

I. The Call

As our concept of stewardship continues to evolve after twelve years of marriage, we are grateful for the people who have challenged us from the beginning to embrace fully Christ's teachings. They weren't always telling us the things we wanted to hear, but we feel blessed that we were able to work through the initial frustrations of committing the best portion of our time, talent, and treasure to the Church. It's difficult to separate ourselves from the demands and possessions of the world, but there's a tremendous amount of peace that comes from every decision we make for Christ and his will for us. We can't overstate the powerful impact the lifestyle has had on our marriage and three children.

—Tom and LaNell Lilly
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THE DISCIPLE'S VOCATION

The Christian vocation is essentially a call to be a disciple of Jesus. Stewardship is part of that. Even more to the point, however, Christians are called to be good stewards of the personal vocations they receive. Each of us must discern, accept, and live out joyfully and generously the commitments, responsibilities, and roles to which God calls him or her. The account of the calling of the first disciples, near the beginning of John's Gospel, sheds light on these matters.

John the Baptist is standing with two of his disciples—Andrew and, according to tradition, the future

evangelist John—when Jesus passes by. “Behold,” John the Baptist exclaims, “the Lamb of God!” Wondering at these words, his companions follow Christ.

“What are you looking for?” Jesus asks them. “Rabbi,” they say, “Where are you staying?” “Come and you will see.” They spend the day with him, enthralled by his words and by the power of his personality.

Deeply moved by this experience, Andrew seeks out his brother Simon and brings him to Jesus. The Lord greets him: “You will be called Kephas”—Rock. The next day, encountering Philip, Jesus tells him: “Follow me.” Philip finds his friend Nathanael and, challenging his skepticism, introduces him to the Lord. Soon Nathanael too is convinced: “Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the King of Israel.”

This fast-paced narrative at the beginning of John's Gospel (see Jn 1:35-50) teaches a number of lessons. For our purposes, two stand out.

One is the personal nature of a call from Jesus Christ. He does not summon disciples as a faceless crowd but as unique individuals. “How do you know me?” Nathanael asks. “Before Philip called you,” Jesus answers, “I saw you under the fig tree.” He knows people's personal histories, their strengths and weaknesses, their destinies; he has a purpose in mind for each one.

This purpose is individual vocation. “Only in the unfolding of the history of our lives and its events,” says Pope John Paul II, “is the eternal plan of God revealed to each of us” (*Christifideles Laici*, no. 58). Every human life, every personal vocation, is unique.

And yet the vocations of all Christians do have elements in common. One of these is the call to be a disciple. In fact, we might say that to be disciples—to follow Christ and try to live his life as our own—is the common vocation of Christians; discipleship in this sense is Christian life.

The other lesson that John's narrative makes clear is that people do not hear the Lord's call in isolation from one another. Other disciples help mediate their vocations to them, and they in turn are meant to mediate the Lord's call to others. Vocations are communicated, discerned, accepted, and lived out within a community of faith which is a community of disciples (cf. Pope John Paul II, *Redemptor Hominis*, no. 21); its members try to help one another hear the Lord's voice and respond.

RESPONDING TO THE CALL

Jesus not only calls people to him but also forms them and sends them out in his service (cf. Mt 10:5ff.; Mk 6:7ff.; Lk 9:1ff.). Being sent on a mission is a consequence of being a disciple. Whoever wants to follow Christ will have much work to do on his behalf—announcing the Good News and serving others as Jesus did.

Jesus' call is urgent. He does not tell people to follow him at some time in the future but here and now—at *this* moment, in *these* circumstances. There can be no delay. "Go and proclaim the kingdom of God. . . . No one who sets a hand to the plow and looks to what was left behind is fit for the kingdom of God" (Lk 9:60, 62).

But a person can say no to Christ. Consider the wealthy and good young man who approaches Jesus asking how to lead an even better life. Sell your goods, Jesus tells him; give to the poor, and follow me. "When the young man heard this statement, he went away sad, for he had many possessions" (Mt 19:22).

Attachment to possessions is always more or less a problem, both for individuals and for the community of faith. In *The Long Loneliness* (New York: Doubleday/Image Books, 1959), written years after she became

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a Catholic, Dorothy Day recalls the "scandal" of encountering a worldly Church—or, more properly, the worldliness of some Catholics: "businesslike priests . . . collective wealth . . . lack of sense of responsibility for the poor." She concludes: "There was plenty of charity but too little justice" (140).

THE CALL TO STEWARDSHIP

Becoming a disciple of Jesus Christ leads naturally to the practice of stewardship. These linked realities, discipleship and stewardship, then make up the fabric of a Christian life in which each day is lived in an intimate, personal relationship with the Lord.

This Christ-centered way of living has its beginning in Baptism, the sacrament of faith. As Vatican II remarks, all Christians are "bound to show forth, by the example of their lives and by the witness of their speech," that new life of faith which begins in Baptism and is strengthened by the power of the Holy Spirit in Confirmation (*Ad Gentes*, no. 11). Faith joins individuals and the community of Jesus' followers in intimacy with their Lord and leads them to live as his disciples. Union with Christ gives rise to a sense of solidarity and common cause between the disciples and the Lord and also among the disciples themselves.

Refracted through the prisms of countless individual vocations, this way of life embodies and expresses the one mission of Christ: to do God's will, to proclaim the Good News of salvation, to heal the afflicted, to care for one's sisters and brothers, to give life—life to the full—as Jesus did.

Following Jesus is the work of a lifetime. At every step forward, one is challenged to go further in accepting and loving God's will. Being a disciple is not just something else to do, alongside many other things suitable for Christians; it is a total way of life and requires continuing conversion.

Stewardship plays an important role in the lives of people who seek to follow Christ. In particular, as we have said, Christians must be stewards of their personal vocations, for it is these that show how, according to the circumstances of their individual lives, God wants them to cherish and serve a broad range of interests and concerns: life and health, along with their own intellectual and spiritual well-being and that of others; material goods and resources; the natural environment;

the cultural heritage of humankind—indeed, the whole rich panoply of human goods, both those already realized and those whose realization depends upon the present generation or upon generations yet to come. Catholics have a duty, too, to be stewards of their Church: that community of disciples, that Body of Christ, of which they, individually and together, are the members, and in which “if one part suffers, all the parts suffer with it; if one part is honored, all the parts share its joy” (1 Cor 12:26).

THE COST OF DISCIPLESHIP

The way of discipleship is privileged beyond any other. Jesus says: “I came so that they might have life and have it more abundantly” (Jn 10:10). But discipleship is not an easy way. “If you wish to come after me,” Jesus also says, “you must deny yourself and take up your cross daily and follow me. For if you wish to save your life you will lose it, but if you lose your life for my sake you will save it” (Lk 9:23-24).

The Lord's way is not a way of comfortable living or of what Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in *The Cost of Discipleship*, scornfully calls “cheap grace.” This is not real grace but an illusion. It is what happens when people approach the following of Christ as a way to pleasant experiences and feeling good. Bonhoeffer contrasts this with “costly” grace. It is costly because it calls us to follow, and grace because it calls us to follow *Jesus Christ*. It is costly because it requires a disciple for Jesus' sake to put aside the craving for domination, possession, and control, and grace because it confers true liberation and eternal life. It is costly, finally, because it condemns sin, and grace because it justifies the sinner.

But all this is very general. To understand and practice this way of life, people need models to imitate. These exist in abundance in the holy women and men who have gone before us in the faith; while our supreme source of guidance is found in the person and teaching of Jesus. Let us reflect on what he tells us about stewardship.



For Reflection and Discussion

1. Mr. and Mrs. Lilly speak about “giving” the best portion of their time, talent, and treasure to the Church. What might be your “best portion”?
2. In what sense is stewardship more radical than the sharing of time, talent, and money?
3. If you believe that you are “called,” what human, personal experience has reinforced your faith in the call?
4. What are some of the reasons why you might hesitate to respond to the Lord’s call?
5. Do you feel that to be a faithful steward you will have to do it alone, or can you count on moral support from other sources? Which ones?
6. If you were to be an ideal Christian steward—with the help of God’s grace, of course—what would it cost you in terms of personal sacrifice and hardship?
7. What does the word of God say to you about our vocation to become disciples and stewards of the mysteries of God? Share your reflections with others.

The word of the LORD came to me thus:
Before I formed you in the womb I knew you,
before you were born I dedicated you,
a prophet to the nations I appointed you.
“Ah, Lord God!” I said,
“I know not how to speak; I am too young.”

But the LORD answered me,
Say not, “I am too young.”
To whomever I send you, you shall go;
whatever I command you, you shall speak.
Have no fear before them,
because I am with you to deliver you,
says the LORD. (Jer 1:4-8)

For I am the least of the apostles, not fit to be called an apostle,
because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I
am what I am, and his grace to me has not been ineffective. Indeed,

I have toiled harder than all of them; not I, however, but the grace of God [that is] with me. Therefore, whether it be I or they, so we preach and so you believed. (1 Cor 15:9-11)

Here is my servant whom I uphold,
my chosen one with whom I am pleased,
Upon whom I have put my spirit;
he shall bring forth justice to the nations,
Not crying out, not shouting,
not making his voice heard in the street.
A bruised reed he shall not break,
and a smoldering wick he shall not quench.
(Is 42:1-3)

8. Comment on the following passages:

In the various types and duties of life, one and the same holiness is cultivated by all who are moved by the Spirit of God, and who obey the voice of the Father, worshiping God and Father in spirit and in truth. These souls follow the poor Christ, the humble and cross-bearing Christ, in order to be made worthy of being partakers in His glory. Every person should walk unhesitatingly according to his own personal gifts and duties in the path of a living faith which arouses hope and works through charity. (Vatican Council II, *Lumen Gentium*, no. 41)

Without a vocation, man's existence would be meaningless. We have been created to bear the responsibility God has entrusted us with. Though different, each man should fulfill his specific vocation and shoulder his individual responsibility. (Anwar el-Sadat)

Like "duty," "law," "religion," the word "vocation" has a dull ring to it, but in terms of what it means, it is really not dull at all. *Vocare*, to call, of course, and man's vocation is a man's calling. It is the work that he is called to in this world, the thing that he is summoned to spend his life doing. We can speak of a man's choosing his vocation, but perhaps it is at least as accurate to speak of a vocation's choosing the man, of a call's being given and a man's hearing it, or not hearing it. And maybe that is the place to start: the business of listening and hearing. A man's life is full of all sorts of voices calling him in all sorts of directions. Some of them are voices from inside and some of them are voices from outside. The more alive and alert we are, the more clamorous our lives are. Which do we listen to? What kind of voice do we listen for? (Frederick Buechner)