

# HAVE I A VOCATION?

By MICHEL RONDET

THE first reply which must be given to one who asks this question is that every christian life is itself a calling to the perfection of charity. For every christian, baptism is the sacrament which consecrates this primary and essential vocation. Pope Pius XI, when someone asked him, 'What is the finest day in the life of a Pope?' replied, with as much humour as truth, 'The day of his baptism!' His answer makes the point that the priestly fullness of the office of sovereign pontiff is itself interior to the holy vocation which is given us through the washing of regeneration in water and the Spirit. Nevertheless, it is not without reason that the faithful spontaneously apply the word vocation first of all to the priestly and religious vocation. For this represents a type of exemplary realisation of baptismal life, and corresponds to a more precise call which clearly manifests the mystery of divine election in the lives of men. It is a privileged example of the discernment of and fidelity to a divine call; and, as such, can be a guiding light for all who desire to order their lives according to the divine will. In addition, a vocation to the priestly or religious life is, like every grace, always given for the sake of the whole body. Its birth and development are the concern of the entire Church. Indeed, priests and religious are not only those who are set apart from the rest of the faithful by their function and their way of life; they are the recipients of graces which must give life to the mystical body of Christ in its entirety.

Whether they are called to prolong the priesthood of Christ amongst us or to be witnesses, in their poor, chaste and obedient life, of the essential values of the kingdom of God, the work they have to accomplish amongst us is eminently a work of grace, a charism to be welcomed, and a light which must shine for the sake of the Church. Priests and religious are not only responsible for the functions and services of the Church, to which it would be possible to consecrate oneself partially or for a time. They are truly called to a new life which is to transform their whole being, in some way to re-create it and to consecrate it for a charismatic mission. Consequently, only those who have recognized in the depths of their being a movement

of grace impelling them to follow Christ in a particular vocation can enter upon this way. It is a formidable and blessed choice which sets some of the faithful apart for the work of the gospel and consecrates them to the spiritual service of their brothers, placing them on a lamp-stand, like blazing torches, to light up the whole house. What is born in the depth of the soul is destined to develop in the light of the day: the grace received is given to an individual person, but for the sake of the whole Church; or, more exactly, to the whole Church in one person, whose life from now on will be transformed by that choice. We should not, therefore, be surprised to see that the problem of the discernment of vocation affects not only the young men or women who think they recognize a vocation in themselves, but also the Church, which will welcome it as a grace. The Church, in order to live, has need of these graces of vocation; she cannot be indifferent to the way in which these charisms, these dispositions, to the priestly or the religious life, are to be recognized and lived. But she knows as well that here she is in the presence of the mystery of divine choice, a mystery which is beyond her, and which she must receive in hope and faith in the Spirit who rules her completely.

Thus the problem of the discernment of vocation brings us to the very heart of a process of grace which demands a constant reference to the Holy Spirit, the author of all grace, and to the Church, the judge of the authenticity of charisms. That is what Pope Pius XII recalled most firmly in the apostolic constitution *Sedes Sapientiae*:

What is called divine vocation, that foundation of all religious life as of all sacerdotal and apostolic life, consists, as everyone should know, of a twofold essential element, the one divine, the other ecclesiastical. The first of these elements, the call by God to the religious or the sacerdotal state, must be considered as so necessary that, were it lacking, the very foundation would be lacking on which the whole building rests. Him whom God does not call, the grace of God neither moves nor helps . . .

Turning now to the second element in religious and sacerdotal vocation, according to the teaching of the Roman Catechism, they are said to be called by God who are called by the legitimate ministers of the Church. That teaching, far from contradicting our words on the divine character of vocation, is on the contrary closely linked with them. Because divine vocation to the religious and clerical state destines

him whom it calls to live publicly a life of sanctification and to exercise a ministry proper to the hierarchy in the Church, a visible and hierarchial society, the vocation must be approved, admitted and authoritatively ruled by the representatives of that hierarchy to which God has entrusted the government of the Church.<sup>1</sup>

These lines, which express very clearly the thought and practice of the Church on the subject of sacerdotal and religious vocations, invite us to distinguish the two essential components of any vocation: divine call and consecration through the Church. Not that they are to be dissociated, still less opposed to one another. On the contrary, they are to be found indissolubly united in that movement of grace which is vocation, and from their meeting a vocation is born. Consequently it is this meeting which must be looked for, verified, and tested in the course of the discernment of a vocation.

The faithful are ready enough to admit at the origin of every sacerdotal and religious vocation the presence of a particular grace which operates in the depths of the soul. But some theologians have been known to challenge this presentation of vocation.<sup>2</sup> To base everything on the interpretation of an interior call, they say, is surely to hand over the sacred functions and the witness of religious life to the risks of doubtful fervour and deluded generosity. Of course it could be answered that the help and control of a spiritual director are there to aid in dissipating illusions and testing fervour; but is that enough? Does not the director run the risk of sometimes sharing the illusions of one whom he knows only through a manifestation of conscience, which, even unconsciously, might not be entirely true? And if he were really prudent, would he ever agree that the will of God can be seen in the desire or interior attraction of the soul which he directs?

These questions are not without foundation, and we shall see that they presuppose great supernatural prudence in the interpretation of the divine call. But they have no force against the massive

<sup>1</sup> *Acta Apostolicae Sedis*, (A.A.S.) 1956 pp. 354 ff.

<sup>2</sup> E.g. Canon Lahitton in a work entitled *La Vocation Sacerdotale* (Paris 1909). Some of the opinions expressed in this book are still rightly debated, in spite of the partial approbation given to them by the commission of cardinals charged with giving an opinion on the controversy to which they had given rise (A.A.S., 15 July 1912, p. 485). In fact, from the point of view of roman documents, if we would have the problem set in its true spiritual climate, and have the discussion removed from narrow and prejudiced positions, we need to refer to the text of Pius XII, cited above.

fact, attested by scripture and tradition, that no one can aspire to the priesthood without having been called to it by God, and that only those can understand truly the spirit of the evangelical counsels to whom this understanding has been given by God.<sup>1</sup> In the Church of Christ priesthood and religious witness are two charismatic vocations lived in the Spirit and by the Spirit; to deny that would be to make of two institutions, essential to the life and to the holiness of the Church, mere sociological functions in the diversity of a hierarchical body. The priesthood is certainly a function and religious life is certainly an institution; but both of them, each in its own fashion, are charismatic and prophetic.<sup>2</sup> It is therefore true that at the origin of every sacerdotal or religious vocation there is a divine grace which calls a man or a woman to a particular mission for the whole body of the Church.

What is the nature of that grace? It is often thought of as an interior voice which forces itself on the conscience of the one chosen. The reality is more complex and more beautiful. That call can come in many ways: awareness in God and through God of the misery and enslavement of a whole people, as for Moses; the discovery of a personal responsibility in view of God's plan, as for Isaias: 'Whom shall I send? Who shall be our messenger? I answered: Here I am. Send me';<sup>3</sup> an irresistible feeling that a return must be made for graces received by the offering of a whole life, as for the psalmist: 'How can I repay the Lord for his goodness to me? The cup of salvation I shall raise; I will call on the Lord's name';<sup>4</sup> the profound compulsion of love which demands dedication to the work of the Lord, as for Peter and, after him, for so many pastors and apostles; love's need of likeness, which tore Francis of Assisi from an easy life, and made Ignatius of Loyola write in his *Spiritual Exercises*: 'Those who wish to love more . . . will make a more costly offering . . . saying: I wish and desire to imitate you by enduring all injustices and all contempt and all poverty . . . if your most sacred Majesty wills to choose me and admit me to that life and that state';<sup>5</sup> the deep echoes of a gospel phrase which sink into the soul so as to transform the whole of life, as for Anthony and all those who, follow-

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Heb 5, 1 & 4 and Mt 19, 11.

<sup>2</sup> It is not our business here to distinguish them, to show what is specific in each and how they are complementary. From the point of view of vocation, which alone interests us here, there is diversity in the specification of graces and calls, but profound unity in the charismatic character of the call. Pope Pius XII stressed that in the text we have quoted.

<sup>3</sup> Isai 6, 8.

<sup>4</sup> Ps 115, 12.

<sup>5</sup> Exx 97-98.

ing him, heard the appeal addressed to the rich young man: 'If you want to be perfect, go, sell all you possess, and come, follow me'.<sup>1</sup> Through all this diversity, it is ultimately one of the faces of Christ which conquers the soul: the face of Christ poor, for Francis of Assisi: the face of Christ carrying his cross in the world for the salvation of men, for Ignatius of Loyola: the face of Christ hidden in the humility of his condition as an artisan, for Charles de Foucauld: the face of Christ weeping for the sins of men, for the Curé of Ars. Stock examples, one may say. But the very fact that they are, shows that they reveal the charismatic element in vocation which we are trying to describe. At the end of such different paths there is always a face of Christ at our point of arrival, a face which conquers the soul that is called, with a mounting power of seduction, and which will take full possession of the soul if it is welcomed. From then on the chosen of God cannot better express what he feels than by taking up the cry of Jeremiah: 'You have led me away, Lord, and I let myself be led'.<sup>2</sup>

But this is the call which has reached its conclusion, and has been recognized in its blessed reality: the moment when a human life utters its *fiat* to God in a blaze of light, as at the Annunciation. Before getting there, the soul will often have a long road to travel. That face of Christ which will thenceforth be everything in its life must first be recognized, and his features must gradually be discerned. The stages of that recognition also admit a great diversity. Sometimes it happens that a veil is torn away, revealing what suddenly becomes so obvious that the soul is surprised that it has been so long in the search. More often, it is only by successive touches, feature by feature, that the portrait is completed: and one day, without knowing how long it has been so, someone is there whom we know well and who awaits our assent.

In the one case as in the other, it is from the whole of life that the light is born. The divine call is not a summons reaching us from outside; it is a recognition in love. It is the history of two lives which find themselves indissolubly united and desirous of sealing their coming together with genuine faithfulness. It is therefore in life that one must look for the signs and premisses of that meeting. It is often by directing an honest look at their past, at the graces and events which mark it, that a young man or a young woman will see how the divine mission, which will henceforth be their vocation, gradually

<sup>1</sup> Mt 19, 21.

<sup>2</sup> Jer 20, 7.

took shape. It was in the heart of their own destiny, in the recognition of the graces which marked their route, that the chosen people became aware of their vocation. It is the same for each one of us. Because we kept all these things in our heart, and then, one day, considered them with an honest mind, we saw God in our life.

Is it necessary then to say that the will of God no longer appears as something outside us or foreign to us? It harmonises with the profound movement of our life, it makes itself felt as the light illuminating all that is within. To recognize it there is no need of a special revelation: the calm use of intelligence guided by love is sufficient. Divine grace and human freedom meet in the same certainty and the same desire. What a man recognizes as his vocation cannot but be the will of God; for grace is given to him in the very honesty of his effort, without his needing to seek elsewhere for the place of his encounter with God.

This way of recognising, in the depths of my life and of my personal history, a movement, a continuity, a coherence which express themselves as a call, is not yielding to a subjective attraction open to many illusions. It is truly making up my mind before God. To deny that this is possible in all honesty and all truth would be both to doubt the Holy Spirit and to reject the clear witness of innumerable lives which have in this way made generous answer to an authentic call from God. True, here more than ever, life must be guided by the evangelical counsel of prudence given to the man who wished to build a tower.<sup>1</sup> To sit down and estimate one's strength means in practice testing the purity and sincerity of the motives for the proposed decision. Do they really come from the Spirit of Christ, a spirit of humility, charity, obedience? Are they really characteristic of what is specific in the vocation envisaged? It is here, perhaps, that illusions and errors are most frequent. There is a risk of taking as a call to religious life or to the priesthood what is simply a call to a more generous and more fervent christian life not directed towards (as it is often without the qualities for) the priesthood or the religious life. Advice, prudence and humility are necessary here, to avoid the illusions of a vague or a presumptuous generosity.

The help of the community of the Church will already play its part at this level, through the advice of parents or older people who are genuinely christian, and through the prudent and enlightened direction of a spiritual father. He, above all, will have the duty of

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<sup>1</sup> Lk 14, 28.

guiding the one under his direction in so delicate a choice. In particular he will need to tell him in detail the spiritual characteristics of the vocation envisaged, aiding him to a clear insight into his motivations and to a correct interpretation of the graces received. It is a work of discernment which requires a very frank and honest dialogue on both sides. The one under direction must hide nothing of what he is and what he desires, and the director must have the courage to say with complete frankness what he thinks of the decision envisaged, the motives for it, and the possible obstacles.

The best criterion of judgment will often be the spiritual fruitfulness of the decision, which is a certain sign of its maturity. A good tree bears good fruit. A choice is good if it leaves the soul in peace, if it achieves the unification of the whole being in truth: that is to say, if intellect, feelings and will, if past, present and future, are therein reconciled and unified in a movement of spiritual progress. There may be many obstacles still to be surmounted, progress still to be made; but the vocation can be considered authentic if it already appears as the centre round which everything is built in harmony, with every element of personality and every stage of life finding there its place and meaning.

Unifying and pacifying for the person who accepts it, the will of God is light and life for the whole Body of Christ. This is a second element in estimating the value of a vocation. If it is a faithful response to an authentic divine call, it will inevitably bear spiritual fruit; the entire theological life will be enlivened. The constancy of faith, vigour of hope, and fire of charity will grow in strength and intensity. The witness borne in one's life will gain in depth and radiance. The personal charism will now show itself in life as a source of grace for the whole community. Any vocation which does not thus express itself in living must be suspected of immaturity or illusions; for life remains the final criterion of the authenticity of charisms. Certainly one must keep in mind the candidate's age, and give his decision time to bear fruit. Delays and times of trial may prove necessary. But there is here a demand for truth which must not be neglected, to which director and directed must give their mind.<sup>1</sup>

When a young man or woman, helped, guided and tested by their spiritual father, have recognized in themselves a call to a charisma-

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<sup>1</sup> On this whole question of discernment of vocation and of the judgment to be made of deep motives, see the valuable book by Fr R. Hostie, S. J. *Le Discernement de Vocations*, (Desclée de Brouwer, 1962): *The Discernment of Vocations* (Geoffrey Chapman, 1963).

tic vocation, which really seems to come from God because it shows the spiritual guarantees of maturity and authenticity, they must, before they can give themselves wholly to the mission in view, submit their project to the judgment of the Church. It is only the Church's guarantee that can make of this project a spiritual decision in which they can be certain of recognizing the will of God. That judgment of the Church cannot come from the spiritual father alone. His task, as we have seen, is performed earlier, when there is need of help and guidance in discernment of the divine call. Now it is for the bishop and the religious superior, or their delegates, the superior of the seminary and the master of novices, to pronounce, in the name of the Church, on the value of the vocation and its deep correspondence with the mission that it postulates in the Church. That is so, whether there is question of admitting to the sacred functions of the priesthood, or to a manner of life officially approved by the Church as witnessing to her holiness and as a living prophecy of the kingdom of God. In fact, in both cases, though in different ways, there is question of a vocation which has an official character in the Church: a character which is expressed in institutions within the Church, whose sanctity the Church must promote and protect. She must therefore reserve access to them only for those who seem to her capable of truly doing honour in Christ to the mission which will be entrusted to them. That is a task which the superiors responsible may not shirk; for it concerns the good of the whole body, the holiness of the Church and its spread.

If they can and ought to take into account the opinion of the spiritual director, they must not put the whole burden on him; for the role and function of the spiritual father are directed primarily to the person of the one under direction, to his particular spiritual benefit and development. It could also be that the spiritual father would not have a sufficiently wide and exact view of the needs and requirements of the Church. Even if he has, it could be difficult for him to free himself sufficiently from the view proper to a spiritual father so as to be capable of a completely objective judgment. Besides, it would be harmful, in case of refusal, if he bore the responsibility of it vis-a-vis the one he is directing, who would at that time need all possible help to accept a painful decision. It belongs, therefore, to the hierarchical superior to commit the Church, and to give to the candidate for the priesthood or the religious life the guarantee of her spiritual authority.

In this task the superior knows that his essential role is one of con-

trol and discernment. He can take note of a call, throw light on it, and ratify it; it is, however, not he, but Christ by his grace, who calls and chooses. The word of a superior conferring a mission in the Church has no spiritual efficacy except through the charism with which it unites, which it helps to discern, and which it finally declares authentic. To call or allow to proceed to priesthood or religious life candidates in whom one has not taken the trouble to recognize and test that movement of grace would be to sin against the Spirit, and at the same time to be guilty of a grave abuse of the confidence of the faithful, who have a right to count on the presence of genuine charisms in those who have a sacerdotal or prophetic mission. Before confirming Peter in his mission, our Lord asked him three times: 'Peter, do you love me?', and it was only after receiving a humble and sincere confession of that love that he added: 'Feed my sheep.'<sup>1</sup> Peter's pastoral office demanded that love. Only in that love is the office given and confirmed. Only in love could it be lived. Whilst giving his attention to the discernment of God's ways, the superior must continue to respect their mystery, reminding himself that God frequently chooses what is weak in order to display his power, and never seeking to substitute his own ways of seeing or judging for the sometimes disconcerting ways which the divine pedagogy will reveal to him. The greater the authority given him by his experience and his position, the more he must remember that he remains a servant of the Spirit, a witness to the infinite gratuitousness of divine love.

To play his part in discernment, it is essential for the superior to have a profound knowledge of the vocation to which he admits the candidate. He must understand the demands it makes and the graces proper to it, the spiritual climate in which it ought to be lived, the aptitudes it requires, and the dangers it brings with it. His first task, in fact, is to enlighten the candidate on the spiritual character and the role in the Church of the vocation to which he thinks himself called. He must then as far as he can, verify and test the human and spiritual aptitudes of the candidate for that vocation. He must find out if there is the deep conformity and the genuine meeting between the spiritual ideal incarnate in such a vocation and the interior movement, the human and spiritual personality seen in the candidate. It is this conformity which enables the superior to confirm, with his full authority, the candidate's desire and to make of it a

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<sup>1</sup> Jn 21, 17.

true vocation. If, in all prudence and humility of judgment, he does not find that profound correspondence, he should refuse or postpone admission, and help the candidate to understand his error of interpretation, or the insufficient maturity of his decision. The superior's task is to bring about the confrontation of a personal grace and a charism lived institutionally in the Church, in order to help them to recognize one another. He must therefore be on his guard against making facile and superficial equiparations: 'He's a good boy . . . therefore . . .'; and he must admit only those conjunctions where the whole spiritual personality of the candidate, and not just this or that good desire, is deeply united with the spirit of a religious Order or of a sacred function. Here also the ultimate criterion is the deep harmony of two graces: that which is discerned in the candidate, and that which is alive in the Order or the function. It is in that encounter, in actual fact, that the true Spirit of Christ which builds up the Church into unity is revealed.

Thus, to the question which we asked at the beginning of this article, 'Have I a vocation?', it is possible to give an answer which is not an imprudent wager in face of a difficult future, but a spiritual choice founded on the faithfulness of the Lord who calls, and on the power of his grace recognized in the life of a man or a woman. The ways of God go beyond us because they are the expression of a love whose grandeur will always astonish us, but they are part of the daily life of the Church and of every christian. It is therefore possible humbly to recognize them. The effort to do so must often be slow and patient, and it may have its share of uncertainty and painful hesitation; but eventually it will issue into the light. 'He who lives the truth comes to the light', was our Lord's reminder to Nicodemus who had come to question him in the night of his doubts;<sup>1</sup> and this promise comes true for all those who honestly try to order their life according to the will of God. To the young man and woman who have thus been able to recognize God's call and welcome it into their lives, who have humbly submitted that grace to the judgment of the Church, the ways of God will appear finally as a blessing: a blessing that is austere and demanding, but which already has within it all the promises of life which the Lord's faithfulness guarantees for ever.

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<sup>1</sup> Jn 3, 21.