

DISCERNING THE LAY VOCATION

Deacon Keith Fournier

Living the Call: An Introduction to the Lay Vocation by Michael Novak and William Simon, Jr., Encounter Books.

Blessed John Paul II used the parable of the workers in the vineyard as the framework within which to address the nature of a lay vocation. "The gospel parable sets before our eyes the Lord's vast vineyard and the multitude of persons," he wrote, "both women and men, who are called and sent forth by him to labor in it." He was speaking of Matthew (13:38): "The vineyard is the whole world."

The Holy Father made clear that "A new state of affairs today, both in the Church and in social, economic, political and cultural life, calls with a particular urgency for the action of the lay faithful. If lack of commitment is always unacceptable, the present time renders it even more so. It is not permissible for anyone to remain idle."

Over many years, and through seasons of service, the conviction that we are all called into the vineyard has directed my life choices. In 1996, I discerned a call to say "yes" to an invitation of the Lord. On the Feast of the Body and Blood of the Lord, I was called to Holy Orders as a Catholic Deacon. Deacons are a bridge from the lay faithful in the world to the rest of the hierarchy (Bishops and Priests) and from the hierarchy to the lay faithful. We have a special role in assisting the lay faithful to both understand and live out their own vocation.

For years I have searched for material which helps lay Catholics come to understand the dignity and implications of their vocation. So, when my friend Bill Donohue asked me to review a book entitled, *Living the Call: An Introduction to the Lay Vocation*, written by Michael Novak and William E.

Simon Jr., I assented.

I am glad I did. I have finally found the book for which I have been searching all these years. I have not stopped recommending it since. It is a must read for every Catholic.

After inspiring introductions from the two lay authors, the first half of the book introduces the reader to the lay vocation. It does so through a solid explanation of its theological ground. However, and even more importantly, we are then introduced to nine lay men and women who live out the vocation sacrificially. These real life stories put legs on the theology by giving us a glimpse into the various portions of the vineyard in which the lay vocation is lived.

In education we meet Elias Josue who teaches at St. Rose in Denver and shows us that "Catholic schools are the way we bring people into the Church." Then, former Principal Mary Baier shows us that Catholic education is "not a job; it's a ministry." Finally, we meet one of my personal heroes, Peter Flanigan, the champion of the school choice movement, who understands and lives the teaching of the Church on solidarity.

In parish life we meet Cambria Smith, a parish life director; Mike Witka, who turned "an avocation into a vocation" overseeing business affairs and personnel; and Kathelle Kichline, a Pastoral Associate. Each offers a compelling story of faith and response. However, in this section, the distinction between the ministerial priesthood, and the priesthood of the faithful, was not as clearly explained as I wish it had been.

Next we are introduced to the array of lay ministries flourishing in the Catholic Church. We meet a lay Jesuit volunteer, Nicholas Collura, who recognizes Christ in the needy. Next, Marcie Moran, whose ministry to the dying and the grieving and work in marriage preparation and counseling is

heartfelt. Finally, Ansel Augustine, whose vibrant vision of youth ministry provides a window into one of the most important parts of the growing lay involvement in the ministry of the Church.

However, the second part of the book, entitled "The Search Within," does more than put legs on the lay vocation: it uncovers the heart of every Christian vocation, a deep interior life. One of my favorite theologians of the early Church, a monk named Evagrius of Pontus, once wrote that a theologian is one who rests his head on the breast of Christ. The image evokes the beloved disciple John.

It points to the common element in the stories told in the first half of the book. Each of the men and women we met has a deep, abiding and personal relationship with the Lord. That relationship comes from living in the Lord by living in the communion of the Church which is His Body.

The first part of the second half of the book provides one of the most beautiful expositions on the interior life I have read. Using short quotes from great classics in the Catholic Tradition, the authors open the reader to further pursuit by increasing our thirst for more. The material increases the spiritual hunger at the core of contemplation.

It offers a lay spirituality rooted in love, nourished by the Eucharist, sustained by spiritual reading, kept alive by intimate prayer and sustained by the Sacraments and the Word of God. I sincerely encourage the authors to expand the material in this half of the book into another complete book.

If they were to choose do so, it could become a classic for generations to come. Their explanation of the Incarnation and the nature of the Church was exquisite. This kind of theology, faithful as well as accessible, is desperately needed in this hour.

The second part of the second half discusses oblates and

associations. However, it does not mention the ecclesial movements which have sprung up in the Church since the Council and have been praised by recent Popes. They provide a base of support for many lay men and women who live the message of this book, the universal call to holiness and the missionary calling of every Baptized Christian.

Chapter nine provides a summary of the single life and marriage through the lens of vocation. The exposition of married life is one of the finest summaries of what is referred to in shorthand as the “theology of the body” which I have read. Blessed John Paul II preferred that his body of expository writing in this area be called “Human Love in the Divine Plan,” and the author’s insights show why that is a much more apropos shorthand title.

The last two chapters, “Teach all Nations,” and “To Rebuild all Things in Christ,” were the only unsatisfying part of this otherwise wonderful book. I say unsatisfying because they were simply too short. I am convinced the authors could write Volume Two of *Living the Call* in which they explain—through examples and accessible teaching—how lay men and women play a vital role in the ongoing teaching and social justice work of the whole Church. I hope they do just that.

Deacon Keith Fournier is the editor of Catholic Online and serves on the Catholic League’s board of advisors. A constitutional lawyer, he was appointed the first executive director of the American Center for Law and Justice (ACLJ), a public interest law firm founded by Rev. Pat Robertson. Fournier is currently pursuing a doctorate at the Catholic University of America.