

Rethinking Vocation in Business
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Catholic doctrine advances by the law of development, not by revolution. Nonetheless Vatican II comes near to being revolutionary in its insistence that lay people are called to holiness by their very work in the secular world. Prior to that, indeed, St. Francis de Sales had spoken of the folly of lay people in the secular world trying to become holy by trying to live the life of religious. So he was advocating a spirituality of secular activity. But he was rather isolated in this. The opposite was the rule: "vocations" were seen as pertaining only to priests and religious who had "renounced" the world. Even the term "secular priest" was perceived to be something of a contradiction and his training in the seminary was somewhat contradictory. It was monastic in form so that he would somehow be immunised from the secular world when he went into his parish, even though his entire ministry would be exercised there and it would be the locus in which he would seek to become holy. Vatican II, not to be known for any new dogmatic definitions, was nonetheless revolutionary in that it gave us a much wider understanding of sanctity. It was proposed as the goal of all Christians, clergy and religious indeed, but laity too in secular life. (*Lumen Gentium, Gaudium et Spes*)

However, Chesterton it was, I believe, who said that when men of few ideas do get hold of a new idea they usually go to extremes on it, and, as some one else wisely observed, a truth when carried too far leads to heresy. Most of the heresies in the history of the church were not so much the denial of truth as the excessive affirmation of some truths to the detriment of other truths e.g. over- emphasis on the divinity of Christ when it lead to the denial of his humanity and *vice versa*.

So also in the case of the vocation of the layman; there is indeed such a vocation. But we must not then go to the extreme of saying that every layman wielding a spade or a shovel, or driving a machine is by that very fact following a divine vocation and ensured of holiness. There have been examples of this kind of extremism already. Martin Luther, for example, with his teaching that the work of the lay man is a *beruf* "calling" like that of the priest or religious. This teaching had its origin in Luther's denial of the sacrament of holy orders. But at that point he was in heresy. Archbishop Oscar Romero came near to this Lutheran type heresy in recent times with assertions such as ". . . just as I celebrate mass at this altar so each carpenter celebrates mass at his work bench . . ." Again, the carpenter is indeed doing something holy at his work bench and his work should be offered up at Sunday mass. But he is not celebrating mass at his bench JUST AS the archbishop was doing at the altar.

The task of a theology (and hence spirituality) of vocation that is true and balanced must avoid such extremes. It must avoid the 'other worldly' spirituality of old which bade lay

people withdraw from the world and try to become as clerics if they are to become holy, on the one hand, and on the other hand, the over worldly spirituality which, in effect, obliterates all distinctions between lay and cleric, the natural and the supernatural, and declares every kind of occupation to be a sacrament automatically.

The starting point for a theology of the lay vocation is not the vocation of the cleric which one might then try to “widen out” so that lay life then comes to be “associated” with it somehow, perhaps as an extension downwards of it, so that the laity then become the "hands and feet" of the priest in his work in the parish. That is upside down. One must begin by asking why the ordained priesthood exists to begin with. It exists solely to serve lay holiness by the three fold ministry of sanctifying, teaching and governing (priest, prophet and king). This means that the church as the community of the faithful exists theologically prior to the church as hierarchy (Cardinal Ratzinger). The laity can indeed, and should, help in this work of the clergy e.g. as readers and lay catechists (teaching), as Eucharistic ministers (sanctifying) and as advisors on pastoral councils (governing). But this only engages a small part of the laity, part time. Their primary pre-occupation is the care of their families and their work. They must become holy in this too, every day of the week, and not just in church on a Sunday.

The correct starting point therefore is the universal call of Christ as head to all to become his members in baptism to participate in the mysteries of creation, incarnation and redemption in their own lives, to prepare the world for the coming Kingdom and to grow in holiness by doing so, that is, to become more closely united with Him. So the lay vocation exists in its own right though not separately from that of the priest. He is there to teach, give the sacraments to and to structure the community of those who are seeking holiness.

What is the form or spirit of this lay vocation? It cannot be that of a detachment, understood as an effort by a purified soul to break free from the trammels of the body and from everything material, in Platonist fashion. If it is, then secular work will not be seen as a vocation but rather as a temptation, except, perhaps, inasmuch as it provides opportunities for penance by enduring what is unpleasant in it. But if it is to be seen as people co-operating with the Father in completing His creation and with the Son in extending His redemptive incarnation by repairing and sanctifying the secular till it becomes matter for the Kingdom, then it must have a more positive form or spirit with reference to the earthly.

To achieve this one has to abolish all false opposition between man and his world, as if man was a disembodied soul floating above the world. This, in turn, is effected by abolishing a false, but often prevalent, opposition between the soul and the body. I say "false opposition" because there is a real distinction, and ordered hierarchy, between the two, but not such that the body, of its nature, poses a threat to the soul's salvation. The threat comes from sin as a result of the fall. This requires that we adopt a metaphysic that is positive in relation to material reality. I believe that Thomism provides this rather than Platonism.

When this false opposition is removed lay holiness comes to be seen not as an abandonment of the secular but as the reintegrating of man within himself, of man with the cosmos which is the stage or workshop of his efforts, of man with his fellowmen, and finally of man with God in Christ. Of great help in this is the picture of man as a microcosm in the macrocosm of the universe with the task of bringing all parts of the universe into a harmony in himself and lifting the whole lot up to God. But it means recognizing also that this lifting up to God is beyond the reach of man's unaided natural efforts: that it requires the help from God which is the grace made available in Christ, which grace is all the more needed on account of the disruption that is the result of sin. So it calls for an exercise in self control and self denial while in the world. If this need for grace is not acknowledged, then the supernatural is forgotten or confused with the natural, science substitutes for faith, human effort for grace and then every occupation becomes of itself a means to God. This, I believe was a pitfall that Teilhard was always in danger of falling into. It is simply neo-pelagianism. It leads ultimately to pantheism.

All of this requires a new understanding of detachment, not as abandonment of the earthly but its purification, in order to repair, re-integrate and uplift it: human effort co-operating with the grace whereby Christ comes down into the world and is extended into every part of it more and more. The mass is the source of this grace and the occasion when the entire project is offered to the Father through and with the ordained priest, the occasion when the layman offers himself also as a sacrifice, that is, a person made holy in his work, therein exercising his real, though non ordained, priesthood.

More specifically then we can say that the lay vocation is a call to holiness arising from baptism (and confirmation) in whatever lawful secular profession. The particular profession chosen is not in itself a vocation but the form of activity in which the vocation to holiness finds response by the person of faith. A calling is to the supernatural. But the natural, in this case the profession, is its matter, because the choice of a particular profession is made on the basis of one's natural - though still God given - talents. In other words one's secular profession is one's mode of engagement with the world and society by reason of natural ability (and technology is an instrument that amplifies the possibilities of that engagement). This engagement might well be for selfish gain, in a spirit of ruthless competition by one whose idol is merely mammon. One cannot call that a vocation. But it can also be with a view to repair, integrate and uplift everything, by transforming matter and organizing people. And if in this latter spirit then the engagement will be the result of a faith-filled vision in one who is consciously striving for holiness, because he or she is referring all things to God, in Christ, as their last end. Then the engagement is the living of a vocation. When the engagement is made by a group in business who together are striving for holiness then we can speak of a corporate lay vocation and of "business with a calling."

There is a new role for religious in this corporate kind of enterprise. In the past it often happened that religious, such as nuns in teaching or nursing orders, were in a dichotomy: "out" of the world because of their consecration but "in" the world because of the work they did. It was a false dichotomy. If there is a lay vocation of work in the world, that is, of lay people referring all

things to God when they transform or organized them, then there is a new urgency for some of those lay people to be consecrated religious, because their vows of obedience, poverty, and chastity will serve as a constant reminder to the others of the Kingdom of God, still the come, for which all are striving and preparing in the world of the present. They will be an anti-dote to pride and selfishness. These religious can also help the clergy in their work of instructing these lay workers in catholic social principles and in bringing them the sacraments.

When all things are thus referred to God then all work activity will be gradually and consciously re-ordered in accordance with the law of God and, more specifically, in accordance with catholic social principles. No more need for revolutions then of the Marxist kind. As Christ is extended in business places that are being redeemed by His grace those workers will find it easier to see themselves in "business with a calling" to holiness, and, as the catholic ethos permeates the work place, it will come to be seen as sign, a sacramental and a foretaste of the Kingdom of God to come.