

The grace of the call



Religious life is a particular form of consecrated life, and, as the Year of Consecrated Life opens, it would be helpful to begin in the beginning, that is to say, to begin with a consideration of the call or vocation to religious life. By understanding better this grace, we will also learn what prepares the seedbed of vocations, what helps them grow and be fruitful, and what will sustain them to the end.

The call to religious life is a grace from God, given to some but not to all. “Somewhere near the heart of a religious vocation is the idea that God chooses certain people to imitate His own Incarnate example of the religious life. [It is] ... a distinctive call from God, choosing certain individuals for this way of life. (“Religious Vocation — of Divine Origin”, an address by Servant of God Fr John Hardon, at the meeting of Consortium Perfectae Caritatis, 29 February 1972).

The discernment of the call to religious life and the response to it requires three things: faith, prayer and sacrifice. Without faith, no one could recognize Christ and his life as the model for all Christians and especially for religious. Without prayer, no one could hear the call or desire to respond by imitation of Christ. Without sacrifice, no one could persevere in responding to the call to leave all things for love of Christ. These three conditions best prepare the soil of the heart to receive the seed — in this case, the seed of a call to religious life. The lack of these dispositions renders the seed fruitless.

To appreciate the importance of these necessary conditions for hearing and responding to a vocation, I will attempt to draw a parallel between the three types of fruitless soil in the parable of the seed (Matthew 13:1–23) with the three conditions of the “good soil” that enable the seed to take root, thrive and be fruitful. In the Gospel, our Lord speaks of these conditions as necessary for Christian discipleship. All the more, then, are they necessary for religious life.

“Where sound religious education is neglected it is either tempting Providence or asking for a miracle to expect vocations to flourish” (Conference of Fr Hardon: “Religious Education and Vocations”). To be realistic, of course, those who believe and come to discern a vocation might not possess a fully developed faith. Yet, even so, their faith must be cultivated not neglected. That is to say, they must not be like the foot path, which is uncultivated soil. No seed can penetrate trampled earth. Likewise, those who have no interest and make no effort to cultivate and understand what they believe prevent the seed from being received. Instead, candidates must have a desire to understand what they believe. They must also be willing to subject themselves, as faith requires, in mind and heart to Christ and his Vicar on earth who teaches us with Christ’s own authority. There are too many sad examples in the history

of the Church that show us the devastation of the demons stealing away the seeds of faith from the minds and hearts of those who only call themselves Catholic — even some vowed religious — but who, in practice, deny the authority of Christ and the Church.

By means of prayer, the soul is listening with heart and mind elevated to God, trying to learn how to think like God and to love and desire the things God loves and desires to give us. This is why desire for religious life is always a sign of a vocation. It isn't the only or definitive sign, of course. It may even be a call simply to deepen one's commitment to Christ apart from religious consecration. Yet it remains a sign that a call has been heard. Without devotion to prayer, however, no call can be heard. A feeble life of prayer might enable us to hear the call, but if there is no depth of soil, even the first trial that comes along could be sufficient to wither the plant altogether. "Since religious vocations are of divine origin, it is only through divine means that they can be sustained, and only by divine means can the young religious be formed to face the terrifying challenges of the ... the twenty-first century." (From his conference: "Religious Vocation — of Divine Origin")

Hearing the call to religious life enlightens the mind and enkindles the heart to follow Christ more closely, as the Church's law says: religious life is "a stable form of living by which the faithful, following Christ more closely under the action of the Holy Spirit, are totally dedicated to God, who is supremely loved" (cic, can. 573 § 1; cf. also cceo, c. 410; cf. Lumen Gentium, n. 44). For those who love, sacrifice is the way to express it — and supreme love sacrifices supremely. Precisely this sacrificial love gives joy to the hearts of religious which they radiate to the world, for by means of their loving sacrifices, they already possess in some way the happy state of the blessed: "the fruit of the Spirit is: love, joy ..." (Gal. 5:22).

The lovers of Christ know that the vows provide the very food of love. Here we should note that since Christianity as such is a call to love and to sacrifice, religious have no monopoly on either one. Many laity, not in the "state of perfection" nevertheless might strive for and attain the perfection of the counsels. Why? Because they love Christ and desire to please him. That is why true believers and lovers of Christ abound in admiration for the evangelical counsels and show gratitude to Christ for giving them. They rejoice at the encounter with those who have been called to religious life and encourage vocations. (cf. St Francis de Sales, *Treatise on the Love of God*, Book viii, cc. 6–9.)

But for those religious or candidates unwilling to sacrifice totally for love of Christ, eventually the weeds of desires for the world creep up, choke the vocation and prevent any fruitfulness. They end up sad, like the rich young man, since they know they have refused a greater love.

St Thomas writes: "When the mind is affected vehemently with intense love and desire for something, the result is that it sets aside other things. Therefore, when a man's mind is fervently carried by love and desire to divine matters, in which perfection manifestly consists, it follows that he casts aside everything that might hold him back from being borne to God: not only the care of things or affection of wife and children but even of himself" (*Summa Contra Gentiles*, iii, c. 130).

These three conditions provide the best soil for a closer imitation of Christ who, "having joy set before him, endured the cross, despising the shame" (Heb 12:2). The joy set before him was our redemption. He preferred to suffer the separation of body and soul in death than to be separated from us for eternity. The *Canticle* describes Christ in these terms: "if a man should give all the substance of his

house for love, he shall despise it as nothing” (8:7).

So now, with all consecrated religious, we enter the Year of Consecrated Life together, our hearts grateful to God for such supernatural gifts, imploring a fruitful and abundant harvest.

“Let each of the faithful called to the profession of the evangelical counsels, therefore, carefully see to it that he persevere and ever grow in that vocation God has given him. Let him do this for the increased holiness of the Church, for the greater glory of the one and undivided Trinity, which in and through Christ is the fount and the source of all holiness” (Lumen Gentium, n. 47).

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