

Experiencing God's Call

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Drawing on Scripture and her own Pallottine spirituality, Sr. Michele addresses four questions:

- ✚ What is a call, a vocation?
- ✚ What do we mean by the call to holiness?
- ✚ What is involved in the call to service?
- ✚ What does it mean to be called to community?

What is a call, a vocation?

I am often asked, “Sister Michele, how did you know that you were to become a Sister?”. I wonder if the question implies a certain “in” that I had, knowing for sure what it was God wanted of me. I suspect that those who ask the question are really asking themselves, “*What is call and how can I know my own call in life?*”. If I could answer that question clearly and put in writing, I’d have a best-seller on my hands! What I can try to do is to explore the meaning of call and present a way of looking at call or vocation in our lives.

Often the question one asks about call refers to one’s state in life: should I marry, remain single, become a permanent deacon, priest, brother or sister? From another perspective, there is but one call for everyone and our lifestyle is a way of supporting our efforts to live out that call. Our call is first and foremost a command to love God and our neighbor. Our vocation then is the living out of that command in our daily lives.

The Bible recounts a number of call experiences. At times the call comes through a direct address by God (*e.g.*, Abraham, Moses, Samuel, John the Baptist); sometimes it comes indirectly through a prophet (*e.g.*, Saul, David). Others are a direct invitation from Jesus Christ (*e.g.*, the apostles). At times the call comes as an imperative rather than an invitation (*e.g.*, Moses, Amos, Jeremiah); the unique call of Paul was a violent imperative.

Most often we don’t think of ourselves as fitting into any one of these models. As I began to look more closely at my own call, I realized that it is “by invitation only.” More, I realized it is an invitation we all receive. However, the invitation is subtle and we do not always recognize it as such. Often it comes through some incident or occasion which requires or evokes a response. The Prophet Jeremiah provides a good example.

Throughout his life, Jeremiah searched for the meaning of his call, his desire to preach. He was near the end of his life when he was finally able to write down how God had called him to be a prophet. The Book of the Prophet Jeremiah presents the details of his call at its beginning, giving the impression that Jeremiah, having received a mandate from God, went and carried it out. What really happened was that he lived his life as best he could, praying to the God of the Israelites, following the promptings and desires within him. It wasn’t until much later, as he looked back over the years, that Jeremiah could see more clearly and believe more deeply that he had indeed been called. Then he could write, “The word of the Lord came to me thus: ‘Before I formed you in the whom I knew you; before you were born I dedicated you, a prophet to the nations I appointed you.’” (Jer.: 1:4-5)

How might we look at our own call? What questions could we ask ourselves? *“What have been the opportunities of my life which have affected me most? “How did they affect me and how did I respond?” “How do I continue to respond to the opportunities of today?”* Most likely we will not have any easy answers to these questions no matter what our age or our state in life. Our call is not static, a once-in-a-lifetime event. Rather it is a process, something we will experience the rest of our lives.

The most familiar command of our God — that we love our God, our neighbor and ourselves — is the basic call we have all received. Implicit in this great command is a threefold call to HOLINESS, SERVICE and COMMUNITY.

What do we mean by the call to holiness?

Holiness is, I believe, rooted in each of us and I would suggest that the choices we make in our daily lives are the expression of that holiness. Choices fill our lives; we are constantly making decisions: what shall I but, what shall I do, whom shall I see, and so on. Many of our choices are unconscious; many others are deliberate. The question is: on what values do I base my choices. That may sound elementary, but perhaps we take our choices for granted.

While we are often making “choices”, we are just as often reacting to situations. Choice implies a deliberate response; reaction implies no real choice. Conscious choice-making can reveal the strength of relationship to God. Perhaps we could ask, *“Am I reacting when I should be choosing my response?”*. Another question might be, *“Are my choices based on Gospel values?”*. These are hard questions that take time and effort to answer. Therein lies the challenge to holiness.

Holiness itself is a word to which we often reach. “Me! Holy! You have to be kidding!” My initial reaction to discussions on personal holiness was one of awkwardness, embarrassment and, to some degree, resistance. I often equated “holiness” with a sort of “showy piety,” something I believed I could never imitate. Being a “saint” is for the giants in the field of spiritual living: St. Francis, St. Augustine, St. Catherine of Sienna, or Mother Theresa of Calcutta. I had to learn to look to how the Lord was calling me to holiness. An important element is to believe that since we are called to this by God, then it is God who will help us to achieve it. Spending quiet time to reflect, to look at how we are living our lives, to pray seriously is absolutely necessary. God has given us the Scriptures to teach us and we need to ponder them with God as our companion and guide.

St. Paul in his letter to the Romans gives us a model for living. To follow this model is to be very aware of our choices. It reads in part, “Your love must be sincere. Detest what is evil, cling to what is good. Love one another with the affection of brothers and sisters. Anticipate each other in showing respect. Do not grow slack but be fervent in spirit; he whom you serve is the Lord.” (Rom. 12: 9-11) You might want to read the rest of what Paul says when you have the time. Paul knows this is no easy task. He concludes this section saying, “If possible, live peaceably with everyone.” But we can be sure that if we seek Him in our life’s choices, God will continue to be loving and merciful and will grant us the grace to become what we are called to become, holy in his sight.

What is involved in the call to service?

The capacity for saintliness is within our reach — not only is it attainable but it is a given, a gift of God for us to cultivate and its second dimension is the call to service. I'd like to suggest that when we live out of a sincere desire to reflect Jesus in our daily lives, we are responding to this further call to service or apostolic action. Apostolic action can be defined as cooperating in bringing about the mission of Christ on earth. But just how do we do that?

We might think that if we are to be apostolic, we must do something for or to others through our church or some other organized activity. After hearing a talk or reading an article such as this, we may ourselves the question, *"How can I, with all that is going on in my own life, bring the Good News to others?"*. We may think ourselves too ill-equipped to be apostolic or equate the apostolic life with people who have chosen ministry as a profession. The responsibility, however, of Christ's continued mission on earth has been given to all of us by virtue of our very creation in the image and likeness of God and by our baptism through which we were graced to be able to realize that image in our lives. So the question remains, *"How?"*.

Writing out of a definite Pallottine bias, I would ask you to consider "that our entire lives, all aspects of our being and doing, are avenues of expressing commitment to the Lord's mission and are ways of following Jesus." That concept was verbalized by St. Vincent Pallotti over one hundred and fifty years ago. Our mission, our apostolate, our service, then, ins mot only to DO for others, but even more so, it is to BE for others. Doing is a very necessary part of reflecting our Christian and Catholic values. But BEING, to the extent of our ability, all that God created us to BE is a major HOW of responding to the universal call to service, very much as Jesus Himself responded when sent into the world. Jesus' entire life was his apostolate; his very living and dying was the way he brought about our salvation. We share in the apostolate of Jesus Christ; we too are apostles. Vatican II emphasized this in its Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity. "ALL activity of the Mystical Body directed to the attainment of spreading the Kingdom of Christ everywhere and bringing all to share in Christ's saving redemption, is called the apostolate, and the Church carries it on in VARIOUS WAYS through ALL her members. For by its very nature the Christian vocation is also a vocation to the apostolate." (#2 -Emphasis mine).

Living with this attitude and remaining conscious of its implications requites a continual exercise of faith, hope and love. As our relationship with God becomes a lived reality, so too does our ability to reflect God's love to one another. The quality of our lives is enriched and so also our ordinary daily activities be they those of homemaker, parent, business person, politician, athlete, laborer, cleric or professional religious.

St. Paul encouraged the community of believers at Colossae and encourages us today: "Whatever you do in word or work, do all in the name of Our Lord Jesus Christ, giving thanks to God the Father through him."

What does it mean to be called to community?

First, what do we mean by community? Community means not only a particular set of environmental surroundings like our world, society, church, neighborhood, or family. It also means a state of mind and heart. To each one of us have been given those basic qualities of human nature as originally created by God, qualities which enable us to respond to this call to community and to spread those very qualities throughout the world.

Scripture is rich with examples of such qualities: openness, honesty, reflectiveness, humility and goodness.

Throughout the opening chapters of the Acts of the Apostles we find such qualities typified as guidelines for community living. In the second chapter of Acts, we note that the early Christians sought each other out: they wanted and needed to be with others who believed and experienced the faith in Jesus that they did. They were generous with each other, ate in each other's homes and prayed with and for each other. (Cf. 2:43-47) I am sure they were cautious with strangers, but they never failed to accept them in to their company. It is evident that a strong level of trust existed among them. The common factor which united them was their faith in Jesus Christ and His Way. Their attitude and manner of relating to others reflected an inner calm, strength and peacefulness. There was no worry they could not be the same tomorrow as they had been today and as they were yesterday.

In his first letter to the Corinthians, St Paul gives us the classic example of community in his analogy of Jesus and the human body: "For the body itself is not made up of only one part, but of many parts....If the whole body were just an eye, how could it hear? And if it were just an ear, how could it smell? As it is, however, God put every different part in the body just as He wanted it to be. There would not be a body if it were all one part." (12:12ff.) Just think how dull life would be if it were! Paul tells us that together we are all Christ's body and each one is a part of it. I imagine that he would also say, in that same spirit, that we not to compete with the body but to complete it.

Community then implies that we are to be community-builders. The qualities essential to community building are found in part in the list of the "fruits of the Holy Spirit" which we find in Galatians 5. The one who is community-minded is other-oriented, generous, trusting, even-tempered, open, honest with self and others, and is willing to let go of that innate need to control. These are but a few and admittedly they are ideal. It takes a lifetime of serious striving to integrate them into our daily lives, yet, we do have them in our possession. Unused they stiffen and atrophy; exercised they grow and develop. Perhaps a brief reflection will help.

When during the last month or so did I become aware of another's enthusiasm or anxiety? Did I acknowledge such awareness to the others? When was I last aware of how my own biases subtly affect my choices? When did I last volunteer myself freely without any hidden expectations? Questions such as these can challenge our capacity for community-building in our families, our places of work, our parishes, our religious communities. Community is an attitude, a style of living which reflects the WAY of Jesus. It makes definite demands on us. It calls us to conscious loving. Perhaps you will want to continue your reflection by allowing the fourth chapter of Paul's letter to the Ephesians on unity and diversity challenge you.

I cannot end without repeating: our call to holiness, to service and to community is not a once-in-a-lifetime event. It is a process which we will experience each day for the rest of our lives. Oh, yes, about my knowing my call to be a Sister! Well, my reflections lead me to realize that I wanted to devote myself full time to this process. I wanted to be as holy as God wanted me to be, to give my life in service to God and to do it in the context of a religious community. That is the life-style I chose. But whatever your choice, know that if we seek God in our lives, God will continue to grant us the grace and the ability we need to become what the people we are called to become. I pray that you will continue to hear God's call, to know God's infinite power working in you, and to live in God's merciful love.