

LITURGY AND CATECHESIS AT THE GENESIS OF THE CALL TO THE PRIESTHOOD



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1. The Solitude of the Church for Vocations

The Magisterium of the Church in the last decades has dwelt *per longum et per latum* on various aspects related to the call to serve the People of God through the ministerial priesthood. The long intensive years dedicated to the formation of future priests have been the object of focused documents published by the Congregation for Catholic Education,¹ as

¹I mention some examples out of a wide range of documents: CONGREGATION FOR CATHOLIC EDUCATION, *Ratio fundamentalis institutionis sacerdotalis* (6 January 1970; second edition 19 March 1985); ID., *The Study of Philosophy in Seminaries* (20 January 1972); ID., *A Guide to Formation in Priestly Celibacy* (11 April 1974); ID., *Instruction on Liturgical Formation in Seminaries* (3 June 1979); ID., *Circular Letter concerning some more urgent aspects of Spiritual Formation in Seminaries* (6 January 1980); ID., *Guide to the Training of Future Priests concerning the Instruments of Social Communication* (19 March 1986); ID., *Directives concerning the Preparation of Seminary Educators* (4 November 1993); ID., *Directives on the Formation of Seminarians concerning Problems related to Marriage and the Family* (19 March 1995); ID., *The Propaedeutic Period* (1 May 1998); ID., *Instruction concerning the Criteria of Vocational Discernment regarding Persons with Homosexual Tendencies, considering their Admission to Seminary and to Holy Orders* (4 November 2005). Cf. CONGREGAZIONE PER

well as by various episcopal conferences² and seminaries³ around the world. It is the duty of the Church to provide the suitable ecclesial environment where members of the faithful are able to respond to the Lord's call and to mature in this journey of love, fidelity and service. The post-synodal apostolic exhortation *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, indeed, affirms that "the Church, as a priestly, prophetic and kingly people, is committed to foster and to serve the birth and maturing of priestly vocations through her prayer and *sacramental life*; by her *proclamation of the word and by education in the faith*; by her example and witness of charity".⁴ In this short excerpt from the Magisterium of the late John Paul II, I would like to highlight two aspects: the role of the sacramental life of the Church and its ongoing catechetical mission

L'EDUCAZIONE CATTOLICA, *Documenti (1969-1989). Formazione dei sacerdoti nel mondo d'oggi*, Città del Vaticano 1990.

² CONFERENZA EPISCOPALE ITALIANA, *Piano Pastorale per le vocazioni in Italia* (1973), in *Enchiridion della Conferenza Episcopale Italiana*, II [1973-1979], Bologna 1985, 137-162; NATIONAL CONFERENCE OF CATHOLIC BISHOPS, *Spiritual Formation in the Catholic Seminary*, Washington D.C. 1984; ID., *Pastoral Formation and Pastoral Field Education in the Catholic Seminary*, Washington D.C. 1985; ID., *Handbook for Vocation and Seminary Personnel*, Washington D.C. 1987; BISHOPS' CONFERENCE OF SCOTLAND, *Norms for Priestly Formation in Scotland*, 2005.

³ SEMINARIO ARCIVESCOVILE DI MILANO, *Prepararono la Pasqua. La formazione del credente verso il ministero presbiterale*, Milano 1994; ID., *La formazione del presbitero diocesano. Linee educative del presbitero diocesano*, Milano 1995. Over the last decade the Seminary of the Archdiocese of Malta has been prolific in the publication of a number of documents on priestly formation. The author who is on the staff of this institution mentions the following: a general document on priestly formation called *A Journey Together in Christ the Shepherd. A Document on Formation in the Seminary of the Archdiocese of Malta* (*Mixja flimkien fi Kristu Ragħaj* 1997); *The Personal Rule of Life* (*Regola Personali tal-Hajja* 1998); *Go and proclaim the Good News which you are receiving* (*Morru xandru l-Bxara t-Tajba li qed tasal lilkom* 1999); *A Programme of Spiritual Formation* (*Programm ta' Formazzjoni Spiritwali* 2004). A document on the identity of the diocesan priest is in preparation and is due to be published in 2006.

⁴ JOHN PAUL II, Apostolic Exhortation *Pastores Dabo Vobis* (25 March 1992), n. 38.

vis-à-vis vocations. This is a theme which merits prolonged reflection: namely, the part played by liturgy and catechesis at *the genesis of the call to the ministerial priesthood*.

This research paper does not investigate the liturgical and catechetical formation of candidates to the priesthood in seminaries and religious houses of formation. Rather, the aim of this study is to delve deeply into a particular moment in the history of the vocation to the priesthood — *its very beginning*. In other words, this paper seeks to investigate the period *prior* to the individual's entry into a major seminary or a house of religious formation. What part does the liturgy (in particular, the celebration of the sacraments) play at those *initial stirrings of one's vocation*? What imprint does catechesis leave on a person who lies at the very beginning of a long process of discernment to see whether he is indeed being called by God? The emphasis, therefore, will be on the role exercised by liturgy and catechesis on those very decisive moments when an individual first listens to God's call, seeks to nurture it, and more often than not encounters trying moments when he seeks to respond to it.

2. The Situation of Contemporary Society

No vocation is born in a vacuum. Neither does it grow and develop in a vacuum. Each vocation, or rather the way the one called seeks to respond, is deeply affected by the context he lives in. Having worked with seminarians for a number of years, it is not difficult to come to the conclusion that those who today are actively discerning God's call to become priests are very much "a product of this age". The young man (or not so young man, in the case of adult vocations) who is knocking on the door of the diocesan seminary or the religious house of formation is deeply influenced by the trends of contemporary society.

Just like other individuals belonging to the same age bracket, those called to the priesthood face the same kind of difficulties, such as alienation, the fear of a lifelong commitment (i.e. the fear that they

may not be faithful to their vocation to the end of their life), contrasting messages in the media and the influence of hedonism. Martin Klöckener affirms that “alienation... occurs whenever relationships are disturbed. This can involve the relationship of individuals to themselves, to their fellow humans, to inherited convictions and modes of thought, events, and processes, and above all to history and culture”.⁵ When he seeks to apply this to the relationship between young people and liturgical celebrations, he explains that “their presence or absence before the celebration, or their developing success or failure during the celebration, determines whether participation in the liturgy becomes deliberate, active, and spiritually fruitful, or else leads finally to an alienated version of participation, and so usually, in the long term, to resultant non-participation”.⁶

I have intentionally chosen to reflect on this theme at the beginning of this study because of its importance. If we are to reflect on the positive influence of the liturgy and catechesis at the beginning of one's vocation, we are to be aware of the variegated experiences of today's young people in their contacts with the Church and their impressions of it as an institution, as well as their firsthand experience of the liturgy. It is often said that the liturgical celebration is analogically the showcase of the ecclesial community. Liturgies which are well celebrated and which indeed reach the heart, the mind and the body of the members of the assembly are a far cry from those where individuals remain distant, uninvolved and unaffected. The editorial note of the review *Priests and People*, in December 2002, was titled “From lifeless to lively liturgies”. The author remarks that “we should ‘enter the gates [of the church] with joy’ and from it emerge enthused to take the good news to the world and begin to build up the kingdom. We

⁵ M. KLOCKENER, “The estranged Relationship between Young People and Liturgy”, in *Studia Liturgica* 20 (1990) 139.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 140.

should. But do we? ... How much attention is paid to enabling the environment to lead congregations to appreciate the language of signs and symbols?"⁷

Despite the existence of such situations, it is also a fact that a number of young people do indeed encounter the Lord in properly celebrated liturgies. The celebration of the Christian mysteries leaves a powerful impact on their life. They experience God and his love for them. Some identify the celebration of the liturgy as contributing positively to the germination of the seed of a life of total consecration to God.

3. The Liturgy: A Locus of Vocations

In his first encyclical letter, *Deus Caritas Est*, Pope Benedict XVI underlines the necessary link between liturgy and the response to the loving invitation of God. The Pope affirms that "in the Church's Liturgy, in her prayer, in the living community of believers, we experience the love of God, we recognise his presence and we thus learn to recognise that presence in our daily lives, He has loved us first and he continues to do so; we too, then, can respond with love".⁸ This is also applicable to those who are wrestling with the Lord's call. Through the grace of God as experienced and bestowed in the liturgy, the believer will be made more ready to respond heartily to the proposal of *sequela Christi* which is being made to him.

In the Apostolic Exhortation *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, Pope John Paul II elaborates upon the relationship between liturgical celebrations and vocation. He underlines the pedagogical dimension of the liturgy, calling it *a great school* wherein those who are called may respond adequately to the Lord's call. He affirms that "the liturgy is a living expe-

⁷"From lifeless to lively liturgies", in *Priests and People* 16/12 (2002) 438.

⁸BENEDICT XVI, Encyclical Letter *Deus Caritas Est* (25 December 2005), n. 17.

rience of God's gift and a great school for learning how to respond to his call. As such, every liturgical celebration, and especially the Eucharist, reveals to us the true face of God and grants us a share in the paschal mystery".⁹ The celebration of the liturgy thus provides one of the ideal settings wherein believers, immersed as they are in their encounter with the Lord, may be able to respond joyfully and generously to the call.

It is within this light that the late liturgist Achille Triacca explains that pastoral work for vocations is strengthened and nourished "with, in, and through the liturgy".¹⁰ He affirms strongly that the liturgy offers a locus of vocation (*luogo di vocazione*¹¹). The liturgical celebration possesses a dynamism of its own. The Risen Lord is at the centre of the liturgical synaxis. The ecclesial community is assembled in his name. The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy of the Second Vatican Council explains in clear terms the fundamentals of the liturgy when it states that "it involves the presentation of man's sanctification under the guise of signs perceptible by the senses and its accomplishment in ways appropriate to each of these signs. In it full public worship is performed by the Mystical Body of Jesus Christ, that is, by the Head and his members. From this it follows that every liturgical celebration, because it is an action of Christ the Priest and of his Body, which is the Church, is a sacred action surpassing all others. No other action of the Church can equal its efficacy by the same title and to the same degree".¹²

⁹ JOHN PAUL II, Apostolic Exhortation *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, n. 38.

¹⁰ Cf. A. TRIACCA, "Liturgia", in *Dizionario di Pastorale Vocazionale*, a cura del Centro Internazionale Vocazionale Rogate, Roma 2002 [hereafter *DPV*], 624: "Come la 'pastorale giovanile è pastorale vocazionale' (Giovanni Paolo II), così la pastorale vocazionale si incrocia, si rinnova, si vivifica, si alimenta, cresce e vigoreggia 'con, nella, per mezzo della liturgia'".

¹¹ Cf. *ibid.*, 624; 637-640.

¹² SECOND VATICAN ECUMENICAL COUNCIL, Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (4 December 1963), n. 7.

The liturgy is the *culmen et fons* of the life of the Church.¹³ Whenever, the Lord calls new men to become his ministers, the Church is continually renewed. New blood is added from time to time to the clergy of each particular Church. New blood signifies new talents, an increased vitality and enthusiasm, new ideas and projects in the pastoral life of a diocese. This ecclesial dynamism is born of the liturgy and is continually reinvigorated by it.

Sacrosanctum Concilium states that “to accomplish so great a work Christ is always present in his Church... He is present in the Sacrifice of the Mass, not only in the person of the minister... but especially in the eucharistic species”.¹⁴ The Council Fathers explained how everything in the Church flows from the celebration of the Eucharist, *summa carismatum*, to use the words of St Germanus of Paris. Indeed, they affirmed that “from the liturgy, therefore, and especially from the Eucharist, grace is poured forth upon us as from a fountain, and the sanctification of men in Christ and the glorification of God to which all other activities of the Church are directed, as toward their end, are achieved with maximum effectiveness”.¹⁵ This therefore includes the birth of each vocation in the Church, and its subsequent development, flowering and accomplishment through life.¹⁶

¹³ Cf. *ibid.*, n. 10.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, n. 7.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, n. 10. Cf. Triacca, “Liturgia”, 637.

¹⁶ In May 1997, the Congregation for Catholic Education held a Congress in Rome on “New Vocations for a New Europe”. One of the speakers, Olivier Raquez elaborated upon the relationship between the liturgy and vocation. It is worth quoting the concluding statements made by Raquez on account of their relevance and density: “Ricchezza, pienezza, solidità sono le caratteristiche dei contenuti della Liturgia. Permettono sicuramente di dare basi solide ad ogni vita cristiana. Chi vi partecipa regolarmente in un modo attivamente consapevole può trovarci una formazione e un quadro generale all’interno del quale potrà valutare le chiamate specifiche che riceverà dall’alto e trovare le forze per realizzarle progressivamente al servizio di Dio e della Chiesa” (“Itinerari vocazionali nella Liturgia”, in *Seminarium* 37 [1997] 479).

In a document published in 1973 by the Italian Episcopal Conference, *Piano Pastorale per le vocazioni in Italia*, we read that the liturgy, with the Eucharist at its centre, nourishes the vocation of every Christian. Prayer and participation in the liturgy are the lifeblood of all pastoral work for vocations. Listening to the Word of God, especially during the liturgy, is a particularly intense experience wherein one becomes aware of the Lord's call which, in due course, eventually matures and bears fruit.¹⁷

In the same document the importance of the sacraments vis-à-vis the Lord's call is highlighted. The Italian bishops affirm that the sacraments of Penance, Eucharist and Confirmation offer the most appropriate humus in order for vocational orientation to take place. The reasons given in this document include the following: reminding believers of their fidelity to their baptismal call, commitment to service of the Church and ongoing conversion.¹⁸ During the celebration of the liturgy, the hearts of parents and their children are more open to the presence of the priest, the religious or the catechist. Such occasions constitute a particularly intense moment when vocational catechesis may be carried out.¹⁹

A document published conjointly by the Congregation for Catholic Education and the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life in 1992 affirms that "the sacraments of Christian initiation be understood always more also as sacraments of the initiation toward the life consecrated to God and to the Church".²⁰

¹⁷ Cf. CONFERENZA EPISCOPALE ITALIANA, *Piano Pastorale per le vocazioni in Italia*, n. 39.

¹⁸ Cf. *ibid.*, n. 41: "I sacramenti della penitenza, dell'eucaristia e della cresima offrono il terreno più adatto per l'orientamento vocazionale, perché propongono la fedeltà alla vocazione battesimale, l'impegno di servizio ecclesiale, la conversione continua a Dio".

¹⁹ Cf. *ibid.*, n. 42.

²⁰ CONGREGATION FOR CATHOLIC EDUCATION – CONGREGATION FOR INSTITUTES OF CONSECRATED LIFE AND SOCIETIES OF APOSTOLIC LIFE, *Developments in Vocational Pastoral Ministry* (6 January 1992), n. 51.

The catechesis associated with these sacraments proves to be, in certain cases, instrumental in assisting young people in discovering their vocation in life and in being accompanied to make the proper decisions accordingly. Within this wide and rich liturgical context (preparation for the sacraments, their celebration, and ongoing catechesis), it is the duty of the whole Christian community – priests, educators and parents – to seek, promote and encourage priestly and religious vocations.²¹ The grace received in the sacrament of Confirmation leads the individual to sharpen his ability to listen to the prompting of the Spirit. This is fundamental when we talk about the genesis of each vocation. The grace of the sacrament serves to strengthen the Christian to accept the call, and to be able to withstand any obstacles which arise from time to time.²²

Triacca explains the liturgical locus of each vocation in the Church. We will attempt to apply to the ministerial priesthood what he presents in quite general terms,²³ while seeking to remain within the parameters of this paper (namely the genesis of the priestly call). The humus of each vocation is the liturgical context. Triacca succinctly expressed this by means of the trinomial “mystery-celebration-life”. From the *sacra mysteria Christi* which are celebrated in the *ekklesia*, the individual within and together with the community strives to put them into practice in everyday life. This is the perennial dynamism binding together *lex orandi* and *lex vivendi*, or in other words, orthodoxy and orthopraxis. The priestly vocation is born in a liturgical context. That small flame is fanned and strengthened in and by the liturgy. Nourished by the celebration of the sacraments, especially Penance and the Eucharist, as well as by other forms of liturgical prayer, the

²¹ CONFERENZA EPISCOPALE ITALIANA, *Evangelizzazione e sacramenti* (1973), n. 92, in *Enchiridion della Conferenza Episcopale Italiana*, II [1973-1979], 193.

²² Cf. E. ANCILLI, “Preghiera e vocazioni”, in *Seminarium* 22 (1982) 595.

²³ Cf. TRIACCA, “Liturgia”, 638-639.

priestly vocation matures steadily. Triacca goes on to explain how the dynamism and the proper characteristics of the liturgy become one with the proper dynamism and features of the vocation, and vice versa. Thus, the ontological aspect of the vocation is grafted onto the reality of the liturgy, while the existential dimension of the liturgy is forged with that of the vocation. It is evident that these two vital dimensions of the individual's life become one.

Another aspect developed by Triacca highlights the role of the Trinity, the life of grace and its realisation in the life of the individual. The plan of salvation is re-actualised (made present) in the believer through the celebration of the liturgy. He experiences and is transformed by divine grace which realises in the believer – as he lives his particular vocation in life – the indwelling of the Trinity.²⁴ Indeed, each liturgical prayer in the celebration of the sacraments is trinitarian. We always ask the Father to send his Spirit (*epiclesis*) that we may become more like the Son. Thus, we continue to understand how the liturgy offers that special encounter of the believer with the three Divine Persons. Since the second Person is also man, Christ becomes the measure so that one may accomplish faithfully his vocation. Indeed, it is through one's vocation in life that the individual imitates Christ, or to use Pauline terminology, is clothed in Christ (cf. Gal 3,27; Eph 4,24).

The liturgy offers a summons to all Christians that they may respond to the personal call they have received from the Lord. This special encounter lived intensely in certain specific privileged moments (as in liturgical celebrations) pervades the rest of the individual's life and duties. This is accomplished in a special way in those chosen to act in the community *in persona Christi*. The liturgy, as we have been seeing makes present and accomplishes the *mysteria Christi*, in other words the life, mission and paschal mystery of the Saviour. This process which is re-lived in each liturgical celebration helps the believ-

²⁴ Cf. *ibid.*, 639.

er, step by step, to discover his vocation in life and to mature progressively. This is what leads Triacca to state that *every liturgical action is a vocational locus* and that the liturgy is at the service of the process of vocational maturation. The vocation experiences – and each vocation is a dynamic process of relationship with the Lord – the same rhythms of the liturgy and the liturgical year.²⁵

4. The Liturgical Year

The mystery of Jesus Christ is celebrated by Christians throughout the course of the liturgical year. This important temporal dimension of the celebration of the liturgy, marked with cycles and other alternating features is part and parcel of the awe and the beauty of the Christian sacred mysteries. The document mentioned above, published by the Congregation for Catholic Education and the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life concisely affirms that attention be devoted that “the liturgical year become *a permanent school* for the vocational journey”.²⁶

²⁵ Cf. *ibid.* We highlight these excerpts from the original text by the author: “...prendere atto che ogni azione liturgica è luogo di vocazione e che la liturgia è a servizio della ‘maturazione’ vocazionale... La *pedagogia della fede* e la *pedagogia alla vocazione* passano dalle pulsazioni liturgiche e dai suoi ritmi, pari all’itinerario di fede, speranza e carità che la ciclicità dell’anno liturgico, con le feste del Signore e i suoi misteri, pone in risalto”.

²⁶ CONGREGATION FOR CATHOLIC EDUCATION – CONGREGATION FOR INSTITUTES OF CONSECRATED LIFE AND SOCIETIES OF APOSTOLIC LIFE, *Developments in Vocational Pastoral Ministry*, 51. Cf. CONFERENZA EPISCOPALE ITALIANA, *Vocazioni nella Chiesa italiana* (1985), n. 29a, in *Enchiridion della Conferenza Episcopale Italiana*, III [1980-1985], Bologna 1986, 1420. A more recent document by the Italian bishops affirms that “da parte sua l’anno liturgico costituisce la scuola permanente di fede della comunità parrocchiale: ne scandisce la vita quotidiana, apre i battezzati alla grazia, accompagna la maturazione vocazionale dei credenti” (ID., *Le vocazioni al ministero ordinato e alla vita consacrata* [1999], n. 19 in *Enchiridion della Conferenza*

Achille Triacca affirms that the vocational pedagogy is rhythmically marked by what the liturgy celebrates from time to time.²⁷ There are various instances in the liturgical year which can offer a stimulus to those who are listening to God's call. Matias Augé explains that the liturgical year offers an itinerary of faith and life on account of the fact that the ongoing catechesis of Christians is to have the liturgical year as its foundation. In turn, vocational pastoral work can reap many fruits from this dimension.²⁸

Augé affirms that the celebration of the Christian mysteries throughout the liturgical year throws light upon and gives a bird's eye-view of the faith experience of committed Christians, an experience which serves to generate possible vocational choices on the part of certain individuals.²⁹

The liturgical cycle is the fulcrum of the ongoing catechesis of the Christian community. The different seasons (for example, Advent, Pentecost) and the various liturgical feasts provide varying emphases on the mosaic of the Christian life and mission. The Marian feasts, in particular, offer manifold opportunities to underline Mary's *fiat* to the divine will as a model to those who are called.³⁰

Catechists and liturgical animators are urged to utilise the richness of the liturgical prayers, the symbols used, etc. to highlight the different vocations in the community. It is within this catechesis that an

Episcopale Italiana, VI [1996-2000], Bologna 2002, 1327. Also cf. E. MASSERONI, "Le vocazioni nascono e crescono nella preghiera della Chiesa", in *Seminarium* 31 (1991) 727.

²⁷ Cf. TRIACCA, "Liturgia", 640; MASSERONI, *ibid.*, 733.

²⁸ Cf. M. AUGÈ, "Anno Liturgico", in *DPV*, 51.

²⁹ Cf. *ibid.*, 52.

³⁰ Cf. CONFERENZA EPISCOPALE ITALIANA, *Vocazioni nella Chiesa italiana* (1985), n. 29a, in *Enchiridion della Conferenza Episcopale Italiana*, III [1980-1985], Bologna 1986, 1420.

ideal environment is created wherein vocations are generated.³¹ In a document published by the Italian Episcopal Conference in 1980, we find that it is within such a context that fundamental decisions are taken to seek the will of the Father and to embrace discipleship.³² One may become aware of his vocation and start discovering its depth in such a highly charged liturgical context. The authentic celebration of the liturgy truly offers the encounter with the Divine who is the source of every vocation.³³

Listening to the Word of God, especially within the different celebratory contexts of the liturgical year, is yet another important agent in the initial moments of a call from God. It goes without saying that an attentive listening to God's Word is a central dimension to every call and state in life. Familiarity with the Word of God as well as one's active listening of this Word serve to assist the individual who is struggling to see what the Lord is asking of him.³⁴ If it is in this attentive

³¹ Cf. AUGÈ, *ibid.*, 53.

³² Cf. CONFERENZA EPISCOPALE ITALIANA, *La formazione dei presbiteri nella Chiesa italiana* (1980), n. 25, in *Enchiridion della Conferenza Episcopale Italiana*, III [1980-1985], Bologna 1986, 134.

³³ Augè illustrates this by examples. For instance, with reference to Advent and Christmastide, he explains that in this liturgical season "siamo invitati tutti ad avviare o ravvivare l'incontro con Cristo, il solo che può dar senso alla nostra vita. La vocazione nasce e si consolida nell'incontro con Cristo e con il suo progetto sulla persona. A cavallo tra il tempo di Avvento-Natale e la prima parte del Tempo Ordinario, le due prime domeniche di questo tempo si riferiscono ancora alla manifestazione del Signore, celebrata nella solennità dell'Epifania: la prima domenica celebra il Battesimo di Gesù e la seconda ci propone – con sfumature diverse negli anni A, B e C – la manifestazione di Gesù ai primi discepoli e la loro vocazione. In questo modo siamo avviati, dopo l'incontro, alla sequela di Gesù, per conoscerlo, stare con lui, e maturare altre eventuali chiamate" (AUGÈ, *ibid.*, 54). The same author, in other parts of the mentioned article (54-56), presents us with a variety of insightful reflections on the Lord's call and the other seasons of the liturgical year. Different dimensions of the latter are highlighted and applied to the various phases in a vocational itinerary.

³⁴ Cf. C.M. MARTINI, "Parola di Dio e Vocazioni", in *Seminarium* 22 (1982) 600.

listening to the Word that one's vocation is born and grows, the liturgical year is the most appropriate locus where this proclamation and its correspondent acceptance take place.³⁵

5. The Eucharist and the birth of a vocation

When interviewing candidates asking to be admitted to the seminary, very often one discovers that very frequently such individuals would have spent *quality time* before the Eucharist. While narrating the history of their vocation, seminarians often refer to intense experiences of prayer and zeal during long moments spent in front of the tabernacle. The Eucharist is the *viaticum* which accompanies every Christian in his lifelong process of maturation as he journeys towards the Father's house.

The sacrament is the source and summit of the Christian life, and lies at the very heart of the ministerial priesthood. Thus, the Eucharist exercises a pivotal role in every priestly vocation. Participating in the Lord's Banquet, receiving the sacred species, and adoring his Body are special moments during which many have become aware of his special call.³⁶ Ermanno Ancilli explains that within the personal experience of the individual who is being called by the Lord, the Eucharist appears as the source and summit of that vocation. In one way or another, all vocations in the Church are derived from the celebration of the Eucharist. Firstly, this is because it is in the Eucharist that one finds "the whole spiritual good of the Church, namely Christ himself, our Pasch".³⁷ Secondly, every vocation in the Church is inserted fully into

³⁵ Cf. AUGÈ, *ibid.*, 53.

³⁶ Cf. CONFERENZA EPISCOPALE ITALIANA, *Vocazioni nella Chiesa italiana* (1985), n. 29b, in *Enchiridion della Conferenza Episcopale Italiana*, III [1980-1985], Bologna 1986, 1420-1421.

³⁷ SECOND VATICAN ECUMENICAL COUNCIL, Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests *Presbyterorum Ordinis* (7 December 1965) n. 5.

the mystery of the Paschal Christ inasmuch as every believer understands that his own life and personal self-gift is to be celebrated within the bonds of ecclesial communion.³⁸

These Eucharistic experiences are indeed part and parcel of the first stirrings which those who are called first felt. The initial stages of the discernment process are marked with such experiences. Imbued with eucharistic fervour, the individual reaches the stage where he shares his innermost thoughts with someone else, perhaps a close friend, a member of the family, or indeed with a priest who may be in a position to guide him in those initial moments of the vocational itinerary.

The relationship between the Eucharist and the Lord's call was beautifully elaborated by Pope John Paul II in his Message for Vocation Sunday of the year 2000. In the text, he reflects on the transforming influence of the sacrament on the believer. He explains how the believer who nourishes himself with the Body given and the Blood shed by the Lord becomes, in turn, a gift to others. This is an important aspect to bear in mind while studying the theme of this paper. The Eucharist – Christ's gift of himself and abiding presence – instils within those who receive him an urge to become, in turn, gifts to others.

The theme of the Message, *The Eucharist, source of all vocations and ministries in the Church*, offers a number of insights which will help us in our reflections. After reflecting on the effect of the Eucharist on every believer, John Paul II goes on to explain that "in their encounter with the Eucharist, some men discover that they are called to become ministers of the Altar, other people, that they are called to contemplate the beauty and depth of this mystery, others that they are called to pour out again its impelling force of love on the poor and the weak, and others again that they are called to grasp its transforming power in the realities and gestures of everyday life".³⁹ In this insightful quota-

³⁸ Cf. ANCILLI, "Preghiera e vocazioni", 593-594.

³⁹ JOHN PAUL II, Message for the 37th World Day of Prayer for Vocations, n. 2, in *L'Osservatore Romano* (English edition 1 December 1999) 2.

tion from the plethora of teachings of the Polish Pope, one grasps the powerful conviction that the Eucharist *internally touches* those who celebrate, receive and adore it. This is the impressive impact of sacramental grace on believers. In other words, the Eucharistic food and the Eucharistic presence in the tabernacle actively transform Christians. In everyday terms, we would say: you cannot stay put. You are urged to do something for the Lord and with him.

Pope John Paul elaborates even further about this change when he affirms that "each believer finds in the Eucharist not only the interpretative key of his or her own existence, but the courage to actualize it, indeed to build up, in the diversity of charisms and vocations, the one Body of Christ in history".⁴⁰ The orthopractical dimension of the Eucharist is clearly stated. The encounter with the Lord taking place in this sacrament stimulates believers to build and strengthen the bonds of communion in the Church, to serve others and to bear witness in society.⁴¹

The Message for the 37th Word Day of Prayer for Vocations also refers to the Eucharistic dimension of the Lucan pericope which narrates the paschal encounter of the disciples on their way to Emmaus. Again, John Paul II shares his strong convictions while building upon the powerful images coming out of the inspired Evangelist's pen:

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ This intimate relation between what we celebrate and our daily life is taken up in the first encyclical of the new Pope when he affirms that "faith, worship and *ethos* are interwoven as a single reality which takes shape in our encounter with God's *agape*. Here the usual contraposition between worship and ethics simply falls apart. 'Worship' itself, Eucharistic communion, includes the reality both of being loved and of loving others in return. A Eucharist which does not pass over into the concrete practice of love is intrinsically fragmented" (BENEDICT XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, n. 14). Cf. also H. SCERRI, "Dall'*actuosa participatio* ad un'ortoprassi eucaristica autentica", in *Actuosa Participatio. Conoscere, comprendere e vivere la Liturgia. Studi in onore del Prof. Domenico Sartore*, a cura di A. Montan e M. Sodi, Citta' del Vaticano 2002, 507-520.

“When ‘in the breaking of bread’, done by the ‘stranger’, the eyes of the disciples are opened, they realize that their hearts were burning in their breasts while they were listening to him explaining the Scriptures. In those hearts that burn we can see the history and the discovery of every vocation, which is not a transient emotion, but an ever more certain and strong recognition that the Eucharist and Passover of the Son must become ever more the Eucharist and Passover of his disciples”.⁴²

What I would like to highlight are certain vivid and vivifying phrases from this text: *hearts that burn; the history and the discovery of every vocation which is not a transient emotion*. It is the encounter with Christ in the Scripture and in the Eucharist which sets the believers’ hearts on fire. This experience lies at the very nucleus of every call which the Lord makes to those whom he chooses to serve him in the ministerial priesthood. Each vocation passes through that special initial moment or phase of discovery when the individual becomes aware of it, perhaps struggles with the Lord’s invitation, prays over it and discusses it with someone else. This is the genesis of any vocation: the history of a very specific experience in the relationship between a servant and the Master. An authentic call is never a transient emotion.

Towards the end of his message, Pope John Paul II addresses vocation promoters, too, and suggests an efficacious action which may reap much fruit in their mission. While expressing the daunting challenges of their task, he expresses his deep conviction that a profoundly radicated Eucharistic lifestyle will offer an incisive witness to many, especially to young people: “I am aware that the pastoral care of vocations constitutes a less than easy ministry, but how can one not remember that there is nothing more uplifting than an enthusiastic witnessing to one’s own vocation? He who lives this gift joyfully and nourishes it daily in his encounter with the Eucharist will know how

⁴²JOHN PAUL II, Message for the 37th World Day of Prayer for Vocations, n. 2.

to sow in the hearts of many young people the good seed of faithful adherence to the divine call".⁴³

In the light of what has been said thus far on the Eucharist and the first concrete response of those who are called, it is appropriate to refer to what some contemporary authors and gatherings have asserted. Antonio Donghi dwells upon the transforming effect of the Eucharist on those who are called. Indeed, each Christian is summoned, through the Eucharist, to live a life of communion with the Lord. To understand the Eucharist entails entering and experiencing the significance of every vocational journey.⁴⁴ In other words, what has just been affirmed can be said of every vocation in life, because every Christian is called to embrace a Eucharistic existence and a Eucharistic lifestyle. But, how much more is this so for those who are called to be ministers of the Eucharist! When we celebrate the Eucharist and when we adore the Blessed Sacrament, we indeed re-live the experience of the first disciples.

In the Fourth Gospel, the first disciples are invited by Jesus to "come and see" (Jn 1,39.46) for themselves. They spent quality time with Jesus. Who knows what was exchanged in that lengthy unwritten dialogue between Jesus and Andrew? The disciple is he who dedicates quality time with the Lord. This was also the experience of Mary of Bethany who sat at Jesus' feet listening to every word he uttered (cf. Lk 10,39). This *sequela Christi* by today's fledgling disciple is animated (in the full sense of the word, i.e. kept alive) by intimacy with the Eucharist.

Donghi explains that the Eucharist constitutes that *par excellence* sacramental locus wherein the disciple, guided by the Holy Spirit and docile to his action, enjoys that one-to-one relationship with the risen Lord who is sacramentally present.⁴⁵ This experience incessantly chal-

⁴³ *Ibid.*, n. 4.

⁴⁴ Cf. A. DONGHI, "Eucaristia", in *DPV*, 472.

⁴⁵ Cf. *ibid.*

lenges him who is called by the Lord to take radical decisions in his life. He is challenged to question himself about his motivations, thus examining himself as to the reasons why he desires to become a priest. When such motivations are truly supernatural (at least potentially, because very often motivations are only purified over the course of years during the formation process), one starts to look at the oblation dimension of the call. This aspect of self-offering is central to the relationship between the Eucharist and the foundations of one's vocation. Reflections on this theme will be presented further on.

As we have seen above, the experience of the two disciples of Emmaus is a model which illustrates what is being explained. The two men, dejected and disheartened, leave the Jerusalem community. They decide to return to their former life. Their *sequela Christi* had just come to a bitter and tragic end. They journey back to the countryside when they encounter the risen Lord without recognising him. It is only in the breaking of the bread that they come to see Jesus with the eyes of faith. It is in the Eucharist that the flame is rekindled within their hearts. Their vocation which had already started to atrophy burst back into flame. And because no vocation is meant to be self-centred, these two men re-embark on a journey of hope, indeed a missionary journey which leads them not only to share their experience with the Eleven but also to re-embrace their former colleagues by returning to the community of Jesus.

This Lucan pericope illustrates the relationship between the sacrament of the Eucharist and vocation. Vocation entails a going out, a departure from the cosy ambience of the room at Emmaus into the dark road back to Jerusalem, a road which is, however, illumined by the eucharistic love shining in the heart of Cleophas and his brother disciple. Donghi reflects briefly on this episode when he states that in the Eucharist the disciple becomes ever aware of his relationship to Jesus in his paschal mystery. He lets go while involving himself in the dynamics of this relationship. In so doing he ritually translates his fundamental option for the Lord by accepting him and uniting him-

self with him.⁴⁶ Rather than thinking he can embrace the Lord, the man who is feeling the call to the priesthood is to be more convinced that it is the Lord's embrace he is to seek, to expect and to thirst for. The fruitfulness of this eucharistic encounter is based on the individual's commitment to listen to the Lord and to be in tune with what the Master asks of those who follow him.⁴⁷

There are a number of fundamental attitudes which can be seen as the consequence of the young person's encounters with the Lord in the sacrament of the Eucharist. These basic attitudes serve to strengthen those who are called, in their Christian commitment and in the earliest moments of their vocational discernment. Among these attitudes, I highlight three: thanksgiving, offering and communion.⁴⁸

5.1 Thanksgiving

An authentic celebration of the Eucharist is meant to instil a sense of gratitude within the hearts of believers.⁴⁹ A lifestyle which is profoundly marked by this sacrament stimulates individuals to be grateful to God for all the wonders he accomplishes in their life. From a young age, individuals are taught to appreciate all the gifts received freely from God and from those who care for them in different ways. Contemporary society is unfortunately losing the real meaning of *gifts*.⁵⁰ In

⁴⁶ Cf. *ibid.*, 474.

⁴⁷ Cf. *ibid.*, 475.

⁴⁸ Here, I am relying on an interesting series of pastoral aids for parents committed to accompany their sons' and daughters' religious formation, especially in their preparation for their first Holy Communion. This booklet, published by the National Catechetical Commission of Malta, offers a wide spectrum of themes, such as prayer, Jesus Christ, conscience, sin and repentance and the Eucharist. Cf. G. DEGUARA, *Ma' Wliedna lejn Alla (Towards God with our Children)*, Malta 1984.

⁴⁹ Cf. *ibid.*, 82-84.

⁵⁰ Cf. *ibid.*, 83.

various situations, individuals of all ages seem to be giving the message that they have *a vested right to a gift*. Gifts are given freely. They give birth or sustain a relationship between individuals. They are an expression of friendship and good will.

Those who are experiencing and exploring the first stages of what they feel is the Lord's call can strengthen their resolve that this call is a gratuitous gift from above as an ongoing consequence of the Eucharistic dimension of their Christian existence. It is in this light that we can understand the strong relationship between the Eucharistic gift and miracle on the one hand and the gift and miracle of each vocation on the other.

5.2 Self-Offering

From a young age, children can be instructed by their parents – obviously in ways appropriate to the psychological maturity of the respective child – about the sacrifice of Christ on the Cross, its re-actualisation in the Eucharist and their daily offering as Christians. Obviously such a pedagogical process depends tremendously on the religious convictions of the parents, their Christian commitment and their way of facing difficult hurdles in life, challenges and their own sense of self-sacrifice and mortification. As has often been said, the family is “the first seminary”⁵¹ where the seeds of vocation are sown, germinate and eventually nurtured. Parents (as well as catechists) are instrumental in witnessing through their own life the important relationship between the Eucharist and the self-offering of the Christian. In close connection with the latter, we highlight altruism,⁵² this lofty, yet attainable, ideal where the individual imitates the self-forgetful Christ who attended to the needs of all and washed his disciples' feet.

⁵¹ SECOND VATICAN ECUMENICAL COUNCIL, Decree on the Training of Priests *Optatam Totius* (28 October 1965), n. 2.

⁵² Cf. DEGUARA, *Ma' Wliedna*, 85.

Such attitudes are indeed foundational and positively predispose the individual when he reflects on his own offering to the Lord.

Those who are actively discerning to follow the Lord by serving him and the Church through the ministerial priesthood are reminded of this fundamental dimension of the Christian vocation. Those who are called to consecrate themselves to God through Holy Orders are invited to realise that their self-offering to God lies at the very nucleus of their existence. It is an attitude which they embrace steadily over the years of formation, and after. We have to be realistic when dealing with individuals who have felt the call for the first time, or whose response is still in its infancy. One cannot expect too much from those who are in the first stages of their response or even in the first years of formation. As a seminary formator, I would be unrealistic were I to expect too much from a young lad who is struggling to respond while he is still in the early stages of discernment, thus still seeing whether the priesthood is his call or not. Even those who are in the first or second year of formation are to be treated differently from those nearing the threshold of ordination. One's self-offering, yes, is to be presented as an ideal and challenge to the young man, but the meandering dimension of every vocation is not to be overlooked.

The bond which links together the ideal of self-offering and the Eucharist in the genesis of a priestly vocation is now elaborated further. J.M.R. Tillard states that "eating the Body given, it [i.e. the community] too becomes – through the power communicated [by the sacrament] – an ecclesial body given, a body-for-others, a body-offered-for-the-masses. And this must take place simultaneously in each member and as a community".⁵³ Thus, the individual who has embraced the priestly call and is seeking to nurture it and to respond faithfully to it starts to realise – in his personal moments of prayer, at the celebration of the Eucharist, during spiritual direction – that like the Lord Jesus

⁵³ Author's trans. of J.M.R. TILLARD, "L'eucharistie et la fraternité", in *Nouvelle revue théologique* 91 (1969) 126.

who has called him he is to called to be all things for all men. He may feel discouraged, or the prospect may seem too steep to him, but this is one of the objectives of formation, namely "to put on Christ" (cf. Gal 3,27; Eph 4,24), to think like Christ (cf. Phil 2,5).

The Italian theologian Carlo Rocchetta expresses the same ideas proposed by Tillard. The Christian is to imitate Christ who gave himself up to all men. This did not take place only on Calvary. His whole lifestyle was one of self-oblation. He was all things for all men, as we read in the Gospels about his public mission. Rocchetta explains that the Christian who authentically lives the celebration of the Eucharist and puts it into practice must, like Christ, become a body that is given up and blood that is shed.⁵⁴ This Eucharistic pro-existential attitude of the one called thus entails a selfless availability to others, seeking their well-being with whole-hearted generosity.

This attitude does not consist only in an external imitation of Christ whereby the individual's words and actions become more in line with the Gospel demands of our Lord, but the believer is, so as to speak, grafted onto the perfect self-offering of Christ.⁵⁵ This Eucharistic attitude can be described as "*the gift of oneself* to God, the culmination of love. And love is, by its very nature and transcendency, *the gift of self*

⁵⁴Cf. C. ROCCHETTA, "Per una teologia dell'eucaristia come teologia della carità", in *Universa nostra caritas est eucharistia: Per una teologia dell'eucaristia come teologia della comunione e del servizio*, a cura di C. Rocchetta, Bologna 1993, 145, note 52: "La celebrazione eucaristica [...] suppone il coinvolgimento di coloro che accolgono il suo corpo dato e il suo sangue versato, fino a farsi a loro volta pane spezzato e vino offerto". Cardinal Silvano Piovanelli is particularly striking when he writes: "mangiare l'eucaristia per farsi pane 'mangiato' e vino 'versato'" (Preface to *Universa nostra caritas*, 8).

⁵⁵Cf. J.M.R. TILLARD, "L'eucharistie et la fraternité", 125; J. ALFARO, "Eucaristia e impegno cristiano per la trasformazione del mondo", in *Cristologia e antropologia*, Assisi 1973, 608; ROCCHETTA, "Per una teologia dell'eucaristia", 145; B. FORTE, *L'eternità nel tempo. Saggio di antropologia ed etica sacramentale*, Cinisello Balsamo 1993, 205-206, 209, 217.

without reserve”.⁵⁶ These attitudes are at the very heart of the priesthood. Very often, those who feel the first stirrings of the call are inflamed with very noble and high ideals. Although motivations are, at times, to be purified and properly channeled, one should not dampen the initial enthusiasm of the individual who presents himself thinking he has a vocation. Consequently, the responsibility of the person who listens to the discerning individual is a heavy one.

5.3 Formed to embrace a spirit communion

Knowing fully what we are celebrating in the sacrament of the Lord's Supper and committing ourselves to what we have participated in as a family, leads to an authentic Eucharistic orthopraxis. We have already seen the profound implications of one's self-offering and its influence on vocation. The English poet John Donne wrote that “no man is an island”. The same is true for each vocation. There is no vocation which implies insularity. The Lord never calls independently of the Christian community. Each vocation is markedly ecclesial. All gifts and charisms in the Church are discovered and exercised interdependently. The celebration of the Eucharist strengthens the community of the Christian faithful. From childhood, young Christians are taught that their joyful participation in the Eucharist is a concrete sign of the bond of unity of those who believe in Christ.⁵⁷ It is within the context of these strongly-forged bonds of communion that vocations can germinate, grow and bear fruit.

Again, as we have seen in other parts of this section of our study, the sacrament of the Eucharist plays a central role at the birth and development of each vocation. *Eucharistic communion* (in both its senses, namely the receiving of the Body and Blood of Jesus, as well as the

⁵⁶ F. BOURASSA, “Sacrifice”, in *Vatican II: Assessment and Perspectives, Twenty-five years after (1962-1987)*, II, edited by R. Latourelle, Mahwah/NJ 1989, 152.

⁵⁷ Cf. DEGUARA, *Ma' Wliedna*, 86-88.

bonds of unity within the community nourished by the sacrament) urges the individual to understand the Lord's call as an invitation to serve the community of the faithful through the ordained ministry. This communitarian dimension is to be underlined because no one can embrace the priestly ministry independently of the local Church to which he belongs, and without the acceptance of the bishop who leads and serves God's People in a particular territory.

6. The Sacrament of Reconciliation and Penance

The sacrament of Reconciliation and Penance also contributes decisively to the individual's vocational discernment.⁵⁸ During the celebration of this sacrament, one receives the sacramental grace needed in order to renew one's "yes" to the Lord's call. This is expressed by Renzo Girardi who also affirms that the sacrament of penance, each time it is celebrated, always constitutes a significant experience vis-à-vis the individual's vocation.⁵⁹ Every sinful action and attitude distances the Christian from following his call. Thus, we can affirm that the individual who is in the early stages of vocational discernment is able, with the result of the grace of the sacrament of Penance, to review his commitment to God, firstly as a Christian, and progressively as one who is being called by the Lord to embrace, in this case, the priestly vocation.

⁵⁸ Cf. CONFERENZA EPISCOPALE ITALIANA, *Piano pastorale per le vocazioni in Italia* (1973), n.41, in *Enchiridion della Conferenza Episcopale Italiana*, II [1973-1979], Bologna 1985, 151; ID., *Le vocazioni al ministero ordinato e alla vita consacrata* (1999), n.19, in *Enchiridion della Conferenza Episcopale Italiana*, VI [1996-2000], Bologna 2002, 1327; ANCILLI, "Preghiera e vocazioni", 595.

⁵⁹ Cf. R. GIRARDI, "Penitenza", in *DPV*, 879: "Anche la penitenza, dunque, costituisce un 'tempo' vocazionale significativo. Ricostruendo in pienezza il nostro rapporto con Dio nella grazia santificante, ci pone nella giusta situazione esistenziale per poter scegliere liberamente e saper corrispondere al dono della specifica chiamata".

The document published in 1985 by the Italian Episcopal Conference describes the positive impact of this sacrament on adolescents and young men who are seriously reflecting on the Lord's call. It explains that the sacrament of Reconciliation and Penance favours that ongoing conversion which becomes the indispensable humus wherein one can answer the Lord's call. The dialogue between the penitent and the confessor, in a context of joyful trust, may offer an appropriate opportunity during which the seeds of vocational discernment may be sown.⁶⁰

7. Catechesis and Vocation

The scope of catechesis always entails the instruction of the Christian faithful that they may deepen their faith and consequently their commitment.⁶¹ The *Piano Pastorale per le Vocazioni* (1973) of the Italian Episcopal Conference strongly encourages a greater knowledge of the psychological and sociological aspects of the vocational orientation of youth. It is in this light that one is to consider the maturation process of the individual at its respective phases of development vis-à-vis the catechetical instruction which is imparted. One is to bear in mind the affective development of the individual and the concomitant spiritual growth as one passes from childhood to adolescence to youth.⁶²

In his Apostolic Exhortation *Catechesi Tradendae*, Pope John Paul II explains the influence of catechetical instruction on the vocational

⁶⁰ Cf. *ibid.*, 880; CONFERENZA EPISCOPALE ITALIANA, *Vocazioni nella Chiesa italiana* (1985), n. 29b, in *Enchiridion della Conferenza Episcopale Italiana*, III [1980-1985], Bologna 1986, 1421.

⁶¹ Cf. *Code of Canon Law*, canons 773-780; *Code of Canons of the Oriental Churches*, canons 617-626.

⁶² Cf. CONFERENZA EPISCOPALE ITALIANA, *Piano Pastorale per le Vocazioni* (1973), n. 33, in *Enchiridion della Conferenza Episcopale Italiana*, II [1973-1979], Bologna 1985, 149.

process. He does this in the fifth section of this post-synodal document when he highlights the importance of catechesis to different age categories. Bearing in mind the centrality of pastoral work, the Polish Pope asks: "How are we to reveal Jesus Christ, God made man, to this multitude of children and young people, reveal him not just in the fascination of a first fleeting encounter but through acquaintance, growing deeper and clearer daily, with him, his message... the call that he addresses to each person...?"⁶³

Reflecting on this powerful text, we note the focus on the person of Jesus Christ. I am convinced that at the genesis of the individual's initial awareness of the vocation lies his personal fascination of the person of Jesus Christ. This christological focus lies at the very foundation of each vocation. When the young man is fascinated by Jesus, he will listen attentively to the call and seek help to respond faithfully and joyfully. This is, I believe, the beginning of that process of "falling in love"⁶⁴ mentioned by Pope Benedict XVI when he addressed seminarians at Cologne in August 2005.

Catechesis "should be explicitly permeated with the vocational dimension, and depict a true and proper vocational journey".⁶⁵ Catechesis, as well as catechisms, are to refer explicitly to the general Christian vocation and to the priestly and the religious call.⁶⁶ A document,

⁶³ JOHN PAUL II, Apostolic Exhortation *Catechesi Tradendae* (16 October 1979), n. 35.

⁶⁴ BENEDICT XVI, Homily to Seminarians, St Pantaleon Church, Cologne, Germany (19 August 2005) in *L'Osservatore Romano* (English edition 24 August 2005) 7.

⁶⁵ CONGREGATION FOR CATHOLIC EDUCATION – CONGREGATION FOR INSTITUTES OF CONSECRATED LIFE AND SOCIETIES OF APOSTOLIC LIFE, *Developments in Vocational Pastoral Ministry*, n. 52.

⁶⁶ This is affirmed by another text on vocations published by the Italian bishops, twelve years after the document mentioned previously. The later text states: "Tutti i catechismi promossi in questi anni dalla CEI – dal catechismo dei bambini al catechismo degli adulti – sono permeati da questa idea, rappresentano un vero e proprio itinerario vocazionale e con frequenza accennano ai contenuti e valori delle vo-

published by the Italian Episcopal Conference, on the formation of priests, underlines the fact that catechesis offers a particularly intense opportunity to proclaim the various Christian vocations, in particular those entailing a more radical following of the Lord.⁶⁷

Catechesis is entwined with sacramental life. What we have studied in previous parts of this study when dealing with the liturgy and the sacraments is already markedly catechetical in character. Liturgical celebrations, whenever they are properly carried out, offer a sound catechesis to those present. When referring to how this touches children, John Paul II explains that “it is a catechesis that gives meaning to the sacraments, but at the same time it receives from the experience of the sacraments a living dimension that keeps it from remaining merely doctrinal, and it communicates to the child the joy of being a witness to Christ in ordinary life”.⁶⁸

Using very realistic terminology, John Paul II refers to the catechesis of adolescents. After expressing his awareness of the various struggles they experience in this particularly delicate period of their life, the late Pontiff talks of “a catechesis capable of leading the adolescent to reexamine his or her life and to engage in dialogue, a catechesis that does not ignore the adolescent’s great questions – self-giving, belief, love and the means of expressing it constituted by sexuality – such a cate-

cazioni di speciale consacrazione” (CONFERENZA EPISCOPALE ITALIANA, *Vocazioni nella Chiesa italiana* [1985], n. 28, in *Enchiridion della Conferenza Episcopale Italiana*, III [1980-1985], Bologna 1986, 1417).

⁶⁷ Cf. CONFERENZA EPISCOPALE ITALIANA, *La formazione dei presbiteri nella Chiesa italiana. Orientamenti e norme*, n.25, in *Enchiridion della Conferenza Episcopale Italiana*, III [1980-1985], Bologna 1986, 134. The full text states that “La catechesi è orientata a formare una mentalità di fede, per la quale soltanto può nascere la decisione fondamentale di cercare la volontà del Padre e di farsi discepolo di Cristo. È questo contesto che offre l’occasione normale per un annuncio forte e coraggioso delle diverse vocazioni cristiane, soprattutto di quelle che comportano una più radicale sequela del Signore in una vita consacrata a lui per il servizio dei fratelli”.

⁶⁸ JOHN PAUL II, *Catechesi Tradendae*, n. 37.

chesis can be decisive".⁶⁹ I highlight the reference made to self-giving, a topic which has already been presented in a previous section of this study. Adolescents often have great ideals. It is also the duty of the adults and teachers they encounter to challenge them and to present them with ideals and models. The ideal of self-giving is part and parcel of each vocation in life.

Again, Jesus Christ is mentioned in the text of the Apostolic Exhortation, as the point of convergence of the ideals and values presented to adolescents and embraced by them. Pope John Paul affirms in very clear terms that Jesus Christ is to be presented as a friend, guide and model, capable of being admired but also imitated".⁷⁰ This is a very important statement, especially in the context of the nurturing of a priestly vocation. It is Jesus Christ who calls the young person. It is the same Jesus who permeates his life. It is Jesus Christ who inflames the heart of the individual and fills him with the zeal that enables a faithful and joyful following of the call.

Building upon the foundations laid in the previous paragraphs, John Paul II delves more deeply on the catechesis of young people. Reading carefully the text of paragraph 39 of *Catechesi Tradendae*, one cannot fail to notice references, direct or indirect, to the response to the call of the Lord. This is presented in the context of the weighty decisions to be taken by young people, decisions which influence the rest of their life. Pope John Paul affirms that "although the young may enjoy the support of the members of their family and their friends, they have to rely on themselves and their own conscience and must ever frequently and decisively assume responsibility for their destiny".⁷¹

Within such life situations, the role of catechesis should never be underestimated. Again, although the text is wide enough to embrace

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, n. 38.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, n. 39.

different situations because it is intended to refer to young people in general, one cannot fail to notice the importance given, yet again, to self-sacrifice and detachment. These attitudes are relevant, indeed foundational, for young people opting for any state of life. In fact, Pope John Paul II avers that "catechesis then takes on considerable importance, since it is the time when the Gospel can be presented, understood and accepted as capable of giving meaning to life and thus of inspiring attitudes that would have no other explanation, such as self-sacrifice, detachment, forbearance, justice, commitment, reconciliation, a sense of the Absolute and the unseen. All these are traits that distinguish a young person from his or her companions as a disciple of Jesus Christ".⁷² Most naturally such attitudes are fundamental in the case of the individual who is in the process of discovering his call to the priesthood. The proclamation of the Gospel and its explanation, followed by the meditation of the text and its application to concrete life situations is an indispensable tool in vocational discernment.

John Paul II proceeds to affirm that properly imparted catechesis offers a sound preparation to "the important Christian commitments of adult life. For example, it is certain that many vocations to the priesthood and religious life have their origin during a well imparted catechesis in infancy and adolescence".⁷³ Catechesis, which in the same text John Paul II calls *a permanent school of faith*, has a particularly strong influence in the incipient stages of the discernment of the Lord's call. Indeed, in the Pastoral Synod of the Archdiocese of Bari-Bitonto, we read that "the laity, catechists [and] teachers of religion [...] are to accompany young people during their vocational itinerary".⁷⁴ Here, the role of catechists and religion teachers in schools is underlined.

⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴ Author's translation of ARCIDIOCESI DI BARI-BITONTO, *Il Libro del Sinodo. Un futuro pieno di speranza. Primo Sinodo diocesano 1996-2000*, Bari 2002, Proposizione

The document mentioned earlier in this paper, on *Developments in Vocational Pastoral Ministry*, refers to the urgent need that catechists and teachers of religion be pedagogically prepared in the field of “the ‘accompaniment’ capable of giving rise to and promoting vocations”.⁷⁵ The competent dicasteries of the Roman Curia affirm that it is highly important that there be well-trained catechists who are versed in the theology of vocation, as well as in vocational orthopraxis. Indeed the same document recommends that catechists be trained with regard to “the diverse consecrated vocations, not only in a general and theoretical form, but even in a personal and individualised form that helps the youth to discern the divine signs of the call”.⁷⁶ This is a very delicate task. In these cases, while exercising the role of a vocational animator (as recommended by the joint document of 1992), catechists should realise how carefully they are to deal with an individual who becomes aware of what may be the first sparks of the Lord’s call. During this delicate task, such catechists are neither to rush the individual to take radical decisions in a short span of time nor to procrastinate unnecessarily the nurturing of the call in its earliest stages.

The *General Directory for Catechesis*, published in 1997, elucidates the role of catechesis in stimulating believers “to lend their cooperation to the different ecclesial services, according to their proper vocation”.⁷⁷ Most naturally this holds true for all the Christian states of life. Catechetical instruction, according to age, circumstances, and the

210: “I laici, i catechisti, gli insegnanti di religione [...] accompagnino i giovani nell’itinerario di scelta vocazionale”.

⁷⁵ CONGREGATION FOR CATHOLIC EDUCATION – CONGREGATION FOR INSTITUTES OF CONSECRATED LIFE AND SOCIETIES OF APOSTOLIC LIFE, *Developments in Vocational Pastoral Ministry*, n. 53.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ CONGREGATION FOR THE CLERGY, *General Directory for Catechesis*, Vatican City 1997, n. 86.

faith itinerary accomplished thus far by an individual or by a group, is directed to encourage Christians to live up to their baptismal commitment, that is to exercise in the most fruitful way the common priesthood of the faithful. The *General Directory* then proceeds to specify that during catechesis “every means should be used to encourage vocations to the priesthood, and to the different forms of consecration to God in religious and apostolic life and to awaken special missionary vocations”.⁷⁸

Catechesis serves to strengthen the resolve of the individual who is grappling with the first sparks of his vocational call. This is more so if such instruction is well-organised, regular and adapted to individual needs. When this individual identifies himself with the attitudes of Christ, he is on the right path of vocational discernment. The *Directory*, in fact, states that “the evangelical attitudes which Jesus taught his disciples when he sent them on mission are precisely those which catechesis must nourish: to seek out the lost sheep, proclaim and heal at the same time, to be poor, without money or knapsack; to know how to accept rejection and persecution; to place one’s trust in the Father and in the support of the Holy Spirit; to expect no other reward than the joy of working for the Kingdom”.⁷⁹

8. Conclusion

In this study we have seen at some depth how the celebration of the liturgy and the ongoing education in the Christian faith are instrumental at the genesis of the Lord’s call to serve him in the ministerial priesthood. These two dimensions provide an appropriate and stimulating environment to the believer who is discovering his vocation and, later, maturing in his response. It is within this context that “our youth begin to experience the fascination of Christ, his mission, his

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

way of responding to the invitation of the Father".⁸⁰ Being fascinated by Christ is the essential lifeblood of each vocation in the Church. This fascination is nourished daily by the celebration of the liturgy, especially the sacrament of the Eucharist and by the concomitant catechesis. But it all began with that first important step, followed by many others. And right through, the Lord continues to look lovingly (cfr Mk 10,21) at those whom he calls, and waits for their response ... a response confirmed each day, and nourished by the sacraments and by catechesis.

Bio-bibliography

Rev. Dr. Hector Scerri, of the Archdiocese of Malta, was born in 1965. He was ordained priest in 1993 and carried out postgraduate studies at the Pontifical Gregorian University, Rome, leading to a doctorate in sacred theology. From 1998, he has been the Vice-Rector of the Major Seminary of Malta and lectures in dogmatic theology at the University of Malta. Since 2000, he has also been Censor theologicus of his native archdiocese. Since 2001, he is Head of the Department of Fundamental and Dogmatic Theology of the University of Malta. He is member of the editorial board of Melita Theologica. Scerri is the author of Koinonia, Diakonia and Martyria. Interrelated Themes in Patristic Sacramental Theology as Expounded by Adalbert Hamman, Malta 1999. He is the editor of Living Theology. Studies on Karl Rahner, Yves Congar, Bernard Lonergan and Hans Urs von Balthasar, Vatican City 2006. He has contributed articles and papers to the following journals and collections: Melita Theologica, Nicolaus, Omnis Terra and Studia Ephemeridis Augustinianum. Scerri is a member of Società Italiana per la Ricerca Teologica (SIRT) and Association Internationale Henri de Lubac.

⁸⁰ A. CENCINI, *Vocation Animation. A Sign of Renewal*, Bombay 1995, 166.