


ONE THING EACH UNIQUE PERSON AS THE WAY OF RENEWAL NECESSARY



Inscape Center for Personal Vocation
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"Every life is a vocation,
and every believer is
invited to co-operate in the
building up of the Church."

SAINT JOHN PAUL II

1. INTRODUCTION

We begin with a brief story told by Christopher Stefanick about a great saint of our time, Pope John Paul II, who boldly taught that each unique person is the way of the Church and that helping each person embrace his own vocation must be for her a fundamental priority. The story is about a series of encounters between Bishop Robert Brom and John Paul II. Here's Christopher's story:

"Brom's first meeting with the Pope occurred in 1963 during the second session of the Second Vatican Council. Brom was a seminarian at the North American College and Pope John Paul was the auxiliary bishop of Krakow. Brom and several classmates were leaving the Church of the Gesu after a visit there when some Polish seminarians with Bishop Wojtyla were entering. At that time Brom and his classmates briefly met the man who would thereafter become the Cardinal Archbishop of Krakow and the first non-Italian Pope in 455 years. Subsequently, Brom forgot all about the exchange.

In 1983, after his appointment as Bishop of Duluth, Bishop Brom met Pope John Paul II during his Ad Limina Visit for what he thought was the first time. However, John Paul, looking into Brom's face said, "I think we have met before." Brom assured the Holy Father that they'd never met. "I believe we have," insisted the Pope, but Brom was equally sure they had not. After all, a meeting with the Pope isn't easily forgotten!

Some days later, during the same Ad Limina Visit, the secretary to the Holy Father, then Monsignor Stanislaw Dziwisz, now Cardinal, approached Bishop Brom to say, "Don't argue with the Pope - he remembers when he met you." "When?" Brom asked. "In November of 1963 outside the Church of the Gesu in Rome." Brom's memory refreshed, he asked Monsignor Dziwisz, "How can he do that?" to which Dziwisz explained that for John Paul to meet another person is to encounter God."

"The glory of God is man fully alive." - St. Irenaeus

There are two key points we can draw from this story about the encounter between Bishop Brom and Pope John Paul II.

First, the Holy Father's radical sensitivity to the unique human person. The only way John Paul II could have remembered Bishop Brom and the thousands of others he encountered is through close and loving attentiveness to each person.

Second, John Paul II did not encounter God in an abstract way when he first looked upon the face of Bishop Brom. He recognized (as so many of his other writings also testify) that Bishop Brom and every person manifest in a unique way the face of God on this earth.

This short document is about the central importance of unique personal vocation.

We will first explore how the human person—each unique and unrepeatable—is “the primary and fundamental way of the church” (*Redemptor Hominis*, 14). We will then discuss the meaning of personal vocation as it emerged from the Second Vatican Council and was developed in the teaching of Pope John Paul II to the point where he wrote in his first encyclical that “every initiative serves true renewal in the Church...insofar as the initiative is based on adequate awareness of the individual Christian's vocation.” (*Redemptor Hominis*, 21)

Every initiative.



Pope John Paul II as a young priest, hiking with students

Given John Paul II's instruction that personal vocation is foundational for every initiative of renewal in the Church, one would think that now, 40 years later, thriving programs would exist for cultivating personal vocation in every area of the Church.

But there is not. Indeed, the very concept of personal vocation remains peripheral in the life of the Church despite clear teaching from the magisterium regarding its central importance.

Why is this the case? We will explore three reasons for the neglect of personal vocation, highlighting the alarming loss of priests and religious in recent decades as the primary reason for the overshadowing of personal vocation. We will go on to argue that, in fact, a robust cultivation of personal vocation can lead to great renewal in the Church and help to solve the problems that led to the neglect of personal vocation in the first place.

Next we will address how everyone, by emphasizing personal vocation as a key formational objective, can help bring renewal to the church. This is especially true for parents, coaches, and educators. So, we won't dwell on the neglect. We'll do something about it!

Finally, we will close with a meditation on the concrete and particular nature of God's love and how Catholics can more deeply manifest such love as they clearly identify and embrace their own personal vocations and help cultivate them in others.

"I understood that every flower created by Him is beautiful, that the brilliance of the rose and the whiteness of the lily do not lessen the perfume of the violet or the sweet simplicity of the daisy."

- St. Thérèse de Lisieux



2. EACH PERSON IS "WAY" OF CHURCH

The first words of John Paul II's first encyclical, *Redemptor Hominis*, are important. The first words of any encyclical give a sense of the whole work, as the first words of a Shakespeare play provide the essential theme of the drama. The first encyclical of John Paul II shows the pathway of his whole, long pontificate.

Early in *Redemptor Hominis* (in English, *On the Redeemer of Man*), John Paul II writes, "For the Church all ways lead to man." Now, when he refers to man he is not referring to the universal human being. A remarkable feature of this section of the encyclical is his constant qualifier, "each man in all the unrepeatable reality of what he is," which includes of course his gender and basic humanity. The pope is at pains to orient his readers toward the concrete and singular human being.

So, it is **this particular person** to which he refers when he says that "man is the primary route that the Church must travel in fulfilling her mission: he is the primary and fundamental way for the church."

What? Is this a radical humanism? Isn't the Church fundamentally about giving glory to God?

We have to make an important distinction. The pope does not mean that the Church's ways are supposed to end with the human person. But they do lead to the human person because of who Christ is as Redeemer and who the Church is as the Body of Christ the Redeemer.

Each person is the way of the Church **because** Christ united himself with each one. Christ redeemed each one when he died and rose again. And through his union with the Father each one can also be in union with the Father.

Notice how radically incarnational this is. The Holy Father uses universal theological concepts because they are true and because language, by which truth is communicated, is based upon general terms understandable to a wide readership. It is very clear that John Paul II wants us to move beyond concepts of humanity, to avoid treating one another in generalizations which mask personhood (liberal, conservative, fat, good looking, rich, poor, celebrity) and to encounter one another in our uniqueness as Christ did and does. We cannot see persons if we encounter them as examples of political or socio-economic or religious categories. And if we cannot see persons we cannot serve them or love them. If we cannot love them, we cannot be Christ to them. And that is our fundamental mission.

He wants us to pay close, close attention to persons in their specific humanity.

This has radical consequences for our lives. If Christ exercised such profound love in uniting himself with each person and calling each one in particular ways to their own special union with the Father, then the Church, the visible presence of Christ on this earth, **must** do the same.

Helping each one to identify and fulfill his personal vocation is how the Church itself moves along the way of the human person and his flourishing in Christ.

3. VOCATION TO HOLINESS & STATE

In *Redemptor Hominis*, John Paul II directly connects personal vocation to his teaching that each person is the “way” of the church. If Christ died for each one and has particularly endowed each person with talents, and if he wants each person to dwell with him and the Father forever, then he clearly has a specific calling for each one.

In order to fulfill our mission, we must have the awareness that loving attentiveness to each person in our sphere of responsibility means attentiveness to his unique vocation and how he can live it to the full. In short, fulfilling our mission on this earth means helping others to fulfill theirs. Pope Francis, in a recent address, said that this mission is one of “personal involvement, in knowing how to care for the lives entrusted to you like chests that contain a precious treasure to be safeguarded.”

The word “vocation” is multi-layered, and we need to unpack it. We will start broad and then narrow it down to its most particular and richest meaning.

First, the universal call to holiness. Every person under the sun has been given this same vocation. “But as he who called you is holy, be holy yourselves in all your conduct: since it is written, ‘You shall be holy, for I am holy.’” (I Peter 1:15-16)

Even though the call to holiness was clearly given to all, an idea crept in and took hold in the church that “real” holiness is primarily the focus of those in the priesthood or religious life. In this mindset, the lay state is acceptable but not really a vibrant path to holiness.

We will address this pernicious idea later, but we mention it now because one of the greatest gifts of the Second Vatican Council was the resounding message that the vocation to holiness is universal. “All the faithful of Christ of whatever rank or status are called to the fullness of the Christian life and to the perfection of charity.” (Lumen Gentium, 40)

*“All the faithful of Christ of whatever rank or status are called to the fullness of the Christian life and to the perfection of charity.”
(Lumen Gentium, 40)*

God calls each person that he creates to holiness. But this especially true for those of us who are baptized. Through this foundational sacrament we are literally engrafted into Christ’s Body and made to share in his divine life through the Holy Spirit.

We can use a visual framework here to help illustrate the three different meanings of vocation and how they are interconnected. Think of a spiritual house, a mansion! St. Peter writes that “like living stones be yourselves built into a spiritual house.” (I Peter 2:5)

All are called to holiness. This is the first meaning of vocation. Every block in this spiritual house – each representing a member of the baptized - is oriented toward holiness.

A second meaning of “vocation” is the one that Catholics typically have in mind - vocation as state of life. We often and rightly speak about calls to marriage or priesthood. People often speak of their career in this sense as well. One might be called serve as a nurse, a chef, an entrepreneur.

One reason we think of calling as “state of life” is because when confronted with major decisions about priesthood or marriage or, to a lesser extent, career we often cry out to God to understand his will: “What do you want me to do, Lord!?”

In our desire for answers to these significant life questions we are especially alert to God’s calling and thus reduce vocation to a state in life. And yet He calls every moment.

Let’s return to our visual. Every “stone” in this house is called to holiness. But there are different kinds of stones representing the various states of life – granite for the priests, marble for the married, and so on.

Personal vocation, to which we turn below, can be likened to each particular block. It includes the universal call to holiness (it’s a “stone”); it involves a state in life (a kind of stone), but is the calling to each one by name (this specific, really existing, stone).

"YOU ARE TO BE HOLY BECAUSE I, THE LORD, AM HOLY."
- LEVITICUS 20:26

4. PERSONAL VOCATION: AN OVERVIEW

In *Redemptor Hominis* John Paul II defines personal vocation in a powerful paragraph that each of us who have a heart for the Church's mission and the new evangelization should take closely to heart:

“Every initiative serves true renewal in the Church and helps to bring the authentic light that is Christ insofar as the initiative is based on adequate awareness of the individual Christian’s vocation and of responsibility for this singular, unique, and unrepeatable grace by which each Christian in the community of the People of God builds up the Body of Christ.”

We could call this singular “grace” a role, or a function, or a part. But in calling it a “grace” Pope John Paul II imbues it with a gift quality – a gift that is offered by God with the intention that it will be given to others.

All are called to holiness. Many have the same state in life. But personal vocation is the calling **by name**. It's about you – the singular **you**. Thus: “I call you, Beth, to marry John and raise children. Teach them what it means to sanctify labor and renew the earth.” Or “You, Agnes, go to Calcutta and wear the Sari as your religious garb and love the poor one by one.”

Personal vocation thus includes the call to holiness and the call to a state in life. Personal vocation is the richest meaning of vocation because it includes these other two dimensions.

In one sense, personal vocation is more real as well. What do we mean by that?

Have you ever seen just a human being walking around? No. We've not had the experience of bumping into a creature whose only defining feature was humanity. Have you ever just encountered a woman whose defining feature was being a female human? No such creature. And there has never been a man who fell in love with just “woman” as such.

We meet and marry and build relationships with concrete persons who participate in or instantiate humanity and gender. But it is the concrete, singular human person who is real.

Similarly, God's call to us is imbued with specificity. Human persons never receive a generic call to holiness. God's call to love and serve him is always singular, unique and unrepeatable. Each one has a different mission whose obedience to that mission marks out his path to holiness. *Moses: lead my people from Egypt. Peter: feed my Sheep. Mary: bear my son.*

5. KEY CHARACTERISTICS

It is yours and nobody else's. Each person has a unique set of gifts and crosses and potentials that no one else ever has or ever will have. You reflect a dimension of God that no one else reflects, and you are called to be this image in the world, to serve God and man according to your unique self.

It is now. We often work with young people who are at the end of high school or at the beginning part of college. Many of them think of their vocation as something a few years out. In doing so they are falling into thinking of vocation as “state in life.” In other words, they often ask: “Will I be a priest or a religious? What career will I have?” Of course, these are critical dimensions of personal calling. But our message to these students is that all of us are called **now** for some specific purpose. Now, they must be students and embrace their classes as a holy occupation.

It is the organizing principle of one's whole life. Put another way: there is nothing that we do which should not be a living out of God's call in our life. Our classes, our relationships, our careers, our friendships, our leisure time, our eating and drinking—every aspect. Nothing should be bracketed out of personal vocation. It is all encompassing.

To be sure, some decisions about what precisely God is calling us to do are more important than others. Going into extensive prayer about whether we should choose the pumpkin or the apple pie at Thanksgiving is probably not a great use of our time. At the same time, we should not make the mistake of assuming that what we put into our bodies is irrelevant to God and his call. “So whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.” (I Corinthians 10:31)

If we are clear about what our personal vocation is, then it can serve as a powerful organizing principle for our lives. People who understand personal vocation are much less likely to suffer from “choice anxiety” or “decision paralysis”. They don't make decisions about what to eat or drink or who to date and marry based merely on data or fleeting emotions – they make choices based on who they know themselves to be and what they are called to do. Our choices take on a broader (eternal) horizon, and this frees us from the myopia of living only for this day, this meal, or this moment.

John Paul II declared at one point, “Man must discover his vocation, and discover it exactly!” When he does this, he has an organizing principle that touches every aspect of his life.

It is intended for the glory of God and the building up of his Kingdom. Personal vocation is about self-fulfillment but directly coupled with service. We discover ourselves in the sincere gift of our selves, as John Paul II often said.

6. FORMATION

We turn now to a key and highly neglected passage from *On The Lay Members of Christ's Faithful People (Christifidelis Laici)*. In this apostolic exhortation, which followed a worldwide synod of bishops on the laity, John Paul II continues to develop teaching from the Second Vatican Council on the critical place of the laity in advancing the mission of the Church. In keeping with his consistent emphasis on personal uniqueness, he also stresses the central importance of helping each Christian awaken to their particular vocation. He says:

“The fundamental objective of the formation of the lay faithful is an ever clearer discovery of one’s vocation and the ever-greater willingness to live it so as to fulfill one’s mission.” (Christifidelis Laici, #58)

Here the pope clearly states that personal vocation is **a fundamental objective in formation**. But how often do we hear that?

It is important to note that discovery of one’s own vocation does not simply apply to the lay faithful (although the passage is taken from a document on the laity) but to every member of the baptized. The priest or the consecrated religious person obviously discerns his/her call from a lay state, and has a *particular way of being a priest or consecrated religious*.

The Church’s call for her members to cultivate discovery of their personal vocations is not a time bound concern of the Church. When a hurricane strikes and devastates, the Church calls upon her people to give aid. After the danger has passed and homes have been rebuilt, she no longer calls us to give aid in that context.

The call for the cultivation of personal vocation is not just for one group of people in the Church—for example, a message to bishops regarding an ecclesial matter, a message to artists about blessing of sacred art and music, a message to business people about the importance of just economic structures. The message applies to each one of us.

A few lines later John Paul II again emphasizes the message when he writes that “this personal vocation and mission defines the dignity and responsibility of each member of the lay faithful and makes up the focal point of the whole work of formation.” (*Christifidelis Laici*, 58)

It is quite clear from these passages that the formation of every baptized person should emphasize what each is called to do as **a fundamental priority**.

This is of utmost importance for mentors and catechists, teachers and parents. These persons are called especially to form Catholics, and should take up the imperative given by the Church to help those under their charge understand and embrace their own vocations.

In order to do this, they must have an awareness of their *own* call. Thus, those in charge of formation have a kind of double responsibility and added privilege. If we are not and do not really take seriously the contours of our own callings, how can we effectively help others discern their unique callings?

7. KEYS TO DISCERNMENT

We will now emphasize some of the key principles of the discernment of personal vocation that John Paul II outlines in *Christifidelis Laici*.

“To be able to discover the actual will of the Lord in our lives always involves the following: a receptive listening to the Word of God and the Church; fervent and constant prayer; recourse to a wise and loving spiritual guide; and a faithful discernment of the gifts and talents given by God, as well as of the diverse social and historic situations in which we live.” (Christifidelis Laici, #58)

Let’s open up this passage.

“A receptive listening to the Word of God and the Church.” Heeding the laws of God—the 10 commandments, the precepts of the Church—is a basic but critical step for determining what one should do with one’s life. Such laws provide clear parameters for what to avoid (because it is sinful), but also what to pursue (because it is good and righteous). There can be no way to hear or faithfully live one’s personal vocation without basic receptivity to the teaching of the Word of God and the Church.

“Fervent and constant prayer.” Our prayer for guidance must be fervent and constant. So often we plunge into action without opening ourselves to the movements of the Holy Spirit in prayer. We won’t always have an obvious answer, but prayer is powerful not just for gaining answers, but for placing us in the right disposition for making decisions, for avoiding temptation, for seeing correctly.

“Recourse to a wise and loving spiritual guide.” How many of us have “a wise and loving spiritual guide”? If not, what is holding you back? There are many wonderful people who might be able to help—not just priests, but lay folks as well. Such a guide might also be a patron saint.

A wise monk once remarked, “most of my best friends are dead!” He did not mean by that that his friends had died and left him, but that he was in close relationship with great saints like St. Benedict and St. Theresa of Avila. They were alive and present to him! Of course having guides living on earth with whom we can discuss vocational matters is ideal, but we should not forget the power of the saints who surround and love us “as a great cloud of witnesses.” (Hebrews 12:1)

“Faithful discernment of the gifts and talents given by God.” The gifts we are given are not simply abilities, but also include one’s station in life, one’s opportunities, cultural, social and financial blessings, and more. Still, in discerning one’s call we rightly emphasize innate gifts.

Each person is hardwired with a certain pattern of behavior, a certain personality, a design that each naturally longs to fulfill. We must pay close attention to what this is. We absolutely cannot faithfully discern vocation or help others do the same without faithfully identifying those innate, inborn gifts that no one else has been given.

The Church teaches that “grace builds on nature.” This is true when we consider universal aspects of our humanity. Grace can elevate and refine each man’s rational nature. God also intends for his grace to build upon the specific nature of the person. God is not going to do violence to the individual essence of each person by calling him to do something that cuts against the very grain of that nature. He created that unique person, and he wants him to be fulfilled according to his specific nature.

It is critical for each of us to consider our pattern of gifts because they naturally orient us in certain directions and not in others. This natural trajectory of unique being helps trace out the lines of personal calling.

“Diverse social and historic situation in which we live.” What is needed at this time? What is context of my life? What are the current needs of my family, my community? The gift of my personal vocation should be given for the building up of God’s Kingdom. When I look at the horizon of needs, especially those that are most pressing, where are obvious connection points to my unique gifts?

Frederich Buechner, an American Presbyterian, wrote: “The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet.” There is a space of need in the world that only I can fill, and I experience authentic joy when I fulfill it.

“God made me fast. And when I run, I feel his pleasure.”
- Eric Liddell, Chariots of Fire

8. HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT

Given the Church's clear call for each of the baptized to discover and be formed according to his/her personal vocation, one would think that personal vocation would be a priority not just within our parishes and our schools, but also within our homes. Unfortunately, it is not given sufficient priority among Catholics today.

Vatican II and Personal Vocation. For many centuries prior to the Second Vatican Council there was an insufficient understanding of the role of the laity in the Church. All of the baptized faithful were considered members of the church, but the necessary role of the laity in sanctifying the world was not well understood, nor was the complementarity between those with vocations to marriage and to consecrated life.

Part of the great gift of the Second Vatican Council was renewed emphasis on the vocation of all Christians in building up the Body of Christ. There were strong pre-cursors to the Second Vatican Council who taught that message: St. Francis de Sales, St. John Henry Newman, St. Jose Maria Escriva, and Catholic Action are among them. But the Second Vatican Council affirmed the universal vocation to holiness and the specific call of the laity to renew the temporal order through close involvement in every sphere of secular life in a way that priests and religious cannot.

All of the popes since the council, from Pope Saint Paul VI to Francis, have reaffirmed the Council's teaching on vocation, but Pope Saint John Paul II in particular highlighted it as truly fundamental for renewal in the church and especially emphasized the unique and unrepeatable aspect of personal vocation.

We have already drawn from key passages in two documents from his pontificate, *On the Redeemer of Man* and *On the Lay Members of Christ's Faithful People*.

We close this section with an especially poignant passage from Pope Benedict XVI in which he addresses the specific responsibility of priests for cultivating in each of the baptized an awareness of their own unique vocation:

“Every person carries within himself a project of God, a personal vocation, a personal idea of God on what he is required to do in history to build his Church, a living Temple of his presence. And the priest's role is above all to reawaken this awareness, to help the individual discover his personal vocation, God's task for each one of us.” (Pastoral Visit to the Parish of St. Felicity and her Children, Martyrs, March 25, 2007)

9. THE NEGLECT

Pause for a moment and ask yourself: how frequently you have encountered explicit teaching on the nature of personal vocation? To what extent do we help our kids seriously identify the special project God has required of them to build up his kingdom? How often are we challenged in our Catholic schools and from our pulpits for each one to discover and embrace his/her unique vocation?

Although we have clear magisterial teaching on the fundamental priority of helping each of the baptized to recognize their unique personal vocation, insufficient attention is paid to it. In fact, generally “vocation” is used only with reference to state of life, not unique and personal callings. And, unfortunately, it tends to be used with singular reference to the priesthood and religious life. For example, most dioceses have Vocations Directors whose job it is to cultivate callings to the priesthood among young men. In our ordinary way of speaking, we can often find ourselves asking about kids who seem especially spiritually mature: “Does he or she have a vocation?” Meaning priesthood or religious life.

Every year we have a World Day of Prayer for Vocations. The description of the World Day of Prayer for Vocations on the United States Council of Catholic Bishops states that “while appreciating all vocations,” the prayer for that day is for the Lord to raise up laborers of priests and consecrated to go to the harvest.

The focus placed on priesthood, and on religious life, is in many ways an understandable one. We are dealing here with beautiful, vital, immensely important vocations in terms of states of life. However, alongside this, and without in any way detracting from this, we need also to speak often and insistently and seriously about personal vocation.

Language is of critical importance for shaping ideas, for shaping how we think about ourselves and other people. The language we use to articulate God’s love for his people in the gift of their calling and his desire for their response to this calling is very significant. **We are on holy ground here.**

When we use the term “vocation” with exclusive reference to the priesthood or the religious life, the sad and direct implication is that those who are not priests or religious somehow do not have a vocation in its full sense. This is inconsistent with the teachings of the Second Vatican Council and the popes since that council. This is harmful.

It is very important that we who teach in the Church are properly grounded in a correct understanding of vocation and stop limiting the use of the term.

SO, WHY THE NEGLECT?

There are many reasons why personal vocation has been neglected, but we will highlight three:

Vocations Crisis. Note that this frequently heard term again assumes that “vocation” means priestly or religious vocation. The last several decades has seen a significant drop in vocations to the consecrated life. Whereas it used to be common within parishes and schools to see nuns, now some Catholics grow up seldom seeing religious sisters or brothers at all. Parishes continue to close or be consolidated all around the country in part because of priest shortages. Without priests there is no Mass, no Eucharist, the very source and summit of Christian life!

In light of such a crisis it would make sense for the Church, clerics and lay faithful alike, to emphasize the need for vocations to the priesthood and religious life.

Reduction of Holiness to Prayer, Sacraments, and Service. When we ask students how they can live out their vocation to holiness they frequently concentrate on sacraments, prayer, and mission work. They say things like “go to Mass every day,” “frequent confession,” “spend time in prayer,” “read the Gospels,” “feed the poor and homeless,” or “evangelize the lost.”

And, of course, they are entirely right to answer this way! As Catholics we know that the Mass is the greatest act of worship, that the Eucharist is the source and summit of life. We know that without prayer we wither. We know that pure religion, as St. James wrote, is to care for the widow and orphan, the neglected. We are right to emphasize the priority of sacraments and prayer, and right to see that direct service to the poor, to those who don’t know Christ, are essential ways of growing in holiness.

The problem is not with declaring that sacraments, prayer, and mission work are essential paths to holiness. The problem is in reducing the pursuit of holiness to these activities. It is not typical for students to say: “I can be holy by cultivating my unique gifts and finding out exactly how to serve according to them.” It is not typical for accounting students to say that doing their accounting work well and with professional excellence can help them grow in holiness. It is not typical for the science student to say that the act of scientific discovery can be a sacrifice pleasing to the Lord and enabling growth in Christ because such discovery is growth in truth.

These students we have spoken to are not uncommon. It is fairly standard to reduce the pursuit of holiness to sacraments, prayer, and service to the poor and to not emphasize the intrinsic value of daily tasks or professional excellence as a means to holiness.

SO, WHY THE NEGLECT? (CONT'D)

When we emphasize universal paths to holiness and note, rightly, that these paths are often in the Church (adoration chapel), through the Church (sacraments via priests) or sponsored by the Church (mission work), we create a climate where Church vocations are emphasized and unique personal vocation is overshadowed.

Suspicion of Individualism & Subjectivism.

Discussion about personal vocation can involve a lot of talk about how “my” way is not the same as “your” way and how each of us has to be concerned with “his/her own way.”

Discussion about personal vocation can involve a lot of talk about one’s own interior experiences and feelings – talk about “finding one’s self” or talk about what the person finds particularly fulfilling and how that fulfillment indicates calling.

If taken out of context this can sound eerily like the kind of radical individualism that leads to real selfishness like husbands divorcing their wives because they are no longer “personally fulfilled.” Discussion about personal vocation can sound (again, when taken out of context) as the sort of subjectivism that fragments community because of a focus on self rather than the common good.

“He – Jesus Christ – must increase and I must decrease,” John the Baptist declared. Every Christian ought to take up this motto. The path to sainthood is not about me primarily. It is about self-sacrifice on behalf of others.



He must increase,
but I must decrease.

John the Baptist

10. RENEWAL OF THE CHURCH

Catechists, parents, and educators are on the front lines of imparting the Catholic Faith, cultivating among those being formed vibrant personal relationships with Christ, and therefore renewing the Church.

As an aspect of Church teaching, personal vocation should be the concern of all catechists, parents, and educators. The truth of personal vocation bears upon the church's understanding of her very nature. She is a Body made up of many parts, each one called by name.

Personal vocation thus has bearing upon ortho-doxis, or right belief. Personal vocation also has direct bearing upon ortho-praxis, or right conduct. It is morally necessary for each of us to do our best to identify and live to the full our unique calling.

We have discussed three reasons for the unhappy neglect of personal vocation. Now we want to address each of these and argue that, in fact, a robust cultivation of personal vocation can lead to great renewal in the Church and help to solve the problems that led to an overshadowing of the truth about personal vocation in the first place.

Vocations Crisis. The last several decades have seen a significant drop in vocations to consecrated life. In light of such a crisis it would make sense for the church, clerics and lay faithful alike, to emphasize the need for vocations to the priesthood and religious life.

But in fact there is no vocations crisis. No such thing! God calls each and every one of us. For every Christian there is a calling. Vocations abound. The shortage of priests and religious is because many who are called are not responding.

In the book by Russell Shaw & Germain Grisez, *Personal Vocation: God Calls Everyone by Name*, the authors argue convincingly that the contemporary response to the so called "vocations crisis" – the great decline in numbers of priests and religious – actually deepens the problem.

"Personal vocation supplies the content for 'vocation' in the sense of state of life (priesthood, consecrated life, marriage, and so forth). We are not meant to select our states of life and then construct vocations within them. Rather, we are to perceive that one or another state of life is a central element of our personal calling from God." - Personal Vocation: God Calls Everyone by Name

First, the term “vocations” when used to refer exclusively to priests and religious clearly implies that those who are not priests and religious do not have “vocations” in the full sense of the word. By narrowing the term in this way those who are not priests and religious are left with the clear and consistent message that they are **not** specially called. This message can discourage Christian zeal and undermine the Catholic’s sense of his/her own dignity. Discouragement is no context for cultivating lively faith. But a vibrant laity, where each is affirmed in the wonder and beauty of his own call contributes to a context in which priestly and religious vocations can be heard and thus take root and flourish.

Second, the typical approach of “vocations” recruitment actually narrows the pool of potential priests and religious. The typical approach begins with a question, rather than an imperative. The question again assumes an exclusivist definition of “vocation.” “Are you called? Have you considered a vocation?” If I’m a typical youth, my answer is in most cases “No.” I feel no sense of calling to the priesthood or religious life. This will especially be true of those whose faith is tepid.

Shaw and Grisez argue that vocations recruitment ought to begin not with a question that assumes an exclusivist definition of vocation, but an imperative that rightly declares all are called. Not “are you possibly called?” but “**you are most definitely called!**” Furthermore, you have a unique and unrepeatable vocation given to no one else, a vocation that will never be offered again.

What we ought to be saying to each one – what the Church herself has taught us to say – is that God has a task that only you can fill. Now, let’s help you find it.

In the rich context of a non-exclusive “Culture of Vocation” where we assume all have a unique call and provide resources and support around it, there will surely be many who awaken to their vocation to the consecrated life.

"Today there is a need to bring into the Christian community "a new vocational culture." - Pope Francis, address to the Italian Bishops Conference Office for Vocations

Suspicion of Individualism & Subjectivism.

A third reason personal vocation might be neglected is concern about individualism and “me centered” subjectivism that breaks down community. Like soldiers in battle fighting a common enemy, we tend to emphasize our common mission as Catholics. Talk about personal fulfillment of personal vocation smells a little narcissistic, feels a bit like it could be featured on a self-help TV show. Catholics ought to be about self-sacrificial love for the other, for the community, for the greater good.

“Each of you has a personal vocation which He has given you for your own joy and sanctity. When a person is conquered by the fire of His gaze, no sacrifice seems too great to follow Him and give Him the best of ourselves. This is what the saints have always done, spreading the light of the Lord ... and transforming the world into a welcoming home for everyone.” - Pope Benedict XVI

It is true that concern about personal vocation can devolve into excessive self-concern. Anything that is good can be twisted. And the greatest goods are twisted in proportionally serious ways.

But the essential point about personal vocation is that it is a direct response to a call from God to love Him and to love others. Rather than diminish the focus on others and community, a correct cultivation of personal vocation enables one to focus on others and enriches community life!

Community life is deepest and best when there is a respectful dynamic between the whole and each of its members, when each person is not just allowed but encouraged to shine in his/her uniqueness not simply for the sake of the whole, but also so that he/she might flourish.

When catechists, teachers, parents and pastors intentionally cultivate an awareness of personal vocation and opportunities to embrace it, there should be an increase in numbers of priests and religious, an increase in holiness as we attend to the mission of helping each one sanctify that part of the world to which his unique calling leads him. There should also be an enrichment of community life.



"The Call of Saint Matthew" by Merisi da Caravaggio

11. CHARITY: THE FORM OF VOCATION

God's love for us is never given in abstract or general terms. We began with Pope Saint John Paul II's writings about how each person is the "way" for the Church because God in Christ united himself with each one of us and suffered, died and was resurrected so that each one could be forever united with God, sharing in the glory of God.

This final passage from C.S. Lewis' sermon *The Weight of Glory* beautifully expresses the relationship between each one of us and our communion in Christ:

"The load, or weight, or burden of my neighbor's glory should be laid daily on my back, a load so heavy that only humility can carry it, and the backs of the proud will be broken. It is a serious thing to live in a society of possible gods and goddesses, to remember that the dullest and most uninteresting person you talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship, or else a horror and a corruption such as you now meet, if at all, only in a nightmare. All day long we are, in some degree helping each other to one or other of these destinations." - C.S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory*

Personal vocation is so significant because it is the specific way that God has given to each person to journey, in Christ, to their destination, to their home with the Father.

When we help our students, our children, those whom we mentor, coach or disciple to seriously discern and embrace what they are uniquely called to do – their specific "Life Project" – we orient and equip them towards their destination of glory. Helping each one of these precious persons achieve their ultimate calling in Christ is, in one sense, the one thing necessary. Again, each person, is the primary and fundamental way of the Church.

And finally, the one thing necessary is also YOU. Only you can take responsibility to live to the full the life that you were freely given. You also are the primary and fundamental way of the Church because the glory of God is each, unique, unrepeatable man – you – fully alive. So please, for your sake and the sake of the entire Body of Christ...**Become who you are!**

*"I think it would be well, and proper, and obedient, and pure, to grasp your one necessity and not let it go, to dangle from it limp wherever it takes you. – Annie Dillard, from *Living Like Weasels**