

THE CHRISTIAN VOCATION

The liturgical year is beginning, and the introit of the Mass invites us to consider something closely related to the beginning of our Christian life: the vocation we have all received. “Make me to know your ways, o Lord; teach me your paths.”¹ We ask the Lord to guide us, to show us his footprints, so we can set out to attain the fullness of his commandments, which is charity.²

In considering the circumstances surrounding your decision to make every effort to live your faith, I imagine that you, like me, will thank our Lord. I know too that, without falling into false humility, this thankfulness will leave you even more convinced that you have merited nothing of this on your own. Usually we learn to invoke God as a young child from our Christian parents. Later, teachers, friends and acquaintances have helped us in many ways not to lose sight of our Lord.

Open your own hearts to Jesus and tell him your story. I don’t want to generalise. But one day perhaps an ordinary Christian, just like you, opened your eyes to horizons both deep and new, yet as old as the Gospel. He suggested to you the prospect of following Christ earnestly, seriously, of becoming an apostle of apostles. Perhaps you lost your balance then and didn’t recover it. Your complacency wasn’t quite replaced by true peace until you freely said “yes” to God, because you wanted to, which is the most supernatural of reasons. And in its wake came a strong, constant joy, which disappears only when you abandon him.

I don’t like to speak of someone being singled out to be part of a privileged elect. But it is Christ who speaks, who chooses. It is the language of holy Scripture: “He chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy,” St Paul tells us.³ I know that such thoughts don’t fill you with pride nor lead you to think yourself better than other men. That choice, the root of our vocation, should be the basis of our humility. Do we build monuments to an artist’s paintbrush? Granted the brush had a part in creating masterpieces, but we give credit only to the painter. We Christians are nothing more than instruments in the hands of the creator of the world, of the redeemer of all men.

The Apostles were ordinary men

I’m greatly encouraged whenever I consider a written precedent for what we have been talking about. We find it, step by step, in the Gospel’s account of the vocation of the first twelve. Let’s meditate on it slowly, asking those holy witnesses of our Lord to help us follow Christ as they did.

The first Apostles, for whom I have great affection and devotion, were nothing to boast about, humanly speaking. With the exception of Matthew, who probably earned a comfortable living which he left behind at the behest of Jesus, the Apostles were mere fishermen. They lived a meagre existence, fishing all night to keep food on the table.

But social status is unimportant. They weren’t educated; they weren’t even very bright, if we judge from their reaction to supernatural things. Finding even the most elementary examples and comparisons beyond their reach, they would turn to the Master and ask: “Explain the parable to

¹ Ps 24:4: *Vias tuas, Domine, demonstra mihi, et semitas tuas edoce me*

² Cf Matt 22:37; Mark 12:30; Luke 10:27

³ Eph 1:4: *Elegit nos in ipso ante mundi constitutionem ut essemus sancti*

us.”⁴ When Jesus uses the image of the “leaven” of the Pharisees, they think that he’s reproaching them for not having purchased bread.⁵

They were poor; they were ignorant. They weren’t very simple or open. But they were even ambitious. Frequently they argued over who would be the greatest when — according to their understanding — Christ would definitively restore the kingdom of Israel. Amid the intimacy of the last supper, during that sublime moment when Jesus is about to immolate himself for all of humanity, we find them arguing heatedly.⁶

Faith? They had little. Jesus Christ himself points this out.⁷ They had seen the dead raised, all kinds of sicknesses cured, bread and fish multiplied, storms calmed, devils cast out. Chosen as the head, St Peter is the only one who reacts quickly: “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.”⁸ But it is a faith beset by limitations, which lead Peter to reproach Jesus Christ for his desire to suffer and die for the redemption of men. And Jesus had to upbraid him: “Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me; for you are not on the side of God, but of men.”⁹

“Peter was too human in his thinking,” St John Chrysostom comments, “and therefore he reasons that those things” — Christ’s passion and death — “were unworthy of him, something deplorable. Consequently, Jesus reprimands him and says: No, suffering is not beneath me; you only think so because your mind is limited to human thoughts.”¹⁰ And did these men of little faith at least stand out in their love for Christ? Undoubtedly they loved him, at least in word. At times they were swept away by enthusiasm: “Let us also go, that we may die with him.”¹¹ But at the moment of truth, they all fled, except for John who truly loved with deeds. Only this adolescent, youngest of the Apostles, can be found next to the cross. The others didn’t find within themselves that love as strong as death.¹²

These were the disciples called by our Lord. Such stuff is what Christ chose. And they remain just like that until they are filled with the Holy Spirit and thus become pillars of the Church.¹³ They are ordinary men, complete with defects and shortcomings, more eager to say than to do. Nevertheless, Jesus calls them to be fishers of men,¹⁴ co-redeemers, dispensers of the grace of God.

Something similar has happened to us. With little effort we could find among our family, friends and acquaintances — not to mention the crowds of the world — so many worthier persons that Christ could have called. Yes, persons who are simpler and wiser, more influential and important, more grateful and generous.

In thinking along these lines, I feel embarrassed. But I also realize that human logic cannot possibly explain the world of grace. God usually seeks out deficient instruments so that the work can more clearly be seen to be his. It is with trembling that St Paul recalls his vocation: “And last of all, as by one born out of due time, he was seen also by me. For I am the least of the apostles,

⁴ Matt 13:36: *Domine, edissere nobis parabolam*

⁵ Cf Matt 16:6-7

⁶ Cf Luke 22:24-27

⁷ Cf Matt 14:31; 16:8; 17:17; 21:21

⁸ Matt 16:16

⁹ Matt 16:23

¹⁰ *In Matthaeum homiliae*, 54,4 (PG 58,537)

¹¹ John 11:16

¹² Cant 8:6

¹³ Cf Gal 2:9

¹⁴ Matt 4:19

and am not worthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the Church of God.”¹⁵ Thus writes Saul of Tarsus, whose personality and drive fill history with awe.

As I said before, we have merited nothing. Before God called us, there was nothing more than personal wretchedness. Let us realize that the lights shining in our soul (faith), the love wherewith we love (charity), and the desire sustaining us (hope) are all free gifts from God. Were we not to grow in humility, we would soon lose sight of the reason for our having been chosen by God: personal sanctity.

If we are humble, we can understand all the marvel of our divine vocation. The hand of Christ has snatched us from a wheat field; the sower squeezes the handful of wheat in his wounded palm. The blood of Christ bathes the seed, soaking it. Then the Lord tosses the wheat to the winds, so that in dying it becomes life and in sinking into the ground it multiplies itself.

Now is the hour for us to rise

The epistle of today’s Mass reminds us that we are to acknowledge this responsibility of apostles with new spirit, with desires, fully awake. “It is now the hour for us to rise from sleep, because now our salvation is nearer than when we came to believe. The night is far advanced; the day is at hand. Let us therefore lay aside the works of darkness, and put on the armour of light.”¹⁶

You might tell me that it isn’t easy, and you are right. The enemies of man — the enemies of his sanctity — try to deny him this new life, this putting on of the spirit of Christ. I can find no better summary of the obstacles to Christian fidelity than that of St John. “Because all that is in the world is the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life.”¹⁷

Lust of the flesh is not limited to the disordered tendencies of our senses in general, nor to the sexual drive, which ought to be directed and is not bad in itself, since it is a noble human reality that can be sanctified. Note, therefore, that I never speak of impurity, but of purity, because Christ is speaking to all of us when he says: “Blessed are the clean of heart, for they shall see God.”¹⁸ By divine vocation, some are called to live this purity in marriage. Others, foregoing all human love, are called to correspond solely and passionately to God’s love. Far from being slaves to sensuality, both the married and the unmarried are to be masters of their body and heart in order to give themselves unstintingly to others.

Whenever I talk about the virtue of purity, I usually qualify it by calling it *holy* purity. Christian purity, holy purity, is not the same as priding oneself on feeling “pure,” uncontaminated. We must realize we have feet of clay,¹⁹ although the grace of God rescues us day by day from the dangers of the enemy. Those who write or preach almost exclusively on this topic are deforming Christianity, in my view, for they forget other virtues so important to the Christian and also to our life in society.

Holy purity is not the only nor the principal Christian virtue. It is, however, essential if we are to persevere in the daily effort of our sanctification. If it is not lived, there can be no apostolic dedication. Purity is a consequence of the love that prompts us to commit to Christ our soul and body, our faculties and senses. It is not something negative; it is a joyful affirmation.

¹⁵ 1 Cor 15:8

¹⁶ Rom 13:11-12

¹⁷ 1 John 2:16: *Concupiscentia carnis, concupiscentia oculorum et superbia vitae*

¹⁸ Matt 5:8

¹⁹ Dan 2:33

Earlier I said that lust of the flesh is not limited to disordered sensuality. It also means softness, laziness bent on the easiest, most pleasurable way, any apparent shortcut, even at the expense of infidelity to God.

To abdicate in this way is equivalent to letting oneself fall completely under the imperious sway of the law of sin, about which St Paul warned us: “When I wish to do good I discover this law, namely, that evil is at hand for me. For I am delighted with the law of God according to the inner man, but I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind and making me prisoner to the law of sin... Unhappy man that I am! Who will deliver me from the body of this death?”²⁰ But listen to the answer of the Apostle: “The grace of God through Jesus Christ our Lord.”²¹ We can and ought to fight always to overcome the lust of the flesh, because, if we are humble, we will always be granted the grace of our Lord.

St John tells us that the other enemy is the lust of the eyes, a deep-seated avariciousness that leads us to appreciate only what we can touch. Such eyes are glued to earthly things and, consequently, they are blind to supernatural realities. We can, then, use this expression of sacred Scripture to indicate that disordered desire for material things, as well as that deformation which views everything around us — other people, the circumstances of our life and of our age — with just human vision.

Then the eyes of our soul grow dull. Reason proclaims itself sufficient to understand everything, without the aid of God. This is a subtle temptation, which hides behind the power of our intellect, given by our Father God to man so that he might know and love him freely. Seduced by this temptation, the human mind appoints itself the centre of the universe, being thrilled with the prospect that “you shall be like gods.”²² So filled with love for itself, it turns its back on the love of God.

In this way does our existence fall prey unconditionally to the third enemy: pride of life. It’s not merely a question of passing thoughts of vanity or self-love, it’s a state of general conceit. Let’s not deceive ourselves, for this is the worst of all evils, the root of every false step. The fight against pride has to be a constant battle, to such an extent that someone once said that pride only disappears twenty-four hours after each of us has died. It is the arrogance of the Pharisee whom God cannot transform because he finds in him the obstacle of self-sufficiency. It is the haughtiness which leads to despising other men, to lording it over them, to mistreating them. For “when pride comes, then comes disgrace.”²³

The mercy of God

Today marks the beginning of Advent. And it is good for us to consider the wiles of these enemies of the soul: the disorder of sensuality and easy-going superficiality, the folly of reason that rejects God, the cavalier presumption that snuffs out love for both God and creatures. All these obstacles are real enough, and they can indeed cause us a great deal of trouble. For these very reasons the liturgy invites us to implore divine mercy: “To you, o Lord, I lift up my soul. O my God, in you I trust, let me not be put to shame; let not my enemies exult over me,”²⁴ as we prayed in the introit.

²⁰ Rom 7:21-24

²¹ Rom 7:25

²² Gen 3:5

²³ Prov 11:2

²⁴ Ps 24:1-2

And in the offertory we shall go back to the same idea: “Let none that wait for you be put to shame.”

Now that the time of our salvation is approaching, it is consoling to hear from the lips of St Paul that “when the goodness and kindness of God our Saviour appeared, he saved us, not by the works of justice which we have done, but according to his mercy.”²⁵

If you leaf through the holy Scripture, you will discover constant references to the mercy of God. Mercy fills the earth.²⁶ It extends to all his children,²⁷ and is “all around us.”²⁸ It “watches over me.”²⁹ It “extends to the heavens”³⁰ to help us, and has been continually “confirmed”.³¹ God in taking care of us as a loving father looks on us in his mercy³² — a mercy that is “tender”,³³ welcome as “rain-clouds”.³⁴

The life of Jesus Christ is a summary and compendium of the story of divine mercy: “Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy.”³⁵ And on another occasion our Lord said: “Be merciful, therefore, even as your Father is merciful.”³⁶ Many other scenes of the Gospel have also made a deep impact on us, such as his forgiveness of the adulterous woman, the parable of the prodigal son, that of the lost sheep, that of the pardoned debtor, the resurrection of the son of the widow at Naim.³⁷ How many reasons based on justice could Christ have found to work this great wonder! The only son of that poor widow had died, he who gave meaning to her life, he who could help her in her old age. But Jesus didn’t perform the miracle out of justice, but out of compassion, because his heart was moved by human suffering.

What security should be ours in considering the mercy of the Lord! “He has but to cry for redress, and I, the ever merciful, will listen to him.”³⁸ It is an invitation, a promise that he will not fail to fulfil. “Let us therefore draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need.”³⁹ The enemies of our sanctification will be rendered powerless if the mercy of God goes before us. And if through our own fault and human weakness we should fall, the Lord comes to our aid and raises us up. “You had learned to avoid negligence, to flee from arrogance, to grow in piety, not to be a prisoner of worldly matters, to prefer the eternal to the passing. But since human weakness cannot maintain a steady pace in such a slippery world, the good doctor has prescribed remedies for not getting lost and the merciful judge has not led you to despair of pardon.”⁴⁰

²⁵ Tit 3:5

²⁶ Ps 32:5

²⁷ Sir 18:12

²⁸ Ps 31:10

²⁹ Ps 58:11

³⁰ Ps 33:8

³¹ Ps 116:2

³² Ps 24:7

³³ Ps 108:21

³⁴ Sir 35:26

³⁵ Matt 5:7

³⁶ Luke 6:36

³⁷ Luke 7:11-17

³⁸ Ex 22:27

³⁹ Heb 4:16

⁴⁰ St Ambrose, *Expositio Evangelii secundum Lucam*, 7 (PL 15,1540)

Responding to God

It is under the “umbrella” of God’s mercy that Christian existence should develop. Ever mindful of that, the Christian should strive to behave as a child of God. And what are the principal means to ensure that our vocation takes root? Today let me point out two of them, which are like living supports of Christian conduct: interior life and doctrinal formation, the deep knowledge of our faith.

First of all, interior life. How few really understand this! If they hear about the interior life, they imagine some obscure temple. For more than a quarter of a century I have been saying that such isn’t the case. I talk about the interior life of ordinary Christians who habitually find themselves in the hubbub of the city, in the light of day, in the street, at work, with their families or simply relaxing; they are centred on Jesus all day long. And what is this except a life of continuous prayer? Isn’t it true that you have seen the need to become a soul of prayer, to reach an intimacy with God that leads to divinization? Such is the Christian faith as always understood by souls of prayer — ”A man becomes God,” writes Clement of Alexandria, “because he loves whatever God loves.”⁴¹

At first it will be more difficult. You must make an effort to seek out the Lord, to thank him for his fatherly and practical concern for us. Although it is not a question of sentiment, little by little the love of God makes itself felt like a rustle in the soul. It is Christ who pursues us lovingly: “Behold, I stand at the door and knock.”⁴² How is your life of prayer going? At times don’t you feel during the day the impulse to speak more at length with him? Don’t you then whisper to him that you will tell him all about it later, in a heart-to-heart conversation?

In the periods expressly reserved for this rendezvous with our Lord, the heart is broadened, the will is strengthened, the mind, helped by grace, fills the world of human reality with supernatural content. The results come in the form of clear, practical resolutions to improve your conduct, to deal more charitably with all men, to spare no efforts — like good athletes — in this Christian struggle of love and peace.

Prayer then becomes continuous, like the beating of our heart, like our pulse. Without this presence of God, there is no contemplative life. And without contemplative life, our working for Christ is worth very little, for vain is the builder’s toil if the house is not of the Lord’s building.⁴³

The seasoning of mortification

In order to reach sanctity, an ordinary Christian — who is not a religious — has no reason to abandon the world, since that is precisely where he is to find Christ. He needs no external signs, such as a habit or insignias. All the signs of his dedication are internal: a constant presence of God and a spirit of mortification. As a matter of fact, only one thing is necessary, because mortification is nothing more than prayer of the senses.

The Christian vocation is one of sacrifice, penance, expiation. We must make reparation for our sins — for the many times we turned our face aside so as to avoid the gaze of God — and all the sins of mankind. We must try to imitate Christ, “always carrying about in our body the dying of Christ,” his abnegation, his suffering on the cross, “so that the life also of Jesus may be made

⁴¹ *Paedagogus*, 3,1,1,5 (PG 8,556)

⁴² Rev 3:20

⁴³ Cf Ps 126:1

manifest in our bodies.”⁴⁴ Our way is one of immolation and, in this denial, we find *gaudium cum pace*, both joy and peace.

We do not look upon the world with a frown. Some biographers of saints have in the past been interested only in highlighting extraordinary things in the lives of God’s servants, from even their earliest days in the cradle. They have, unintentionally perhaps, done a disservice to Christian truth. They even said of some of them that as babies they did not cry, nor drink their mother’s milk on Fridays, out of a spirit of penance. You and I came into this world crying our heads off, and we most assuredly drank our milk in total disregard for fasts and ember days.

Now, we have learned to discover, with the help of God, in the succession of apparently similar days, a time for true penance, and in these moments we resolve to improve our life. This is the way to ready ourselves for the grace and inspirations of the Holy Spirit in our soul. And with that grace, I repeat, comes *gaudium cum pace*:⁴⁵ joy, peace and perseverance in our struggle.

Mortification is the seasoning of our life. And the best mortification is that which overcomes the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life in little things throughout the day. Ours should be mortifications that do not mortify others, and which give us more finesse, more understanding and more openness in our dealings with everybody. You are not mortified, if you are touchy; if your every thought is for yourself; if you humiliate others; if you don’t know how to give up what is unnecessary and, at times, what is necessary; if you become gloomy because things don’t turn out the way you had hoped. On the other hand, you can be sure you are mortified, if you know how to make yourself “all things to all men, in order to save all.”⁴⁶

Belief and reason

A life of prayer and penance, together with an awareness of our divine filiation, transforms us into Christians whose piety is truly deep. We become little children at the feet of God. Piety is the virtue of children. And if the child is to take refuge in the arms of his father, he must be, and know that he is, small, needy. I have often meditated on this life of spiritual childhood, which is not incompatible with fortitude, because it demands a strong will, proven maturity, an open and firm character.

We are to be pious, then, as pious as children, but not ignorant. Insofar as possible, each of us should study the faith seriously, rigorously — all of which means theology. Ours should be the piety of children and the sure doctrine of theologians.

Our desire to advance in theological knowledge, in sound, firm *Christian doctrine* is sparked, above all, by the will to know and love God. It likewise stems from the concern of a faithful soul to attain the deepest meaning of the world, seen as coming from the hands of God. Every now and then, monotonously sounding like a broken record, some people try to resurrect a supposed incompatibility between faith and science, between human knowledge and divine revelation. But such incompatibility could only arise — and then only apparently — from a misunderstanding of the elements of the problem.

⁴⁴ 2 Cor 4:10

⁴⁵ *Gaudium cum pace, emendationem vitae, spatium verae poenitentiae, gratiam et consolationem Sancti Spiritus, perseverantiam in bonis operibus, tribuat nobis omnipotens et misericors Dominus. Amen.* (Roman Breviary, Prayer before Mass)

⁴⁶ 1 Cor 9:22

If the world has come from God, if he has created man in his image and likeness⁴⁷ and given him a spark of divine light, the task of our intellect should be to uncover the divine meaning imbedded in all things by their nature, even if this can be attained only by dint of hard work. And with the light of faith, we also can perceive their supernatural purpose, resulting from the elevation of the natural order to the higher order of grace. We can never be afraid of developing human knowledge, because all intellectual effort, if it is serious, is aimed at truth. And Christ has said, “I am the truth.”⁴⁸

The Christian must have a hunger to know. Everything, from the most abstract knowledge to manual techniques, can and should lead to God. For there is no human undertaking which cannot be sanctified, which cannot be an opportunity to sanctify ourselves and to cooperate with God in the sanctification of the people with whom we work. The light of the followers of Jesus Christ should not be hidden in the depths of some valley, but should be placed on the mountain peak, so that “they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.”⁴⁹

To work in this way is to pray. To study thus is likewise prayer. Research done with this spirit is prayer too. We are always doing the same thing, for everything can be prayer, all activity can and should lead us to God, nourish our intimate dealings with him, from morning to night. Any honourable work can be prayer and all prayerful work is apostolate. In this way the soul develops a unity of life, which is both simple and strong.

Advent is a time for hope

I don't wish to go on any longer on this first Sunday of Advent, when we begin to count the days separating us from the birth of the Saviour. We have considered the reality of our Christian vocation: how our Lord has entrusted us with the mission of attracting other souls to sanctity, encouraging them to get close to him, to feel united to the Church, to extend the kingdom of God to all hearts. Jesus wants to see us dedicated, faithful, responsive. He wants us to love him. It is his desire that we be holy, very much his own.

You see within yourselves, on the one hand, pride, sensuality, boredom and selfishness; on the other, love, commitment, mercy, humility, sacrifice, joy. You have to choose. You have been called to a life of faith, hope and charity. You cannot seek lesser goals, condemning yourself to a life of mediocre isolation.

Some time ago I saw an eagle shut up in an iron cage. It was dirty, and half its feathers were missing. In its claws was a piece of carrion. I then thought what would happen to me were I to renounce my vocation from God. I felt sorry for that lonely, fettered bird, born to soar the heavens and gaze at the sun. We too can scale the *humble heights* of love for God, of service to all men. However, in order to do this, we must make sure that our souls have no nooks or crannies into which the light of Jesus Christ cannot shine. And then Christ will be in your mind, on your lips, in your heart, stamped on your deeds. All of your life will be full of God — in its sentiments, its works, its thoughts and its words.

⁴⁷ Gen 1:26

⁴⁸ John 14:6: *Ego sum veritas*

⁴⁹ Matt 5:16

“Look up, and lift up your heads, because your redemption is at hand,”⁵⁰ we have just read in the Gospel. This time of Advent is a time for hope. These great horizons of our Christian vocation, this unity of life built on the presence of God our Father, can and ought to be a daily reality.

Ask our Lady, along with me, to make it come true. Try to imagine how she spent these months, waiting for her Son to be born. And our Lady, Holy Mary, will make of you *alter Christus, ipse Christus*: another Christ, Christ himself!

⁵⁰ Luke 21:28