

SOMETHING GREAT THAT IS LOVE (V): How Do We Discover Our Vocation?

The sun has set in Judea. Nicodemus comes to Jesus seeking answers for the restlessness in his heart. With his features lit by the flickering lamp flame, his dialogue with Jesus opens up a new and mysterious world to him. The Nazarene's replies to his questions leave him perplexed. Jesus assures him: *The wind blows where it wills, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know whence it comes or whither it goes; so it is with every one who is born of the Spirit (Jn 3:8)*. A vocation, every vocation, is a mystery, and discovering it is a gift of the Spirit.

The book of Proverbs says: *Three things are too wonderful for me; four I do not understand: the way of an eagle in the sky, the way of a serpent on a rock, the way of a ship on the high seas, and the way of a man with a maiden (Prov 30:18-19)*. Even more so, who, without God's help, can decipher the workings of grace in a soul, and discover the meaning and destiny of a life? Who, without being guided by the gifts of the Holy Spirit, can know *whence it comes or whither it goes*—the divine breath in the soul that is often audible only as longing and restlessness, inklings and hopes? This is something that totally surpasses us. Hence the first thing we need in order to discern our personal calling is humility: falling on our knees before the ineffable, opening our heart to the action of the Holy Spirit, always able to surprise us.

Therefore to discover our own vocation, or help someone else to do so, it is impossible “to offer prefabricated formulas, or rigid methods or rules.”¹ That would be like trying “to place rails on the ever original action of the Holy Spirit,”² which *blows where it wills*. Cardinal Ratzinger was once asked: “how many paths are there for reaching God?” With disarming simplicity he replied: “as many as there are people.”³ There are as many histories of vocation as there are men and women. Below we will try to point out some of the most frequent signs for reaching a conviction about one's own vocation, in order to help us to recognize them.

A restless heart

Nicodemus senses a restlessness in his heart. He has heard Jesus preach and been moved by his words. Nevertheless, some of his teachings have scandalized him. Certainly, witnessing Jesus' miracles has amazed him, but he has also been unsettled by the authority with which Jesus expels the merchants from the Temple, calling it “my Father's house” (cf. *Jn 2:16*). Who would dare to speak like this. In his heart he senses a growing hope that he finds it hard to repress. Could this be the Messiah? But he is still assailed by questions and doubts. He can't bring himself to follow Jesus openly, although he wants to find answers to his questions. So he goes to

¹ Saint Josemaria, *Letter*, 6 May 1945, no. 42.

² *Ibid.*

³ Joseph Ratzinger, *The Salt of the Earth*, Ignatius Press, 1997, p. 34.

Him at night: *Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do, unless God is with him (Jn 3:2)*. His heart is restless.

The same thing happens to other people in the Gospel, like that young man who came up to Jesus one day and asked: *Teacher, what good deed must I do, to have eternal life? (Mt 19:16)*. He isn't satisfied with his life. His heart is uneasy. He senses that he is capable of doing more. Jesus tells him that he is right to be searching: *You lack one thing... (Mk 10:21)*. We can also recall here the apostles Andrew and John. When Jesus sees them following Him He asks: *What do you seek? (Jn 1:38)*. All of these people are "searchers." They are searching for a marvelous turn of events that will transform their life and make it an adventure. Their heart is open and hungry for more, filled with dreams and longings. Restless.

A young person once asked Saint Josemaria how one sensed a vocation to the Work. He replied: "It's not a matter of feeling, my son, although we realize when God is calling us. The heart is uneasy, unsatisfied.... You aren't happy with yourself!"⁴ Often when searching for one's own vocation, everything begins with this restlessness in the heart.

A loving presence

But what exactly is this restlessness? Where does it come from? In recounting the scene of the young man who draws close to our Lord, Saint Mark says that Jesus *looking upon him loved him (Mk 10:21)*. He does the same with us. Somehow we sense in our soul the "presence" of a special love choosing us for a unique mission. God makes himself present in our heart, and seeks an "encounter," communion. But this has not yet been achieved, and hence our restlessness.

This loving presence of God in the soul can be manifested in various ways: a hunger for greater intimacy with Him; the eagerness to satisfy, through my own life, God's thirst for souls; the desire to build up the Church, God's family in the world; the longing to see our talents truly bear fruit; the dream of alleviating so much suffering in every corner of the world; the awareness of how many gifts we have received: "Why have I received so much and others so little?"

God's call can also be revealed through apparently fortuitous events, which stir our heart and leave an imprint there. When reflecting on his own life, Saint Josemaria said: "Our Lord was preparing me in spite of myself, using apparently innocuous things to instill a divine restlessness in my soul. Thus I came to understand very well that love, so human and so divine, that moved Saint Therese of the Child Jesus when, leafing through the pages of a book, she suddenly came upon a picture of one of the Redeemer's wounded hands. Things like that happened to me too—things that moved me and led me to daily Communion, to purification, to confession, and to penance."⁵

⁴ Saint Josemaria, Notes from a family gathering, *Cronica*, 1974, vol. I, p. 529.

⁵ Saint Josemaria, Meditation, 14 February 1964. Cited in Andres Vasquez de Prada, *The Founder of Opus Dei*, vol. 1, p. 67.

This loving presence is sometimes also discovered through people or ways of living the Gospel that leave a lasting divine imprint on our soul. Although at times it may be an unexpected event or encounter that changes our life, usually our calling takes shape through the way we have lived our life up to this moment. Finally, words from Sacred Scripture may engrave themselves on our heart and leave a loving savor that lasts our whole life. This is what happened to Saint Teresa of Calcutta, for example, by hearing Jesus' cry on the Cross: *I thirst (Jn 19:28)*; or to Saint Francis Xavier, whose life was changed by Jesus' question: *For what will it profit a man, if he gains the whole world and forfeits his life? (Mt 16:26)*.

But perhaps what is most characteristic of this restlessness in the heart is that it is marked by what we could call a "painful appeal." As Saint Paul VI said, God's call comes to us as "a voice that is both unsettling and calming at the same time, a gentle and imperious voice, a bothersome and yet loving voice."⁶ The call both attracts and repels us; it spurs us to abandon ourselves to divine love, while frightening us with the risk of our freedom. "We resist saying 'yes' to God; we both want to and don't want to."⁷

Connecting the dots in prayer

Nicodemus comes to Jesus spurred by his restlessness. The lovable figure of our Lord has already entered his heart; he has already begun to love Him, but he needs to speak with Him. In the dialogue that follows, the Master opens up new horizons to him: *Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born anew, he cannot see the kingdom of God*. He invites him to a new life, a new beginning: *to be born of water and the Spirit (Jn 3:5)*. Nicodemus fails to understand our Lord's words, and he asks with simplicity: how can this come about? (cf. *Jn 3:9*). In this face to face encounter, he begins to realize who he is for Jesus, and who Jesus should be for him.

In order for the restlessness in a person's heart to take on its true meaning in the discerning of one's vocation, it needs to be "read" and interpreted in prayer, in our dialogue with God. "Why is his happening to me now, Lord? What are you trying to tell me? Why does my heart have these longings and yearnings? Why am I so unsettled by this and those around me aren't affected? Why do you love me so much? How can I make the best use of these gifts you have given me?" Only the habitual disposition of prayer will enable us to rightly grasp God's loving care—his Providence—in the events in our life, in the people we have come to know, and even in how our character has been shaped, with our interests and abilities. It is as though God, throughout our life's path, had been "drawing some dots," which only now, in uniting them in prayer, take on the shape of a recognizable picture.

Benedict XVI said in this regard: "the secret of the vocation lies in the relationship with God, in prayer that develops, precisely, in inner silence, in the capacity for listening, hearing that God is close. And this is true both before the decision, that is, at the time of deciding and setting

⁶ Saint Paul VI, Homily, 14 October 1968.

⁷ Saint Josemaria, Notes from a family gathering, *Cronica*, 1972, p. 460.

out, and afterwards, if one wants to be faithful and to persevere on the way.”⁸ Therefore for someone who is trying to decide on their vocation, the first and most important thing is to draw close to Jesus in prayer, and learn to see our own life with his eyes. Perhaps that person will experience what happened to the blind man whose eyes Jesus anointed with saliva. At first he sees with a clouded vision, and men look like trees that are walking. But he lets our Lord continue, and ends up seeing everything clearly (cf. *Mk* 8:22-25).

The “detonator”

Two years after that nighttime encounter with Jesus an event takes place that will force Nicodemus to make a decision and show himself openly as a disciple of our Lord. Urged on by the chief priests and Pharisees, Pilate crucifies Jesus of Nazareth. Joseph of Arimathea obtains permission to recover his body and bury it. Saint John recounts: “Nicodemus also, who had at first come to him by night, came” (*Jn* 19:39). The Cross of our Lord, the abandonment by his disciples, and perhaps the example of Joseph of Arimathea’s fidelity, challenge Nicodemus personally and force him to make a decision: “Others are doing this; what am I going to do for Jesus?”

A detonator is a small sensitive explosive device, usually set off by a fuse or electric spark, that detonates the more powerful and less sensitive main explosive. In the process of seeking one’s vocation, there is often an event that acts as a “detonator” for all the restlessness our heart harbors, giving it a clear meaning and pointing out a path with the impetus to follow it. This event can be of many different types, and its emotional charge can be greater or smaller. But the important thing is that, like the restlessness in the heart, it needs to be “read” and interpreted in the prayer.

The detonator can be a divine motion in the soul, or an unexpected encounter with a supernatural reality, as happened with Pope Francis when he was almost 17. It was during the month of September, and he was about to meet up with some friends to go out and have a good time. But he decided to stop for a moment in his parish church. There he saw a priest he didn’t know, but whose recollected attitude of prayer impressed him, so he decided to go to confession with him. “In that confession, something strange happened to me. I don’t know what it was, but it changed my life; I would say that I was ‘caught off guard.’ ... It was a surprise, the wonder of an encounter; I realized that I was being awaited. From that moment on for me, God is the one who ‘acts first.’ We seek him, but he seeks us first. We want to find him, but he finds us first.”⁹

At times the detonator will be the example of a close friend: “my friend has given himself to God, and what am I going to do?” Or it can be a warm invitation to accompany our friend on a specific path: “Come and see,” as Philip encouraged Nathanael (*Jn* 1:46). Or it can even be an

⁸ Benedict XVI, Meeting with Young People, Cathedral of Sulmona, 4 July 2010.

⁹ S. Rubin and F. Ambrogetti, *The Jesuit: Conversations with Cardinal Jorge Bergoglio*, SJ (Buenos Aires: Vergara, 2010), p. 45.

apparently trivial event, but one charged with meaning for someone whose heart is restless. God makes use of even very small things to stir up our soul. As happened to Saint Josemaria when, after a heavy snowfall, the Love of God came in search of him.

Often, however, rather than a sudden “detonation,” this process involves the slow maturing of faith and love, through prayer. Little by little, almost without realizing it, with God’s light a person attains moral certitude about his or her vocation, and reaches a decision, under the impulse of grace. Blessed John Henry Newman, when recalling the process of his own conversion, wrote regarding his growing doubts about the truth of the Anglican faith: “Certitude of course is a point, but doubt is a progress; I was not near certitude yet. Certitude is a reflex action; it is to know that one knows. I believe I had not that, till close upon my reception into the Catholic Church . . . Who can determine when it is, that the scales in the balance of opinion begin to turn, and what was a greater probability in behalf of a belief becomes a positive doubt against it?”¹⁰ The gradual process of maturing in the decision to give oneself that takes place little by little and without a sudden “shock,” is in reality usually much surer than that provoked by the brilliant flash of an external sign, which can easily dazzle and confuse us.

In any case, when presented with this “inflection point” in our life, not only do we begin to see our path clearly; our will is also moved to undertake this path. As Saint Josemaria wrote: “If you were to ask me how the divine call is perceived, how one becomes aware of it, I would say that it is a new outlook on life. It is as though a new light is lit within us, a mysterious impulse.”¹¹ The calling is light and impulse. Light in our minds, illumined by faith, to “read” our life; impulse in our heart, enkindled with God’s love, to want to follow our Lord’s invitation, even though it may be with the “painful appeal” that often marks God’s concerns. Therefore, each person should ask not only for “light to see their path but also the strength to want to unite themselves to the divine will.”¹²

The help of spiritual direction

We don’t know whether Nicodemus asked for advice from other disciples, before or after going to see Jesus. Perhaps it was Joseph of Arimathea himself who encouraged him to follow Jesus openly, without fearing the other Pharisees. If so, he would have led him to his definitive encounter with Jesus. This is what spiritual accompaniment or direction involves: being able to rely on the advice of someone who walks with us; someone who tries to live in harmony with God, who knows us well and loves us.

It’s true that the calling is always something between God and me. No one can see the vocation for me. No one can decide for me. God addresses me, invites me, and gives me the freedom to respond, and his grace to follow this path. Nevertheless, in this process of discerning

¹⁰ Blessed John Henry Newman, *Apologia Pro Vita Sua*, Macmillan, 1931, p. 233.

¹¹ Saint Josemaria, *Letter*, 9 January 1932.

¹² Fernando Ocariz, “Light to see, strength to want to.” Available at opusdei.org.

and deciding, it is a great help to be able to rely on an expert guide—among other reasons, in order to confirm that I possess the required objective qualities needed to undertake this path, and to ensure an upright intention in my decision to give myself to God. Moreover, as the *Catechism* teaches, a good spiritual director can become a teacher of prayer¹³: someone who helps us to read and interpret in our prayer the yearnings in our heart and the events in our life. Thus we can be helped to clarify our own calling. In the end, it is someone who can perhaps tell us one day, as Saint John told Saint Peter, on recognizing the Person speaking to them from the shore: “It is the Lord!” (*Jn* 21:7).

In any case, this discernment is to a large extent a personal path, as is also the final decision. God himself leaves us free. Even after the “detonator.” Hence, once the first step has been taken, it is easy for doubts to reappear. God never stops accompanying us, but He remains at a certain distance. It is certain that He has done everything, and will continue doing it, but now He wants us to take the final step with full freedom, with the freedom of love. He doesn’t want slaves, but children. And therefore He remains at a discreet distance, without forcing our conscience, almost we might say as an “observer.” He watches us and waits patiently and humbly for our decision.

“You will conceive in your womb and bear a son” (*Lk* 1:31). In the moment of silence that follows the announcement of the Archangel Saint Gabriel, the whole world seems to hold its breath. The divine message had been delivered. For years God’s voice has been speaking softly in our Lady’s heart. But now, God is silent. And He waits. Everything depends on the free response of that young girl in Nazareth. “And Mary said, Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word” (*Lk* 1:38). Years later, at the foot of the Cross, Mary will receive from the hands of Nicodemus the dead body of her Son. How moved would this recent disciple have been to see, amid such immense sorrow, the Mother of Jesus lovingly accept once again the paths of God: “let it be to me according to your word.” How could one not give everything for a love that is so great?

¹³ Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 2690.