

# The Vocation to Follow Jesus

Different responses to God's calling, as described in the Gospel—PART II

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**I**N THE GOSPEL OF LUKE WE FIND SOME relevant observations on what the following of Jesus involves. I will examine them briefly.

“As they were making their way along, someone said to him, ‘I will follow you wherever you go.’” Here one must keep in mind that, in that extraordinary time, to follow Jesus did not mean to enter some particular community or, even less, a religious order. Rather it signified living with him on the road, walking throughout Palestine. A hard life, one that is so exacting that Jesus feels obliged to explain to that particular man: “The foxes have lairs. The birds of the sky have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head” (Lk 9:57-58).

In the following centuries with the rise and formation of various forms of communal life, the love of the Church, expressed by the entire believing community, has seen to it that all the followers of Jesus would have the necessary sustenance and adequate place to live in accordance with their vocation. This, however, in no way undermines the radical call that is specific to the follower of Jesus to “have nowhere to lay his head,” to possess nothing. That is the fascination of that road.

The rest is what is added on to the gift of God that is never lacking.

## A vocation for all

I am thoroughly convinced that this total vocation is not only for those who are called to a form of consecrated life: it is the vocation of all Jesus' followers which will then be expressed in various ways of life. Everyone receives this call because all

are called to give themselves completely to Him.

To another Jesus said, “Come after me.” And he answered, “Let me bury my father first.” Jesus replied, “Let the dead bury their dead; come away and proclaim the kingdom of God” (Lk 9:59-60). In all probability the words of this person do not actually reflect an unexpected situation, in this case the father's death. They imply, rather, the request to wait for the father to end his days in peace and after that he will follow the Master.

Jesus' response is unequivocal: his call implies the formation of a new family that, by the same standards asked of those called to matrimony, requires taking leave of one's father and mother and while maintaining the dutiful affection for one's parents it goes beyond a natural love to a new love, that which unites the members of the family of Jesus.

## No turning back

“Yet another said to him: ‘I will be your follower, Lord, but first let me take leave of my people at home.’ Jesus answered him: ‘Whoever puts his hand to the plow but keeps turning back is unfit for the reign of God’” (Lk 9:61-62).

The call to follow Jesus requires the total gift of self for all of one's life. It is, as we have said, to espouse God: a leap so qualitatively different from any other, since it involves the whole of one's existence, that one is no longer able to turn back. One could fall, perhaps, and get back up, but not turn back. Those who do not respond to this call will taste a subtle angst all of their lives that nothing will be able to appease.

There are yet many other vocations in the Gospel. Over all of them, one has attracted

my attention in a particular way because the dimension of leaving everything is apparently absent: it is the vocation of Mary. When the angel announces to her that she will become the Mother of the Son of God, Mary replies simply: “I am the servant of the Lord” (Lk 1:38). There is no doubt that these brief and intense words evoke the most radical letting go of everything, but it is a letting go that takes place in a silent way, in a manner that we can truly say is Marian. They are words that take us beyond human considerations to a place where everything becomes secondary before the God who calls, and what shines forth is the adherence and the concreteness of the gift of oneself to Him.

## Jesus' own vocation

But there is yet another vocation on which I would like to dwell. It is the vocation of Jesus. He, also, in his own way as the Son of God, has been called *ab aeterno* when the Trinity decreed that it would manifest its love to the world by sending him, the only Son of the Father.

There then is his coming on earth: thirty years of life beside Mary and Joseph, in the intimacy of their home and their work. Then his going into the desert: forty days of preparation before manifesting himself as the Messiah. There—writes Luke—he was “tempted by the devil.” It is amazing. Jesus wished to experience temptation. Luke continues, “During that time he ate nothing—the fast, as we know, was a form of penance much in use—and at the end, he was hungry.” Then the devil said to him, “If you are the Son of God, command this stone to turn into bread.” Jesus answered him, “Scripture has it, ‘Not on bread alone shall man live!’” (Lk 4:1).

It seems that Jesus, appealing to Scripture (see Deut 8:3), refused to change the stone into bread, as if he had no concern for this primary need of humankind. In fact, the Gospels narrate that during his public life he was concerned about feeding the multitude that followed him. They had nothing and he twice multiplied bread until it satisfied five thousand men, plus women and children. The evangelists take note that there were twelve baskets full of what remained (see Mt 14:13-21 and Lk 9:10-17).



**Christ among the Twelve Apostles. Arcosolium in the Catacomb of Domitilla in Rome.**

What is significant in Jesus' reply to the devil? I think it calls us to be careful not to exploit spiritual power—of which we may be recipients—for the purpose of obtaining material advantage. Instead it will be in giving “the bread of life,” just as Jesus teaches us, that we receive material bread.

The devil, the evangelist continues, then led Jesus “up higher and showed him all the kingdoms of the earth in a single instant. He said to him, ‘I will give you all this power and the glory of these kingdoms; the power has been given to me and I give it to whomever I wish. Prostrate yourself in homage before me and it shall all be yours.’ In reply Jesus said to him: ‘Scripture has it, “You shall do homage to the Lord your God; him alone shall you adore” ’” (Lk 4:5-8).

The words that the devil pronounces are mysterious. It almost seems that God has granted him the right to reign over the earth with wealth and power. Even

the follower of Jesus can be tempted to transform his or her spiritual power into religious and political power. Instead it is Christian humility that needs to be practiced, be it in dealing with the poor or in dealing with the rich and powerful. It is this that God asks.

### **Humility**

Finally—and it is the last temptation that Luke reports—the devil led Jesus “to Jerusalem, set him on the parapet of the temple, and said to him, ‘If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, for Scripture has it, “He will bid his angels watch over you....” ’” Jesus said to him in reply: ‘It also says, “you shall not put the Lord your God to the test” ’” (Lk 4:9-12).

This is perhaps the subtlest temptation, glorifying oneself in the spiritual riches given us by God. In reality he will lavish these riches in abundance to those who follow him. Mark illustrates them: “They will use my name to expel demons, they

will speak entirely new languages, they will be able to handle serpents, they will be able to drink deadly poison without harm, and the sick upon whom they lay their hands will recover” (Mk 16:17-18). However, it is never to be forgotten that these also are placed in the service of one's brothers and sisters. Saints of every age, from the beginning of the first Christian community, are living witnesses of this. Here we find the call to evangelical humility. Even if God has chosen us and given us the capacity to introduce to humanity a current of new life, we need to take joy only in being disciples of Jesus, of loving him and knowing we are loved by him. ■

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