

‘HERE I AM, LORD’

By WILLIAM H. FARLEY

AS MEMBERS OF the laity, we are called to active membership in the Christian community. We are, in fact, disciples of the Lord and as such we must express our Christianity where we are in life. ‘You are the light of the world, a city set on a hill cannot be hidden . . . do not light a lamp and then hide it under a bushel basket, set it on a stand where it gives light to all in the house!’ (Mt 5). So it is for the laity—we must shine forth with the light of Christ in our family, in our work place and in all our human contacts in life. This is our general call and it is incumbent on us as Christians to hear and heed the call.

Scriptures, both Old and New Testament, portray the many and varied calls of the Lord. In the case of the Old Testament accounts of Abraham (Gen 22), Moses (Exod 3), Isaiah (Isai 6) and Joshua (Exod 17) and the New Testament calls of Mary (Lk 1), Joseph (Mt 1), Peter (Lk 5) and Saul (Acts 9), the words of response are somewhat different. However, the essence of the response itself is always positive—‘Here I am Lord’. Many who were called exhibited great fear. It is likely that all who were called sensed forthcoming changes in their lives and recognized the challenges that would be the direct result of that change.

It is important to note that the Lord called specific people by virtue of their particular place in life. They were usually simple, everyday people who were needed for the work of the Lord at that time and place. It is also critical to recognize that they did, in fact, respond. Probably many more accounts could be written about those who were called and did not respond. It is still true today: many of us are called and only some of us heed the call. The Old and New Testament accounts tell us about those who received the call, listened and responded—to these, changes in their lives and their communities were the results.

Think for a moment about Abraham who proved his commitment by the awesome response of being willing to sacrifice his beloved son. His loyalty having been proven by this test, the Lord first saved his son, Isaac, and then endowed Abraham with the

profound power of the Lord in guiding his people to freedom. The New Testament immediate response by Peter, the fisherman, resulted in his primacy among the apostles. Perhaps the most extraordinary is the call of Saul. The dramatic separation of Saul and his animal brought out the immediate and dramatic conversion of Saul the persecutor to Paul the teacher and builder of the Christian community. Abraham, Peter and Paul were ordinary men who heard the call, were open to that voice and transformed not only their lives, but the lives of countless others. Their responses were immediate and not without compromise. The result in each case was unique, positive and far-reaching. They and many others were there when called. We as twentieth-century Christians must be open and ready for our calls. We must be there, and we must respond.

In the latter stages of the twentieth century, it seems much more difficult to hear and to discern the call of the Lord. Our world is so complex, our workday so busy, the plethora of messages almost endless. Our challenge is to sort out the messages, to sensitize our ear to the pearls of wisdom out of the cacophony which envelops us. We must tune ourselves into the Lord's wavelength. We must struggle to tune out the static and turn on the clear, soothing and often challenging call of the Lord. We must discern as Elijah did (1 Kg 19). Elijah was told to wait for the Lord. He listened as the account tells us,

a strong and heavy wind was rending mountains and crushing rocks before the Lord—but the Lord was not in the wind. After the wind was an earthquake—but the Lord was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake there was fire—but the Lord was not in the fire. After the fire there was a *tiny whispering sound*. When he heard this, Elijah hid his face in his cloak and stood at the entrance of the cave.

The whispering sound, of course, was the Lord! This tiny whispering sound superseded the various phenomena normally and traditionally utilized to herald the Lord's presence. This message should provide us with a great lesson—perhaps the Lord's call will be loud and easily heard. On the other hand, perhaps we must be like Elijah at Mount Horeb, listening for the loud and clear call, but finding the Lord in the 'tiny whispering sound'.

It does seem logical that our specific call will be unique, as unique as the many calls of which we read in scripture. After all,

we have unique personalities which are a result of our varied backgrounds, intellects, associations and personal circumstances. We each hold an individual moment in history where we bring our own background and heritage and place together to the current moment. There is no other person exactly in our place. We are unique. It is therefore quite logical that we must listen and ultimately respond based on where we are in life, for, as the Lord needed Peter and his boat nearly 2,000 years ago, the Lord needs us and our boat, or our desk, or our lathe, or our homemaking today.

What is our role as laity? How do we differ from the ordained clergy? After all, we are different and in the American Catholic Church, we laity have a tendency to perceive ourselves as less powerful, as second-class citizens, but we are not. Our Church has evolved from its status as an immigrant Church in which the clergy alone were educated to a Church in which a large percentage of the laity have reached highly educated levels, sometimes beyond the clergy. Yet there continues to be a rather noticeable deference to the clergy which expresses itself as 'Well, since Father says it, it must be right'. Without meaning to demean the importance of the clergy, it is important to proclaim the vitality of the laity. It really is *one* Church, that is, the Church of both the clergy and the laity. Do not forget, the clergy have been called from the laity in a beautiful and unique call. Likewise the laity is also called forth to ministry of a unique type. We are all called to be ministers, all called to the royal priesthood: 'You however are a chosen race, a royal priesthood' (1 Pet 2).

In a recent homily to participants at The National Consultation on the Vocation of the Laity in the World, Joseph Cardinal Bernadin stated the following:

As you stated so clearly in your working paper, as important as the formal ministries of the Church are—most of which are indeed open to the laity—they are not co-extensive with the Christian vocation. Not all receive a call to service in formal ecclesial ministries, but all—by reason of Baptism—are called to use their gifts to enable the faith community to carry out its mission. And they do this in the places where they live, work and play—in their homes; in their occupations and professions; and in the social, cultural and political life of their neighbourhoods and communities, as well as in the nation and the world at large.

It is the sacrament of Baptism which enables and empowers us to our roles as servants of Christ, not the sacrament of Ordination. We are all called into priesthood through our Baptism. Ordination calls one into public service and leadership. But Paul in his letter to the people of Ephesus states, 'It is Christ who gave apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers in roles of service for the faithful to build up this body of Christ' (Eph 4).

So, we as laity have many roads open to us. As baptized Christians, we can be effective and active members of our parish. The roles of lector, minister of the Eucharist, teacher, liturgist, cantor, choir director, youth volunteer are important functions which contribute greatly to the worship life and to the wholeness of the parish community. Active membership on the parish council can be a path to improving the governance of the parish by the direct transferal of financial, organizational, public relations, management and other skills to parish life.

On a deeper level, moral and spiritual support of the clergy can be of enormous importance and can be a great ministry for the laity. All too frequently, pastors and priests are isolated and lonely. We as laity should be aware of this loneliness and must be prepared to reach out in friendship. The clergy, on the other hand, need to develop a sense of where their parishioners are in life, what kind of feeding and nourishment is required, what type of problems the laity are facing. Here is an excellent two-way opportunity. The laity in reaching out in love and concern to their pastors and priests can be available to minister to the clergy's need to understand the laity and their place in life. It is an opportunity often missed, perhaps avoided. It is an opportunity that should be grasped by the laity in a loving, caring fashion. After all, we certainly are exposed to lay criticism of the inadequacy of Father's homilies. Would it not be better to approach our clergy directly with a candid statement of our needs and with a gentle suggestion that we receive feeding in the areas of our everyday work life, and at the same time to give him affirmation when he does indeed meet our needs in his homily? Given our uniqueness, it is incumbent that we respond to our clergy lovingly, forthrightly and in a manner which utilizes the best of our talents and takes advantage of our particular circumstances.

Perhaps an account of my own attempt to listen, discern and act on the call of the Lord might be illustrative. As an American husband, father, businessman and community volunteer, my life

is active and at times draining. Interwoven with these various roles is my Christian spirituality which impacts profoundly on my various relationships. I have sensed my Christian calling to be primarily in the greater community rather than in pursuing the role of diaconate within the Catholic Church. I have always been convinced that a call to Orders is a direct and rather clear call—one which I have not received. Several of my married friends have received the call and are today fulfilling the role of deacon in their parish community. This again speaks of the uniqueness of the Lord's call. However, in preparing this article I have been asked to address my own personal call to Christian discipleship. Actually, I believe that my greatest particular call is to live a truly Christian lifestyle within my family and business, and to raise consciousness of the importance of blending work and faith. I have attempted to respond to this call in several ways. First, as the president and chief executive officer of a large regional commercial real estate company I have attempted to create an environment in which justice and equity flourish. Our company is committed to fair and generous wage scales, a warm and caring employer/employee relationship and an atmosphere in which people can grow and be nourished. As a company policy, we hold integrity as our most valued asset and honor and respect both our clients and our competitors.

As an example of this care and concern, I would like to cite a recent case in which one of our employees was let go for having violated several rules, after having been on probation. Within hours of the dismissal, one of my partners and one of our managers were made aware that the dismissed employee had a drug and alcohol problem. They immediately sought him out, brought him back to the office and spent several hours with him. They learned the details of a serious narcotic and alcohol problem. They further learned that he was the son of two alcoholic parents and had fought the problem all of his adult life. By the end of the day, the company had withdrawn the dismissal and had arranged for an immediate entry into a rehabilitation programme. Eight months later, we have a rehabilitated, productive and loyal employee who knows that he is important, worthwhile and loved.

I have further attempted to consider my desk as my altar at which the liturgy of my work is celebrated. If we are truly called to the royal priesthood, it is logical that we must be prepared to celebrate liturgy with others. If we can honestly make our desk

our altar (and this is much more difficult than it sounds) we can concelebrate the liturgy of our own work. We can invite the Lord's presence to our table and into the inner workings of our business. Whereas we will still have to reprimand and fire people at times, if our desk is our altar we will be able to do so with far greater compassion, caring and love. We can go the extra step to make those difficult times more palatable and comforting.

Indeed, if we can make our desk our altar, is it not logical that our business place can be the temple in which we celebrate? Think of it! Our office or factory a sanctuary? What wonders might we create in this business environment? It is obviously a challenge to think and to act in this way. It is difficult, but not impossible. But, even those few times of realization of this goal make it worthwhile to try.

Beyond my own work place, I have responded to my own personal call in several ways. Initially, I cut my teeth teaching religious education to teenagers both in the classroom and in informal home groups with a friend. Then I worked with Peter Rosazza, Auxiliary Bishop of the Archdiocese of Hartford, Connecticut, to bring a group of business and Church leaders together in a monthly dialogue about the business place and its morals and ethics. Bishop Rosazza subsequently called for and was a member of the committee which produced the bishops' *Pastoral on the American economy*. Then, about four years ago, I formed a parish group called 'The Christian in the Marketplace' which continues to meet bi-monthly at an early morning hour to discuss issues facing Christians in business today. Even more recently, I have helped to establish a bi-monthly ecumenical fellowship group of downtown Hartford business leaders. Our objective is to pray with and to support one another in our daily work.

Yet another outreach to the Christian person who deals in the world of work has been a retreat programme for Christian business persons. Working with two other business people and Pierre Wolff, S.J., an internationally acclaimed retreat director, we have sponsored three retreats and one workshop on discernment at a retreat house on Long Island Sound. An average of forty men and women have attended each of the weekend retreats. The objective of these retreats was for Christian people who work in the world of business to bring their business and themselves as business persons to the Lord. The format is based on the Spiritual Exercises

of St Ignatius Loyola, but specifically oriented to people in business. The workshop dealt with methods of better discerning business decisions in light of our Christianity.

Then, in direct response to the call of the Lord, I began to publish a newsletter which I named *Between Sundays*. It is a journal which includes copies of articles, prayers, vignettes, meditations and cartoons. All of the inclusions are gleaned from newspapers, magazines, books, the scriptures and other relevant sources. During the last three years, ten issues have been produced and mailed to more than 500 people across the United States. Many of the recipients tell me that they copy the letter or parts thereof and forward them to fellow workers, family and friends. The newsletter is designed to raise people's consciousness of the work/faith issue. By sharing the actual stories of how some Christians have been able to blend their work and their spirituality, I hope to motivate others to do likewise.

An additional call to all Christians is to reach out to those in need. It is my belief that the more successful people are in their chosen world of work, the more incumbent is their need to share. The simple way for a successful person to share is to reach into his or her pocket and contribute money. Whereas this is good and will be helpful to the recipient, I submit that it is inadequate. I believe that it is imperative for successful persons to share their very selves. There are certainly many causes reaching out for workers and leaders and there are many varied ways to share the effort. By way of example, and in a spirit of humility, I would like to share my own personal journey into the world of poverty. It all began one day seven years ago as I was returning from lunch and in a hurry to get to a business meeting. A street person, obviously drunk, reeled across the sidewalk and fell into a pile on the concrete. Without much thought, I quickly skirted the heap of humanity and rushed on to my meeting. About two hours later, the realization of what I had done (or not done) hit me hard. I was ashamed of myself and horrified at my insensitivity. I then began a journey into the world of poverty in our city that has been personally most rewarding and that I hope has been an honest sharing of self with 'these the least of my brothers' (Mt 25).

Upon the realization of where I was, I sought help from a young urban minister, the Reverend Harvey Pinyoun, who ran a soup kitchen called The Friendship Center. I finally steeled my courage and entered this foreign territory in order to serve coffee. It was

not an easy step; in fact, for four consecutive days I had intentions of going to the soup kitchen and failed to summon my courage enough to enter. Finally with a great deal of prayer and still bearing some trepidation, I entered—and it was fine. People were friendly and non-threatening. They were genuinely happy to see someone who would just be willing to spend time and help them get a meal.

Well, the soup kitchen service was habit-forming, and I soon added more duties to my work with the poor. It seemed that there was the possibility of gaining control of a building, a former convent in which the soup kitchen could exist, but also rooms for more than sixty single poor people could be developed. Along with a planning task force, we surveyed the property, with the generous help of an architect friend who spent countless hours measuring and then drawing plans for the 40,000 square-foot structure. Next, my real estate skills were on the table as we negotiated a lease of the facility. We then called on craftsmen to repair, rebuild and furnish the building the Center City Church group, an ecumenical coalition of urban churches, and dozens of individuals raised funds and hired a staff. The dream became reality. Six years later, St Elizabeth's House continues to flourish, now as an outreach of the Sisters of Mercy.

Shortly after the St Elizabeth house experience, I began to stop in on occasion at a new soup kitchen in another part of our city. There, two St Joseph Sisters had begun service with a coffee pot—the first week twelve guests arrived. Slowly, the selfless love of Sisters Maureen and Theresa blossomed forth and the crowds grew. I began to help serve coffee and to leave an occasional monetary contribution. Then came the call! A close friend of mine, Fr Ed McLean, a board member of the House of Bread soup kitchen said quite simply, 'We need you on our board and, furthermore, we need you as president of the board'. Well, there was no denying the call, much like Elijah hearing the 'tiny whispering', this request reached the depths of my being. Today, more than six years later, I continue in the most selfish service of my life—service to the poor urbanite, often homeless, frequently alcoholic or drug dependent and most always unemployed. It is selfish, because I am clearly served in all of this work. There is great joy in supporting the vision of Sisters Maureen and Theresa; in serving coffee to the Lord masquerading as a minority who is out of luck; in sharing a few words with a proud elderly poor

person who cannot make it through the month without some free meals; in going to the corporate community to raise the requisite funds to keep the doors open. Today, the House of Bread serves 2,000 meals per week; operates a day shelter where poor people can get relief from the cold or companionship, a hot shower and counselling; runs a sixteen-bed transitional housing programme and is now deep in planning for the construction of a fifty-room residential facility for the working poor. Clearly, the above work has been the result of teamwork from our two magnificent sisters and the scores of volunteers ranging from cooks and servers to a generous board of directors, each of whom brings his or her varied and profound talents into a group effort to help the poor as Jesus so clearly instructed.

Recognizing the fact that busy executives cannot do their demanding job and at the same time spend all day ministering at the soup kitchen, how can they be helpful? At the base level, every meal must be served—even the most busy executive can be a meal server once a week or once a month. In so doing, that executive will find the true joy of serving ‘these, the least of my brothers’ (Mt 25). Further, they can experience the real need of this type of work and will have the opportunity to respond by helping with zoning efforts for the next soup kitchen proposal, by supporting the hard-working staff or by raising funds to finance the entire agenda. This, of course, is only one of many community involvements which can be a source of both service and reward to the busy executive.

In summary, I do believe that we are all called to service in the Christian community. That call and the ensuing response will be unique. What is most important is that we listen carefully and discern the Lord’s individual plan for us. Once we have heard the call, whether it be the roar of a hurricane or a tiny whispering, we must be prepared to respond. In doing so, we will fulfill our discipleship to the Lord as full-fledged members of the Christian community and, in turn, our reward will be great. ‘And I promise you that whoever gives a cup of cold water to one of these lowly ones because he is a disciple will not want for his reward’ (Mt 10).