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What is Vocation?

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OVER THE COURSE OF THE LAST FEW YEARS I have been privileged to help groups of faculty and staff at St. Norbert College and at St. Bonaventure University in an exploration of vocation. These three-day seminars have proven exceedingly fruitful for the participants. Not only are they powerfully engaged during the events, but also many find that their lives after the event are clarified and renewed. This paper will detail some of what we have done in these sessions and will draw out the implications for how one might think about business education.

The seminar is designed to be an extended conversation about the topic of vocation. Many people in the United States have a resistance to the topic, thinking that what is being addressed is the recruitment of persons to enter into priesthood or vowed religious life. One of the first orders of business is to move participants beyond this restricted understanding.

The seminar aims at creating an environment and a process that facilitates an in-depth exploration of the concept of vocation. Because this concept moves one beyond the intellectual, the seminar includes experiential and reflective elements, small group experience, short lecture,

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preliminary reading, group prayer and individual reflective time. The aim would be for all, including the leaders, to gain a deeper intellectual and felt appreciation of vocation. The seminar is an opportunity to explore how vocation might be an aspect of each of the participant's own life and work projects. Out of this, it is hoped that the opportunity might emerge for seeing how vocation might be used in course development and other activities at the university. Ultimately, what is hoped for as an outcome of the seminar is that there be a deeper integration between faith and life by those that are part of the experience.

We begin our time at the seminar by laying out some of the matters for conversation:

What is vocation?

How does it grow? What are the preconditions?

What facilitates it?

What impedes it?

How does it unfold?

How does timing enter in?

How does "charism" or giftedness enter in?

How does mission, or having a "project," fit in?

What are the contours of a Catholic Christian unfolding of vocation?

What are some practical tools to help explore vocation?

The seminar is then structured around addressing these questions from the participant's own experience, from the rich Catholic spiritual and theological tradition and through group prayer. This paper will address some of the spiritual and theological aspects of vocation and will draw out some of the implications for business education.

Vocation is something profoundly personal and sacred, and it carries weighty social implications. It is also something that every person can live into. Unfortunately, in Catholic circles vocation tends to be seen as limited to those called to the sacrament of orders or the vowed religious life. This tendency has impoverished the language vocation. The fact is that all have a vocation; it is constitutive of being human.

A commonly used definition of vocation in the United States is a paraphrase of one used by Frederick Buechner in *Wishful Thinking, A Seekers ABC*. He defines it as the "place where your deep

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gladness meets the world's deep need.”¹ This definition highlights some important aspects of vocation. It tells us that it lives in the intersection between the world and ourselves. It tells us that it is activated in us when we access our depths and find there what truly brings joy and passion. Vocation is about desire and our deepest longings. It highlights the fact that vocation becomes actualized when it connects with real needs in the world around us. Vocation is something inherent in each person's life, but it also is inherent in the corporate reality of a business, or any institution for that matter. What I mean by this is that a university, for example, has in a very real sense a vocation that can be thought about, reflected upon and elucidated. And although we will focus on the vocation of an individual person, these reflections have relevance to institutions. I would include other elements in a definition of vocation, but will leave that until the very end of the paper and the elucidation of vocation as something profoundly personal, sacred and with weighty social implications.

Vocation is profoundly personal because it entails the creation of a self. The self comes to be through a teleological unfolding. If one does not hold to a vision of life that includes teleology, the consideration of vocation will make little sense. A Judeo-Christian vision of life is inherently teleological. We believe that there is a terminus toward which we and all of life are directed and that there is design and purpose in life. As a person actualizes her life in the world through activity and engagement, she creates herself by that very activity and engagement. We become who we are meant to be by living into the three parts of vocation: call, charisma and mission. In his book, *The Healing Spirit*, R. R. Fleishman gives an excellent psychological description:

Patients will talk about their need to find their tasks, their jobs, their work to be done. The need to feel useful, used, relevant, connected, a spoke on the wheel, a voice in the chorus is the need for a calling. This need is the bedrock of human life. A calling provides a foundation for all human activity, and particularly for utilizing one's personal facets or individuating characteristics.²

It would be a mistake to think that because vocation is personal and individual, that it is not profoundly social. Vocation is about the creation of a self in community. Robert Bellah, *et al*, in *Habits of the Heart*, points out:

In a calling one gives oneself to learning and practicing activities that in turn define the self and enter into the shape of its character. Committing one's self to becoming a “good” carpenter, craftsman, doctor, scientist or artist anchors the self within a community practicing carpentry medicine or art. It connects the self with those who teach, exemplify and judge these skills. It ties us to still others whom they serve.³

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There is a sacred dimension to vocation. It is as we respond to what is deepest within us, that aspect of the self in touch with the holy, i.e. with God, that vocation develops in its authenticity and fullness. Another psychologist, Carl Jung, could say:

“True personality always has vocation, which acts like the law of God from which there is no escape. Who has vocation hears the voice of the inner man; he is called. Now vocation is not the prerogative of great personalities, but also belongs to the small ones. But it happens to not a few to be summoned by the individual voice, whereupon they are at once differentiated from the others and feel themselves confronted by a problem that the others do not know about.”⁴

The sacred dimension of vocation is felt in various ways and times. The element of the uncanny will often be alluded to by those touched by a strong sense of vocation. This element comes at key junctures in life when a sense of direction emerges and feels like a compelling summons. It is often felt in looking back over a life and pondering the mystery of what appears as a providential hand guiding decisions and events.

As mentioned previously, vocation has three elements, like three legs of a tripod. Each of these is essential to the whole and might be thought of as holding up the edifice that is a life well lived. These elements are call, charism and mission. I will treat each of these elements in turn. The first element is call. Martin Buber reflects the Jewish vision of life that we as Christians also accept: “Living means being addressed.” The basic presupposition in this statement is that at the core of each life is a mystery calling for response. In other words, a “word” is addressed to us – a word that calls us to something. We are made for a destiny that involves us in listening and responding. The challenge is to be open to be spiritually guided. However, there is much that gets in the way of our listening and responding. As a result, the process of responding to one’s calling is arduous and calls for discipline.

From the Christian standpoint, living means being addressed and invited by God to participate in God’s project in history through entry into relationship and ultimate union with Christ. The fundamental call is to a relationship with God that is mediated through the risen Christ acting in the Holy Spirit and the Church. As one is touched by the Christian mysteries in the ritual life of the Church and through the Scriptures, she/he is conformed to Christ and co-labors with God in God’s project for humanity. The response to this Christian call will take innumerable shapes and expressions, according to one’s more specific personal vocation.

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The second element that makes up vocation is charism or gift. Charism deals with our endowment and with our particular capacity for contribution. It is about our unique entrée into the world and life, where our best contribution can develop and unfold.

We each have talents and natural endowments that come to us through genes, our family and society and our individual history. We each have a particular “take” on life that informs who we are. When we function out of our charism, we engage what is deepest and best in us and in a dance with the world’s “deep needs,” we move our life/work project toward fulfillment. When this engagement happens, passion manifests itself to provide the energy and dedication to live out one’s vocation.

Charism is a biblical term that refers to a gift given by the Holy Spirit for the community. It is connected with the same root word that is translated as “grace.” Charisms have often been associated with the extraordinary, such as prophecy, healing, etc., but there is a charismatic basis to all of life, and certainly, to the ordinary Christian life. God is in each person and to tap what we have been given as an endowment is to begin to live authentically, i.e. to author a life worthy of God’s gifts. When we respond authentically to God’s call in life to contribute, to serve, to grow, we begin to access that endowment that is, ultimately, gift. A Christian believes that to live is to have been created to serve – God, others and life – out of what we have been given. A Christian further believes that he or she has been given a portion of Christ’s Spirit. Entry into Christian discipleship leads to receiving an abundant portion of the Spirit enlivening one’s giftedness for the community of the Church and the world. Recognizing what is one’s giftedness is an important and often difficult task.

How might one know when one is living out of one’s giftedness? One could notice when one is most one’s self and alive in an activity or endeavor. If you recall, Frederick Buechner’s definition speaks about vocation being manifest at the intersection of “our deep gladness” and the “world’s deep need.” When we tap into our giftedness, our deep gladness becomes manifest.

Certain indication can point toward one’s giftedness. The questions that we use in the seminar that might help a person discern giftedness are:

What tends to be your unique contribution in a work or family setting?

For what do you tend to volunteer?

For what do people come to you?

In what contributory activities do you feel most alive?

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What work have you been given to do, regardless of your job title?

What do you do that leads to a rich interrelation of you, others and life?

What is it about who you are that leads to rich interrelation of you, others and life?

Another excellent avenue for discerning charism is to imagine what might be said about you at your funeral. A eulogy will often capture much of the person's life as an expression of charism. Other people often have a fairly good handle on who we are and what we bring to life. An exercise we use during our seminars is to gather a small group of people who work together and have each person make a list of his/her own gifts/talents. One participant then agrees to become the "focus person," and she/he shares her/his list with the group. The group, then addresses the person, one at a time, affirming, adding or amending according to his/her own experience of the focus person. This group experience, while having an element of vulnerability, never fails to be extremely helpful and affirming for the "focus person" and for the group as a whole.

Charism leads us into mission, the third element of vocation. It is out of call and charism that our life project and power to be effective develops. Our life history has given us something to do that connects to our giftedness. The gifts/talents we have been given are given not only for our own sakes, but also for others and for the service of life itself. We each have a mission in life. It is as we respond to our call and live into our charism that our mission unfolds.

Mission is the purpose that develops out of responding to call through charism. Our life/work project is the result of this development. Our mission unfolds as we engage what has been put in front of us to do and to take on. What might that be? The response to this question will be as varied and rich as human life itself. It might be to make art, or to raise children or to create wealth through business. Each is a service to life, and therefore to God.

To be a Christian is to have one's call, charism and mission touched and shaped by the revelation of God in Christ. This revelation is multifaceted and rich beyond measure. I will take just one facet of this revelation and show how it might impact a life project. To those who have been graced to contemplate its 'word,' the suffering and death of Christ on the cross discloses that, even in our brokenness, there is a superabundant love and forgiveness that is poured on the world. It also discloses God's identification with the suffering of the world. This revelation creates a dynamic that causes the Christian to embody this same sense of superabundant love and identification with suffering humanity. A Christian, who has identified with his Lord, will configure her or his life in a manner that embodies God's revelation in Christ.

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There is much more that would need to be said about how one builds a life project that honors call, charism and mission, but that is a topic for another paper. I am sure that other presenters will touch on the key topics of discernment and conversion.

The final part of this paper briefly draws out the implications for how one might think about business school education. Any approach to business education, or any education for that matter, that does not take into account vocation will be fundamentally flawed. Yes, the imparting of technical expertise and information are necessary. But when this happens without creating an environment that helps the student discern his or her vocation, i.e. call, charism and mission, then one has acceded to an educational model that commodifies education. Of course, a business school that does not have a faculty who themselves are on the vocational journey will find it difficult to help their students enter into a vocational exploration. Schools that have not seriously reflected on the vocation of business will be creating business leaders who are not equipped to lead business in a manner consonant with a perspective that takes vocation into account.

Ultimately, talk of vocation inevitably calls for a spiritual perspective. This is difficult in the best of times, but in a time when philosophical streams such as materialism, radical individualism, utilitarianism and instrumentalism militate against such a perspective, we are faced with great difficulty. There are however, some current philosophical perspectives opening the way. I would point to the work of Charles Taylor as one philosopher showing us how to think deeply in a manner that can accommodate talk of vocation.

In summary, this paper has been a description of some aspects of a seminar on vocation developed for faculty and staff of two institutions of higher learning. In the light of what has preceded I would define vocation as the life long process of discovering and enacting our life's purpose through call, gift and mission. This process demands a profound listening that discloses what there is to be done and who one is to become.

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¹ Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking, A Seeker's ABC* (Harper Collins: 1993)

² Fleishman, P.R., *The Healing Spirit: Explorations in Religion and Psychotherapy*. (New York: Paragon House, 1990), 57.

³ Richard Madsen, William M. Sullivan, Ann Swidler, Steven M. Tipton, Robert Neelly Bellah (Editor), *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (University of California Press: Berekley, 1996), p. 69

⁴ "The Development of Personality," in the Collected Works of C. G. Jung, Volume 17.