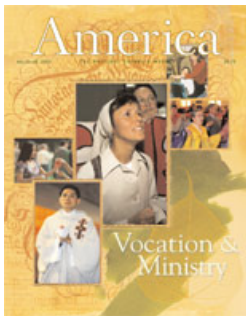


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The Chosen Path

WILLIAM C. SPOHN | JULY 21, 2003



A large financial-services firm in Boston was interviewing a senior from a Jesuit university a few years ago for a position on a team to work on international business deals. The recruiters, who were in their 20's and early 30's, told the student that while the work was challenging and demanded 70 hours a week, the compensation was excellent. After a day spent in their well-appointed corporate offices, he asked them, "Do you enjoy this work?" There was an awkward pause. They replied that maybe the work wasn't all that enjoyable or meaningful, but the salary and perks were great. At that point, he knew he would not take the position.

Whether he realized it or not, the college senior was asking about vocation. He was trying to find work that would tap into his deeper values and provide a sense of meaning. He wanted more than a job, work that would pay his bills and student loans. The young people who were trying to recruit him already had more than a job; they had a career, which involves a greater personal focus, serious preparation and sustained commitment to a profession. But the question that the young man asked showed he was looking for even more than just a career. He wanted work that would have meaning because it contributed to something larger than financial security.

"What ought I to do?" is the Socratic question that drove the liberal arts tradition that has been at the core of Western education. In Christian spirituality that question has often been framed as one of vocation—that is, "What am I called to become?" That question becomes acute for college students when impending graduation forces them either to choose a path for their lives or to drift for a few years. Faced with a multitude of career options and often uncertain about their own gifts and aspirations, they can frequently let other voices determine what they will do. Family expectations, the opinion of peers and the demands of the marketplace often dictate what shape their lives should take.

The common wisdom about career choice often runs as follows: figure out what sort of lifestyle you want to have; then estimate the level of income that it will take to live in this way; finally, find a career that will deliver that income. I fear that there could hardly be a worse way to discover a meaningful life. That logic has the process backwards. It looks to work only as a means to a financial end. It ignores the possibility that work could be worthwhile because it expresses our unique talents and actually makes a difference in the world. I know one thirty-something lawyer who says, "I hate spending 60 hours a week making rich people richer."

Ignatian spirituality offers a different wisdom on vocation. It counsels us to discover our personal calling by aligning our gifts and aspirations with what we see as the deepest needs of our world. For people of faith, that convergence is where the Spirit of God invites them to a unique path. Prayerful reflection opens us to those fundamental desires and to compassion for the world. An authentic calling goes beyond personal fulfillment to a concern for justice that asks about fulfilling the needs of others, even if they are strangers.

From the perspective of Ignatian spirituality, we find our vocation by engaging the world and reflecting on how that engagement elicits fundamental desires to heal, serve and create. Because God's Spirit

speaks through both the world's realities and the gifts of the individual, vocation arises from this interaction of faith and justice, the heart and the world. This understanding of vocation is captured in the words of Herman Hesse: "There are many types and kinds of vocations, but the core of the experience is always the same: the soul is awakened, transformed, or exalted so that instead of dreams and presentiments from within, a summons comes from without: a portion of reality presents itself and makes a claim."

Seeking and Choosing the Path

Since the Second Vatican Council, Catholics have realized that the concept of vocation extends to all the baptized, not only to those called to ordination or religious life. All who are part of the body of Christ are equally called to holiness and service to make God's reign a reality in the world. Ignatian spirituality insists that this is no generic obligation, but rather a call to individuals tailored both to their talents and the community's needs.

Discernment of vocation lies at the heart of the Jesuit tradition. St. Ignatius Loyola drew on his own conversion experience to compose his classic *Spiritual Exercises*. This 16th-century soldier and courtier learned the art of spiritual discernment as he struggled to discover his own calling over a 20-year period. Looking back at those years of searching, Ignatius referred to himself as a "pilgrim." Today some might call him a "seeker," one of those restless people who are dissatisfied with ordinary life and inherited traditions and who insist that there must be more to life than the status quo.

The Exercises are designed to be a time to recognize God's unique invitation. It does not come like a bolt from the blue or a direct command, but as an invitation addressed to our freedom. If God's invitation had the clarity of marching orders, Ignatius would not have spent 20 years of trial and error acquiring wisdom the hard way. Those mistakes taught him to help others find the path for their freedom to take. Instead, Ignatius asks us to look into our own personal consciousness and ask: "What am I attracted to? What draws me over time in a certain direction? What are the roots of my motivation, the deepest desires of the heart?" It takes time and candor to sift them out from surface attractions and others' expectations.

Those fundamental hopes and desires, however, are only half the story. As Hesse pointed out, there has to be an external aspect to a calling, a situation in which our hopes can be realized. Hopes without any grounding in reality or actual prospects of realization lure us to frustration. Time and again, Ignatius found that his dreams did not correspond with the facts on the ground. He could not be a shaggy hermit and also be of service to people in the public arena. He could not preach the Gospel without going back to school to learn Latin, philosophy and theology. He and his companions could not fulfill their dream of going to the Holy Land, because there was a war on. They wanted to be itinerant preachers, but found that what their world actually needed was schools and solid learning.

They had to pay close attention to the actual needs of the church and the world in order to translate their great desires into practical service. The life of Christ made it clear that servants take their cues from the people they serve, not from their own needs. Early on his journey Ignatius kept his own counsel and made a number of bad decisions. In time, he came to realize that discernment needs others' counsel as a check against self-deception. In the retreat context of the Exercises the spiritual director provides this kind of sounding board. Many today find that ongoing spiritual direction brings a reality principle into discernment. Others use mentoring groups and forums for serious conversation about their lives to find focus and accountability.

Like anyone steeped in a religious tradition, Ignatius interpreted this central human experience of invitation in the symbols and language of his faith. He believed that the human desire to serve echoes the divine compassion, that concern for healing the world in our small arena of job and family and community stems from God's desire to heal the world. He wanted people to find where their deepest desires would lead them to serve, because he believed that would be the place where they would find God, or rather, where God would find them. Ignatius did not spend 20 years looking for a fixed blueprint

for his life. It takes time to learn the art of discernment as we pursue our own winding pilgrimage. What we end up with is not a road map but a compass.

Ignatian discernment can offer wisdom not only at the outset of a career but also later, when the calling can become more nuanced. As one's career progresses, other questions come to the fore: How can I sustain a vocation while pursuing a career? Can our deep aspirations connect with the worlds' minor needs, like doing the dishes, preparing the tax forms and attending committee meetings?

Called to Justice

The contemporary commitment of the Society of Jesus to integrate faith with the work of justice emphasizes the public pole of vocation. The world is just as much the place to discover God's calling as are the movements of the heart. Traditionally, Jesuit institutions have been guided by a Christian humanism that sought to "educate the whole person" intellectually, morally, aesthetically and spiritually. Emphasizing the personal good of education was meant to support the common good of society. Now the common good of the whole world has taken on new urgency and is seen to embrace the personal good. The superior general of the Jesuits, Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, S.J., has urged the American Jesuit colleges and universities to produce graduates of "well-educated solidarity," whose lives will be linked to the poor and oppressed who make up the majority of the human race.

This new emphasis on the virtue of solidarity has deep theological roots. The incarnation of the Word of God in Jesus Christ means that all of human history and experience is open to redemptive transformation. His cross and resurrection locate that transformation at the heart of human suffering and oppression. Because this biblical concern for justice is rooted in love of neighbor and the realization of God's covenant with humanity, people of faith must pay special attention to the children of God who are suffering.

How does God call us to the right path? Usually this awareness comes through a process of discerning both the interior and the worldly poles of vocation. God's Spirit works in the depths of our humanity to help us become aware of our gifts and aspirations, and the same Spirit works through our experience to point out what the world needs from us. Often the Spirit helps us notice those problems that our talents are uniquely suited to address. Grace connects these two poles like a spark that arcs between them. Reflecting with others on the experience of invitation helps to ground that call and "keep it real."

Faith and justice work together to insure that both poles receive equal consideration in the discernment of vocation. A deepening faith gives self-knowledge and trust in God's help, while the virtue of justice sharpens our perception of what is distorted in the structures of society. The practices of faith and justice locate our sense of calling in the real world, rich with possibilities and fraught with brokenness. Without the light of faith and honest awareness that we have been gifted by God, the world's needs can seem an overwhelming burden. Without knowledge of the actual conditions of the world, our talents and aspirations can be wasted, sadly, on mere success.

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