A CULTURE OF VOCATION

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Catholic culture in twentieth century Britain

In a not wholly mythic golden era, every Catholic boy and every Catholic girl would at some stage of their education consider becoming a priest or a nun. Such thoughts emerged as part of what could be called the totally Catholic culture. In the totally Catholic culture, a young person's life was often completely defined by the life of the Church: born into a Catholic family, everything from school during the week, to the sports team on Saturday and the youth club in the evenings could be a Church run institution, culminating in Mass on Sunday. Within such a rich cultural experience, many boys and girls would experience the call of Christ as a call to ministry within this great tradition. If they did not enter a seminary or a religious house, then, in the language of the time, they didn't have a vocation and usually proceeded towards marriage.

While many elements of this Catholic culture continue to flourish, they no longer interlock in the same way and they have ceased to constitute a Catholic young person's whole world; the all embracing nature of the totally Catholic culture has disappeared along with many other all embracing cultures. The totally Catholic culture began to disappear in Britain in the 1960's and had disappeared in most places by the end of the 1980's. One outward sign of the disappearance of the totally Catholic culture was the halving of the number of those attending Sunday Mass between 1980 and 2000. Since 2000, Mass attendance figures have remained steady at just under 1 million.

In the totally Catholic culture, priesthood and religious life were the only real vocations. In essence, the totally Catholic culture contained a sub-culture of recruitment to priesthood and the religious life. This sub-culture recruited the best of Catholic youth to the best vocations. As Catholic culture declined so did vocations, because the sub-culture of recruitment relied on the totally Catholic culture. Each required the other. In the 20 years when Sunday Mass attendance halved (1980–2000), seminary entrants declined by two thirds. The sub-culture of recruitment had died along with the totally Catholic culture. Then in the twenty-first century the statistics showed an unexpected change. Between 2001 and 2010, while Mass attendance remained steady in the midst of a rising population, the number of men entering seminary rose from 27 to 56. A new approach to vocation had begun to emerge, one that took seriously the challenge of creating a culture of vocation.

What is a culture of vocation?

The phrase 'a culture of vocation' is a modern one and it first appeared in St John Paul's message for Vocations Sunday in April 1993. It received a more considered treatment with the Congress on Vocations to the Priesthood and to Consecrated Life in Europe that the Pope summoned in 1997.

The vocational culture of which the document speaks is something new. St John Paul asked the Congress to promote a '*new vocational culture* in young people and families'. What is new about this vocational culture is precisely that it exists in a Europe that no longer shares the Christian faith as normative, a Europe where the totally Catholic culture no longer exists.

This is the context in which the culture of vocation comes into being. So the Congress constantly affirms the task not of recruitment but of spreading the belief that life is vocation: 'there exists a specific vocation for every living person . . . connected to the simple fact of existing' For this reason the culture of vocation 'is a component of the new evangelisation'.

Each person's specific vocation is an expression of the general vocation of humanity described as follows by St John Paul: 'Love is the fundamental and innate vocation of every human being'. So to create a culture of vocation is to evangelize with the message that life has a purpose and that this purpose is to love.

The setting of the culture of vocation is therefore the polar opposite of the totally Catholic culture. While the totally Catholic culture reinforced Catholic teachings daily, the setting of the culture of vocation is one where basic Christian truths are rarely expressed. So the first element of the culture of vocation is that all people are made by God for the purpose of expressing love in a specific way.

The second element is that everybody has a vocation. This simple statement is now taken for granted but it demands careful consideration. While the basic Christian calling has always been the call to baptism and the Christian life, nevertheless, the word 'vocation' came to be used exclusively to refer to the call to the religious life and the priesthood. The process of undoing this use of 'vocation' as referring only to ecclesiastical callings was originally a work of the Protestant Reformation. The Reformers objected to the religious life per se and they changed the theology of the priesthood; however, having deconstructed the medieval language of vocation, the Reformers still wanted to speak about vocation but to what could they now attach the label 'vocation?' Many of them identified a person's vocation with their work. In Britain, this attitude still influences the secular use of the term vocation as seen in the expression 'vocational qualifications' meaning those courses of study that lead directly into work in contrast to 'academic qualifications'.

Perhaps the most important point to remember about vocation is that it is a metaphor for how God changes a person's understanding of their place in the world. A job, for example, is usually a necessity not a vocation; it becomes a vocation if it is seen as part of God calling a person to life in Christ. So some saints have made cleaning floors part of their vocation while some teachers have never discovered how teaching can become a vocation. When life in Christ is seen as the ultimate goal, a person's whole life becomes a response to a vocation. So the Catholic theology of vocation includes work as part of somebody's vocation but work in itself is not a vocation.

The Catholic tradition has evolved a theology of states of life as more fundamental to vocation than work. The four states of life are: priesthood, religious life, marriage and dedicated single life. In contemporary Catholic theology, the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church expresses this dogmatically: 'the laity, by their own vocation, seek the kingdom of God by engaging in temporal affairs and by ordering them according to the plan of God'. So the statement that 'everybody has a vocation' can be interpreted in two distinct ways: both ways agree that all share in the basic baptismal call to holiness in the Christian life but beyond that, the Reformed tradition sees just one further step, namely work, while the Catholic tradition sees several states of life as well as work. It's worth noting that work here has a broad interpretation not just a paid job.

So the second element in the Catholic culture of vocation is that those whom God calls to baptism are called to holiness in the Christian life as expressed in a state of life and in work.

The third and final element in the definition is the recognition that vocational ministry is integral to the Church's life and not an additional extra: 'pastoral work, from its beginnings and by its very nature, is orientated towards vocational discernment. This is a service offered

to every person, so that they might discover the way towards the realisation of a life project as God wants it, according to the needs of the Church and the world of today'.[1]

Putting together the three elements, we have a working definition of the culture of vocation: the Catholic Church affirms that God has made every individual with a purpose and seeks to accompany all people to help them express their fundamental human vocation to love. Those Christ invites to baptism are each called to holiness in a distinctive way, through their state of life and their work. Each Christian community has a duty to help people find their vocation and to live it out, so creating a culture of vocation at the service of the Church and society.

How can a culture of vocation find expression today?

a) Vocational culture

The recruitment sub-culture described earlier threatens a young person's freedom by putting pressure on people to sign up; there is evidence that the young with some sense of religious vocation still fear being press ganged by vocations directors. So the culture of vocation that replaces the recruitment sub-culture must very explicitly respect a person's freedom. The culture of vocation must be about discernment not recruitment.

Discernment is an offer of assistance to help people discover their path in life and so it's starting point recognizes a person's freedom. Some may ask at this point if this means abandoning the promotion of the specific vocations to the priesthood and religious life. The answer is definitely no; but this shift does mean abandoning vocations ministry as solely about recruitment of priests and religious in favour of the wider work of discernment for all. IVT expresses this quite clearly: 'In fact, the shortage of specific vocations — vocations in the plural — is above all an absence of the vocational consciousness of life — vocation in the singular —, or rather the absence of a culture of vocation'.[2] To put it crudely, if you want more priests and religious nowadays, you have to help everybody find their vocation.

IVT explains the elements involved in discernment: 'vocational discernment happens in the course of precise communitarian journeys: liturgy and prayer; ecclesial communion; the service of charity; the experience of receiving the love of God and offering it in witness.'[3] These elements are all communitarian and yet they 'promote and accompany the vocational journey of each believer.'

Without the proactive support of the local community, young people today will find it hard to discover their particular identity. This is not communal discernment but it is personal discernment made possible by the community of the Church.

Of course, any young person can participate in these elements of church life, but in order for this participation to be part of a vocational culture, the elements need to be brought together in the person's life by an explicitly vocational agenda. The four elements become vocational when the local church offers to help the young person to use them as vocational tools.

b) Vocational culture in practice

The culture of vocation has already begun to take root and there are several different types of community based discernment currently offered by the Catholic community in England.

[1] IVT 26a.

[2] IVT 13 B.

[3] *Acts* 6:7 quoted in IVT 27.

The common elements are, more or less, those four described by IVT with the explicitly vocational agenda is added by leadership from experienced priests and religious.

There are two distinguishing criteria. First, the amount of basic catechesis in a group will vary as many young people today seek a deeper understanding of Catholic identity, the essential prelude to discerning a vocation. The other differentiating element is the geography and timescale of the different discernment opportunities. The location and time involved varies on a spectrum from a city based occasional evening drop in to a year long process in a residential retreat centre in the countryside. Let's now consider examples along this spectrum.

TYPE 1: DROP IN GROUP. Example: In some dioceses, the diocesan vocations director and a religious sister welcome people to drop in one evening a month for a talk and prayer around the theme of vocation. Participants are free to come and go as they wish.

TYPE 2: LOCAL GROUP (catechesis): Example: In some parishes, there is a vocations group for young people who are still in full-time college or university education. The group meets about once a month for the celebration of Mass followed by a talk and a meal together. There is an emphasis on catechesis and spiritual formation as the basis for discernment.

TYPE 3: LOCAL GROUP (lectio divina): Example: Cardinal Martini began Samuel Groups in Milan in 1989. Participants take time to listen to God and to His Word speaking to their life. They commit to attending monthly meetings with the group for a year and to meeting individually with a spiritual guide.

TYPE 4: RESIDENTIAL GROUP: Example: A group of religious run a programme that involves staying at a retreat centre for one weekend a month for nine months and for Holy Week. The programme involves communal living, the Prayer of the Church and catechesis.

To this list can be added groups for men considering the priesthood, of which there are a growing number. For some men they fulfil the same role as the above groups and they are now paralleled by groups for women explicitly discerning the religious life. In addition, experience shows that certain kinds of pastoral activity are a fruitful field of vocational discernment; for example, gap year schemes of work in Church sponsored youth centres and missions at home and abroad. Alongside all these, individual vocation discernment with an experienced guide remains a constant feature and training in this role has emerged as new development.

This typology of discernment is not claiming to describe the only kinds of vocational ministry but rather the main outlines of new initiatives that have grown up in the twenty-first century. Their emergence has not been coordinated and shows a spontaneous response to the call for a new culture of vocation that began in the pontificate of St John Paul.