

## *Retrieving the Tradition*

# VOCATION<sup>1</sup>

• Hans Urs von Balthasar •

“The only act by which a human being can correspond to the God who reveals himself, is the act of unlimited readiness. It is the unity of faith, hope, and love.”

---

### 1.

There are fundamental Christian concepts that, although they have always remained in the Christian consciousness, in a particular age of history so step into the light that it is as if they are being discovered for the first time. Three factors have succeeded one another in the contemporary Church that place the meaning of Christian vocation in a new light.

1. In the centuries after Thomas Aquinas, a basic sense forms for the freedom of God, on whose good pleasure all worldly being depends. The Old Testament image of God as the Lord who elects and rejects comes to determine, in a sort of retroactive effect, even the relation of the Creator God to his world. This image of God, however, appears historically to be still too bound up with the Augustinian doctrine of predestination (which continues to exert influence, particularly in the Reformation) to have been able of itself

---

<sup>1</sup>From *Zur Pastoral der geistlichen Berufe. Zum Welttag der geistlichen Berufe, 24 April 1966* (Freiburg: Informationszentrum Berufe der Kirche, 1966), 3–15. Translated and published by kind permission of the Hans Urs von Balthasar Archive in Basel, Switzerland.

to generate a satisfactory doctrine of vocation. It remains the background for the following.

2. In contrast to the Reformation's insistence on the (biblical) "Word" as the reality of God's revelation, Ignatius of Loyola will place the redemptive coming of God in the flesh entirely under the concept of the "call." In order to convey the quintessential nature of the Gospel, he prefaces all the meditations on the life of Jesus with the parable of a call (of a king to his subjects, to march into battle with him against unbelievers). From this parable, by degrees and with the use of central New Testament texts, the mission of Christ is explained:

If already we take seriously such a call of an earthly king to his subjects, how much more worthy of consideration is it to see Christ our Lord, the Eternal King, and before him the complete and entire world. To it as a whole and to each individual in particular his summons goes forth and he says, "It is my will to subjugate the whole world and all my enemies and thus to enter into the glory of my Father. Therefore whoever wishes to come with me must labor with me, so that just as he followed me in trials, he may also follow me into glory" (Ex 95).

Here it comes to our attention: 1) that the Gospel is regarded as the "proclamation" of a deed yet to be accomplished, in which the world and man are invited to participate from the first instance; 2) that at issue here is not the Church, but rather the "complete and entire world" on the one hand, and "each individual" on the other, so that the realities of "call" and "vocation" are situated somewhere before the developed Church; 3) that therefore the one hearing and responding to this call is himself invited into the event of the redemption (much in contrast to Luther's model of hearing the word, where the one called receives an already-accomplished justification to hear and to believe).

3. The third factor is already present in Ignatius, but was not yet instinctively stressed by the Counter-Reformation. It appears on the stage when reflection is brought to bear on the eye-to-eye between the "complete and entire world" and "each individual": only then is the fundamental meaning of biblical vocation grasped. According to the proclamation of the Eternal King, the calling of "each individual" takes place for the sake of the complete and entire world, for it is the will of the King "to subjugate the whole world and all my enemies and thus"—through the cross, descent into hell,

and resurrection—“to enter into the glory of my Father.” In order to free this statement from the iron shackles of an Augustinian-Calvinistic-Jansenistic theology of predestination, modernity’s universal consciousness of humanity and the world was necessary. The latter, however, only led the former home to an understanding of salvation as developed by Paul and John at the conclusion of the Bible and, following them, by the Greek Fathers.

2.

When God’s universal plan for the world, for its creation as for its redemption, thus definitively moves into view, it becomes impossible to interpret the doctrine of election in the Old and New Covenants, with their clear preference for one individual vis-à-vis others, other than as a moment within this universal plan. Paul himself understood it thus, since he understood the teaching regarding individual election (Rom 9) only typologically, with a view to the election of Israel from among the nations. In the dialectic of Romans 11, this latter is again understood functionally, for the totality of the nations. Israel is called for the sake of the Gentiles, and this call of Israel becomes a model for the call (“calling out,” *ecclesia*) of the Church, which takes place for the sake of the world, and thus also for every personal call within the Church, which without exception demonstrates this same ecclesial figure of meaning: to be called for the sake of those who (for the time being) are not called. This biblical-patristic and modern understanding leaves behind once and for all every theology of individual predestination (the most consistent form of which was the theology of double predestination), according to which the one chosen is chosen primarily for his own sake, so much so that he must stand amazed and trembling before the mystery of others not-being-chosen (perhaps even being rejected)—whether these others be many or few.

We can and must formulate this very simply: everyone who is called in a biblical sense is called for the sake of those who are not called. Most centrally, this is true for Jesus Christ, who is predestined and thus called by God (Rom 1:4) to die and rise in substitution for all who have been rejected. At the same time, what becomes visible in Jesus Christ is that the Father loves him with such a preferential love precisely for this reason: because he made himself a function of

the Father's universal will to salvation. It is not through modern philosophy, but fundamentally already through Christian revelation that we first learned no longer to look upon person and function as contraries. Read from the model of Christ, vocation in the biblical sense is the expropriation of a private existence into a function of universal salvation: handing oneself over to God, in order to be surrendered by him to the world that is to be redeemed, and to be used and spent in the event of the redemption.

But now, immediately, comes the decisive point: just as Christ is a person in order to become a function, all vocation in the biblical sense is primarily personal, in order—from a personal assent to God—to be able to be used functionally. In the realm of revelation, the “abstract” and “institutional” is always secondary. In fact, we must go so far as to say that everything institutional can only develop in the space that first comes into existence through the functionalization of a person who has been called. The Church is the eucharistically surrendered Christ, who forms his mystical body. Israel establishes itself in the space of Abraham's faith. Ecclesial office is built upon the rock of Peter's faith. Paul is mother and wet-nurse to his congregations. Mary's boundless assent is the personal reality from which the social reality of the Church as the Lord's Bride is formed. On the foundation of the apostles grows the building made up of believers. Those who are called are the “pillars of the Church,” “columns in the temple of my God” (Rev 3:12).

It is thus biblically incorrect to leave the call of these supporting individuals behind as a preliminary step and, once the form of the Church has been established, to proceed from the call of the Church as the primary concept, vis-à-vis which the call of individuals would only be “exceptions” that occur with reference to individual functions, offices, roles, or states in the Church. As true as it is that the prophets are called for the sake of Israel, it remains just as true that Israel's calling rests upon the call of Abraham, and of the man who first bears as an individual the name of Israel; and that the application of the notion of “call” to the people of Israel is secondary and late (it first appears in Deutero-Isaiah) with respect to the use of the same term in reference to the mission of the prophets. This is at least as true in the New Testament: the original event of the call—the encounter that the Ignatian “proclamation” puts into words—occurs there, where the Church is only in the process of becoming out of Christ, that is, in becoming not as a closed

institution, but as an open function of the redemption of the “complete and entire world.”

3.

This is true of every vocation, including the specifically inner-churchly ones (such as the priestly vocation to the pastoral care of the faithful). But before we get into the analogies and differences that affect the content (goal) and manner of the vocation, we must hold fast to the common foundational structure. A vocation demands, in the Old as in the New Testament, first of all unconditional, unrestricted readiness for everything for which God could use and wishes to use the person called by him, and anywhere that he could and might wish to send him (Gn 12:1; 1 Sam 3:9; Is 6:8; Acts 9:6). Thus, if the reality, “vocation,” is at all to take place, a readiness that is first humanly limited is out of the question: I will follow God’s call and serve him, if I can do this or that, or be placed here or there. The assent to the God who calls is much too near to the act of faith in the God who reveals himself to allow for such restrictions; it is an act that must be just as boundless, made with a view to the entire truth of God, whether the human being involved understands it or not, and whether it gladdens or saddens him. Yes, the specification of the “for what” of a person’s being-called is given by God only into the assent of unconditional readiness. Mary seems to be an exception, since in the conversation with the angel she is shown her exact function in the plan of redemption in an apodictic future (“You will bear a son,” etc.), before she expresses her agreement; but this apparent exception only proves that here, in contrast with all sinners, who always would like to set conditions (cf. Moses, Jonah), God can count on an a priori assent to everything imaginable and unimaginable.

If the Son is sent to redeem “the complete and entire world,” what corresponds to this boundless goal is not some limited mode of his Yes, but his readiness alone: to allow himself to be sent and led by the Father far beyond his human will into the furthest darkness of sin, godforsakenness, and hell. The limitlessness of his obedience already contained the whole fruitfulness of his activity and suffering. Likewise, no one called by Jesus has a chance of becoming fruitful through his service in the Kingdom of God, unless everything finite he will do and suffer is the outcome of a boundless

readiness to be used. This applies to vocations to active or contemplative orders just as completely as to vocations to the priesthood or to the world communities (*instituta saecularia*). For example, people who, when they enter or later, impose conditions on their bishop regarding how they may be used (suggestions are a different matter), or who, upon entering a world community, demand as the *conditio sine qua non* of their membership, to be able to continue in this or that profession, which they perhaps already practice, have utterly failed to understand the elementary, indispensable theological foundation of vocation—beyond all analogies.

The only act by which a human being can correspond to the God who reveals himself, is the act of unlimited readiness. It is the unity of faith, hope, and love. It is also the Yes that God demands, when he wills to make use of a believer according to his divine plan. Only in this (feminine–Marian–ecclesial) womb of absolute readiness does God deposit the seed both of his Word and of the mission he bestows (which in the end are the same seed). Only this assent of boundless readiness is the clay out of which God can form something; only it has redeeming, in the grace of Christ, co-redeeming power. In the total, also ecclesial, test of obedience, all the (rare) extraordinary commissions can also be identified: those which have their source immediately in God and, requiring the most absolute obedience to him, have to prove themselves—most often through suffering—in the space of the Church. New concepts of Church, ecclesial apostolate, etc., corresponding to a new age, can therefore recommend themselves in the Church in no other way than through an unfanatical, unheretical obedience (*haeresis*=the absolutizing of a finite, plausible point of view), an obedience that is open to every possibility of God, which always surpasses the individual.

This is why Jesus' demands, when he receives the disciples he has called, are so relentless: to leave everything, even the natural ties of family or piety ("bury my father"), fundamentally to be ready to cut through everything, to the point of having nothing more on which to lay one's head, to stake everything on the one card of the call, and on the one who calls. For Jesus is the synthesis, granted by the Father, of nature and supernature, world and Church; in no way is Jesus one part of a synthesis that Christ would have to perfect, for example, between the demands of the reality of creation on the one hand and the reality of redemption on the other; between his duties with respect to the world and its worldly laws and development, and his duties to the Church and her demands. This entirely artificial and

therefore distorted point of view obstructs all vision of the original truth of the Gospel. For if this view were correct, judgment of creation's integration into Christ would in the end belong to man, and no longer to Christ and God. Thus, wherever the contemporary Church wishes to claim for herself this synthesis, in order to make the essence and source of her vocation dependent upon it, the original revealed meaning of vocation is definitively falsified. This must be stressed so strongly because today, qualified, contingent assents cripple vocations everywhere like mildew. People either want to commit themselves only for a time (and thereby take away from God the possibility of being able to dispose over the whole man), or only for a certain kind of work they have in mind, that attracts them or seems timely (and thereby bind the hands of their ecclesial superiors, preventing them from disposing over those under them), or often, say, in world communities, already draft the group's statutes in such a way that they allow for such half- or quarter-readinesses, and are content with this. Everywhere that this takes place, one asks only initially and superficially what "the Church" needs, or even what "our time" needs, or even worse, what today's priest or religious "needs" in order to develop his personality harmoniously, and no longer, what God needs. Only one thing can be of use for God, with a view to his Kingdom: total surrender, which posits no conditions.

#### 4.

If this total surrender of the person into the function determined by God is the indispensable common foundation of all vocations, then with respect to it, all—even considerable—differences in the manner and goal of the vocation are secondary. Let us repeat the main point: the sphere of the original and fundamental vocations is an original sphere, a sphere where things take root (*Wurzelbereich*), out of which the Church as community and institution first comes into being (just as the people of Israel first comes into being out of Abraham and Israel, and just as the Church first comes into being out of Jesus, Mary, and the apostles). And if Paul from the beginning speaks to all the faithful about their calling (*klésis*), he never forgets, on the one hand, his own position of being called directly vis-à-vis the congregation; and on the other hand, he describes the sacramental meaning of baptism according to the scheme of the personal, total

renunciation of the world on the part of the one called, together with Christ (Rom 6:3–11).

The synoptics reflect the same content, when they extend the Lord's words regarding the fundamental attitude of readiness of those first called, to an attitude of all the faithful as such. The original and literal "leave everything," which Matthew refers to the apostles (19:27), is in Luke demanded of the "great multitude"; likewise, that every disciple "hate father and mother and wife and child and brother and sister, even his very self"—in the sense that the love of the Lord becomes the decisive measure for all these natural relationships of love (Lk 14:25ff.). Based on this, we must say that the so-called "evangelical counsels" are the concrete soteriological modes of the readiness to follow, in those who were first called, and that the expansion of these modes into the general-ecclesial modality, which Paul undertakes in 1 Corinthians 7 (paralleling Lk 14), clearly reflects the continuity between the original, fundamental sphere of vocation, and the sphere of the Church that has come into being out of it. The word "counsel" (1 Cor 7:25) here is in a way open to misunderstanding, since it is spoken by one of the originally-called to the community. However, the existence of Israel as the people of God is already built upon a strict obedience of following the God who leads freely and as he pleases: on the part of Abraham, in the wandering in the desert, in the prophets' instructions for religious and historical behavior. Israel's existence is built, too, upon a poverty that comes ever more clearly to the fore as the distinguishing mark of true faith and true belonging to the living God: Jesus' sermon on the mount takes as its starting point these two demands. The fact that Israel is to be a fleshly people made up of generations leading toward the Messiah, eliminates virginity, but the distinguishing sign of the circumcision has this theological meaning (its ethnological origins are indifferent): that the sexual sphere has been laid claim to by God, with a view to the future salvation (as a sign that self-centered lust has been disarmed, with a view to service), and that, with the coming of the Messiah, this sphere is no longer of essential theological importance, since now, the "second Adam from heaven" has stepped into the place of earthly generation in limited families, eucharistically pouring himself out for the whole of humanity. In the New Covenant, Daughter Zion or Wife Jerusalem is transformed (through the mediation of the virgin-mother Mary) into the virginal-fruitful *Ecclesia*, as Bride (2 Cor 11:2), and eschatologically into the Wife of the Lamb. Marriage has

theological meaning only insofar as this fleshly yet virginal mystery between Christ and the Church is reflected in the old relationship of the sexes (Eph 5:32). All this clearly shows that the modes of Christian love, a love that renounces, which the title “evangelical counsels” attempts to hold together, are not so to speak exceptional rules for sporadically-appearing higher souls within the Church. Rather, they are the fundamental reality of Jesus Christ himself—deeply prepared in the fundamental reality of Israel—which is communicated to everyone who has been “called” and who, together with Jesus Christ, lays the foundations for the reality, Church.

That the three aspects of the “life of the counsels,” thus foundational, are nothing other than the pure expression of full availability to the call of God and of Christ—and not, in the accusation Luther makes against this life, a religion of self-redemption through meritorious works—requires no further comment. This availability for every use that God wishes to make of me, is in turn nothing other than the condition for the soteriological fruitfulness of the life of one who has been called, in whatever ecclesial “state” and whatever concrete manner of living it out that may present itself. In every case, it is self-surrender to God for one’s brethren, for the world, whether this “poured out for you” (Phil 2:17) take place hiddenly, in the contemplation of a Carmel or a Charles de Foucauld, or in the action of priestly or religious life, or in the quiet presence in the world of a world community.

## 5.

It is enough here to have pointed to full availability as the root of the life of the counsels. For in the face of it, the question of how life according to the counsels is to be laid out and formulated individually is largely secondary and determined by the concrete task in the structure of the Church. A diocesan priest who has made no vow of poverty, but who remains available for his parishioners with everything he has, with an open heart and an open door, surely stands much closer to the availability described above than the religious who, within the framework of his vow of poverty, has not renounced the spirit of bourgeois enjoyment of possessions.

However, we must nonetheless hold fast to this: that vocation requisitions the entire life of a human being, and demands

a correspondingly whole answer, and that the “once and for all” of the surrender belongs to the fundamental form of the life of everyone who has been called. If Christian marriage is already supposed to be indissoluble, how much more so the form of consecrated life! Novitiates, seminaries, and even longer trial periods for world communities are necessary, but always with a view to a once-for-all surrender. A perpetuation of “temporary vows” is theologically nonsensical, and allows the act of definitively giving oneself away never to take place. Any other form of life could not even express the covenant fidelity demanded of Israel, let alone that of the Church.

If obedience is to be theologically relevant, it is always obedience to the “wholly-other,” the one who disposes with a total freedom, never the God who has come to be at our disposition (e.g., through a law or a rule). The authoritative standard for Christians is the human obedience of Jesus’ disciples to the Master whom they regard as a man—up until his resurrection, his divinity is for the apostles like a limit-concept. They follow him, the Master; he is their rule; he commands, disposes, decrees, sends them out with a program determined by him; he gives his judgment on what they, returning in the evening, tell him. As the living, free Other, he is their superior, and precisely as such he is the incarnation of the freely speaking, freely disposing God of Israel. This relation cannot be surpassed, it can only be made present (quasi-sacramentally) through the ecclesially sanctioned relationship of obedience of one of the faithful to his superior, who concretely represents Christ to him. Naturally, this superior is somehow given to the Christians of the congregation in the pope and bishop, but the apostles’ total surrender to the Lord—so that he might fashion their lives—becomes unavoidably concrete in a bishop’s relationship of disposing over his priests, or a religious superior over those under him.

Virginity is indivisible, not only in its bodily, but also in its spiritual aspect. In other words, the ethic of the one called, with regard to the sexual sphere, is entirely determined by the virginal bodily relation between Christ and his Church: its exclusivity has nothing to do with prudery or exaggerated asceticism. It is the exclusivity of the Body of Christ eucharistically surrendered to the end and—as the response of the one called to this—the exclusivity of the body of the Christian handed over to Christ. From the grace-filled fruitfulness of the latter, the Lord can draw what he wills for

the redemption of the world. The tenor of such an ethic can be heard in 1 Corinthians 6:12–20.

The poverty of the one called must, above all, make visible the poverty of the people of God in the world that is to it a “desert” and a “foreign land.” It is a poverty that, in the Old Covenant, is one with faith (which has nothing but God), and in the New Covenant is one with love (which, in the Spirit of God, has given everything away). The canonical regulations are important to the extent that they help to support this Spirit and not, to the contrary, darken or diminish its power as a witness of faith.

## 6.

If, in the Church, we are to speak of the analogous forms of life of those called, it is much more important to establish their shared rootedness in the same thing than to emphasize the differences, which are easily exaggerated in the attempt effectively to distinguish all kinds of “spiritualities” of the different states. In order not to confuse and level everything through freehanded constructions and additions, we will have to take our bearings constantly from the biblical image and what it places in relief. In it, what strikes us is the first analogy, already discussed repeatedly above: the individual as such called for the sake of the Church and the world. From him is demanded total availability, and thus the renunciation of every restricting bond. Then the individual as member of the Church, which, as the Body and Bride of Christ, lives (in a Marian way) from the same availability to Christ, communicating her spirit to all who live in her, in the grace that is the content of the sacraments (including marriage), of the Word of God in Scripture, and in the proclamation of the liveliness of agape in the Church.

This distribution of the Church’s life-spirit to individuals takes place not through “vocations” in their original sense. Rather, here the concept of “charism” enters in: it means the conferring of graces, which take the individual into the service—here, too—of all, and “measure out” (*metron, analogia*: Rom 12:3–6) to him a particular service, in “decrees” that have their origin in the Head (*emerisen*: Rom 12:3; *edoken*: Eph 4:11; *didotai*: 1 Cor 12:7f.; *etheto*: 1 Cor 12:28). Although these are for the most part determined (Rom 12:3–8), they nevertheless leave intact the freedom “to strive for the higher gifts.” The distribution of charisms is at issue in every place

where Paul speaks of this, primarily regarding the living organism of the Church, and in all these passages something of a fluid transition becomes visible between the hierarchical and the charismatic office. In our context, it is enough to say that the hierarchical office surely possesses a charismatic aspect: as inner-churchly function (though certainly of a special kind), for which a special grace of office is also communicated (through the laying on of hands).

With this, the priesthood steps into a twofold light: as “personal vocation,” it can reach into that realm of fundamental vocations that ground the Church; but it can also have its emphasis in the inner-churchly, common-charismatic space, as an office that stands out within it. Between these runs a dividing line that is difficult to determine, and that decides to what extent the office of priest belongs together with the original life of vocation (thus along with obedience, poverty, and virginity), and to what extent, as an inner-churchly charism, it can be compatible with married life. The current praxis (strict obedience, undivided celibacy, with poverty receiving little emphasis), is in this context not especially satisfying, and it would be thoroughly biblically tenable if, for example, one were to imagine a priesthood subdivided into two, clearly distinguished forms of life: on the one hand a life that has its source in the undividedness of the counsels, in the original call of Christ, and on the other hand, an ecclesial life normally combined with marriage, with a predominantly ecclesial function, and which would naturally have to have a regard for charismatic aptitude. The border between “vocation” and “charism” lies, from the subject’s point of view, clearly there, where earthly (ecclesial-worldly) purposelessness distinguishes itself from earthly, humanly ascertainable purposefulness. Purposelessness means: handing over one’s entire existence to God for his free disposal, whereby the person surrendering himself does not even wish to know what his surrender will be used for. Who in the Church and in the world converts through the contemplation and penance of a Carmelite nun? She does not know, and asks for no reckoning from God. Where will a Jesuit or Dominican be placed? He does not know, and in the end, it does not matter to him. He is available. Wherever this attitude is present, there can be vocation. But wherever a Christian wants to exercise a particular service, the importance of which occurred to himself and no other, there can be charism.

Of course, in the realm of vocation there can also be charisms, which, however, do not have the same urgency as the

vocation itself. The vocation is an act between God in Christ and the man who surrenders his entire existence. Whether this man becomes a Benedictine rather than a Carthusian or a diocesan priest is a much less important question. The great orders, rooted in the fundamental vocation of their founders, stand in the realm of the Church like available charismatic spaces; perhaps the Lord who calls points to one in particular, perhaps he leaves the one whom he calls a choice that is to a large extent free. Here, a natural-supernatural being-drawn, a preference, an awareness of suitability, have room for play. A purely contemplative life will most require a kind of special vocation, but even this is only relative.

The same holds true for vocations to the new world communities, which bind life in a worldly profession with a life of perfect availability to God, according to the Lord's "counsels." In terms of theological foundation, these vocations do not differ in any way from the other genuine vocations. They go "the whole way" just as much as, for example, monks, and moreover renounce many helps the cloister offers (a regulated community life, lesser danger for virginity, easier conditions for obedience than in a worldly profession, etc.). And if, with many world communities, an orientation toward a human goal appears to be bound up with their foundation (as is also the case with many religious congregations), this is an occasion to remember once again that, without a profound, purposeless, and total surrender of the members to God, such foundations will bear but little fruit. This must be held up with all severity in the face of a technologically-minded younger generation, which would like to measure what is Christianly meaningful with the measuring rod of the humanly purposeful. What "purpose" does it have when Mary of Bethany (who has chosen the best portion) spends the whole day sitting at Jesus' feet, listening to him? World communities with depth of vision therefore do not at all reckon with measurable success. They place their members as those "consecrated to God," people who remain available to God, in the midst of the unchristian world, without so much as suggesting to them a particular, organized apostolate along the lines of Catholic Action: through their total surrender, they are present invisibly, here and there even visibly, as leaven, in a manner that is perhaps not at all far from the "apostolate" of a contemplative cloister.

Under these conditions, the vocation to a world community stands just as near to the source of all genuine vocations as those to any given religious order. They stand where Jesus' summons goes

forth to the “complete and entire world . . . and to every individual in particular,” telling them that Jesus wishes to lead “the entire world” home to the Father. The Church is not at all a point of discussion here: the individual who decides to “offer . . . his entire person” for the “pains” of the redemption (Ex 97, 95) stands beside the Lord representing the Church, and the Church in the soteriologically pure sense is the totality of those who offer their entire persons to the Lord for the sake of the complete and entire world. Viewed in this way, the Church is less the static hurdle of fenced-in sheep than, much more, the dynamic radiating of the light of Christ into the dark space of the world, a transitional concept between the God-man and “the complete and entire world.” The cloister is the “city set on a mountaintop,” the outward form of which is built according to a model of the static Church. The world community is leaven that disappears into the lump, hardly or not at all noticeable, unprotected vis-à-vis the world. We should beware of seeing the “evangelical counsels” as a line of demarcation vis-à-vis the “evil” or “ordinary” world: they are pure being-exposed (even and precisely virginity), or they are nothing. No one who considers this rightly will claim that the path of the world communities is “easier” than life in religious communities or the priesthood, or that it is a compromise with the world.

Of course, secondarily, there is also a host of purpose-bound points of view that speak for the relevance of world communities. Above all, that they allow access into milieus that are generally not accessible to priests and religious and precisely for this reason stand most in need of care; that they can be of great service to the ethos of worldly professions through their professional competence; that, unlike fathers and mothers, the members are not absorbed by familial duties and need to have less of a care for financial security, and thus are also more available in the charitable sense; that in coming times of persecution they will possibly be the (only remaining) great help for the Church. Lastly, that their members, as genuine laypeople who also live the counsels, help effectively to bridge the thousand-year old chasm between the ecclesial states, and many more reasons.

## 7.

Up until now, we have shed light on vocation above all from the perspective of the attitude of the one called; but according to the

beginning of our investigation, vocation depends essentially upon the freedom of the one who calls. This freedom, which comes to the fore in the late Middle Ages and entirely dominates Ignatius' image of Christ, delivers us from the problematic of the medieval doctrine of perfection, i.e., the life of the counsels is more perfect than the life of the mere commandments, and whoever would be perfect must choose the former. But it is Christ who calls whom he wills, when and as he wills. We do not know whether the rich young man came to the Lord out of curiosity or because of a call; the Lord allows him the way, no more can be said. Others, who ask Jesus to receive them into the circle of the disciples, he turns away, clearly placing them in the "state of the world" as the state God wills for them (Lk 8:38–39). Perfection consists, for each, in doing the will of God for him. This does not hinder Matthew (20:16; 22:14) from seeing that the number of those called far exceeds the number of those who truly take up their vocation.

In the consideration that a faith can thoroughly wash and purify itself with a view to full availability for God's possible call, without thereby forcing God to call it in the original sense, lies an opening to the thought that the rod that measures every Christian perfection is perfect Christian love. This opening lies only here, because elsewhere, it is almost (or entirely) impossible to avoid the illusion that man knows from himself what love is, and how it is to be practiced. In truth, however, a sense for divine love first arises in man when he stands before God, in full readiness to allow himself to be led with Jesus Christ—in love—on the path of perfect renunciation and ultimately of the cross. A path of the renunciation of, not love (for example, in marriage), but all hidden egotism in *eros* and in the whole community of the family. To wish to introduce, for the sake of this point of view (that "love is the bond of perfection"), the expression, "a Christian vocation to marriage," would be to distance oneself not only from the linguistic usage of Scripture, but also from its entire theological understanding of vocation. In Scripture, the theology of vocation has a precise, clearly delineated form, which, through such attempts at leveling, is deprived of its whole inner power and existential effect.

The real balancing out lies not in reducing everything to one level, but in the thought that vocation always means expropriation on behalf of the others, and that therefore, expressed in New Testament terms, the "greatest among you" is to be a servant of all and the least of all, and really is so. When, as an apostle, Paul knows

himself to be in the lowest place, and from there, not without bitter irony, draws the Corinthians' attention to the ecclesial dialectic, he speaks like the Lord himself: "We are weak, but you are strong; you are held in honor, we in disrepute" (1 Cor 4:10). This dialectic is absolutely indissoluble, because Christ is obedient and poor unto death, so that we might be made free and rich in God. And for the one called to follow in the discipleship of the cross, it does not matter how he is ranked in the worldly sense (1 Cor 4:3); he is one who descends with Christ into poverty and contempt, and in this can only see a privilege, because Christ has walked this path for him. We should never forget, here, that virginity, which seems to us (because of Mary) to be crowned with honor, is nevertheless in reality a sign of weakness, futility, and shame. This is clear in the Old Testament: that the barren (or abandoned) wife bears children, is a sign of the power of God in human powerlessness. The virginal man especially, who, outside of the Church, often encounters contempt and suspicion, may not overlook this point of view. The dialectic remains, in a worldly sense, indissoluble, and precisely as such points toward its ground in revelation.

## 8.

There are questions that straddle the border between the theology and pastoral-psychology of vocation (a treatment of the latter would go beyond the framework of this essay). We will look at three of these.

1. Only as an exception are vocations unmediated by human beings; normally, they are mediated. The vocations of the apostles in the gospel of John (1:35–51) are doubly mediated: first through the Baptist, who so formed Jesus' first two disciples that they immediately understand his reference to the Lamb of God, leave him, and follow Jesus; then through the disciples themselves, insofar as Andrew recruits Peter, and Philip, Nathanael. Vocation is in essence fruitful, in new vocations, but also confers the conscious duty of an apostolate of vocations. From this flows the serious obligation, not only of religious (say, in schools), but of the whole clergy, to point in preaching and catechesis to the path of total surrender as the archetypical path of Christians: upon it rests, uniquely (in the apostles and Mary) and in every case, the Church. The powerful contrary ideologies that have arisen within the

Church, and that today impress the youth, are to be refuted from the depth and the fullness of the Word of God, and from clarity of thought regarding discipleship. In this, the speakers should point to the path of vocation in general; diocesan clergy should not talk as if the diocesan clergy were the only way to happiness, and religious as if their order were the only one in question. Religious and secular clergy should not conspire against the new path of the world communities, so strongly supported by the Church, calling them unedifying, unproven, and dangerous, or discrediting them as a halfway measure. It is nonsensical and the mark of lowness of character to ridicule older feminine congregations with specific charitable goals—running hospitals, school, orphanages, or engaging in the private care of the sick—as “outmoded,” while demanding as a matter of course their fully indispensable help. Everyone should keep in mind, on the one hand, the totality of the ecclesial forms of life, and, on the other hand, their fullness of form. Everywhere, there is always something in need of reform; but such reformation takes place in a meaningful way neither through sarcasm nor through exterior “aggiornamento” (by introducing televisions and eliminating cloisters). Rather, real reformation requires reflection on the intentions of the founders and, more profoundly: on what the Lord needs from the Church at this moment, with a view to the redemption of the world.

2. “Every vocation that comes from God is always pure and transparent” (Ex 172); it is not questionable, merely possible, and therefore tormented, but rather, at the moment of the human being’s definitive assent to it, it is “one hundred percent,” and therefore calming and joyful. Transparency can be lacking because of various reasons: ethical reasons in the one called, e.g., he cannot bring himself to full availability, but clings to conditions and reservations vis-à-vis God (it is well-known that the main point of the Ignatian Exercises is to dismantle these). But there can also be causes that the believer who has been called cannot exclude, such as an incapacity to live virginity (1 Cor 7:9), irremovable ecclesial impediments. God wants a joyful giver, even when the gift perhaps increasingly becomes a cross. If this original joy in giving is absent (as with people who choose the path of the counsels or the priesthood because it is more difficult: that is always pride), then the vocation is not genuine.

3. Vocations can objectively and subjectively come in different gradations. Objectively, there can very well be degrees of

urgency with which the Lord's call is issued. It can be so great that God simply seizes someone whom he needs, almost without leaving him room to assent, overpowering him like Paul (cf. 1 Cor 9:17–18), throwing him down like Nathanael, or simply “taking him along” like Philip and Matthew. But the call can also be like an inviting request, brought forward with that discretion of the God-man that builds upon man's understanding and free decision. It can, lastly, be something like a permission, which, out of love for someone who desires this way for himself, opens it to him (Mt 19:16f.). To be distinguished from this is the subjective gradation of the manner in which someone perceives the call: suddenly and with the irrefutable knowledge that he has been addressed from above; or gradually and as if persuaded from within; or from his own reasonable reflection that, as a believer who wants to orient his whole life by his faith, he would like to offer himself for full service to the good Lord.

The young Christians who grapple with the question of vocation urgently need guidance from experienced, praying, and spiritually reflective persons, now more than ever in the history of the Church, since the whole atmosphere of the Church is contaminated by theologically unreflected, short-winded, and often downright “watered-down” catchwords and ideologies. It would be desirable if those in positions of responsibility from all states—priests, religious, lay—would come together in order further to clarify theologically the problems of vocation today, and together to seek paths toward workable solutions.—*Translated by Michelle K. Borras.* □

**HANS URS VON BALTHASAR** (1905–1988) was a Swiss theologian and a co-founder of *Communio*.