

Personal Vocation and Integrating the Faith

Sunday, October 25, 2015

Thirtieth Sunday in Ordinary Time
Readings: Jeremiah 31.7-9;
Hebrews 5.1-6;
Mark 10.46-52**By Russell Shaw**

Someone once asked Flannery O'Connor why she, a Catholic, wrote about Protestants rather than her fellow Catholics. This was her reply:

To a lot of Protestants I know, monks and nuns are fanatics, none greater. And to a lot of the monks and nuns I know, my Protestant prophets are fanatics. For my part, I think the only difference between them is that if you are a Catholic and have this intensity of belief you join the convent and are heard from no more; whereas if you are a Protestant and have it, there is no convent for you to join and you go about in the world, getting into all sorts of trouble and drawing the wrath of people who don't believe in anything much at all down on your head. . . . This is one reason why I can write about Protestant believers better than Catholic believers – because they express their belief in diverse kinds of dramatic action which is obvious enough for me to catch.

Listening and responding to God's call, something that today's gospel passage about Jesus and the blind man highlights as imperative for each of us, is part of what it means to "go about in the world, getting into all sorts of trouble and drawing the wrath of people who don't believe in anything at all down on your head." One reason why more Catholics do not grasp that fact and take the risks it often entails may be incomplete thinking about the whole idea of vocation.

The Idea of Vocation

It is customary to speak of four vocations: the clerical state (deacons, priests, bishops), consecrated life (for the most part, although not exclusively, religious women and men), matrimony, and the single lay state in the world. This way of understanding vocations equates a vocation with a state in life, with pride of place assigned to the vocations to the clerical state and the consecrated life. The usage has been common among Catholics for a long time: To have a vocation means having a call from God to be a priest or a religious. The problem with thinking this way is that it ignores the reality of personal vocation.

The idea of personal vocation can be found in classical writers such as St. Ignatius Loyola and St. Francis de Sales. Blessed John Henry Newman expresses it forcefully in one of his Anglican sermons when he says:

[T]hey who are living religiously, have from time to time truths they did not know before, or had no need to consider, brought before them forcibly; truths which involve duties, which are in fact precepts, and claim obedience. In this and such-like ways Christ calls us now. There is nothing miraculous or extraordinary in His dealings with us. He works through our natural faculties and circumstances of life. Still what happens to us in providence is in all essential respects what His voice was to those whom He addressed when on earth.

In our times Pope St. John Paul II was the great expounder of personal vocation and its practical implications. A key passage from his apostolic exhortation *Christifideles laici* deserves quoting at length.

The fundamental objective of the formation of the lay faithful is an ever-clearer discovery of one's vocation and the ever-greater willingness to live it so as to fulfill one's mission.

God calls me and sends me forth as a laborer in his vineyard. He calls me and sends me forth to work for the coming of his Kingdom in history. This personal vocation and mission defines the dignity and the responsibility of each member of the lay faithful and makes up the focal point of the whole work of formation, whose purpose is the joyous and grateful recognition of this dignity and the faithful living-out of this responsibility.

In fact, from eternity God has thought of us and has loved us as unique individuals. Every one of us he called by name, as the Good Shepherd “calls his sheep by name” (Jn 10:3). However, only in the unfolding of the history of our lives and its events is the eternal plan of God revealed to each of us. Therefore, it is a gradual process; in a certain sense, one that happens day by day.

To be able to discover the actual will of the Lord in our lives always involves the following: a receptive listening to the word of God and the Church, fervent and constant prayer, recourse to a wise and loving spiritual guide, and a faithful discernment of the gifts and talents given by God, as well as the diverse social and historic situations in which one lives.

Therefore, in the life of each member of the lay faithful there are particularly significant and decisive moments for discerning God’s call and embracing the mission entrusted by him. Among these are the periods of adolescence and young adulthood. No one must forget that the Lord, as the master of the laborers in the vineyard, calls at every hour of life, so as to make his holy will more precisely and explicitly known. Therefore, the fundamental and continuous attitude of the disciple should be one of vigilance and a conscious attentiveness to the voice of God. (*Christifideles laici*, 58)

This teaching by John Paul II clearly applies to everyone and underscores the need we all have to integrate our faith into our lives, as we listen and act on a daily basis. Today’s gospel story about the blind man reminds us how crucial faith is, how essential it is for responding to Jesus’ call and transforming our lives and the world around us.

Practical Considerations

But what really does it mean to integrate faith in our lives on a day-to-day basis? How do we do it? What steps do we take? How do we know when we’ve achieved it? These questions are very concrete, and one useful approach to answering them begins by noting this fact: At its heart, integration is a matter of lifestyle, a coherent, coordinated way of living. Not to think of it in these terms is to risk the opposite of integration, that is, the compartmentalization of our faith.

So, for example, think about consumerism – the excess consumption of the world’s goods. This problem has been targeted often. At the level of a society or a nation, it takes the form of what St. John Paul II called “superdevelopment” arising from “excessive availability of every kind of goods, for the benefit of certain social groups” and expressed in an obsessive quest to own and consume more and more (cf. *Sollicitudo rei socialis*, 28). On the individual level, too, consumerism is manifest through similar patterns of behavior. For example, Pope Francis notes how “people can easily get caught up in a whirlwind of needless buying and spending. . . . [They come] to believe that they are free as long as they have the supposed freedom to consume” (*Laudato si*, 203).

The cure for consumerism lies in acquiring and practicing the virtue of temperance. One person living temperately bears its own fruits and gives good example to others. A multitude of people living temperately can change a nation or even the world for the better.

Along with allied virtues like detachment and chastity, temperance is not just about avoiding this or that. As St. Josemaria Escriva says: “Whoever really lives his faith knows that the goods of the world are means, and uses them generously, heroically.” The practice of temperance is way of growing in freedom: in acquiring and using temporal goods, a temperate person observes the criteria of social teaching while becoming increasingly more able to choose the right thing in the right way for the right reason.

It is easy to find examples of intemperance and social irresponsibility all around us. We don’t need to think too long or hard. Our secular culture does a lot to create pressures that are constantly brought to bear against the practice of temperance. Politics, the courts, big corporations, and the media often have major roles in all this.

Starting with Introspection

Given the many obvious obstacles to the practice of temperance, how can we in our own personal lives hope to acquire this virtue so important for living a lifestyle congenial to the principles of the faith?

One important step is introspection, getting to know oneself better – in this case, seeking a realistic picture of the form intemperance is most likely to take with you. Eating or drinking too much? At least those are fairly obvious faults. But if the problem is something more subtle – and there is a good chance it is – it may take time and effort to bring it out into the light. Here an experienced advisor, a spiritual director who knows us well, can be of much help.

Regular, repeated acts of voluntary self-denial also are classic means for acquiring the habit of temperance. Fasting is one of them. In recent times, of course, the Church has greatly relaxed its laws on fasting. That leaves it to individuals to take up the slack for themselves.

The philosopher Josef Pieper wrote before the Church relaxed its fasting laws, but what he says is still eminently sound. Although fasting is often thought to be “something extraordinary,” something only for ascetics and saints, Pieper remarks, St. Thomas Aquinas nevertheless declared it to be “a commandment of the natural law . . . intended for the average Christian.” Pieper explains:

Whoever has not reached the maturity of perfection – that is, all of us ordinary Christians – could not persevere, without recourse to the medicine, the discipline, of fasting, that inner order of virtue by virtue of which the turbulence of sensuality is kept in check and the spirit liberated. . . . Our natural duty obliges us to pay dearly so that we may become what we are by essence: the free moral person in full possession of himself.

A life organized around principles like this has a fighting chance to become one in which the faith is wholly integrated, and indeed one that achieves the fulfillment God has created and called each of us for. Today’s second reading, from Hebrews, reminds us that we do not achieve any of this on our own: “No one takes this honor upon himself but only when called by God.” And we may recall with hope and confidence these words from today’s first reading from Jeremiah: “I will console them and guide them; I will lead them to brooks of water, on a level road, so that none shall stumble.”

Pope Francis poignantly describes this movement toward the fulfillment to which God calls and guides us:

Christian spirituality proposes a growth marked by moderation and the capacity to be happy with little. It is a return to that simplicity which allows us to stop and appreciate the small things, to be grateful for the opportunities which life affords to be spiritually detached from what we possess, and not to succumb to sadness for what we lack. This implies avoiding the dynamic of dominion and the mere accumulation of pleasures. . . . Such sobriety, when lived freely and consciously, is liberating. It is not a lesser life or one lived with less intensity. On the contrary, it is a way of living life to the full. (*Laudato si*, 222)

About the Author

Russell Shaw is coauthor of *Personal Vocation: God Calls Everyone by Name (Our Sunday Visitor, 2003)* and has written twenty other books. He is former Secretary of Public Affairs of the United States Catholic Conference/National Conference of Catholic Bishops and former Director of Information of the Knights of Columbus.

FOR FURTHER READING

Francis, *Laudato si*, available at: http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html

John Paul II, *Christifideles laici*, available at: <http://tinyurl.com/nawd4yu>

William E. May, "Does Everyone Have a Personal Vocation?" available at: <http://www.christendom-awake.org/pages/may/personal-vocation.htm>

Rev. C. John McCloskey, "Newman as Parish Priest," available at: <http://www.catholicity.com/mccloskey/newman-priest.html>

Rev. Peter F. Ryan, S.J., "How to Discern the Elements of Your Personal Vocation," available at: <http://tinyurl.com/n9fcvf8>

IN SHORT . . .

- ***"Only in the unfolding of the history of our lives and its events is the eternal plan of God revealed to each of us. . . . [I]t is a gradual process . . . that happens day by day."***
- ***Integrating our faith into our lives is a matter of lifestyle, of forming a coherent, coordinated way of living.***
- ***The practice of temperance is way of growing in freedom: a temperate person becomes increasingly more able to choose the right thing in the right way for the right reason.***
- ***Our secular culture does a lot to create pressures that are constantly brought to bear against the practice of temperance.***
- ***Some introspection is necessary for getting a realistic picture of the form intemperance is most likely to take with you.***
- ***"Christian spirituality proposes a growth marked by moderation and the capacity to be happy with little. . . . It is not a lesser life or one lived with less intensity. On the contrary, it is a way of living life to the full."***