

## CALLED FROM THE CROWD

Fr Morgan Batt

Harvesting, being fishers, shepherding, picking up the cross and following are all popular images of the call to ordained ministry. But what may need consideration is whether these images have been appropriated by the Church for ordained ministry discernment at the cost of being wonderful images of discernment of vocation for all the baptised. Even the phrase “discernment of vocation” has ministry and religious life written all over it. The discernment of vocation for all the baptised is paramount as the People of God seek to discover who is called for what ministry from the crowd of believers - consecrated life of religious and married, ordained (priest & deacon), and the single life. If this discernment perspective was encouraged we could come to see that belonging to Christ does not negate all other relationships; rather, Christian commitment makes all other relationships holier and happier (Mathew 10:37-42).

This article seeks to come to an understanding of eight discernment perspectives in the vocational call within the context of God’s conversation to us and our heart response to God.

Standing within the crowd of humanity we encounter decisive moments of choice in our lives. At these crossroads we ask a question. The question of “who am I called to be” is but one question of the discerning heart. I use the word called to “be” rather than “do”. ‘Do’ implies an activity that at times can be non-reflective and at times implies that a vocation is all about a person in office and doing the work of Christ and the Church rather than being authentic witness. ‘Be’ is something that wells up from Be-ing. Who am I to be is an all of life question. At the heart of being human lies the breathtaking image that God is imaged in this world through our humanness. And between this utter unimaginable reality of God and the littleness of a human being there is relationship.



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The choice scenario is as ancient as the biblical call itself. Deborah leads people knowing her unworthiness; Jeremiah is in shock with a feeling of being too young for such tasks. St Paul’s whole world is shaken and challenged. Sometimes it is shock and a sense of disbelief like when Mary asks “But how can this come about”. There is a detachment when Jesus asks the disciples to leave their world behind and follow, or when Jonah just finally stops running. This discernment of “who am I to be” is a heart to heart conversation. This is a conversation in which God calls by name asking one to consider extremely important things not only for you, but for the whole of humanity. *Sero Te amavi* “Late have I loved thee” - St Augustine exclaimed these words with a sense of having arrived finally at the light of Christ after so long a journey to get there.

God calls, we respond. This is imperative to understanding discernment. God puts upon our hearts a way of being that we are asked to respond to. It is a heart speech that asks what will you be with your life. What are the plans? Have you ever thought of committing your existence totally to Christ? Do you think that there can be anything greater than to bring Jesus to people and people to Jesus (John Paul II, May 13, 1984)? “When you are where God has called you to be, then and only then, will you set the world on fire” (St Catherine of Sienna). Firstly, discernment is a sense of well be-ing, idealism and excitement about where you feel you are to be.

The whole of creation is in one great groan of asking “Why am I here”? “Why am I alive”? “What must I be”? None of us is alone in posing these questions. Humanity as a whole feels the burden

to give sense and purpose to a world which is increasingly complicated and difficult to be happy in.

The crossroads of life for the Christian is really a response to the question of “Why did God put me here”? “What must I be for God”? “Why am I created by God”? The future begins to be present slowing as one cuts away all else to reveal the call placed upon my heart. Responding to God within the world is an awesome responsibility to discern. Through encouragement and prayer discernment becomes a purposeful life stance toward acknowledging and responding to God’s call. Secondly, discernment is a purposeful and intentional stand toward a particular way of life situated within prayer, sacraments and spiritual direction. Vocation has to be an intentional orientation to consider the call.

You must never think that you are alone in deciding your future. And when deciding your future you must not decide alone. Thirdly then, discernment toward vocation never happens in a vacuum. *Lumen Gentium* (#5) directs us to take to our hearts that a call to holiness is directed to all Christians. Holiness is not so much about doing as about be-ing. Holiness is about being set apart to accomplish a particular call. This is not a question about privilege or of spiritual elitism. It

  
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is not a matter of some person feeling inclined to heroic daring. Even less is it a question of seeking a quite refuge adapted to certain forms of piety or certain natural temperaments. It is a question of a grace offered to all the baptised, but in varying ways (Ephesians 4:7). The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (#1546) clearly says, “The whole community of believers is, as such, priestly. The faithful exercise their baptismal priesthood through their participation, each according to his[her] own vocation, in Christ’s mission as priest, prophet, and king”.

The Second Vatican Council elaborated a new evangelisation through an ecclesiology of communion, such as was common in the early church and right through the patristic period. It has to be admitted that from the early church to today, this new ecclesiology has not significantly transformed the church either in its own community life and structures or in its missionary activity. In practice ‘authority’ still dominates in many places as

the key defining concept of the Church among clergy and laity alike. For example, when authority is given more importance than communion - which it is meant to serve - the Church will be seen primarily as an institution and its structures and organisation will be pyramidal, leaving the laity largely passive. Running alongside of this is the need for discernment of the ministers, not to be seen as institutional and locked up in office, but rather breaking open the Kingdom (Matthew 16:13-20). That is, the charism of vocational discernment belongs to the person and their gifts, called to stand and serve the community along WITH the community.

We are called to be witnesses of the paradox that Christ proposes “They who love their life will lose it, and they who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life” (John 12:25). Fourthly then, discernment is about recognising that the measure of your success will be the measure of your generosity. We are called – each in a different way – to go and bear fruit generously. The disciples were chosen by the Master. They did not present themselves nor were they volunteers, at least not in the initial stage. We often hear and see the image of the call as Jesus walking and yelling out follow me, or that sheep need a shepherd, or that we will become fishers of people. The Lucan image of the call of the Apostles gives another image (Luke 6:13f). They were all standing among each other - the disciples and friends of Jesus. And Jesus turned and chose

twelve to come forward to fulfil the ministry of Apostles. This is a powerful image of “call”. The image of the fisherman or the shepherd can give off the impression of a lone ranger riding the hills and waves gathering in the lost. The call from the crowd gives the idea that the call belongs in the midst of the community and that different ones are chosen to fulfil different ministries from the community. We are called from the crowd. Fifthly, discernment entails this precise meaning of being called in the midst of the community and our response to God through the community.

In the John’s gospel we also have this understanding of being called from the crowd. Jesus calls Andrew who then goes and brings Simon to Jesus (John 1:42). Certainly Jesus shows himself sovereign in His call to Simon, but on his own initiative Andrew played a decisive role in Simon’s meeting with the Master. The community brought Simon to the Lord. Hence, the discernment within a community is vital so that we share in the priesthood of all and are not given the idea that we are more special than others. But that others also empower us to give generously our lives of service – “This means that in God’s creative initiative there enters a particular act of love for those called not only to salvation, but also to the ministry of salvation. God prepares in our fruitful heart the gifts and conditions for the personal, conscious and opportune response to the call of Christ and of the church. God who loves us, who is love, is also “He who calls” (Romans 9:11).

Do we respond to this vocational gifting or not? “Why have you made me thus” (Romans 9:20) is a heart felt question - because He who calls is also “He who is” (Exodus 3:14). Therefore, in the presence of a vocation we adore the mystery and we respond to the invitation. We say “yes”. The yes is a personal acclamation of the fruits planted within. The yes is an acclamation by the Church that she too calls us and encourages us to respond. And the yes is the experience of the inrush of the Holy Spirit when we actual say the word yes. Sixthly then, discernment is a sense of peace perceived as the gentle breeze in the clarifying touch of grace.

  
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Consider now that the seventh perspective of discernment may be seen from the human perspective. Vocation in the Church begins with a discovery, with finding the “pearl of great price” (Matthew 13:45-46). However, before one sells everything to purchase the pearl, one must pray for the insight to recognise that “pearl” when he/she finds it. The discernor discovers Jesus: his person, his message, his call. After the initial discovery, a dialogue in prayer ensues, a dialogue between Jesus, the one called, and the community – whether it be the domestic church of the family or a broader context. This dialogue goes beyond words and expresses itself in love (John Paul II, San Antonio, 13 September, 1987).



If we were to discover the psycho-vocational process from this dialogue it would be apparent that for some the initial religious enthusiasm is only an initial and passing grace. This first encounter has the purpose of prodding the person toward the decisive commitment of conversion and walking generously in faith, hope and love. The calling first finds its source in God. In our mind and in the choice that God makes and which we need to read in our hearts. In clearing and cutting away all else and bearing the good fruit on the vine the vocation that comes from God is seen sometimes in our response as a feeling of inadequacy or insufficiency. Hence, eighthly, in discerning the vocation, we may even attempt to defend ourselves against the responsibility of this calling. And so, almost without wanting it, the calling becomes an interior dialogue with God and, at times, even results in becoming a battle with the ‘Vine Dresser’. Faced with the hesitancy and difficulties that human reason sets up God offers the power of grace. And by the power of

God's grace we are able to fulfil the calling. Grace then empowers the Church which in turn empowers each one according to their gifts. Thus the words of Jesus begin to make sense when He challenges: "There is one thing you lack, come follow me" (Mark 10:21). Maybe this 'lack' is the grace to respond to that which you are called to fulfil in your life. Is Jesus perhaps asking for even more love, more generosity, more sacrifice. For the call does involve generosity. To follow one's vocation in Christ and to serve the world in his name requires courage and strength. There is no place for a heart full of fear. Do not be afraid when grace and love demand a response. To lose your life in Christ is to have gained a whole new life for the world.

  
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Here, then are the eight vocational discernment perspectives that could be identified. These are by no means exhaustive but meant to open up the reflective conversation about a person being called from the crowd, the Church, and offering their life to the call that God has placed upon one's heart.

"Behold the hand maid of the Lord, be it done to me according to your word" (Luke). This was the moment of Mary's vocation. The very possibility of the incarnation hung upon this moment. Without Mary's yes, the incarnation may never have happened. If we take the discipleship of Mary we have then a person who has responded with this very "yes" to God's call. A yes filled with joy and trust. And this yes is backed by the powerful acclamation "do what ever He tells you" This means listen to Jesus Christ, act on His words and put your trust in the Lord. Learn to say yes to the Lord in every situation of your life. This is the Christian witness expected from all who discern discipleship and those who are called from the crowd.

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