

SPECIAL CALLS IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

ATTENTIVE and prayerful reflection on the pages of the Old Testament, which deal with the experiences of those men and women, who, in God's plan of salvation, were chosen and called in view of mission, has thrown much light on the constitutive elements of any and every special call. Biblical theology has made a considerable contribution to this developing understanding, by showing that the call is God's deep and overpowering action, by which he 'seduces' the person, who in turn allows himself to be 'seduced', and thus enters into a relationship of familiarity with God (cf Jer 20,7). This creative action touches the innermost fibres of the being; it is an inner force which can be described as a fire burning in the heart, imprisoned in the bones, so that any effort to restrain it is wearisome (cf Jer 20,9). Through such action, God wishes to establish a relationship of religious intimacy with the person chosen, in which he shares his own concern and love for his people, and his intentions on their behalf. This 'touch', and the intimacy initiated by it, already turns the human heart and spirit to the mission hidden in God's design.

Whenever the one who is touched gives a response amidst interior struggle and renewed abandonment, God in his turn communicates the strength to act according to his will, demanding though this may be; he gradually introduces the person into a closer and transforming relationship. Its quality can be summed up in the expression used to describe the familiarity with God which developed in the life of Moses: 'Thus the Lord used to speak to Moses face to face, as a friend speaks to his friend' (Exod 33,11).

Prayerful study of the New Testament, with its many descriptions of individual summons by the Lord, and of the progressive nature of the responses given by those influenced by the divine action, clarify still further the meaning of call. The New Testament puts into even bolder relief God's freedom and initiative in electing, choosing, summoning to a form of life which implies a special relationship with the Master, with a view to the proliferation of his mission. Here we discover how God reaches out to the person, attracts and draws the

individual to himself, gradually and constantly fashions him, giving him a new capacity, a power which changes the quality of his life to a point where that life becomes in fact a mission. What strikes us most is that the ability to live out this union with God is possible only 'to those to whom it is given'; and without such divine intervention, it would be impossible. The constitutive elements, the very core of this form of life, are equally emphasized. They are progressively revealed to us in the sayings and doings of the Incarnate Word, as he begins to go about doing good (cf Mk 1,21ff), announcing the good tidings and curing the sick.

This is not to say that during the days of his earthly life he did not invite all those with whom he came into contact to live according to the Beatitudes and to accomplish the Father's will. What is undoubtedly true is that he deliberately and freely called certain individuals 'to be with him', to live in union with him, to link their lives and destiny to his in a particular way. We must therefore acquaint ourselves with Christ's ways of dealing with those whom he first called to himself, and listen to what they themselves have shared of their own experiences. We find innumerable examples in the Gospels themselves, in the Acts of the Apostles and the Letters of St Paul: valid accounts and descriptions of how they were affected in their first meetings with Christ, as well as some of the most important 'logia' of the Master, through which he explained to them the kind of life they were living and why it was possible so to live and do. Our reflections thus put us in touch with what God has done, and continues to do, as he calls certain individuals to share his life in a special way.

We begin, then, by seeking a fresh understanding of the spiritual itinerary of the disciples, as it developed from the time of their first encounter with the Master until the end of their lives. With the help of certain scholars, we discover that there were two important phases in the process of the disciples' growth, especially in its beginnings.¹

The initial stages of the spiritual journey

As Christ travelled the length and breadth of Galilee, his journeys sometimes led him to the adjoining countries. Everywhere he went, he approached these men in a variety of ways, in their own environment, in the midst of their every-day occupations, and in the company of their own relatives and friends.

As he 'passed by', 'moved on', 'turned round' and 'looked at' them, as he addressed them by the lakeside, or spoke to them as

they were 'following' him; as he surprised one of them by saying that he 'knew' him, astounded another by calling him 'by name', or revealing his intentions for him, he created in each of them a compelling need to enter on 'his way', to go towards him; or, more explicitly, 'to go and see':

. . . They followed Jesus. Jesus turned and saw them following, and said to them, 'What do you seek?' And they said to him, 'Rabbi' (which means Teacher), 'where are you staying?' He said to them, 'Come and see'. They came and saw where he was staying; and they stayed with him that day (Jn 1,37-39).

All these Gospel passages describe how Jesus approached them, as they were occupied in mending or washing their nets, fishing together with their father, sitting at the customs house or under a fig tree (cf Mt 4,20;19,27-29; Mk 2,14;10,28-30; Lk 14,26;18,28-30; Jn 1,50).

This kind of careful reading of the Gospel accounts enables us to see the progressive nature of Christ's influence: the way in which he gradually entered into the lives of those who were destined by the Father's will to become his closest companions, his disciples and friends. By such meditative reflection we are also enabled to appreciate, from the disciples' point of view, their growth in awareness of what was taking place in their lives. There was the gradual development of a bond of friendship, of fondness, of affection, which had its origin in Christ's gentle, delicate and very personal 'coming to them', 'touching their hearts'.

This burgeoning of a sincere attachment to Christ prepared the disciples for a crucial choice at the opportune moment: to leave their everyday occupations, their homes and families in order to be at the side of the Master, ready to enter into his life and world. The Synoptics, especially Mark, offer us a very vivid and impressive account of this turning-point in the development of the call, and of the response that the disciples were invited to give at that particular moment. The evangelists thus present in bold relief the fundamental characteristics of the call, of the life into which the disciples were drawn, and the irrevocability of their choice. It will be useful, then, to examine it in closer detail.

The call and the response

The episode to which we refer precedes the first multiplication of the loaves. It might be called 'the vocation on the mountain' (on the

hillside). In his first Galilean ministry, Jesus had made a tour through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news and curing all kinds of diseases and sicknesses (Mt 9,35). In the course of these journeyings, Jesus had visited on a number of occasions the little villages around the lake: Capernaum, Bethsaida . . . where his future disciples were living. There he had approached them and touched their hearts. His own initial mission-journeys had taken him as far as Tyre and Sidon. Yet he continued to return to the lakeside, and on his arrival there, his friends always gathered round him, happy to see him again, anxious to spend some time with him and listen to what he had to share with them.

It was on one of these occasions that crowds of people, because they had heard how much good Jesus had done among those who suffered, and learning of his return, hastened from their hamlets and homesteads, looking for him. Yet this was a moment when, we are told, he had decided to withdraw to a quiet place with his friends.

The evangelists describe very vividly these needy and suffering crowds now flocking round Jesus from all parts of the country because they had heard of all he was doing (cf Mk 3,7-8). For this reason these poor people were anxious to reach him, 'to touch him, for he had cured so many' (Mk 3,9). They were bringing all those who were afflicted by one kind of sickness or another, and were pressing round him with such insistence that Jesus had to ask his friends 'to have a boat ready for him to prevent him from being crushed' (*ibid.*).

This moving scene of the Lord in the midst of a suffering multitude enables us to understand the importance of that moment, and of what is about to happen in the life of the disciples.

Jesus himself draws their attention to the painful scene, to the people that surround him, lamenting, crying, imploring, begging . . . He shares with them his own inner feeling: 'I feel sorry for them . . .' (Mt 9,36). Then he points out to them that 'the harvest is rich . . . but the labourers are few . . .' (Mt 9,37): to those, that is, who are willing to share his life of loving concern and of total giving to alleviate the miseries of others and to bring them life.

But at that moment, instead of involving his friends there and then in activity, he urges them to 'ask the Lord of the harvest to send labourers into his harvest' (Mt 9,37). Then, without abandoning the suffering crowds which need him, but going a certain distance from them, he enters into prayer; 'all night he continued in

prayer to God' (cf Lk 6,12; Mk 3,13). He who has come to do the Father's will; he who never acts on his own and only does what he sees the Father doing . . . remains in this prolonged contact of loving dependence on the One who has sent him to live among men.

After having been absorbed in deep communion with his Father, he rejoins the people that have watched him in prayer: in the presence of this same crowd anxiously waiting for him to do something for them, a crowd of people for whom he cares and whom he embraces with his eyes and his heart, Jesus 'summons (calls) those whom he wanted himself' (Mk 3,13). As some exegetes have pointed out, a better translation of this verb is 'those whom he carried in his heart', which emphasizes the affective dimension of the call as it comes from the heart of Christ. These men are in fact those whom he loves in a special way, because they are the ones that the Father has entrusted to him, as he will manifest later on in his priestly prayer: 'Father, those whom you have entrusted to me . . . I kept them in your name' (Jn 17,6.9.11.24). For the same reason, he will emphatically remind his disciples: 'It is not you who have chosen me, but I have chosen you' (Jn 15,16).

When we place this episode in its proper context, we are led to see that Christ calls 'his own' in the very midst of his missionary activity among men — while he is among the suffering crowd that seek his help. It is in order to provide for the needs of this crowd that Christ calls them: it is to these people who are in need that they will be sent ('so that they might be sent' — Mk 3,14).

I chose you and commissioned you to go out and bear fruit, fruit that will last (Jn 15,16).

The apostolic and missionary aim of this choice and call is unambiguously clear. Hearing themselves called — and called by name — and being constantly touched in the depths of their being by this creative word of Christ, 'they go to him' (cf Mk 3,13).

Neither is it a question of a mere physical movement towards him. Rather it is a deliberate 'leaving behind', in order to be with him: they abandon their place among the crowd, in order to place themselves, and be, 'at his side'.

'*They were to be with him*': here one finds the heart and the *raison d'être* of the call.

'To be with him': first of all to be physically present to him, and therefore to accompany him. In fact, from this moment on they will be recognized as those 'who were with Jesus' (cf Mk 14,67).

Most importantly, it means to be with him in a stable manner, for better or for worse; it means to declare oneself for him clearly and openly; it is a choice of him, in the sense that he becomes for them the centre of their lives. They acknowledge in him the Messiah, the Lord already present in our midst, whom everyone is destined eventually to follow, to listen to, recognize and accept.

But they give themselves to him here and now, without hesitation and half measures, without any other mediators. They recognize him and accept him as 'their Lord and Master'. Thus they become the 'family of God' (Mk 3,35), because, by placing themselves 'at his side', 'to be with him' permanently and 'for ever', they positively begin to share with him, in the fulfilment of the Divine Will for the establishment of his Kingdom: a moment which ushers in that divine reality destined to be lived by all men 'when the Lord comes'.

In this way, they become the existential and eschatological witness, which enables humankind to catch a glimpse beforehand of the total realization of the Kingdom destined to find its completion in the fulness of time.

To be with him: that is, to enter into his ways by accepting his 'criteria'; to let him mould them, form them in such a way that they put on the Lord Jesus Christ (Rom 13,14), have the same mind as Jesus Christ (Phil 2,5), identify themselves progressively with him, and thus remain in him and he in them, as he remains in the Father (cf Jn 15,5-17). It is precisely because of 'their being with him' and 'remaining in him' that 'they may testify, and give witness' to him as he does to the Father, because he is in the Father and the Father is in him.

Further, they are called to be at his side, not in order to be instructed and then sent to repeat what they have learnt. Rather they are with him in order to know him intimately through a communion of life which will gradually transform them in him, and make them share from within his own way of living, thinking, loving and acting. By being one with him, identified with him, by letting him live in them, they will be able to testify to him.

This being with him will then lead them to move together with him from one place to another, as he spends himself for men, always led by the Father and under the impulse of the Spirit. Thus it is that they will be gradually initiated into the love that Christ himself has for men: that love which urges and prompts him to give himself without counting the cost and without any limit. Such a 'being with Christ' is neither an individualistic nor a fantasy relationship. It is a

very real bond which associates them constantly more and more with him in the accomplishment of his mission.

It is from this 'being with him', and only from this, that they will have the 'power' which Christ alone has of 'casting out devils': that is, the strength and energy to fight efficaciously against the evil of the world, in whatever form it manifests itself among humankind.

The capacity to carry on, perpetuate, extend and accomplish the mission of Christ is therefore rooted in this 'being with him'. Personal union with Christ and mission are not two distinct realities: they are intrinsically united, as they are in Christ himself, in whom life and mission are blended into one reality.

It is true that the texts which we have cited speak of those who were destined to become the 'apostles', the shepherds of the flock, the pillars of the Church as an institution. Yet, as biblical scholars have pointed out, there is another element in the phenomenon of the group of the disciples of Jesus, besides the kerygmatic institutional aspect, which is of paramount importance:

In the group of the disciples there begins to exist in an exemplary way a new type of life which up to that time had not existed in this manner; it was one which, after Easter, was destined to become the very heart of the Church: the life according to the evangelical counsels.²

So it is that the group of the disciples is the prototype of a new form of life. This phenomenon is so transparent in their case that the fundamental structures of the life according to the evangelical counsels become visible in it.

Furthermore, there are other instances related by the Evangelists in which we can observe the Lord Jesus taking the initiative in calling to himself and inviting other people to follow him: that is, to make the same choice of himself and to put themselves at his side, to abandon all things in order to be in communion of life with him for ever, and to share his destiny and mission (cf Lk 10,1ff; Mk 19,21;10,21; Lk 18,22;14,33; Mt 16,24; Jn 7,17, etc.).

It is in this choice of the Person of Christ, made possible by the call, and in this centring of one's own capacity for love in him, without the mediation of a human partner, and therefore with an undivided heart (cf 1 Cor 7,32-35), that we find the very essence of this new form of christian living: virginity or celibacy for the sake of the Kingdom of Heaven.

This reveals the power of the presence among men of Christ, God

made man, the Lord and Master who alone has the right to demand such a gift of self, made out of love, which entails the sacrifice of certain aspects of life congenital to man.

He alone can ask the totality and immediacy of human love, here and now, so that he will become, already in this earthly life, 'the one necessity' (Lk 10,42); as indeed he will be for all humankind in the life to come. Here we find the eschatological value of the response given by those who are called to this new form of life and who welcome it sincerely and joyfully.

At the same time, the Lord, in other instances which do not refer to the group of the twelve, openly says that not everyone can enter into this relationship of loving union with him: but only 'those to whom it has been given' (Mt 19,11).³ It is significant that this is explicitly stated in the context of a choice between the married state and virginity or celibacy for the sake of the Kingdom (*ibid.*).

We must notice, too, that the Lord did not accept among his 'companions' others besides the ones whom he had chosen and called, no matter how generous and anxious they might have been to offer themselves. This is because the call is not a simple invitation. It is an action of God reaching to the very roots of the individual's actual being and personality, conferring a new capacity for a form of life and love only upon those who are 'touched' in this way.

In the light of all this, one can better understand why it has been stated that the group of the disciples is the prototype of that form of christian living which began to exist from the earliest times of the Church, and then grew and developed into what is now called the religious life. As is stated in the Council's decree, from the Church's first beginnings, there have been men and women who, urged by the action of God and guided by his Spirit, have followed Christ, dedicating their whole being to him and sharing more closely in his life and mission (cf *Perfectae Caritatis*, 1). The same transforming action of God, which changed a group of fishermen into the 'disciples'⁴ of Jesus, continues to give rise to and foster in the Church that kind of christian living which expresses itself in a radical choice for the Person of Christ, and in the total giving of the self to him so as to share his life and mission.

By virtue of this divine action of God, and in the strength of this personal bond of love with Jesus which finds its expression in the vow of virginity, a special kind of union is established between him and the one who answers his grace-giving call. It belongs to the nature of this mission that the person is progressively led to share

ever more effectively the thoughts and the ways of Christ: the basic dispositions of mind and heart which inspired and animated the whole of his life on earth, his life as Son, sent by the Father into the world, that the world might be saved through him (cf Jn 3,16-17).

In consequence, those who make this oblation of self and live in union with him, urged by the strength of the love which his Spirit pours into their hearts (cf Rom 5,5), share his life in depth, and therefore do not hold on to or cling to anything (cf Phil 2,6-8); they do not possess anything and, following the example of Christ, share with others whatever they are and have, so that others may be enriched through their poverty (cf 2 Cor 8,9).

Furthermore, in union with him, they love the Father so much that they live to the extreme their radical dependence on him, making themselves obedient even to death on a cross (Phil 2,8); and this in order that men may regain the life which they lost because of their disobedience, independence and pride (cf Rom 5,15-21).

It is through the strength of their union with him that they burn with that fire which Christ 'came to cast on earth' (Lk 12,49), urging them to spend themselves for others, sharing their sorrows, lightening their burdens, caring for them in all possible ways, and thus enabling them to experience the goodness of God, source of all goodness; contributing to their development and growth in the ways of justice, peace and love.

It is thus that they 'follow Christ, virginal and poor (cf Mt 8,20; Lk 9,58) who, by his obedience even to the death on a cross (Phil 2,8), redeemed and sanctified humankind. Their compelling motive is that love which the Holy Spirit pours out in their hearts (cf Rom 5,5), so that they live more and more for Christ and for his Body which is the Church' (*Perfectae Caritatis*, 1).

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NOTES

¹ Cf Carlo Martini S.J., *L'itinerario spirituale dei dodici nel Vangelo di Marco* (Roma, 1976).

² H. Schürmann, 'Der Jüngerkreis Jesu als Zeichen für Israle und als Urbild des Kirchlichen Rätstandes', in *Geist und Leben*, 36 (1963), p 23.

³ Cf especially Bruno Proietti, 'La scelta celibataria alla luce della S. Scrittura', in *Il celibato per il Regno* (Milano, 1977), pp 7-75.

⁴ We use the word in its more specific sense of those whom he called to be with him. We are not excluding the broader meaning of the word — those who accepted his teachings.