

VOCATION: Part 2

~What do you want me to do? ~

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1. Living the Year of the Priest

We have celebrated the beginning of the year which brings to a close the first decade of the twenty-first century on which we set out in the spirit of Jesus' command, "Put out into the deep". This is a time, I think, for us, here in Kyoto Diocese, to take stock of what we have achieved during ten years of trying to implement 'collaborative ministry for mission'.

This year, too, following on from last year's theme 'The first year of promoting vocation', Kyoto diocese will be thinking about, praying and working for 'Vocations'. Together with this, since June of last year, we are keeping the 'Year of the Priest', which Pope Benedict XVI announced to mark the 150th anniversary of Saint John Mary Vianney. Priests, including the bishops, firmly believe that the priesthood is a gift from God and that there is no vocation to compare with freely and willingly fulfilling that gift. I urge all priests to learn the love of our Lord Jesus Christ who gave his life for his flock and to renew their resolve faithfully to offer their lives as pastors of the people of God.

2. Mary's experience of vocation

The person who perfectly lived out the gift of a vocation is Mary the Mother of God. In order to think about our own vocation we should think back to the response of Mary on the occasion of the Annunciation (Luke 1:26-38). This is an example for the Christian of how to receive, understand and accept a vocation; it is the path which any believer follows.

The dialogue between the angel Gabriel and Mary includes, in turn, the three persons of the Trinity: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. First of all Mary hears the greeting, "Rejoice, you who enjoy God's favour!" and receives the blessing, "The Lord is with you". Next, she hears that she will give birth and is enlightened about the Son. Then she is told that this miracle can come about because, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you". In response to this Mary's response is shown as developing: she is "disturbed", then curious, "How can this be?", and then accepts, "Be it done to me."

3. Mary's surprise at being greeted by the Father.

The angel "went in and said to her, 'Rejoice, you who have found God's favour! The Lord is with you.' She was deeply disturbed by these words and asked herself what this greeting could mean." 'You who have found God's favour' is a new name which

God is giving to Mary; it is a symbol of the vocation which Mary is receiving. God the Father is giving the grace he will give to mankind through the redemption of his beloved Son, first of all to Mary, whose task is to become the mother of the Son of God, and giving it in its perfection.

Mary thinks deeply, **“what could this greeting mean?”** She is puzzled and surprised at the fact that, through an angel, God should have come to approach directly someone of the, **“low estate of his handmaiden”** (Luke 1:48). People are aware of God’s closeness, His immanence – the fact that God is with us – and, at the same time, of His distance from us – His transcendence. Furthermore, we need to know that we are essentially created beings and then the smallness of that existence.

From the angel’s greeting Mary realizes two things. The first is that a ‘special grace’ from God is being promised; the second is that, because of that grace, a response is required on the part of Mary herself to a ‘special request’. Although, as a matter of course, we seek familiarity with God, if He addresses us directly we shy away from Him. This is because we are being asked to do something. For Mary, too, time was necessary for her to understand what God was asking of her.

4 The open-heartedness of Mary who asked how she would conceive the Son of God

After his greeting the angel made clear the purpose of his visit and the importance of his commission: **“You are to conceive in your womb and bear a son.”** On hearing this, **“Mary said to the angel, ‘But how can this come about, since I have no knowledge of man?’”**

Mary, having realized that she is receiving a special grace from God has already made the basic spiritual preparation to respond to God’s call but, aware of her circumstances, she still thinks that it would be impossible for the message she has been given to be brought about; by human means the fulfillment of the angel’s mission is unthinkable.

Even if, as a virgin betrothed to Joseph she is not free Mary wants to believe unconditionally that the will of God be carried out and so asks the angel what she should do to reply appropriately. In a literal translation of Greek text the question, “But how can this be?” would read, “How can this event take place?” The way in which Mary open-heartedly and unhesitatingly asks this, displays her attitude. Mary is asking the angel for more practical directions.

5 The confidence of Mary who entrusted her body to the Holy Spirit

What possibility is there of conceiving the promised Son? For human beings this is quite impossible but the angel gives an answer from the standpoint of God: **“The Holy Spirit**

will come upon you and the power of the Most High will cover you with its shadow.” As the child whom Mary, betrothed to Joseph, will bear is the ‘Son of the Most High’, for this miracle to be accomplished the sending of the Holy Spirit, who will work within Mary, is being announced. Mary, who knows what kind of marital relationship she must maintain and has been shown that for God there is a way which transcends this, knows the unequivocal will of God; she is told, **“Nothing is impossible to God”**. She confesses once again that she is powerless in the face of the divine plan: **“I am the handmaid of the Lord.”**

Mary professes that, before God, human existence is nothing more than being looked upon mercifully by Him and immediately consents to that. **“Be it done to me according to Your Word.”** Mary’s ‘Yes’ (in Hebrew ‘Amen’ – let it be as you say) is the ‘Yes’ of the incarnate Word (Hebrews 10:5-7), in other words it anticipates the ‘Yes’ which Christ, with the responsibility of human freedom, says in order to carry out the Father’s will

6 Saying ‘Amen’ to my vocation; saying ‘Amen’ to life

Mary’s experience of the Annunciation is the ideal model of the ‘Amen’ which we must give when we hear and keep the will of God. Giving birth and bringing up a child in itself is a normal human occurrence. God the Father entrusts the salvation of mankind to that event. The Word of God makes clear the deep meaning of the things which happen in our lives, and by discernment and giving direction draws out that meaning for people in the various choices they make in their everyday lives. The Holy Spirit gives us power to understand what God the Father is asking of us, gives life to the Word of God and conforms it to reality.

Mary’s carrying out of her vocation, however, was not an easy matter; it involved great suffering and persecution. Simeon prophesied: **“A sword will pierce your soul too.”** (Luke 2:35) We could say that the vocation which Mary accepted bears witness to saying ‘Amen’ to the sacrifice and adversity which accompany everyday life lived in love and that people can take part in God’s plan for salvation.

7 Joseph’s Experience of Vocation

God did not entrust His plan for salvation to Mary alone. We must not forget the vocation of Joseph who supported Mary in her vocation. Joseph, knowing that Mary to whom he was betrothed had become pregnant, and worrying about whether to call off the marriage, is told by the angel that everything is according to God’s plan. At that point he notices something important. “Do you think, Joseph, that it is only Mary who has been chosen for God’s plan of salvation? God has not only called Mary; He has called you, Joseph, as well.” He realized that he had been given the role of protecting the Son of God Mary was to bear, as his ‘guardian’.

Joseph, overcoming his sense of crisis and risk, fulfills his vocation without a word of complaint. After the birth of Jesus, to avoid the king's slaughter he was warned of in a dream, supported the whole family who took refuge, briefly, in Egypt. He was always faithful to the voice of God which spoke to him in his heart. Before he acted upon it he asked for no guarantee as to whether it would be effective, he simply gave himself to the problem at hand and accepted the task of putting it into practice.

8 God's Plan of Salvation and the Place of Vocation

When God puts into practice His plan for salvation He chooses to ask for the cooperation of mankind. The bible tells the history of salvation as the history of vocation in which the invitation of God and the response of mankind are intertwined. In fact the vocations of Abraham, Moses and the Prophets, as well as of Jesus' disciples which are told in the bible arise from the meeting of two freedoms: the freedom of God and the freedom of mankind. The individual people who are called, invited by the Word of God offer themselves for His service.

In this way the journey of faith begins. **"If anyone wants to be a follower of mine, let him renounce himself, take up his cross and follow me."** (Matthew 16:24) Following this Way is not something which comes without difficulties and trials; we bear them as our own crosses. On the other hand, on the journey of vocation these things lead to a deeper and deeper intimacy with God so that we always give ourselves over to His will; they form us as disciples.

9 Let Us Think, Within the Church, About Our Own Vocation

Having looked at the vocation of Mary, let us now look at our own vocations. Let us think especially about our vocations in the context of our relationship to the present day Church. The Lord's **"gifts were that some should be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ."** (Ephesians 4:11-13)

Different vocations are born and nurtured within the Church; the different kinds of gifts we have received from Christ (Ephesians 4:7) bear fruit when joined to the Church. In this way the relationship of each one of the People of God as members of the Church, which is Christ's body, is brought about. Every Priest, Religious, Lay Christian as a member of the "Church Fellowship" is called to work to bring about the Kingdom of God; they have received a variety of charisms and ministries so that they can help each other.

10 The Community which Stimulates Vocation

Because vocation takes place in the Church and is based on the premise that through grace God freely draws people to Himself, the Christian community has the important task, in cooperation with God, of seeking out vocations among its members, especially among its children, so that they can live those vocations.

Even though different vocations and the way they develop is a personal and unique matter, we can surely encourage the growth and development of other peoples' vocations. We must come to see anyone's vocation as a gift for the community, and the community must be able to use that vocation for the Church. The Church is never an arena for boasting about our individual activity or for ego-centered behaviour. In fact, to become a united evangelizing community, characterized by mutual trust and love, priests and laity cooperate with generosity to recognize the particular vocations of Church members.

11 The Vocation of Lay Christians in the World

The way is open for the lay Christians to engage in different kinds of spiritual and pastoral activities. The particular characteristic of being a lay Christian is 'living in the world' but for the lay Christian there is no separation between 'the Spiritual life' and 'living in the world'. As well as their life of faith, the family and work place, their role in society, their responsibility as citizens, and cultural activity – all these different areas – are included in God's plan. He wants all the aspects of life to be a 'sphere of activity' in which glory can be given to God our creator and Father, as well as a 'sphere of activity' in which the love of Christ is working through our love and service of other people. Lay Christians, whilst striving for the salvation of people around them who do not yet know Christ the Saviour of mankind, in response to their own vocation fulfill their obligations in this world.

12 A Word for Young People

All you young people, Christ needs your youth and generous enthusiasm for spreading the gospel. All the young people of Japan, surrounded by an uncertain social environment, concerned about their own unintelligible anxiety and despondency, probably find it hard to see their lives in terms of purpose and a plan.

Because they feel this way, however, they are sensitive to matters such as the injustices of this world: inequality, violence, and destruction of the environment. Please, enlightened by the Word of God, listen to the cry of a world thirsting for truth and justice and consider the possibility of your own vocation. Kyoto Diocese has projects for experience and learning overseas and for volunteer activities. Think about what a wonderful thing it is to face various challenges whilst giving one's self for other people. Christ will do nothing to thwart your own hopes and plans. Rather, he will give meaning to your existence and fill you with the joy of life.

13 Prayer for Vocations

A true vocation comes from God. It is not something which can originate in a human being, still less can we plan for the development of the human spirit. People cannot accept a call from God by their own strength, nor is it something which in some way can be forced upon them. It is precisely for this reason that we pray about vocations, even when we do not know for whom we are praying, asking for a special grace to be given to those whom God is calling to make it possible for them to acknowledge and respond to their vocation.

God's choice, "Many are invited but few are chosen" (Matthew 22:14), gives meaning to His action which is necessary for people to realize for themselves that they are called. Prayer for vocations is asking for God's choice so that people who feel God's invitation may accept it courageously, even though they may feel confused or ambivalent about it.

Let us all, who this year are continuing to emphasize the theme 'Vocation', seek again with faith our own vocation and faithfully follow it, live with a spirit of service and self-giving for the Church and Society, and ask for the intercession of Mary the Mother of God. Then I would like everyone in Kyoto Diocese, 'United in heart and mind' (Bishop's motto) to carry out our mission to spread the Gospel.

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Solomnity of Mary Mother of God