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Vocation and Mission for All

THERE ARE TWO words we laypeople need to redeem from misuse and misunderstanding: *vocation* and *mission*. Actually, they are yin and yang descriptions of the same reality: the call to us from God to do something with our lives, and the sending forth of us by God to do that exact thing.

I realized not long ago that the vocation and mission I *have* are *not* the vocation and mission I thought I *didn't have*. Let me explain. When I was about thirteen years old, I thought I might "have a vocation." Back then, that meant I thought maybe I should become a priest. So I entered the diocesan seminary at age thirteen. At about seventeen years old, I thought I might have a mission. Back then, that meant maybe I should be a foreign missionary. So off I went to a college seminary for missionary priests.

It took me until I was about twenty-one years old to realize that I did not want to be either a priest or a missionary. Thus,

I concluded that I had neither a vocation nor a mission. Some people were called or sent, I thought, but I was not. I was fine with this decision and went out into the world to make my way.

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Years later, when I was in my thirties and forties, it began to occur to me that perhaps I still did have a vocation and mission—not as a priest or missionary but to a secular profession or career. Perhaps I was being called or sent to be a community organizer, or a writer, or a publisher, or a husband, or a father—all of which I eventually became. After all, the church teaches that we are all the Body of Christ, the People of God, modern-day disciples, and that the laity have special roles to play in and to the world. Maybe my vocation/mission was as a layperson.

So I began to talk about it that way for a while, but I ran into problems. For one thing, a lot of laypeople did not like to talk about their work or their lives as a vocation or a mission. I remember learning this from a friend who is a garbage collector for the city of Chicago. He was the best garbage collector I have met: conscientious, honest, intelligent, friendly. He worked primarily to make a living and provide for his family, and when I suggested that this was some kind of mission or call from God, he actually laughed at me. He was more than willing to do his job and do it well, and he was even willing to agree that his work had social value. But he did not need to have his work “baptized” with a religious word such as *mission* or *vocation*. In fact, I think he was a little offended by the very idea.

I encountered many other people who did not view their work as a calling or mission. Sometimes people hate their jobs or their working conditions, and they cannot imagine that God wants them to do it. Others feel they are making very

little contribution to the world by the particular work that they do. "I'm just an accountant (truck driver, waitress, salesperson, etc.)," they say. Or, even if they see some social value to their own work, they name plenty of other jobs that don't have any. Or people are unemployed or retired, often not by their own choosing, and it seems silly to call that a vocation or mission. All these situations seem to lead to the conclusion that some people (who have interesting, important, meaningful work) have a vocation or mission in life and other people do not, which doesn't seem right somehow.

Then there were those who tried to define vocation or mission by "state in life." Under this idea, you were called or sent to be either married (with or without children), widowed (with or without children), single (with or without children), vowed religious, or ordained. That way everybody had a vocation. The problem with this approach is that some people did not like the state of life they were in: Single people wanted to be married, married couples wanted to have kids, some religious and ordained wanted to be laicized, some lay-people wanted to be ordained. I remember commissioning a woman to write a book on the joy and beauty of the single life, but then she called me several months later to say she had just gotten engaged. And try telling single parents that God is calling or sending them forth to raise their kids on their own. "Thanks a lot, God!" might be their sarcastic reply.

On top of the feedback everyone else was giving me on the question of vocation and mission, my own experience was telling me that God was not sitting somewhere holding a list with my name on it (or not on it, for that matter) with the vocation/mission I was supposed to be following. For one thing, I obviously had many different kinds of work going on in my life. Some of my jobs were interesting and fulfilling and socially meaningful, and others were not. I was married, divorced, and had no children. Then I became happily married

and had three children in twenty months. Was I called to the married and parental state all along, or only when I was successful at it?

Finally, I came to the conclusion that the concept of mission or vocation was not a useful one in my life. If everything that anyone does is a vocation, then it is a pretty meaningless concept. If, on the other hand, only certain people have a vocation and most don't, then it is an elitist and ultimately not very helpful concept.

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Recently, however, I have been working with young adults—my own three children and many others. It strikes me that one of the things young people are looking for is a vocation or mission worthy of their lives. They may not articulate this, but as they are deciding whether or not to go to college, what to study or major in, what kind of job or career they might pursue, whether or not they want to get married, what kind of person they might want to marry, whether or not they might want to have children and how they would want to raise their children, where they might want to live, how to take care of their aging parents (actually, they don't think about that last one at all), they are really asking what their vocation or mission in life might be.

This led me to revisit my own understanding of the vocation/mission question, and I finally asked it the right way. What I asked myself was this: is there anything in my life that I have always felt called or compelled to do, any drive or impulse that I have ultimately been unable to ignore? The answer was that yes, there is. Ever since I was a young man, I have felt the strongest of urges to try to help make the world a better place. I don't know exactly where this feeling comes from. I am sure it is in great part due to my parents and the rest of my family and friends, to my wife and children, to my

education and the countless books I have read, and to what I have learned sitting through literally thousands of Masses and religious education classes and programs.

I have no other imperative in my life that is as strong as this one, except maybe survival and protecting my children. It is so strong, in fact, that—for the first time in my life—I feel comfortable in calling it a vocation or mission from God. I can ignore it, but it does not go away. I am happier when I am following it than when I am not. It is something that gives integrity and meaning to all the other choices I make in my life.

Could it be that I have had this vocation/mission all my life and have just never been able to recognize or articulate it? Could it be that all people have such a calling, such a mission worthy of their life, embedded in their very soul?

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Certainly, people would differ in how they describe their vocation/mission. Some might say they are driven to creating beauty, and everything in their lives revolves around that. Others might cite fighting for freedom or justice, or pursuing adventure, or sating their intellectual curiosity. Some might name developing relations among family or friends as their guiding principle, while still others might describe their vocation/mission as serving others.

Are all of these the same vocation? I am tempted to say that they are, but I don't want to presume. The key element, however, would be that the vocation/mission initiated with God and culminates with God as well. It is the strength, the inevitability, and the persistence of the call or commission that determine its divine origin.

What about vocations/missions that are not from God? What if someone really feels, for example, that his or her purpose in life is to make as much money as possible, and that nothing else much matters? But since a vocation/mission is

between ourselves and God, perhaps there is no way of ultimately deceiving ourselves on this issue. In other words, the only true vocation/mission is the one God gives us, and God gives each one of us a vocation/mission that is truly worthy of our lives. We either accept it or we don't, discern it or not. But it is not something we can make up or kid ourselves about.

Does everyone have a vocation/mission? I now say yes, almost unequivocally. Do we all recognize, understand, and accept that vocation/mission? No, at least not on a conscious level. But we may act on it in any case. Is everyone's vocation/mission the same? Not in the sense that we would explain or describe it in the same words, but certainly in the sense that St. Paul described: "We know that God is always at work for the good of everyone who loves him. They are the ones God has chosen for his purpose, and he has always known who his chosen ones would be" (Rom 8:28-29). For how could God's callings or commissions be at cross-purposes to one another?

This sense of vocation/mission is critical when it comes to practicing the spirituality of work, for unless we are clear about it, we cannot see how our daily work—both of the paid and the unpaid variety—serves our greater purpose in life. And when it comes time for the Dismissal from Mass, we have to know what we are being sent forth to do: we are not merely being dismissed to go do our various jobs; we are being sent forth to fulfill our shared vocation/mission to help make the world more like God—the Father, the Almighty, the maker of heaven and earth—would have it. That is truly a mission worthy of anyone's life.

A Story about Vocation/Mission

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Four stone masons were working on a cathedral.
"I am making a good living," said the first.
"I am building a cathedral," said the second.
"I am pursuing my career," said the third.
"I feel compelled to make beautiful things," said the fourth.

All four were called by God. All four were sent by God. All four fulfilled God's purpose: The cathedral was built, it was beautiful, and the world was a better place because of it.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

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- 1. Is there anything you feel compelled to do, whether you have to or not, whether anyone sees it or not? What is it? Where do you think that drive comes from? Why?
2. How do the various jobs and volunteer activities you do fit in with the overall sense of purpose in your life? What do you do when you find they don't?
3. Give an example of a true vocation/mission from God and an example of a false one. Use examples from your own life if you have them. How can you tell the difference between a true and a false vocation/mission? How do you know one is from God and the other is not?