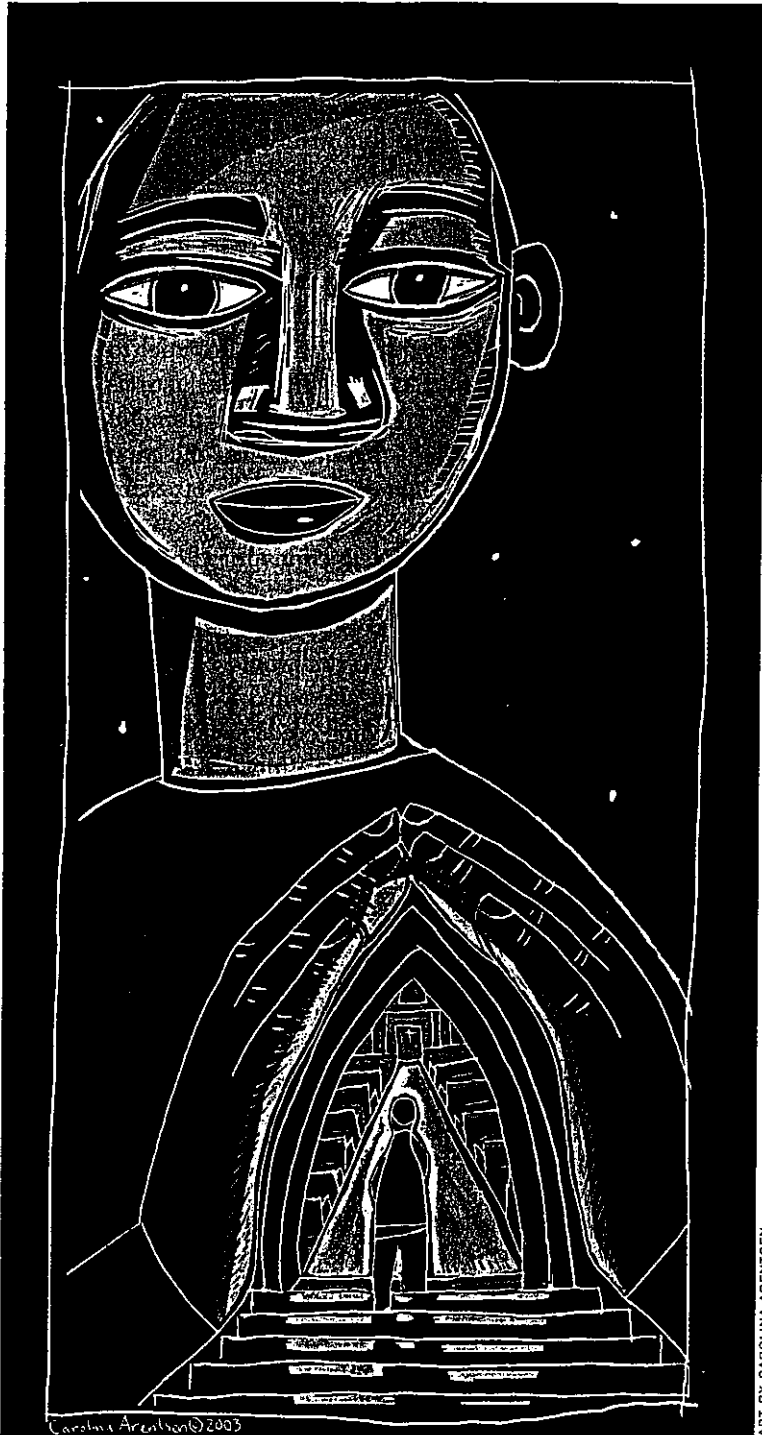


What Vocation Shortage?

The challenge is to discern the vocation you unquestionably have.

BY RUSSELL SHAW



DESPITE ALL THE TALK ABOUT a vocation shortage, there is in fact no such thing in the Catholic Church. The real shortage is that of vocational discernment, and that is a very different problem. The shortfall in the number of candidates for the priesthood, the consecrated life and other forms of Christian witness and service would quickly disappear if many more Catholics, and ideally all, made it a practice to discern, accept and live out their unique, irreplaceable callings from God—their personal vocations.

The idea of personal vocation and the practice of discernment are also the key to removing clericalism from Catholic life once and for all and replacing it with a healthy understanding of clergy-lay relationships. Personal vocation and vocational discernment also are crucial to helping the laity, along with everyone else, understand and embrace their proper roles in carrying out the church's mission.

These are large claims, of course. In weighing them, it is useful to begin with the three distinct but related senses that the word “vocation” has in religious talk.

THE FIRST OF THESE is the common Christian vocation received in baptism and strengthened by confirmation. In very general terms, the common vocation consists in what follows from the commitment of faith: loving and serving God above all else and loving and serving one's neighbor as oneself, and so collaborating in the redemptive work of Christ that is the mission of the church. In 1964 the Second Vatican Council offered a succinct but clear statement of the idea when it said the baptized are “appointed by their baptismal character to Christian religious worship” and have an obligation to “profess before people the faith they have received” (“Dogmatic Constitution on the Church,” No. 11).

The second meaning of the word refers to what traditionally is called “state in life.” The clerical state, the conse-

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crated life, Christian marriage, the life of the single lay person in the world—these are states in life. They are specifications of the common Christian vocation, chosen by overarching commitments that set us on long-term paths that shape our lives by the countless specific choices and actions needed to see them through to the end. Christian states in life are meant to complement and reinforce one another, not to compete.

The third sense in which “vocation” is used is that of personal vocation. It is the unique combination of commitments, relationships, obligations, opportunities, strengths and weaknesses through which the common Christian vocation and a state in life are concretely expressed in the case of someone trying to discern, accept and live out God’s will; it is the particular role intended by God for each of us in his redemptive plan. “We are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them” (Eph 2:10). Or, as Pope John Paul II said in a message for World Vocations Day in 2001, “Every life is a vocation.”

When Catholics speak of vocation, they usually mean state in life. In fact, they usually mean priesthood or religious life. A “vocations director” is someone in a diocese or religious institute responsible for recruiting and screening those who think they may be called to be priests or religious; a “vocations program” is a program with this purpose. From one point of view, there is nothing wrong with speaking of vocation in this way. Priesthood and religious life really are states of life and, for some people, central parts of their callings from God. From another point of view, however, exclusive emphasis on vocation as state of life—and, practically speaking, as a call to be a priest or religious—can do much harm.

The most obvious harm is in communicating to those not called to be priests or religious the message, “You don’t have a vocation.” That may be disappointing for some and welcome news for others; but in either case it is a disincentive to continuing discernment, acceptance and living out of God’s will for oneself. Here is one of the root causes of the clericalist mentality still so widespread among Catholics.

The idea of personal vocation is the antidote. Everybody has one—God calls every member of the church by name. Seen in this light, the challenge is not to find out whether you have a vocation but to identify the vocation you unquestionably have.

THE IDEA OF PERSONAL VOCATION is unfamiliar to most Catholics today, but it is hardly new. It is rooted in the Pauline doctrine of charisms and of the church as the body of Christ. Other classic sources of Christian wisdom have developed the insight further. St. Francis de Sales, for instance, spoke of personal vocation in his *Treatise on the Love of God*, though he did not use the term. It is not God’s

will that everyone live the evangelical counsels, he points out, "but only such counsels as are suitable according to differences in persons, times, occasions, and abilities." Writers like St. Ignatius Loyola and Jean Pierre de Caussade, S.J., suggest the same.

Cardinal John Henry Newman offered a particularly insightful exposition of personal vocation in one of the sermons he gave while still an Anglican, "Divine Calls." Newman emphasized the here-and-now, ongoing character of this uniquely personal call: "For in truth we are not called once only, but many times; all through our life Christ is calling us. He called us first in baptism; but afterwards also.... He works through our natural faculties and circumstances of life. Still what happens to us in providence is in all essential respects what His voice was to those whom He addressed when on earth."

Given the existence of this powerful and persuasive testimony, why have Catholics been slow to grasp the idea of personal vocation? One probable reason is that Martin Luther was an enthusiastic exponent of this truth. "Everyone must tend his own vocation and work," he wrote. But Luther also rejected the idea of mediation in the spiritual realm and, with it, priesthood and religious life. The reaction this provoked among Catholics helped make the idea of personal vocation suspect in Catholic circles for centuries.

In modern times, nevertheless, the concept can be found in the documents of the Second Vatican Council and in many postconciliar documents of the magisterium. No one has analyzed the idea more carefully or promoted it more vigorously than Pope John Paul II, who wrote about personal vocation long before becoming pope (in *Love and Responsibility*, which appeared in Poland in 1960) and has returned to it time and again during his pontificate. In his first encyclical, *Redemptor Hominis*, published in 1979, he said:

For the whole of the community of the People of God and for each member of it what is in question is not just a specific social membership; rather, for each and every one what is essential is a particular "vocation." Indeed, the church as the People of God is also "Christ's Mystical Body." Membership in that body has for its source a particular call, united with the saving action of grace. Therefore, if we wish to keep in mind this community of the

People of God...we must see first and foremost Christ saying in a way to each member of the community: "Follow me." (No. 21)

The idea of personal vocation is an important complement to Vatican II's teaching about the universal call to holiness. All members of the faithful, not just a select few, are called "to the fullness of Christian life and to the perfection of love," the council declares ("Dogmatic Constitution on the Church," No. 39). But there is not much guidance for living this out, and even less incentive to do so, in telling people that if God has not called them to be clerics or religious, they do not have a vocation in any meaningful sense.

Personal vocation puts this matter in a radically different light. Everyone has a personal vocation, an unrepeatable call from God to play a particular role in his redemptive plan and the mission of the church. The task of each is to discern God's will, accept it and live it out. That is responding to the universal call to be holy.

Contrary to an elitist view of vocational discernment, which tends to treat it as an exercise for a select few, discernment is for everybody. "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 out," Pope John Paul II says in his

post-synod document on the laity, *Christifideles Laici* (1989).

To carry out this mandate, parishes need to become schools of vocational discernment—places where liturgy, catechesis and spiritual direction encourage parishioners to engage in continuing, prayerful reflection on what God is asking of them. The effort should start with children (in an age-appropriate manner) and continue with adolescents, young adults and adults at every stage of their life journey. Special opportunities—retreats, days of recollection—should be provided for those who have major vocational choices to make. The aim is discernment, not recruitment.

But, someone might object, won't emphasizing personal vocation distract people from heeding calls to the priesthood and consecrated life? Won't it make the real-life vocation shortage worse?

The answer is no. If many more Catholics practiced ongoing discernment regarding their personal vocations, many more would discover that they are called to the priesthood or consecrated life. The best solution to the dearth of new candidates—and to many other problems in contemporary Catholic life as well—is personal vocation. Indeed, it may be the only one. **A**

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