The Call

Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying,
"Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?"
And I said, "Here am I! Send me." (Isa. 6:8)

When I was in college, during the crisis I described in chapter 1, I was struck by the way those geniuses—Aristotle, Descartes, and the rest—disagreed about what is real, what is right, and what life is about. If they were so smart and still disagreed, what chance did I have to understand these things? From their disagreements I concluded that their different worldviews were ultimately based on first principles that could not be strictly proven but had to be accepted on some kind of faith. That insight (which I still consider correct) shook me deeply and triggered a top-to-bottom crisis. What did I believe in? On what basis? I couldn’t give solid reasons for what I had been taught and had accepted up until then.

Though I didn’t know it at the time, I had entered the postmodern world. Now I realize I have plenty of company. Sooner or later a crisis of authorities and inherited worldviews strikes most members of my middle-class tribe.

It took me much longer to grasp that this kind of crisis is not just about understanding the world around us. It is about finding a path in life, an identity. It is about discovering our vocation.

THE IDEA OF A VOCATION

What do we mean by vocation? That is an idea we have to reach for in contemporary society. Late capitalism might offer us a job, even a profession, but the only vocation it knows is getting and spending. That robs us of our dignity.

Grown-ups ask children what they want to be when they grow up, and children answer: an astronaut, a firefighter. Later, dreams grow more realistic. Then economic pressures crowd in. The flame of adventure flickers, and dreams can die, either because they are impractical or because of lack of courage or lack of opportunity, or because there is nobody there to stroke the dreamer in us. In the process, many, maybe most, fail to discover their vocation.

My vocation might be to raise children, discover new planets, drive a truck, or lead a social movement. It will not be something I just up and decide on, like picking out a shirt in a store. My vocation is something I discover. More than something to do, it is who I am or might be. For most people, music is a pastime or a hobby, but for Pablo Casals it was destiny: something that unlocked his most creative energies. When we discover our vocation, something clicks. We have found what we were born for.

After graduating from college, my friend Mark got a job in a hotel and soon found himself helping organize a union. He was good at it and loved it, and stayed with it, even though other lines of work would have paid better. Eventually, Mark made his way to Central America, where he collaborated with beleaguered labor leaders in wartime conditions. Once he was nearly killed when a union headquarters was bombed. After recovering from his injuries, he returned to Central America. More recently, thugs tried to kidnap and kill him for his support of fired union leaders. None of this has dampened Mark’s enthusiasm for working with his and their rights. He is currently pursuing graduate studies in industrial relations. Mark has discovered his vocation.

We can have several vocations. I can be a mechanic, an athlete, and a spouse, all at once. Still, we don’t identify completely with these activities. I would still have a mission in life if I could no longer repair cars or if my spouse died.

Is there a deepest vocation that integrates the others? If so, it would be that way of life that fulfills me as a human being. What does that mean? Consider Forrest Gump of the movie by that title. Forrest is mentally retarded, and people are forever telling him he’s dumb and not much good for anything. At one point he spits back: “I know what love is,” Forrest is right. He can love; he’s good at helping people. That does not depend on special talents, which he scarcely has. Case closed.
I'd say. Human beings are made to love, to help others. That is our deepest vocation.

A life of service is not something people normally muscle into by sheer willpower, however. It is, literally, a calling that they "hear," a "still small voice" which, in privileged moments, comes through straight and clear.

In his memoir, Markings, former U.N. Secretary General Dag Hammarksjöld describes responding to an invitation that transformed his life: "I do not know Who — or what — put the question," he writes. "But at some point I did answer 'Yes' to Someone — or Something — and from that hour I was certain that existence is meaningful and that, therefore, my life, in self-surrender, had a goal." Responding to this call cost him dearly: "I came to a time and place where I realized...that the price for committing one's life would be reproach, and that the only elevation possible to man lies in the depths of humiliation. After that, the word 'courage' lost its meaning, since then nothing could be taken from me."2 Hammarksjöld's vocation led to his death, working for peace in war-torn central Africa.

Maryknoll sister Ita Ford paid the same price in El Salvador in 1980. The armed forces labeled Ita and her fellow sisters subversives for their work among refugees. Shortly before she and three companions were raped and killed, Ita wrote to her young niece, Jennifer, in the United States: "I hope you come to find that which gives life a deep meaning for you. Something worth living for — maybe even worth dying for — something that energizes you, entices you, enables you to keep moving ahead. I can't tell you what it might be. That's for you to find, to choose, to love."3

Ita invited Jennifer to discover her deepest calling.

Life is short; we only get to do it once. We can sleep through it, squandering it on trivial pursuits. The wake-up call to service resonates with our own need for something worth living for, our need to find ourselves by losing ourselves.4

As the word suggests, vocations are called forth from us. We often discover them thanks to role models — people like our Aunt Mildred or that special teacher, Mr. Prescott, whom we admired so much. Role models evoke an echo deep within us. As in a mirror, we recognize in them part of who we are or might be. We grow into and out of emotional identification with role models as we discover and shape our identity.

Mentors also call forth our vocations. They are people with experience who point out our gifts and help us develop them. There are few greater gifts in life than the opportunity to apprentice with a good mentor.

Role models and mentors are special cases of the general rule: we discover our callings in response to the world. Mothers and fathers discover theirs in response to their children. Couples call forth from each other their vocation of spouse and lover. Martin Luther King discovered his prophetic calling during the Montgomery bus boycott. Dietrich Bonhoeffer in Nazi Germany and Dorothy Day in Depression-era New York grew into their vocations in response to their turbulent surroundings. Our surroundings shake us, sift us, and draw our vocation from us.

A lot depends on where we place ourselves. If King had spent his youth hanging out by the pool, would we remember him today? The crucified people are a privileged place for hearing the call to service. They provoke the crucial question: What will we do to take them down from their crosses?

Faith recognizes the call to love and serve as the voice of Christ. (We say this call is a constitutive dimension of the human condition, an "existential.") Christ invites people of every time and place to participate in the Reign of God.
THE CALL OF CHRIST

Jesus said to them, “Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.” And immediately they left their nets and followed him. (Rev. 3:20)

Between the First and Second Weeks of the Spiritual Exercises, Ignatius inserts the exercise traditionally called the Kingdom Meditation. I prefer the title “The Call” (for reasons I will explain). In this exercise, retreatants consider the call Christ makes to everyone to collaborate with God’s work in the world. This exercise prepares them to hear that call in the future and to consider now, beforehand, what a fitting response should be.5

The call

Ignatius presents a parable about a great-hearted charismatic leader (a king) with a difficult, noble cause. The leader invites; he does not order. He shares the hardships of his troops in the field and promises that if they labor with him they will share in his victory. Ignatius compares Christ’s call to this attractive leader’s.

Kings are out of fashion these days,6 and we are slow to follow the leader, even a humble, generous one. Sometimes that reflects a healthy, critical attitude. At other times it reflects an individualism that balks at collaborating in something wider than our personal projects. Today we might imagine a credible, selfless leader mobilizing others to combat poverty, war, discrimination, or environmental destruction. We could consider a personal appeal for help from someone like Dorothy Day or Oscar Romero, the kind of invitation only a small-minded person would refuse [94]. Christ calls each one personally like that with words like these:

It is my will to win over the whole world, to overcome evil with good, to turn hatred aside with love, to conquer all the forces of death—whatever obstacles there are that block the sharing of life between God and humankind. Whoever wishes to join me in this mission must be willing to labor with me, and so by following me in struggle and suffering may share with me in glory [95].7

Christ invites all to participate in God’s project, or “Reign,” offering to be mentor and role model for those who respond.

The call is something people experience in real life. It comes in the form of consolation, drawing them to a freer, more generous way of life. In the Exercises, people normally experience it as consolation attracting them to Christ (whom they are contemplating) and his cause the Kingdom. It is a personal invitation—“My sheep hear my voice. Know them and they follow me” (John 10:27)—to join others, working in community and for community.

The response

The aim of the exercise is not to experience the invitation during the exercise itself but to prepare for it. The petition (“what I want”) at the beginning indicates the purpose of the exercise. We pray “not to be deaf to Christ’s call, but ready and diligent” when it comes in real life [91]. It is a gift that we cannot schedule or conjure up. But we can prepare for it and reflect on how best to respond.8

Ignatius says that any decent person will respond to Christ’s invitation without reserve [cf. 96]. We will all say, “Sure, count on me! However, following through is another matter. When the call actually comes, greed and sensuality can prevent us from attending to it; fear of hardship and rejection can prevent us from following through. To neutralize this danger, people with “more” desire “to show devotion and to distinguish themselves in total service” [97]9 will appeal to Christ in advance, in terms like these:

Eternal Lord… I am moved by your grace to offer myself to you and to your work. I deeply desire to be with you in accepting all wrongs and all rejections and all poverty, both actual and spiritual—and I deliberately choose this, if it is for your greater service and praise. If you… would so call and choose me, then take and receive me into such a way of life. [98]10

Those who are serious about having something to live for, maybe ever to die for, will pray to share rejection and poverty with Christ! (“Spiritual poverty” in the prayer means detachment from possessions.) The prayer helps neutralize fear of hardship and rejection; it helps keep...
us vigilant, lest Christ’s call should catch us napping (cf. Matt. 25:5; 26:41). The prayer also reflects the logic of companionship: Christ calls us to be his companions and share his lot ([95]; cf. Mark 3:14). We will return to these suggestive themes later on.

**GOD ON OUR SIDE—
OR RATHER, VICE VERSA**

Christ invites all to collaborate with God. If this means ascribing divine sanction to our activities, it might strike some people as quaint at best and pernicious at worst. On the other hand, consider Tessie, a six-year-old African-American girl who helped integrate the New Orleans public school system around 1960. Each day for a full year, federal marshals escorted Tessie and two schoolmates past a mob of jeering white segregationists on the way into school. Some protesters stayed on to taunt and threaten the girls as they left school in the afternoon.

The young psychiatrist Robert Coles accompanied Tessie and her friends during the ordeal. Coles and his tape recorder were on hand one morning at Tessie’s house when the girl, recovering from the flu, was chafing at having to face the hostile crowd again. Her grandmother Martha reminded her of her mission: “I’m not the one to tell you that you should go, because here I am, and I’ll be watching television and eating or cleaning things up while you’re walking by those folks. But I’ll tell you, you’re doing them a great favor; you’re doing them a service, a big service.”

Martha chased down and swatted a bee. “You see, my child, you have to help the good Lord with His world! He puts us here—and He calls us to help Him out. That bee doesn’t belong here; it belongs out there. You belong in that McDonogh School, and there will be a day when everyone knows that, even those poor folks—Lord, I pray for them!—those poor, poor folks who are out there shouting their heads off at you. You’re one of the Lord’s people; He’s put His hand on you. He’s given a call to you, a call to service—in His name!”

Some weeks later, Tessie told Coles what her grandmother (and mentor) meant that morning: “If you just keep your eyes on what you’re supposed to be doing, then you’ll get there—to where you want to go,” Tessie explained. “The marshals say, ‘Don’t look at them; just walk with your head up high, and you’re looking straight ahead.’ My grann says that there’s God. He’s looking too, and I should remember that it’s a help to Him to do this, what I’m doing; and if you serve Him then that’s important. So I keep trying.”

When integration was finally achieved and the jeering mob dissolved, Tessie confided to Coles: “We were supposed to get ther to stop being so angry; then they’d quiet down, and we’d have th desegregation—and now it’s happening,” she said. “So we did th service we were suppose to for New Orleans, and Granny says, ‘Ne- it’ll be some other thing to do,’ because you always should be tryin to help out God somehow.”

Tessie was more than a young victim caught up in a racial confrontation. She understood herself to be deputized by God to help integrate New Orleans and win over embittered segregationists in the process. This gave her the sense of purpose she needed to persevere.

**COMMITMENT OVER TIME**

A vocation to service is a lifelong commitment that is fleshed out in concrete commitments that project into the future. Liberal society ca be poor soil for this kind of commitment to take root. Liberal culture’s critical temptation is the corruption of its supreme value, freedom, I promotes a kind of “open-door” freedom. In this interpretation, being free is like standing in a room full of doors and being able to walk through any one. After walking through one door, however, I am reluctant to close it behind me, because that would foreclose returnin to the original room and walking through those other doors. Freedom means being free to undo tomorrow what I decide on today.

Many balk at committing themselves more than two years into the future because they can’t foresee circumstances two years from now. And by what logic should a couple commit themselves “till death do us part,” tying their hands like that? After all, things change, especially in liberal society.

People also avoid weighty commitments because they lack information or feel pressured: I can’t be sure that marrying Stephanie-
or going to medical school, or entering the ministry — is a truly free and responsible decision, that I am not responding to the press of circumstances. Will I regret my decision five years from now? Will I find myself asking, Did I really choose my spouse (or my career) freely? Was I mature enough? If I had it to do all over again, would I choose as I did?

We need to question “open-door” freedom. We may have a hundred dreams, but ninety-plus will have to die for one or two to become reality. Consider Gladys and James, who have been together for forty years (going strong, more or less). While they have endured doubts and crises, their relationship deepened by working through them. The reasons they stay together now are not exactly the ones that first brought them together. When they got married, they walked through a door and closed it behind them. But in the new space they entered, other doors opened, new and unforeseen possibilities that have enriched their lives qualitatively.

Their life project unfolded over the years, the present building on the past: children, sickness, job changes, tragedies, and triumphs. Together they made a history they could not have made alone. They could accomplish what they have because each could count on the other being there as each had promised.

James and Gladys show us how the “open-door” caricature misconstrues freedom as the private property of isolated individuals. I can only undo tomorrow what I decide on today because I am alone in my decision, because I’m not engaged in any common effort, because no one has to count on me to be there tomorrow, because I don’t have to answer to anyone. In this concept of individualistic freedom, each instant of time is an isolated moment. I start each day as if I had no past and no future in common with others. But is that freedom — or permanent childhood?

Liberal individualism fails to appreciate the drama of interior freedom by which we mature. It mistakenly takes this freedom for granted. In reality, inner freedom is a difficult conquest. Our choices shape us. Some expand our freedom, while others diminish it. Through our choices we forge our identity. Freedom grows and develops as we assume our vocation, making commitments that close some doors and open others.

Our vocations draw us to collaborate with others, and that requires being able to count on one another to be there in the future. Otherwise, there will be no clinic, labor union, or serious scientific endeavor. When it comes to a shared life project involving primary support, as in marriage or religious life in community, permanent commitment is essential. When we promise to walk with others into an unknown future we have to assure them that they will be able to count on us.

If such a commitment has been responsibly made, we need to put our hand to the plow and hold on. It is debilitating for people like Gladys and James to keep looking back and asking, “But what if...? If the chosen path turns out not to be our vocation, that will become clear in practice without having to afflict ourselves with a hundred doubts and a divided heart.

Real life involves risks. Since total freedom and clarity are fantasie commitments only requires sufficient freedom and information. Although sometimes forces decisions — school, career, job, marriage partner etc. — before all the data is in. When the train is pulling out, we have to climb aboard or get left behind.

When we have sufficient reason to make a vocational decision, it is unreasonable not to do so. In The Call, we beg to be prompt to respond to Christ’s invitation [cf. 91]. To one candidate, Christ said, “Follow me.” But he said, ‘Lord, first let me go and bury my father.’ But Jesus said to him, ‘Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God’ (Luke 9:59–60). The call of Christ, th call to service, is a gift that most often comes with force when people are young and unencumbered. The window of opportunity can close. If we demur, the seed sown will fail to bear fruit.

CONCLUSION

Abraham and Sara, Moses, Deborah, the prophets, Mary and th apostles all heard God call them. They said “Yes” to an uncontrollable future, and God made history through them. So did Sojourne Truth, Dorothy Day, Simone Weil, John XXIII, and countless worka
heroes — housewives and bus drivers — closer to our time. The story continues today.

What is the cause to which Christ calls us? And who is Christ, who calls? Ignatius could count on a common understanding of the cause, that is, God’s saving work and the mission of the church. We cannot presume that today. In addition, people are skeptical of saviors, especially when saviors ask for total commitment, as in this case.

We first turn to consider the cause of Christ, God’s “Reign,” and then the caller, Christ himself.

The Reign of God

The time is fulfilled, and the Reign of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the good news.

(Mark 1:15)

In recent years, tens of thousands of people from all over the world have gathered at the World Social Forum in Porto Alegre, Brazil, and in Mumbai (Bombay), India, to celebrate their conviction that “another world is possible,” a world free of mass poverty and environmental degradation, and to explore ways to bring it about. Are they deluded? Can we overcome poverty, violence, and environmental crisis before they overcome us?

Every day thousands of parents, health professionals, and other dedicated persons spend their waking hours helping severely handicapped people just get through the day. Is their time well spent? Is a life serving “unproductive” people worthwhile?

What do efforts like these have to do with the call and cause of Christ, and what does his message say about their value and prospects? According to the New Testament, Christ invites all to labor with him for God’s Reign of justice, truth, and peace (cf. 1 Cor. 15:24–25; Rev. 11:15; 12:10; and [95]). This sounds at once consoling and utopian. Yet while many may be open to a life of service, before signing up for the Christian version they will surely want to hear more about the “Reign of God.”

In the Spiritual Exercises, the Contemplation on the Incarnation [101–9] follows immediately after The Call and opens the Second Week. By describing how Christ received his own mission, this exercise throws light on the cause to which he calls. Ignatius invites us to view humanity with the eyes of the Trinity: to observe the whole expanse of the earth, with the multitude of peoples and races, in their diversity of dress and customs. Some are at peace and others at war,