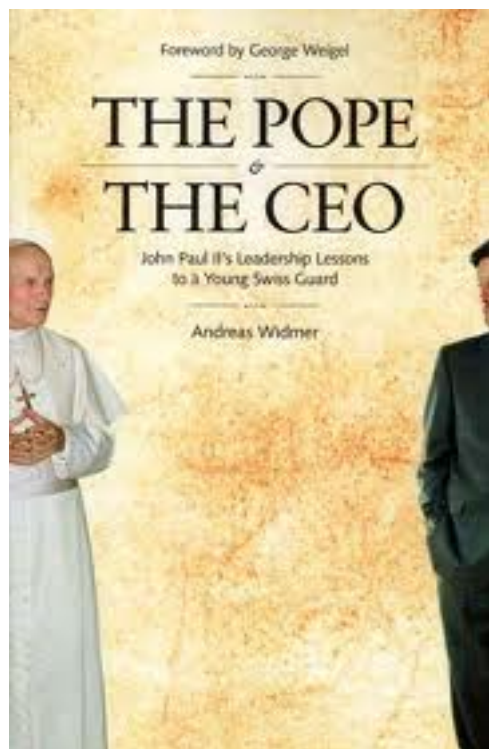


The Importance of Vocation



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When I entered the Swiss Guards, I was twenty years old and, like my fellow guards, in peak physical condition. But as fit and energetic as we were, John Paul II could still run rings around us.

That running began before 6:00 every morning when he would rise, pray, dress for the day, then head to his private chapel for more time in prayer. At 7:00 a.m., small groups of visiting dignitaries, Catholic pilgrims, or Vatican staff would join him for Mass. After Mass, guests joined him for breakfast. An hour or two of office work followed. Before greeting official visitors at 11:00, he would meet briefly with linguists to review the finer points of whatever language he would be using to speak to the visiting crowds or dignitaries. Then the audiences began.

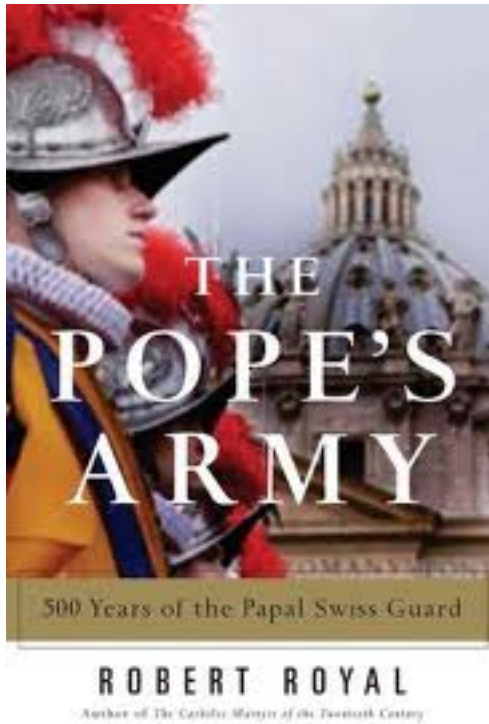
Sometimes he spoke to thousands, sometimes only a select few; yet these audiences lasted until one or two in the afternoon. Then it was on to lunch, where various Vatican staff joined him, followed by more time for prayer, with John Paul II often heading to the rooftop gardens of the Papal Palace to walk and talk with God.

After that there was more office work and more audiences, lasting right up until dinner at 8:00 p.m. when guests often dined with him. After the meal ended he would return to reading and writing and working well into the night. Sleep came around midnight or even later. Somewhere in all that, he also found time to ask a Swiss Guard about his day, chat with the sisters who cooked for him, and keep up with old friends.

That was just his Rome schedule. Compared to his schedule while traveling, it was comparatively light. I have often tried to remember times I saw that schedule taking a toll on the pope. I couldn't. I recalled plenty of occasions when I was worn out with exhaustion. Not once do I recall him being bleary-eyed. In fact, it was just the opposite. The reason he could do that, joyfully and unfailingly, was

because he knew what God had made him to do. He knew his vocation.

The term “vocation” means much more than the standard dictionary definition of “a career path or line of work.” It is more of a “calling” than a “job.” According to John Paul II, your vocation answers the question, “Why am I alive?” Moreover, he believed, only when you’re living out your vocation can you find fulfillment in this life. Your vocation, understood, embraced, and lived, is what makes you feel truly and fully alive.



There are three different levels of vocations.

The first of these three is the universal vocation. It doesn't matter who you are or where or when you live, you have the same universal vocation as every other human being on the planet: To know, love, and serve God in this life so that you can know, love, and serve him eternally in the next life. Your objective is to receive grace now so that you can receive glory later, or even more simply put, to cooperate with God in his work to save your soul.

After the universal vocation, it starts to get more specific. How we live it, the way of life in which we love and serve God and others, is our primary vocation. According to the Catholic Church, there are three primary vocations: married life, the priesthood, and consecrated life (brothers or sisters living in community and consecrated singles living in society at large).

Each of these vocations is a permanent and freely chosen way of life. Each also entails a gift of self. In choosing a primary vocation, you make your inalienable and non-transferable “I” someone else's property. In other words, you give priority in your life either to God and the consecrated life or to your spouse and family.

Our modern notions of freedom can confuse us about the value of this kind of vocation. So often, we see the type of limitations to our freedom that a permanent commitment brings as impediments to

“being who we are.” But real freedom isn’t freedom from outside restrictions. Real freedom is the freedom to love and give ourselves fully. Freedom in fact exists for the sake of love. It is the means to the end we all desire – loving communion with God and others. It is when we give ourselves most fully that we’re truly free.

The third level of vocation, your secondary vocation, is what you do on that path. It’s how you use your gifts and talents in service of God and others while living out your universal and primary vocations. For most of us, this means our work or profession. It also, however, can apply to your civic and community involvement, apostolate work, or simply bearing the various crosses and trials that come your way in life. It’s your plan of action for living.

John Paul II realized that through our work we don’t simply make more: We become more. Work shapes us, refines us, and pushes us to discover and hone our natural gifts. It enables us to love, becoming a means by which we’re able to serve our family, customers, clients, neighbors, and communities. Through that, work becomes a means of giving our life to God.

When you understand all three levels of vocation and the place each one holds in the hierarchy of importance, it becomes much easier to order your life and your priorities, pursuing the virtues you most need, and balancing competing roles without compromise.

John Paul II was living proof of that. All work, not only that of priests and religious, can be holy when done as an act of love, service, and sacrifice according to the mind of God. That’s what the Incarnation made possible. That’s why St. Thomas Aquinas could say with such confidence, “There can be no joy in living without joy in work.”

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