

WHAT IS A PERSONAL VOCATION?



A Startling New Way to Find Your Niche as a Lay Catholic

By Mary Gannon Kaufmann, MA, MS

The reality of personal vocation allows everyone sitting in the pews, especially lay Catholics, a new awareness of their mission through the Church, and of God's action through them to the world. Many of our current anxieties about the vocation crisis can be relieved by recognizing that each of us (whether ordained or lay) receives a unique, unrepeatabe, personal vocation from God. By recognizing and living our individual calls to participate in the Church's mission, we become the "risen Christ" for others.

As I sat at a Catholic family conference listening to the parents of a priest and a nun

share how they nurtured the vocations of their children, I began to wonder if I needed also to apply their advice to my life as a married person. In the quest to help the children find meaning and a mission worthy of giving their lives, the couple spoke of the need to provide them with regular opportunities to serve others both within and outside the family, to cultivate the virtues, and to develop a consistent prayer life. They seemed to say, "God calls, but we need formation in order to respond generously and accept the vocation."

I suspect that many of us have heard similar recommendations but, feeling exempt

ourselves, were willing to offer it to others called to be priests and nuns. But, are we exempt from discerning a vocation once we have chosen to be married or to be parents? Does the Good Shepherd call only once and only to a select few sheep? I hope not!

In *Personal Vocation: God Calls Everyone by Name*, Russell Shaw and Germain Grisez suggest that God offers each of us a practical way of living out our Christian lives that is unique and unrepeatabe and something that must be discerned throughout our lives. God reveals our specific service or personal vocation in a threestep

summons. First, God draws us into the Church through baptism and equips us to be his disciples. Second, in order to impact a certain sphere, the Holy One calls us into a “state in life” as a priest, nun, married, or single person. Lastly, from this “state in life”, God provides us with distinct spiritual gifts, with training, with life situations to impact, and with tasks to complete on an ongoing basis. By generously living this three dimensional personal vocation, we become the “risen Christ” to others around us. God does not form generic Christians or leave the majority abandoned without a call. We listen for God’s call through all our experiences each day.

More specifically, once discerned, the parameters of our personal vocation become the criteria we use to examine our daily actions, attitudes, and thoughts. It becomes the specific context in which we practice the virtues and the beatitudes. Using the lens of our personal vocation, we undertake daily exam and prepare for sacramental confession.

With this in mind, many of the dynamics that have been applied to the vocations of priests and nuns can now be applied to the rest of us in the world. As a married woman, if God has something specific for me to accomplish in the concrete situations of my life, I must be alert to this. I need to recognize the invitation of God in the events of my day, and consider this a type of prayer. I realize that I grow in the virtues precisely by involving myself in the lives of real people around me. If I represent the Church as a baptized disciple of Jesus, I can become a “sacrament” of God’s presence at my child’s school, at work, when I offer a physical expression of love to my husband, or go wherever my call beckons me. I am challenged to find my unique contribution to the needs of my community and seek what theologian Frederick Buechner describes as the place God calls me to which is “the place where my deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.”

The call that God reveals to me as a married woman is a grace, a grace that draws me to wholeness. By being receptive to

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this grace of personal mission, as Fr. Herbert Alphonso, S.J. suggests in *Discerning Your Personal Vocation*, I grow in holiness and experience the “simplicity of concentrated richness in depth.” In finding new meaning, I am healed and transformed from within as God renews the world around me.

A powerful example of living a personal vocation in “simplicity of concentrated richness in depth” through the ordinary activities of family life is Mary Ann Kuharski. Mary Ann is a mother of 13 children and founder of “Prolife Across America,” a national prolife media organization. While her children napped or played in the yard, Mary Ann started writing and submitting family-centered articles to local publications in Minnesota. Over time, her efforts expanded into writing four books on Catholic family life and starting “Prolife Across America,” which places positive prolife billboards and

radio advertisements in over 35 states. From the throes of family life, Mary Ann describes marriage and motherhood as a school in loving each child as a particular gift and in learning to find “Jesus in his most distressing disguise.” Through an intentional prayer life, daily Mass attendance, eucharistic adoration, and devotion to the wounds of Christ, Mary Ann attempts to remain united with God through the events of her day. She says, “There is no balancing act for me between mothering and ministry, only an attempt to respond to God’s will. Once, after a prolife conference, I received a call from an advertising executive. The man said, ‘I’m an advertising genius; I have a degree in marketing. One of my workers brought me one of your brochures. I had to call you and find out how a housewife from Minnesota could do what we are struggling to do.’” Mary Ann answered the executive, “What you see is not me; it is the Holy Spirit. A disciplined prayer life is so important; because then, when good things happen, I attribute them to God and not myself.” She seems to live with an awareness that God’s power acting through her can do “infinitely more than she can ask or imagine (Ephesians 3:20).” By living her life as a vocation and by nurturing her relationship with God, Mary Ann allows God to transform people and social structures around her.

While Mary Ann Kuharski presents an inspiring example of personal vocation in parenting a large family and starting a successful, national ministry, living a personal vocation does not necessarily mean undertaking things way out of the ordinary. The essence of it, according to Russell Shaw is to faithfully “carry out one’s everyday responsibilities to family, friends, Church, and community... in other words, to intentionally live St. Therese of Lisieux’s little way.” Christ invites us to do the next most obvious thing out of love of God and neighbor.

Although my routine for prayer, adoration, and daily mass attendance may differ from Mary Ann Kuharski’s, rather than being optional, my prayer life and periodic retreat time with God are essential. As Ralph Martin, the director of evangeliza-

tion at Sacred Heart Seminary in Detroit says:

“It is wrong to think a shallow prayer life suffices for the laity. This minimalist corruption of the Gospel has got to go. Our power to witness is deeply rooted in the encounter with Christ that we have in prayer.”

If I listen, God will direct and empower me to serve my family, my work associates and my community.

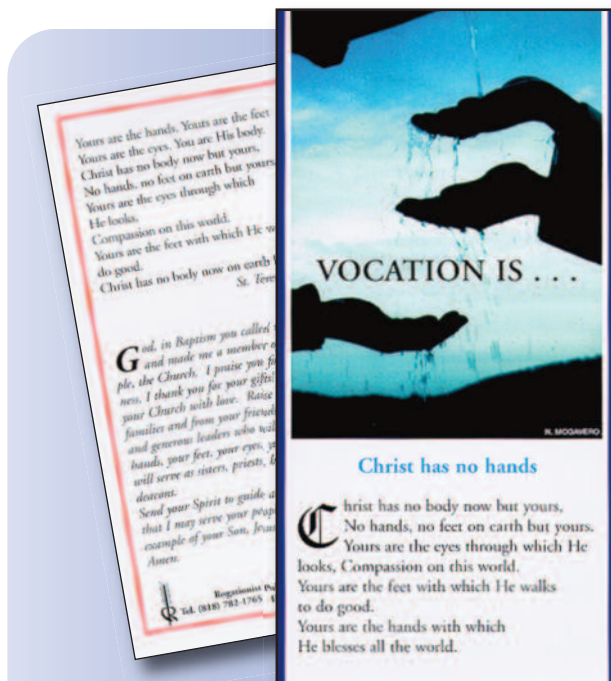
As lay people, we have not taken our lives seriously enough. God’s mission through us requires us to undertake ongoing formation and demands from us, as Shaw and Grisez say, a “penetration/continuity and methodical effort.” In fact, what seems to be happening today may not be a vocational crisis as such, but a crisis of discernment and formation. We are called to transform the world by using the gifts and situations that God has given us or allowed in our lives. Thankfully, we have no room to fear, for, as Ralph Martin continues, “When we fall in love with God, we have plenty of energy to serve others and build the Church.”



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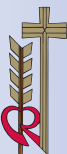
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