



The experience and desire of God

*Anthropological Hermeneutics
of the Human and Christian Vocation*

Alain Guibert Alama Bogogo II

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*God's saving grace, the believer's faith that leads to salvation,
and the spiritual power that inspires our words, our actions,
and our relations with the world are three forms of deliverance from
fear that the Gospel brings us. We need to turn to them
again to embark on the path of re-foundation, with the full freedom
of the children of God who walk, in the grace of the Spirit,
in the footsteps of Jesus¹.*

1 SIMON-PIERRE ARNOLD, *Au risque de Jésus-Christ, une relecture des vœux*, Lessius, Paris 2007, p. 20.

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pillar in my formation, in that noble impulse of interdisciplinarity that is the basis of the Gregorian in general and of the Saint Peter Favre Centre for Formation to the Priesthood and Consecrated Life.

Finally, I would like to express my gratitude to all my potential readers, especially the young, whose lives will be most touched and transformed by this book. You are my main target, my main motivation. Please find here my renewed affection and prayers, that you may obtain the grace of courage to move forward in your lives, in union with the Lord who is always calling you. May St Joseph Calasanz intercede for you!

Alain Guibert ALAMA BOGOGO II Sch. P.

FOREWORD

Reflecting on what is essential

When I read the book you are holding in your hands, written by Fr. Alain Guibert Alama Bogogo II Sch.P., I quickly realized the title I should give to the foreword that the author asked me to write. Alain's work is a valuable contribution to one of the most important challenges facing men and women today: to reflect on what is essential.

What is the meaning of the search for God? What are the keys that can help us understand the deep desire for God that lives in the depths of the soul of each one of us? In a world like ours, in which many people consider a life far removed from faith, it is more necessary than ever that we dare to reflect on what is essential, on what the search for God's will means for each one of us.

And this is the task that the author tackles in this brief and profound book. The subject is approached with academic rigor and pastoral sense. These are two dimensions that we can expect from the work of a Piarist. Likewise, the final references to St. Joseph Calasanz and Mary are as convenient as Calasanctian.

I invite you to read this book with interest, and I hope that Fr. Alain will continue with this kind of studies and reflections. We need to enter deeply into what defines us as persons and as children of God so that we can also help others, especially today's youth, to approach the Mystery with an eagerness to discover what it means to be a Christian.

Thank you, Fr. Alain, for your work. I hope and pray that you can continue to bring your reflection to the whole of the Pious Schools and to all those who want to continue to reflect on the essentials of human life. Thank you!

Good reading!

Fr. Pedro Aguado Sch. P.

Abbreviations

| | |
|-------|---|
| C: | Constitutions of the Order of the Pious Schools |
| PBC: | Pontifical Biblical Commission |
| COLL. | Collection |
| LG: | Lumen Gentium |
| GS: | Gaudium et Spes |
| DV: | Dei Verbum |
| RH: | Redemptor Hominis |
| CCC: | Catechism of the Catholic Church |
| VC: | Vita Consecrata |
| NMI: | Nuovo Millennio Ineunte |
| SRS: | Sollicitudo Rei Socialis |
| PP: | Populorum Progressio |
| VD: | Verbum Domini |
| AM: | Africae Munus |
| EG: | Evangelii Gaudium |
| CV: | Christus Vivit |
| CDF: | Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith |
| RM: | Roman Missal |

Introduction

In spite of the plethora of contemporary ideologies that seek at all costs to wrest from man every idea of God and every religious and moral value, in spite of the promises that are made to him every day to find his total fulfilment in the things of this world, there is still in this divine creature the hope and certainty of God's uninterrupted presence in his personal history. By creating man in his own image and likeness (cf. Gen 1:26-27), God wanted him to be docile to his love. And when sin entered the world, he sent his only Begotten Son Jesus Christ among men for their redemption and to bestow divine adoption through the Spirit (cf. Gal 4:5). There is no doubt that every human creature is endowed with an intelligence that drives him to question his existence, however complex, its identity and aspirations, and with a freedom that allows him to decide, sometimes at his own risk, what he intends to become. Discerning one's vocation therefore means grasping the opportunities that are revealed to man, God's plan for oneself and for one's fellow human beings.

The title of this book contains within itself a revealing sense of the orientation I thought to give to my reflection. It is a question of vocational pedagogy that I intend to offer the reader, starting from an atypical experience: that of Simon Peter at the lake of Gennesaret in Lk 5:1-11. Such a pedagogy, as St Augustine called it in his time, is the "creation of the spirit"². It is this creation of the Augustinian spirit that has guided my decision to reflect on the theme of vocational anthropology at the heart of experience and desire for God.

2 AUGUSTIN, *Les Soliloques, Le manuel et Les méditations de Saint Augustin*, Trad. Nouv. sur le Latin, Guillaume Desprez, Paris, 1696.

It is also a duty of pastoral conscience towards children and young people, for whom I have great esteem, as a Piarist religious, priest and educator; as well as towards all men and women of good will, who wish to experience God like Simon Peter and his two companions. This unfolding of the spirit reminded me of my own vocational journey. If vocation is, on the one hand, a personal call, it should be noted that it is also an objective reality, guiding each individual to an encounter with others. In other words, vocation is understood as a relational experience, because it is the call for the other and the call to the other.

That said, discovering one's vocation, perceiving and defining it, is one of the most important concerns in every person's life; and sometimes, one of the most difficult experiences in one's life. Each of us has asked himself at least once in the course of his life questions such as "Who am I?", "Why did God create me?", "Where am I going to?", "What do I want to become?" The founder of Criticism and the doctrine of 'transcendental idealism', Immanuel Kant, also addressed these questions in his time through four essential questions that marked the four divisions of the philosophical universe: 'What can I know?', 'What must I do?', 'What can I hope?' and 'What is man?'. For him, the first question refers to the theory of knowledge (the search for an ultimate truth and a method to better think, identify and understand the world). This first question refers to epistemology. The second instance refers to man's action as a created being that gives meaning to his life. Is he free to choose good or evil? This is morals or axiology. The third question, in turn, questions the existence of salvation and, if so, its necessity. Should man hope for a so-called 'eternal' salvation after his passage into the world of visible beings? This is metaphysics. And the fourth question, "What is man?"³, join some of the ideas I will develop later in my text. Even if this last question did not yet have the form of a Christian theology, as it is undertaken and formulated today, it is nevertheless the underpinning of a transcendental anthropology, which places the attempt at an ontological definition of man and his relationship to God at the centre of reflection. And in this cur-

3 Cfr. EMMANUEL KANT, *La religion dans les limites de la simple raison*, Gallimard, Paris, 1794.

rent 21st century, the Catholic Church again placed the question of man's destiny at the centre of her reflections. A recent document is entitled: *What is Man? An Itinerary in Biblical Anthropology*⁴.

This is therefore an unavoidable question that expresses man's natural duty: to seek God who offers himself to him. In addition to his destiny, he questions human condition in general, his hopes, his experiences and desire for God, his doubts... And speaking precisely of the experience of God, the Spanish theologian Jiménez Duque, in his phenomenological approach to Christian vocation, said that it "is an immediate and direct knowledge of a necessarily concrete object, intentionally interiorised, with which one maintains a relationship and enters into vital communion"⁵. In fact, any attempt to define vocation leads only to this reality; it is nothing other than that experience that makes man enter into a heart to heart with the surprising and concrete reality that is God. For it is in the unfolding of this experience that man, as a contingent being, hears the voice of Jesus, like Simon Peter on the shore of the lake of Gennesaret: saying: "Put out into the deep"; and this is only possible through faith.

That said, this work, supported by the ideas of a number of authors, invites the reader to define his own interests and to decide for himself, in the light of God's Spirit, the meaning he wants to give to his own life, guided by Simon Peter's obedience and willingness to go forward in his life. In order to ensure an inclusive and interdisciplinary approach, I have called upon four sciences: Philosophy, as it is, according to Paul Glenn, "the study of all things naturally knowable by man's unaided powers, insofar as these things are studied in their deepest causes and reasons"⁶. Then, Theology, as a rational discourse about God (theo-logos), which finds its source in the act of faith; Theological Anthropology, insofar as it presupposes man, a vocational subject, created by God in His image and likeness and called to enter into a relationship with him in the intimacy of the

4 COMMISSION BIBLIQUE PONTIFICALE, *Qu'est-ce que l'homme ? Un itinéraire d'Anthropologie Biblique*, Cerf, Paris, 2020.

5 JIMÉNEZ DUQUE BALDOMERO, *La Mística: La experiencia del Misterio*, Edicep, Valencia, 1946, 73-74.

6 PAUL GLENN, *An Introduction to Philosophy*, Vail-Ballou Press, Binghamton, 1944, p. 3.

revelation of His risen Son Jesus Christ, in order to participate in eternal salvation; and the Psychology of Vocation, in the concern to offer the vocational subject the necessary rudiments, starting from his religious experience and in the light of theological facts, that allow him to better understand himself and God's plan for him and for the world. Convinced of the necessity of these elements already mentioned, the most important thing for this book is not, therefore, that it simply be read. Rather, it requires that the reader appropriates the spirit that runs through it and becomes imbued with the overall objective, which is none other than to stimulate a taste for the experience of God, Christian duty and the courage of hope in the midst of the vicissitudes of the world in which we all live and move. In short, these few pages are meant to question us and encourage us to find personal answers from within ourselves, that give meaning to our own vocation.

CHAPTER I

Man, a sacred story

From the two creation narratives, contained in Gen 1:1-2,4a and Gen 2:5-3,24 respectively, two identical essential realities emerge: that of the image and likeness of God and that of man itself, who is at the centre of God's plan. Thus, from the moment of creation, God shows his predilection to man and entrusts him with the first place of his vocation: the Garden of Eden. This trust of the Creator in his creature initiates the desire to participate in the divine project, so that together, Creator and creature enter into a relationship of intimacy at the centre of which love and the fullness of life are manifested. This first beginning then commits man's full vocation, which is to live in God, with God and for God. When, at the beginning, God communicates the image of himself to the man and woman he has just created in a Trinitarian communion, he realises his power in them, because he makes them a somewhat special creation that he himself describes as 'very good' (Gen 1:28-31), in that his own image is imprinted on them⁷.

When man eventually falls into sin through disobedience, God will multiply covenants with his people to assure them of his care and to raise them from their fall into sin. Thus will begin a new page in the history of the people of Israel, with Abraham at the head of the thread. Without even knowing in advance what God's plan was for him, Abraham set out towards an unknown and uncertain destination. He heeded the call of the Lord who said to him: "Go from your country, from your homeland and from your father's house to the land that I will show you...I will make you a great people and I will bless you..." (Gen 12:1-2). Abraham response to this divine call will

7 Cfr. KILANI MONDHER, *Introduction à l'anthropologie*, Payot, Lausanne, 1992, p. 5.

definitely inaugurate not only his personal vocation, but above all that of the people of Israel to which he belongs. This new people of God will be formed following many stages until they reach the promised land (cf. Gen 17:8; Ex 6:8; Lev 20:24; Deut 6:10). Among these stages is the exodus from Egypt and the long march through the desert, seeking deliverance from Pharaoh's wicked hands and the fulfilment of God's promises. Thus, the history of the new chosen people through the New Covenant will continue until the fulfilment of God's promises in Jesus Christ, his only Son, when the times will be fulfilled⁸. This experience of faith of the people of Israel is also realised in every man today. This first chapter will therefore focus on God's plan for humanity. The following reflections are aided by Psalm 8, which asks the fundamental and all-encompassing question: What is man?

Human life as a vocation

Human life and human development are two intimately connected realities that define man's long-standing need to be at the centre of the universe as a privileged creature of God. By imprinting the essentially divine character in man, God makes him a marvellous being, "little less than a God, crowning him with glory and honour" (Ps 8:5). In ordinary human language, the word 'experience' may mean the manifestations or dispositions of the mind about a specific reality. For instance, one might say that he is experienced in driving, only when having been confronted for a considerable time with this activity and its various mechanisms of operation. One could also say that he is experienced in teaching, having undoubtedly been immersed for a long time in this professional environment and thus now able to identify the various mechanisms of the teaching milieu with less difficulties.

Besides, in the field of the humanities and social sciences, experience refers to the contribution of knowledge that the external world makes to the human mind. Indeed, experience has an empirical dimension here, in that it keeps the subject in contact with

8 Cfr. LUIS FRANCISCO LADARIA FERRER, *Mystère de Dieu, mystère de l'homme, II. Anthropologie théologique*, Cerf, Paris, 2011.

immediate, sensible reality. In the field of psychology, for example, experience is known as “the mode of knowledge through the intuitive and affective grasping of meanings and values, perceived on a world that emits qualitatively differentiated signs and reminders. It is the spontaneous, involuntary movement by which man finds himself challenged by the world, by an object, by another”⁹.

In other words, one can only speak of experience if an idea or situation causes the mind to perceive or engage in immediate meaning. This immediate trigger necessarily leads to the motion of the human spirit. And if the vocation of man is, in its entirety, an experience of God, thus, this must constitute a life project for man, so that he can reach and define his own identity, to the point that to speak of a vocational experience is to speak indirectly of the unfolding of God in the history of man, making him a sacred history¹⁰.

Human vocation at the centre of theological anthropology

In the introduction to this book, I stated - and I will return to this point later - that man, in his relationship with God, is the focal point of anthropological-theological discourse. This is why in the understanding of the German theologian Karl Rahner, theological anthropology designates the systematic set of theological statements about the human person¹¹, to such an extent that to speak of God is also always, intrinsically and inevitably to speak of man, since he is the central subject of human life. This discourse necessarily invites man to become aware of his natural identity as a being created in the image of God. Indeed, if man, from his creation, is endowed with a vocation, it is important that this be perceived in a twofold movement: on the one hand, the disposition to receive the call that comes to him from God his Creator; on the other, the response that he gives to God in all freedom and vocational responsibility. Therefore, the people of God must manifest an authentic life of faith, which helps them to invest themselves in the search for God’s plan.

9 ANTOINE VERGOTE, *Psychologie religieuse*, Charles Dessart, Bruxelles, 1966, p. 36.

10 RAIMON PANIKKAR ALEMANY, *L'expérience de Dieu. Icônes du Mystère*, Ed. Albin Michel, Paris, 2002.

11 Cfr. KARL RAHNER, «Théologie et anthropologie», in *Théologie d'aujourd'hui et de demain*, Cerf, Paris 1967, p. 111.

Indeed, it is impossible for man to enter into union with Christ the Lord if he does not have the certainty of the unconditional love of the Triune God. Only in this way can human freedom be conceived in response to God's call, whose foundation is none other than unconditional and disinterested love (cf. Mt 22:37-40).

The challenge of a vocational model in a pluralist and secularised world

Today, the world advocates for an “avocational” anthropological model, which renounces any meaning in life. Many people today are overwhelmed by the madness of the world and no longer know the elementary grammar of existence, and live on daily basis, without any projects, without any perspectives. Faced with this current challenge of our world, the anthropology of vocation renews God's project in the human person, proposing him the courage of a new spiritual adventure in Christ and with Christ. And because man appears at the centre of creation, he receives life from the breath of God. That is why he is *capax Dei*, that is, capable of God, capable of knowing and loving him, capable of entering into a personal relationship with him, by virtue of this imprint of his creation. If the world retained this unique identity as adopted children of God, it would certainly reflect eternal bliss on earth. Even though sin has entered the world, God continues to show his love in the work of his hands, lifting man up when he falls and giving him the grace of a new beginning. Thus, our communion with God through Christ and our communion with all men and women makes us “in Christ a sacrament or, if you like, a sign and means of realising intimate union with God and the unity of the whole human race”¹².

To Respond to one's vocation, then, means making this natural responsibility to reproduce the image of the Son in the heart of the world. And this reproduction of the image of the Son in the life of the believer only makes sense when the life received in its fullness radiates in the midst of others. In this way, man fulfils God's plan, which has been revealed to him since his creation. Thus, God asks him to preserve the life received in obedience to his Son Jesus

12 LG, n. 1.

Christ. This is vocational obedience. It presupposes the recognition of God as Creator and Lord, opening up the possibility of a personal relationship. The response that man gives to God is constitutive of human freedom. The Virgin Mary demonstrated this, the prophets and disciples of Jesus as well, and as Simon Peter, whose vocational experience runs through this book. In all freedom, on the shores of the lake of Gennesaret, he said to the Lord: “Master, we have toiled all night and caught nothing; but at your word I will cast the nets” (Lk 5:5). This experience and many others allow me to affirm without ambiguity that the concrete and personal vocational project is the most authentic and true realisation of the human being, his greatest good. These aspects are easily seen in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. He lived the filial relationship with the Father and responded with his whole life to his will. He was obedient to the Father to the point of dying on the cross (cf. Phil 2:8).

Grace in God’s plan

Grace is one of the most frequently used words in the language of the Church; it appears repeatedly in the vocabulary of Christian life, in sermons and Sunday homilies, in prayers and in the liturgy of the Church, in conversations with family and friends, etc. But what is it really about? What is grace?

Grace in human language

Among the three greeting formulas of the priest at the opening of the Mass, there is one that introduces the concept of grace. It goes thus: “The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all”. (2 Cor 13:13). Whether Priest or laity, we have all used already this concept. Yet, if asked to define it, many would find it difficult.

The concept of ‘grace’ refers to the Greek *Καρις* and Latin *Gratia*; this word was used in everyday language in the ancient world and is still used today. For example: it was applied to beauty, splendour, clarity, enchantment, friendliness, etc. It has been applied indiscriminately to both the ancient and the modern world, both to people and to animate or inanimate things. So, one could speak of grace to express the beauty of the body, for instance, of clothes,

words, the sweetness of life, the joys of marriage, etc. Moreover, this concept was used to express in concrete situations the superiority of someone over another, that of a master over a slave... and even today, in most of our States, we still speak of a presidential clemency to designate the constitutional and penal provisions that grant the Head of State the right to remit or cancel certain court sentences. From both points of view, the word refers to a privilege. However, from the Christian point of view, it is the gift of God in the Covenant He has sealed with His people through His Son Jesus Christ and it is about his project of love.

Grace as a project of love

Beyond the penal, social, cultural or constitutional considerations I have just mentioned, Christian grace is a project of love. It exceeds the sum of merits, because if God's work were necessarily conditioned by man's action and merits, God would bite his tongue and find in man nothing but disappointment and ignominy. Grace, then, is nothing other than God's life in man, His presence in him, His dwelling in him... Provided that the latter cooperates and opens himself to the Spirit who invites him to this encounter. The love of God has never been considered as an abstract reality, but as a purely and intensely personal attitude.

Clearly, we can say that grace manifests the saving act that God performed through his Son Jesus Christ, who was crucified on the cross, died and rose on the third day. It is not something, but a Person: it is God himself; it is Jesus Christ of Nazareth, his life and love, his mercy, his greatness and splendour. It is indeed this divine presence that makes us new creatures¹³.

Man, imago Dei

I intend to recall the relationship of the vocational subject with his Creator and the need for openness and collaboration. Among the questions already formulated in the general introduction is the

13 Cfr. LUIS FRANCISCO LADARIA FERRER, *Teologia del peccato originale e della grazia*, BAC, Madrid, 1993, 295-298.

central one of this first chapter. It is: "What is man? Since the beginning of the world, many ideals have tended to treat man as a means to an end; or to measure his value only in terms of his contribution to the group or production in the family and elsewhere. Yet "God created man in his own image; in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them" (Gen 1:26-27).

What is man that you should care for him...?

This question, taken from Psalm 8:4ff, poses the central concern of God's goodness to man. As such, each of us has a special place in God's eyes. Created in the image of God, man is also called to cooperate with God and his brothers and sisters in the society in which he lives¹⁴. This teaching on what man is implies starting from the consideration of man as a social being, living in the world with his fellow human beings. Indeed, the question "What is man?" is for all ages a precious inheritance received from the Judeo-Christian Tradition. It imposes introspection, questioning and, above all, abasement. Faced with the ineffable love of God, man can only marvel with the psalmist: "If I look at your sky, the work of your hands, the moon and the stars which you arranged, what is man that you should care for him? Yet thou hast made him little less than a God, with glory and honour hast thou crowned him; thou hast given him power over the works of thy hands, all things thou hast laid under his feet..." (Ps 8:4-7); and Psalm 144 (143) adds: "Lord, what is man that you care for him? A son of man for you to care? Man is like a breath, his days like a passing shadow" (Ps 144:3-4). In both cases, God manifests Himself to man essentially as love.

It must be remembered, therefore, that all men are bearers of an eternal destiny; so much so that their very existence is already an expression of an act of unchanging love, manifested by God their Creator. The book of Wisdom demonstrates this most clearly: "... for thy incorruptible spirit is in all things. That is why you chastise the guilty little by little and admonish them by reminding them of their sins, so that, having renounced wickedness, they may believe

14 Cfr. JÜRGEN MOLTMANN, *L'homme, Essai d'anthropologie chrétienne*, Cerf, Paris, 1979.

in you, Lord”. (Wis 12:1-2). In presenting his book *Dieu pour penser. L’homme*, the Belgian theologian Adolphe Gesché writes:

Theology dares (to think about man) and can (contribute) to it. Of course, his discourse is mainly about God. But it is also about man, insofar as theology thinks about God in order to think man through this key that it calls God. And this is especially true in the Christian regime where, after the Incarnation, it became impossible for faith to express itself in any other way than by seeing God and man as signifiers of each other. There would then be a theological anthropology, which would have a word on man that, in whatever way it adheres to it, could help him understand himself¹⁵.

“God is love” (1 Jn 4:8), his love is communicated and freely given. From the beginning, he has spread his mantle of love over man by establishing the order of creation, man’s unique divine vocation and grace through Christ. Can there be an event, no matter how shocking that can be, that turns man away from God’s love? Can we imagine for a moment that God ceases to be God? St Paul testifies to the beauty of the experience of God and with his song of blessing comforts mankind: “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in heavens, in Christ (...) And this to the praise and glory of his grace which he has given us in his beloved Son” (Eph 1:3-6). It is the discovery of what God, our Creator, has made of his work. His love is eternal, free and unconditional, infinite and personal, and he has made it his plan for us. God’s plan for man is therefore immutable and irrevocable. Sin crumbled it, crumpled it, but never destroyed it. For sin has been forgiven, reconciliation has taken place through the blood of the Lamb, death has been defeated, the gates of heaven have been wide opened, slaves have received the legitimacy of children of God, the dispossessed have received the earth as their inheritance, and love and grace have been poured out with full measure¹⁶. In the mystery of the Incarnation of Our Lord Jesus Christ, the divinisation of man, which had be-

15 ADOLPHE GESCHÉ, *Dieu pour penser. L’homme*, Cerf, Paris, 1993, p. 8.

16 Cfr. BERNARD SESBOÛÉ, *L’homme, merveille de Dieu, Essai d’anthropologie christologique*, Salvator, Paris, 2015.

gun from the creation of the world, was definitively realised. In his humanity, heaven and earth united forever. Jesus, as God, manifested his kenosis, taking on our poor nature, to the point of reaching it in its most difficult experiences, except for sin. (cf. Phil 2:6-11).

A Dehumanised humanity

If we affirm that man is a sacred being placed at the centre of the world to manifest the image received from God, it is deplorable to realise that his value and dignity are today more than ever strongly questioned. In the current context, many doctrines have buried the human person at the expense of selfish interests. This world torn apart by civil and tribal wars, genocide and murder of all kinds poses a serious challenge to humanity¹⁷. How can we deal with a society in which men and women do not accept each other because of the colour of their skin, because of their race? A society in which the prevalence of violence seriously challenges the traditional and existential conception of man created in the image of God? What to do in a world where the increase in crime and drug abuse, even among the young, is becoming more and more alarming? Such circumstances force Christianity to ask essential theological and anthropological questions about the return to human, moral and religious values. Are they not the consequence of sin and the fact that human beings have lost their true identity, that of being created in the image of God? Are they not the negative aspect of a society without God, of a world that is making God die? Do they not stem from seeing others, especially the weak and vulnerable, as less human and therefore objects to be exploited? Or, finally, are they not evidence of the Christian's inability, or rather refusal, to promote love and peace among brothers and sisters?

Nevertheless, the centre of God's relationship with man is life in all its contents. That is, the defence of life, the dignity of life, the rights of life and even the happiness of life. These are values that must be promoted by anyone who is animated by the Spirit of God. Through the mystery of the Incarnation, God further confirms his likeness and presence in human history by divinising man; while he, God,

17 Cfr. HANS URS VON BALTHASAR, *Au cœur du monde*, DDB, Paris, 1956.

humanises himself. And with the psalmist we marvel once again: “What is man that thou shouldst care for him,” (Ps 8:4). It is also in the sense of the humanisation-divinisation dialectics that Jesus reveals himself as the one who made the total gift of himself. He who, in his omnipotence, came to us to take on our flesh, in all humility; he who came to dwell among us and give us life by the power of the Holy Spirit, invites us to consider life as a total gift of his Father for humanity (cf. Phil 2:5-11). In his kenosis, the Son of Man has thus manifested his relationship with the Father and the Holy Spirit (cf. Jn 14:24; 16:7-8).

From what has been said, the focus of God’s relationship with his people is to be understood not necessarily and only in relation to belonging to a religion, but above all in relation to something more fundamental: life. In other words, if our belonging to a religion does not promote the flourishing and growth of life, then that religion, however famous or ancient, is useless. However, what I would like to emphasise is that religion, whatever it may be (Jewish, Christian or Muslim), does not exist on its own if it is not a religion of man, a religion of life; that is, a religion that defends God’s plan for humanity. The true religion is the one that gives life, the one that humanises man; it is the religion characterised by the defense of the rights to life, the protection of all men and the guarantee of their happiness¹⁸. It is in this sense that St James writes in his Epistle: “A religion pure and undefiled before God our Father is this: to succour orphans and widows in their afflictions and to keep oneself pure from this world” (Jas 1:27). Only in this way can we expect holiness. Simon Peter also responded to this life mission around the lake of Gennesaret. From his boat, he knew how to respond to his responsibility as fisher of men, that is, of lives to be secured and preserved.

The universality of the human vocation

“The Lord wants us to be saints and does not expect us to be content with a mediocre, watered-down, inconsistent existence”¹⁹ Pope Francis reminds us. We are all invited to participate in the life and happiness that God offers us in its fullness. It is a call to universal

18 Cfr. JOSÉ MARÍA CASTILLO, *La laicidad del Evangelio*, Desclée Brower, Bilbao, 2014.

19 FRANCIS, Apostolic Exhortation *Gaudete et Exsultate*, LEV, Roma 2018, n. 1.

brotherhood, an unexpected invitation, because it is God's initiative. Our life has meaning only when it discovers the face of Christ. The parable of the wedding guests (cf. Mt 22:1-14; Lk 14:15-24) clearly demonstrates this. If I resort to it, it is above all to illustrate the gratuitousness of our Lord's invitation. This is the universal vocation of love.

The vocation to love

All men are called to collaborate in the vast field of love and encounter, which is the manifestation of God's presence in the world. Every person, in his or her own environment, is a protagonist in this sense. Having become a new creature through the waters of Baptism, every baptised person is called to collaborate in the building of a new world, where, moved by the Spirit, he spreads the love of the Risen One. The world in which we live, the Church to which we belong, undeniably faces many challenges that leave no conscious mind indifferent. I earlier mentioned some of them. The goal for all should therefore be to seek the ways of holiness, inserting it into everyday reality and seizing the opportunities. The Baptism we have received requires us to commit ourselves more fully to our responsibilities. We must live in a new way. St Paul, whose voice resounds for our world and the Church today, invites us to mature in the relationship of adopted sons; for we have not received a Spirit of slaves to make us fall back into fear! We have received a Spirit of adopted children that makes us cry out in all legitimacy: *Abba! Father!* (cf. Rom 8:15).

The Apostle to the Gentiles exhorts us to a free life in the Holy Spirit, which opens up prospects of hope. The true human novelty is thus the one invested in the dynamic of the law of love: "You shall love your neighbour as yourself" (Mt 22:39; Mk 12:31; Lk 10:27, 36-37; Rom 13:8-10...) "Thus the Spirit of God and charity go hand in hand, because "the fruit of the Spirit is charity, joy, peace, patience, helpfulness, kindness, trust in others, meekness, self-control..." (Gal 5:22-23). We must model our lives on this freedom, so that we can rightly call out to God: *Abba! Father!* And just as the Spirit descended upon Jesus at his Baptism in the Jordan and anointed him, so too the one who receives Baptism in Jesus Christ receives the same anointing that configures him to the Master and is sent into

the world to bring the Good News of salvation to God's poor and to set the oppressed free (cf. Lk 3:21-22; 4:18). It is then that the disciple is drawn throughout his life into this tension born of the Spirit: it is a matter of becoming a member of the new creation in Christ.

Called and sent to witness

If Baptism is the sacramental sign given to the Christian community to express and embody the totality of the new life in Christ, it is also the birthplace of the new humanity, because we are indelibly identified with the crucified and risen Christ. Whoever receives the waters of Baptism thus becomes a member of a community characterised by profound equality, a community in which all forms of difference are banished. The new man who emerges from the waters of Baptism, the Christian is then called and sent to be a fisher of men, a witness of love and fraternal communion in the midst of the world. Our belonging to the Church through Baptism opens us up to a double task: that of participation in communion and that of fraternal and universal solidarity. In other words, we are called to build a social and ecclesial communion around us, where our task becomes the great missionary presence in the world, in Jesus Christ.

On the other hand, there is a reality in which the whole of human nature is involved. No one invents or decides his own passage from being to non-being. No one decides the beginning and the end of his life. Bearing this truth in mind, the book of Ecclesiastes (Qohelet) says: "No man is so master of his breath of life as to withhold it, nor has any power over the day of his death" (Ec 8:8a) All of us, whether we like it or not, have been called to life and for life. It is this anthropological perspective that makes the human vocation universal. It is therefore appropriate for everyone to accept it as a free gift from God. We cannot but confirm this: "Every person is a sacred story", because he is in the image of God and called to enter into communion with Him. Delving into the New Testament, St Paul, in his Letter to the Romans, reminds us that since the creation of the world, God has destined all people to be his adopted children and to communicate (transmit) to them his divine life through his only Son Jesus Christ (cf. Rom 8; Eph 1). This means that the universal vocation is clearly the first form of consecration to which the human and believing race has been called since creation. And

for the baptised it is a grace to be part of this new covenant, which now confers a new title, the one I just pointed out above: adopted children through the blood of the Lamb. And this consecration must obviously be referred to the consecration of Jesus, as we read in the Gospel according to John: "He whom the Father has anointed and sent into the world" (John 10:36). It is in him, in fact, that all the new people are consecrated; he is the consecrated one par excellence and in his priestly prayer he prays to his Father for our own consecration: "Consecrate them with the truth, he says. Your Word is Truth. As you sent me into the world, so I send them into the world. And for their sake I consecrate myself, that they also may be consecrated by the Truth" (Jn 17:17-19).

This prayer of consecration implies the Christian's commitment to fully live his vocation in the Church and in the world. Like Christ and with him, we must give ourselves. And once again St Paul exhorts us: "I urge you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercy of God, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God: this is your spiritual worship." (Rom 12:1). To love God with all one's heart, with all one's soul, with all one's mind and with all one's strength, and to love one's neighbour as oneself, as Christ has loved us, is the true meaning that every man, every believer, must give to the universal vocation. It is a call to holiness, wherever we are, whatever we do. From this vocation comes man's desire to go into the depths with the Lord and become fisher of men, for his greater glory and the salvation of souls.

CHAPTER II

“Duc in altum”: a call to metanoia

Let us continue exploring the fifth chapter of the Gospel according to Luke (cf. Lk 5:1-11). In fact, the whole region already knows that Jesus is passing through and performing miracles: he heals the sick and casts out demons (cf. Lk 4:40-41). Moreover, he is aware of the missionary task entrusted to him by his heavenly Father: to proclaim the Kingdom of God to the ends of the earth. We already read the indications of his roadmap in the last three verses of the fourth chapter: “At the break of day he went out and came to a desert place. But the crowds sought him, caught up with him, and wished to detain him lest he should depart from them. But he said, ‘I must proclaim the Kingdom of God also to the other cities; for this I was sent’. And he went preaching in the synagogues of Judea” (Lk 4:42-44). The call to become fishers of men is part of this dynamic of expansion of the universal mission. Christ, being the first missionary, goes out to meet all peoples, transmitting to them the message of love. Thus, he invites all his disciples to go to the ends of the earth, to meet men and women, making disciples of them and baptising them in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit (cf. Mt 28:19).

In the boat of experience with the Lord

What must first be stated is that the theological sources of Christianity are based on a compendium of experiences of God that are Scripture, the Tradition of the Apostles and the Magisterium of the Church. All this sum of facts, words and deeds form a solid basis that allows God-seekers of all times to read their own history, always ancient and always new. God, in fact, continues to speak to people in reality, and his uninterrupted presence is realised and

renewed in every man, every woman, every child and young person, every community and every generation of believers, provided they open themselves to his mystery and his saving Word, under the life-giving action of the Holy Spirit. God is beyond our human limits and his experience is both mediated and direct. He offers himself in time and space, through the mediation of created reality. And through this, God actually becomes present - he is God in our history.

*“Put out to sea and cast your nets for fishing”:
Simon’s experience*

Simon Peter’s encounter in the boat with the Lord and his two companions, James and John, is proof enough of the experience each of us can have with God, to the point of leaving everything to follow him. To the extent of a true experience of Christ, a metanoia took place in Simon Peter, that is, a change, a new way of appreciating the reality before him. Furthermore, it is important to remember that the experience of God is inseparable from the experience of faith. It is a vital experience in which faith is taken on as one’s own and personal, and not only as something felt, but above all as something freely lived, accepted and appropriated. The thoughts and actions of the man who became a fisher of men were no longer the same as before, as we shall see as we proceed in this chapter.

We must not therefore shirk from the truth that the initiative of the encounter always comes from God. It is he who renews his goodness in each of us, as he did with Simon Peter, asking us to enter his boat. The Lord goes before us in all our endeavours. Our experience of him is therefore not the result of our own efforts, for without him we can do nothing²⁰. It is God and him alone who inspires every good deed in us; for he alone is God and his unexpected, gratuitous and superabundant solicitude for humanity has no equal. At the beginning of his Apostolic Letter *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, Pope John Paul II refers to the beautiful words of Jesus. He does so in these words:

20 Cfr. FRANCIS, Apostolic Letter *Evangelii Gaudium*, Vatican Editions, Rome 2013, n. 42.

At the beginning of the new millennium, as the great Jubilee in which we celebrated the two thousand years since the birth of Jesus comes to a close, and a new section of the journey opens up for the Church, the words echo in our hearts with which Jesus, after speaking to the crowds from Simon's boat, one day invited the apostle to "put out to sea" for fishing, "Duc in altum" (Lk 5:4). Peter and his first companions trusted the word of Christ, and cast their nets. And having done so, they caught a great multitude of fish" (Lk 5:6). Duc in altum! This word resounds for us today, and invites us to make grateful memory of the past, to live the present with passion, to open ourselves with confidence to the future: "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and for ever" (Heb 13:8)²¹.

In what, then, does this Christian experience consist? Firstly, the long expectation has finally culminated in the definitive coming of the Son of Man; secondly, in him the Kingdom of God is inaugurated and in him God's definitive covenant with his people is sealed; finally, with him, the God who had promised "You shall be my people and I will be your God" (Jer 30:22) has begun to be the "Emmanuel - God-with-us" (Mt 1:23). This means, in other words, that the experience of God of which we speak in a Christian context can only be realised through an encounter: that with the person of Jesus Christ.

Simon Peter and his two companions, as "professionals" and therefore experienced fishermen, knew that if they failed to catch anything during the night, it would be useless to insist when it is already daylight. For fishing takes place in the darkness of the night. Against all odds, Jesus tells them to cast their nets again. Although perplexed and confused, the poor men have a clear idea of the Lord; they obey him and the result is palpable: the fishing is indeed miraculous! But before turning to this word of life and hope from the Lord to Simon Peter and his companions, I would like to return to the importance of seeing, through this same word, the unwavering closeness of God to man and how much his heart full of love allows itself to be submerged in the face of human sorrow and discouragement. Simon Peter is an example of this: together, they have toiled

21 JOHN PAUL II, Apostolic Letter *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, Vatican Editions, Rome 2001, n. 1.

all night without catching anything; they are undoubtedly discouraged, they have lost all hope; at least as far as this fishing trip is concerned. Yet he entrusts all his will to the Lord and whispers to him: "... On your word I will cast the nets" (Lk 5.5).

"... On your word I will cast the nets"

In a language proper to vocational anthropology, it is easy to understand that every communication between the Creator and man is an expression of a vocation, of which God is the author and man the recipient. In the history of salvation, God reveals Himself through the Word. Through this Word "God not only communicates something of himself, something that is implicit in every word, but also [...] asks something of someone; the one he calls, the one he sends, to whom he makes the promise and for whom he is judge"²². If we understand this way, then we can better understand that the communication initiated by God himself reveals a great vocational scope. By creating man, God called him into existence, to destine him for a mission, making him a promise to be with him wherever he sends him. God created him with the power of his Word; the Word that creates and recreates. In the Incarnation of his Son Jesus Christ, he makes him the living Word, the *Logos*, the Word made flesh. What do we see in Jesus' countless miracles during his public ministry? Well, with his Word he heals, encourages, forgives sins. It is also with his Word that he makes Simon Peter's fishing an unforgettable scene.

The verb *vocare*, which has the meaning of calling, inviting and appointing someone, helps us to understand the power of the Word in the entire history of salvation. In this sense, it is God who addresses his call to man and invites him to establish an intimate interpersonal and filial relationship with him (cf. Jn 1:12; 1 Jn 3:1). Vocation is always a grace, initiated by God, to go out to meet humanity, which He Himself created out of love. It is, and therefore requires, participation in life with God. The Second Vatican Council clearly expresses this experience in these terms: "For by this Revelation, the invisible God (cf. Col 1:15; 1 Tim 1:17) in His great love speaks to

22 CARLO MARÍA MARTINI, *La vocazione nella Bibbia, De la vocación bautismal a la vocación presbiteral*, SEA, Madrid, 1997, p. 20.

men as to friends (cf. Ex 33:11; Jn 15:14-15), and He entertains Himself with them (cf. Bar 3:38) in order to invite and admit them to communion with Himself²³. In the face of such goodness and wisdom of God, should man still resist?

When Jesus said to Simon Peter: "Put out to sea and cast your nets for fishing" (Lk 5:4), the latter did not hesitate any longer to respond to this mysterious Word with words that reflected both his helplessness and his total abandonment to the Master: "Master, we have toiled all night and have caught nothing; but at your word I will cast the nets" (Lk 5:5) And from this experience, the Lord will entrust him with the mission (vocation) to become not a fisher of fishes in the waters, but a fisher of men in the world. It is worth remembering that the Lord's call is not imposed on man; he is free to answer. Simon Peter could have closed himself off in his complacency as a 'professional' fisherman in the waters of Galilee; he could have paid no attention to the distraction caused by Jesus in his boat. Yet he allowed himself to be enlightened by the Spirit; he cooperated with grace to enter into the relationship of friendship spoken of in these pages. In this sense, when one resists God's call and will, life becomes meaningless, superficial and vague. The episode of the rich young man bears witness to this:

As he was leaving to set out on his journey, a man ran up to him and, throwing himself on his knees before him, asked him, "Master, what must I do to have eternal life?" Jesus said to him, "You know the commandments [...] He then said, "Master, all these things I have kept from my youth." Then Jesus stared at him and loved him. He said to him, "One thing you lack: go, sell what you have and give to the poor and you will have treasure in heaven, then come and follow me. But he was saddened by these words and went away sorrowful, for he had many possessions. (Mk 10:17-22).

Sometimes we fall into the trap of indecision when faced with the Lord's invitation to follow him. Like the young man in the parable, we seem to turn away or become saddened by the Word of the Lord, because we assume our inability to obey, either because of our lack

23 VATICAN II, Dogmatic Constitution *Dei Verbum*, Vatican Editions, Rome 1965, n. 2.

of faith or because of our pride and selfishness. In his Apostolic Exhortation *Verbum Domini*, Pope Benedict XVI wrote:

The Word of God, in fact, does not oppose man, it does not mortify his authentic desires, on the contrary it enlightens them, purifying them and bringing them to fulfilment. How important it is for our time to discover that only God responds to the thirst that is in the heart of every man! In our age, unfortunately ... the idea has spread that God is extraneous to man's life and problems and, indeed, that his presence can be a threat to his autonomy... Jesus presents himself to us as the one who came so that we might have life in abundance (cf. Jn 10:10). Therefore, we must make every effort to show the Word of God as an openness to one's own problems, an answer to one's own questions, a broadening of one's own values and at the same time as a satisfaction of one's own aspirations²⁴.

It was the work of the Word of Jesus in the heart of Palestinian life, on the Sea of Galilee, by the Lake of Gennesaret, that transformed the lives of Simon Peter and the others. In this vast fountain of water, Jesus sets to work to restore confidence to a group of men weary of their professional efforts. Only the Word of Jesus restores the order of things. Jesus, in Simon Peter's boat, teaches the crowds through the Word.

He proposes a journey with everyone who, like Simon Peter and his two companions (James and John, according to Luke's account) accept to follow Christ, to become with him "fishers of men" (cf. Lk 5:10). Let us pay attention to the grammatical form of Jesus' recommendation to Simon Peter: "Put out in deep and cast your nets for fishing". Though the English Language form does not enable to grasp explicitly the movement from singular to plural, however, we can imagine that Jesus injunction to Simon Peter is both in the imperative singular "Take", and the imperative plural "Take", (so as to say, let everyone take part in the action). Therefore, though initially personal, the call of Jesus becomes eventually inclusive of others. Not only did he call Simon Peter, but also were James and John according to the Lucan narrative. This shift from the singular to the

24 BENEDICT XVI, Apostolic Exhortation *Verbum Domini*, Vatican Editions, Rome 2008, n. 23.

plural confirms God's universal plan of salvation for mankind and the need for communion among the peoples of the whole earth. The joy of a miraculously fruitful catch is what Jesus Christ wants for everyone! That is why he commissions us to go in deep, to build a new world. This is what I call "vocational solidarity".

Every mission starts from the encounter with God, with Jesus, and finds its meaning in humanity and with humanity. Simon Peter had agreed to take Jesus in his boat. But why did Jesus choose Simon Peter's boat and not the others? (since the Gospel informs us that there were two boats! cf. Lk 5:2-3) Was the owner of the second boat not welcoming? Probably not. The Lord asked for Simon Peter's boat, probably because he wanted to make him the rock on which his Church would be built. The idea was to make Simon Peter the leader of his Church. At this action of Simon Peter and his companions, the unbelievable happened! The miracle of God! The nets gathered an indescribable amount of fish, so much so that they could hardly hold on to the ropes (cf. Lk 5:6).

In the boat of the Lord's desire

The call of the Lord is renewed every day. Simon Peter and his two companions heard the call of Jesus, "and they followed him". Today more than ever, Jesus calls all men and women to cast their nets into the sea that, apparently, is empty of fish, but which, in reality, is full to overflowing, so that they may become fishermen for their brothers and sisters.

And Simon said to him, "Depart from me, Lord, for I am a sinner"

This section seeks to demonstrate the relevance of desire and will in the experience of God in the light of vocational awakening, especially in young people. Every experience of God is in itself a vocational experience, because it is, after all, the relationship that defines the identity and mission of every human being. Did not Peter try to give true meaning to his life? Did he not discover it when he met the Lord? This is what it is all about. Peter discovered within himself that his life would only have meaning if he recognised his lowliness in the face of God's desire to make him a fisher of men.

A faith in search of growth cannot shy away from humility, mixed with boldness and confidence. It is this humility and confidence that the Lord teaches us in Matthew 18:1-5. To become fishers of fish and of men, one must leave the shore of oneself. This requires much energy and also trust in divine providence. Like Simon Peter, who obeyed the Lord and recognised that he was very small before the greatness of God, we must dare to abandon our complacency and our tendency to possess everything for ourselves. But we must also dare to step outside the logic of our own reasoning, which leaves no other possibility of orientation. Simon Peter, though a well-trained fisherman, allowed himself to be seduced by the Word of the Lord that convinced him to try again. He obeyed, without thinking of defying his interlocutor by making speeches of circumstance. This logic of Simon Peter leads us to understand that the mission of the Church cannot depend essentially on our human means, but above all on fidelity, on total trust in Jesus, the fisherman par excellence.

Moreover, in this unprecedented humility of Simon Peter, we discover another aspect of Jesus' mission: the initiative comes from him and we are its beneficiaries. The mission is not Simon Peter's, but the Lord's. Simon Peter is simply the instrument. However, in this mission, the Lord needs you, he needs your humility, your willingness and your obedience. As with Simon Peter, Jesus also needs your nets. After having fished, Simon Peter realises how poor and empty he is before Jesus and cries out in anguish, a sign of humility: "Get away from me, Lord, for I am a sinner" (Lk 5:8) This cry gives the impression of an episode similar to this one, in which Jesus himself pushes Simon Peter away from him: "Get away from me, Satan. For you do not think according to God, but according to men" (Mt 16:23). The first cry that rises up around the lake of Gennesaret is an expression of astonishment, of wonder at the sight of such an astounding miracle. Peter did not expect to experience such an event. The second, near Caesarea Philippi, is an expression of the power of Jesus Christ over the forces of evil that seek to hinder his missionary impulses and his divine project, which passes through the cross. However, what interests us most in this section is obviously the first intervention: that of Simon Peter on the shores of the lake of Gennesaret. Simon is challenged in the very place of his professional competence, but he accepts and trusts. He knows that Jesus cannot let him down. Moreover, had he not witnessed the healing

of his mother-in-law? (cf. Lk 4:38-39) Simon Peter recognises in this superabundance a sign from God and asks Jesus to leave in his turn: “depart from me, Lord, for I am a sinner” (Lk 5:8). He recognises that he is unworthy, and this too is a gift: his sin is revealed to him in the very heart of the gift, because he humbly trusted.

Thus, his humility will earn him a great catch and he will recognise in Jesus the Lord. Then he hears a mysterious word: “Fear not, thou shalt henceforth be a fisher of men” (Lk 5:10). Simon Peter shows his obedience to the word of the Lord and his recognition of the holiness of the Messiah. When he begs the Lord to turn away from him, Simon Peter does not want to give the impression of an immoral man or one who leads a very ignoble life; of course, no one would imagine this professional fisherman a holy man; he has his weaknesses. But in this episode, Simon Peter realises that what his Master has just done is a miracle! In his long experience as a fisherman, he has never had such an experience. In order to cast the nets into the sea again, two fundamental attitudes are required: faith and constancy. These two attitudes are the sign of the humility shown by Simon Peter.

From promise to fulfilment - “Fear not, thou shalt henceforth be a fisher of men”

I imagine that Jesus’ injunction “Put deep in water” never ceased to resound in Simon Peter’s ears... It is as if Jesus were saying to Simon Peter: “Do not be afraid, follow me and the Holy Spirit will take you into the depths of the world, into the depths of yourself, into the depths of my mystery”. It is a powerful word for each of us, provided we are open to the Spirit of God. “Duc in altum” therefore invites us to penetrate into the depths of ourselves, to discover our desire: there we find God, more intimate to ourselves²⁵. Do not be afraid to penetrate deep within yourself, to dig into your desire: there you will find God, more intimate to yourself than yourself, and you will discover yourself in truth. Do not be afraid to go deep into the encounter with the other, discover your own face and welcome the face and gaze of others as Jesus welcomed yours with its greatness and its misery;

25 Cfr. SIMON-PIERRE ARNOLD, *Au risque de Jésus-Christ, une relecture des vœux*, Lessius, Paris, 2007, 144p, p. 10.

do not be afraid and immerse yourself in the heart of the world; be a witness as a useless servant who offers his life for his friends.

Simon Peter discovers in the person of Jesus the manifestation of God's omnipotence, but he also discovers himself as a sinner and unworthy before the immensity of Jesus' love. But Jesus wants to conquer Simon Peter, so he tells him: "Do not be afraid; from now on you will be a fisher of men" (Lk 5:10). And leaving everything behind, the disciples followed Jesus (cf. Lk 5:11). Man must therefore be able to accept the message that liberates and reassures. It is this fundamental relationship that is clearly expressed in Jesus' response to Simon Peter. The grace of vocation presented in the numerous biblical narratives helps us to understand once again how the Word of God takes the form of the decisive call. This call, taken up in the personal and community history of the people of God, reinforces the need for conversion, where the person called is invited to discern his response. The call of God that reaches the human heart must necessarily transform it radically. This inner transformation is accompanied and consolidated by God, who acts in the innermost part of man, with the life-giving power of the Holy Spirit.

This experience offers us an analogy. Very often, man is as if submerged by the world around him. He is less attentive to the movements of his soul, less concerned with the things of the Spirit. Yet, Jesus knows how to follow him in his innermost being; he acts in a pure flow. This is how he worked in the life of Simon Peter, in the lives of his companions and, today, also in our lives. What he heard from the Father, he revealed to us; what he saw the Father in heaven do, he did for us, as he did for Simon Peter, filling his boat and his nets with fish. And when man learns to listen to his voice, wonders begin to happen in his life. Jesus knew what awaited the three fishermen, yet he invited Simon Peter to participate in this new theophany. So this experience cannot be reduced to a mere natural event, but is about God acting in human history and fulfilling his promises.

The Sequela Christi

The Christian vocation is expressed through Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who became flesh and dwelt among men. Therefore, recognising Jesus Christ, listening to his voice in the midst of our usual oc-

cupations and accepting to follow him is in fact what defines Christian identity. It also means putting oneself in the school of Simon Peter and his two companions, who were able to leave everything at the beginning of a new day to follow the voice that spoke to them from within.

Christian risk and the decision of faith

Caught between the ideologies promoted by an increasingly secularised society and the spiritualities that advocate prosperity without the Cross, on the one hand, and the invitation of Jesus Christ to carry one's own cross in order to follow him, on the other, modern man tends more and more towards the first option, towards a human life devoid of any possibility of risk or difficulty. Yet the Cross is the glory of Christ's disciples, it is their consolation. It is in fact the foundation of God's Covenant with his people. Finally, through the Cross, the place of predilection, the Christian faith is founded, because the grace of a Christian life is inevitably the glimpse of a life of faith in God who became man among men, and it is this faith that impels the believer to reach out towards the things above. It penetrates appearances, transcends the logic of human reason, and recognises Christ as the only Saviour. Therefore, in this case, following Christ becomes believing in the love of God who reveals Himself while hiding. To arrive at this vocational decision, it is absolutely necessary to put oneself in the school of listening, which made Simon Peter the custodian of the mysteries of his Master, when the latter entrusted him with the key to his Church.

When we speak of Christian risk and the decision of faith, we cannot but turn to that first group of men who courageously accepted to become disciples of the Lord and who were willing to accompany him in his public ministry. The Gospels give sufficient account of this. Moreover, with this vocational decision, St Luke concludes the beautiful episode of the miraculous fishing at Lake Gennesaret: "When they had brought the boats ashore, they left everything and followed him" (Lk 5:11). St Luke also serves us the progression of Simon Peter's intimate relationship with his Master and the impressive expression of his faith. Thus, he calmly responds to Jesus when the latter poses a "test question" to his disciples gathered around him: "And you, who do you say that I am" (Lk 9:20). Only Simon Peter identified him as

“the Christ of God” (Ibid.). In reality, faith in the Word of Jesus and in His miracles necessarily leads the believer to a vocational decision, because he is now able to identify the signs of predilection that impel him to proclaim his faith in Jesus the Master. Simon Peter was probably not the first to manifest his faith. This is what I call “the Christian risk and decision of faith”. Abraham had already demonstrated this, I spoke about it in detail in the first chapter of this book. We also have John the Baptist’s profession of faith (cf. Jn 1:29), that of Mary, who had the courage to carry in her womb the God made man (cf. Lk 1:38).

However, Simon Peter, for leaving everything to follow Christ (cf. Lk 5:11) and for following the one who called him from the boat at Genesaret as “the Christ of God” (Lk 9:20), makes himself special. It is he who clearly joins the ranks of the keepers of the mysteries. His faith in the “Christ of God” earns him the Master’s trust, expressed exclusively in the Gospel according to Matthew: ‘Blessed are you, Simon, son of Jonah, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. And I say to you that you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my Church (...). I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven: what you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and what you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven’ (Mt 16:17-19). With this announcement made by Jesus, we see the unveiling of a life project that is no longer limited to earthly realities, but also involves heavenly and spiritual ones. For this reason, the believer’s earthly life must truly engage in values that enable him to live a life of peace. This is also why man is called to strive for the heavenly city, because he is a citizen of heaven. In short, the Christian risk and the decision of faith drive one to aspire to give oneself beyond space and time. Finally, the decision of faith implies a commitment to accompany the Master on the path to our bliss. The Apostle Paul experienced this and confidently testifies to his decision of faith: “I have been crucified with Christ, and it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me; if I now live in the flesh, I live in the faith of the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me”. (Gal 2:20).

Dying to live in Christ

The horizon of experience and desire for God provides a providential opportunity to take another step in God’s paths and to discover and further explore the inexhaustible riches of the mystery of Jesus

Christ. For it is in Him that the Christian dies to a new life in Him. Dying to live also prepares the Christian to celebrate the great proclamation of the mystery of the Incarnation. The glory of God, manifested to humanity, has realised and continues to realise the intimate union of the members of the Church. Indeed, if the Church, of which we are members through Baptism, is the total Christ, then in her and also through her, God meets our humanity to make it a universe where life reigns in fullness. Thus, whoever dies for Christ and his Church, lives eternally in Christ and with Christ. And in this case, to follow Christ simply means to die for Christ. It is He who joined humanity when the times were fulfilled and continues today to stimulate it with the life-giving power of the Holy Spirit to share in the inheritance that God the Father has prepared for the ages.

Dying to live in Christ means leaving oneself, abandoning one's selfish decisions and plans to embrace God's plan. It is to think God in order to live God and do his will. Thus, Jesus Christ, the Son of God, modelled his life on the Father's plan. He lived only to do the will of the Father who sent him into the world. He said: "My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to do his work" (John 4: 34). Already in the first chapter of the Letter to the Philippians, St Paul confessed his greatness to Christ, whom he was eager to serve even unto death; Christ is his life for him, and if he were to die, it would be an imperishable gain. Indeed, this Pauline confession should be the motto, or rather, the profession of faith of every disciple of Christ. Even if he must suffer, even if he must die, he is convinced that he is an instrument for the expansion of the Kingdom of God, and his death inaugurates his life in Christ.

There is no doubt that all followers of Christ desire to have a vital experience with Him, or aspire to know the fullness of the inner life in him, or even to dedicate themselves to His service with an undivided heart. However, every disciple of Christ, animated by this great desire for life, can only achieve this goal if he bears his cross daily and follows his Master. If being created in the image of God means that man must enter into communion with God through the filial adoption received from his Son, then this means that the old sinful nature in Adam must die so that the new Adam, who is Christ, can live in man. For "unless the grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit" (Jn 12:24).

Christ recalls this principle and gives it meaning in the sacrifice of his own life. He is the first grain of wheat that fell into the earth to die, so that through his death there might be life in abundance. Without this sacrifice, there would be no transmission of life; it is the pledge of the inner experience of all who are part of it. Finally, it must be the vital expression of the new Christian life, for its glory is its own life reproduced in those who are part of it, it is its expression in the midst of the people who receive it. And in Simon Peter, John and James we see portrayed this people who accept the life of Christ on the shores of the lake of Gennesaret. It is this acceptance of the life of Christ that St Paul also expresses in these terms: "For in the Praetorium and everywhere, no one is unaware that it is for Christ's sake that I am in chains, and most of the brothers in the Lord, encouraged by my chains, are more confident in proclaiming the word without fear" (Phil 1:13-14).

CHAPTER III

Here am i, send me

When one experiences God, one's entire existence is immersed in him. And when immersed, one is ready to make a personal response to the Lord's call. This chapter calls the believers of today and tomorrow to a commitment without fear or dread to the Lord's service of humanity. The passage of the Lord into the boat of our life has such a transforming power that it involves every aspect of our life, its general orientation and its deepest motivations. This is what we have been able to perceive in the previous chapters, with Simon as the central character, and of course other characters in the other Gospel narratives, reflecting the fascinating encounter with the Lord, the option for him and the vocation to follow him. Like Simon Peter in the Gospel, adherence to the Lord is actually expressed and manifested in what I call "Christian commitment", or simply the concrete response to God's plan. This is the actual dimension of our life of faith, called to perseverance and fidelity, which are proper to the Master who invites us to follow him, Jesus Christ. In this chapter I would also like to stress on the Church's interest in young people, her love for them and her concern to see them go out and grow in their relationship with Christ and their brothers and sisters... It is therefore a question, with the help of the Supreme Pontiffs, of awakening in each of them the taste for a loving encounter with the Son of Man.

Gifts and responsibilities: serving in the Spirit

As with Jacob, the Lord renews his unceasing care: "Fear not, for I redeem you. I call you by name: you are mine! If you walk through the waters, I am with you; and the rivers shall not submerge you; if you walk through the fire, it shall not burn you, and the flame shall not kindle you... For you are precious in my sight; for you are honoured, and I love you" (Is 43:1-5). So Isaiah saw the Lord in the temple and it was there that he realised he was a "man of unclean

lips” (Is 6:5), a sinner. But after being cleansed by the burning fire, Isaiah answered the Lord’s call: “Here I am, send me” (Is 6:8).

Vocation as self-giving

The notion of commitment, André-Pierre Gauthier will tell us, refers to multiple meanings, apparently very different. For example, two people committing themselves to each other, a driver committing himself at a crossroads... What these examples have in common is that in all cases we commit ourselves, it is a personal and free decision²⁶. Commitment, in fact, means making a consequential decision. It is therefore based on freedom, often individual freedom, and above all on responsibility, which presupposes a certain maturity. It is a response, an availability, a service. At the same time, commitment implies an ethical and social requirement. God who calls us entrusts us with a mission at the heart of our families, our communities, our societies and the world at large. Today, in a world marked by excessive individualism, emotionalism and self-fulfilment, the word needs to be reconsidered and re-proposed appropriately. For this, its Christian meaning must be deepened in the light of the Gospel and as an expression of following Jesus Christ. The encounter with our Lord Jesus Christ, alive and present here and now in the trying experiences of our lives, cannot but spur us to confront the challenges imposed on us by fear, terror, anxiety, discouragement, pressure from those around us, abandonment, etc. It is therefore the reality that arouses in women and men, in young people and children affected by this experience, the desire to follow him by imitating what he is, dedicating themselves to the service of others, going out to meeting others. We thus move from an excessive individualism to an unprecedented altruism.

The prophet Isaiah gives us an answer that is full of love and delights God’s heart. He knew how to show his readiness for God’s mission in the world: “Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, ‘Whom shall I send and who will go for us? I answered: ‘Here I am, send me’” (Is 6:8). Christian commitment is thus understood as a believing, loving,

26 Cfr. ANDRE-PIERRE GAUTHIER, *Au risque d’un oui, un projet en fraternité*, Beauvais, 2011.

trusting response to Christ, confessed as the Saviour and Redeemer of humanity. It is the mode of expression through which one's experience of him is manifested. The dynamics of commitment are understood as the dynamics of faith, hope and charity in the lives of those who have received Baptism. The root of this baptismal experience requires that every believer should "start afresh from Christ".

Apostles of universal communion

Participation in the universal communion takes place both in the solidarity of God's children and in responsible commitment, through awareness of the gifts and talents that the Holy Spirit infuses into our hearts. Since we are created in the image and likeness of God, our existence inevitably enters into the dynamic of responsibility, where we are all called to live out in full the gifts we have received from the Holy Spirit. Therefore, all that we receive in the Spirit must be put to the service and edification of humanity and the Church. Here, with the fourth Gospel, we see unveiled the great commandment of love that disposes every one of Christ's faithful to offer himself freely to his community: "A new commandment I give you, that you love one another; even as I have loved you, that you also love one another" (John 13:34-35). We cannot speak of gifts without turning to St Paul, who instructed the Corinthians on the diversity of gifts and charisms bestowed by the Holy Spirit. The Apostle urged them, and us today, to take care of these gifts and charisms, to put them at the service of the community. Christian responsibility presupposes that each person is aware of the gifts and charisms he or she has received from God and that he or she uses them for the common good, in the family to which he or she belongs and in all the other spheres of life in which he or she is called to live. In fact, refusing to dispense our blessings for the building up of the Church or society means refusing to recognise the goodness of the One who created us in His image and likeness, and thus refusing to respond to His plan.

The parable of the talents (cf. Mt 25:14-30; Lk 19:12-27), similar to the one in Jn 15:1-12 (the vine and the branches), warns us against ignoring or hiding our talents. Just as the master distributed the talents to each of his labourers before going on his journey, so God has given us the talents, each according to our abilities. And in distributing them, he expects everyone to make them bear fruit. But how? By offering

ourselves in the service of all, by engaging in the building of our society and the Church. In a word, the parable of the talents encourages us to take the risk of breaking the fear that prevents us from accepting certain responsibilities that we are called to assume in our daily lives. It is through the power of the Spirit that we receive the gifts. And these gifts are the pledge of God's unfailing love in our lives. It is our duty and responsibility to make them bear fruit through missionary endeavour, with a view to universal communion.

In one of his famous theological works, Adolphe Gesché states: "All Christian revelation, as God's self-revelation, is in every way a proposal of life and salvation for human beings"²⁷. It is clear, therefore, that it is a Word that calls man into existence, a Word that presents itself not only as a blessing, but also and above all as a promise: one that establishes a relationship between God and man from now on. Once again, the question of man's value is highlighted: "What is man?". If he was created by God, for what purpose? In other words, what is his primary vocation? This path opened by a call that offers a destiny is radically open to every human being simply because he is human. And Pope John Paul II reminds us:

The human being, as a person, is a unity of soul and body that is realised dynamically through openness to the other. Being-with and being-for others, which is realised in love, is constitutive of the human person. It is precisely love that drives the person to progressively develop the network of his or her relationships beyond the sphere of private life and family affections, until it opens up to the universal and embraces - at least as a desire - the whole of humanity... It is a question of the need to form man as a person: a subject who, in love, builds his own historical, cultural, spiritual and religious identity, putting it in dialogue with others, in a dynamic of gifts reciprocally offered and received... In the context of globalisation, it is necessary to form subjects capable of respecting the identity, culture, history, religion and above all the suffering and needs of others, in the awareness that 'all of us are truly responsible for all'²⁸.

27 Cfr. ADOLPHE GESCHÉ (Dir.) -PAUL SCOLAS, *Et si Dieu n'existait?* Cerf, Paris 2001.

28 JOHN PAUL II, Encyclical Letter *Sollicitudo rei socialis*, Vatican Editions, Rome 1987, n. 38.

A free response to become fishers of men

If responding to God's call means simply entering the banquet hall, it is equally appropriate to remember the invitation to join the other guests gathered for the same cause.

Beyond comfort

When one feels called to the priesthood or consecrated life, the first action to take is surely to ask those in charge to enter a seminary or a house of formation for religious life. Once entered, the candidate learns new responsibilities and the doors of priestly ordination or religious profession open to him. It is then that he is called more than ever to fidelity to the Lord who consecrated him. In a world where technology is advancing greatly, where human effort is being replaced by machines, where the Internet has become man's system of thought, it is a great challenge for young men and women to agree to overcome these cultural, social, environmental and familial barriers in order to converge in Consecrated Life. In a world where many families are in crisis, where divorce is justified by the search for fulfilment, men and women of our time, especially young people, are called to make a difference by choosing to live like the first Christian community in Jerusalem: "They were diligent in listening to the teaching of the apostles and in fraternal union, in the breaking of bread and in prayers". (Acts 2:42). And "all who had become believers stood together and held everything in common". (Acts 2:44). They had left everything, "houses, brothers, sisters, fathers, mothers and children" (Mat19:29) for the Kingdom of heaven.

In the past, I learnt, young people did not expect to live in the "comfort" of religious communities or dioceses. They wanted to be holy, through challenge and transformation. They wanted to be like Jesus Christ: free from selfishness and individualism; they wanted to be all to all people. They wanted to be free from the lie that power and money are the way to success and that pride and violence are the safe ways to be heard. They wanted to belong to a bigger and more beautiful world, a world of love and commitment to others. They wanted to be in contact with the Body and Blood of Christ. It is these young people from the not too distant past that the world of our time so desperately needs. For this to be effective, they must necessarily start afresh from Christ. Must they wait until they are

saints to embark on the path of renewal? Of course, no. The Lord calls them in their weaknesses and wants to make them strong, if and only if they participate in his pedagogy of kenosis. For “my grace is sufficient for you: my power is best expressed in weakness”, says the Lord (2Co 12:9); and St Paul adds: “I will not hesitate to put my pride in my weaknesses, that the power of Christ may dwell in me... For when I am weak, then I am strong.” (2Co 12:10).

A decisive turning point for consecrated and priestly life

On the eve of the Jubilee Year 2000, Pope John Paul II, calling for a flowering of vocations to the consecrated religious life, to the priesthood, made a strong appeal to young people that I would like to repeat here for you:

Many men and women today live in darkness, in a world of illusions, dreams and false promises. To you, young people, I say: if you sense the Lord's call, do not reject it! Rather, insert yourselves courageously into the great currents of holiness, which distinguished men and women saints have initiated in the wake of Christ. Cultivate the yearnings typical of your age, but readily adhere to God's plan for you, if He invites you to seek holiness in the consecrated life. Admire all God's works in the world, but know how to fix your gaze on the realities destined never to fade. The third millennium awaits the contribution of the faith and inventiveness of legions of young consecrated men and women, so that the world may be made more serene and capable of welcoming God and, in Him, all His sons and daughters²⁹.

The Pope then turns to consecrated persons and reiterates his appeal, encouraging them to live their commitment to God in fidelity, edifying and supporting one another. He also reminds them of their mission, which is to invite men and women of our time to look to the future and not to let themselves be overwhelmed by everyday affairs, but to allow themselves to be seduced by God and the Gospel of Jesus Christ, despite the many difficulties they face³⁰. He in-

29 JOHN PAUL II, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Vita Consecrata*, Vatican Editions, Rome 1996, n. 106.

30 Cfr. IBID, n. 109, §§2,4.

vites them to detach themselves from the world in order to attach themselves to God's world.

Identification and personal freedom, an awakening of youth

Young people, often recognisable by their ardour, vigour and initiative, increasingly suffer from the "resignation and surrendering syndrome"; it turns out that many no longer bother to identify themselves.

Being young in today's world

As human beings, we are both sacred and social, endowed with many gifts and talents from God. Being human is therefore one gift, being young is another. More and more often we find that young people no longer have any interest in the thing of God; they even seem to have crucified the Spirit of God that is in each one of them. One notices in many of them a certain indifference and almost a disinterest in the Church. Some of them are convinced that the Church is something for consecrated persons, clergy or adults. Yet young Catholic Christians are the apple of the Church's eye. Just as they are said to be "the spearhead of the nation", so is the Church of today and tomorrow. And this is because it is "a gift and treasure from God for which the whole Church is grateful to the Lord of life"³¹. St Paul taught us so well when, in the Epistle to the Romans, he reminds us that we belong to God through the Holy Spirit. It is this Spirit that makes every believer no longer a slave, but freed from the grip of fear, isolation, disengagement, resignation (cf. Rom 8:14-15).

True evangelical fraternity and the authentic freedom of every Christian derive from the truth that through the Spirit of the Lord Jesus, received on the day of Baptism, we are sent into the world to meet our brothers and sisters and to announce to them the Good News of salvation in God who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Pope John Paul II, following the example of St Paul, encouraged young people with the following words: "Do not wait until you are older to set out on

31 BENEDETTO XVI, Esortazione apostolica post-sinodale *Africae Munus*, LEV, Roma 2011, n. 60.

the path of holiness. Make known to all the beauty of the encounter with God that gives meaning to your existence. In the quest for justice, peace, commitment to fraternity and solidarity, do not be left behind!"³². Because we are sons and daughters of God, the Spirit opens us up to peace and inner serenity, joy, strength and, above all, hope. We thus become a gospel of life that, built from within ourselves, we can then pass on to the world, which is so much in need of new points of reference. Only from this inner tranquillity, fully lived and shared with our brothers and sisters, can we expect to build a new world, a free world. Pope John Paul II never ceased to exhort young people throughout the world to personally take on the task of evangelising and Christianising peoples and society, first of all by Christianising themselves, ...so that a different world can emerge: a world in which tolerance of peoples, respect for human values, forgiveness and recognition of the other as *imago Dei*³³ can find a place. Today's world is in great need of authentic witnesses to the Gospel of Christ; it needs young people who believe in Jesus. On what sure foundation can and must we build a new world? Or, what should be everyone's fundamental convictions for ecclesial and social coexistence? The answer lies in the Gospel message of Jesus Christ himself.

Pope Francis' concern

In an extension of youth ministry, Pope Francis has not failed in his paternal duty to encourage the world's young Christians to commit themselves unreservedly to the building up of the Holy Church. By convening a synod dedicated to young people, on the theme: "Young people, faith and vocational discernment", the Holy Father showed his concern to give young people a special place within the great family of believers, where all, without exception, feel members. The Holy Father invited the universal Church to question herself on how to accompany young people on their journey of faith, in their vital decisions, and to encourage them to identify the best ways to proclaim the Good News of Christ. This is the spirit that animated this ecclesial event. At the end of this synod, many res-

32 JOHN PAUL II, *Message to the youth of the world, on the occasion of World Youth Day*, Toronto, 28 July 2002.

33 IBID.

olutions were made public in the Final Document, which gives an account of all the reflections envisaged by our synod fathers.

If the first two parts emphasise the journey with Christ, which leads to his recognition and the desire to remain with him, the third and final part opens up missionary perspectives, where every baptised is called to go and proclaim the Good News of the Risen Lord throughout the world. In both the Final Document and the Post-Synodal Exhortation, the Pope recalls the strong role that young people play in the Church and society³⁴. He recalls the commitment of young people that is manifested in the waters of Baptism in which they have been immersed. They thus become prophets, priests and kings. Through the Post-Synodal Exhortation *Christus Vivit*, we discover a Church open to all young people, whether members or not. To achieve the good evangelisation desired by Jesus, Pope Francis invites them to a conversion of hearts, without which their projects, however beautiful, will never succeed.

Thus, all young people are called to rise up and give hope to the Church and the world, which are in such need of a new breath. Their charisms make them participate fully in the life of the Church, through Groups, Associations, Movements, joining Religious Institutes or Societies of Apostolic Life, etc³⁵. Faced with a world threatened by individualism and excessive sectarianism, where faith is no longer a good to be sought, Pope Francis remains optimistic: he sees in each of the planet's young people a new strength for life today and in the future. With his gentle but convincing words, he awakens consciences, rings the bell so that society and the Church feel the presence of this dynamic that is youth. Optimistically, the Pope reiterates his message in these terms: "Please do not let others be the protagonists of change! You, you are the ones with the future! Dear young people, do not look at life from the balcony', get involved, Jesus did not stay on the balcony, he immersed himself..."³⁶.

34 Cfr. FRANCIS, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *Christus Vivit*, Vatican Editions, Rome 2019, n. 04.

35 Cfr. IBID, n. 203.

36 IBID, n. 174.

CHAPTER IV

Leading paths towards the divine project

This chapter has a particularly psycho-spiritual character, because discerning one's vocation is a continuous experience and duty that involves the whole of man's life of faith; and because the response to God's call has a double object: his project for man and the latter's desire to manifest his adherence to it³⁷. It is therefore necessary to highlight the intrinsic relationship between man and his desire to be in the intimacy of God, in his transcendent dimension. Having said this, the experience of vocation, an undertaking that is always mysterious and variable from one person to another, requires an openness to the ever-constant presence of God and a journey of personal conversion. It is in this journey of faith, lived by each person within the Church and in the world, that the vocational reality is inserted, from which the desire for God is nurtured.

Discernment is fundamental for man and for the Christian in particular. Its importance derives from its relationship with the freedom of the vocational subject, which in turn depends on the understanding of practical truth. I have shown this with the scene of the miraculous catch involving Simon Peter, James and John in the Gospel according to Luke. We could notice the freedom and willingness of these characters, who invite us by their attitude to listen to this voice that "challenges" us to cast our nets in deep waters. For to discover one's Christian vocation is to recognise that God is calling for a specific path. To achieve this, I propose in these lines some attitudes, some dimensions to be developed from a dialogue between theological anthro-

37 Cfr. ENRICO MASSERONI, «Il discernimento vocazionale nella direzione spirituale», in *Quaderno CNV*, n° 3, Annuncio, proposta, accompagnamento vocazionale, EDB, Bologna 1986.

pology and the psychology of vocation. These suggestions will serve not only the vocational subject as any person in search of growth or as a candidate in formation, but also those in charge of vocational pastoral care, confessors, spiritual directors and formators in convents and major seminaries... Moreover, these specific contributions will help to verify the service of vocational discernment carried out with every person engaged in a journey of faith; and, if necessary, also the essential criteria for getting out of the uncertainty or apathy of vocational discernment, in which man could get bogged down, given the complexity of the socio-cultural context in which we live and move today.

Towards a psycho-spiritual discernment of the human and Christian vocation

The vocational experience is marked by events that reveal to the believer the grace of divine love. Meditating on this relationship between the Christian vocation and man's response, Saint Josemaría Escrivá remarked:

If you ask me how a person perceives the divine call, how a person realises it, I will tell you that it is a new vision of life. It is as if a light was kindled in us; it is a mysterious impulse that pushes the person to devote his or her best energies to an activity that, little by little, with practice, acquires the depth of a profession. This vital force, which has something of the impetuous storm, is what others call a vocation³⁸.

In my previous development, I emphasised how every vocational process between created man and God the Creator is necessarily established on the basis of faith. If God calls and man responds, it is actually because a living, animating and reassuring faith has been established in man. The previous chapters have shown the value of man's encounter with God and the need for total conversion, such as that experienced by Simon and his two fishing companions. From this previous reflection it emerges that the human dimension in the dynamics of the vocational process implies the openness of man to God's plan of salvation for him and for the whole of humanity. Because one is called

38 JOSEMARIA ESCRIVA, *Lettre du 9 janvier 1932*, n° 9.

to a precise mission, a mission that takes place within a community of brothers and sisters and that helps them to transform themselves by transforming others. Thus, Simon moved from his job as a fisherman, which helped him provide for his daily needs and those of his family, to a broader responsibility involving not only his family, but the wider human family. He thus became the 'professional' of cultural, religious, social and political integration wherever he was sent.

In his discourse on the mountain, Jesus dispels our doubts: we are God's children, he loves us and calls us to a life in fullness with him; a life in love, mercy and hope. Jesus wants to live according to the will of his Father and invites us to follow him on this path of love that transforms the world. Whoever agrees to break the chains of selfish ambitions of this world and listens to the Word of God, opening himself by faith to the promises of eternal life, receives the Spirit of God; he passes from slavery to the freedom of the children of God (cf. Gal 5:1-15). In his infinite love, God gives mankind the gift of freedom, which was inaugurated at the moment of creation, but was unfortunately crushed by sin, and whose redemption will come through Christ, through God's grace and the gift of the Holy Spirit³⁹. To better understand, here is an interesting little anecdote involving two characters: the first is a candidate for missionary life and the second is the person responsible for vocational accompaniment in a religious community.

The story goes that one day, in the cold of winter, a young candidate for missionary life came to honour an appointment at a convent in a nearby town. He arrived at five o'clock in the morning, rang the bell and was greeted with great difficulty by the guard who made him sit in a small room. The young man waited for three hours, nailed to his seat, without being received. At eight o'clock, a man of a certain age, with a determined air, introduced himself and began questioning the young man. He was a retired missionary, responsible for the reception and accompaniment of aspirants. Without wasting time, he asked the young man his first question:

–Can you spell? Although embarrassed, the candidate answered him:

39 Cfr. CDF, n. 58.

- Yes, Father.
- Good! continued the missionary.
- Can you spell “Baker”?
- With pleasure, answered the candidate again, who began to spell: B-a-k-e-r.
- Very good! said the missionary and continued:
- Do you know anything about numbers?
- Yes, Father, replied the young man.
- So, tell me: $2 + 2 = ?$
- Four, replied the candidate calmly.
- Good, you just passed the test! I’ll inform the Council tomorrow, murmured the missionary.

And so the interview ended. At the Council meeting the next day, the examining missionary calmly explained his method to his missionary colleagues: “First I tested the candidate’s self-denial by having him arrive at five o’clock in the morning, in the bitter cold of winter. He left a warm bed without complaining. Next, patience. He waited three hours to see me. Then I tested his temperament and he showed neither anger nor annoyance. At the end, I tested his humility by asking questions that a child could answer and he was as humble and meek as a lamb. He will make an excellent missionary”.

This encounter between the missionary and the young candidate also has great pedagogical and spiritual significance. It offers us the opportunity to re-read Simon Peter’s experience in his boat and his self-denial, despite the confusions that had previously inhabited him. He had been tested, examined and exposed in a way that he would only understand later, when the miracle of the catch was realised. Should he have obeyed when he was convinced of his professional abilities? Should he not have resisted when the Lord made the most difficult request of all: to leave everything and follow Him? How many miracles have been lost because of the search for a logical order in everything? Simon Peter comes out of his logical complacency and when he goes beyond the limited experience, into the realm of trust and risk, wonder happens. From that moment he learns to trust the Lord’s commands. His faith goes beyond logic to finally receive God’s promises. Starting from the objective and subjective elements

that take into account the deeds, words and gestures of God and the natural operations of the person called, it is possible to carry out an integral discernment of one's vocation. Vocational dialogue implies a metanoia, as earlier emphasised, which is in fact a free decision of the subject, from his natural and personal aptitudes.

How to find one's basic identity

In his concern to ground the human and Christian vocation on the basis of the "deep self", John Paul Lannegrace asks a series of questions such as: "Who am I in the depth of myself?" "What is my authentic personality?", "What vocation am I called to unfold in this world?" According to him, if the "deep self" were a physical place, it would certainly resemble a well, where one would have to go deeper to fetch living water. It is the spiritual centre of every being, from which all values gravitate and from which the living source must be brought forth and the light shone. Moreover, for Lannegrace, the human being cannot be reduced to his *soma* and *psyche* alone, but more important is his *pneuma*, which enables him to access and contemplate the spiritual realm. This triad indicates three realities characterised by their interrelation, in order to strengthen the unity of the human person⁴⁰. It is this "deep self" that establishes the identity of every being and every Christian and that, when it does not shine through, leads to lukewarmness and spiritual acedia or indifference.

Therefore, everyone must look at himself as in a mirror, in the perspective of life according to the Word of the Lord. This is the spiritual pedagogy of Jesus, who is not so much concerned with the past experiences of his disciples as with what they intend to become in their future existential and vocational journey. Created "in the image and likeness of God", man is a unique being. He receives salvation from God and redemption through his Son Jesus Christ, through the Spirit who gives life and sanctifies all things. If he does not understand that his identity is first and foremost in God and that he is made to manifest God's glory through the witness of his life, it is clear that he will remain unsatisfied, incapable of self-identification.

40 Cfr. JEAN-PAUL LANNEGRACE, *Trouver son identité profonde avec les penseurs chrétiens*, Salvator, Paris, 2017, p. 39.

In his *Magna Moralia*, Aristotle rightly affirms the value, the complexity, but above all the possibility of attaining self-knowledge. He put it in these eloquent terms:

To know ourselves is very difficult [...] and at the same time a great pleasure [...]. But we cannot contemplate ourselves: the proof is in the reproaches we address to others, without realising that we make the same mistakes, blinded as we are, for many of us, by indulgence and passion that prevent us from judging correctly. Therefore, just as we look in the mirror when we want to know ourselves, it is by turning our gaze towards our friend that we might discover ourselves, for a friend is another self [...]. Self-knowledge is a pleasure that is not possible without the presence of someone else who is our friend; the self-sufficient man would therefore need friendship to know himself⁴¹.

Aristotle already in his time invited people to humility and the spirit of encounter with the other who is another self. This call of the philosopher should constantly resound in today's man as a challenge of love; a challenge of life with others, accompanying each one in his universe of self-discovery. Indeed, the proud, the contemptuous and the complacent would not be able to identify their strengths and weaknesses and make a distinction between them. They take pleasure in their folly of greatness, defying the community.

Self-knowledge is understood as the ability to see oneself clearly and objectively, in a constant questioning of and about oneself. From a Christian perspective, self-knowledge, like the experience of God, is an objective openness to the Spirit of God, which gives us knowledge of who we are, where we come from, what we know, what we have to hope for, etc. Unfortunately, many people wear masks all their lives to appear to the world different from who they are. Not having this self-knowledge, they project an idea opposite to what they really are. Experiencing God means being authentic; it means recognising one's strengths and weaknesses objectively. St Teresa of Avila insisted on spiritual greatness that is essentially God-centred, to ensure a healthy and fruitful relationship of intimacy with

41 ARISTOTLE, in GEORGE STOCK (trad.), *Magna Moralia*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1972, 1213a, p.14-26.

Him and neighbour⁴². Knowing ourselves is so important that we cannot renounce it, as long as the desire to grow spiritually in God moves us. Knowledge of ourselves will only be complete if we surrender ourselves into God's hands and allow ourselves to be guided by His Spirit. Contemplating his greatness and magnificence, we ipso facto come into contact with ourselves, with our unworthiness. Contemplating her purity and allowing ourselves to be impregnated by her, we become aware of our many faults. In her humility we discover more about our pride. The danger of not discovering ourselves is very great. We are often tempted to accuse our neighbour of being responsible for what happens to us. And if Simon Peter had not shown great spirit, he would undoubtedly have accused his companions of being the cause of their nightly misadventure. He would then have demonstrated that he is spiritual and moral baby, which makes irresponsible and inconsistent⁴³.

The Inner Look

Simon knew that he was a skillful fisherman; he knew at what time and where to cast his nets. But he also knew that he could sometimes make mistakes; he knew that he could go some nights without catching anything. He also knew that he could trust the others around him who would share his grief over an unsuccessful catch, and especially Christ. This is the example of one who is willing to look inside himself. Suddenly, trust was established when he heard the words of Christ: "Fear not, [Simon], from now on you will catch men" (Lk 5:10). There is a famous anecdote about the value of the inner gaze that is repeated several times in Anthony de Mello's spiritual writings. He recounts the attitude of a young fish who cannot identify with his natural environment. So, one day, the story goes, this fish had gone in search of the ocean. Then he began to look around without finding anything. He then begged one of the old fish to help him in his search, saying:

–Excuse me, you are older than me and more experienced, and you can probably help me. Could you tell me where

42 Cfr. THÉRÈSE DE JÉSUS, in MARCELLE AUCLAIR (Trad.), *Le château intérieur ou Les demeures*, 1588, Arbre d'Or, Suisse, 2003, pp. 11-17.

43 Cfr. LOUIS ROY, *Se réaliser et suivre Jésus : est-ce possible?* Fides, Paris, 1989.

I can find what is called ocean? I have looked everywhere and found nothing.

–You mean the ocean? Startled the old fish and added, “You are swimming in it!”

–This? But it’s just water! What I’m looking for is the ocean, not just water! Exclaimed the young fish, enraged and very disappointed and contemptuous of the ignorant old fish, and with a flick of his fin he went looking elsewhere⁴⁴.

Once more, this little anecdote as well as the previous one, has a great pedagogical and spiritual relevance for all those who want to know the answer to the question: “Who am I?” Indeed, many men and women today identify with this young fish. They resist the truth, they are not ready to accept it. However, it is necessary to break down any barrier of blindness caused by subjective and immature beliefs, in order to have a true spiritual and vocational experience. It is necessary to question one’s interiority, to listen to it in order to discover what the world and God expect. To do this, however, one must develop a spirit of meditation and contemplation and be open to the grace of God offered by the Holy Spirit. Having said this, accepting one’s existence means accepting God’s will. For it is by accepting our existence that we know and encounter God. And this search for our identity requires first of all an objective and sincere love for ourselves, which then extends to the encounter with our brothers and sisters. Is it not often said in common language that “the most beautiful woman can only give what she has”? Or, in ancient Rome, it was said that “Nemo dat quod non habet”, that is, no one gives what he does not have. It is therefore clear that one must accept oneself, truly love oneself, if one wants to love one’s neighbour as oneself. Simon Peter was able to look at himself and recognise himself as a “sinner”. And so he teaches us that no one can go out into the open sea and make a “good deal” unless he has undergone the exercise of humility, which is actually the admission of one’s own emptiness. Humility was lacking in the young fish, who obviously needed information about his natural environment

44 Cfr. ANTHONY DE MELLO, *Comme un chant d'oiseau*, Desclée Brouwer, Paris, 1982, p. 23.

in order to better explore it, but was not prepared for the answer from the elderly man he had approached.

Having attempted to argue with the Lord through his human words, Simon Peter imposes on himself an inner discipline that will lead him to add these words, which have left their human imprint to espouse the life of the Spirit: "... On your word I will cast the nets" (Lk 5:5). And moved by the miracle of a miraculous catch, he said tremblingly to his Master: "Depart from me, Lord, for I am a sinner" (Lk 5:8).

Self-esteem and the courage of hope

Beyond the inner look in our spiritual and vocational journey, self-esteem is indispensable for fruitful integral growth. If we take a quick look into the history of the social sciences and especially the cognitive sciences, the concept is not clearly traceable in its origins. Although some psychological theories have undertaken research on the "self", it must be acknowledged that "self-esteem" as such has not been the focus of their attention. We note that for most related theories, the emphasis is on self-realisation, which others would call self-fulfilment. Yet, from the perspective of Christian morality, self-fulfilment is necessary because it is thought to be the starting point for bliss or happiness. One cannot claim to be happy if one does not know how to love oneself. It is a Gospel precept to love oneself in order to love one's neighbour. In the Gospel according to Mark, Jesus thus responds to the Pharisees and scribes who try to put him to the test with the question about the greatest commandment. The Lord said, "The first is, 'Listen, Israel...' And the second is this: 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself'; there is no other commandment more important than these" (Mk 12:28-31). Self-esteem, like self-knowledge, is the prerequisite for meeting others, for recognising other, for serving others⁴⁵.

On the other hand, the vocational decision is the place par excellence of risk on the basis of faith. If God does not always give us such obvious signs to understand us and grasp the meaning of what he expects from us, he does, however, give us the freedom to choose

45 Cfr. ANDRÉ GODIN, *Psychologie de la vocation. Un bilan*, Cerf, Paris, 1975.

the signs that test us most. Returning to the experience of the miraculous catch that runs through the book, one of the striking signs that may have been overlooked by Simon Peter is the glow of the day. To be a fisherman is to be able to invest oneself in the heart of the dark night. Yet Simon Peter accepts to read the signs of the Lord's presence and power in this daylight. It is then that he adheres to the divine presence and says: "Master, we have toiled all night and caught nothing, but at your word I will cast the nets" (Lk 5:5). Simon Peter freely runs this risk of adventure. It is the place of risk, but also of trust in Jesus. He is now convinced of this. No one can commit himself in the place of the other, not even God. He does not replace our freedom; he lets us do our part⁴⁶.

Between self-knowledge and self-esteem, inner vision and personal freedom, one finds the courage to hope. Hope, this theological virtue that springs from within the soul, is all oriented towards the eternal Good. It animates and directs our desires, to achieve the one Desire: the Sovereign Good of which St Thomas Aquinas speaks. It is not a simple and fragile hope placed in the transient things of the world. On the contrary, it opens up a perspective of charity that does not pass away. Many young people, unfortunately, repress their strongest vocational desires because they are attached to what passes and fades away. They do not have the courage of hope. They wait until they have all the necessary physical guarantees before leaving. They do not trust themselves, let alone God; they underestimate their ability to walk in the Church with their brothers and sisters; they do not want to commit themselves anywhere; they want to remain in the bondage of fear. Because of this, they scramble to utter phrases like, "I don't think I can make it... I don't have the skills to commit to such a life...". But there is no true vocation without true freedom and without the courage to take risks. Because all true freedom necessarily leads to the gift of self for the love of humanity⁴⁷.

46 LOUIS ROY, *Le sentiment de transcendance, expérience de Dieu ?* Cerf, Paris, 2000.

47 PIERRE BRUNETTE, *Sur les pas d'Emmaüs. Pour discerner et accompagner*, Médiaspaul, Montréal et Paris, 2005.

CHAPTER V

Path of identification: the legacy of Calasanz

Christian perfection (...) consists in loving God more, which an illiterate as well as a man of letters can do, and this love of God must be realised by many acts of humility without ever presuming to reach such a level of dignity⁴⁸.

At the beginning of this chapter, I would like to express my profound gratitude and praise to God for His unfailing presence during the last four hundred years of existence of the Order of the Pious Schools. Indeed, the Piarist vocation is part of the broader reality of the Christian vocation, like all other vocations in the Church, it is rooted in the initial sacrament of Baptism, through which we enter into the intimacy of the Body of Christ, of which He is the Head, being part of the priestly, royal and prophetic people of God, which belongs to Him. This people, whose prefiguration and promise were established in the Old Covenant, manifests its reality in the fullness of time through the mission of Jesus Christ, the Incarnate Word, under the action of the Holy Spirit, who gives life, guides and sanctifies all things through Christ. I rejoice that this same Spirit led me to respond to the Lord's call in a specific context: the Order of the Pious Schools (Piarist Fathers), a work initiated by Saint Joseph Calasanz in Rome, dedicated to the education of children and young people, who eventually was proclaimed Patron Saint of all Catholic schools by Pope Pius XII on 13 August 1948.

In fact, this chapter aims to reveal the greatness of a 16th century man who, not without difficulty, was able to read the signs of

48 MIGUEL ANGEL ASIAIN, in *Itinerario de espiritualidad calasanziana*, t. III, Calasancias, Madrid, 1990, n. 1385.

his time, turning away without regret from his first dream (that of climbing the ecclesiastical ladder of privilege of his time), to give himself totally to the transformation of Roman society, which was gradually losing its values, through the education of abandoned children in the streets of Trastevere. Like Simon Peter, Calasanz listened to the voice of the Lord calling him from his inner boat: “Put out into the deep and cast your nets for fishing” (Lk 5:4), to become a fisherman for children and young people of Rome and the whole world, especially the poorest.

Calasanz and his work: some biographical facts

As I have just noted, it was within the Church community that St Joseph Calasanz heard the voice of the Spirit in the lives of the poor children of Trastevere. When he initially left his homeland, Spain, to become “great” in the way of the world, the Lord transformed his original motivation when he saw the reality that prevailed in the Rome of his time. It was then that he left his canonical quest to embrace the underprivileged Roman boys. He courageously and generously followed Christ to become with him the servant of the suffering world. Like Isaiah in the Old Testament, Calasanz had to answer the Lord: “Here I am, send me “ (Is 6:8).

The family: the initial place of Calasanz’ experience

According to historians and hagiographers, Joseph Calasanz was born on 11 September 1557 in Peralta de la Sal, in the Kingdom of Aragon. A Catholic priest in the diocese of Urgel, Spain, he was also an educator and founder of the Order of the Pious Schools, which provided free education to poor children. He was a contemporary and collaborator of the famous scientist Galileo Galilei. He was the youngest of eight siblings, (six sisters and a brother). His parents, Pedro Calasanz y de Mur, and María Gastón y de Sala, cared for the success of their offspring and gave them all an exemplary family education, which would be reinforced by primary, secondary and university education. Joseph was the greatest beneficiary. After primary school in Peralta, in 1569 he was sent to study Latin literature at a boarding school in Estadilla run by the friars of the Trinitarian Order. There, at the age of 14, he discovered his priestly vocation. For his higher studies, Calasanz studied Philosophy and Law at the

University of Lleida, where he obtained a Doctorate in Law. He then began a theology course at the University of Valencia and the Complutense University, also in his home town of Alcalá de Henares⁴⁹.

When Joseph Calasanz's mother and brother died, his father Pedro wanted him to marry to continue the family line. Fortunately, we might say, in 1582 an illness brought the future servant of God to the brink of the grave. Seeing this, Pedro realised that his son was suffering from a psychological illness, caused by his refusal to see him become a priest. He accepted his son's wishes and, eventually, Calasanz was cured⁵⁰.

Calasanz in the service of the Church

Calasanz was ordained a priest on 17 December 1583 by Hugo Ambrosio de Moncada, at that time bishop of Urgel. During his ecclesiastical career in Spain, Calasanz assumed various positions of responsibility, first in the diocese of Albarracín, where Bishop Gaspard de la Figuera appointed him Theologian, Confessor, Synodal Examiner and Procurator of the diocese. When the bishop was transferred to Lérida, Calasanz followed him to the new diocese. During this time, he spent several years in La Seu d'Urgell. As secretary of the cathedral chapter, Calasanz had extensive administrative responsibilities. In Claverol, he founded an organisation that distributed food to the poor in and around the area. In October 1585, de la Figuera was sent as Apostolic Visitor to the Abbey of Montserrat, and Calasanz again accompanied him as secretary. When the bishop died the following year, Calasanz left Montserrat Abbey, despite the insistence of some asking him to remain there. He rushed to Peralta de la Sal, his native village, where he wanted to attend his father's last breath. From there, he was called by the Bishop of Urgel to become the Vicar General of the ecclesiastical district of Tremp. However, in 1592, he left Spain for good and went to Rome to obtain more ecclesiastical privileges. St Joseph Calasanz died in Rome at the age of 92 on 25 August 1648. He was beatified on 7 August 1748 by Pope Benedict

49 Cfr. SEVERINO GINER GUERRI, *San José de Calasanz, maestro y fundador*, BAC, Madrid, 1992.

50 Cfr. DIONISIO CUEVA, *Saint Joseph de Calasanz*, Médiaspaul, Paris, 1997.

XIV and canonised on 16 July 1767 by Pope Clement XIII. Pope Pius XII proclaimed him Patron of the Christian Schools in 1948⁵¹.

From canonry fisherman to fisherman of poor children in Rome

Joseph Calasanz was only 35 years old when he left to Rome. He hoped to continue his ecclesiastical career and obtain some sort of benefice, which at the time was called “canonry”. He lived there for about 56 years until the end of his life. While in Rome, he met an illustrious man, Cardinal Marco Antonio Colonna, who became his protector and who chose him as his theologian and entrusted him with the spiritual direction of his staff.

Called to a new experience

The city of Rome offered a magnificent field for works of charity, particularly for the education of neglected and homeless children, many of whom had lost their parents. Calasanz seized the opportunity that God offered him. He joined the Confraternity of Christian Doctrine, picked up street children and took them to school. The parish priest of the church of Santa Dorotea in Trastevere, Father Anthony Brendani, offered him two rooms next to the parish sacristy and promised to help him teach. With the help of two other priests, Calasanz opened the first free popular school in Europe on 27 November 1597, five years after his arrival in Rome⁵².

On 25 December 1598, disaster struck the entire Roman city. The Tiber, the river in the centre of Rome, reached a frightening water level. The devastation was maximum; hundreds of families, already languishing in poverty along the banks of the river, were left homeless and without food. The death toll was alarming. So Joseph Calasanz, a phlegmatic but unscrupulous man who had joined a religious confraternity dedicated to helping the poor, began the clean-up and recovery of the city. In 1600, he opened his Scuola Pia

51 Cfr. SEVERINO GINER GUERRI, Op. cit.

52 Cfr. MARIO SPINELLI, *Giuseppe Calasanzio, il pioniere della scuola popolare*, Città Nuova, Roma 2001.

in the centre of Rome and, in response to the numerous requests for enrolment, established extensions. Given the scope and importance of this new work, many ecclesiastical personalities, friends and new acquaintances of the founder, contributed to the work, so much so that in a short time Calasanz had around 1000 children in his care. On the account of this rapid growth, in 1602 Calasanz rented a new house in Sant'Andrea della Valle, where, together with his collaborators, in particular Pietro Casani⁵³, they began community life, thus laying the foundations of the Order of the Pious Schools.

Countless wonders: the legacy of a noble work

On 6 March 1617, Pope Paul V, with the Brief *Ad ea per quae*, approved the Pauline Congregation of the Poor of the Mother of God of the Pious Schools, the first religious institute dedicated essentially to teaching. The Congregation was later on raised to Religious Order with solemn vows on 18th November 1621 by Pope Gregory XV, with a Brief *Ordo Clericorum Regularium Pauperum Matris Dei Scholarum Piarum* (Order of the Poor Clerics Regular of the Mother of God of the Pious Schools). While the Constitutions were approved on 31st January 1622 by the same Sovereign Pontiff and the Order was granted all the privileges of the Mendicant Orders, with the recognition of Calasanz as Superior General⁵⁴.

Piarists profess the vows of Poverty, Chastity and Obedience. And, in accordance with the vow of Obedience, they profess a fourth: Dedication to the education of children and young people. When Calasanz died, he left the Church and society an immense legacy, and it is in his footsteps, in the midst of the children and young people of yesterday, today and tomorrow, that I gaze and bow before his memory. Like Jesus, he took little children to himself and taught them the fear of God. And to us he bequeathed, like an echo, this Gospel recommendation: "Whoever welcomes one of these little ones in my name welcomes me" (Mt 18:5).

53 Cfr. CARLO CREMONA, *Giuseppe Calasanzio – Vita avventurosa del santo inventore della scuola per tutti*, PIEMME, Roma 2000.

54 Cfr. ANTONIO LEZAUN, *Histoire de l'Ordre des Écoles Pies* (Manuel), ECCE, Madrid, 2011.

Calasanz' openness to the promptings of the Spirit

Piarists of the past and today share the spiritual experience of their Founder, imitating Jesus, the Shepherd par excellence, who watches over his flock day and night. Like Simon Peter and like Joseph Calasanz, they hear the call of the Lord in a personal experience of their lives. They answer the call and are thus sent as labourers into the great harvest for the evangelisation of society through the education of children and young people, especially the poorest, in "Piety and Letters".

Imitation of Christ

"Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven is for such as these." (Mt 19:14). And "Whoever welcomes one of these children in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me does not welcome me, but him who sent me" (Mk 9:37). These two passages of Scripture remained throughout Calasanz's life the compass that directed him towards the very reason for his mission on earth: to follow Christ, the friend of the poor and of children. They still are for all Piarists of the world and for all those who share the Founder's legacy. One of the consequences of human nature is that people are called to universal solidarity. Immersing ourselves in the history of creation, we cannot fail to perceive the love the Creator has for humanity. In this sense, the central symbol of God in the Christian faith is drawn from this immeasurable love for humanity. In the First Letter of St John, we read: "God is love" (1 Jn 4:8,16). He offers himself totally to us through his only Son Jesus Christ, who entered into our history. This is the mystery of the Incarnation, the joint work of the Holy Trinity⁵⁵. This community of Persons is the perfect example of solidarity to which the world is invited today. St Joseph Calasanz was an undisputed witness to this. Even in the midst of the torments he experienced while exercising his ministry in the Church and in the world, Calasanz knew how to maintain his faith and unceasingly entrusted himself to the immeasurable wonders of the Holy Trinity. The imitation of Christ

55 Cfr. LOUIS BOUYER, *L'Église de Dieu. Corps du Christ et temple de l'Esprit*, Cerf, Paris, 1970.

is a duty of the disciple who seeks to build his Christian identity in a process of identification and one of the terminal values. And what would it mean to build one's Christian identity from a process of identification? In fact, in the pure language of Christian vocational anthropology, identity and identification are interconnected. Otherwise, the one without the other would be a mere theory. If we admit that Christian identity is that reality that defines man according to what he is in relation to the mystery of the Holy Trinity, it only becomes visible when it is incarnated through a process of identification. Then, this identity drives the believing man to encounter Christ through the *anawim* of God.

Besides, the mystery of the Holy Trinity, summed up in the famous phrase "God is love", suggests to us that the God whose image and likeness we have acquired is in itself a community of Persons, moved by communion and radically equal to each other by an ineffable love. This experience of divine life invites us to work, each at our own level, for the promotion of love and justice, peace and harmony, for the promotion of the dignity of the human person and universal solidarity. All are called to participate in building a community of brothers and sisters, characterised by the equality of all. In its Trinitarian perspective, the Church has discovered a special significance in the history of human creation. If we consider the second chapter of Genesis from a Trinitarian perspective, it is clear that the image imprinted on man is above all relational. When we are in communion with Christ, the Holy Spirit immerses us and puts us in relationship with the Father, and we become capable of working together with the Triune God to realise His plan of love for all creation. (Cf. Gen 1:26-27).

Like James and John who witnessed the omnipotence of Jesus with their brother Simon Peter, all *Piarists* would like to experience the presence of the Lord Jesus Christ in the Church in order to perform this noble mission in his name. The historical reality of our time is increasingly complex; religious and moral values are losing their meaning in society. Jesus' call to the Calasanz of his time and to each of us today remains, therefore, a vocation, a call to read reality in the light of the Gospel. Thus, we can accept as a life project the re-establishment of human, religious and moral values, initiating in the youngest the experience of intimacy with God. Indeed, if children

are educated in “ piety and letters” from an early age, we are sure to have a more just and humane society. This was the conviction of St Joseph Calasanz and it should still be so for our world today. In the world, clouds are gathering over many; people suffer and die from material hunger, hunger for justice, culture, education and faith; there are those who live in an inner void and in the total absence of the experience of God... In this context, the Lord calls each of us by name to proclaim and bear witness to the Gospel of Christ, which impels us to go deep within to become fishers of men. In this way, we all become, with Calasanz, reapers of Christ in a dying society.

The Spirit who sanctifies and provides

Speaking about the vitality of the Spirit in the Piarists experience, Pedro Aguado Cuesta, Sch.P.⁵⁶ Superior General of the Order of the Pious Schools, wrote in his traditional *Salutatio Patris Generalis* to the entire Piarist family, inviting them to be open to the dynamism of the Holy Spirit. With his permission, I share with you some highlights of his correspondence entitled: “Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit”:

Calasanz began his Constitutions, written 400 years ago, with a phrase that Piarists of all generations have learnt by heart: Spiritu Sancto duce. The General Congregation has decided that our 48th General Chapter should be convoked with this motto so beloved of the holy founder: “Under the guidance

56 PEDRO AGUADO CUESTA is a religious, educator and priest of the Order of the Poor Clerics Regular of the Mother of God of the Pious Schools (Piarist Fathers). He has been the General Superior of the Order since 2009. Born on 26 June 1957 in Bilbao (Spain), he was a student at the Calasanz College in the same city. Ordained a priest on 13 June 1982, he spent his first years as a teacher and pastoral leader at the Calasanz College in Pamplona, Spain. In 1985, he was appointed rector and schoolmaster in Bilbao. A graduate in Pedagogy and Theology, he is also an expert in Pastoral and a lover of the Piarist charism. In 1995 he was elected Provincial Superior of Vasconia and re-elected in 1999. He was also Provincial of the new Province of Emaus in 2007 and two years later was elected General Superior during the XLV General Chapter held in Peralta de la Sal (Spain) in 2009. Since 2016, Pope Francis appointed him as Consultor of the Congregation for Catholic Education, a responsibility he combines with that of President-in-Office of the Education Commission of the Union of Major Superiors. Father Pedro was re-elected for a third term at the end of the XLVIII General Chapter held in February 2022 in Mexico, with the official approval of the Holy See.

of the Holy Spirit” [...] What we seek, what we dream and hope for, is that our General Chapter will truly be the occasion of the Spirit, an opportunity to listen to and welcome his inspirations, a space for spiritual discernment that will help us to mark out the direction that the Order must follow in the coming years, in fidelity to the Gospel, to Calasanz and to our educational and pastoral mission. I am writing this fraternal letter to contribute to this valuable objective: to reflect in depth on what it means to celebrate a General Chapter “under the guidance of the Holy Spirit” [...]”⁵⁷.

This convocation could also be understood as an exhortation to all. It is not only Piarist, because it carries a universal evangelical message. Everyone will then be able to reflect on the implications, the requirements, the relevance and the resonance of such an openness to the Spirit of God who, as St Paul tells us, is a Spirit that sets us free from the chains that have long kept us imprisoned by our selfishness, our indifference, etc.

It is therefore this Spirit of freedom that makes us call God “Abba! Father” (cf. Rom 8:15). It is only at the price of this intimacy with the Holy Spirit that each of us will be able to realise such great projects for the world, for the Church and for the whole of society, in response to the Lord’s call to us. St Joseph Calasanz received an original charism from God, which called him to the unconditional service of young people and children at heart. This charism, which touched his heart centuries ago, can be renewed today in the service of the poor, the marginalised, the neglected... In short, his battleground has always been miserable childhood and youth in loss of values. This is what God wanted for Calasanz and what he generously passed on to us. This was God’s work in Calasanz, who allowed himself to be led along this path of life: he offered himself totally, freely, unconditionally, with love, affection and sincerity to the one who called him through the poorest children and young people.

In this way, we discover precisely the path traced by this great man who, throughout his life, never ceased to reiterate his desire to see

57 PEDRO AGUADO CUESTA, *Salutatio Patris Generalis*, San Pantaleo – Rome, Sept. 2020.

and live a society that lives the Gospel of Christ. Hence the invitation with these words: “Christ, who shared the life of the humble and blessed the children who came to him, offers us their simplicity when he says: ‘Unless you become like children, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven’ (Mt 18:3). If we wear these sentiments of the Lord, we will become co-workers with the divine Truth and be more able to conform to the lifestyle of children and the poor”⁵⁸. Here is an invitation that resonates more than ever and reveals to us the path we must take. Having said that, following the itinerary traced out by Calasanz four hundred years ago means being ready to set out again, like good shepherds leading the flock of children and young people of our time wherever the need arises. To set out on the journey is also to clothe oneself with childish littleness; it is to offer oneself in the service of the little ones, to love the mission and freely commit oneself to it. To be on the road is also to have a “missionary spirit”, to go out to discover new horizons. It is in this logic of life that Simon Peter became the ‘fisher of men’ for Christ. We are all called, therefore, to set out and, whatever our situation, to allow ourselves to be inhabited by this breath of life that is the Holy Spirit, so that it may irrigate our daily lives and enable us to live as men and women, for the glory of God and the salvation of our neighbour. We must also help young people to leave their newly-formed worlds, but to listen to the voice of the Lord who invites them to “put out into the deep”.

58 C., n.19.

CHAPTER VI

The experience and desire of God with Mary

Mary's faith can be compared to that of Abraham, called by the Apostle "father in faith" (cf. Rom 4:12). In the salvific economy of divine revelation, Abraham's faith constitutes the beginning of the Old Covenant; Mary's faith at the Annunciation inaugurates the New Covenant⁵⁹.

Just as Abraham, who did not even know what YHWH expected of him, set out anyway, abandoning his human wills and projects (cf. Gen 12:1-3), so we have Mary, in whom the perfect dialogue between the freedom of God and that of man is realised, she who makes the vocational project possible. In her we are given the grace to contemplate YHWH's project in Jesus Christ. Generations of men and women have turned to her, having found in her refuge, hope and courage. She is the image of God's plan for creation⁶⁰. In her, too, we are given hope, so that even in the midst of the tumult of the world we may welcome the word of Jesus, who whispers to us to put out to sea and cast our nets. The wisdom of YHWH established in her the sublimity of a Mother, who bore in her womb the Messiah, the Saviour of humanity.

This last chapter, therefore, proposes to revisit, in a few points, the key moments of the Marian experience and their incidence in the realisation of man's vocational project. Because in Mary, in whom the New Covenant⁶¹ is inaugurated, everything refers to the Son⁶².

59 Cfr. KARL RAHNER, « Le principe fondamental d'une théologie mariale », in *Recherches de Sciences Religieuses*, XLII, 1954, p. 508 ss.

60 RM, n.14.

61 Cfr. IBID.

62 Cfr. PAUL VI, Apostolic Exhortation *Marialis Cultus*, Vatican Editions, Rome 1974.

She accepts with faith, through the Spirit, her vocation, which she manifests with her maternal concern, as shown, for example, in the Gospels of the Visitation, the Wedding at Cana, the drama of Golgotha, etc.

Be it done to me according to your Word

Mary, the Mother of God, “blessed among women”, was able to grasp the hand of her Creator through her fiat. She, who had been chosen for a unique vocation in the history of the world, joyfully consented to the programme that God had established from the beginning for the salvation of mankind. As a daughter of the human race, she is close to mankind and experiences it, for she bore in her womb the Word made flesh. She is the one in whom the Holy Trinity has fully and freely manifested its freedom, marking her with a divine sign that makes her pure and immaculate. No human thought, no intelligence could grasp such an enigma without the help of faith. Mary too descended into the depths of darkness, fear and confusion (cf. Jn 19:23-37). Yet, when the angel Gabriel said to her: “Fear not, Mary, for you have found favour with God”, she pulled herself together, took courage, kept her faith in God and uttered these words that are a profession of faith in God: “Behold the handmaid of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word “ (Lk 1:38). (Lk 1:38). This profession of faith finds its resemblance in Simon Peter’s words of confidence in the boat on the lake of Gennesaret: “Master, we have toiled all night and caught nothing; but at your word I will cast the nets” (Lk 5:5).

Mary and then Simon Peter show us what faith really is. It does not consist primarily in a multiplication of words. A single word is enough to express one’s trust in God: it is Mary’s ‘yes’, the one that resounds in ‘Let everything happen according to your word’. Faith is simply an adhesion to the free gift of life received from God, even in the midst of the confusions and clutches of the world. It is saying a firm ‘yes’ even when ‘no’ seems to impose its force. Mary could have said “no” to the distressing news of the Angel Gabriel; Simon Peter, too, could have said “no” to the Lord for a new fishing attempt. But, moved by the Spirit of God, he accepted this new challenge, trusting in the Word that had just been spoken to him: “Put out into the deep and cast your nets for fishing” (Lk 5:4). Faith is committed to going out into the deep, that is, into the depths, where one does not

know how to go; where everything seems impossible and intriguing; where it seems obvious that alone one cannot succeed. Mary is for every believer an example of what the Lord, in his magnificence, can accomplish in anyone who freely accepts to walk with him. Mary's free 'yes' is a response of constancy in her inner journey of faith, which will inevitably lead her to the foot of the Cross.

This young girl from Galilee, who did not even know a man, was forced to undertake the impossible task of pregnancy and childbirth. Yet she is not afraid to go forward in the midst of the anguish that drives her at this moment. She bravely says her 'fiat'. How many times do men and women, children and young people abandon their path because they have probably failed in this or that project! "It is impossible for me to continue living in these conditions, in this situation... It is impossible for me to live this failure, this loneliness, these trials of the death of my loved ones, of my health; it is impossible!" Mary, who accepted everything for humanity, is therefore a model of faith for everyone, especially for young people today who, wanting to discover and listen to God in their lives, find themselves as if in a labyrinth, unable to courageously say "yes" to God.

Mary, model of vocations, accompanies God's plan

Every vocation in the Bible finds its meaning in the figure of Christ; although, it should be noted, in the Old Covenant its Christological perception is still implicit. Thus, the vocation of Abraham, "our father in faith" (cf. Rom 4:12), for example, to which I returned in the introduction to the first chapter of this book, unfolded in God's plan as the preparation of the people of Israel, from whom the Messiah would come. Without this Christological and soteriological substance, the irruption of the Virgin Mary into this project would make no sense. As Martini and Vanhoye state:

It is not possible to feel called by God, to discover one's vocation, without a real relationship with the Word of God par excellence [Christ], who contains in Himself all the other words of God. Concretely, Jesus is the great Word of call for the world, he is the one who contains the plan of salvation for humanity, to which, therefore, all our plans necessarily refer. This is the place of our choices. Every vocational choice is inscribed in a

*history with Jesus Christ. Otherwise it would not be a vocational choice, referring to the Word of God, but a simple search for personal adaptation to immediate concrete circumstances*⁶³.

As I noted above, vocation, while being an objective reality, is first of all subjective, in the sense that each one is a personal story, full of personal experiences. However, from God's call to man's response and his multiple experiences, we can see vocational analogies. On the one hand, salvation history unfolds for the entire human race, on the other, God alone is its author, because it is he who reveals himself to his people, it is he who calls each one by name and entrusts him with his project. This is what we have seen in the previous chapters with Abraham, Moses, Jeremiah and now with Mary, the Mother of God.

If God's plan is to give everything to humanity, which he himself took care to create 'in his image and likeness', then the Virgin Mary is at the centre of this adventure, the bridge that connects our existence to our Creator. "She made herself servant and disciple of the Word to the point of conceiving in her heart and flesh the Word made man to give him to humanity... Through her example and intercession, the Blessed Virgin continues to watch over the development of vocations and priestly life in the Church"⁶⁴. Therefore, the main characteristic we can remember about her is that she was able to respond in faith, like Simon Peter, to God's call, carrying the Son of God in her womb. Furthermore, the Second Vatican Council maintained the 'Daughter of Zion' as the one whom humanity, wounded by sin, was waiting for to manifest its salvation. The words to express this expectation are explicit:

The Virgin Mary, who at the Annunciation of the Angel received the Word of God into her heart and body and presented life to the world, is recognised and honoured as the true Mother of God and the Redeemer. Eminently redeemed on account of the merits of her Son, united to him by a close and indissolu-

63 CARLO MARIA MARTINI – ALBERT VANHOYE, *Bibbia e Vocazione*, Morcelliana, Brescia, 1983, p. 23.

64 GIOVANNI PAOLO II, *Esortazione apostolica Post-sinodale Pastores Dabo Vobis*, LEV, Roma 1992, n. 82.

ble bond, she receives the immense burden and dignity of being the Mother of the Son of God and, consequently, the beloved daughter of the Father and the sanctuary of the Holy Spirit, an exceptional gift of grace that sets her far above all creatures in heaven and on earth. But she is also, as a descendant of Adam, united to the whole of humanity in need of salvation; indeed, she is truly 'Mother of the members (of Christ)... having cooperated with her charity in the birth in the Church of the faithful who are members of this Head'⁶⁵.

It is not possible to place Mary outside the mystery of Christ. For this Mystery of Christ is also expressed in the heart of Mary's own history. Thus we read in St Paul's epistle: 'When the time was fulfilled, God sent forth his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, that we might receive adoption'. (Gal 4:4-5). It is here that we understand Mary's story, which makes possible the historical being of the Son of God, with all that this entails in terms of humanisation. Just as she fulfilled her vocation as Mother of Christ and of all humanity, so she is the mother of all vocations. She stands at the door of every divine call to exercise her tenderness on those who respond generously. Thus, Mary accompanies those who entrust themselves to her at the moment of their vocational decision, be it ministerial priesthood, consecrated life, marriage, consecrated celibacy, etc.

The relationship that exists between the Virgin Mary and God is thus found in the Mystery of the Incarnation. This relationship is defined in view of Christ⁶⁶, because she bore the Son of God in her heart and body; she thus became the Mother of God by grace. It is thanks to this unique mission that God preserved her from original sin, filled her with the abundance of heavenly gifts and wanted the Incarnation to be preceded by his Fiat⁶⁷. The Christian life consists in contemplating these wonders and living in the presence of God, in receiving everything from Him, in receiving from Him the Life that is in Christ Jesus. To do this, we must place ourselves close to

65 LG, n. 53.

66 Cfr. CONGREGATION FOR CATHOLIC EDUCATION, *The Virgin Mary in the Intellectual and Spiritual Formation*, Vatican Editions, Rome 1988, n. 6.

67 Cfr. LG, n. 53.

Mary, trusting in God, because with her we contemplate the mystery; with her, moreover, a totally new life opens up, where God alone is God, teacher and guide.

The hope that dwells in Mary

Marian spirituality leads us to the full maturity in Christ of which the Apostle Paul speaks (cf. Eph 4:13). It is about allowing oneself to be formed and guided by Jesus under the maternal presence of Mary his Mother. It is also a matter of allowing oneself to be configured to Christ through her. In this sense, it is impossible to guarantee an experience like Simon Peter's without learning patience, humility, listening, courage and above all Faith and Hope from Mary. The Curé d'Ars had experienced this in his time. For him, "Jesus Christ, having given us all that he could give us, still wants to make us heirs of what is so precious to him, namely his Mother"⁶⁸.

Indeed, the experience with Mary makes us discover the acceptance of the Word in which God makes himself present in the world and in the lives of men. Then, with Jesus, the whole of humanity is encountered; his work is multiplied and he becomes "All in All", to the point that men are challenged from their innermost being with these words of Christ: "My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and put it into practice" (Lk 8:21). The Mother of the Lord is strongly felt as a presence of grace. Therefore every Christian should put himself in her school. For she is the spiritual teacher and model of hope and active faith. And because of the hope that resides in Mary, we must be able to entrust ourselves, as she did, to the Providence that made her pronounce the profession of faith in her Creator: "Let it be done to me according to your word" (Lk 1:38), thus accepting God, our hope, from whom everything comes. This hope comes to man, whom he has made capable and "a little less than God" (Ps 8:5), and it is in Mary that this project is realised and the human desire to unite with the Trinitarian communion is intensified.

In a particularly difficult world today, Mary still represents a hope and a reference point for education in humanism. In the dynamic

68 BERNARD NODET, *La pensée et l'âme du Curé d'Ars*, 1^{ère} éd., Fayard, Paris, 1956.

of accompanying man in his constant search for happiness, Christian education must be more deeply rooted in the Gospel of Jesus Christ, so that hope may shine in the hearts of the men and women of our time. It is in this sense that the face, presence and example of the Virgin Mary are essential. Because, as I said earlier, they help to deepen our knowledge of the mystery of Christ, the Church and man's vocation⁶⁹. From the Upper Room, where the Virgin Mary remained in prayer with the Apostles (cf. Acts 1:14), her maternal solicitude has always distinguished many believers, who see in her their new refuge. Thus, she will continue to carry in her heart the sorrows, anguish and joys of her sons and daughters, as a sign of the love shown to her Son even at the foot of the Cross. She is the "Theotokos", the Mother of God (cf. Council of Ephesus, 431).

The Lord is with you

When we commit ourselves to go into the depths, the Angel reassures us, as he did with Mary in the past: "The Lord is with you" (Lk 1:28). This expression from the Bible is the assurance given to those who are called to a vocation, however difficult it may seem, that they will be helped by God's grace. Do we not read of the difficult experience of Moses called to lead the people of Israel out of the land of Egypt (cf. Ex 3:12) or of the responsibility entrusted to Joshua to cross the Jordan with the same people (cf. Jas 1:9)? Mary's faith, like that of Abraham, her father in faith, which we have just seen, is not obstinate; it is an active faith, which allows itself to be guided unreservedly towards new paths. In her human poverty, she recovers the splendour and purity of having consented to accompany God's plan. In her humility, she is clothed with greatness, because she is now the handmaid of the Lord. She opens herself, like Israel, to the salvation of the world through the Christ she carries in her womb.

Mary receives God's blessing in her Son, which will remain from generation to generation. Having become the Mother of the Saviour, she will be full of grace in the very presence of the Angel who brought her the Good News. As A. Feuillet: "When the Angel speaks,

69 Cfr. GIOVANNI PAOLO II, Lettera Enciclica *Redemptoris Mater*, LEV, Roma 1987, n. 1-25.

this phrase [of blessing] not only announces the glorious task that Mary has to perform in salvation history, but indicates that God has already worked in such a way that she is a priest for this task⁷⁰.

Living in the presence of the Lord presupposes that man, like the patriarch Abraham, the Virgin Mary or Simon Peter, undertakes an inner process of adherence. While the Virgin Mary's faith and obedience earned her the grace to carry the Lord in her womb, Simon Peter's humility on the lake of Gennesaret earned him the miraculous catch of fish and the mission to become a fisher of men. From both experiences, there is no doubt that the Lord always offers himself to those who accept to experience him. There is therefore no response to God that does not result in a tension beyond human expectation and logic. Simon Peter was able to embark on this personal inner journey when the Lord met him on his boat. From here a dialogue was established that was guided by mutual listening. He listened to the voice of his visitor who said to him in a reassuring tone: "Go out into the deep and cast your nets for fishing... Fear not, thou shalt catch men from now on". He called himself a disciple of the Lord, obedient to his word of love that renews and removes fears. From this encounter with Christ, Simon Peter was able to find concrete answers to his many expectations. He now knows who he is; he also knows why God created him, where he is going and what he would like to become in the end with the Lord, namely a witness to Christ's love among his brothers and sisters, fishers of men in the world. For even with him now rests the blessing and grace of the Lord, who made Mary say her fiat.

70 Cfr. ANDRE FEUILLET, *Jésus et sa Mère, d'après les récits lucaniens de l'enfance et d'après Saint Jean - Le rôle de la Vierge Marie dans l'histoire du salut et la place de la femme dans l'Eglise*, Gabalda et Cie, Paris, 1974, p. 45.

Conclusion

The many questions that man asks himself throughout his history are in fact the recognition of his dependence on the Supreme Being, God, who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. And these questions can be summed up in one: “What is man? “. Psalm 8 has expressed this question since ancient times, philosophers too⁷¹, and since the 20th century, theologians have developed a theological anthropology. In order to answer this question and choose a life project in tune with our authentic being, I have emphasised in these pages that it is essential to embark on an inner journey, in order to better understand ourselves and God’s plan for us and for the whole of humanity. This undertaking of self-knowledge is a prerequisite for the happiness that God, who created us, has prepared for us since the beginning of the world.

The proposal I have made in this book includes a simple process of appropriating God’s plan of salvation for mankind, so that each person, if opened to God’s Spirit, can make sense of his life and respond to the Lord’s call. This is not a text whose content is an exposition of advice on how to say yes to the Lord. But the book is an invitation to start this inner dialogue with oneself, to define oneself and discover God’s plan. Above all, it is a contribution to understanding God’s will, expressed in deeds and gestures, for which only attention and willingness are required. I had no intention of pursuing an irrefutable reflection on the question of vocation. What I undertook to do was simply to meditate, in the light of faith, on certain aspects of God’s call, as a means of penetrating the mystery of his love. You

71 Cfr. JEAN GREISCH, « Que m’est-il permis d’espérer ? - Herméneutique de la philosophie de la Religion », in *Revue des sciences religieuses (Sésame ouvre-toi)*, 93/4, Paris, 2019, pp. 343-367.

will have noticed a multiform presence of quotations and references, biblical, hagiographic, theological (ecclesiological and pastoral), whose only desire was to refer the reader to the fundamentals of the anthropological-vocational question.

Furthermore, the book poses the problem of vocational identification and is addressed both to all the baptised and to every person of good will. It is a reflection dedicated both to young people in search of vocational orientation, and to those who have already begun their journey in seminaries or novitiates, as well as to those who are on their way to definitive consecration to the Lord, and to those who would like to meet the Lord in their lives. This is the place of my solicitude towards all my brothers and sisters, through my prayers and my encouragement to remain faithful to the Lord in the decisions they will make in their lives. The itinerary that has been developed in the course of this work has consisted of an overview of the theology, anthropology and psychology of vocation and even philosophy. This has allowed me to better understand and share with readers the different structural aspects linked to the process of vocational discernment. At the end of this journey, I would like to recall that the grace of vocation, the task of discerning the call, the decision to go into the abyss like Simon Peter and his companions, and also the process of internalising this call, are the factors that guide and orient every vocational adventure.

I would like to make it clear that vocation is a gift from God and that only divine grace is the ultimate guide. This is essentially revealed in God's self-communication to his people, from Abraham to today's infant. This self-communication establishes a covenant between the two parties: God's free call and man's free response. For this reason, every person who feels called must always have before him or her the words of Jesus: "You did not choose me, but I chose you and made you, that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide. Then whatever you ask of my Father in my name, he will give it to you" (Jn 15:16). Taking vocation as a gift from God that acts and transforms our lives is essential in discernment. In this way we can move from our personal concerns to those of the world, like Simon Peter who moved from his professional concerns for personal and family well-being to the other stage of fisher of men, where from now on he will be concerned about the world entrusted to him. This

transition from the self-centred *I* to the selfless and humanistic *We* is only possible if each person opens himself to divine grace to listen to the Lord's call. This is what I have called "vocation pedagogy".

However, no vocational journey, even if moved by God's grace, is without difficulties or obstacles. On the contrary, these difficulties and obstacles are part and parcel of the journey of interiorisation of the call that resonates in the innermost part of man. Simon Peter experienced this when he first expressed his scepticism at Jesus' words ordering him to go out into deep waters: "Master, he said; we have toiled all night and have taken nothing..." (Lk 5:5). Simon Peter's response shows us that the Word of the Lord is challenging. Yet, in the end, he will show that he adheres to the voice that speaks to him and will express himself in words that will definitively change his destiny and he will confide: "... On your word I will cast my nets" (Lk 5:5). Responding to the Lord's call is undoubtedly the place par excellence to experience God. We are all called to embark on a journey to be signs of the unfailing presence of God in the world, so much so that "All God's works for mankind can be summed up in a single word: Love"⁷². And if God is Love, the task of vocational discernment cannot be said to be complete until it is translated into the concrete manifestation of this Love in the heart of the world. Such a mission was also expressed in the experience of St Joseph of Calasanz, Founder of the Order of the Pious Schools on the streets of Rome more than four centuries ago, securing the future of the poorest children of Trastevere, imparting on them intellectual and spiritual knowledge and accompanying them towards the creation of a more just world.

Therefore, I now entrust my efforts to the power of the Holy Spirit who guided, enlightened and empowered me to complete this book. What I know is that the task was not light at all. This reflection I offer you today is the fruit of a long journey, marked at times by dryness and fatigue and also by the constraints of a life as a priest, formator and student. The pen I took to write these lines, I laid it down praying to "the Lord of the harvest to send labourers into his harvest" (Mt 9:38), because "the harvest is plentiful, but the labourers are few" (Mt 9:37).

72 MARIA ESTHER POSADA – ANNA COSTA e al, *La Sapienza della vita. Lettere di Maria Domenica Mazzarello*, (Lettera n° 40,1), SEI, Torino, 1994, p. 12.

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