

SOMETHING GREAT THAT IS LOVE (VIII): Am I making the right decision?

The apostles are thoughtful as they reflect on Jesus' recent encounter with the rich young man, and how it had ended: that young man *went away sorrowful* (Mt 19:22ff). They may be disconcerted at how Jesus had looked at him, not sorrowfully but yes with hurt in his eyes: *it will be hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven*. As on other occasions, Peter makes himself the spokesman for their shared concern: *Lo, we have left everything and followed you. What then shall we have?* Echoing these words, and with the same familiarity of a good friend, Saint Josemaria addressed our Lord in a difficult moment for the Work: "What will become of us? ... What are you going to do with us now? You can't abandon those who have placed their trust in You!"¹

What will become of me?

The beginning of a vocation, like the start of any path, usually brings with it an element of uncertainty. When God allows unrest to enter our heart, and we begin to sense that a specific path might be the right one for us, it's only natural that we ask ourselves: is this the right way?

What lies behind this doubt? First of all, this fear is quite normal. Fear about our life and our own decisions: we don't know what the future will bring, where this path is leading us, because we have never traveled it before. This doubt is also a sign of our desire to make the right decision; we want our life to be of value, to leave a mark. Moreover, any great and beautiful endeavor demands the best of us, and we don't want to rush into things. But the deepest reason is both more mysterious and simple at the same time: God is seeking us and we want to live with Him. Usually it is not God we are afraid of, but our own selves. Our own fragility in the face of such an immense Love unsettles us; we think we can never measure up to it.

When Peter asks Jesus "what will become of us"; when Saint Josemaria asks Jesus "what will become of us"; when a Christian asks Jesus "what will become of me" if I set out on this path, how does Christ respond? Jesus speaks right to our heart, his voice brimming with joy and affection. He tells us that each of us is a wager on God's part, and that God never loses his bets. Life entails adventure, risk, limitations, challenges, effort; it requires letting go of the small world we can control and discovering the beauty of dedicating our life to something greater than ourselves, that fully satisfies our hunger for

¹ Andres Vázquez de Prada, *The Founder of Opus Dei*, vol. III, Scepter, pp. 27-28.

happiness. We can imagine the keen look in Jesus' eyes when he speaks those words that have resounded and will continue to resound in many hearts: *every one who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or lands, for my name's sake, will receive a hundredfold, and inherit eternal life (Mt 19:29)*. God never gives in half measures.

Nevertheless, we can't expect to receive a crystal-clear revelation, or a plan spelled out down to the last detail. God has a plan in mind for us, but He also counts on our own initiative. "When a person is uncertain of a special call from God, one needs to ask the Holy Spirit for 'light to see' one's vocation. But if the person concerned and those whose role it is to help in the discerning of a vocation (for example, through spiritual direction) see no objective impediment, and if Providence (ordinarily through human channels) has actually guided that person towards that experience, then in addition to continuing to ask for 'light to see,' it is important (a first priority, I would say) to ask the Holy Spirit for 'strength to want to,' so that by that strength which lifts up freedom in time, the divine and eternal vocation itself may take shape."²

We are not alone: the Church accompanies us

In the process of discerning our own vocation we are never alone, since every vocation is born and takes shape in the Church. Through our Mother the Church, God attracts us towards Himself and calls us; and the Church herself welcomes and accompanies us on our path towards God.

The Church attracts. In the course of history, God makes use of people who open a deep furrow with their life, who mark out paths for the self-giving of others. Their life, their ideals, their teachings inspire and unsettle us; they draw us out of our selfishness and call us to a fuller life, a life of love. This call forms part of God's plans—of the action of the Holy Spirit who prepares the way for us.

The Church calls. God "doesn't ask for permission to 'complicate' our lives. He gets in... and that's that!"³ And to do so, He relies on his children's daring in inviting others to seriously consider the possibility of dedicating their life to Him. Jesus compared the Kingdom of Heaven to a great banquet that God wants all men and women to take part in, including those who initially didn't seem to be invited (cf. *Lk 14:15-24*). And in fact, God usually relies on an *external invitation* to make his voice resound in a person's heart.

Every vocation in the Church, when it meets with a loving response, leads to sanctity. Therefore the best vocation for each person is his or her own one. But no paths are closed "a priori." A life leading towards God in marriage or in celibacy is in principle

² Fernando Ocáriz, "Vocation to Opus Dei as a Vocation in the Church," in *Opus Dei in the Church*, Four Courts Press – Scepter Publishers, 1994, p. 89.

³ Saint Josemaria, *The Forge*, no. 902.

open to everyone. Our biography, our personal history, gradually shapes our own path and places us before specific choices. The choice depends on our personal freedom: it is just that, a choice. Christ wants us to be free: *if anyone wishes to follow me... (Mt 16:24); if you wish to be perfect... (Mt 19:21).*

But what leads a person to choose a specific vocation among all the possible ones? Our freedom seeks great horizons, divine horizons of love. Saint Ignatius of Antioch said: “Christianity is not a matter of persuasive words, but of greatness,”⁴ the greatness that is Christ’s love. It is enough to set forth a specific path in the Church in all its beauty and simplicity, through one’s life and words, for souls to be drawn to it by its own force, provided they let themselves be challenged by Christ (cf. *Mk 10:21*). Something in the person’s own heart—very intimate and deep, and mysterious even for that person—resonates in harmony with this proposal of a path within the Church. As the Greek philosopher said: like is known by like.⁵ The authentic life of other Christians calls us to draw close to Jesus and give Him our heart. We see an example of sanctity in people close to us and we think: “Perhaps I too...” It is the “come and see” of the Gospel, which challenges us here and now (*Jn 1:46*).

The Church welcomes and accompanies. Any normal person, even without experiencing a special call, can set out on a life of service and self-giving: in celibacy or in matrimony, in the priesthood, in the religious state. The discernment of each person’s vocation involves looking at the right intention and abilities of that person, his or her suitability for a specific path.

This discernment requires the help of other people, especially through spiritual direction. Moreover, it also requires the deliberation of those who govern the specific institution in the Church that is being considered as a possible path in life. The mission of welcoming, on the part of the Church, also involves making certain that each person finds his or her right place. If we reflect on it, clearly it is a divine blessing that, when trying to decide on the plan for our life, we find people in whom we can trust and who in turn trust us. Thus other people, with a deep knowledge of our personal situation, can state in conscience: “take heart, you can do it,” you have the required conditions and talent for this mission, which may be for you, and which you can accept, if you truly want to; or who can tell us, also in conscience: “perhaps this isn’t your path.”

A vocation is always a “win-win” situation. It is the best for each of the two sides of the relationship: the person in question and the Church institution involved. Our Father God follows each of these personal histories very closely with his loving providence. The Holy Spirit has raised up in the Church institutions and paths of holiness that can be a channel and help for specific people. And it is also the Holy Spirit who urges individuals,

⁴ Saint Ignatius of Antioch, *Letter to the Romans*, no. 3.

⁵ Aristotle, *De Anima* I, 2.

at a specific moment in their life, to enrich with their own self-giving these channels in the Church.

A leap of faith: trusting in God

Seeing the multitude of people following Him, Jesus asks Philip: *How are we to buy bread, so that these people may eat?* (Jn 6:5). The apostles realize very clearly that they can do nothing to provide for the hunger of so many people. They have only *five barley loaves and two fish* brought by a young boy. Jesus, taking the loaves, provides food for everyone, and so much is left over that He tells the disciples: *Gather up the fragments left over, that nothing may be lost* (v. 12). Only Jesus can ensure that nothing in our life is lost, that it is of service to all mankind; but we have to entrust all that we have to Him. Then He works miracles, and the first to benefit are we ourselves.

Trusting in God, opening to Him the doors of our life, leads us to have compassion on the multitude that is hungering for Him, like sheep without a shepherd. And to realize that He is relying on us to bring his Love to all these people. And then, to set out, because it is an endeavor we could never have conceived of on our own account. To set out, realizing that with God's help we will go forward: placing ourselves in his hands, relying totally on Him. And since God does not impose Himself on us, a "leap of faith" is needed: "Why don't you give yourself to God once and for all . . . really . . . now!"⁶

Certainly, one needs to consider things carefully. This is what the Church terms a period of discernment. But it is good to keep in mind that "discernment is not a solipsistic self-analysis or a form of egotistical introspection, but an authentic process of leaving ourselves behind in order to approach the mystery of God, who helps us to carry out the mission to which He has called us, for the good of our brothers and sisters."⁷ Vocation implies getting out of oneself, leaving behind our comfort zone and personal security.

If we decide to make a parachute jump, the parachute needs to open properly, so we can land gently. But first we need to leap from the plane with the parachute still shut. In a similar way, vocation requires trusting in God and letting go of our personal supports. Saint John Chrysostom said, referring to the Three Wise Men: "While the Magi were in Persia, they saw only a star. But when they left their homes behind, they saw the Sun of Justice. We can say that they would not have continued to see the star if they had remained in their own country."⁸

"You know that your way is not clear, and that by not following Jesus closely you remain within that clouded vision. What are you waiting for to make up your mind?"⁹ I

⁶ Saint Josemaria, *The Way*, no. 902.

⁷ Francis, Apost. Exhort. *Gaudete et exsultate* (19 March 2018), no. 175

⁸ Saint John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Saint Matthew*, VII, 5.

⁹ *The Way*, no. 797.

can follow a path only if I choose it, and live what I have chosen. To continue seeing the star we need to set out, because God's plans always exceed our own capabilities. It is only by trusting in Him that we become capable. At the beginning we can't do it, and we need to grow. But to grow we need to believe: *without Me you can do nothing* (Jn 15:5)—but with Me you can do everything.

Hence the mistake of those who spend their youth waiting for a definitive illumination of their path in life, and fail to make a decision. Nowadays there is also a special obstacle: so many selfies are taken, young people see themselves in so many photos, that they could even begin to think they already know themselves perfectly. Nevertheless, to truly find one's own identity one needs to rediscover *what one doesn't yet see* about one's own life: its element of "mystery," God's presence and his love for each person. Living fully means discovering and abandoning oneself trustingly to this mystery, accepting a logic and way of reasoning that we cannot fully grasp.

The histories written by God begin little by little. But a trust that risks everything is the path to achieving our greatest dreams, the dreams of God. When, as good children of God, we let ourselves be guided by the Holy Spirit (cf. *Rom* 8:14), our life attains heights we could never have dreamed of. This is the path of the Magi; of Mary, a young girl who becomes the Mother of God, and of Joseph, a carpenter whom God adopts as his father; of the Apostles, who rise above their initial mistakes and doubts to become the columns on which the Church is built; and of so many Christians who precede and accompany us. Who could ever have dreamed of this mystery at the beginning of their life? It is only seen clearly at the end. But the ending is possible only because at the beginning each one chose to leave behind their false security and to "leap" into the strong arms of their Father God.¹⁰

Thus, when discernment has taken place, and a specific vocation has been clarified with definite features, the need becomes clear, in order to continue advancing, for the initial leap of faith: saying "yes." The process of discernment still requires a final stage, and therefore the Church has foreseen, with a wisdom formed by many centuries of experience, the need for a series of progressive steps, to be as certain as possible about the suitability of those who want to undertake a specific vocational path. This way of acting brings a lot of peace to one's heart and strengthens the decision to trust in God, who led the person to a path of self-giving. This isn't a question of doubting God but ourselves, and therefore we trust in Him and in the Church.

On our part, we need to consider all that we are and have, so as to be able to offer everything, as we see in the parable of the talents (cf. *Mt* 25:14-30). We can't keep back anything for ourselves and fail to invest it, to share it. This is the key for a mature and sincere decision: the readiness to give everything, to abandon ourselves completely in

¹⁰ Cf. Saint Josemaria, *The Way of the Cross*, Seventh Station.

God's hands, without keeping back anything for ourselves, along with the realization that this self-giving of ours brings a peace and joy that doesn't stem from ourselves. And then the strong conviction begins to take shape that we have truly found our path.

In discerning her vocation, Mary asks the angel: *How can this be, since I have no husband?* (Lk 1:34ff). The angel is the messenger, the mediator whose call echoes God's voice. Mary places no conditions, but she asks a question in order to be certain. And the angel assures her: the Holy Spirit will act, because what I have told you transcends your understanding, but *with God nothing will be impossible* (v. 37). If even our Mother Mary needs to ask, it isn't surprising that each of us needs to ask for advice when we begin to sense God's love in our heart. What should I do to give Him my life? What do you think the best path is for me to find happiness? How great it is to seek advice in order to be able to say "yes," with a radiant freedom and filled with trust in God. We place our entire being in his hands: *be it done unto me according to your word.*