

The Disciples' Call: Theologies of Vocation from Scripture to the Present Day

Christopher Jamison, O. S. B., ed.

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This collection of essays, originally papers delivered at a seminar convened by the National Office of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, in collaboration with Boston College, USA, and the International Theological Institute, Austria, reflects some of the contemporary confusion surrounding the concept of "vocation" within the Catholic Tradition. There is considerable fluidity across the contributors about what is meant by "vocation." On the whole, the essays point to the universal vocation to the perfection of love, so well-articulated by *Lumen Gentium* 39-42, but the difficult question of specific vocation to one of the many contemporary forms of male and female consecrated life and the Priesthood emerges regularly. But there is no single voice, and most admit that suggestions are provisional. A great deal of attention is given the canonical and traditional structures that determine the various "forms" of life in the Catholic Church. The only study of a vocation to marriage is written by a Ukrainian Greek-Catholic married Priest (Yuriy Kolasa), and it is limited to what liturgical documents and the Popes have said about it, with a final reflection on how marriage and celibate Priesthood relate to one another.

Impressive are Richard Lennan's essay on the Church as mission, and the location of vocation in its ecclesial context, and studies that dialogue with Aquinas (Joseph Bolin), Ignatius of Loyola (Gemma Simmonds), the Reformation (David Hoyle, accompanied by a brief note by Geoffrey Scott on the Post-Reformation period), and the thought of Hans Urs von Balthasar (Gill Goulding). But no clear directions for our contemporary dilemmas are found there, except for the crucially important call to an unconditional gift of self in response to the love of God and the Lordship of Jesus Christ. I found myself wondering about the ambiguous messiness of contemporary Western society, and the disappearance of any consistent acceptance of the von Balthasarian view among even the most altruistic young people. These issues are mentioned but not faced in any depth by the collection. Indeed, Gill Goulding's fine study of von Balthasar struggles to come to grips with the freedom of the individual to reject God's loving design for the whole of creation, and she must ultimately decide, with von Balthasar, that such a stance is a form of sinfulness.

More "hands on" reflections on what is distinctive about Religious Life (Cathy Jones), the apostolic Religious Life (Susan O'Brien), and the Diocesan Priesthood (Stephen Wang) are enlightening. Much of this material serves as a helpful guide through the complexities of the canonical status of the various manifestations of consecrated life. Stephen Wang's study makes a healthy suggestion that cuts through the oft-expressed dilemma of the Diocesan Priest, called to a union with Christ, especially in his Eucharistic ministry and his Prayer, and the inevitable pressures of dealing with the pastoral needs of the people he is

called to serve. He points out that one works itself out in the light of the other, and this apparent “tension” should be seen as part of the Priest’s vocation to holiness.

In a skilful use of Chrétien de Troyes’ *Romance of the Grail*, Peter Tyler articulates eight “lessons” that this fundamental account of “search” can teach the vocation apostolate. However, even here I sensed an interest in the traditional younger candidates, while today’s reality is that many contemporary “searchers” are at a second stage in their life-journey. The final essay from the editor of the volume, Christopher Jamison, is an excellent piece on the contemporary youth-world and the need to generate a “culture of vocation.” Again, however, one senses that the “culture” suggested is directed to the traditional school-leavers or university students.

Any collection of essays has its high and low points. I was surprised to find the suggestion in the essay on the biblical background to vocation that the immediate response of the first disciples as Jesus calls them by the lake in Mark, Matthew and Luke can be explained by accepting that John 1:35-51 tells what actually happened; they had already met Jesus. This approach not only misunderstands the narrative rhetoric of Mark, Matthew, Luke and John, but misses the essential link between the Markan and Matthean calls with Old Testament precedents (especially 1 Kings 19:19-21), and the play upon the “days” of John 1:19-51, climaxing with “the third day” of John 2:1. Reflecting the recent history of the Church, the essays are well documented surveys of the teachings of the Popes, especially John Paul II, and the sometimes complex canonical issues that determine contemporary Religious Life.

At one point in Susan O’Brien wise use of William O’Malley’s incisive work on contemporary Religious Life she cites words that should direct our contemporary reflection upon each and every vocation within the Christian Tradition:

The categories with which we think about religious life are inadequate to the historical reality and that inadequacy is to a large extent responsible for some of the confusion in the Church today about religious life (157).

The editor and the contributors that have given us this book have made a start. But more is required before we can claim we are thinking about the Christian life in a way that is adequate to our historical reality.

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