will enable a teacher in this field, fraught as it is with inherent spiritual dangers, to tread a path that is safe and ordained by the Creator of all beauty, including that of words. Augustine himself, though he abandoned literature and rhetoric as a profession, was deeply influenced by his study of both and used his knowledge of them to help others, as Robert J. Forman argues in *Augustine and the Making of a Christian Literature*. However, this skill, like all others for Augustine, has value only as it is seen to be both given and used by God. Clearly, for Augustine, the grace of God working through him is what enables him to do anything worth while. If *The Confessions* has anything to say to the academic of the twenty-first century, it is an encouragement toward humility and reliance upon God’s grace for both insight and guidance and, ultimately, for salvation. These defining characteristics, explored deeply in *The Confessions*, are crucial for the redemption of the teaching of literature or rhetoric and can make this calling a true vocation if one pursues it in light of them.

English professors are called to the service of the word in all its beauty, as expressed in great works of literature and in rhetorical excellence. However, unless the service of the word reflects the deeper and higher service to the Word of God, Augustine would consider the teaching of literature or rhetoric a dangerous and probably foolish pursuit. Yet when the study of words is used as a means to love God and to serve him through our neighbor, then all the high beauty of language and literature can be enjoyed and explored. Words then become an expression of the dialogue that is at the heart of community. Through the study of literature, the words of others can be examined for their reflection of truth and of God, and, through the study of rhetoric, our own words can be used not to dominate but to serve and to empower others. In light of this pursuit, which only God’s grace can enable, a professor of literature or rhetoric can truly fulfill his or her vocation in the spirit of St. Augustine.

For me, having moved from an early conversion, which led me through a growing academic interest and eventually to a tenured position and directorship of first year writing at Seton Hall, Augustine’s experiences as an unconverted academic and, later, as a converted teacher in the church have much to offer in the way of guidance. His rejection of being a professor of rhetoric does not necessitate my doing the same, if I am to benefit from his insights, and if I am careful to follow the guiding principles that inform his Christian vocation as a priest and teacher. As believers, we are all called to serve God in one way or another. My academic career is only one part of my vocation, which also involves marriage and motherhood. In fact, I am certain that my academic vocation must come second to my family relation-
ships because any other approach would be, in Augustine’s thought, a love that is out of order. Those professors in my field whom I most admire are those who have these priorities in order. Those most inclined to fall into the dangers of pride, selfishness, and wrong emphases are professors who somehow put their academic position ahead of their families, their souls, their personhood.

To keep these priorities in order, one must rely completely on God’s help. Prayer, particularly at the beginning of the day, and reading at least a small portion of Scripture, are extremely helpful for me in this regard. Also, at least once a week and, if possible, more often, I attend Mass in the chapel at Seton Hall. While there, I am surrounded by other believers – some professors, more students and staff, and an occasional visitor. A priest, often someone I know, says Mass, and I witness a colleague transformed into something else in his vocation representing Christ and being a conduit of his grace on the altar. We in the congregation are similarly transformed. We are no longer faculty or students or staff. We are united as the Body of Christ, joined together in something so powerful and transformative that we cannot return to our various roles on campus the same afterward, if we allow ourselves to be truly touched by it. I admit that there are times when I rush off to my next meeting, not having fully experienced the mystery the Eucharist offers. But I never leave the celebration of Mass on campus untouched. There are days when I feel that I have nothing to offer, that my resources are depleted through my increasing busy-ness and sometimes intensely demanding family obligations, but I can always invite Christ into my heart anew, asking him to “love through me.” He will always do this for us, imperfect and unworthy as we are, and this great lesson, key to Augustine’s spirituality, is essential to me in my vocation as a Christian academic.

1. Augustine of Hippo, Confessions, trans. Garry Wills (Penguin: New York, 2007), Book Nine, II, Section 4, 187; all further references to The Confessions are to this edition and will be cited parenthetically.
A Sense of Calling: Vocation in the Academic Life

Zeni Fox

Introduction

In young adulthood, I encountered the Biblical symbol of the Kingdom of God, or the Reign of God. It has provided a framework for my understanding of God's desire for the world, and for each of us, and has been a touchstone for judging the events of life, personal and societal. I have frequently used this symbol as a way of exploring meaning with various groups, including faculty, administrators and support staff at two Catholic colleges. I think that this symbol can provide a framework for understanding the collectivity of vocations in a university – teachers in the varied disciplines, and the administrators, professionals and support staff who share in the task of the institution.

In this article, first I will draw on the poetry of the Bible to uncover various dimensions of this symbol, and the ways in which the hope which it embodies responds to the deepest yearnings of the human heart. It is my experience that persons from varied religious traditions, and no religious tradition, identify with the human desires evoked by the poetry, and the theological concepts drawn from the texts. Second, I will share some ways this symbol has impacted my life, personally and professionally. Third, I will outline some of the varied works of the human community which embody actions toward the Kingdom, toward a world in which the deep desires of the human heart are fulfilled. Fourth, I will apply the texts to the work of an academic institution – the various disciplines, and services, which comprise the school. Finally, I will delineate some recent theological exploration which sees the Kingdom of God as the central point of focus in the life, teaching and meaning of Jesus, and the horizon of the work of the Church, and therefore of a Catholic university.

A Horizon of Hope and Meaning

The Hebrew Scriptures include a large number of individual texts, and an even greater range of literary forms, written over centuries, and drawn from an oral tradition older still than the texts themselves. One way of approaching these writings is to search for themes that can be traced throughout the books. One theme is that of the Kingdom of God – the symbol of the expectations of a people. The Israelite community envisioned a time when God would fulfill all their hopes, all their desires, because Yahweh was a God who loved them, and would fully save them. The Scriptures proclaim that when God's reign comes in its fullness, hunger will be no more; each family will have its own fig tree. There will be no more sickness, and beauty and truth will fill the land. Peace will flower, the lion and the lamb lying down together, with love and understanding manifest among all the peoples. Holiness and happiness, freedom and completion will shine forth in the whole community – a people once captive in Egypt, a people once captive by selfishness, now free at last. In the books of the Torah, the Psalms, the writings of the prophets, and also the Christian Scriptures, we find these visions of a future in which God's plan is fulfilled. Here, a few instances will serve to proclaim this great theme in the language of poetry, a language with a power to articulate desire and hope more fully than that of prose and abstraction.
**Fullness and Plenty**

I mean to deliver them out of the hands of the Egyptians, and bring them up out of that land to a land rich and broad, a land where milk and honey flow…

Numbers 3:8.

On every roadway they will graze, and each bare height shall be their pasture. They will never hunger or thirst, scorching wind and sun shall never plague them; for he who pities them will lead them and guide them to springs of water.

Isaiah 49:9-10

**Health and Well-Being**

Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, the ears of the deaf unsealed, then the lame shall leap like a deer and the tongues of the dumb sing for joy.

Isaiah 35:5-6

On that day the deaf shall hear the words of a book; and out of gloom and darkness, the eyes of the blind shall see. The lowly will ever find joy in the Lord, and the poor rejoice in the Holy One of Israel.

Isaiah 29:18-19

**Beauty and Truth**

Yahweh, God of Gods, speaks, he summons the earth. From east to west, from Zion, perfection of beauty, He shines.

Psalm 50:1-2

Send out your light and your truth let these be my guide, to lead me to your holy mountain and to the place where you live.

Psalm 43:3

... for the water gushes in the desert, streams in the wasteland, the scorched earth becomes a lake, the parched land springs of water. The lairs where the jackals used to live become thickets of reed and papyrus.

Isaiah 35:6b-7
**Love and Understanding**

Yahweh will yield authority over the nations and adjudicate between many peoples; these will hammer their swords into plowshares, their spears into sickles. Nation will not lift sword against nation, there will be no more training for war.

Isaiah 2:4

He shall stand firm and shepherd his flock by the strength of the Lord, in the majestic name of the Lord, his God; and they shall remain, for now his greatness shall reach to the ends of the earth; he shall be peace.

Micah 5:3-4

**Holiness and Happiness**

But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord. I will place my law within them, and write it upon their hearts; I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer will they have need to teach their friends and kinsmen how to know the Lord. All, from least to greatest, shall know me, says the Lord...

Jeremiah 31:33-34

Then I heard a loud voice call from the throne, 'You see this city? Here God lives among the people. He will make his home among them; they shall be his people, and he will be their God; his name is God-with-them. He will wipe away all tears from their eyes; there will be no more death, and no more mourning or sadness... I will give water from the well of life free to anybody who is thirsty; it is the rightful inheritance of the one who proves victorious, and I will be their God, and they children to me.'

Revelation 21:3-4, 7

**Freedom and Completion**

And Yahweh said, 'I have seen the miserable state of my people in Egypt. I have heard their appeal to be free of their slave drivers. Yes, I am well aware of their sufferings. I mean to deliver them out of the hands of the Egyptians and bring them up out of that land to a land rich and broad, a land where milk and honey flow... And now the cry of the sons of Israel has come to me, and I have witnessed the way in which the Egyptians oppress them, so come, I send you to Pharaoh to bring the sons of Israel, my people, out of Egypt.'

Exodus 3:7-10
I, Yahweh, have called you to serve the cause of right;
I have taken you by the hand and formed you;
I have appointed you as a covenant of the people and the light of the nations,
to open the eyes of the blind,
to free captives from prison,
and those who live in darkness from the dungeon.

Isaiah 42:6-7

The images from these texts are part of the tapestry of our culture. A wall across the street from the United Nations headquarters in New York City depicts swords being beaten into plowshares, and is inscribed with the text from Isaiah, chapter 2. At Christmas, greeting cards with lions and lambs abound—some religious, some secular in their style and message, all evoking the promise of peace. “Sweet honey from the rock” is celebrated in popular music, and “let my people go” in African-American spirituals, both images that tap into our wellsprings of hope. Ancient texts, ancient symbols, articulating the deep desires of the heart, informing and shaping our lives today.

A Personal Digression

My first encounter with the symbol, the kingdom of God, came in an Old Testament course, my first in graduate school. The professor read his lectures, seated, in a voice so low that it was hard to hear him. His focus was on the exegesis of individual texts, and I tried to write notes about what seemed to have no cohesion, just as fast as I could. There was a monumental amount of reading. But gradually, a picture emerged, a vision of certain themes, paramount among them, the kingdom of God. My professor, Msgr. Myles Bourke, was a giant in Catholic Biblical scholarship, a discipline still young in this period, and the class was filled with people from various countries, come to learn from him. I was quite intimidated! But for me, the discoveries were more than exegetical, scholarly; they were a glimpse of a new way of understanding God, and God’s relation with us. Truly, my heart rejoiced at the beauty of the texts, the splendor of the promises.

Through the years, particularly in the season of Advent, individual texts provided a focus for me. Their hope made me hopeful. At various points in my life, teaching high school, working in parish religious education, giving lectures to diverse groups, as part of various graduate courses, I taught about the kingdom, always with joy, wanting to share this wellspring of meaning. As I encountered more of the struggles of life, personally and professionally, I developed a little mantra, “It's not the kingdom yet.” There was realism in that view, but not cynicism; hope remained.

Over time, I began to “read” societal events in light of the promises. I rejoiced when varied green revolutions were reported, greater “fullness and plenty.” I read with approval when institutions, warehouses, really, to house the mentally challenged were closed, and a plan for living in apartments was fostered: “freedom and completion.” I supported the founding of a peace academy, to parallel the military academies, to foster “love and understanding.” And I allowed the light of the Scripture texts to give deeper meaning to the ordinary events of my life—preparing food for special celebrations, planning communal gatherings, teaching so as to open out diverse views in a sympathetic way.

And so in this essay, I have a desire to share this symbol with others, because of its power, beauty, hopefulness. But also because I believe that it has a particular relevance to the work of the human community, in its totality, and to the work of a Catholic college and university, in particular.
In Pursuit of the Promise

The human community can be envisioned as actively in pursuit of the fullness of the Kingdom of God, in its various dimensions, through the everyday work of our lives. It is possible to think of each individual who contributes to the common good as having been drawn by the Spirit of God into the work they do, drawn through the deep desires of their hearts. Within a passionate caring about justice or beauty or peace is the seed of vocation, of calling, of invitation to do this good for others. Not always fully reflected on, nonetheless the stirrings of the soul which lead to action in a particular realm may be read as pursuit of the values of the Kingdom of God. The works are infinitely varied; some examples will illustrate this.

Fullness and plenty suggest not just enough food, but an abundance of good food, and a sense of celebration together in sharing the bounty. Homemakers and restaurateurs, soup kitchen workers and agricultural researchers, farmers and those who process food all pursue this good. In addition, an organization like Bread for the World, the Christian hunger advocacy group, has this goal, and when legislators and politicians address hunger concerns, they do as well. The Scriptural image of a great end-time banquet captures the sense of completion of the work of all who strive for fullness and plenty.

Health and well-being are dominant concerns of modern times. Certainly, in every age there have been medicine men/women, herbalists, physicians, healers of all kinds, but today there are great segments of the society engaged in attention to this human value. Individuals such as doctors and nurses come quickly to mind, but all of those who work in health care institutions must be included – administrators and technicians, maintenance workers and cleaners, lab workers and secretaries. Beyond such settings, pharmaceutical companies (researchers through marketers, and more) and city sanitation workers represent some of the many others committed to physical health. The pursuit of mental well-being engages counselors, 12 step program workers, psychiatrists, researchers, and writers of many self-help books, to name a few. The image of the lame dancing and the dumb and depressed singing expresses the joy of fulfillment of the work of all those pursuing health and well-being.

Beauty and truth are the realms of painters and philosophers, musicians and mathematicians, homebuilders and journalists, city planners and theologians, homemakers and physicists, gardeners and teachers, carpenters and historians, poets and detectives, sculptors and judges. Gerard Manley Hopkins bemoaned the fact that the world too often “bears man's smudge.” Yet at the same time there are great numbers of men and women committed to creating beauty. Deceit and hypocrisy seem ever with us, but the effort to seek truth, and proclaim truth, is seen every day. The drawings our earliest ancestors left in prehistoric caves, and the making of music even in the concentration camps of World War II attest to the perennial triumph of the movement toward beauty. Today, works as varied as the efforts of truth and reconciliation commissions and the sending of astronauts to the moon attest to the incessant drive of the human community toward truth. The human spirit blossoms when fed with beauty and truth, when this value of the Kingdom is nourished.

Holiness and happiness are sought in every age, by individuals for themselves, and by individuals and groups on behalf of others. Holiness as wholeness - as the human person fully alive, as the human person living his/her unique vocation - embraces both of these human desires, seeing them as vitally connected. A signal of the centrality of these concerns today can be seen in any bookstore, in the great number of books devoted to self-help and to spiritual growth. Indeed, such books have tended to dominate best-seller lists in recent years. The writers and publishers of these books – both more secular guides such as F. Scott Peck and Parker Palmer, and more religious guides such as Thomas Merton
and Mother Theresa – have sought holiness and happiness themselves, and seek to share their wisdom with the community. Parents work to guide their children, when they are little, and even when they are adults, in the paths of holiness and happiness. Friends counseling friends and therapists with their patients endeavor to suggest ways to grow in holiness and happiness, as do religious leaders and spiritual guides. Spiritual directors with their directees and spouses with their partners focus their love and concern toward the holiness and happiness of the other. The desire for holiness and happiness is found everywhere.

Freedom and completion are values at the core of the culture of the United States. In Philadelphia, home of the signing of the Declaration of Independence, Freedom Hall and the Freedom Bell are central icons visited every year by great crowds of citizens. Freedom is a value seen as worth devoting one's life to – even dying for. Our legislators, in federal and state houses, shape laws to guard the freedom of the people, judges seek to define the application of laws toward this human good, and police protect against offenses. But freedom is not only, not even primarily, a political reality. The freedom of the human spirit is part of the quest of philosophers and poets, and even of adventurers who seek to plumb the depths and scale the heights of our earth. Social reformers who are today's voice against oppression - “Let my people go” – and spiritual leaders who proclaim “the freedom of the sons and daughters of God” are filled with desire for the freedom and completion of the people of our times.

The Kingdom and the University

The vision of the Kingdom explored here is an expression of the desires of the human heart, as they were given particular articulation in the Jewish and Christian traditions. Understood this way, the symbol has a universalism which makes it an apt image to embrace the diversity of disciplines and roles which are the fabric of a university. As a symbol, it has the potential for motivating individuals, and of drawing them together in a commonality of purpose. It engages the imagination, a powerful dimension of the human psyche.

In the latter years of the 20th century, a new appreciation of the role of the imagination emerged in various disciplines. Educators, sociologists, physicists and theologians were among those who focused attention on the shaping power of symbols relative to the consciousness of individuals and of groups. We note that an engagement ring changes the perceptions a man and a woman have of each other, and that their families and friends have of them. The lowering of the flag of one nation and raising of another nation's engenders powerful feelings, signals new allegiances, evokes new understandings of a people. The symbol of the Kingdom invites the realization that we can contribute to the coming of a time when fullness and plenty, health and well-being, beauty and truth, love and understanding, holiness and happiness fill the land, when the Kingdom comes in its fullness. This realization can inspire a deeper appreciation of our work, individually and collectively, and motivate to a deeper commitment and purpose.

In one way, certain Kingdom values seem especially congruent with particular disciplines and campus services, such as health and well being as a goal in the School of Nursing and the Office of Health Services. At the same time, individuals might define themselves as embodying a particular value in a special way, such as a science teacher who focuses on the ways that researchers are addressing world hunger issues, out of personal concern for the value of fullness and plenty. Collective and individual pondering of the varied aspects of the symbol of the Kingdom can yield insight which may engage deep dimensions of consciousness. These actions are part of the deepening appreciation of the calling or
vocation of each individual, and the community itself. An academic community focused on together exploring, articulating and pursuing the values of the Kingdom would grow in intentionality and a sense of shared purpose, as well as commitment to this mission.

The Kingdom and the Catholic University

In our time and place in history, there are particular challenges faced by Catholic institutions, indeed, by all the institutions of our society. Excessive individualism, captured so well in the image of “bowling alone,” is an obstacle to the formation of communities of shared vision, values, purpose. The increasing diversity of our populace, the peoples of the world coming to our shores, and colleges, while certainly a great gift, makes intentional efforts for creating communities of discourse ever more important. The sheer pace of life, of change in our lives, is not only exhausting at times, but also places limitations on time for being with others. The kingdom of God is a symbol which, when pondered deeply, invites us toward commonality of effort, and communion of minds and hearts. The promises inherent in the vision of the reign of God are not simply to us as individuals, but to all of us together, brothers and sisters blessed by the gifts of God's kingdom.

A characteristic of Catholic colleges and universities today is that we no longer exist as Catholic enclaves, but rather as meeting places for people of every, and no religion. As shown above, the Kingdom can be understood in a universalist sense, and embracing, and being embraced by, a diversity of people. However, it is also a symbol particular to the Catholic Christian tradition. Jesus opened his public ministry by reading from the text of Isaiah:

> The spirit of the Lord has been given to me,
> for he has anointed me.
> He has sent me to bring the good news to the poor,
> to proclaim liberty to captives
> and to the blind new sight,
> to set the downtrodden free,
> to proclaim the Lord's year of favor...
> Then he began to speak to them, 'This text is being fulfilled today even as you listen.'

His parables proclaimed the Kingdom, and his actions demonstrated that the promises were being fulfilled in and through him. Contemporary scholars see the theme of the Kingdom as the heart of the teaching and life of Jesus. The Church continues the mission that Jesus began; Catholic institutional ministries such as colleges and universities are part of this great work. It can be said that preparing the way for the coming of the Kingdom of God is inherent in the mission of a Catholic university. In a setting with students, teachers, administrators and diverse employees from a variety of religious traditions, and no religious tradition, it is the universalist understanding of this symbol which will primarily inform the life of the school. But at the same time, the particular understanding of this symbol, as proclaimed and fulfilled in a special way by Jesus, will inform the deepest sense of the mission of the school. Those who share a commitment to the Catholic Christian faith will be the particular bearers of this mission, focused with intention and commitment on continuing the mission that Jesus began.
1. Feminist scholarship has critiqued the limitations of this symbol. While agreeing with the arguments offered, that the language is obsolete and sexist, I see a value in the deepest meaning of the symbol, a new age when the promises of the Kingdom will be fulfilled, a response to the desires of the human heart.


3. I am indebted for some of the language describing the values of the Kingdom, as used here, to Thomas Groome, *Sharing Faith* (Harper Collins: San Francisco, 1991).


The Vocation I Choose to Follow

Ines Angeli Murzaku

Introduction

At the opening of the Exhibit on the World’s Religions at Santa Clara University in 2005, the renowned Swiss theologian Hans Küng observed that if you want to see divine providence in your life, you do not have to look ahead; instead, you have to look backwards and then you can see a certain order in your life.1 Probably, Küng is right in his assumption. When I look back into my life’s journey I notice a certain orderliness that has led me to who I am and the vocation I choose to follow: a church historian, researcher and teacher.

Education, life experiences, and background have made me interested in the study of Byzantine history, Eastern monasticism, and the interactions between the two halves of the once united Christendom, East and West. I was born in the East, trained in the East and the West, and my vocation led me beyond the East and the West, across the Atlantic Ocean, to America. I was born in Albania- a self-proclaimed godless country- at the height of Communism and Communist persecution of religion. In fact, it is no exaggeration to say that, since the Diocletian persecution of the Christian Church, there has never been such a concerted, determined, and ruthless attempt to sweep all religion from the face of the earth.2

In 1990 I sailed from the Communist controlled country of Albania for Rome. Ostensibly, I was going to study history in Rome, but in reality I was going to study church history at the Pontifical Institute of Oriental studies, part of the Gregorian University consortium. Little did I know what was in store for me, but I was full of hope. Having the privilege to study church history in Rome, at a Pontifical Jesuit University, at a time when Albania was still under the Communist rule and religion was outlawed and persecuted, was quite remarkable.

Moreover, studying at the University of Calabria, which is located at the heart of Magna Graecia, was quite significant as well. Calabria is home to an unequalled presence of two parallel, millennia-old religious traditions, the Latin and the Byzantine traditions. They make the area’s history even more involved and exceptionally interesting to the scholar of Byzantine history, as well as to the ecumenist. Calabria is the meeting place of East and West, home of the Greek ascetic movement and Greek monasticism. At the University of Calabria I was trained in the source languages, which became key to my future research and study of the religions of the region. Calabria provided me with the exposure so necessary for a church historian to understand and live religion from within.

During the years I was pursuing graduate studies in Rome, I had another extraordinary opportunity: to work for the Vatican Radio International Program. This event certainly made me wonder, why me?, at a time when my country of origin was still under Communist dictatorship, and the clergy- Christian and Muslim alike- and the faithful -whose only crime was their belief in God- were serving sentences in the “re-education” camps. Certainly, one’s opportunities are not coincidental. One year after Mehmet Ali Agca shot Pope John Paul II in St. Peter’s Square, the Pope said that in the designs of providence, there are no mere coincidences. George Weigel, the renowned Catholic theologian, reflecting on the Pope’s attempted assassination, wrote that that is the truth about vocation, obedience, and abandonment. Chance is for card games while God does not work that way.3
The purpose of this chapter is to explore what sprang out of my educational background and training, in pursuit of my personal vocation as a church historian. What exactly made me the scholar and teacher I chose to be? The first part of the chapter will look at the Communist-Marxist and the Jesuit-Catholic educational systems. It will explore the incongruity among these educational systems, and how these systems in their unique ways, woke and preserved the sense of vocation in me. The second part of the chapter will explore what personal vocation means to me and how I am furthering my intellectual vocation.

My Educational Journey

Certainly, personal vocation includes education and training. It is perfectly legitimate for individuals to set objectives and aspire to personal and professional fulfillment. Indeed, studying and receiving adequate qualifications is part and parcel of self-fulfillment. Therefore, every effort at self-development and self-fulfillment through education should be undertaken and carried out as part of one’s vocation. Pope Paul VI, in his 1967 encyclical *Populorum Progressio* observed:

Endowed with intellect and free will, each man is responsible for his self-fulfillment even as he is for his salvation. He is helped, and sometimes hindered, by his teachers and those around him; yet whatever be the outside influences exerted on him, he is the chief architect of his own success or failure. Utilizing only his talent and willpower, each man can grow in humanity, enhance his personal worth, and perfect himself.

I have navigated through three contrasting educational systems. I completed my first undergraduate university education in the Communist Albania with a BA in history and philology; earned a master’s degree from the University of Calabria in Italy in languages and literatures; and a licentiate and doctorate in ecclesiastical history from the Pontifical Jesuit Oriental Institute (*Oriente*), part of the Pontifical Gregorian University consortium. At first appearance, this combination might seem an inconceivable path for an individual to have pursued. While essentially different in their approaches and methodologies, these incongruent systems provided ample exposure to major areas of knowledge and, in an accurate and persuasive fashion, this discrepancy of approaches inculcated in me a perennial desire to quest in the field of history, and then discern and pursue my scholarly vocation.

While my Jesuit education followed the typical Anselmian motto, *fides quaerens intellectum* (“faith seeking understanding”), the Communist system followed its own set of moral, philosophical and ideological tenets, its own creed. These were fed to the whole population, but particularly to university students, who are the most praised, feared, and vibrant force of a Communist society. What better way to influence students than to substitute faith in God with faith in Communist ideals and morals, or the Communist Decalogue! After all, Communism proved to be a religion, a system of beliefs, with its own creed, prophets, martyrs, excommunications, as well as its own universality.

Although profoundly different in substance and methodology, these educational systems, i.e., the Communist and the Jesuit-Pontifical, had something in common. Both systems were dogmatic, because as G. K. Chesterton observed: “Dogma is actually the only thing that cannot be separated from education. It is education.” Moreover, educators in both systems were dogmatic, and to use Chesterton’s paradigm they were really teaching because: “A teacher who is not dogmatic is simply a teacher who is
A calling to immerse myself in historical research began exactly from the love of history that my teachers in both systems awoke in me. As the late Pope John Paul II explained, it is the bond of love that unites all things, and it is exactly this love that unites human beings with their different vocations in life.8

**The Communist-Marxist Higher Education**

The years of Communism brought about an imperious education to Albanian citizens. Communism instituted a system of a proficient higher education. It established a state university system, eradicated illiteracy among its people, and expanded the country’s school system so that one out of every four citizens was engaged in some form of educational pursuit.9 High priority was given to the education of women. In 1989, compared to 1964, the number of Albanian women with a college degree had increased to 47%.10

Upon taking power in 1944, the Albanian communist regime gave precedence to the opening of schools and to masterminding the educational system to resonate Communist ideology. In 1950, the Albanian school system was given an exclusively Soviet orientation. Institutes of higher education were all patterned on Soviet paradigms. In fact, teams of Soviet educators laid the structural, curricular, and ideological foundations of the University of Tiranë.

I was raised on the teaching of Marx, Engels, Lenin, Stalin, Enver Hoxha, and during the Albanian version of the Cultural Revolution, on the teachings of Mao. As Anchee Min in her classic *Red Azalea* explained, history was the history of the class struggle, how the proletarians won over the reactionaries, while Western history was nothing but a history of capitalist exploitation.11 I was born and raised under the rule of the dictatorship of the proletariat, which, as Mathew Spinka observed, is a misnomer for the dictatorship of the communist over the proletariat.12

The university curriculum clearly targeted the education of the whole human person. Marxist-Leninist philosophy (which included dialectic and historic materialism and atheism, studied as opposites to idealism and religion), military science, productive labor, and foreign languages were part of the core curriculum across all specialties. In the humanities, philosophy, domestic and world history, national and world literature, and the grammar and history of language were given high priority in the core curriculum requirements and were initially taught by highly qualified Soviet instructors. The core curriculum gave students a broad and deep acquaintance with the main study areas. In fact, the exposure was so effective that it often made dissidents out of indoctrinated young minds, as in my case. Originally trained in Marxist philosophy, dialectical materialism and atheism, I would make my life’s vocation the study of the until-then-forbidden ecclesiastical history, with special focus on the history of Eastern Christianity, Greek monasticism and inter-religious dialogue.

Additionally, the tenets of communist education stressed the primacy of the collective over the interests of the individual. In the socialist society, the individual human being did not belong to himself, but to the society. Consequently, the state refused to entrust the education of the children to their parents. The future of education belonged uniquely to social education.13 So, private institutions or schools funded or sponsored by charitable or religious institutions were nonexistent in Albania until 1992. All education was carried out by agencies of the government or the party, which guaranteed a dogmatic ideological purity within the school and an absolute protection from being mentally “poisoned.”14
A distinctive feature of the socialist school system was that the curricula and teaching methods were integrated with other aspects of the society, such as politics, culture, and the economy. Thus, the focus of education was that every educated citizen became acquainted with the elements of all crafts during his/her university training so that the most brilliant man of science would also be skilled in manual labor. As a result, undergraduates at the Albanian higher education system spent one month in productive labor and one month in military training each academic year. Both components were part and parcel of the curriculum and fulfilled the requirements of the revolutionary triangle: scholarship, productive labor, and physical education.

Although the Soviet system was inefficient by economic standards, it managed to raise the country's educational level to among the world’s highest. Soviet elementary and secondary schools, despite their relatively guarded style, remained an outstanding example of egalitarianism, social accessibility, and high achievement. I learned discipline and resilience, under the constant strain of the hammer and the sickle of the Communist educational system, a regimen which has helped me throughout my life.

However, the worst features of the Soviet-Communist-Albanian educational system were its totalitarianism and inflexibility. How was history studied in former Eastern block countries? The significance of the Marxist view of history is concentrated on the economic changes which are affecting modern society. The Communist system taught that the basic premise of historical materialism is that the ultimate source of human development is the development of the productive forces. This premise can permit a scientific conception of history. In fact it was Marx who viewed history as a series of class struggles, as humanity evolved through five basic stages of development, i.e., primitive, slave, feudal, capitalist and socialist. Edward Hallett Carr in his classic What is History? commented on what exactly history was for Marx. In Marx’s final synthesis history meant three things, Carr observed: the motion of events in accordance with objective and primarily economic laws; the corresponding development of thought through a dialectical process; and corresponding action in the form of the class struggle which reconciles and unites the theory and practice of the revolution.

Consequently, history books written in East European countries conformed to the latest version of communist Orthodoxy and were dominated by Marxist-Leninist interpretations of historical events. Old national mythology was recycled and re-invented to quench the thirst for communist-national identity. In Romania, for example, historical figures like Decebal, the king of Dacians and a powerful enemy of the Roman Empire, medieval kings and princes including Stephen the Great, Michael the Brave, Vlad the Impaler, known as Dracula, were all presented and re-invented as precursors of Nicolae Ceausescu.

However, Marxist doctrine and Marxist synthesis of history is essentially apocalyptic. It is a denunciation of judgment against the existing social order and a message of salvation to the poor and oppressed who, after the social revolution, will attain a classless society. In fact, Communism passionately affirms the belief of the earliest Christian communities that the Kingdom of God is at hand, which for them is the classless society, in which all economic injustice shall be no more.

**Pontifical-Catholic-Jesuit Higher Education**

George Bernard Shaw thought that a Catholic university is a contradiction in terms. So did Indro Montanelli, the renowned Italian journalist and historian, who applied the same terminology: an Italian university is a contradiction in terms. At the heart of the argument is the meaning of “Catholic” and “university.” Shaw viewed the church as a closed society and a possessor of dogmatic beliefs, and
the university as an open, vibrant society representative of intellectual freedom and speculation. As a consequence, according to Shaw, an educated person cannot be religious and an intellectual simultaneously, as these two are in eternal contradiction. The confusion between “Catholic” and “university” is worsened by the prevalent enthusiasm for diversity and multiculturalism in higher education. However, the words “Catholic” and “university” have the same root meaning: 22 *catholicus* from the Latin, meaning general, universal and university; *universitas*, from *universus*, meaning all together and, literally, turned into one. Additionally, Catholic Christianity founded universities and fostered them out of its deepest beliefs. 23 Such was the case with the University of Bologna. Thus it was Catholic medieval Italy that welcomed the first university of the western world.

What is so distinctive about Orientale that differentiates it from the Universities of Tiranë and Calabria? Orientale is a truly Catholic institution, established in conformity with the apostolic constitution *Sapientia Christiana*, an institution which represents not just one aspect, but the fullness of Catholic tradition, both West and East. It is an institution of higher learning where Orthodox theology is studied from within, with sympathy, reverence, and love. Indeed, it is an institution that invented Eastern Spirituality as an academic discipline. 24 Orientale is an intellectual place where faith and scholarship fraternize, where ecumenical scholarship is explored as a new and specifically Christian way of studying Christian tradition, in order to reconcile and unite, rather than to confute and dominate. 25

Certainly, Orientale is faithful to the *magisterium*, but is not the *magisterium*. What struck me was how the Jesuit educators understood Catholicity in the deepest meaning of the word. Orientale is a place of scholarly inquiry, seeking the relevance of the Christian message to contemporary problems that the Catholic Church is facing. The Jesuit faculty is dedicated to the spirit of inquiry and intellectual competence. Old answers could not satisfy the new religious situation in which the Catholic Church found itself, after the fall of Communism and the regained freedom of religion in Eastern block countries. That was the critical situation that needed a new way of theological thinking. Wasn’t that a perfect example of *fides quarens intellectum*, faith seeking understanding in the university community, an expression of belief that would be relevant to the modern questions? As Cardinal Newman explains, the university “educates the intellect to reason well in all matters, to reach out towards truth and to grasp it.” 26 I was trained at Orientale in ecclesiastical history, to write *inter alia* of Catholic matters, but to do so, as Dermot Quinn explained, sympathetically, but without abandoning my critical faculty. 27 It is erroneous, then, to imagine Catholic history” as special pleading or the abrogation of critical judgment. 28 Quite the contrary, my previous training in the Communist system made me more critical in my understanding of church history.

In contrast to the Marxist view of history, the Jesuit-Pontifical system taught a different interpretation of history based on divine revelation, and divine intervention in the life of humankind. 29 Indeed, the doctrine of the Incarnation is central to the Christian interpretation of history, as an interpretation of time in terms of eternity, and of human events in the light of divine revelation. Christian history is framed in a chronological system which takes the year of Incarnation as its focal point of reference. 30 Thus, the Christian interpretation of history, as Christopher Dawson explains, finds its fullest expression in the primary documents of the Christian faith—the writings of the Hebrew prophets and in the New Testament itself. 31 So, Christian history is apocalyptic. It is His-tory, the story of God at work in the world and though the world. 32

Why Me? Some Final Remarks

“I set off in search of the source of my vocation,” wrote Pope John Paul II at the beginning of his book *Rise, Let us Be on Our Way*, on the occasion of the 45th anniversary of his ordination as a
Bishop. The pope finds the source of his Episcopal vocation beating there in the Upper Room in Jerusalem, where the Last Supper took place. In fact, John Paul II is the first pope in a long time to tell us that he had a hard time making a vocational decision to enter the priesthood.

What, then, is a personal vocation and how are individuals called to such commitments? As its name suggest, this type of calling is very personal. It is a proper course for every person’s development to follow, a specific way in which the individual commits his/her whole life to the service of certain values. Consequently, vocation embraces the person’s strengths and weaknesses, talents and disabilities, existing commitments and obligations, and requires that personal choices be made in the light of such calling; in fact, it embraces the whole person and his/her most inward being or identity. Personal vocation, as such, is not a job or a career path which individuals might take to earn a living. It is a specific lifetime goal, and it gives a unique meaning and purpose to one’s life. It is a commitment of love, a type of love fixed on particular life goals.

Looking back on my life’s journey, there is certainly orderliness. The intellectual vocation of church historian and teacher that I am pursuing is the vocation that I have discovered, and I have discovered it accurately.

7. Ibid.
25. Ibid., p. 51.
28. Ibid., p. 72.
30. Ibid.
31. Ibid., p. 246.
32. Ibid., pp. 173-174.
Research as Conversion

Richard M. Liddy

Knowledge makes a bloody entrance
—Aristotle

Years ago, during doctoral studies, a number of my companions experienced very difficult times. So did I. For the life of the doctoral student is often one of lonely afternoons, slow progress, dead ends and unexpected interruptions. Just persevering in research can be a very difficult process. So why does knowledge make a “bloody entrance?” Why the pain?

This paper does not presume to chart all the elements in this assault on our animal being that takes place through years of intense study. But I do want to indicate that the process of research itself involves radical turns – perhaps a number of them. Consequently, in this article I would like to: 1) reflect on the academic vocation of “research” and the implicit conversion from previously accepted assumptions that it entails; 2) take as my exemplar the great writer on cities and the environment, Jane Jacobs; 3) reflect on the implicit intellectual conversion such conversions entail; 4) call attention to “the habits of mind” genuine research entails; 5) point to the work of Simone Weil on the “attention” needed for genuine research; and finally, 6) quote Teilhard de Chardin on the need for patience in research.

1. Meaning

One of the core tenets of Bernard Lonergan’s philosophy – and indeed of classical philosophy - is “the intelligibility of being.” In other words, we would not search, we would do no “research,” we would not question, if we did not initially have the fundamental assumption that ultimately “the whole thing hangs together.” There are answers to questions – even if sometimes the answer is that we have to refine our questions. Life is meaningful.

Of course, “getting somewhere” often takes a long time. Even our discovery that our particular question is meaningless or put the wrong way is a step in the right direction. When in the course of our research we say, “How can I have been so stupid as to have thought this? By that very realization we are heading in the right direction. Such realizations, such refinements of our questions, help us to arrive at deeper questions that do lead somewhere. Our minds are made for reality.

A religious sister once told me that she was traveling on a bus in the outback of Australia – a long ride into the bush – and as she traveled she reflected on Lonergan’s thesis on the “isomorphism” or similarity of form between the structure of our knowing and the structure of what we seek to know. The physicist’s mind seeks the basic structures of physical reality. The biologist seeks the structures of organic life. Suddenly she had the insight: “Our minds are made for reality!” This is who we are! Not just our minds on the level of sensation and imagination, but our minds as capable of questioning, of having insights, as sticking to a research project no matter where it leads – even to the outback of Australia.

Isaac Newton is an example of someone who stuck to his questioning for long periods of time – until he came up with something. People brought food to his room and left it by his door, only to return hours later to find the food untouched. His spirit fed on something deeper.
Every day for many years a little old man was seen going to the British Museum to research and to write. That man’s name was Karl Marx. Bernard Lonergan once remarked that Christianity would not have lost so many of the working class in the twentieth century if she also had had a little old man in the nineteenth century going every day to the British Museum to research and to write on the structures of the economy.

Lonergan highlights this deep desire within the human person to get to the bottom of things.

Deep within us all, emergent when the noise of other appetites is stilled, there is a drive to know, to understand, to see why, to discover the reason, to find the cause, to explain. Just what is wanted, has many names. In what precisely it consists, is a matter of dispute. But the fact of inquiry is beyond all doubt. It can absorb a man. It can keep him for hours, day after day, year after year, in the narrow prison of his study or his laboratory. It can send him on dangerous voyages of exploration. It can withdraw him from other interests, other pursuits, other pleasures, other achievements. It can fill his waking thoughts, hide from him the world of ordinary affairs, invade the very fabric of his dreams. It can demand endless sacrifices that are made without regret though there is only the hope, never a certain promise, of success.

Everyone who has done research has tasted this desire. When was it first tasted? In childhood? On a slow summer day when there was nothing else to do but read a book? Jerome Miller writes of a young girl as she peers for the first time into a telescope:

One look through the eye of a telescope may be all it takes for a child to become an astronomer in her heart – if the glimpse of the stars it offers her makes her feel like she has been given access to an inexhaustibly fascinating world in comparison with which her ordinary world suddenly seems not just uninteresting but insubstantial.

Who knows where we are going when we are young? We set out on paths of exploration. Something beckons us, attracts us, “calls us.” Perhaps some aspects of that attraction lay in the gene pool, the long and mysterious emergence of the universe and of our self within the universe. Perhaps the attraction lit up when we happened upon a particularly influential mentor who opened up for us worlds we never knew existed. He or she “limned” the shape of the universe for us.

In one of his essays Lonergan writes of “the passionateness of being.” Somehow, in some way, the billion year old-universe with its countless elements and teeming physical, chemical and biological processes - somehow this whole incalculable mass and momentum has arrived at - ourselves. Evolutionary process has arrived at conscious persons who can wonder at and catch glimmers of this eon-old process. In our minds the universe can become “luminous;” and we can wonder at our own power to wonder and to bring to light these “wonder-full” aspects of the universe. And we can wonder about a mind beyond our minds, and about a truth beyond the limited truths we seek; and about a personal goodness beyond ourselves and the universe.

2. Jane Jacob’s “Messy” Method

In a celebrated passage Aristotle granted that his ideal of the theoretic life was too high for man and that, if one lived it, one would do so not as a man but as having something divine present within one. Nonetheless he went on to urge us to dismiss those that would have us resign
Ourselves to our mortal lot. He pressed us to strive to the utmost to make ourselves immortal and to live out what was finest in us. For that finest, though slight in bulk, still surpassed by far all else in power and in value.5

The roads to research are manifold, but it would seem that it always unfolds in questioning leading to insight. The pieces fall together in a coherent and perhaps even beautiful way. Regularly this takes place after a particularly long and difficult journey. As Aristotle put it, “learning makes a bloody entrance.” Jane Jacobs, marvelous researcher and writer on cities, once described her method of searching.

Here is what I do. When I start exploring some subject, I hardly know what I think. I’m just trying to learn anything I can about it. Rather than reading systematically, which is possible only if you know what you want, I read as omnivorously as I can manage, in anything that interests me. I often don’t even know why I’m interested in some facet or other, and all I can say about this is that from experience I’ve learned to trust myself when I’m interested.6

Could it be that deep down on some primal level she presumes there are answers? She basically trusts these semi-conscious dream-like suggestions, and follows where they lead.

The experience from which I’ve learned that is being interested but saying to myself, “no, no, come off it, stop wasting time, this is beside the point,” and then learning much later, as I begin to put things together, that it wasn’t beside the point at all and my subconscious, or something, was trying to tell me something.

She describes the emergence of insight, reflective understanding and judgment.

As I read, and also notice things concretely, patterns from this information begin to form in my mind. Also, I learn that what I thought originally was “the subject” is not necessarily the subject, or is only an alley or side shoot of it – that there is a lot else to it, or underneath it. So I make outlines as I go along, but they keep changing, and what I end up with bears little relation – or relation only in small part – to what I was starting with…

She evaluates this whole process.

Very messy. This is also very uncomfortable. I don’t like all this confusion. I only keep at it because, hard and uncomfortable though it is, it is worse to stay in such confusion. I tend to think: I would never have gotten into this if I knew what I was getting into, but then it’s too late.

Discerning judgment is at work.

Back to the patterns. They begin to show up, of their own accord, just out of the material itself. I am very suspicious of them. I try to find stuff to disprove them, and when they don’t hold up, I discard them. Often in doing so, I learn something else, so the process, while disappointing – hey, it sounded like a great idea but it wasn’t – is not wasted…

If a pattern or an idea holds up, instead, and further exploration or examples, insofar as they appear, only reinforce and amplify it, then I begin to trust it, although I keep on the lookout for contradictions…
Somehow beauty is part of this whole process.

While I'm not an artist, I do feel bound to try, as far as I am able, to produce a work of art as well as a piece of truth — and one thing about a work of art is that it conceals, rather than parades, the laboriousness that went into it which was, after all, nothing but the work in its service.

But as you see, I've no magic or great enlightenment to explain, rather just messy, muddy work, which I'm inclined to think that thinking maybe usually is. If somebody could tell me how to go about it more neatly and quickly and efficiently, and still make it work, oh would I be grateful.

3. Intellectual Conversion

We began by recalling Bernard Lonergan’s teaching on the intelligibility of being, of all that is, underpinning our own drive to know. But Lonergan also emphasizes that there can be key moments in this process and one of those moments is when we become convinced that the process itself is worth while. He calls this “self-appropriation” or “the appropriation of one’s rational self-consciousness,” or simply “intellectual conversion.”

Such a conversion is really a conversion to our own minds, to our own selves as not just a bundle of drives but essentially as a luminous drive for being. It is a move out of the “reification” of reality and of ourselves into the light of being. It can be exemplified in the life of Augustine of Hippo who, in the spring of 386, after years of searching among various philosophies, began to read “a few books of the Platonists” lent to him by an acquaintance. In these books he found an invitation to go within himself. “Being admonished by all this to return to myself, I entered into my own depths…” And what he discovered within himself was more than he could imagine. In fact, he found that his desire to imagine reality was at the basis of his many previous intellectual mistakes.

My mind was in search of such images as the forms of my eye was accustomed to see; and I did not realize that the mental act by which I formed these images, was not itself a bodily image.

Many years separate St. Augustine from modern science but modern science itself witnesses to this need to break free from the fetters of illusory images.

St Augustine of Hippo narrates that it took him years to make the discovery that the name “real” might have a different connotation from the name “body.” Or, to bring the point nearer home, one might say that it has taken modern science four centuries to make the discovery that the objects of its inquiry need not be imaginable entities moving through imaginable processes in an imaginable space-time. The fact that a Plato attempted to communicate through his dialogues, the fact that an Augustine eventually learnt from the writers whom, rather generically, he refers to as Platonists, has lost its antique flavor and its apparent irrelevance to the modern mind. Even before Einstein and Heisenberg it was clear enough that the world described by scientists was strangely different from the world depicted by artists and inhabited by men of common sense. But it was left to twentieth-century physicists to envisage the possibility that the objects of their science were to be reached only by severing the umbilical cord that tied them to the maternal imagination of man.
Such a transformation takes place in historical research. We had been going down one road of research and suddenly we begin to suspect that there is no outlet in this direction. A medieval researcher took it for granted that “Pseudo-Dionysius” was a contemporary of Saint Paul. After all, this identification had been taken for granted by writers for centuries. Then a medieval researcher realized, “How could this be? He quotes Plotinus who lived centuries after Saint Paul!” Immediately things begin to fall into place and historians began to get closer to the historical origins of Pseudo-Dionysius.

Historical research consists of many such “inverse insights” – the awareness that we have been mistaken, that our questions themselves involved faulty assumptions. Suddenly we say to ourselves, “How could I have been so stupid as to have thought this? Reality is beckoning me in another direction.” A major thrust of Bernard Lonergan’s own work is to help people become familiar with these “little conversions” and through such conversions begin to break their bondage to imagination as the mediator of reality. Such a discovery is “startling” and “strange.” It is a discovery that has to be appropriated and lived out in one’s life. Of that breakthrough Lonergan writes: “one has not made it yet if one has no clear memory of its startling strangeness.”

4. Habits of the Mind

A research project…is a lifetime affair; and only those who put their whole lives into it get anywhere. The assumption behind tenure is that being an academic is a vocation. The assumption behind abolition is that there are no vocations for anyone any more. (Nicholas Boyle)

In the face of Margaret Thatcher’s threat to abolish tenure in the English universities, the Cambridge historian, Nicholas Boyle, contended that tenure was a direct contradiction to the principle of functional efficiency, so dominant in contemporary life. Tenure witnesses to the power and validity of unfettered human intelligence against the demands of immediacy.

How to live out this conviction that the pure desire to know is worth following? That understanding and judging head us beyond imagination into “the real world”? How sustain such a conviction and live out such a quest? Certainly there is need for “habits of the mind” as well as habits of the heart to support one’s quest.

Joseph Pieper once wrote a text, well-known at the time, entitled Leisure: the Basis of Culture. Pieper’s point is that civilization and higher culture depend on the ability of people to take time out from the struggle for existence to ask long-term questions, to follow out leads. In order to do this one has to listen and discern the movement that would call us to greater life away from the distractions that deaden our spirits. An ethics of authenticity, of listening from the depths of one’s being, leads us to avoid distractions and to be obedient to the deep call we find within our selves. It leads us to our vocation. Is it to be a writer? A teacher? A scholar? To research in this area or in that? What is calling us? What has touched us so deeply that it is worth giving our life for it? Stephen McKenna, the great translator of the philosopher, Plotinus, spent many years waiting on tables in a restaurant in Dublin in order that he might be free to do his translations. Asked why, he replied, “This is worth a life.”

Practical decisions must be made, then, that support this intellectual pattern of experience, this “waiting on truth” that is the call of research.
5. A Moment of Passivity

Bernard Lonergan wrote of following out the deep desire within us that is “the pure detached disinterested desire to know.” But in response to this desire there is also a moment of passivity, of “waiting on truth,” as the French writer, Simone Weil, called it. In a wonderful essay, “Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies With a View to the Love of God,” Weil wrote of the relationship between study, human love and the love of God. All three demand attentiveness of spirit to “the other;” both demand an element of passivity, of “waiting on the truth” “waiting on love” or “waiting on God.” None are attained by sheer willing or physical force.

In her article Weil links a deepening of the love of God and the love of other people with the deepening ability to “pay attention” that comes with study. In one of her more remarkable quotes on the distinctiveness of attention Weil writes:

Twenty minutes of concentrated, un-tired attention is infinitely better than three hours of the kind of frowning application which leads us to say with a sense of duty done: “I have worked well.”

But, in spite of all appearances, it is also far more difficult. There is something in our soul which has a far more violent repugnance for true attention than the flesh has for bodily fatigue. This something is much more closely connected with evil than is the flesh. That is why every time that we really concentrate our attention, we destroy the evil in ourselves.15

Perhaps this is why Bernard Lonergan was such a committed “intellectualist” and why he conceived of the basic sin of human nature, deeper and more destructive than individual and group selfishness, to be “the sin against the light.”16 It is our common sense orientation to obfuscate philosophical issues or to say they are not important.

According to Weil, even if we do not “succeed” in our study—if we do not “get” the right answer to a mathematical problem - still, by the very fact that we focus our attention on the problem, we grow.

If we have no aptitude or natural taste for geometry this does not mean that our faculty for attention will not be developed by wrestling with a problem or studying a theorem. On the contrary it is almost an advantage. It does not matter much whether we succeed in finding the solution or understanding the proof, although it is important to try really hard to do so.

No genuine effort of attention is wasted.

If we concentrate our attention on trying to solve a problem of geometry, and if at the end of an hour we are no nearer to doing so than at the beginning, we have nevertheless been making progress each minute of that hour in another more mysterious dimension. Without our knowing it or feeling it, this apparently barren effort has brought more light into the soul.17

Growth in attentiveness in one area of study, even if we do not “do well” in that area, can influence our attentiveness in other areas as well.
Moreover it may very likely be felt besides in some department of intelligence in no way connected with mathematics. Perhaps he who made the unsuccessful effort will one day be able to grasp the beauty of a line of Racine more vividly on account of it.

Such connections cannot be “proved.” They need to be experienced. But to have the experience, to begin to feel these truths, one must give oneself to the process of study.

Certainties of this kind are experimental. But if we do not believe in them before experiencing them, if at least we do not behave as though we believed in them, we shall never have the experience which leads to such certainties.

This effort at “paying attention” eventually bears abundant fruit.

An Eskimo story explains the origin of light as follows: “In the eternal darkness, the crow, unable to find any food, longed for the light, and the earth was illumined.”

If there is a real desire, if the thing desired is really light, the desire for light produces it. There is a real desire when there is an effort of attention....Even if our efforts of attention seem for years to be producing no result, one day a light which is in exact proportion to them will flood the soul.

Weil goes on to distinguish this attentiveness of spirit with other “more pragmatic” desires that might influence a student’s study: the desire to compete, to get a job, to impress others, etc.. Such motivations can easily distract us from attention to the truth and can keep us from analyzing our own mistakes. Most of the time we hide from our mistakes instead of learning from them. What is needed is humility – “a far more precious treasure than all academic progress.”

Attention is not something muscular, contracting our eyebrows and feigning the pose of Rodin’s The Thinker.

We often expend this kind of muscular effort on our studies. As it ends by making us tired, we have the impression that we have been working. That is an illusion. Tiredness has nothing to do with work. Work itself is the useful effort, whether it is tiring or not.

Nor is the work that is attentive study a question of “will power.” Unlike in manual labor,

…the intelligence can only be led by desire. For there to be desire, there must be pleasure and joy in work. The intelligence only grows and bears fruit in joy. The joy of learning is as indispensable in study as breathing is in running. Where it is lacking there are no real students, but only caricatures of apprentices who, at the end of their apprentice-ship will not even have a trade. It is the part played by joy in our studies that makes of them a preparation for spiritual life, for desire directed towards God is the only power capable of raising the soul. Or rather, it is God alone who comes down and possesses the soul, but desire draws God down.18

Most of all, attention means “waiting on the truth.” It means keeping our thought detached, empty and ready to be penetrated by the object.

Our thought should be in relation to all particular and already formulated thoughts, as a man on mountain who, as he looks forward, sees also below him, without actually looking at them, a great many forests and plains. Above all our thought should be empty, waiting, not seeking anything, but ready to receive in its naked truth the object which is to penetrate it.
All wrong translation, all absurdities in geometry problems, all clumsiness of style and all faulty connection of ideas in compositions and essays, all such things are due to the fact that thought has seized upon some idea too hastily and being prematurely blocked, is not open to the truth. The cause is always that we have wanted to be too active; we have wanted to carry out a search.

We do not obtain the most precious gifts by going in search of them but by waiting for them.\(^{19}\)

In every school exercise there is a special way of waiting upon truth, setting our hearts upon it, yet not allowing ourselves to go out in search of it.

Weil compares academic work with manual labor.

Happy then are those who pass their adolescence and youth in developing this power of attention. No doubt they are no nearer to goodness than their brothers working in the fields and factories. They are near in a different way. Peasants and workmen possess nearness to God of incomparable savor which is found in the depths of poverty, in the absence of social consideration and in the endurance of long drawn-out sufferings. If however we consider the occupations themselves, studies are nearer to God because of the attention which is their soul. Whoever goes through years of study without developing this attention within himself has lost a great treasure.\(^{20}\)

Finally Weil indicates what one must be willing to sacrifice to come to knowledge of the truth.

Academic work is one of those fields which contain a pearl so precious that it is worth while to sell all our possessions, keeping nothing for ourselves, in order to be able to acquire it.\(^{21}\)

6. Patience

Perhaps the lesson of patience in our academic work can be a lesson we can model for our students. Perhaps we can share with them this reflection from the great geologist-theologian, Teilhard de Chardin.

Above all, trust in the slow work of God.
We are, quite naturally impatient in everything to reach the end without delay.
We should like to skip the intermediate stages.
We are impatient of being on the way to something unknown, something new.
And yet it is the law of all progress that it is made by passing through some stages of instability; and that it may take a very long time.

And so I think it is with us.

Our ideas mature gradually; so we must let them grow, let them shape themselves without undue haste.
Don’t try to force them on, as though we could be today what time (that is to say grace and circumstances acting on our own good will) will make us tomorrow. Only God can say what this new spirit gradually forming within us will be. We must give Our Lord the benefit of believing that his hand is leading us; we must accept the anxiety of feeling ourselves in suspense and incomplete.

4. See Bernard Lonergan, “The Subject, *A Second Collection* (University of Toronto Press: Toronto, 1996) 85: “Is this whole process from the nebulae through plants and animals to man, is it good, a true value, something worth while? This question can be answered affirmatively, if and only if one acknowledges God’s existence, his omnipotence, and his goodness.”
15. Simone Weil, *Waiting for God* (Harper and Row: New York, 1951) 56. Previously she had written: “From this point of view it is perhaps even more useful to contemplate our stupidity than our sin. Consciousness of sin gives us the feeling that we are evil, and a kind of pride sometimes finds a place in it. When we force ourselves to fix the gaze, not only of our eyes but of our souls, upon a school exercise in which we have failed through sheer stupidity, a sense of mediocrity is borne in upon us with irresistible evidence. No knowledge is more to be desired. If we can arrive at knowing this truth with all our souls we shall be well established on the right foundation.”
22. I do not have the source of this citation; it was given me by a friend, Andre Delbecq.
III.

THE VOCATION OF THE CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY
Speaking with One Voice:
The Vocation of a Catholic University

Rev. Paul A. Holmes

In 2002, Seton Hall University learned of a marvelous opportunity. Indiana’s Lilly Foundation had already offered $2-million grants to many of the nation’s faith-based colleges and universities to conduct a “theological exploration of vocation” at their institutions. We decided to draft a proposal for the third round of this national initiative and, after a great deal of work, we submitted a proposal entitled, “IMPACTS: Inspiring, Motivating and Promoting a Call to Service” which outlined how Seton Hall would attend to the kind of exploration Lilly was sponsoring by establishing a Center for Vocation and Servant Leadership.

In our proposal to Lilly, we wrote: “As a Catholic university, we recognize that not only persons but institutions also have a vocation.” As Seton Hall endeavored to articulate what its vocation might be, we told Lilly that our institutional focus on the formation of servant leaders “provided significant impetus for our university to look beyond its walls to help heal the conditions of poverty and injustice that fester just outside our gates.”

We tried to illustrate this institutional vocation with a description of just where Seton Hall is located:

A drive out of our main gate reveals a microcosm of the challenges America currently faces. A turn in one direction, and one finds a comfortable middle-American sort of downtown with shops, restaurants and tidy homes. A turn in the other direction, and one encounters rundown buildings, few viable businesses, men in their twenties standing on street corners with fewer employment options than were offered during the Great Depression. And in the background of both vistas is a train that whisks commuters to Manhattan traveling just fast enough for its passengers not to notice what they are passing through. We can do better than this — and we will do better — with faith-filled men and women who in their education at our University hear a call of vocation as a call to serve others.

Not only was Seton Hall forming servant leaders for a global society, as our mission statement promises, we were letting the proposal evaluators at Lilly Endowment know that the University was trying to respond to its own institutional vocation to be a servant leader, too. What are universities “called” to do in the world, we were asking. Those of us who drafted the proposal were convinced that “vocation” is a much broader concept, theologically, than we might have originally thought.

How fortunate Seton Hall was to receive the $2 million it sought to establish its Center for Vocation and Servant Leadership. Some years later, we also received another $500,000 — an additional grant that funded an extension of the great work we were doing under the aegis of Lilly’s extremely successful Programs for the Theological Exploration of Vocation.

One of the Center’s recent initiatives — not envisioned in our original proposal — has been its University Mission Seminar. Faculty and administrators are invited to attend an eight-week program that hopes to explore just what it means to be a Catholic university. And one of the presentations offered during the seminar was originally entitled, “The Essence of a Catholic University.” However, we
believed that the title focused too much on the ethereal, the immaterial. It was eventually renamed, “What Makes a University Catholic?” One might not think there is much of a difference here. But it seemed to us that this question gets to not just the “essence” — What *is* a Catholic university? — but to the more important issue: What does a Catholic university actually *do?*

The seminar runs every semester and, according to the participants, it is having a profound effect on how Seton Hall’s faculty and administrators think about the University’s mission. The session on “What Makes a University Catholic?” is a frank discussion about what activities, what tasks, constitute a Catholic university’s “actuating,” or “operationalizing” its identity.

In leading this session each semester, I end the presentation with an examination of a document I helped write in 2008. “Speaking with One Voice: Untested Claims” is the product of my collaboration with Dr. Richard Yanikoski when he was president of the Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities (ACCU). We had been asked to consider what the future of Catholic higher education in the United States might look like and the first consideration of that fruitful collaboration was a sobering one. Given the vast diversity that exists among the nation’s 230 Catholic colleges and universities, how could we contemplate speaking “with one voice”? Our institutions are large and small, urban and rural, old and young, and the descriptions of our Catholic identity are varied along historical, geographical and ideological lines. *That* we are Catholic, especially after the publication of John Paul II’s *Ex corde Ecclesiae* in 1990, is still subject to a good deal of fruitful conversation on our campuses; *how* we are Catholic gets short shrift, we thought, and a consensus might be difficult to forge.

Nevertheless, Dr. Yanikoski proposed a number of questions that, we felt, needed to be answered. And we went one step further: rather than ask the questions, we endeavored to make specific claims about what *all* institutions purportedly do in order to “institutionalize” our Catholic mission.

It should be noted that the only “American” declaration about, and by, the institutions of Catholic higher education in the United States is the still-controversial statement adopted in 1967 and published three years later as the “Land O’Lakes Statement on the Nature of a Catholic University.” Beyond the controversies over what the statement did, and did not, say, there is a recognition in the document of the service our institutions are meant to provide. In its paragraphs on “the Catholic university and public service,” the Catholic university as “the critical reflective intelligence of the Church,” and “the Catholic university and research,” the Land O’Lakes statement provided our institutions with a brief acknowledgment of our tripartite vocation: we are called to offer service to society, service to the Church and service to the academy itself.

Dr. Yanikoski and I asked ourselves if it was possible for all the nation’s Catholic institutions of higher learning to speak with one voice about this service: to “get past” what makes us different from one another and subscribe to a description of what we are *all* trying to accomplish and, in making such a declaration, let it be known how we set ourselves apart on the landscape of American higher education. We imagined that making even “untested” claims about what all Catholic colleges and universities actually do might invigorate a national conversation about what our “vocation” as Catholic institutions might be and, as well, what the future of Catholic higher education might look like.

In setting out — not just who we are, but — what we do, a declaration would need to focus on the service Catholic institutions of higher education provide: to society, Church and academy. During Seton Hall’s University Mission Seminar, the participants are engaged in a conversation about whether, and in what ways, Seton Hall actually attends to its vocation — the service we are called to offer to its three “publics.”
Catholic Higher Education in Service to Society

In considering a Catholic institution’s contribution to society at large, seven of our claims focus on what it might mean to be a “prophetic voice,” how we demonstrate a “preferential option for the poor,” what “good corporate citizenship” might look like, and how our programs and research attend to the “common good.”

1. Catholic colleges and universities serve as a “prophetic voice” within a larger society typically described in terms of secularism, individualism, and consumerism.
2. Professional schools at Catholic colleges and universities distinctively advance the moral, ethical, and normative practices of graduates and their respective professions.
3. Our institutions demonstrate a “preferential option for the poor” in our admission practices, hiring, research priorities, teaching, and civic relations.
4. Various curricula, service learning programs and student affairs programming at Catholic colleges and universities demonstrate a particular facility in teaching students a higher-than-ordinary commitment to civic responsibility, human interdependence, and the common good.
5. Our centers, institutes and sponsored projects address societal needs in an exemplary and distinctive fashion, improving public policy, strengthening non-profit organizations and enhancing effective and ethical practices in government and business.
6. Catholic colleges and universities are models of good corporate citizenship.
7. Catholic institutions of higher education collaborate at regional, national and international levels to improve societal organizations and the quality of public life.

Catholic Higher Education in Service to the Church

How do Catholic colleges and universities serve the Church which, in many different ways, sponsors them? Five of our claims focus on the ways our graduates eventually devote themselves to ecclesial service, how we assist the other institutions of the Church like Catholic schools, hospitals and social service agencies, and how we serve the Church’s “intellectual apostolate.”

8. Graduates of Catholic colleges and universities typically add value in comparison to what other adults bring to the Church in terms of vocations, leadership, volunteerism, generosity, sacramental participation and lay ministry.
9. Our degree, certificate and pro bono service programs are specifically designed to assist other Catholic organizations, such as schools, hospitals, diocesan offices and Catholic Charities.
10. Research at Catholic colleges and universities advances the “intellectual apostolate” of the Church.
11. Catholic colleges and universities support the work of evangelization and catechesis beyond their own internal academic community.
12. Faculty at Catholic colleges and universities have assisted the Church in advancing ecumenical and interfaith dialogue, as well as in addressing the growing diversity and salient divisions within both the American and global Catholic faith community.

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Catholic Higher Education in Service to the Academy

Our last eight untested claims intend to encourage conversation about how our institutions serve the academy. How do we model best practices regarding the exercise of academic freedom, employment practices and campus protocols? How do we provide “corporate witness” to the Church’s social justice teachings in our programs and research? And in what ways do we contribute to the “culture” of the academy?

13. Catholic colleges and universities assist one another (e.g., cross-registration of students, joint research, student and faculty exchanges, shared overseas programs, the Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities, the Association for Student Affairs at Catholic Colleges and Universities, religious order initiatives like the Association of Jesuit Colleges and Universities and, on a global level, the International Federation of Catholic Universities).

14. Employment practices, statements of faculty rights and responsibilities, ethical norms and campus protocols at Catholic colleges and universities serve as exemplary models for wider use.

15. Catholic colleges and universities implement academic freedom and tenure provisions in a manner which gives special attention to the “common good” criterion stated in the AAUP’s 1940 Statement of Principles on Academic Freedom and Tenure: “Institutions of higher education are conducted for the common good and not to further the interest of either the individual teacher or the institution as a whole.”

16. There are distinctive curricular elements at Catholic colleges and universities that offer promise to other higher educational institutions.

17. Student Affairs practices at Catholic colleges and universities are both exemplary and potentially applicable to other institutions.

18. Catholic institutions of higher learning cooperate in a special way with one another in order to build up the Catholic academic community.

19. Catholic institutions of higher education collaborate with other universities and agencies in order to promote and give corporate witness to the Church’s social teaching.

20. There are many ways in which Catholic colleges help to change the dominant academic culture from one of suspicion, criticism, and competition to one of appreciation, openness, humility, seriousness, cooperation, and hope.

The Future

After offering our University Mission Seminar many times now, we at Seton Hall recognize that many of these claims require significant testing.

A week before the session on “What Makes a University Catholic,” the seminar participants are given a list of these twenty claims and are asked to consider them: Is each of these a strength at Seton Hall, one of its weaknesses, or do the participants feel they do not have enough information and experience to make such an evaluation? The conversation encouraged by this exercise has made all of us aware of how far we have come in actuating our Catholic identity and mission. It has also given us insights into where there may be need for sharper focus and deepened commitment.

Making these twenty claims is quite different from verifying them — not just at our venerable institution, but at all of the 230 colleges and universities that call themselves Catholic. It is our hope that, one day, the nation’s Catholic institutions of higher education will, indeed, be able to make a public declaration of how we respond to our institutional vocation.
Since 2002, our Lilly-funded Center for Vocation and Servant Leadership has provided the University with many initiatives that support both the individual and personal vocations of our students, our faculty and our staff — and we will always be grateful for the Endowment’s generosity. With the University Mission Seminar, especially, Seton Hall now has an ongoing forum for discussing our collective and institutional calling — our vocation to heal the seemingly intractable societal conditions festering at our gates, but even more: our vocation to be a servant leader not just in society, but in the Church and the academy as well.

1. I owe a debt of gratitude to Seton Hall University’s Monsignor Richard Liddy and the late Dr. William Toth who helped draft the proposal we sent to Lilly Endowment.

2. This question has been asked by many theologians and philosophers, and others, over the last several years. A good example would be Gregory J. Coulter’s “What Makes a University Catholic?” delivered at a 1994 seminar, “The Idea of Catholic University,” at the University of St. Thomas. To access the essay, go to: http://www.shc.edu/theolibrary/edu.htm.

3. See Neil G. McCluskey, S.J., The Catholic University, Neil G. McCluskey, (University of Notre Dame Press: Notre Dame, IN, 1970). While the United States Bishops authored an American application of the norms outlined in Ex corde in 2000, their document is recognized as a charter, of sorts, for how Catholic colleges and universities are to live out their mission and identity, it is written “to” and “for” such institutions, but not “by” them.
The Vocation of the Catholic University: 
Reconsidering Christian Humanism and the Role of the Arts

Ki Joo Choi

A remarkable feature of contemporary academic life is the renewed interest in the question of what universities and colleges are called to do. While most institutions of higher learning would not necessarily employ the term, such a question is certainly a question of academic vocation. Motivations for this return to the question of academic vocation are numerous and varied, but one that stands out distinctively is the economic realities of today’s colleges and universities. Specifically, as any parent accompanying their child through the college application process nowadays can very well attest, the cost of a college education in recent years has soared and continues to soar. At many schools, the total cost of tuition, room, and board over four years can cost more than the average price of a single family home in many American neighborhoods. As a result, private college education, especially, has become increasingly out of the reach of many lower, moderate, and even middle class Americans. To be sure, recent moves by some of the richest universities, such as Harvard and Yale, will help to mitigate the problems of rising tuition, but the issue of affordability is far from resolved. For this reason, many colleges and universities find themselves engaged in discussions about whether what they provide is actually worth the increasing costs. What exactly is our vocation—at the macro, institutional level and at the more micro level of specific disciplines and departments? More personally, what is the vocation of the individual academic or scholar?

One response that is often reiterated is that the goals of the academy are simply the expansion of knowledge. Part of the subtext to such a view is the idea that the goals of the academy are not primarily social or political, but merely the pursuit of scholarly excellence. Of course, this is not to assume that scholarly excellence is irrelevant to the wider society but that this is only a consequence, not a first cause. In this sense, the primary goals are not to make students “the most generous, patient, good-hearted and honest people on earth,” as Stanley Fish recently described, but to merely bring honor to itself—that is, we ought to pursue scholarship with the intent of producing scholarly excellence. So, in speaking about the humanities in particular, Fish argues that the “humanities are their own good.”

Variations on such a position are numerous, but one that has taken particular hold of the modern academy is what Anthony Kronman, the former dean of Yale Law School, refers to as political liberalism. Kronman argues that the most ardent defenders of political liberalism in the academy are those who are the most committed to diversity in higher education. One reason often advanced is that consideration of the possible social relevance of the work of the academic disciplines inevitably assumes a particular notion of the human, social good. The reality of diversity demands that we recognize that there are competing, diverse visions of the good life. Accordingly, this reality requires neutrality on the question of the social relevance of the academic enterprise, lest we commit the “sin” of moral hegemony.

From the perspective of Catholic universities and colleges, the values of political liberalism ought not to be overlooked but taken as a cautionary note. Political liberalism at its best, I think, constitutes an important guard against ideological appropriations of academic scholarship (or ideologically driven education). But given the political, economic, and social context that so many college students will enter upon graduation, I think it is fair, perhaps urgent, to ask whether the utility of political liberalism has come and gone. Consider for instance some global economic realities. The Princeton philosopher Peter Singer recently highlighted several striking statistics from UNICEF: approximately 30,000 children die every day (or approximately 10 million children a year) from poverty related causes. More specifically,
half a million children die a year from rotavirus. Additionally, approximately a billion people live on one U.S. dollar a day, while approximately another billion of the global population are considered affluent. Astonishingly, these economic realities are not new developments, but magnifications of what was noted as the increasing economic divide between rich and poor in the mid-twentieth century by Vatican Council II. For example, Gaudium et Spes, Vatican II’s “Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World,” remarked that “[i]n no other age has humanity enjoyed such an abundance of wealth, resources and economic well-being; and yet a huge proportion of the people of the world is plagued by hunger and extreme need while countless millions are totally illiterate.” With globalization, the internationalization of capitalist institutions and forces, the ascendancy of transnational corporations, and the rising and enveloping culture of consumerism and consumption, issues of global poverty, the disparity between rich and poor, and the precariousness of human dignity have not only persisted but deepened.

Global poverty was one of the “signs of the times” of Vatican Council II—and is it not more so today? While I do not want to claim that these dire economic realities are the only pressing realities that face our communities, our educational institutions, and/or our students, the realities of global poverty raise serious questions about what we as members of the academy are responsible for—what exactly is our calling as scholars and educators? And it seems to me that given the tens of millions of people whose lives hang in the balance—and the way in which the kind of choices we make (consumer, political, even career choices) tip that balance in one direction or another—the values of political liberalism seem insufficient. That human lives, literally, are at stake raises the question of whether political liberalism is a compelling and adequate set of values for the organization and self-understanding of our teaching and scholarly-research enterprises, particularly in a Catholic setting.

What then might be an alternative to political liberalism? If the “signs of the times” are to be taken as an important, necessary methodological point of departure for how we ought to be in the world, then both Michael Buckley, S.J., and David Hollenbach, S.J, may indeed be correct in calling for a retrieval of Christian humanism within Catholic universities and colleges. To be sure, the very idea of Christian humanism is today a contested notion, at least within the academic fields of religious studies and theology. Much of the controversy centers around issues of identity, traditionalism, ecclesial particularity, challenges of modernity (and post-modernity, if there is such a thing), the prospects for mutual understanding, and so on. But despite the “politics” of Christian humanism, the values of Christian humanism, in distinction to the values of political liberalism, may prove more relevant and pressing today. Accordingly, the theological reflections of the great twentieth-century Jesuit, Karl Rahner, may be necessary more than ever to the self-understanding of contemporary Catholic higher education.

To the question of why Christian humanism and what it means for the vocation of scholars, educators, and academic institutions, Rahner provides key insights. Like the idea of Christian humanism itself, Rahner is a contested figure in many contemporary theological circles. But the level of disagreement he now engenders within Catholic and broader Christian communities are good indications that his work is serious enough to wrangle over and thus certainly worthy of sustained consideration.

At its most basic, Christian humanism, Rahner tells us, indicates a theological account of why the sphere of human affairs ought to be a critical focus for the Christian in general and the Christian theologian more specifically. Insofar as God makes himself known to us in the person of Jesus Christ who is the “the God-man,” Rahner claims that “Christianity acknowledges an absolute meaning and validity in every concrete human being.” One of the difficulties of Rahner’s Christian humanism is simply deciphering and moving through his highly dense and abstract theological descriptions. In more specific and non-technical terms, Rahner’s essential point is simply that in loving our neighbor—in “the shape
of self-forgetfulness”—we experience an “absolute origin that is not ourselves,” that is, the love of God. Thus, for Rahner, because of the God-man Christ and the drama of salvation this God-man signifies, “there exists an original and ultimate unity of the love of God and of one’s neighbor...so that...the love of God only occurs (and man only knows who God is) when man loves his neighbour.”

The concrete significance of the unity of love of neighbor and love of God is that the salvation of the individual person is not mediated in some sort of esoteric spirituality or in splendid isolation outside of human history. Rather, it is mediated in the human sphere, when, to be more specific, she, in selfless responsibility and freedom, serves all her fellow-persons.

The theologian is aware that—if man is essentially a “political” being—this love of one’s neighbour must not be the mere inclination of the affections or private intercommunication, which can be the most sublime form of egoism precisely because it can be so intimate and bring such happiness, but must become the sober service of “political” love as well, whose concern is the whole of mankind, turning the most distant person into the nearest neighbour and having occasion to hold the nearest person sternly at a distance.

But for Rahner, love of neighbor does not merely mean loving the other near and far. It also means loving the other in all her dimensions: personal, public, economic, political, and cultural. As Rahner writes, “the actual mediation of this salvation cannot be solely a matter of the individual’s inner life, but must itself be a historical and social quantity, service to one’s ‗neighbor,’ in whom all men are present.”

The foregoing underscores why Rahner thinks that Christian theology must always be “political theology.” As pertaining to the political, theology’s task is above all to inquire about and announce “what and who man is,” The human person, says Rahner, is one whose very being is by virtue of God’s desire to be in relationship. To love God, therefore, is to stand in the presence of God who is absolute mystery and humanity’s destiny. This love, however, can only be actualized in historical existence, which means through the love of neighbor. Correlatively, Rahner suggests that theology as political theology is a kind of practical theology, which is to say a theology that informs humanity of how to love, or the manner in which one ought to practice her call to love neighbor. True neighbor love entails a profound attentiveness to the social well-being of the other. After all, is not the human person a being who exists in political communities, participates in civic societies and economic systems, is a member of a family, seeks friendships? Loving the neighbor divorced from such social concerns is an impoverished if not empty love. While human personhood is not wholly determined by the world (Rahner is not a materialist), human personhood abstracted from the world would belie the reality of human creatureliness.

In referring to theology as political or practical, Rahner is trying to suggest that God’s grace—as revealed to us in the God-man Christ—invites us to God’s “absolute future” or “the ‘kingdom of God’.” At the same time, the actualization of this invitation involves the task of working toward what he refers to as a “concrete humanism” or the “human future.” This is another way of saying that the Christian cannot, above all, be neglectful of our present history, the social condition of the human person. The Christian must always seek a more humane existence in the service or anticipation of the coming Kingdom of God in its fullness. So Rahner claims, “we are obliged to say that the creation of a humane future is not something optional for the Christian, but is the means by which he prepares himself in actuality and not merely in theory, for God’s absolute future.” It is in this sense that Rahner thinks that Christian theology is a humanistic endeavor, that is, an endeavor that seeks further understanding of human nature and, correlatively, the flourishing of human personhood in the world. And insofar as theology’s task is humanistic in this manner, Rahner thinks that Christian theology should exist in solidarity with other “humanisms” or the non-theological disciplines. This is a striking statement in its recognition...
of other academic, scholarly disciplines as partners to theology in furthering understanding of the human person and the pursuit of the humane future. In fact, Rahner can be read as suggesting that the other disciplines may at times be better positioned and equipped to deepen such knowledge of human personhood.21

For Rahner, one can call Christianity a kind of humanism insofar as “it can enter into dialogue with other humanisms.”22 But this dialogue must entail the recognition by the other humanisms that their claims about the human person are not absolute, but must be seen as contributing to the fullness of what it means to be human in the world. In fact, Rahner thinks that one of theology’s tasks is to remind the non-theological disciplines of this recognition: that no one discipline’s work is of unqualified certainty and value. Theology, therefore, is to be prophetic. Rahner is unambiguous on this point. “Christianity does not erect a particular concrete humanism but denies it an absolute value.”23 Later, he states more forcefully, “But Christianity pronounces judgment on any humanism which sets itself up as absolute and thus explicitly or implicitly tries to inhibit man’s openness to further concrete history and hence to God’s absolute future.”24

The task of dialogue between the various disciplines or humanisms is, more specifically, to gain “clearer awareness of those hoped-for aspects of the future which have as yet been anticipated only dimly—justice, freedom, dignity, unity and diversity in society.”25 Theology, therefore, must learn from the other humanisms if it is to better contribute to the humane future. In turn, the other humanisms must take it upon themselves to affirm that their findings about the human person are not the singular answer to the question of the humane future, that is, to the promotion of “justice, freedom, dignity, unity and diversity in society.” Such matters cannot be resolved by the work of only one discipline (as if one discipline can have the “future tucked away in his pocket like a complete five-year plan”), but requires mutual collaboration of all. As Rahner opines, “Must Christian and non-Christian humanists be enemies? I do not think so, provided that both sides realize that their obligations are to the future....”27 The task of theology and the non-theological disciplines is to work together as humanists, which is to say, to contribute in mutually sustaining ways to the advancement of human flourishing. This task is frustrated when one discipline claims that it knows once and for all the solution to such advancement, i.e. the humane future. The fullness of the humane future belongs to God in the coming and full realization of his Kingdom and not to any one humanism, whether theology or the non-theological disciplines. It is this very anticipation of the coming Kingdom that warrants epistemic humility in all humanistic endeavors; the theologian as well as the scientist—all humanists!—must be open to continuous inquiry, to each others’ insights. Such openness, then, marks our love and hope for the future that is here and yet to come.

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Rahner’s Christian humanism provides a conceptual framework that advances the importance or, quite possibly, the necessity of pluralistic discourse, that is, discourse between all the humanisms or disciplines of human inquiry. At the very least, such a conception reframes the academic vocation of universities and colleges away from the valuational neutrality of political liberalism to the prophetic. Our call—as theologians, economists, jurists, historians, anthropologists, scientists and many others—is not to remove oneself from the fundamental questions of the good life, but to engage our work as both scholars and teachers in the service of such questions. More specifically, the vocation of a Catholic university—as a society of various humanisms—is mutual collaboration, dialogue, and inquiry toward the fullness of human personhood, i.e., toward a humane future, “justice, freedom, dignity, unity and diversity in society.” Only in pursuing such mutual deliberation, can we realize more deeply what all human persons are called to do in response to God’s love for us: love the neighbor. Scholarship and education, then, takes place in view of service to others—or, a readiness to love. How does what we do as scholars and teachers contribute to the human person, to her dignity, well-being, or flourishing, whether in the political or non-political, in the public or private, the religious or secular? This is the question that ought to inform the
academic vocation of Catholic higher education, so long as the values of Christian humanism and not that of political liberalism are given priority. Otherwise, scholarship and teaching within the parameters of neutrality in the way political liberalism defines it can too easily underscore and enable the kind of individualism that can be as detrimental as the moral hegemony that political liberalism so fears. If questions of the good life—or the question of the humane future as Christian humanism would put it—are bracketed from our studies, teachings, and research and consigned to the domain of personal, private, or individual decision, then knowledge is subject to one’s own valuations—knowledge and education is only valuable to the extent that it is valuable to me. In a society in which so many lives hang in the balance, in a society in which one’s choices can affect dramatically the well being of a fellow person near and far, is the appropriation of knowledge and education for the mere advancement of one’s competitive advantage sufficient? Is it responsible? The question of responsibility—to whom are we accountable in our work as scholars and teachers—is at the heart of education that is driven by the spirit of Christian humanism.

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But how might a Catholic university foster the kind of mutual deliberation among the disciplines that Christian humanism proposes as necessary to the more genuine realization of humanity’s call to love our neighbor? In addition to Christian humanism, I want to propose in these final paragraphs that Catholic universities and colleges need to engender what one could call Christian aestheticism. It may be more precise to refer to Christian aestheticism as a constituent part of Christian humanism insofar as its aim is to promote the culture of Christian humanism. In any event, by Christian aestheticism I mean to propose a privileged place for the arts in the academy and a retrieval of beauty. Again, Rahner proves insightful as a point of departure. Consider his reflections on poetry. Like our discussion of his conception of Christian humanism, love of neighbor figures prominently in Rahner’s discussion of poetry. If in loving neighbor we become open to the grace of God, then “the capacity and the practice of perceiving the poetic work is a presupposition” of loving the neighbor and thus “hearing the word of God,” of being receptive to God’s grace. But why? Because God has revealed himself to us as the Word made flesh. This returns us to earlier comments about the significance of the God-man Christ. More specifically, it calls attention to the reality that “the human word has existed as the embodiment of the Word of God…[A]nd ever since this Word has been heard in its permanent embodiment, there [has been a] brightness and a secret promise in every word.” But not literally in every human word but, more specifically, in the word of poetry.

Rahner ascribes particular power to the poetic word; it can school us to hear God’s grace more acutely, profoundly, or urgently in its capacity to appeal to the heart and not merely the intellect. The power of poetry lies in its capacity to confront its audience with the question of who they are.

In doing so, he [the hearer of the poetic word] may be entangled in guilt, perversity, hatred of self and diabolical pride, he may see himself as a sinner and identify himself with his sin. But even so, he is more exposed to the happy danger of meeting God, than the narrow-minded Philistine who always skirts cautiously the chasms of existence, to stay on the superficial level where one is never faced with doubts—nor with God.

But what does it exactly mean to say that the poetic word has the capacity of exposing us “to the happy danger of meeting God?” Interestingly, Rahner alludes to a theme we have already witnessed in his reflections on Christian humanism: in the poetic word, “we go therein to meet the unique future that calls us.” This is the future that God promises, his Kingdom, which is here but not yet in its fullness.
Rahner does not think that all persons will be affected by the power of poetry. As he admits, “It cannot be objected that there are enough true Christians who have no truck with the Muses.” Some will possess the “faculties which the poet and those open to poetry possess,” while others will lack them. But while he may not be a naïve aesthetic idealist, Rahner’s primary aim is to argue for the normative significance of poetry. From a Christian stance, should poetry be relegated to the level of secondary concern, or should it be supported and allowed to flourish more than it often is today? In some instances, poetry may indeed fall on deaf ears (especially “under the achievements of technological skill and suffocated by the chatter of the masses”), but does that necessarily mean that to speak of the evocative power of poetry is ultimately hollow speech? Insofar as God’s revelation of himself to us is mediated and through our worldly reality, particularly in the human word (once again, this reflects the reality of the God-man Christ), the poetic word can constitute opportunities for focused moments of inquiry about the Word of God. This is a normative claim, despite whatever challenges the poetic word may encounter in reality. “Because it grows out of the divine word which bears within it the inmost essence of the poetic word,” Rahner claims that “the poetic word is also promised ever new victories in endless struggle.”

What are these victories? At the very least, it includes the perception of the good. That is, to hear the Word of God in the worldly, human words of poetry is to also perceive the good. Stated more specifically, to encounter the Word in the human word is to also encounter who we are and thus hear what we are called to be. Such a claim underscores the more general notion or premise that the inquiry and perception of what is real or true through the poetic word illumines at the same time what we ought to be and do.

If poetry links the true and the good, then Christian humanism requires the cultivation of the poetic word; it must be allowed to be spoken and heard! With respect to the idea of the Catholic university, we might say that a university that does not actively foster and promote the arts (and for Rahner this means especially poetry) dis-empowers its capacity to manifest the values of Christian humanism. It is the arts that offer those moments in which we, the members of the academic community, can reflect more deeply on our academic vocation by inquiring about what it means to be human and thus what our responsibilities ought to be to each other—in other words, the good.

But how can this be so? How might the poetic word, in its capacity to touch our hearts, incite deliberation about the true and, correlatively, the good? The literary theorist Elaine Scarry offers one possibility in her slim but provocative text On Beauty and Being Just. While the primary focus of the text is the rehabilitation of the concept of beauty within the modern academy, Scarry’s implicit aim in this rehabilitation is garnering greater support for the arts in general. For Scarry, a basic attribute of beauty—its perception, whether in a poem, painting, landscape, or libretto—is its capacity to “[invite] the search for something beyond itself.” Accordingly, Scarry argues that “the moment we see something beautiful, we undergo a radical decentering.” “We willingly cede our ground to the thing that stands before us.” The self, one’s own interest and desires, are no longer the primary object of attention, but now exists in the “service of something else.” The beautiful painting, the beautiful narrative, or perhaps the beautiful poem, to the extent that it is truly beautiful, incites inquiry, the desire to know more deeply the nature of the beautiful object perceived and the reality it points to. Can we not recall moments when upon suddenly seeing something beautiful we find ourselves staring more intently, asking out loud or to ourselves what it is that we are seeing? Or, what it is that we are reading? Even hearing? Or, more generally, what the object in question is all about? It is in these moments of inquiry that we begin to forget our own notions (in fact, the very act of inquiry requires that we let go of our preconceptions or regard them more tentatively), and in so doing we begin to find ourselves “standing in a different relation to the world that we were a moment before.” We no longer stand alone, but in relation to another; we come face to
face, even for a brief moment and sometimes for sustained periods of time, with the experience of selflessness and other-regard.42

Can a university exist without the arts? Yes, certainly. But such a place may very well be a place of diminished moral discourse—a place in which discussion of the humane future, about who we are and our responsibilities to each other, are far from robust and sustained. The demands and deadlines of daily academic life, for both educators and students, can too easily foster an inward turn. But what about a community actively committed to the life of the arts, in their plurality? In their capacity to draw us to themselves, we are drawn away from ourselves. Such a movement of the mind and heart are requisites of a community capable of engaging one another in discourse and mutual deliberation about ourselves and our world. The arts in the academy, therefore, are a kind of school within a school, promoting the habits and dispositions integral to the culture of Christian humanism.

6. The neutrality of political liberalism as an educational philosophy draws upon the larger public and legal philosophy of liberalism as developed in the American context. See, for instance, Rogers M. Smith, Liberalism and American Constitutional Law, second edition (Harvard University Press, 1990).
9. Ibid., 165.
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid., 201.
15. Ibid., 191.
16. Ibid., 191, 195.
17. See, for example, ibid., 191.
18. Ibid., 189.
19. Ibid., 196, 201.
20. Ibid., 201.
21. Ibid., 192.
22. Ibid., 194.
23. Ibid.
24. Ibid., 197.
25. Ibid., 203, emphasis added.
26. Ibid., 203.
27. Ibid., 202-203.
29. Ibid., 362.
30. Ibid.
31. Ibid., 360.
32. Ibid., 365.
33. Ibid.
34. Ibid., 363.
35. Ibid., 364.
36. Ibid.
38. Ibid., 111.
39. Ibid., 112.
40. Ibid., 113.
41. Ibid., 112.
42 See also Iris Murdoch, “The Sovereignty of Good Over Other Concepts,” in *Sovereignty of Good* (Routledge Classics, 2001, 1970): “Beauty is the convenient and traditional name of something which art and nature share, and which gives a fairly clear sense to the idea of quality of experience and change of consciousness. I am looking out of my window in an anxious and resentful state of mind, oblivious of my surroundings, brooding perhaps on some damage done to my prestige. Then suddenly I observe a hovering kestrel. In a moment everything is altered. The brooding self with its hurt vanity has disappeared. There is nothing now but kestrel. And when I return to thinking of the other matter it seems less important….Art, and by ‘art’ from now on I mean good art, not fantasy art, affords us a pure delight in the independent existence of what is excellent. Both in its genesis and its enjoyment it is a thing totally opposed to selfish obsession.” (82-83)
ABOUT THE PARTICIPANTS
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Center for Vocation and Servant Leadership

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The Center for Vocation and Servant Leadership advances Seton Hall University’s mission to prepare a new generation of leaders for Church and society by challenging the University community to be attentive to God’s call, responsive to the common good, and mindful of the example of Christ who came to serve and not to be served.

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