

“Hearing God’s call and choosing a life of service to the church is one of the most important, and most difficult, decisions that a person can make. The authors of *Catholics on Call: Discerning a Life of Service in the Church* offer valuable insights into religious life and vocational discernment. This book is a wonderful resource for anyone who is in the process of vocational discernment. It is equally valuable for those who know someone who is considering an ecclesial ministry. A must read.”

—Rev. Martin O. Moran, III  
Executive Director  
The Catholic Campus Ministry Association

“Some advice for all who minister to young adults: read *Catholics on Call* with chapters by outstanding, pastorally sensitive authors (Donald Senior, Robert Schreiter, Robert Morneau, Thomas Rausch, Sheila McLaughlin, Charlene Diorka, Stephen Bevans, and Robin Ryan) who present helpful theological perspectives and practical suggestions for young adults discerning their vocation; give copies of the book to young people (it is written with them in mind) who may be interested in church ministry; form a group to discuss the book; and send some young adults to the informative and inspirational ‘Catholics on Call’ summer conferences run by the Catholic Theological Union in Chicago.”

—James J. Bacik  
Campus Minister and Adjunct Professor  
University of Toledo



# Catholics on Call

*Discerning a Life of Service  
in the Church*

Edited by Robin Ryan, CP



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*Robin Ryan, CP*

## **Introduction**

### **A New Generation of Leaders**

They arrive on planes, trains, and buses from around the country. The T-shirts they wear indicate their affiliations and commitments: campus ministry associations, Bread for the World, diocesan young adult groups, international volunteer programs, Taizé prayer and eucharistic adoration groups. They are young adults discerning a life of service in the church who are gathering for an experience of reflection on their vocational journey. Some of them are at an advanced stage of discernment, having confided in a spiritual director for some time and explored a variety of options related to lay ecclesial ministry, religious life, or priesthood. Others are just beginning. They have a vague sense that God is calling them to something special, but they are uncertain about what path they should take and how to go about making the best choices for their lives. All of them—to a person—express their gratitude for the opportunity to come together with like-minded peers who are asking similar questions about their lives and are considering a call to serve the people of God. They report that they often feel alone and isolated among their friends and sometimes even among family members, who question their desire to explore an ecclesial vocation. Meeting others who have felt a similar tug from God

is reassuring and illuminating as they listen to their stories and learn from one another's experience.

This book emerges from the experience of young adult conferences conducted by Catholics on Call, the national vocation discovery program at Catholic Theological Union funded by the Lilly Endowment Inc. In its first four years of offering summer conferences 245 young adults have participated in programs that bring together men and women, ages eighteen to thirty, who are exploring a life of service in the church as a vowed religious, lay ecclesial minister, or priest. At these conferences young adults listen to and dialogue about presentations on call, prayer, discernment, and the various avenues of service in the church. They also visit and converse with distinguished pastoral ministers who share the stories of their own vocational discernment and the paths that led them to their ministries. These young adult discerners are accompanied by mentors who listen to their questions and dreams and facilitate discussion. All of this takes place in the context of prayer as participants share in the Eucharist, the Liturgy of the Hours, and a variety of other prayer experiences drawn from the church's rich spiritual tradition.

## **Young Adults and the Church**

### *The Practice of Faith*

The women and men who come to Catholics on Call are keenly aware that the relationship between the institutional church and contemporary young adults is a tenuous one. They often hear older Catholics express their concerns about the faith development and religious practice of young adults. In a 2003 poll of U.S. Catholics, more than half of those surveyed said that a lack of participation by young adults is a serious problem for the church. They listed this concern as one of the three most serious problems faced by the U.S. Catholic Church, along with the clergy sexual abuse scandal and the decline in vocations to religious life and the priesthood.<sup>1</sup> Catholics on Call participants

realize that most of their peers do not celebrate the Eucharist on a regular basis, even though they readily identify themselves as Catholics. Their young adult friends tend not to view infrequent participation in the sacraments as a problem. Raised in a culture of choice, young adults are at home selecting elements within Catholic tradition and practice that they wish to comprise their own Catholic identity. Most of them readily espouse belief in a personal God, the incarnation, resurrection, and divinity of Jesus, the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist, and devotion to Mary. They also rate the call to reach out to the poor as among the most important Catholic teachings. At the same time, they tend to judge church teachings about frequenting the sacraments, sexual and reproductive morality, the role of women in the church, and marriage requirements as of much less significance for their Catholic identity.

### *Knowledge of the Tradition*

Young adults associated with Catholics on Call want to know more about what it means to be Catholic. Like many young adult Catholics, they say that the formation in the faith that they received was inadequate. They claim that it was long on process and short on content, leaving them with little grasp of the tradition. In a recent study, Dean Hoge and Marti Jewell stated as one of their key findings, “Whether self-identified as traditional or liberal, young adults want to know more about their faith.”<sup>2</sup> Catholics on Call participants remind presenters and mentors that we must not assume that teachings and practices that older Catholics have internalized are known to younger Catholics. What many older Catholics learned about their tradition “by osmosis” is not as familiar to Catholics in their twenties and thirties.

### *A Different Generation*

The leaders of Catholics on Call have learned from young adults that they sometimes feel frustrated at the failure of middle-aged and older Catholics to understand their concerns and aspirations

regarding faith and life with God. They are disillusioned by the ideological battles that have been waged by Catholics in the years since the Second Vatican Council. Classifying young adult Catholics as “liberal,” “conservative,” “pre-Vatican II,” or “post-Vatican II” can be misleading because it projects onto young adults labels that are more descriptive of an older generation. Writing for and about the younger generation of Catholics, Tim Muldoon argues that young adults have little foundation on which to build their understanding of controversies that are at the forefront of debate among Catholics. Muldoon observes about young adults, “They have become disillusioned by the fact that so much energy is spent trying to vilify the perceived enemy, rather than building a community founded in love seeking justice.”<sup>3</sup> Muldoon’s conclusions are consonant with our experience in the Catholics on Call program. For example, some young adults who are strongly committed to the church’s social justice mission are also attracted to traditional practices like eucharistic adoration and the rosary. They do not view such practices of prayer as devotional “throwbacks” but as a discovery of dimensions of the Catholic tradition that they find compelling. Many of the labels and categories employed by post-Vatican II Catholics do not align with the perspectives of Catholics in their twenties and thirties.

### *Interest in Church Vocations*

Are contemporary young adults really interested in the prospect of undertaking lives of service in the church as religious, priests, or lay ecclesial ministers? Some observers think not; they adopt a basically negative view about these possibilities. Focusing specifically on the call to religious life, Jesuit anthropologist Richard Malloy argues that there is a radical difference—a “disconnect”—between the culture in which U.S. young adults are immersed and the values enshrined in consecrated life. He thinks that the influence of the U.S. culture on young adults makes a vocation based on the vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience seem very foreign to them.<sup>4</sup>

But others who are familiar with the spirituality of young adult Catholics offer a more positive view concerning the possibilities of young adults responding to a call to an ecclesial vocation. In a 2008 survey of newer members of religious communities that was conducted by the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate, researchers concluded that “there are still significant numbers of men and women who are responding to a call to religious life and are hopeful about its future.”<sup>5</sup> And in their 2007 survey of young adult Catholics involved in campus ministry or diocesan programs, Dean Hoge and Marti Jewell discovered a notable degree of openness to a life of service in the church.<sup>6</sup> One-third of the college students and nearly half of the diocesan sample said that they had seriously considered lay ecclesial ministry as a future vocation. More than 80 percent of these young adults felt that lay ministry is a call from God. Approximately half of the men in the survey reported that they had seriously considered becoming a priest at one time in their lives. While the level of current interest was more difficult to assess, Hoge and Jewell estimated that 18 percent of the men involved in campus ministry activities and 10 percent of the men engaged in diocesan programs were still interested in a vocation to ministerial priesthood. Approximately one-third of those surveyed said that they had seriously considered becoming a religious sister or brother. About 70 percent of the men and one-third of the women stated that they had been encouraged by someone to consider ministry as a priest, brother, or sister. While these findings do not augur an immediate end to what many call the “vocation crisis” in the church, they do indicate that there are young adult Catholics who are willing to consider a call to an ecclesial vocation. This study also demonstrated that the more involved young adults are in the life of their parish, diocese, or campus ministry the more likely they will be to consider such a call. The authors of the study emphasized the need for pastoral ministers to redouble their efforts in inviting young adults to active participation in the life and ministries of the church.

These findings resonate with the experience of those who have spent time with young adults in the Catholics on Call program.

There are a significant number of Catholics in their twenties and thirties who manifest a genuine interest in a life of service to the church as religious, priests, and lay ecclesial ministers. These are intelligent, thoughtful, and generous men and women, many of whom have already offered a great deal of time and energy in volunteer service through the church and other organizations, serving the most vulnerable people in our world. These young adults want to meet older Catholics who will listen to their aspirations and dreams and take them seriously. They need and appreciate assistance with their personal discernment in an environment that is free of the pressure to move in any particular direction. They are in search of experienced mentors who will accompany them and offer their wisdom for the journey. As suggested above, they also yearn to come to a deeper understanding of the Catholic tradition in its many dimensions, including its rich store of spiritual practices. And they want to hear words of invitation and encouragement assuring them that they can indeed become the next generation of leaders in the church.

### **About This Book**

This book is directed to young adult Catholics and to pastoral ministers who work with them in the discernment of vocation. Born from the Catholics on Call experience, it seeks to introduce men and women who are considering a life of service in the church to the dynamics of vocational discernment and the different paths of life and ministry within the church. It also explains important dimensions of the Catholic tradition that are relevant to responding to God's call, such as the understanding of the nature and mission of the church. The book can be used in a variety of ways among distinct audiences. It can serve as a source of personal reading for a young adult who wants to find out more about a church vocation. It could be used as a resource for a retreat for young adults or a lecture series in a campus ministry program. A book club in a parish or campus ministry setting may find the reflections by these theologians

to be a fruitful source of dialogue. Campus ministers, vocation directors, and young adult ministers will find the book to be a stimulus for dialogue about their work with young adults in vocational discernment.

We have already seen that young adults want reliable mentors who can serve as experienced guides along the journey of faith and vocation. The authors of this book have been chosen not only because of their extensive knowledge of theology and spirituality but also because they are wise mentors willing to share their own experience with a younger generation.

Donald Senior, a Passionist biblical scholar and the president of Catholic Theological Union, helps readers become immersed in the meaning and dynamics of vocation as disclosed in the Scriptures. His intriguing survey of biblical vocation stories makes it clear that God calls ordinary people to extraordinary service and that most of these people have to struggle with doubts and hesitations in responding to the call.

Robert Schreiter, a Precious Blood Missionary and expert on issues of faith and culture, reflects on the challenges of following Jesus in the context of the cultural milieu of North America. Acknowledging that “choice” is a cherished value in our individualistic culture, Schreiter underlines the need for young people to find trustworthy sources of guidance as they sort out the dizzying array of possibilities that are available to them.

In addressing the topic of prayer, I emphasize that vocational discernment requires a commitment to make our lives an ongoing conversation with God. Those who are considering a vocation to religious life, priesthood, or lay ecclesial ministry need to develop a vital friendship with Christ—a relationship made possible by the presence and action of grace in their lives.

Bishop Robert Morneau, a well-known author and spiritual guide, introduces readers to the skills of discernment. The principles of discernment that he explains can serve as reliable guideposts for those seeking to hear and respond to God’s voice.

Thomas Rausch, a Jesuit systematic theologian and experienced college professor, presents a contemporary understanding of the nature and mission of the church that is rooted in the

earliest traditions of Christianity. This ecclesiology, based on the notion of communion, envisions the church as a global community of memory in which every Christian is called to a shared life in Christ with God and with others.

Sheila McLaughlin, director of the Cardinal Bernardin Center at Catholic Theological Union and a national leader in lay ministry, charts the development of lay ecclesial ministry in the church since Vatican II. She draws our attention to the importance of the 2005 statement by the U.S. bishops, *Coworkers in the Vineyard of the Lord*, and she explains the many ways in which laypeople serve as professional ministers within the church.

Charlene Diorka, a Sister of Saint Joseph and associate director of the National Religious Vocation Conference, offers a lucid and compelling description of the vocation to vowed religious life. Noting that religious life is a life of service, she shows how the traditional vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience lead to a countercultural way of living that frees one to be of service to God's people.

Stephen Bevans, a Divine Word Missionary priest and theologian, presents an understanding of priesthood as "a ministry for ministry." He describes the ministry of the priest as one of calling God's people to their full potential as members of the Body of Christ.

## **A Communion of Vocations**

The calls to religious life, priesthood, and lay ecclesial ministry that are described in this book are grounded in a more fundamental vocation—the call to holiness. In its Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (*Lumen Gentium*), the Second Vatican Council taught that all the baptized are called to holiness and that this call is foundational for all other vocations within the church. The council said, "It is therefore quite clear that all Christians in any state or walk of life are called to the fullness of Christian life and to the perfection of love, and by this holiness a more human manner of life is fostered also in earthly society" (LG 40).<sup>7</sup> Donald Senior

and Stephen Bevans each highlight this fundamental vocation of the baptized as a call that unites and binds us together as followers of Jesus, prior to any differentiation into distinct ways of life and ministry within the church. Vatican II teaches us that “all the faithful are invited and obliged to holiness and the perfection of their own state of life” (LG 42). In the Bible, the call to holiness is really about *belonging*. The people of Israel are called a holy people because they belong to the all-holy God; they are God’s “special possession” (see Exod 19:3-8; NAB). In the New Testament the members of the first Christian communities were called “saints” (“holy ones”) not because they were necessarily morally superior to other people but because in Christ and through baptism they belonged to God (see 1 Pet 2:9-10). Because we have died and risen with Christ in baptism, all Christians are called to remember *who* they are and *whose* they are. We are summoned to affirm the dignity that we have been given as sons and daughters of God and to live in a way that demonstrates that we belong to God. This way of holiness always entails a life of service to others in the name of Christ—ministry that takes many different forms according to one’s particular vocation and context.

Thus, there is a communion of vocations within the church. Thomas Rausch describes the church as a global community, a communion of churches. This understanding of what it means to be church is one that is centered on relationship—relationship with God and others. Life as a follower of Jesus entails an ever-deepening communion with the triune God and with all those who comprise the Body of Christ in the world. Every Christian is invited to envision his or her chosen way of life as a response to God’s call, and all believers are summoned to participate actively in the church’s mission of proclaiming the reign of God. Whether single, married, ordained, or in religious life—and whatever occupation a person undertakes—the life and work of every Christian are meant to contribute to making the church a more radiant sign of salvation in Christ.

This same reality of communion applies to vocations that are specifically designated as “ecclesial”—religious life, priesthood, lay ecclesial ministry. Each of these distinct forms of committed

service in the church witnesses to the presence of Christ and helps the church to fulfill its mission in the world. Vocations to dedicated service in the church should not be understood as a zero-sum game—as if, for example, the growth in the numbers of lay ecclesial ministers is “subtracting” from vocations to religious life and priesthood. On the contrary, these are distinct but complementary ways of serving the people of God and building up the Body of Christ. There is an urgent need for closer collaboration between religious, priests, and lay ministers in their service to God’s people. Young adults who are considering these ways of life and service should envision them within the framework of a communion of vocations in the church.

### **The Challenges of Discernment**

Two distinguished sociologists of religion have recently published important studies of the religious interests and commitments of young adults.<sup>8</sup> In *After the Baby Boomers*, Robert Wuthnow of Princeton University analyzes the religious beliefs and practices of contemporary young adults across faith traditions, comparing them with those of the same age cohort of the 1970s. He points out that the trend toward marrying and having children later in life has led to an extended period of single life and vocational exploration. Young adults in their twenties and thirties are exploring a multitude of options, and sometimes they feel lost as they do so. In *Souls in Transition*, Christian Smith, a researcher at the University of Notre Dame, draws similar conclusions from his study of the religious and spiritual lives of eighteen- to twenty-three-year-olds. Smith points out that “the transition from the teenage years to fully achieved adulthood has stretched out into an extended stage that is often amorphous, unstructured, and convoluted, lasting upward of 12 or more years.” While these years are marked by “a lot of fun and growth” they are also characterized by “a great deal of transience, confusion, anxiety, self-obsession, melodrama, conflict, stress, disappointment, and sometimes emotional damage and

bodily harm.”<sup>9</sup> Wuthnow voices his concern that few institutional supports exist in our society to assist men and women in this age group in making important life decisions. He says, “We cannot hope to be a strong society if we invest resources in young people until they are eighteen or twenty and then turn them out to find their way entirely on their own.”<sup>10</sup>

We believe that what Wuthnow and Smith say about the overall young adult population in the United States is applicable to the situation of Catholics in their twenties and thirties. Young adult Catholics, particularly those who are considering an ecclesial vocation, need the church’s ongoing support in their vocational exploration. They deserve to have experienced mentors accompany them as they attempt to discern and respond to God’s call in their lives. It is the hope of each of the authors of this book that what is presented here will inform, guide, and inspire the many gifted and committed young adults who wish to give their lives in service to the church. We hope that readers of this book will find support and encouragement as they listen for God’s voice and seek to respond to God’s call.



# 1

*Donald Senior, CP*

## **Answering the Call: Biblical Perspectives**

Since the time of Jesus and his first disciples, Christians have used the metaphor of “call” or “vocation” to describe the search for God’s will in their lives. What will I do with my life? Where and how will I find a life of meaning and purpose?

For people of faith, the answer to that question ultimately involves confidence that God has given each of us unique gifts and wants us to flourish in our lives. Searching the Scriptures does not give us magical answers or quick solutions but can provide us—as it has generations before us—with the courage and wisdom to seek our call in life and to respond generously.

It has always intrigued me that in biblical Hebrew the way of referring to past and future has the opposite orientation than it does in English. While we say “the past is behind me” and “the future is in front of me,” the biblical idiom is the opposite: that is, “the past is in front of me” (literally, “before my face”) and “the future is behind me” (“at my back”). The image is visual, something like rowing a boat across the lake. The receding shoreline is “in front of you”; where you are headed is at your back, behind you. You view the “past”—the receding shore—in order to fix your course for where you are going.

This is how the Scriptures function for us, it strikes me. We view our sacred past not out of nostalgia but to find there the footprints of God, the traces of our religious roots in order to give us direction for the future that we cannot see but that we know God holds out for us. Our Scriptures give us the images and metaphors and collective wisdom that help us find our vocation in life.

## The Call Stories

Stories about those who were “called” to follow Jesus abound in the New Testament, particularly in the gospels. In the opening chapters of the gospels of Mark and Matthew, Simon and Andrew are found casting their nets in the sea along with James, son of Zebedee and John his brother, sitting in their boat mending their nets. None of them has an inkling of what is about to happen to them, something that will change their lives forever. Jesus, walking by the sea, calls to them: “Follow me and I will make you fish for people” (Mark 1:16-20). They drop their nets and leave their father and his workers behind in the boat where they had been sitting and follow Jesus.

In Capernaum, the border town on the frontier between the realms of Herod Antipas and Herod Philip, Jesus meets Levi son of Alphaeus sitting at his tollbooth and once again “Follow me” is the unadorned command. Without hesitation Levi gets up, leaves his counter, and follows Jesus. That night Jesus dines in celebration with Levi’s tax collector friends and other unsavory characters, earning a sharp rebuke from the religious leaders. But Jesus does not hesitate: “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.” (Mark 2:17).

Luke’s gospel has a variant on these inaugural call stories in his enticing account of the call of Peter. Jesus’ magnetic power draws large crowds to the shore of the sea, thirsting to hear his words. Their eagerness presses Jesus to the water’s edge where some fishermen are washing their nets, their boats now empty

after a nighttime of futile fishing. Jesus steps into Simon's boat and asks him to push off a bit from the shore, and in such a glorious pulpit Jesus of Nazareth preaches to the crowds fanned out on the shoreline of the cove in front of him. His sermon finished, he asks Simon to cast out into the deep and to let down the nets for a catch. "Master," Simon replies, "we have worked all night long but have caught nothing. Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets." When the nets are full to the breaking point with fish, Simon Peter, overwhelmed, falls down at Jesus' knees and exclaims, "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man." Jesus responds, "Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people." When the boat comes to shore, Simon and his partners James and John leave everything and follow Jesus (Luke 5:1-11).

John's gospel presents the inaugural calls differently, as is often the case with the Fourth Gospel. The call of Jesus comes not as a command by the shore of the sea or at a tollbooth in Galilee, but in the Judean desert in the southern part of Israel. While John the Baptist is preaching to his disciples, Jesus passes by like some haunting specter. "Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world," acclaims the Baptist. As if caught in the beauty of his net, two of John's disciples begin to follow after Jesus. Jesus turns and says to them, "What are you looking for?"—a question that echoes down the centuries like a distant clap of thunder. "Rabbi, where are you staying?" "Come and see." And so begins a chain of allurements as Andrew returns to draw Simon Peter his brother to come and see what he has seen. And then Philip and then Nathaniel—all enthralled by the mysterious power of Jesus (see John 1:35-51).

There are many other stories, some with poignant variations. In the Acts of the Apostles, Paul, so sure of his own convictions and determined to destroy the early followers of Jesus, is knocked to the ground on the way to Damascus, blinded by the brilliance of the risen Christ and called to be Christ's chosen vessel even as he kicks against the goad (Acts 9:1-9). With the help of Ananias and the other Christians in Damascus, Paul will now begin to proclaim the Gospel to the world (Acts 9:10-22).

Peter's call is renewed at the end of John's gospel, in perhaps the most exquisite story of all the New Testament. Deflated disciples fish listlessly on the Sea of Galilee, when a figure appears on the shore with a charcoal fire—someone unknown but hauntingly familiar. The mysterious figure gives directions again for where to fish and once more, as in Luke's account, there is an abundant catch. Then comes the heart-pounding recognition that it is the risen Christ who stands on the shore. Peter plunges into the sea and swims ashore to find a breakfast of bread and fish prepared. And then the moment of reconciliation: "Simon son of John, do you love me?" The threefold question heals the breach of a threefold betrayal. "Feed my lambs. . . . Tend my sheep." Here discipleship is restored and the call renewed (John 21:1-19).

Luke's account of the annunciation to Mary also serves as a type of "call" story. A voice from God on the lips of an angel calls her to a new and startling life, a life of unexpected abundance and wrenching suffering, a call to bring God's own life into the world in a manner of unimaginable beauty and daring. To this call, she says, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word" (Luke 1:26-38).

Not all the calls were heeded. A rich young man whom Jesus loves turns away because the cost is too high (Matt 19:16-22). For a scribe seeking the truth about the commands of the law, the call is still a distance away—"You are not far from the kingdom of God"—Jesus says to him (Mark 12:34). For Nicodemus, who dares to come to Jesus only by night, the shattering loss of Jesus' death finally moves him to overcome his fears and claim the body of the crucified Christ (John 19:39).

### **Qualities of the Gospel Call Stories**

We might note at the outset some of the fundamental qualities of these gospel call stories. First of all, the stories make abundantly clear that the life of discipleship begins not with a choice but with a call. It is Jesus who either by majestic command or compelling allure initiates the life of discipleship.

Second, most of the stories also make clear that the call is first and foremost a call to follow after Jesus. The focal point is the person of Christ—that remains the heart and soul of all Christian experience.

Third, the disciples who are called to follow Jesus also will share in his mission of redemption: “I will make you fish for people.” They will be plunged into the work of establishing the reign of God, of healing and exorcism and teaching just as Jesus did. And their destiny will be to encounter the withering power of alienation and death in Jerusalem just as he did, but, ultimately, to share also in the joy of his resurrection.

Finally, these stories make clear that the lives of those called will be transformed. They leave their boats and their families and their tollbooth. Once the call is heard, their lives fundamentally change and new allegiances are required.

## **The Old Testament and God’s Call**

Compelling stories about God’s call that gives direction to people’s lives are also found in the Old Testament. This is particularly true of the stories from the prophetic and historical literature of Israel’s scriptures, where God calls human beings to follow the divine path and to participate in the drama of human redemption.

When, for example, in his letter to the Galatians (1:15), Paul the Apostle reflects on his first encounter with the risen Christ, he does not use the dramatic language of sudden conversion found in the story of the road to Damascus in the Acts of the Apostles, but the language of “call,” or vocation, echoing words found in the prophet Isaiah: “The LORD called me before I was born, while I was in my mother’s womb he named me. . . . I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth” (Isa 49:1-6). A similar text is found in the opening words of Jeremiah: “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations” (Jer 1:5).

Virtually all of the great characters who would shape the destiny of Israel receive such divine calls. God asks Abraham and Sarah who are viewed as the parents of Israel's history to set out on a journey of faith, leaving their homestead behind and, as the letter to the Hebrews would say, setting out on a journey whose destiny they did not yet know (Heb 11:8). And with exquisite beauty and even great humor the Bible makes clear that this journey of faith was not the initiative of Abraham but was a call from God. In Genesis 17 God appears to Abraham and promises the patriarch that he will be the ancestor of a multitude of nations. Abraham, dismayed at this impossible prospect, hides his face in the crook of his elbow and laughs—"Can a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Can Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?" (Gen 17:17).

The saga is repeated in the next chapter of Genesis when three mysterious visitors appear at the tent of Abraham and Sarah at Mamre near Hebron. Abraham recognizes that these visitors are the divine presence and so he prepares a feast for them. When they are about to leave, they repeat the preposterous promises: Sarah will bear a child and the offspring of Abraham and Sarah will be as numerous as the stars. Standing behind the tent flap, Sarah laughs at the prospect! And the Lord through the visitors challenges her: "Why did Sarah laugh? . . . Is anything too wonderful for the LORD?" (Gen 18:13-14).

There is this note of the preposterous in virtually all of the biblical call stories in both the Old and New Testaments. Moses encountering God in the burning bush at Horeb the mountain of God, hesitant and fearful as God anoints him to lead the people out of slavery: "O my Lord, I have never been eloquent, neither in the past nor even now that you have spoken to your servant; but I am slow of speech and slow of tongue." Then the Lord said to him, "Who gives speech to mortals? Who makes them mute or deaf, seeing or blind? Is it not I, the LORD? Now go, and I will be with your mouth and teach you what you are to speak" (Exod 4:10-12).

Or the call of the prophets: Amos of Tekoa, dragooned by God into a powerful mission of justice. "I am no prophet," he says, "nor a prophet's son; but I am a herdsman and a dresser of sycamore

trees, and the LORD took me from following the flock, and the LORD said to me, 'Go, prophesy to my people Israel'" (Amos 7:14-15). Or Jeremiah, tongue-tied, hesitant—"I am only a boy," he tells God. "Do not say, 'I am only a boy,'" God thunders, "for you shall go to all to whom I send you, and you shall speak whatever I command you. Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you, says the LORD" (Jer 1:6-8). Or Isaiah himself, standing in the portals of the temple overwhelmed by a sense of God's presence and his own unworthiness, crying out, "I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips." A seraph purifies his troubled heart with a burning coal from the temple brazier and then the voice of God penetrates the prophet's dread: "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" His anguish put aside, the prophet speaks: "Here am I; send me!" (Isa 6:1-9). And so it would be with all of the great characters who form the biblical saga, men and women hesitant and awkward, yet called by God to take up their mission on behalf of the people.

The call of God is often disruptive, breaking into ordinary lives and asking ordinary people to bear a mission of human transformation and to experience profound and sometimes wrenching change in order to be faithful to that divine summons. And nowhere in the Christian Bible is this more apparent than in the gospel portrayal of the disciples of Jesus. Despite their initial response to drop everything and follow him, they prove to be awkward, slow to learn, often confused. The gospel literature does not hesitate to portray the disciples at their worst: impeding Jesus' mission, objecting to his destiny in Jerusalem, and when the terrible threat of the passion fell over Jesus' ministry, deserting him, denying him, and even betraying him. Only after the death and resurrection of Jesus are the disciples reinstated in their mission and their betrayal of Jesus reconciled.

## **The Biblical Call Stories and the Christian Vocation**

What do these biblical call stories tell us about our own search to find what we should do with our lives in today's world?

First of all, the stories remind us that the notion of vocation in its most fundamental meaning is not defined by any specific role or function but is something far greater, with God as its author and life as its subject. Sometimes in the past people thought of a call or vocation solely as applying to a commitment to priesthood or religious life. But, as important as these ways of life are, the biblical notion of vocation or call has a much broader and deeper meaning. Vocation touches upon the very foundations of our faith. We believe that God calls all human beings into life and gives them meaning and purpose, along with the freedom to choose and to commit to the gifts that God offers. That is the foundation of all the meanings of the word “call” or “vocation” in a Christian sense. As people of faith we are called throughout our lives to seek the face of God—a call to holiness and the fullness of life itself. This is the end point of the biblical quest: to see the face of God and live. It is for this that we are called, all of us as part of the human family, and surely all of us as part of the church.

This wider sense of vocation was one of the defining moments of the Second Vatican Council as it tried to express a new consciousness of what the church is, an expression that ultimately bore fruit in the council document *Lumen Gentium*, the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church. The church, it proclaimed, is the mystery of God’s loving presence in the world, calling all people to holiness and fullness of life. The first definition of the church’s character is not its differentiation into specific structures and roles but its common character as the pilgrim people of God, called into being by God’s love and setting out on the quest for holiness and union with God. Only as a second moment—and only in service to the church’s fundamental vocation to holiness and communion—can we differentiate roles within the church. This fundamental vocation is sealed in baptism. The waters of the sacrament symbolize that heritage of abundant life given by God in Christ, and also symbolize our common life and destiny with God’s people.

Second, if we accept that God through Christ is the source of every vocation—the vocation of life itself and every specific

aspect of our lives, including that of priesthood and consecrated life and forms of lay church service—then we should approach this question full of hope and expectation. God is with our world and with our church. In spite of ourselves, if need be, God will call people of goodwill to carry out the divine mission in the world and people will respond.

Third, we can take heart from so many of these biblical call stories because they show us that God calls ordinary people like us—people who hesitate, who are skeptical or doubtful, who feel unworthy, who are unsure of their gifts, who wonder if they are making the right choice. The list is long: Abraham and Sarah thinking they are too old and that their time had passed; Moses who stammered and wondered if he could speak in public; Jeremiah who thought he was too young for the job; Isaiah who felt he was “unclean” and not worthy of the service to which God was calling him; Amos who declared that neither he nor his family was equipped for what God was asking of him; the awkward apostle Peter asking Christ to leave him alone; Mary, a young woman unsure and fearful of what God might have in store for her; and Paul, wrongheaded and stubborn, violently persecuting the followers of the very Jesus who would call him to be the Apostle to the Gentiles. All of these great characters felt inadequate for the lives of greatness to which God was calling them, but ultimately through God’s grace they found the courage to respond. The very human characters in these stories encourage us never to count ourselves out.

There is another key characteristic of vocation we can draw from our biblical heritage. A Christian vocation, whatever form it takes, is inherently missionary in character with the transformation of the world as its purpose. The fishermen on the shores of the Sea of Galilee were called to become fishers of people. Peter’s reconciliation on that same shore after the passion of Jesus led to the mandate to feed Christ’s lambs, feed his sheep. Through baptism all Christians are called to share in the mission of Jesus—healing and teaching and reconciling and giving life and freedom to the children of God. Every expression of Christian vocation, whether in some explicit form of church service

or in the professional life of medicine or science or politics or business or the art of raising a family, has a public character and a missionary purpose. Like the very being of Jesus, vocation is a call to engender life—in one's self and in the world in which God has placed us. We are called to use our gifts and energy on behalf of others, to make our world a place of beauty and justice—as God intended it to be.

Finally, the biblical call stories remind us that responding to God's vocation requires conversion and lifelong personal transformation. One has to be attentive to God's call, ready to leave something or someone behind in order to be free to follow Jesus: damp nets, a confused father, a tax collector's booth, memories of failure, a tired body, competing obligations, the tug of family and possessions, fear of the unknown and untried. Sometimes the burden to be shed is massive. The example of Peter on the shore of the Sea of Galilee during that breakfast with the risen Christ is vivid. He had to come to grips with the fact that he had publicly denied the one he loved and the one who had given every ounce of meaning to his life. "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you." The words are full of heartbreak but they had to be said before the apostle could be reinstated. Paul too had to put behind him his cocksure understanding of God's ways, a surety that had led him to persecute the church of God. He finally had to see himself not as a super apostle but as one "untimely born" (see 1 Cor 15:8-10), a frail earthen vessel carrying God's treasure (2 Cor 4:7-12). Only then could Paul be free to bring the gospel to the world.

## **The Journey of Discipleship**

It is not by accident that the most pervasive biblical symbol for describing the life of faith is that of the "journey." Israel's history is cast as a long and often tortuous journey of faith: from the first stirrings of Abraham's trek into the pastures of Canaan, through the exodus from Egypt and the journey to the Promised Land, and from the wrenching experience of exile to a muted and

hope-filled return to the land of Judah. And so too the gospels portray the life and mission of Jesus as a long journey, beginning with his ministry in Galilee and then on to the ominous and purposeful journey to Jerusalem where he would meet his destiny in death and resurrection.

The gospels are clear that this journey of Jesus and his disciples captures the spirit of the Christian experience of faith. Luke is most explicit—the first name given to the church is the “Way” or the “Journey” (see Acts 9:2; 19:23; 22:4; 24:14, 22). Response to God’s call is not an instantaneous or static reality but one that unfolds over time and one that must endure the rigors of the march to Jerusalem, a journey that often involves loss, fatigue, and failure before the discovery of abundant and joyful life.

At the same time, this is not a solitary journey. The search for God’s will in our lives takes place in the context of the Christian community as a whole. We are a pilgrim people, together searching to find our answer to God’s call. We need to listen to the experience and guidance of others; we need to sound out our possible life choices with people we trust—our families, our friends, our spiritual advisors. We need to fortify our search with prayer and deep reflection.

## **The Biblical Heritage and Vocations Today**

Has there ever been a time in our collective memory when there has been more need for those willing to use their gifts to bring life to our world? In a world filled with violence and with increasing chasms of hostility between cultures and races and ideologies, is there not an urgent need to demonstrate that it is possible for diverse peoples to live together in harmony and love—that community is possible through God’s grace? To witness in a public way for a whole generation that thirsts for authentic spirituality that a life of holiness and virtue is indeed possible in our time? To be willing to take up those forms of service that so often governments and private agencies are tempted to abandon: working with victims of AIDS, feeding the hungry,

throwing in one's lot with the homeless and abandoned, standing with the immigrant and refugee, demonstrating for peace? In a world where so much greed and dishonesty has robbed people of their livelihoods and homes and caused so much human suffering, has there ever been more need for those who will use their talents and their gifts of honesty and integrity to build up our world, to promote justice and the common good? In a world where so many people thirst for meaning and something worthwhile to believe in, has there ever been more need for those who are willing to preach the Gospel and to bring the life of Christ to those who hunger for spiritual nourishment?

This is not an easy time for the church. Vocations to the priesthood, especially in the Western world, remain few. Many religious communities in the United States and elsewhere find themselves in a time of diminishment—consolidating and cutting back. Preparing for lay ecclesial ministry can be costly and the financial rewards cannot compare with the opportunities in business.

What do we do at a time like this? Is not this a time when we have to dig deep into our heritage and lift up again for ourselves and for the people we serve the most noble and sacred ideals of our Christian faith? We must remember with accuracy and intensity the beauty of the gospel and the highest ideals of the Christian call as priests or religious or committed laity on behalf of God's people.

From a host of recent sociological studies of young adults, we know that this new generation of Christians is no less good, no less generous, no less children of God than any previous generation before them. Only if we passionately believe in the church and its ministry, only if we believe with all our hearts that God will not abandon us and that God will call us to life, will we be able to speak without embarrassment or hesitation to young Christians and invite them to hear God's call to bring the Gospel to the world. Only when we summon up our own best ideals and deepest faith, will we be worthy of this new generation of Christians who seek a life of holiness.

## For Reflection

- What do you think of when you hear the word “vocation”?
- Which biblical story of call do you most identify with?
- In what ways have you experienced God’s presence and call at key moments in your journey of discipleship?

## Scripture Passages

Exodus 3:1–4:17	Isaiah 6:1-8	Jeremiah 1:4-10
Luke 5:1-11	John 21:1-19	Galatians 1:11-24

## Recommended Reading

- Brueggemann, Walter. *The Word that Describes the World: The Bible and Discipleship*. Minneapolis: Augsburg, 2006.
- O’Collins, Gerald. *Jesus: A Portrait*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2008.
- Orsuto, Donna. *Holiness*. New York: Continuum, 2006.
- Senior, Donald. *Jesus: A Gospel Portrait*. Rev. ed. New York: Paulist Press, 1992.