

Finding One's Calling In Life

Fr Thomas Hopko

Article from OED Book / *October 5, 1997*

When we consider the Orthodox Christian understanding of vocation, several certain points can be made. The most obvious are the following.

Everyone Has a Calling

God creates every human being in His image and likeness for everlasting life. There are no mistakes and no accidents. As the saying goes, "God makes no junk." Everyone, or in Biblical language, the "many" are called. But not all are chosen. Some are rejected not because they have no vocation from God, but because they refuse to accept their calling.

Everyone has a vocation. And all vocations are "religious." This does not mean that everyone is called to serve the church in professional manner; to be a bishop, priest, deacon, monk, nun, psalm reader, or church worker of one sort or another. Obviously not all are called to these specifically ecclesiastical ministries. But everyone is called to serve God and their fellow human beings in some form of life which God Himself wills. This "form of life" is not necessarily a job or profession. For example, some people may be called to suffer on this earth and to bear the results of fallen humanity in the most violent manner; to be victimized by disease, retardation, affliction; to be the objects of other people's cares, or disdain. This is their vocation, and they are particularly blessed by God and loved by Christ in its acceptance and fulfillment.

In a word, there is a divine plan and purpose for everyone. There is a "predestination," not in the sense that God programs His creatures or forces His will upon them against their will, but rather that God knows every person from before the foundation of the world and provides their unique life and the specific conditions of their earthly way which are literally the best possible conditions for them; however unacceptable this may seem to us creatures in our limited and fallen state. And God works together with each one of us so that, by suffering what we must on this earth, we may attain to life everlasting in the age to come.

Everyone Has the Same Calling

In a certain sense every person has the same vocation, which is to be a saint. We are called to be saints, to be holy as God is holy, to be perfect as the Father in heaven is perfect (Rom 1:7, 1 Cor 1:2, 2 Pet 1:15, Mt 5:48). We are all made to fulfill ourselves as creatures made in God's image and likeness for eternal life. And we can do so because God not only creates us with this possibility, and indeed, this command; but because He also does everything in His power to guarantee its accomplishment by sending His Son and His Spirit to the world.

Since Christ has been glorified and the Holy Spirit has been poured out on all flesh, there is no excuse for those who know and believe this, and experience it in the life of the Christian Church, not to be saints. Everything possible has been done to secure this. There is nothing more that God can do. All is given and all is fulfilled. The rest is up to us. Whatever the Lord may be doing with other people in

other places, some things are certain for Christians, and certainly us Orthodox: We can cooperate with God. We can share His holiness. We can become, as the saints themselves teach us, all that God Himself is by His gracious action in our lives. We can become loving, peaceful, joyful, good, wise, true, patient, kind, compassionate, powerful, pure, free, self-determining ... or we can refuse to cooperate with God, never find our true selves, and perish.

Everyone Has His or Her Unique Calling

All are called to be saints, but each person is called to do so in his or her own unique way. No two persons are the same. Each one is different. All are called to partake of God's being and life. All are called to love as He loves, know as He knows, serve as He serves, live as he lives. But each will do it in his or her own specific manner, according to the concrete conditions and means that God provides.

Some will sanctify their lives being married; others will be single. Some will do it in clerical orders, others as lay people. Some will be monastic; most will live in the everyday secular world. Some will work primarily in a physical way, others will work intellectually. Some will be artists, scientists, business people, professionals. Others may have no particular job or profession. And some may be called simply to suffer, while others, in terms of this world, will hardly suffer at all. Some will have many temptations, and will bear heavy burdens because of the sins of the world and their particular inheritance of a fallen, broken, distorted humanity. And some may have to fight destructive memories, imaginations, and passions that seem at times impossible to bear. While others will be greatly blessed by receiving a highly purified humanity, for which they will especially have to answer before God. For, as Jesus taught, "to whom much is given, of him much will be required" (Lk 12:48). But each person will have his or her own life to sanctify. And each will answer for what he or she has done. In the eyes of God none is better than the other. None is higher or more praiseworthy. But each must find his or her own way, and glorify God through it. This is all, ultimately, that matters. The rest is details.

The Will to Find God's Will is Essential

All that is needed to discover the will of God and to do it is the pure desire to see, to hear, to understand and to obey. God does the rest. When people saw Jesus on earth, and yet did not accept and obey Him in love, the Lord himself gave the reason, quoting the Prophet Isaiah. He said that the people had eyes but did not see; had ears but did not want to hear; had minds, but refused to understand and be saved [Is 6:9-10; Mt 13:13-14; Mk 8:18; Jn 12:36-41].

To find one's vocation demands that one really wants to do so. It sounds simple. And it is. But, to quote the Lord once more, "few there be who find it" (Mt 7:14). The reason is that it takes courage to allow the Lord to speak, or rather, to hear the Lord when He speaks, and to follow Him. It is also quite painful. Our own will has to go. Our egocentric desires have to be denied. Our ideas about ourselves have to be abandoned. Our personal plans and projects have to be discarded. Our agendas of action have to be thrown away. We have to say to God: Speak Lord, your servant is ready! We have to respond to God: Let it be to me according to Your word! And we have to mean it. If we do, we will find our way. But if we fight it, and keep craving the things that we want, we will be miserable and unhappy. We will realize, as the song says, that we "can't get no satisfaction." For the heart of the human person is made for God - for truth, for love, for life itself, and not for mere "existence" and is inevitably unsatisfied, frustrated, confused, distressed, angered, bored...until it comes to rest in Him.

We Need Help on the Way

To will God's will is essential. Without this, nothing can happen. With it, everything. One saint of the desert even dared to say that if a person would will God's will without wavering from sunrise to sunset, by the end of the day he would be "to the measure of God." But to will God's will we need help. We need, first of all, the help of God Himself. This means that we have to pray and to participate in the mystical life of God's Church. Jesus said, "Ask, and you will receive" (Mt 7:7). And the apostle James reminds us that if we do not ask rightly, we will not receive. "You do not have, because you do not ask. You ask and you do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions" (Jas 4:2-3). To find our vocation in life we have to pray to God to show it to us, and to guide us into it for His Name's sake, and ultimately, for our own.

In addition to the direct help of God, so to speak, we also need His help as it comes to us through others. We need the guidance of those who are experienced in His ways, particularly our fathers and mothers in the faith. "Ask your fathers, and they will show you; your elders and they will teach you" (Dt 32:7). The saints of the Church love to repeat this line from the song of Moses. To hear God's voice, to discern His desires for us, to discover His purposes for our lives, we need the help of those who have found Him, or, perhaps more accurately, those who have been found by Him.

We receive this help in the life of the Church, first of all by our participation in the services and sacraments. We find it also in the Bible and in the lives and teachings of the saints. And we find it in the pastors and teachers whom God gives us. God promises that those who seek instruction will never be left without it. He Himself will see to it, as the saying goes, that "when the disciple is ready, the Master will appear." Without obedience to God's Word and Spirit in the services, sacraments, scriptures, and saints of the Church, we who claim to be Christians will never discover our calling in life. For we will have rejected the means that God has given us to find it.

We Must Be Faithful Where We Are

Finally, we are taught that to discover God's will for us we must be faithful to Him where we are, faithful to and in the conditions in which He has placed us. One of the greatest obstacles to the discovery of one's vocation in life, which is a clear expression of our disobedience and self-will, is the desire to be someone else, someplace else, sometime else. We have all heard people say that if only they lived in another place, or in another time, or with other people ... then they could be holy. Or, if only they were married. Or, if only they were not married. If only this, and if only that! We must come to see how sinful such an attitude is, how crazy and deluded. It is simply blasphemy. And it may well be the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit which Christ says cannot be forgiven, for it dares to tell God that our failures in life are His fault for making us the way we are (Mt 12:31; Lk 12:10).

God has made us who we are. He has put us where we are, even when it is our own self-will that has moved us. He has given us our time and our place. He has given us our specific destiny. We must come to the point when we do not merely resign ourselves to these realities, but when we love them, bless them, give thanks to God for them as the conditions for our self-fulfillment as persons, the means to our sanctity and salvation.

Being faithful where we are is the basic sign that we will God's will for our lives. The struggle to "blossom where we are planted," as the saying goes, is the way to discern God's presence and power in

our lives, to hear His voice, to accomplish His purposes, to share His holiness. Jesus said that only those who are "faithful in little" inherit much and get set over much. Those who are not faithful in the little things of life, and thereby fail to accept and to use what God provides, end up losing the little that they have, or -- as Jesus says in St Luke's gospel - the little that they think that they have, for even that "little" may exist only in their own deluded imaginations (Mt 25:14-30; Lk 19:11-27, 8:18).

So the summary of the whole thing is this: We must labor to do the smallest good and to avoid the smallest sin in the smallest, seemingly most insignificant details of life. We must accept who we are, where we are, when we are and how we are, and struggle to sanctify our real state of existence by the grace of God; resisting the world, the flesh and the devil and gaining the Spirit of God through Christ in the Church. We must participate in the services and sacraments, be fed on the scriptures and imitate the saints. We must seek out the help of the experienced, and heed their counsel and advice. And we must go to God Himself and say with a pure heart: Thy will be done! And He will see that we find our vocation and calling in life, and become the saints that He has willed us to be from the beginning.