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# The FURROW

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Enlarge the  
Space of your  
Tent (Is.54:2) :  
Vocation and the  
Universal Call  
to Holiness

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# Enlarge the Space of your Tent (Is.54:2) :Vocation and the Universal Call to Holiness

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Margaret Cartwright, Anne Codd and Gerard Gallagher.

‘The word vocation can be understood in a broad sense as a calling from God, including the call to life, the call to friendship with him, the call to holiness.’ Pope Francis, *Christus Vivit*, 248

## CHURCH: A PEOPLE IN MISSION

Today there is growing realisation, at least in pastoral conversation, that to be Church is to be a people in mission. As Pope John Paul II signalled in *Christifideles Laici*, it is the entire community of those who have heard and answered the call of God through their baptism who constitute the Church and, moreover, the Church is missionary by its very nature. The recognition that ‘the vast majority of the members of the Church’, that is, the lay faithful, are the frontier people of God’s mission in the world is gradually taking root (Pope Francis *Evangelii Gaudium*, 102).

Here we will *first* take a very brief look back on key phases in how Church has understood itself from the beginning until now. In this way we can deepen our appreciation of current developments

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in ecclesiology and their implications for how we must understand 'vocation' in our time. In the early centuries of Christianity, self-understanding was focussed on core questions: who was Jesus Christ, and what can we know of the God to whom he prayed? Who were his first followers, and what were they to do with their experience, as well as their growing conviction that the Messiah had come; that though his life had ended in seeming failure, this proved to be not the whole story? Could they be expected to forget the extraordinary experiences of presence and power which was theirs after Pentecost? And so, understanding grew and the community expanded. It took shape throughout Europe and Northern Africa up to and into the Middle Ages, under the dual influences of the 'texts' of the faith and the contexts in which the increasing number of communities of believers found themselves.

It was not until the post-reformation period, and the corrections required by those times, that the strong ecclesiological idea of the perfect society, *societas perfecta*, became the official stance of the Roman Church. Four hundred years later, the ground had shifted. Catholic theologians, ironically dubbed 'progressive', were returning to the sources. In prophetic mode, Pope John XXIII insisted that, even though some were under a cloud, they come to advise the Council Fathers gathered in Rome for Vatican II. The ecclesiology of the Council marked a profound shift in how the Church understands itself, from the perfect society to the *pilgrim* People of God – hierarchy and laity together sharing in a common baptism and a common mission. The ecclesiology of Vatican II is replete with biblical reference and organic images: light of the world (*lumen gentium*), People of God in 'koinonia', communion and mission, a pilgrim people sharing the joy and hope (*gaudium et spes*) as well as the grief and anguish of all humanity as witness to the gospel.

In the decade after Vatican II, Leon Josef Suenens developed the idea of co-responsibility in the Church. If the Church is a communion of believers, pastors and people together, this implies every member has a vocation and is responsible for the mission of the Church. Johann Baptist Metz summed up the challenge to be taken up, referring in 1977 to a resolution of the then German Synod. He notes that the text calls for 'a transition from a traditional Church for the people to a Church of the people'.<sup>1</sup> - 'the people' whom he goes on to consider, corporately, as the 'agent' of the Church's history before God. We refer to Metz in particular as he is rightly credited with giving significant, theologically rich impetus to the post-Vatican II uncovering of the radicality of the

1 Johannes Baptist Metz, *Followers of Christ*, Great Britain: Burns and Oates, 1978, p.33.

call (vocation) to discipleship. In that context, the relation of all other calls (vocations) to their foundations in baptism into the community of disciples, and their being ‘ordered’ to the service of that discipleship, become clear.

The opening article of the Preparatory Document of the Synod on Synodality indicates the continuing call:

With this convocation, Pope Francis invites the entire Church to reflect on a theme that is decisive for its life and mission: ‘It is precisely this path of synodality which God expects of the Church of the third millennium.’ This journey, which follows in the wake of the Church’s ‘renewal’ proposed by the Second Vatican Council, is both a gift and a task: by journeying together and reflecting together on the journey that has been made, the Church will be able to learn through Her experience which processes can help Her to live communion, to achieve participation, to open Herself to mission. Our ‘journeying together’ is, in fact, what most effectively enacts and manifests the nature of the Church as the pilgrim and missionary People of God.<sup>2</sup>

Contemporary ‘practical ecclesiology’ makes a valuable contribution to the task of understanding Church today. This involves a dialogue between an understanding of Church through ‘ideal types’ – ‘Body of Christ’, mystery-sacrament, communion of communities – and ethnographic studies of Church in all its reality as a collective of self-identified Catholics and what they say and do in their time and place.<sup>3</sup> A *middle* ground, with potential to integrate these two perspectives, can be found in considering the Church’s three-fold relationship: with God, with history and with the world.<sup>4</sup> Here we find a continuously expanding horizon of mission, which underpins our consideration, to follow, of *vocation* in our present-day context.

The self-understanding and self-awareness to which Pope Francis continually calls us as Church members to become communities of missionary disciples has this precise ‘integrated’ pitch and tone

2 Johannes Baptist Metz, *Followers of Christ*, Great Britain: Burns and Oates, 1978, p.33.

3 Nicholas Healy, ‘Ecclesiology and Practical Theology’ in James Sweeney, Gemma Simmonds, David Lonsdale (eds.), *Keeping Faith in Practice*, London: SCM Press, 2010.

4 Richard Lennan, ‘The Church as Mission, Locating Vocation in its Ecclesial Context’, in *The Disciples’ Call, Theologies of Vocation from Scripture to the Present Day*, Christopher Jamieson (ed.) London, Bloomsbury, 2013, pp. 43-63.

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*I dream of a missionary option, that is, a missionary impulse capable of transforming everything, so that the Church's customs, ways of doing things, times and schedules, language and structures can be suitably channelled for the evangelisation of today's world rather than for her self-preservation. (Evangelii Gaudium, 27).*

In another place the Pope writes: 'In virtue of their baptism, all the members of the People of God have become missionary disciples. All the baptised, whatever their position in the Church or their level of instruction in the faith, are agents of evangelisation' (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 120). In this regard, we find it helpful to distinguish between 'all the baptised', and those who through embracing the gift and call of their baptism, have become in truth, believers and followers. This is especially relevant in our present context of much conventional Catholicism, described by Richard Price as:

*the widespread reduction of our faith to a cultural symbol or a vague code of ethics, or at best a man-made, man-centred idealism, where the supreme goal is not the glory of God, but human fulfilment.<sup>5</sup>*

## GIFTS FOR MISSION AND MINISTRIES

To enable us to be a Church of missionary disciples, the Spirit gives gifts for the building up of faithful practice, and so for the advancement of God's mission. I Corinthians 12 is as relevant in our time as it was in mid-first century Greece:

*There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit distributes them. There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. There are different kinds of working, but in all of them and in everyone it is the same God at work. Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good [1 Cor 12:4-7. NIV].*

In the vision of Vatican II, the Church is called to recognise the unity of purpose and the diversity as well as the plenitude of gifts which the Spirit offers:

*In the building up of Christ's body, various members and functions have their part to play. There is only one Spirit who, according to his own richness and the needs of the ministries,*

5 Richard Price, 'The Early Monastic Tradition and Vocation' in *The Disciples' Call*, pp. 29-42.

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*give his different gifts for the welfare of the Church. Lumen Gentium, 7.*

A believing, praying community which rejoices in remembering the deeds and the words of Jesus and so giving glory to God values the service of ordained priests who lead them in their worship and sacramental life. They welcome opportunities to gather together to express and nourish their faith, life and mission. They appreciate the sacramental ministry to which some among their number are called. It is also clear that the person ordained to act on behalf of his community in the person of Christ the head '*in persona Christi capiti*' is a vital figure in the public domain, representing this community to itself and being a sign and instrument of its unity within the wider Church of the diocese.

A community wishing to grow in understanding faith as a life-long journey will welcome wise and dedicated scholars, teachers and catechists. And as they see clearly the relation of faith to life, witness and service they equally welcome the ministry of ordained deacons to enable them, for instance, to identify the needs of their communities and to equip and support them in gospel service. Equally, a community recognising the challenges of being 'together, [having] all things in common' (Acts 2:44) will appreciate the expertise and commitment of authorised community builders among them, for example the members of Parish Pastoral Councils.

Discerning and encouraging the plenitude and diversity of gifts for ministerial service within living faith communities is the essence of 'vocations ministry'. Our present context, in Ireland, where parishes are facing dramatic changes, surely calls for an all-member approach to nurturing the call to service and harmonising the gifts of the Spirit. One of the priorities from the Synodal Gathering in Prague was that the Synodal Assembly would 'address the question of an all-ministerial Church, as the horizon of a reflection on charisms and ministries (ordained and non-ordained) and the relationships between them'.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, there is a realism in the Synodal programme, no less than may be expected from a process where honest conversation was encouraged:

*The synodal experience can be read as a path of recognition for those who do not feel sufficiently recognised in the Church. This is especially true for those lay men and women, deacons, consecrated men and women who previously had the feeling*

6 Final remarks of the European Continental Synod Assembly | Irish Catholic Bishops' Conference accessed 1/03/23.

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*that the institutional Church was not interested in their faith experience or their opinions.*<sup>7</sup>

### RELIGIOUS IN THE CHURCH

The witness and service of men and women Religious find meaning in relation with and within Church. It is yet another gift and call for the building up of the community for life and mission, which finds its place within the 'all-ministerial' Church according to their various charisms. The very public profession of the evangelical counsels places religious in a place of both privilege and obligation, to which Pope Francis consistently calls them: 'Wake up the world! Be witnesses of a different way of doing things, of acting, of living! It is possible to live differently in this world'.

Through the centuries of Christianity, forms of Religious Life have abounded. From the hermits in the desert and the coenobites of the east, through to cloistered communities and actively apostolic congregations of the west, the call to 'monastic' life as a means to attain holiness, has existed continuously in our Church. In the Irish context, 'celtic' monasteries were at the heart of Christian communities all over the country. A visit to heritage centres in Glendalough or Clonmacnoise, for example, can connect us powerfully to this history. Later developments brought the continental 'cloistered' forms of monastic life here. The emergence of 'monastics without wall' from the thirteenth century onwards was also reflected with the early arrival here of the Franciscans and Dominicans. In the late eighteenth century several so-called 'active' congregations began to emerge in the Irish context as a faith-based response to situations of dire social and educational needs.

In its Synodal Submission AMRI, the Association of Leaders of Missionaries and Religious in Ireland, observes of its members:

Consecrated men and women in Ireland today continue to provide very valuable, meaningful, courageous, and relevant ministries to the poor and marginalised, both at home and overseas. Today we want to be at the heart of the local Church; able to engage in mutual empowerment with every encounter, be able and willing to live with uncertainty and doubts in the pursuit of Truth/Reality.

As Consecrated men and women inspired by Pope Francis, we dream of a Church that is open and welcoming to all people without question so that all feel they belong, can participate, and their giftedness, knowledge and experience is valued.

7 Working Document for the Continental Stage n.32 WORKING DOCUMENT FOR THE CONTINENTAL STAGE (synod.va) accessed 1/03/23.

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In relation to the movements outward in mission from the Irish Church, however historians and sociologists may rationalise it, the facts remain that:

Over the past two centuries the Catholic Church in Ireland has played a significant part in the modern missionary movement of the universal Church. Today, there is still a strong cohort of Irish missionaries working on mission.<sup>8</sup>

### A CULTURE OF VOCATION

The phrase ‘a culture of vocation’ first appeared in St. John Paul II’s message for Vocations Sunday in 1993. The importance of a culture of vocation for our time was endorsed and its significance explored at a Vatican Congress on Vocations to the Priesthood and to Consecrated Life in 1997. The context, as noted by Christopher Jamieson OSB, in particular in the so-called ‘western world’, is the increasingly secularised character of society.<sup>9</sup> The ‘new Europe’ is marked by diversity and is increasingly complex. In the absence of shared normative bases of meaning, and of convergence around values, there is a great danger that ‘everything becomes indifferent and flat’, and some may even have difficulty finding a meaning in life. (*In Verbo Tuo*, 11a)<sup>10</sup> Even so, in the context of a ‘new Europe’, studies reveal cohorts of young people who resist the drive towards an ‘ethically neutral society’ and are:

*... searching for freedom and truth, spirituality, authenticity, their own personal originality and transparency, who together desire friendship and reciprocity ... companionship, [and want] to build a new society, founded on values such as peace, justice, respect for the environment, attention to diversity, solidarity, voluntary work and the equal dignity of woman. [In Verbo Tuo, 11d; See also Christus Vivit, 170-172.]*

The ‘new Europe’ continues to change. The call to unity surely resounds today as the drumbeat of battle is heard again with relentless ferocity. In the face of the current and the real, no one is neutral, there are no ‘bystanders’ (*Christus Vivit*, 174). ‘There

8 Irish National Synodal Synthesis, section 3 The Irish National Synodal Synthesis – August 16th, 2022 – Association of Catholics in Ireland (acireland.ie) accessed 1/03/23.

9 *The Disciples’ Call*, pp. 225-226.

10 *In Verbo Tuo*, Final Document of the Congress on Vocations to the Priesthood and Consecrated Life in Europe, Rome, 5-10 May 1997, 11(a) [https://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/ccatheduc/documents/rc\\_con\\_ccatheduc\\_doc\\_13021998\\_new-vocations\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccatheduc/documents/rc_con_ccatheduc_doc_13021998_new-vocations_en.html), accessed 8/03/23.



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exists a specific vocation for every living person ... connected to the simple fact of existing' (*In Verbo Tuo*, 13a).

In response to the universal call to holiness the Congress proceedings bring to light in an impassioned plea, the dream of 'new models', embodied in many callings: to be bridge builders, authentic and life-oriented fathers and mothers, husbands and wives, people capable of cultural dialogue and 'cultural charity', professionals and simple people bringing the transparency of truth and the intensity of Christian charity to their working relationships and friendships, as well as priests, permanent deacons and 'consecrated apostles' (*In Verbo Tuo*, 12b).

In context of Christian life, the idea of a specific vocation finds its place within a global and ultimate call: 'When life in Christ is seen as the ultimate goal, a person's whole life becomes a response to a vocation.'<sup>11</sup> *In Verbo Tuo* constantly affirms the task, not of recruitment, but of spreading the belief that we are made for love, that life is vocation.

In dedicating the Synod of Bishops (2018) to young people, faith and vocational discernment, Pope Francis was unapologetic in framing the task of youth, in particular, as discerning purpose and calling in life. Here, Jamieson observes: 'A particular vocation must be directed towards the fulfilment of the universal call to holiness, the fundamental and common vocation of all [hu] mankind'. This is reminiscent of the quotation from Pope Francis quoted at the top of this article. At the same time, the Pope does not shy from proposing to young people, 'In discerning your vocation, do not dismiss the possibility of devoting yourself to God in the priesthood, the religious life or in other forms of consecration.' (*Christus Vivit*, 276)

In the last analysis, as Jamieson concludes, 'The culture of vocation which the Church is called upon to create is a Christ-centred meeting place for the world's deepest needs and people's deepest desires'.<sup>12</sup>

11 *The Disciples' Call*, p. 239.

12 *The Disciples' Call*, p. 239.