

Examining the Call

By Joe Riordan, S.J.

John C. Haughey, S.J. ed., *Revisiting the Idea of Vocation: Theological Explorations.*

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This is not another book about the “vocation crisis” in the Catholic Church, the kind that laments the bare ruined choirs and conjures up a bleak future of priestless parishes and vacant convents. Nor do our authors engage in the sort of finger-pointing that is all too common among vocational pundits. On the contrary, their approach is altogether more constructive, in large part because they avoid the pitched ideological battles surrounding the subject and instead focus on the more fundamental theology of vocation.

All of the ten contributors are theologians connected with Loyola University Chicago. This collection of essays records their attempt to inspire their colleagues to reflect more deeply on the relation between their various disciplines and the idea of call. These explorations did not arise *ex nihilo*, of course, but mark their response to a different sort of call, in that Loyola received a generous grant from the Lilly Endowment to “encourage young people to consider questions of faith and commitment when they choose their careers.” The result, as one might expect, is not so much a singular vision of vocation, but a keener insight into the depths and mystery of calling.

The authors of this volume are not of one mind, nor even of one faith, and the diversity of their approaches is evident from the start. The editor and contributor John Haughey, for example, turns to philosophy for some illumination, and he points up the affinity between Bernard Lonergan’s doctrine of “authenticity” and personal calling. Following Lonergan, he outlines the intellectual, moral, and affective conversions that form part of the pilgrimage toward authenticity, with a special emphasis on the latter. For Haughey, affective conversion involves a deepening of *caritas* in the soul and is closely allied with “charism,” which he believes is the key to understanding vocation. He stresses that charisms are ubiquitous and poured out on the entire Church, not reserved solely for the clerical and spiritual elite, much less confined to the “Charismatic Renewal.” Just as Vatican II exhorted religious communities to return to their original charism, he invites every believer to lay claim to the unique ways the Spirit anoints one for service. In the end, Haughey makes a compelling case for the need to recover a broader sense of charism in the Church. If his intuition is right, the retrieval of charisms might not immediately

provoke a second Pentecost, but it would certainly have far-reaching ecclesiological implications.

It would be unusual for any theological exploration of vocation to entirely ignore the Bible, so it should come as no surprise that two Scripture scholars weigh in, teasing out vocational themes from the Old and New Testaments.

Camilla Burns examines the story of creation in Genesis, where God speaks and calls the world into existence, and concludes that man’s deepest identity and calling is to be a creature (*imago Dei*). She discerns the vocational import of the divine injunctions to be fruitful and multiply and to have dominion over the earth, drawing out the obvious procreative and less obvious ecological meanings of the text. In a similar vein, Urban C. von Wahlde turns to the Gospel of John and offers a brief meditation on Jesus as the perfect model of vocation. His basic insight is that the call of every disciple is to respond to the Father as Jesus did. Both of these essays are short on specifics but long on cultivating the proper attitudes toward the gift of a vocation, and

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perhaps therein lies their chief contribution.

In addition to Scripture, other less canonical oracles are consulted as well. For example, Mark McIntosh offers a close reading of the great Puritan allegory *The Pilgrim's Progress* and uncovers various "habits of discernment" that help the pilgrim find his way. Along the same lines, Phillip Neafsey traces the convergences between the psychological task of heeding one's authentic "inner voice" and the Ignatian discipline of following the movements of the good spirit. Paul Harmon delves even deeper into the charisma of Ignatius and provides an incisive account of how the *Spiritual Exercises* guide and train the individual to discern God's will.

For good measure, there is also a more empirical tack on the subject, in that Mary Elsbernd summarizes the vocational attitudes of applicants to the Institute of Pastoral Studies who claim to have heard the call to some form of ministry. Taken as a whole, these essays come close to outlining a phenomenology of vocation, if not quite a blueprint for promoting vocations.

There are two contributors from outside the Christian fold – the Islamic scholar Marcia Hermanson and the Jewish theologian Edward Breuer. Hermanson presents a brief overview of vocation in the Qur'an and in the later intellectual and mystical traditions of Islam. She warns against crudely imposing the theological constructs of one religion onto another, but also notes some affinities between vocation and a constellation of Islamic reflections on guidance, memory, Providence, right intention, and discernment.

On the one hand, the match is less than symmetrical, in that

Islam has no institutionalized clergy or religious orders, which play a rather significant role in the Christian theology of vocation. Nonetheless, there clearly is some heuristic value to the comparison.

For his part, Edward Breuer echoes her words of caution, and remains in the final analysis skeptical that the notion of vocation applies to the Jewish faith, despite the fact that the Hebrew Scriptures ostensibly serve as the historical basis for much later theological reflection on vocation. He acknowledges that the language of vocation has entered the Jewish vocabulary, but attributes that to the alien influence of Christianity and modernity.

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inally, the Protestant patristic scholar D.H. Williams explores not merely the possibility but the reality of losing one's vocation, albeit in a collective rather than personal sense. He writes eloquently about the vocation or, as Newman would say, the idea of a university, and traces the decline and fall of the religious identity of the historically "confessional" Protestant colleges in America. His account is sobering but not discouraging, in that he argues for the place of an unapologetic "confessionalism," of the sort outlined in *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*, as the best hope for Catholic universities to safeguard their religious character while preserving their academic standing. In this regard, he is hardly a lone voice crying out in the desert

– in fact, Peter Steinfels recently issued a similar warning to Jesuit institutions in these very pages, but the hierarchy of Catholic higher education seems reluctant to heed their counsel.

Some will be disappointed that our authors, for all the pains they take to be ecumenical and inclusive, neglect certain aspects of the specifically Catholic vocational scene.

For example, there is barely mention, let alone analysis, of the near-total collapse of religious life among American women that took place in the span of less than a generation. Nor is there much ink spilled over the state of the priesthood, not to mention the possible fallout from the recent scandals.

In their defense, one might acknowledge these problems and omissions, while rightly claiming that their focus lay elsewhere. To my mind, far more troubling is the potential for their project to become co-opted by the market forces increasingly taking over higher education and indeed all aspects of American society. It does not require any extraordinary prophetic powers to foresee a future where careerism and raw ambition dominate the campus culture of Jesuit schools, where branding and corporate sponsorship govern all aspects of student life, where the rhetoric of vocation itself becomes commodified and marketed, even as genuine learning and discernment slip further and further from view. The better essays in this volume are alert to these dangers, and remind us that to accept such a future without a fight would be to betray our calling.