

The Call to Vocation in the Mission and Ministry of Christ in His Church

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Submitted to the Right Rev'd Wendell N. Gibbs, Bishop
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I believe that God, in his loving purposes, has called me to live my life in vocation as a priest in holy orders. My understanding of my calling, and my faith in it, must begin with my initial experience of call. As I have shared that experience elsewhere, I will not get into it in any great detail here. However, since I have continued to reflect upon my initial experience throughout the vocational discernment and formational processes which have followed, and as I have continued to find both consolation and clarity therein, I think that it is fitting that I should briefly review those details of my experience which I believe are of continuing relevance, as they continue to speak to the meaning and course of my vocational path.

I was received into the Episcopal Church at the Great Vigil of Easter at St. Paul's Cathedral in 2001. At the time, I looked forward to the event as something of a capstone for the year that had preceded it. That year began for me on Palm Sunday of 2000. It was on that day that I first darkened the door of the Cathedral. I had spent the previous fifteen years or so of my life mostly outside of the Church. My feelings during that time towards both God and the Church ranged from alienation to indifference. And so, after I moved to Detroit, I found myself surprised by those occasional experiences of attraction to the Cathedral that would affect me when I walked past it. Those feelings turned into a powerful compulsion for me on the morning of that Palm Sunday.

I found something mysteriously attractive and indescribably good at the Cathedral that day, and I returned every Sunday thereafter. Throughout that year, I found myself interested in everything that was being said, sung, and done through the course of worship at the Cathedral, and I paid close attention to all of it. As the year went on, I felt myself to be changing inside somehow, as my thoughts and feelings about religion and the Church, and indeed about God, warmed. Following my catechism, and some related experiences, I came to believe that I had what I would call “an intellectual right to believe” in the message of the Christian faith. That is, I came to believe that the good news of God’s loving purposes and work in Christ could stand the test of reason, even if those truths could not be established entirely upon philosophical grounds or otherwise proven. This was an important place for me to come to, and I was grateful for having been brought there. Moreover, I had come to want to believe that the Gospel was, in fact, not only reasonable, but also true.

Thankfully, upon my reception into the Episcopal Church, God gave me to know an enormously powerful and ultimately inexpressible experience of his active and intentional presence with me, and he made me to know and to experience in this some of the most essential facts about his person and purposes as they relate through time and space to me and to all of humankind. I knew absolutely and essentially in all of this that God’s purposes in my life and in all of creation had been, were, and always would be entirely driven by love.

As I knew God’s love in all of this, I fell deeply in love with God. I knew then that my life had changed in some essential and significant way, for I had come to see the world in which I lived from a substantially different perspective. This could not help but to affect the course of my life. I believed then, as I do now, that I had been brought from an understanding of the world, and of myself therein, which had become darkened and distorted through the course of my life, towards a perspective which was in line with that view of things which God would have me take. It was all very much for the better. I discovered that I had indeed been blind in some very real way, and now I could see more clearly than I had been able to see for a very long time.

I was enormously happy with all of this, and through the course of that Easter Season, I was content simply to live my days in love with God. I did not worry much about where all of this was taking me, for I knew that it could only be to good places. Then, some eight to ten weeks after Easter, in the summer of 2001, while I was engaged quite deeply in the sort of contemplative prayer that had become my spiritual mainstay, I knew God to say to me “you should consider becoming a priest, you may need to do that.”

I knew immediately that this was much more than a polite invitation. I knew that God was calling me to change the direction of my personal and professional life radically. I knew that God was calling me to take a course in my life which would allow me to dedicate myself in all of my gifts and energies, and in my very identity and being as a person, to a life lived as deeply and as comprehensively in love with God as I was meant to. I believed that this meant that I was called to live a special life of love in service in the Church. And I knew

that for me, all of this meant that my life would have to be set apart in a special way, as a priest, as the nature of that life of love in service to which I was called would require the comprehensive placement of my life within that vocation.

I hadn't desired any of this. I knew that it would upset my life enormously, and I resisted it, as I hoped that it would all go away. But my efforts to resist and to run were unsuccessful in large part, I think, because I knew in the end that although I hadn't desired this path, I had indeed rather quickly come to want it; I had come to believe and to know that I needed it. I knew that in the end, in all of this, God was calling me to be nothing other than myself. I knew that if I said "no," God would still love me as he always had. But I knew that if I said "yes," I would be saying yes to God's intentions for my whole life. And I wanted to give him that, completely. I knew then, as I know now, that life in the love of God can only be most complete when we give everything that we have to God for his purposes, and for our redemption therein.

I have reflected upon what it means to be called to vocation ever since I first experienced my own calling. Before that time, I thought of a vocation as something like an especially meaningful job that has the added quality of being assigned to one by God. Although I was not entirely off the mark with this, I have come to believe that in its purpose and character, a vocation is much more than this. I believe now that if we really want to understand what our vocations are, then we must begin by taking a look at the vocation of our Lord Jesus Christ, who I believe is the author of all of our vocations in the Church.

When I consider Christ's vocation, I take the Fall seriously. By this I mean that I believe that humanity and every member of its kind lives in this world in a condition of alienation from that life which can only be lived in the fullest presence of God. More to the point, I believe that although God loves us perfectly and completely, and that God has made us to live most fully in that love, which means that he has made us to share the love that he has given to us with him and with each other in him, it is obvious that we invariably fall far short of loving God and each other most fully. And so, we fail to live in the fullest possible relationship with God in love, which is nothing short of life itself. As a consequence, we are haunted throughout our lives by the opposites of the love and life that God has intended for us. These are the specters of sin and death.

Understanding this is the key, I think, to understanding Christ's vocation. Because God's purpose in Creation is love, and as God effects and engages Creation through his obedient and loving Son, it is Jesus Christ, who is the incarnate Son of God, whose vocation it is to serve the Father's loving purposes by correcting this situation. He does this through the reconciliation of humanity most fully to God. Christ effects this purpose through the entire course of his earthly ministry from his Incarnation to his Ascension and Glorification. The sacrifice of his Passion marks the center of Christ's ministry and the pivot upon which all of history turns. In all of this, we know that Christ's vocation in ministry is one of humble and sacrificial service in obedience and in love. Indeed, it seems that an essential message of the life of Jesus must be that real

love and real service in humility are necessarily and essentially connected. This should tell us something about vocation.

As the Son serves the Father in the perfectly loving and obedient self-giving of his Incarnation, Christ the Incarnate Son serves humanity in love throughout his life in the world and especially in his sacrifice on the Cross. And as all of this service is in God's love, its purpose is to exercise the loving relationship that flourishes between the Father and the Son, from which the Holy Spirit proceeds, towards the purposes of our re-incorporation into the fullness of that life which is essential to the character and the purpose of the triune God.

Christ by the Grace of God has made this reconciliation possible, and he has made it real, and it will be made complete for all of us who are saved as we are resurrected and brought fully into the loving presence of God with Christ Glorified. But since God's purpose for us is to engage us in a relationship of love so that we might live most fully with God, and with each other in God, I believe that our reconciliation is something that we are given to begin to experience and to accept in the course of our lives here and now. That reconciliation is given to us through the love of God in Christ, as Christ brings us to his Church, and as we are called therein to exercise that love, and so to share it and to grow in it, here, and now, in the loving service of God and of each other in God, which is God's gift to us. In other words, although it is true that God saves us by his Grace, it is also by the loving grace of God that we are called to engage the project of his reconciliation and salvation of us and of the world. This is because these projects of salvation are ultimately about living relationships that involve every one of us in all that we are throughout and beyond time, together with God and in God.

This is our vocation, and every Christian is called to it. Every Christian is called to receive the saving grace of God and to live in his love, and to share that love with God and with the World in the loving and Christ-given service of reconciliation. As such, every true vocation is a vocation of humble service in love in the Church. And the purpose of every vocation, in love, is to advance the purpose of the Church, which is the continuing vocation of its head, which is Christ Glorified. This vocation is the reconciliation of the World in love with the living God. Christ continues to exercise this vocation, as he is the head of the Church. And in Christ's work in that office, he calls us to know him and to take his place in the World, as we are called to represent Christ to each other and to the World all literally for the love of God. Our vocations in Christ begin when we are baptized, for this is the sacrament that witnesses and effects our death to sin and our birth in Christ. Here, we become Children of God in Christ called to share in the life and works of him who God has given us to be at once our brother and our Lord.

If all Christians are called to the same vocation of reconciliation in and for the love of God in Christ, we might well wonder why it is that our vocations seem to come in such apparent variety. The answer, I think, is that while it is certainly true that all Christians are called to live in Christ's priestly vocations of love and faithful sacrifice in service, so as to live most fully in Christ and to be Christ most fully in the Church and in the world, it is also true that in his wisdom, God has

created all of us as persons who are unique even as we share equally in our creaturely nature and in the love of God.

I believe that God delights in us as he has made us each with our own gifts and with our own hearts, minds, bodies, and souls. And so, God gives vocations to each of us that are identical in so far as they speak to our humanity, but which are different in other ways that respect, reflect, and magnify us as we have been made to be different and distinct. In all of this, I believe that we can only live most fully in the love of God, and with each other with love in God, if we understand and respect the dignity of who and what we, each of us including ourselves, have been made to be. Knowing and practicing our vocations as they are made for each of us is an essential part of this project. Our vocations, in this respect, are essentially significant to our relationships with God.

Discerning all of this is not always easy. Certainly, we should take careful inventories of our gifts and our proclivities. But we should also listen to God, so that we might hear what God would tell us about ourselves and about our vocations. And that, as I know well, is neither an easy nor an entirely “safe” project, for we cannot control where it will take us. But it is a necessary project, and in the end, only good can come of it because God is loving in his purposes, and because God has the power always to effect his purposes.

For me, I heard from God powerfully and, I think, unmistakably, that I was indeed called to a particular vocation before I ever really thought of myself as having any sort of vocation in the Church at all. But my experience is not unique. It seems that most of those whom Jesus chose to be his disciples heard about their vocations first from him. He called them, and he formed them, for the special office of discipleship and for the office of apostleship that would follow from their commissioning by Christ and their inspiration by the Holy Spirit. It was this office, the office of apostleship, which became the foundation and the form for the essentially related offices of the priesthood and the episcopacy. These are special callings that at once are part and parcel to the larger calling which all Christians share, and yet which set those who receive them apart for lives that are given in dedication to a special kind of service.

As God calls all people to salvation in Christ, he calls those who are members of Christ’s body, the Church, to be Christ to the world in loving service with Christ and in Christ. All Christians share this vocation of calling the world to reconciliation through their Christ given service in that world. But I believe that some are called from within the Church to practice a life in vocation which is distinguished from the life of the laity, but which is practiced and lived entirely within that larger life in Christ that is shared by the laity. Some, such as the Disciples and the bishops and priests who followed them, and who are still following them, are called to witness Christ in special ways to the sons and daughters that God has adopted in Christ. Such people are called in some measure to a state of life that is exceptional in relation to that state which is lived by the rest of the people of God. But that particularity is not a particularity of honor or distinction. It is a particularity of service in love.

That special service in love is to be Christ for the people of God who are Christ's Church in those ways that they otherwise cannot be fully for each other even as they are Christ for each other and for the world. As such, these special ways of life, though they are established by Christ, and witnessed by the apostles and those who have followed them, are defined by the needs of the rest of the members of Christ's body.

The needs of the people of God begin, I believe, with their need to be served sacramentally. Of course, all Christians are called to serve each other and the world in sacramental ways, for all Christians are called to witness outwardly to each other and to the world the inward grace of God's loving purposes in Christ. This is how we are made to be Christ for each other and for the world. But as we can see in the relationships of loving service between Jesus and his disciples, and between his disciples and the rest of the followers of Christ, some members of the Body of Christ are called to a special sacramental office through which the faithful are brought together and formed especially in community, and served in community, as they are gathered together to be the body of Christ. These persons are called to be Christ for the community of Christians in those forms of sacramental leadership and service that the rest of the members of Christ's body cannot otherwise fully be for each other as they might try to serve each other in their individual or collected persons.

Therefore, the priestly calling is about the selection and formation of persons for a state of life in which they are able and ready to serve the people of God in Christ towards the formation, health, and growth of each of the members of the family of Christ as they are gathered in love.

In this context, then, it is especially fitting that the priest be principally responsible for the sacraments of Baptism and Eucharist, which define and sustain the community as such. Indeed, the Eucharist must be at the very heart of the priest's vocational ministry because the Eucharist is not at all as much for feeding the Christian as he or she is an individual seeking only personal spiritual benefits as it is for feeding the Christian as he or she is a fully incorporated member of the larger life which is Christ's Church and which we know first in the gathered community. The Eucharist may benefit us as individuals, but it is principally a family meal at which all of us who are the Children of God dine, and all of us celebrate, and all of us benefit as we are gathered together. But only one of those Children gathered with together at any one time is called to preside over the meal. And that presidency is a service to which one is called, the loving purposes of which include simple order and unity.

As with the Eucharist, it is right also that the other sacraments and sacramental acts of the Church as it is gathered in community be led principally, if not exclusively, by the priest such as to reflect the nature of the Body of Christ as it is gathered together in familial community.

The sacramental quality of my calling is something of a mystery to me. I cannot say that any of my more material gifts qualify me especially to the sacramental ministry of the priesthood, save perhaps for my voice, which can fill a very large

lecture hall or church without any electronic amplification if need be! But what I can say is that I have been drawn especially and very deeply to the sacraments of the Church, especially in the Mass, and to sacramental life more generally. Indeed, it is my hope to give my life completely, and so sacrificially and sacramentally, in loving service in my affirmative response to my vocational call. Indeed, I believe that my calling is in some large measure a gift for me by God of the opportunity to do just that.

In addition to the explicitly sacramental ministries, I believe that a priest is called also to represent Christ to the church gathered in other ways which were witnessed by Jesus and which were taken up by his disciples and have been a part of the priestly vocation since.

The ministry of reconciliation is central to the priest's vocation. As with Christ and as with his apostles, everything that a priest does in his office should be directed towards this purpose. This includes every aspect of the sacramental ministry but is expressed in a special way with the sacrament of reconciliation and, I believe, also with the sacrament of healing or unction.

The ministry of reconciliation is something much greater than the work of mediation. It is a broad ranging and essentially important project that requires its practitioner to seek and to receive most especially the grace of humility. In this, I believe that a priest's ministry, as with every Christian's ministry, is not at all so much about being right as it is about being loving, and about calling others to love. As I believe that I am called to the special sacramental ministry of the priesthood, I believe also that I am called to the broader but equally sacramental ministry of reconciliation. In fact, I believe that engaging in this ministry in the Church in the special ways that bring the Church together under Christ is imperative, even though I cannot know exactly how this ministry will always look.

I also believe that the priest's vocation, with Christ, is a teaching vocation. Although it is true that being loving is more important than being right, there are essential truths about the person and purposes of God, and about ourselves, and about love itself, which we should know. These truths, when known, can be used by Christ to heal the injured, to reconcile the alienated, and to draw us all to a closer relationship with God, and to each other in God, and all in love. In this, the teaching and prophetic vocations are related. They are not exclusive to the priesthood of course, as many in the Church who are not ordained ministers are called to teach in the Church. But teaching is exercised in the office of the priesthood in special ways that work especially towards the formation and growth of the community gathered. That is, the specifically priestly aspects of teaching as a Christian calling are exercised within and directed towards the life and growth of the sacramental community.

I am more confident that I am materially well suited for this aspect of the priestly vocation than I am with regard to any of the others. I have been given good gifts in this regard, along with many opportunities to exercise and develop them. These gifts include my intellectual curiosity and my abilities as an analytical and

critical thinker, along with my ability to make a variety of ideas accessible to a variety of people. But the most important of my gifts, I believe, are the profound yet accessible and living truths of God's loving person and purposes that I believe that he has given to me to tell. I am hopeful that my priesthood will include a strong teaching and preaching ministry so that I might share the truths that God would have me share, in loving service for the edification and growth of the community of Christ gathered in the Church.

To these aspects of the priestly office, many would add things like church administration and programmatic leadership, evangelism, outreach, and especially, pastoral care and counseling. Certainly, priests are often called to engage these and other ministries in the course of their vocations. And I believe that with my experiences in life and in the Church and the professional and the academic worlds, I have gifts that I might bring to these areas. But I have not addressed them here as I have the sacramental, teaching, and reconciliation ministries because I believe that there is nothing inherent in these areas that requires their exercise by a priest per se, save for some matters of pastoral care, especially when they require other areas of the priest's vocational ministry.

Indeed, it is probably best that most of these other ministries be practiced as much as possible by others in the Church who might know special callings to these areas of service. The community of Christ is healthiest, I think, when all of its members are engaged in the ministry of the Church as fully as they are called to be. In this, priests are always called to support their brothers and sisters in their respective ministries in ways that draw from the priest's primary vocational calling and which strengthen not only individuals, but the community as a whole, in the larger purposes of God's reconciling love. This is an issue that is very important to me. I believe that many of my most important accomplishments in life have been in work in which I have helped others to reach their potential in areas that were meaningful to them. Certainly, I have always found this sort of work to be most satisfying.

Finally, and most fundamentally, priests are called to a life of prayer. In this, every priest is called, I believe, to share in something of that calling which we so often associate with persons religious. I think that the necessity of a solid relationship with God in prayer should be obvious given that such is a universal calling for all Christians and given the seriousness of the challenges of the other, more externally oriented aspects of the priestly vocation. But I also believe that every priest, along with every Christian, must know and practice prayer as more than the fulfillment of a commandment or a preparation for the challenges which we all find in our lives, as important as these imperatives are. We should never forget that God loves us, and seeks to engage us in that love, not for what we do, but for who we are. So, our call to prayer is a call to life as we can know it most fully, which is in a loving and personal relationship with God. As every priest should constantly call every Christian to this life, every priest should practice and live in this life jealously, which is to say that prayer should be a centrally important and protected part of the priest's life.

The practice of prayer, and the call to it, has been at the very center of my understanding and experience of vocational calling from the beginning. This is so much the case that I have questioned seriously whether I might well be called to a monastic vocation as a priest religious, which would seem to free me most completely for the life of contemplative prayer which I find so attractive. But as open as I have been and remain to this possibility, I know first that I am called to the priesthood. Precisely where and how that vocation will develop remains for me a matter of discernment. But wherever I find myself in my vocation, I believe that sacramental ministry, reconciliation and healing, and teaching and prayer will mark my life and my work all for the purpose of living as fully in the love of God as I can in the way that I am meant to. And that would be very good for me, as I hope that it would also be very good for all of those who might be served well in that love, which ultimately is God's.