

Vocation as the Meaning of Life in the Letters of St. Paul

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Presented for the inaugural conference of the Monsignor Jerome D. Quinn Institute of Biblical Studies

The Word of God in the Life and Mission of the Church:

Integrating Biblical Studies and Theology in the Formation of Priests

June 11-13, 2009

St. Paul Seminary School of Divinity

“Vocation” is a choice and cherished word to all seminarians, for indeed, precisely in order to focus whole-heartedly on their vocational discernment and preparation, upon committing themselves to seminary formation, those young men strive to relegate all the other dreams, interests, and passions of their lives. Quite simply and demonstrably, “vocation” is the seminarian’s *raison d’être*, the meaning of his life, his very identity as a seminarian.

This is as it should be, but not just for seminarians - it stands to reason that each person created purposely by God can only find ultimate meaning in discovering that providential purpose, in responding to the divine call, in discerning his own God-given vocation. One of the first concepts often presented to potential seminarians, in fact, is an introduction to the all-inclusive call to holiness, especially as set forth in *Lumen Gentium*, in the fifth chapter, entitled *De Universali Vocatione Ad Sanctitatem in Ecclesia*. Later, I’ll return to the fundamental interplay between the universal vocation to holiness and one’s particular vocation to a state of life, but for now, just this little observation: ironically, the official who attempts to convince the budding seminarian of the underlying importance of that universal aspect of vocation is most often the diocesan “vocation” director, a priest specifically charged with the recruitment and support of a decidedly non-universal, distinctively limited, cadre of candidates for holy orders.

So not surprisingly, after entering the seminary, the new recruit often settles into a *de facto* reduction of the task of vocational discernment by primarily seeking to answer the question, “Do I have a vocation to the priesthood, and if so, how do I prepare myself for that?” To be recognized as relevant, every course, every convocation, even every expectation of the seminary must at least potentially contribute to the answer of that question. Generalizing even further, it could also be said that anything experienced in life is ultimately meaningful only to the extent that it relates to one’s vocation.

Let us consider a concrete example here. As seminary scripture teachers, you and I are energized and inspired by students with a manifest hunger for the word of God. Occasionally, we even might feel like Ezra and the Levites in Neh 8, serving up large portions of God’s Word to grateful listeners who have dreamed all their lives of this ecstatic experience, *people who intuitively recognize divine revelation as key to their human vocation*.

But we also encounter the frustrating phenomenon of those seminarians who complain of a seeming surfeit of scripture, those who would conceivably hail the curtailing of the Word of the Lord mentioned in Amos 8 as a liberating promise, rather than a devastating prophecy! For such seminarians, scripture courses (aside, perhaps, from Synoptics) are depreciated as vocationally irrelevant. The agitated auditor asks, “What do Obadiah’s oracles against Edom have to do with my future priesthood?” In the seminary, that’s a sincere and legitimate question, and when there’s no immediately apparent answer, there’s no immediately apparent reason to “tune in.”

Now a self-motivated student might still force himself to “dig in,” to study merely for the sake of a grade. But that’s not why he came to the seminary, and that’s not why we teach! Not much, at any rate, will likely be remembered or utilized after the final exam, for few indeed are the benefits from classes which, at best, are grudgingly acknowledged as obliquely relevant - the way you and I may have tolerated, for example, the canon law courses we had to suffer through in our day. Yet here, even our J.C.D. colleagues would admit that a distaste for and disconnect from canon law is more common and generally less consequential for priests than apathy or antipathy for sacred scripture. To juxtapose the wisdom of the ages: *Ignorance of the law is no excuse* - that’s bad enough! But, *ignorance of scripture is ignorance of Christ* - that’s something much worse!

Now remember, the word “ignorance,” incidentally, refers not just to the static lack of knowledge, but also, more radically, to the act of ignoring, whether accidental or even intentional. Sadly, though, as the fathers of the recent synod bemoaned, there is plentiful evidence of all grades and shades of ignorance of scripture among seminarians and priests, and even ignorance among scripture scholars themselves of the indispensable integration of the exegetical and theological dimensions of the Scriptures.

Yet, has not all that God revealed about Himself to man been revealed precisely to inspire, aid and enable man to answer the divine call, to live up to his noble vocation as adopted son of God? Scripture was not written as a textbook for science or secular history - we know that well enough, and most, if not all, of our students know that. But sometimes we forget that neither was scripture written as the primary text for a class that could best be entitled, “Excruciating Esoteric Exegesis,” and surely, those who misappropriate any book of the Bible to teach such a course, even one of indubitable scholarly merit, are quite guilty of sacrilege. Particularly as servants entrusted by the Church to teach scripture, you and I must echo St. Paul in decrying this unacceptable absurdity, :← (Ξ<≅49≅ - let it not be so!

In order then, that such things not be so, the methodological key lies, I am convinced, in vocational awareness, in teachers deliberately connecting students with the vocational relevancy of every jot and tittle of divine revelation. This does not mean in any way, of course, that we succumb to subjectivism or overlook the warning that there is no prophecy of scripture that is a matter of personal interpretation (2 Pet 1:20). Rather, all scripture has God as the divine subject, and thus, as public revelation, all scripture is a matter of personal application. A vocation-centered scriptural approach therefore examines what is revealed about God (He who calls), what is to be learned both about man and by man (he who is called), and what can be concluded about vocation (the call itself in the past, present, and future). Thus, the method is at once both exegetical and hermeneutic in scope and execution.

Briefly consider, for example, some sketches of what surfaces when Pauline literature is read around that vocational key. A quick computer concordance search reveals that, of 63 instances of forms of the English word “call” in the RSV Pauline corpus, at least 45 of those bear a vocational nuance, viz.:

RSV

Vocational "Call" in Paul

Rom 1:1	...Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ,	called to be an apostle, set apart for ...
Rom 1:6	including yourselves who are	called to belong to Jesus Christ;
Rom 1:7	...To all God's beloved in Rome, who are	called to be saints: Grace to you and ...
Rom 4:17	...believed, who gives life to the dead and	calls into existence the things that do not ...
Rom 8:28	...good with those who love him, who are	called according to his purpose.
Rom 8:30	...And those whom he predestined he also	called ; and those whom he called he also ...
	...predestined he also called; and those whom he	called he also justified; and those whom he ...
Rom 9:11	...not because of works but because of his	call ,
Rom 9:24	even us whom he has	called , not from the Jews only but also ...
Rom 9:25	...Those who were not my people I will	call 'my people,' and her who was not ...
	...and her who was not beloved I will	call 'my beloved.'"
Rom 11:29	For the gifts and the	call of God are irrevocable.
1 Cor 1:1	...Paul,	called by the will of God to be ...
1 Cor 1:2	...at Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus,	called to be saints together with all those ...
1 Cor 1:9	...God is faithful, by whom you were	called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus ...
1 Cor 1:24	but to those who are	called , both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power ...
1 Cor 1:26	For consider your	call , brethren; not many of you were wise ...
1 Cor 7:15	...or sister is not bound. For God has	called us to peace.
1 Cor 7:17	...assigned to him, and in which God has	called him. This is my rule in all ...
1 Cor 7:18	...Was any one at the time of his	call already circumcised? Let him not seek to ...
	...Was any one at the time of his	call uncircumcised? Let him not seek circumcision.
1 Cor 7:20	...remain in the state in which he was	called .
1 Cor 7:21	Were you a slave when	called ? Never mind. But if you can gain ...
1 Cor 7:22	For he who was	called in the Lord as a slave is ...
	...the Lord. Likewise he who was free when	called is a slave of Christ.
1 Cor 7:24	...So, brethren, in whatever state each was	called , there let him remain with God.
Gal 1:6	...that you are so quickly deserting him who	called you in the grace of Christ and ...
Gal 1:15	...me apart before I was born, and had	called me through his grace,
Gal 5:8	...This persuasion is not from him who	calls you.
Gal 5:13	For you were	called to freedom, brethren; only do not use ...
Eph 1:18	...what is the hope to which he has	called you, what are the riches of his ...
Eph 4:1	...you to lead a life worthy of the	calling to which you have been called,
	...of the calling to which you have been	called ,
Eph 4:4	...body and one Spirit, just as you were	called to the one hope that belongs to ...
	...to the one hope that belongs to your	call ,
Phil 3:14	...the goal for the prize of the upward	call of God in Christ Jesus.
Col 3:15	...in your hearts, to which indeed you were	called in the one body. And be thankful.
1 Thess 2:12	...to lead a life worthy of God, who	calls you into his own kingdom and glory.
1 Thess 4:7	For God has not	called us for uncleanness, but in holiness.
1 Thess 5:24	He who	calls you is faithful, and he will do ...
2 Thess 1:11	...our God may make you worthy of his	call , and may fulfil every good resolve and ...
2 Thess 2:14	To this he	called you through our gospel, so that you ...
1 Tim 6:12	...of the eternal life to which you were	called when you made the good confession in ...
2 Tim 1:9	who saved us and	called us with a holy calling, not in ...
	...saved us and called us with a holy	calling , not in virtue of our works but ...

We immediately see that the universal vocation to holiness, the topical heading of chapter V of *Lumen Gentium*, is a thoroughly Pauline notion, especially since he pointedly writes to those “**called** to be saints.” But the vocation to his specific state in life is also a habitual reference point for “Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, **called** to be an apostle....”

That is not to assume, though, that there are two distinct calls from God, one for the general masses, and another for special individuals, such as Paul and other apostles. Rather, the call of God is to be considered both in its universality and singularity, *et universis et singulis*. In his writing (e.g., 1 Cor 9), Paul’s vocation to be an apostle comes across undeniably as *consequential*, but emphatically not as *preferential* - it was simply the specific way that the universal call to sainthood was manifest in his life, all according to God’s plan. The same is true, of course, of all specific vocations - they all fully incarnate the universal vocation, and not some more than others! Moreover, the universal call is, providentially, never experienced as an abstract, impersonal, or generic call, as if God were to say, “Be holy - but it certainly is no concern of Mine whatever manner you might chose or come across to do that in your life.” Rather, the universal vocation to holiness is always articulated in a precise particular vocation to a defined state of life, just as, for the sake of clarification, the details dimly traced in a full-body portrait are appropriately brought to light in a facial close-up shot - it’s the same vocation or person, we would say, just more focused!

But even an eventually well-defined delineation and correlation of the universal call to sanctity and the specific call to apostleship would barely begin to examine the extensive Pauline idea of divine vocation. There are, for example, the stirring sketches of the cosmic dimension and the eternal, infinite scope of God’s call presented in Ephesians (particularly chapters 1 & 2). The election of Israel (chapter 9ff), the irrevocable call of God’s chosen people (chapter 11), and other ecumenical vocational implications are well-developed themes of Romans. Another line of inquiry, seen *inter alia* in Galatians, follows the developmental unfolding of Paul’s *progressive* discernment: while having been definitively called as an apostle, his successes and failures, his privations and his private revelations were constant course correctives, repeatedly helping Paul realize both when he was evidently being called himself in new directions, and when the time had come to assist others with calls in new directions. And many of the epistles, Philippians, for instance, contain reflections on the advantages and necessity of cooperative, as opposed to competitive, approaches to vocation.

All of these example insights are extracts of actual exegesis, but also of immediate, engaging, and obvious import for all seminarians in consideration of their own vocations. A familiar reminder is found in 2 Tim 3:16 that “all scripture is inspired by God...” - by itself, the *exegetical* criteria insists that it is solely the Old Testament that is originally meant here, but the integrated *theological* dimension validly calls to duty the New Testament as well - “... and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.” Complete and equipped, in other words, for fulfilling his vocation! All that God revealed about Himself to

man has been revealed precisely to inspire, aid and enable man to answer the divine call, to live up to his noble vocation as adopted son of God. St. Paul understood that, and he labored mightily to help others grasp that and live that.

And of course, it was St. Paul himself who passionately insisted to the Corinthians and others that, while various Christians will share the same specific vocation, nonetheless, each person is providentially called to live his vocation in a individualized and unique manner corresponding to his share of charisms, his reflection of experience, and, to an appropriate degree, even his own blend of preferences, for, after all, “the body has many members.” We note, for example, St. Peter and St. Paul, both called to apostleship, both faithful in that vocation unto a martyr’s death, nonetheless both followed that vocation in quite different directions, and rightly so, to the greater glory of God!

In light of these initial propositions, it would not be an exaggeration to state bluntly that, like seminarians, St. Paul recognized “by the grace of God, I am what I am” (1 Cor 15:10) - his own vocation from God was the central meaning of his life, and he zealously bore it and proudly wore it as the source and summit of his very identity. But St. Paul was not, in any sense of the word, “self-centered” in his vocational discernment. Rather, what you and I strive to do ourselves, and what we absolutely must help seminarians do for themselves, is the same noble task that St. Paul did himself : he prayerfully and studiously reflected, taught, and collaborated on the theological connections and consequences of God’s call in the past, present, and future - this, my friends, is our vocation!