

UNIT 3B: PASTORAL AND ASCETICAL THEOLOGY

77: Vocation and Work (COMPLETE)

1. Introduction: Personal Vocations and the Vocation of the Parish

The word *vocation* comes from the Middle English *vocacioun*, meaning “a divine call to a religious life”; and that old sense still lingers to the word today.¹ However, in this lecture our interest is in vocation in the earlier Latin sense of “a calling”—a calling to each of us to live, to participate in life itself through work and prayer, to participate in the life of God.²

It is helpful to recall that the Church itself has a vocation to participate in the life of Christ, which is lived out at the parish level through pastoral commitment and liturgical reality. We will consider that parish vocation in greater detail next term in Lecture 83 on The Orthodox Parish. However, before we can focus on our own personal vocations, it is important to recognise that the vocation of the parish is somewhat under threat in Great Britain. **Precisely because we are limited in the possibility of living a Christian life in a thriving Orthodox parish, it is difficult to become an Orthodox Christian who is finding and fulfilling a personal commitment to Christ.**³ As one Orthodox priest commented, “Orthodoxy in this country is a dog’s breakfast compared to what it is in many other countries; and what it might become here.”

¹ John Barnet begins his essay, “Seek First His Kingdom: An Invitation to Christian Vocation” with the story, “A number of years ago the abbot of a monastery answered my question of vocation—whether I should get married or become a monk—with the startling words, ‘God doesn’t care.’ He then added, ‘God only cares that you seek first his kingdom” in Ann Mitsakos Bezzerides (Ed.), *Christ at Work: Orthodox Perspectives on Vocation* (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2006), pp. 43-69.

² For the theological foundations of this approach see Father Stanley Samuel Harakas, “Vocation and Ethics” in Bezzerides, pp. 175-207 where Father Stanley insists that our ‘calling’ or ‘vocation’ is, at its core, a call to the life in Christ” (p. 189).

³ The difficulty of finding a vocation in the contemporary world has been presented in more theological terms in an outstanding article by Khaled Anatolios, “Considering Vocation: The Witness of the Fathers” in Bezzerides, pp. 107-127, with a focus on engaging in the process of purification, illumination and union with God.

Only some 5% of adults in England, Scotland and Wales are going to church regularly on Sunday—about three million people, fairly evenly divided among Roman Catholics, Anglicans and others—with Orthodox Christians among “the others.”⁴ Many churches have closed or lack both lay and clerical leaders. In an article in the Roman Catholic weekly magazine, *The Tablet*, Father Daniel O’Leary and a friend reflected on why a church had closed in a small town in Yorkshire:

If we were asked [he wrote] by an interested passer-by for the story of this neglected church, we discussed two ways of responding. One way, the usual way, would be to describe it as the necessary refuge from a threatening world; therefore we must join it, become practising members of it, believe its teachings, obey its laws, overcome our sinfulness, so as to please a Christian God out there, and thus be saved.

Our questioner might point out that obviously such a message no longer touches people: that for some reason they do not seem to hear it, or need it now. Small wonder, she might add, [this closed church] looks so lost and lonely.

The other way, we would then explain, the traditionally contemplative but forgotten way, would be to perceive that very ordinary church as the symbol of the holiness of the whole town, the sign that the families and individuals in every street are already a delight to God, exactly as they are.

Would this be too much for our questioner to understand, we asked—to see all the bustle in the streets around us, all the human commerce we had been

⁴ The Faith Survey has estimated that during the period from 1980 to 2015 “church attendance in Great Britain declined from 6,484,300 to 3,081,500, equivalent to a decline from 11.8% to 5.0% of the population. England has the lowest percentage of the population attending church in 2015 (4.7%), just below Wales at 4.8%. In Scotland, the equivalent figure is 8.9%.” See: <https://faithsurvey.co.uk/uk-christianity.html> .

observing, as the real presence of God, the shape and colour and smell of the God of Jesus, the human touch and feel and sound of the Christian God?

... There is nothing new or fanciful about this truth. It is as old as [the] [I]ncarnation ... [T]he infancy narratives of Matthew and Luke . . . are proclaiming, ‘God has truly become human and we are all now bright with divine beauty.’⁵

The example is thought provoking, but possibly misleading. It is true that the second explanation of the Church is more challenging than the first. It is also true that we each participate in the Incarnation, Crucifixion, Resurrection and Ascension of Jesus Christ and “we are all now bright with divine beauty.” However, **people (including us) may not necessarily be “already a delight to God exactly as they are”.** We might be living lives that are not in keeping with the will of God for each of us. That neglected church building might still need to be reopened and become a thriving local church in order for us to fulfil our personal vocations.⁶ Unless we choose to join a monastery, we deceive ourselves if we think we can find a vocation outside of a thriving Orthodox parish or by living in the culture of our grandparents.

2. Balancing the Two Dimensions of a Personal Vocation: Spiritual and Social

Each personal vocation is unique, but there are usually two dimensions to any vocation— a spiritual dimension and a social dimension. Both dimensions are neatly captured by Ann Mitsakos Bezzerides in *Christ at Work: Orthodox Christian Perspectives on Vocation*, with her insistence that “**God-given vocation is borne out in community because it is a response to the call to love the neighbour.**”⁷ It is also helpful to ground Bezzerides’ spiritual awareness with a deeper appreciation of social development as set out by the Stanford University historian, archaeologist

⁵ Daniel O’Leary, “Sign of delight”, *The Tablet*, 27 November 2010, p. 14. Father O’Leary concludes: “What an astonishing revelation hidden in that unprepossessing place decorated with discarded cigarette packets, trampled liquorice wrappers, broken beer bottles—and straw.”

⁶ However, see the conclusion of this lecture for further reflection.

⁷ Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2006; Bezzerides, “Introduction,” p. 10.

and classicist, Ian Morris in his remarkable 750-page study, *Why the West Rules—For Now: The Patterns of History and What They Reveal about the Future*. No matter how “spiritual” we become, we are still confronted with the question posed by Morris:

The great question for our times is not whether the West will continue to rule. It is whether humanity as a whole will break through to an entirely new kind of existence before disaster strikes us down—permanently.⁸

As we discern our vocations, we are confronted by what Morris aptly terms “the five horsemen of the apocalypse”—famine, epidemic, uncontrolled migration, state failure and climate change.⁹

We need to learn to focus—both spiritually and socially—to limit our attention to particular spiritual goals and particular social problems at particular times (or seasons) in our lives in order to understand the vocations that are possibilities for each of us.¹⁰ In one sense, personal vocations are influenced by our God-given talents, but in another sense, we ourselves mould these talents to specific purposes. For example, in *Five Minds for the Future* the Harvard educator, Howard Gardner notes the importance of cultivating the ethical mind that:

ponders the nature of one’s work and the needs and desires of the society in which one lives. This mind conceptualises how workers can serve purposes beyond self-interest and how citizens can work unselfishly to improve the lot of all. The ethical mind then acts on the basis of these analyses.¹¹

⁸ London: Profile Books, 2010; p. 36.

⁹ pp. 28-29.

¹⁰ In a helpful article in *Harvard Business Review*, “Warning: Your attention is Under Siege” [Blogs, 15 November 2010] Tony Schwartz reflects on how difficult it is in the face of digital-based information overload to gain “control of our attention—to put it where we want it, and keep it there for sustained period of time”. His four recommended practices are useful: “1. Do the most important thing first every morning, without interruptions, for at least 60 to 90 minutes.... 2. Chunk your email, meaning answer it in batches, rather than continuously throughout the day.... 3. Take short breaks through the day—2 to 3 minutes at first—to close your eyes and practice quieting your mind... 4...[T]ake at least one uninterrupted half an hour in the evening to read a challenging book, or to think reflectively and write in a journal about your day.”

¹¹ Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2006; p. 3.

Gardner suggests that **“knowledge is best construed as tentative”**; and that insight applies as much to one’s understanding of God as to one’s understanding of one’s work.¹² In other words, **we need to develop our theology and then make the necessary changes to our ideas about vocation and work as grow in maturity.**

The balancing of spiritual and social goals in finding a personal vocation is quite nuanced.¹³ Consider the example of the World War I poet, Wilfred Owen.¹⁴ He began his own search for a vocation within the first understanding of the Church sketched out by Father O’Leary above. Owen was influenced by the intense religiosity and rather controlling nature of his mother; and from the ages of 18 to 20, he worked as a Vicar’s Assistant in an Anglican church in Dunston, near Reading, where for two years in the afternoons he visited the poor. Writing one of his more than 500 letters to his mother, Owen commented that he spent his time **“sitting on uncomfortable chairs, talking to uncomfortable people in uncomfortable cottages.”** However, Owen became disillusioned with the irrelevance of the church to the poor and disillusioned with God. Instead, he found his vocation in **“the human experience of war”**—a war in which 9 million people died, including Wilfred Owen, M.C. himself (at age 25) in the last week of that war. Reflecting on that experience of war, Owen wrote that **“all a poet can do today is warn.”** In a similar vein, all a lecturer on vocation and work can do today is point out that in the human experience of work and of relationships **we each build our own lives—with our own strengths and weaknesses, socially and spiritually.** Wilfred Owen would certainly be surprised to learn that he has become the second most studied poet (after Shakespeare) in

¹² Gardner, p. 26.

¹³ For an outstanding theological presentation of balancing the spiritual and social dimensions of a vocation, see Demetrios S. Katos, “In the Image of God: Mystical Theology and Secular Vocation” in Bezzerides, pp. 129-149, where Katos argues that **“Christian mysticism does not separate believers from the world, rather it urges them to transfigure the world by perceiving God permeating its every dimension.”**

¹⁴ This sketch of Owen is drawn from the BBC/Modern Television production, **“Wilfred Owen: A Remembrance Tale”**. Produced and Directed by Louise Hooper; Narrated by Jeremy Paxman. 2007.

British schools. We too may be surprised by what happens to us if we seek a personal vocation, but that does not mean we should strive for fame or honour.

The choice is not between a social or a spiritual vocation, but how the social and spiritual dimensions combine. As a young man of 20, struggling to find a vocation, Wilfred Owen wrote, “Murder will out; and I have murdered my false creed. If a true one exists, I shall find it.” He did not lose the hope of finding purpose in life, even as he lost his faith in God. Five years later, as an infantry officer, he wrote of his men: “My aim is to help these boys; directly, by means of leading them as well as an officer can; indirectly, by watching their sufferings that I may speak of them as well as a pleader can. I have done the first.” Owen was to complete his Christ-like vocation of participating in suffering and pleading for those who suffer only many years after his death: in his lifetime only five of his poems were published, but by the 1960s he had become emblematic of those who protested against war itself. We too can seek a balance between the spiritual and social dimensions of our unique personal vocations.

3. How to Find Your Vocation

This is not a theoretical lecture: it is a practical one. The aim is for each of us to find the right work and the appropriate vocation. The fuller definition of *vocation* offered by Bezzierides is appropriate: “Vocation is one’s ongoing and unique way of being in the world that is a response to Christ’s call to love God with heart, soul, mind, and strength, and one’s neighbour as oneself.”¹⁵ She also proposes a “matrix of discernment” for determining a vocation:

True vocation is a life lived for God and the neighbor....The ongoing process of discovering this unique response [to God] requires careful, ongoing discernment that may be guided well by the Orthodox cycle of [1] feasts

¹⁵ Introduction, p. 10.

and [2] fasts, [3] prayer, [4] repentance, [5] confession and [6] Communion, all of which invite us to a rich life in Christ.¹⁶

Let us add four further methods of guidance to Bezzerides' list—[7] spiritual direction, [8] knowing yourself and Christ, [9] discerning opportunities and [10] patience. Then we shall examine in turn how each of these ten approaches to vocation help us to find our unique vocations, with appropriate work and relationships.

Feasts

Perhaps it seems strange to begin the process of discerning a vocation with the Orthodox feasts, but on reflection, this makes a lot of sense. **The feasts bring us a deep sense that God loves us, as we celebrate the life we share with Him, and as we gain the security to deepen our participation in the life of God.** What does that mean in practice? How can we deepen our participation in the life of God?

As Father Georges Florovsky (1893-1979) reminds us, “To worship God means precisely to be aware of His presence, to dwell constantly in this presence” and thereby to be formed as a new person.¹⁷ The first of the Great Feasts in the church year, The Birth of the Theotokos on September 8th as well as the Annunciation on March 25th are especially relevant in offering Holy Mary as a model for how to respond to God’s call, to be willing to say, “May it be done to me according to your word” (Luke 1:39), even when one does not fully understand the calling.¹⁸ The feast of Theophany on January 6th, celebrating Christ’s baptism, is a reminder of both

¹⁶ pp. 10-11.

¹⁷ “Encounter and Dialogue” in Mother Mary & Kallistos Ware, *The Festal Menaion* (South Canaan, PA: St Tikhon’s Seminary Press, 1998), p. 31.

¹⁸ For a fuller reflection on Holy Mary as a model for a personal vocation, see Deborah Malacky Belonick, “The Call of the Virgin Mary,” in Bezzerides, pp.151-173, where Belonick cites Holy Mary “as an example for all human beings, because what happened in her life certainly will find its counterpart in every Christian born of the Spirit of God,” as well as because of her “integrity, wholeness, and purposeful dedication.”

the humility that Christ brings to his own vocation, as well as the need for renewal that we all experience as we strive to find our vocations.¹⁹

Fasts

Intriguingly, fasts share with feasts the goal of removing us from “attachment to earthly things” and guiding us to the “study and understanding” of “spiritual existence and ... spiritual destiny.”²⁰ To a far greater extent than the Roman Catholic, Anglican and Protestant traditions in the West, Orthodox Christianity still considers fasting as “connected with the very mystery of life and death.”²¹ As Father Alexander Schmemmann has pointed out, Adam and Eve “broke the fast” by eating the forbidden fruit (Genesis 3:6), in contrast to Christ who began his ministry by **fasting for forty days (Matthew 4:11)**. In brief, it is necessary at times to fast if we are to find our vocations so that we face “the ultimate question: on what does my life depend?”²² Within this context, fasting becomes “our entrance and participation in that experience of Christ himself [of being hungry] by which he liberates us from the total dependence on food, matter, and the world.”²³ Thus fasting is not primarily focused on dietary rules about “what is permitted and what if forbidden,” with all its “superficial hypocrisy,” but rather on accepting that at certain times we are hungry, and that “**hunger itself is first of all a spiritual state and that it is in the last reality hunger for God.**”²⁴

Prayer

Father Alexander’s presentation of fasting requires a commitment to prayer:

... fasting as a physical effort is totally meaningless without its spiritual counterpart: ... prayer. This means that without feeding ourselves with Divine

¹⁹ Cf. Mother Mary & Kallistos Ware, pp. 55-59.

²⁰ Protopresbyter George Dion. Dragas, *Ecclesiasticus II: Orthodox Icons, Saints, Feasts and Prayer* (Rollinsford, NH: Orthodox Research Institute, 2005), p. 136.

²¹ Father Alexander Schmemmann, *Great Lent: Journey to Pascha* (New York: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2001), p. 94.

²² Schmemmann, p. 95.

²³ Schmemmann, p. 96.

²⁴ Schmemmann, p. 97. Cf. Matthew 5:6

Reality, without discovering our total dependence on God and God alone, physical fasting would indeed be suicide....We need first of all a spiritual preparation for the effort of fasting. It consists in asking God for help and also in making our fast God-centered. We should fast for God's sake. We must rediscover our body as the Temple of His presence...²⁵

As we each ask God for help to find our own vocations, we should be open to receiving a clear vision of what God seeks from us, as Isaiah did and of responding to the Lord, "Here am I. Send me" (Isaiah 6:8). However, we should also recognize that to find our vocations we do not require a magnificent vision of "the Lord sitting on a throne ... with the train of His robe filling the temple" (Isaiah 6:1), but simply a quiet sense that a certain work, a certain prayer, a certain commitment is the work that the Lord has given us to do today. Lecture 74: Prayer is an important aid to finding your vocation.

Repentance

We are all sinners, and yet we can each find our vocations. Ultimately, **we all have the same vocation**—to choose what work to do, what relationships to develop, what prayer commitments to implement in the midst of the options available to us. Our shared vocation is **to be formed in Christ**, to become one with Christ in some way we may not even as yet understand. When we are told, "You can find your vocation now," our response is likely to be the same as that of Holy Mary when the Archangel Gabriel told her that she would conceive a son: "How can this be?" (Luke 1.34). Mary was thinking of her virginity; we think of our general incompetence and attachment to sinning. **We are sinners, and yet we can repent; we live in the world, and yet we live with God. It is possible to bring these two opposing ideas together: we can become repentant sinners; we can learn to live with God in the world.**²⁶ Through bringing sin into the realm of grace, we then discover our

²⁵ Schmemmann, p. 97

²⁶ Thinking in which two opposing ideas are held "in fruitful tension" is known as integrative thinking and is considered further in Lecture 85: Christian Education. This has been proposed in a management context by Roger Martin in *The Opposable Mind: How Successful Leaders Win through Integrative Thinking*, Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press, 2007, p. 6.

vocations and the work we are to do: we have to accept all of ourselves—our strengths and our inadequacies—as we learn how to turn from our inclination to sin to relying on God’s grace.²⁷ We must not delay our vocation on account of our sinfulness. It is by His grace that we become fit to serve, even while serving, and we become stronger by acknowledging our weaknesses and giving these to God.

Confession

How can we know that we have truly repented and that God has forgiven us? Make a sincere and honest confession. We do not have to face the public penance which the early Church delivered to sinners, as set out in Lecture 71: Repentance and Confession. We confess to God alone, and not to the whole community or to a priest as is done in Roman Catholic (and a few Anglican) parishes.²⁸ However, we do have to repent genuinely before God, and express our repentance before an **Orthodox priest** who serves as a witness not to our sins, but to our repentance. It is good to remember that repentance and confession are a sacramental unity: repentance without confession is an unfulfilled personal hope; confession without repentance is a waste of our time and a priest’s time.

Through confession we turn in front of a fellow Orthodox person from sin to grace, from a sense of inadequacy before God to an experience of reconciliation with God. Without confession, we have only the hope of repentance, the hope of not sinning again. However, **through the sacrament of confession we receive help from God not to sin again—we receive His acceptance of our return into the Christian community that is the Church. We do not have to pretend anymore.**

²⁷ In “Pursuing the Mind of Christ: Lessons on Vocation from the Old Testament,” Father Paul Nadim Tarazi defines repentance as a “new beginning” or “turning (around) (Hebrew *shub*) to indicate a turning of the heart” (Jeremiah 25:5; 26:3; 35:15; 36:3,7) and points out that “the same verb is employed to describe the people’s return from exile in Babylon. Thus, God promises that if the people will return to him, he will return to them.... Once all the barriers the people have erected between themselves and God have been swept away, they can return to him, and he to them, whether in Jerusalem, Babylon, or elsewhere” (Bezzierides, pp. 13-42, esp. p. 28).

²⁸ See also note 36 below and the stress from Deacon John Chryssavgis in *Soul Mending: The Art of Spiritual Direction* that in the Orthodox Church the “priest at confession is ‘witness not detective.’”

Holy Communion

As Ann Bezzerides has suggested, many of us discern our vocations and the “rich life in Christ” to which we are invited through Holy Communion in the midst of the Divine Liturgy.²⁹ Perhaps this is because we have the time and space to pray and reflect privately while we are in church, but there is also a sense in which during any type of liturgy we are celebrating as a community. We are joined to the support and prayers of other Christians, because “liturgical prayer ... is the prayer of the entire community;” appropriately, “the Greek word *leitourgia* literally means ‘common work’ or ‘work on behalf of the community.’”³⁰ Thus receiving Holy Communion during the Divine Liturgy is our acknowledgement of the spiritual and social dimensions of the Church, as well as our striving to find our own vocations as members of the Church. Often, if we are struggling with a particular situation or question, simply bringing that problem to Communion leads to a viable resolution which does not occur without Communion. Perhaps this is because when we offer a problem to God and acknowledge our own failure to resolve a situation, we deepen our trust in Him, thereby removing the barriers that we have unknowingly erected.

Spiritual Direction

Lecture 73 has already presented “The Spiritual Father in Orthodox Christianity” by Metropolitan Kallistos Ware, in which he noted that “the real journey of the starets (or spiritual father) is not spatially into the desert, but spiritually into the heart.”³¹ However, most of us will never meet a starets, so Metropolitan Kallistos suggests that for spiritual direction we begin by reading books, especially the Bible (with guidance from an experienced person as to what to read) as well as visiting holy places and established monastic communities.³² These activities empower us to grow in a capacity for silence and to follow the advice of St Seraphim: “**Acquire inward peace.**”³³ As Father Stanley Harakas has pointed out, this effort “to lead a

²⁹ Bezzerides, pp. 10-11.

³⁰ Paul Meyendorff, “The Priesthood of the Laity,” in Bezzerides, pp. 209-227, esp. pp. 217, 220.

³¹ Lecture 73, p. 4.

³² Lecture 73, pp. 10-11.

³³ Lecture 73, p. 3.

life worthy of the calling to which you have been called” (Ephesians 4:1), is essentially “a matter of functioning as a Christian in whatever circumstances or situation we are embedded.”³⁴

For those engaged in spiritual direction or seeking further spiritual direction, an excellent contemporary guide is the book by Deacon John Chryssavgis, *Soul Mending: The Art of Spiritual Direction*.³⁵ In an introduction to that book, Metropolitan Kallistos reflects on the insight of the Romanian theologian Archpriest Dumitru Staniloae that “each person is a word spoken to us by Christ, the Divine Logos—a word to which we in our turn are invited to *respond*.”³⁶ The nature of both our own self-understanding and our response to others is neatly set out by Metropolitan Kallistos in his selection of Deacon John’s key phrases in *Soul Mending*:

My helplessness is itself part of God’s grace. Saying ‘no’ may sometimes be the real way of love. The priest at confession is ‘witness, not detective.’ We become more whole when we recognize that we are incomplete.... only when we confess the hole in our soul, can we be filled to overflowing.³⁷

This is a challenging understanding of spiritual direction, which is helpful both to spiritual directors and to those seeking direction.

Knowing Yourself ... and Christ

To know one’s self does not mean we should pursue a modern sense of “self-realisation” or “self-fulfilment.”³⁸ Father Theodore Stylianopoulos challenges us to understand the who, what and how of vocation:

Who are we called to be? Who ... calls us to be what we ought to be? If in my personal journey I search for a vocation in harmony with my true self, who

³⁴ “Vocation and Ethics” in Bezzerides, p. 189.

³⁵ Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2000.

³⁶ p. x. Emphasis in original.

³⁷ p. xi.

³⁸ See Theodore Stylianopoulos, “‘A Life Worthy of God:’ Vocation According to St Paul,” Bezzerides, pp. 71-105, esp. p.73; and Anatolios, p. 109 in Bezzerides: “The problem is that, while the modern ethos champions self-fulfilment as an absolute value, it is decidedly ambivalent about what constitutes the self and what constitutes fulfilment.”

am I? What is my true nature and destiny? What is human personhood? What is true humanity? How do I discover who I am that I might be true to my deepest self? What is my own self-understanding and on what terms do I aspire to make a meaningful contribution to society?³⁹

These are difficult questions, but two key points emerge: (1) “the formation of vocation is significantly dependent on community,” not only for St Paul, but for us today; and (2) “identity and vocation cannot be authentically discovered apart from the quest after God, faithfulness to God, and the sincere seeking of God’s will.”⁴⁰

As implied above in the discussion on prayer:

Orthodox Christians need not wait for unexpected events or dramatic renewals... **By virtue of their baptism and personal faith, Orthodox Christians enjoy a full share in God’s election and covenant, God’s summons to be his people, servants and examples to those willing to see and listen. The first task of the Orthodox Christian is to internalise this fundamental truth and then to allow it to flower to its fullest extent by God’s grace.** What is crucial is to work out ‘who to be’ as an Orthodox Christian in order then to discern more clearly ‘what to be’ and ‘how to be’ in the presence of God and society.⁴¹

³⁹ Bezzerides, p. 73. Emphasis added.

⁴⁰ Father Theodore Stylianopoulos in Bezzerides, pp. 78-80. Father Theodore stresses how the “personal identity” of St Paul “was formed by the corporate consciousness of the Jewish people” (p. 76). Father Paul Tarazi notes that (especially in Philippians 2:1-6) St Paul dwelt on the importance of imitating the humility of Christ and “being in full accord and of one mind” with Him (p.14). Father Paul also points out that “if a community is to be of one mind, united in the same love, this community must have the mind of Christ.” This leads Father Paul to conclude that: “What then may be learned from the Old Testament about Christian vocation? Simply put, that any Christian definition of vocation must be rooted not only in the Old Testament’s understanding of God’s insistent call to his people to fulfil his *torah* in the sight of the rest of the world, but also that any temptation to turn inward towards the security of excluding others must be shunned as direct rebellion against God. To seek the good of the other is wise; to seek only our own good, unwise” (pp. 36-37 of “Pursuing the Mind of Christ: Lessons on Vocation from the Old Testament,” pp. 13-42 in Bezzerides).

⁴¹ Stylianopoulos, in Bezzerides, p. 81.

The goal is to be at one with St Paul's self-awareness: "It is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me" (Galatians 2:20).⁴² **Our aim is "Christ-realization rather than self-realization."**⁴³

Precisely *what* we should *do* in the modern world is a much more open question for each of us than *who* we should *be*. Whatever we choose to do in the midst of the complexities of modern life, we can still follow the advice of St Paul in Colossians 3:17: "Whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him." This ambiguity about precisely what we should each do is not a cop-out, but rather based on an awareness that "human beings cannot ultimately derive their worth, and their true fulfilment, from the things of the world."⁴⁴ Whatever work we choose to do (or is foisted upon us by others, especially parents or other members of our families) Father Theodore's advice is sound:

Any profession without a deep sense of commitment and service to others can easily become mere employment. On the other hand, any job or employment, conducted from the perspective of leading a life worthy of God, would itself be transformed into a calling, indeed an ongoing sacrament, conducted for the love of God and the service of others.⁴⁵

Often, the precise work we do at different times in our lives is linked with specific responsibilities that we wish to meet, within our families or churches or local communities.

In the midst of these ambiguities surrounding *what* we should do, Paul offers very clear advice in Romans 5:1-5 about *how* to live our vocations—recognize the validity

⁴² It should be noted that Father Theodore also comments that: "Orthodox Christians have invaluable opportunities through personal prayer and repentance, study and meditation, worship and stewardship, to experience periodic Damascus moments—moments of illumination, moments of conversion and self-knowledge, moments of renewal and empowerment for mission" (p. 81).

⁴³ Belonick, "The Call of the Virgin Mary," in Bezzerides.

⁴⁴ Stylianopoulos, in Bezzerides, p. 89.

⁴⁵ Stylianopoulos, in Bezzerides, pp. 90-91.

and challenge of moving from tribulations, to perseverance, to proven character, to hope, through living a life committed to faith, hope and charity (1 Corinthians 13:13; 1 Thessalonians 1:3).⁴⁶ However, we do not always understand the purpose of our vocation or experience God's immediate help in how to live a vocation. In *The Ascetic of Love*, an Orthodox Nun, Mother Gavrilia, presents a striking vision:

Someone was complaining of being unfairly treated... Then one day he had a vision: He saw God, up in Heaven, with an embroidery-frame, on which He was embroidering the lives of all of us. He also saw us humans, down on earth, looking only at the loose threads hanging from the reverse of the Embroidery, unable to discern or understand God's wonderful Needlework....⁴⁷

Even when we do not understand God's purposes we can still be confident that He will prepare us for what He wants us to do: "As the magnitude of the vocation increases, so does the preparation."⁴⁸

Discerning Opportunities: Finding Your Mission in Life

Just as there is dynamic, continuing movement and possible changes of direction as a vocation matures, so we each confront many different jobs, both paid and voluntary, as we grow in our understanding of life and of Christ. "Every job broadens your experience for the next one," commented a member of the [British] Automobile Association's Special Operations Response Team (appropriately known as SORT) in the midst of cold weather in December.⁴⁹ The challenge is to discern what tasks to tackle, both spiritually and socially, at which particular times.

⁴⁶ See Stylianopoulos, in Bezzerides, pp. 93-101.

⁴⁷ Athens: Eptalofos Sa, 2000, p. 309; cited by Belonick, p. 159 in Bezzerides. Belonick also cites a poem with a similar theme by the American poet and song writer Grant Colfax Tullar (1869-1950) : "My life is but a weaving betwixt my God and me;/I do not choose the colors He worketh steadily./Oft times He weaveth sorrow, and I in foolish pride/Forget He sees the upper, and I the underside./Not till the loom is silent and the shuttles cease to fly/Will God unfold the pattern and explain the reason why./For the dark threads are as needful in the Weaver's skilful hand/As the threads of gold and silver in the pattern He has planned. He knows, He loves, He cares,/ Nothing this truth can dim./ He gives His very best to those/ Who choose to walk with Him" (p.159).

Available on the web at: http://www.hymnary.org/person/Tullar_Grant.

⁴⁸ Belonick, p. 167.

⁴⁹ *The Guardian*, 4 December 2010, p. 33.

For those looking for a job or considering a change in employment linked to a change in vocation, an excellent guide is *What Color Is Your Parachute: A Practical Manual for Job-Hunters and Career-Changers*.⁵⁰ One of the reasons why this book, updated each year, has sold nearly 11 million copies is the appendix, “Finding Your Mission in Life” which treats the word “mission” as a synonym for “calling” or “vocation.” Bolles sees finding your vocation and the work that is associated with that vocation as a three-step process of discernment and commitment:

Your first Mission here on Earth is one that you share with the rest of the human race, but it is no less your individual Mission for the fact that it is shared; and it is, **to seek to stand hour by hour in the conscious presence of God, the One from whom your Mission is derived.** *The Missioner before the Mission*, is the rule. In religious language, your Mission here is: *to know God, and enjoy Him forever, and to see His hand in all His works.*

Second, once you have begun doing that in an earnest way, *your second Mission here on Earth* is also one that you share with the rest of the human race, but it is no less your individual Mission for the fact that it is shared; and that is, **to do what you can, moment by moment, day by day, step by step, to make this world a better place, following the leading and guidance of God’s Spirit within you and around you.**

Third, once you have begun doing that in a serious way, *your third Mission here on Earth* is one that is uniquely yours, and that is: (a) **to exercise the talent that you particularly came to Earth to use—your greatest gift, which you most delight to use;** (b) **in the place(s) or setting(s) that God has caused to appeal to you the most;** and (c) **for those purposes that God most needs to have done in the world.**⁵¹

⁵⁰ Richard N. Bolles (Berkeley, CA: Ten Speed Press, 2017), *What Color is Your Parachute?*

⁵¹ Italics and bold in original text.

While this statement about vocation lacks a sacramental dimension, in both the vision and the implementation, the advice offered is sound as is Bolles' emphasis that "truly helpful career counselling depends upon defining the particularity or uniqueness of each person we try to help."⁵²

Patience

Given the complexity of finding and following a vocation, it is not surprising that patience is an essential virtue. Father Alexander reflects that "between holiness and disenchanted cynicism lies the great and divine virtue of patience—patience, first of all with ourselves."⁵³ There is a relevant idiomatic French expression: "Ne va pas trop vite sur les voie de la Providence"—"Don't rush ahead too quickly on the ways of Providence." As Belonick phrases it, "Instead of waiting for God's ripe moment, we intrude [our own ideas] as [imaginary] little providences and divert God's purposes."⁵⁴ The problem is not new, as is clear from Proverbs 16:9: "The mind of man plans his way, But the Lord directs his steps." As is written in the Book of Hebrews, "through faith and patience" we "inherit the promises," that is, God's blessing on our lives" (6:12).

4. Conclusion: Our Vocations are Self-Determined, Not Pre-Determined

As Demetrios Katos reminds us, citing St Irenaeus,⁵⁵ "At the heart of all Christian theology is the belief that one's approach to God must be free and willing."⁵⁶ God initiates prayers, friendships, opportunities and ideas for us, yet it is true that:

We are not predetermined to a specific course or manner of life; rather we have the gift of self-determination and can choose or refuse that which life

⁵² Bolles, p. 268. The books by Max Eggert, *Perfect CV* (2007), *Perfect Interview* (2007), *Perfect Answers to Interview Questions* (2007), and *The Perfect Career* (1999) (all published by Random House) are helpful tools for implementing the ideas in *What Colour Is Your Parachute?*

⁵³ Father Alexander Schmemmann, *Great Lent: Journey to Pascha*, p. 99.

⁵⁴ p. 164.

⁵⁵ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 4.38.1: "God made man a free agent from the beginning, possessing his own power, even as he does his own soul, to obey the behests of God voluntarily and not by compulsion of God."

⁵⁶ Demetrios Katos, "In the Image of God: Mystical Theology and Secular Vocations, pp. 129-150 in Bezzarides, p. 139.

presents us within parameters far broader than any other creature of this world.⁵⁷

It is in our freedom that we find our vocation and our work.

This lecture began with Father Daniel O’Leary’s two understandings of the Church, and a rejection of his assertion that “the families and individuals in every street are already a delight to God, exactly as they are.” Yet there is a sense in which each of us can be “a delight to God.” The possibility is firmly posed by St Paul in 1 Corinthians 6:19-20:

... do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and that you are not your own? For you have been bought with a price: therefore, glorify God in your body.⁵⁸

Father Alexander sums up the challenge of what it means to be a Christian:

These words [from 1 Corinthians 6;19-20] are a real summary of St Paul’s constant appeal to Christians: we must live according to what has ‘happened’ to us in Christ; yet we can live thus only because it *has* happened to us, because salvation, redemption, reconciliation, and ‘buying with a price’ have already been given to us and we are ‘not our own.’ We can and must work at our salvation because we have been saved, yet it is only because we are saved that we can work at our salvation. We must always and at all times *become* and *be* that which—in Christ—we already *are*: ‘you are Christ’s and Christ is God’s (1 Corinthians 3:22).⁵⁹

So perhaps there is a sense that in our acceptance of trying to be Christian, trying to find our vocations, we have already found them. **We belong to Christ; and that is the essence of each vocation.**

⁵⁷ Katos, p. 140.

⁵⁸ Cited by Schmemmann, *Great Lent: Journey to Pascha*, p. 119.

⁵⁹ Father Alexander points out there is a similar tension between accepting that we are each worthy to be one with God in communion, and yet also unworthy of his love. He reflects: “From this divine trap there is no escape by means of human reasoning...” (p. 120). We are each unworthy servants; yet in God’s eyes we are each worthy; and the local Christian community proclaims that worthiness when a deacon or priest is ordained or when a lay person assumes responsibility for a specific task in the local parish.