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Something Great That Is Love (III): Our true name

Responding to God's plan for our life reveals our true name to us. A new article in the series on vocation.

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The first book in the Bible begins with an account of God the creator, who brings creatures into existence with merely his word: *And God said, "Let there be light ... "Let there be a firmament in the midst of the waters"*

... *“Let the earth put forth vegetation, plants yielding seed, and fruit trees”*
...*“Let the earth bring forth living creatures according to their kinds: cattle and creeping things and beasts of the earth according to their kinds”*
(Gen 1:1-25). But when the moment comes to create the human being, something different happens. Rather than simply creating a species or kind of being, God creates a being made in his own image, a being called *personally* into existence who is given a personal name, and who God addresses personally.

If we turn from this account of creation to the last book in the Bible, we discover something surprising. Besides the name we receive from God when He creates us, we need to be given a new name at the end of our life. *To him who conquers I will give some of the hidden manna, and I will give him a white stone, with a new name written on the stone which*

no one knows except him who receives it (Rev 2:17). How are we to understand this new name that will be given to us at the end of our life? We are faced here with the mystery of vocation—a personal mystery that unfolds as we advance on our path towards true life.

Both free and unfinished

A rose, an oak tree, or a horse don't need to make any decision to become what they are: they simply exist. They grow and reach their fullness and finally disappear. But it's not the same with the human person.

As we grow, and especially during adolescence, we come to realize that we can't simply be "one more." Something urges us to become *someone* unique, with a name and surname, a distinct and unrepeatable person. We sense that we are in the world to achieve something, and that with our life we can make this world

a better place. We aren't satisfied with knowing what we are, or how things are, but rather feel urged to dream of *who* we would like to be and how we would like our world to be.

Some people will see this as being naïve, as a lack of realism that sooner or later needs to be overcome. Nevertheless, this urge to dream truly pertains to our highest self. For a Christian, the desire to be someone, with a name and surname, reveals how God has wanted to create us: as a being who is unrepeatable. He created the world and left it in the hands of our first parents, *to till it and keep it* (Gen 2:15). He wished to count on our work to preserve this world and make it shine forth in all its beauty, so that we will love it “passionately,” as Saint Josemaria liked to say.[1]

God does the same when He grants us the gift of life. He invites us to develop our own personality, and leaves this effort in our own hands. Therefore He wants us to put into play our personal freedom, our initiative and all our abilities. “God wants something from you. God hopes in you,” Pope Francis said in a World Youth Day address. “He is encouraging you to dream. He wants to make you see that, with you, the world can be different. For the fact is, unless you offer the best of yourselves, the world will never be different. This is a challenge to you.”[2]

He calls you by your name

Simon accompanied his brother Andrew to listen to the Baptist. The journey from Galilee to Judea was a long one, but it was worth the effort. Something great seemed to be occurring there. Centuries had gone

by since God had sent a prophet to his people, and now in John a new prophet seemed to have truly appeared among them. Andrew encounters Jesus along the banks of the Jordan and spends an entire afternoon speaking with Him. When he returns to his brother Simon, he tells him: *We have found the Messiah*. And he brought Simon to Jesus (cf. *Jn* 1:41-42). What must have Simon been thinking on the way there? Is it possible that the Messiah, the one sent by God, has finally arrived? Could the world they were living in be about to change, as Scripture prophesized? When they approached the Teacher, *Jesus looked at him, and said, "So you are Simon the son of John? You shall be called Cephas" (which means "Rock")*. Before the world could change, Simon's life had to change.

The Gospels show us Simon Peter's life as a continual discovery of Jesus'

true identity, of the mission being entrusted to him. Soon after returning to Galilee, following those days spent with the Baptist, Jesus once again comes to Simon Peter, and asks him to put his boat out a little from the land so He can preach from it. Simon must have been a bit reluctant to do so, since he had just spent the whole night fishing and hadn't caught anything. When he finishes speaking with the people, Jesus makes a new request: *Put out into the deep and let down your nets for a catch (Lk 5:4)*. It must have seemed absurd to Simon, since they had spent many hours that night fishing without success, and everyone knows that in the bright light of day fish refuse to enter the nets. But Simon obeys, and he sees his nets fill up with fish. Who must this man in his boat really be? *But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord" (Lk*

5:8). And our Lord responds: *Do not be afraid; henceforth you will be catching men (Lk 5:10).*

Who is Simon? A fisherman from Galilee, like the men in his family had always been? He had spent years at this work and had become very good at it. He thought that this was his identity. But Jesus sheds unsuspected light on his life. Our Lord's closeness reveals his true self: a sinner, but a sinner God has singled out, whom He wants to rely on. Hearing this divine call, Peter and his brother, *when they had brought their boats to land, they left everything and followed him (Lk 5:11).* Benedict XVI reflected on this Gospel scene: "Peter could not yet imagine that one day he would arrive in Rome and that here he would be a 'fisher of men' for the Lord. He accepted this surprising call, he let himself be involved in this great adventure: he was generous; he recognized his limits but believed in

the one who was calling him and followed the dream of his heart. He said ‘yes,’ a courageous and generous ‘yes,’ and became a disciple of Jesus.”[3]

Later on, our Lord is more specific about the mission that will reshape his life: *And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the powers of death shall not prevail against it* (Mt 16:18). God’s plan for us, his call to share our life with Him, has the same transforming force as creation. Just as the human being’s creation involves a personal call, so also each personal call from God has a creative power able to transform reality. This is something so radical that it means for us receiving a *new name*, a new life. Who remembers today a fisherman who lived two thousand years ago by the shores of a Middle Eastern lake? And yet how many people venerate Peter, an apostle called by Christ and

“the visible foundation of his Church.”[4]

The hidden treasure

The mission Jesus offers us can change our life and fill it with light. Therefore the realization that God could be calling me is very attractive. But it is also deeply unsettling. For it can seem to us that if we are being called, if God is counting on us, we could lose our freedom. Now we can't choose any other path in life! The only possible path is the one He wants for me.

Reflecting on the history of Peter's life can help us here. When he decided to leave everything in order to follow Jesus, did he lose his freedom? Wasn't this the freest and most “freeing” decision in his life? Sometimes we can view freedom as above all the ability to choose, without being limited by anything. Nevertheless, viewed in this light

freedom is reduced to specific choices that affect us only briefly: whether to eat a hamburger or chicken, whether we should play football or basketball, whether we want to listen to this song or to that one.

But there are other types of choices that give a completely new direction to our life, making it freer and more joyful. This happens when we put our entire life on the line, and decide who we want to be. Freedom is then seen in its true light, in its “freeing” capacity. These are no longer momentary decisions, but decisions that affect our whole life. For example, when someone decides to get married to a person who is seen as the greatest treasure the world can offer. Or similarly, when a young person decides to become a doctor, knowing that this choice will require great effort and sacrifice. Giving oneself to another person, or taking

on a mission, entails renouncing everything else. Certainly this will place conditions on one's future choices. Nevertheless this step isn't seen as a renunciation, but rather as risking one's life for a love or goal that will fill it with meaning. And thus, over time, that person's name is no longer only the one received at baptism: now it is also "the husband or the wife of..." or "Doctor...." Their name, their identity, takes on a clearer shape; their life takes on a clearer meaning and direction.

Jesus offers us a choice of exactly this type. He has created us with certain gifts and qualities that shape our way of being. Later, in the course of our life, He presents to us a "treasure," a mission that is "hidden" in our soul. *The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and covered up; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field (Mt 13:44).* In reality, the

treasure is Himself—his unconditional Love; and the mission is the same that He received from his Father. If I have discovered it, I don't need to seek any further. I can embrace it with my entire life, and let Him shape every facet of it. Like Peter, apostle, Rock on which the Church is founded; like Paul, apostle to the Gentiles; like Mary, the handmaid of the Lord, Mother of the Saviour.

Embracing this mission—welcoming Jesus into our life and following Him—leads us to set aside everything else. For nothing can free us as much as the truth about ourselves: *veritas liberabit vos (Jn 8:32)*. Thus we can say, with Saint Paul: *But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and*

count them as refuse, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him (Phil 3:7-9).

Perhaps discovering how close Jesus is to us can be a bit unsettling at first—realizing that He wants to count on us. But when we stop to consider it, we see how what He is asking from us fits perfectly with who we are, with our aptitudes and experience. It seems as though we were born *for this*. The *new* name then is seen as something that was already there from the creation of the world. God has made us for this. And nevertheless, perhaps it can seem too much for us. “This treasure, this mission...for me? God truly has set his eyes *on me*?”

Putting into play all my gifts and aptitudes

God doesn't call us only at a specific moment in our life: He does so constantly. In the same way, our

response lasts our entire life, responding to his calls to love more fully each day with an ever renewed love. “Ever since you said *Yes*, time has broadened your horizons, giving them new and brighter colors and making them more beautiful every day. But you have to continue saying *Yes*.”[5]

Saint Peter said “yes” to our Lord many times. When many of those who had followed the Teacher went away scandalized on hearing Him speak about the Bread of Life (cf. *Jn* 6:60-71); or when Jesus insisted on washing his feet, and it seemed absurd for Him to do so (cf. *Jn* 13:6-10). Peter remained alongside Jesus, professing once again his faith. Nevertheless, there was much that he failed to understand about our Lord. He continued to dream about a glorious manifestation of our Lord to the world, when He would show Himself in his triumphant power,

and become famous throughout the whole world. It took him years to realize that this wasn't God's way of acting. He experienced the sadness of denying Jesus three times, being a traitor to Him. He had to confront his own weakness. But in the end he understood, because he never turned his eyes from Jesus. "Our Lord converted Peter, who had denied him three times, without even a reproach, with a look full of Love." [6] For the vocation is, in the end, an invitation to look at Jesus, to let oneself be looked at by Him, to share his Life and strive to imitate Him. And this leads to a self-giving, filled with love, of one's entire life.

Peter's call took on its definitive form that day by the shore of the Sea of Galilee, when he encountered the Risen Jesus. He had the opportunity to ask for forgiveness, and realized how much he loved Him, with his poor heart, and told Him so again.

The Divine Master responded: *Feed my sheep* (Jn 21:17); and then He told Peter: *Follow me* (Jn 21:19). This summed up everything, because Peter had already discovered that following our Lord meant loving to the end, on a marvelous path of self-giving and service to everyone: a path, not a goal. The same path we have to travel each day in our life, alongside Jesus.

A fulfilled life

Peter died a martyr in Rome. Tradition places the site of his martyrdom, by crucifixion, on the Vatican Hill. When he learned of the sentence, he would surely have looked back on his whole life. His days as a young man, with his strong and determined temperament, his work as a fisherman in Galilee. And then his encounter with Jesus, and from then on, so many marvellous events! So much joy and suffering. So

many people who had entered his life. So much love. Yes, his life had certainly changed greatly. And it had all been worth it.

On meeting Simon by the banks of the Jordan, our Lord saw not only a grown man, with certain characteristics. He saw in him Peter: the *Rock* on which he would build his Church. And when He looks at us, He sees all the good that we are going to do in our own life. He sees our talents, our world, our history, and He offers us the possibility to help Him, despite our littleness. He doesn't ask us to do impossible things, but simply that we follow Him.

Our qualities are what they are, neither more nor less, and this way of being makes us well-suited to follow our Lord and serve Him in the Church. With his help, we are called to find the best way to do so. Each of

us with the gifts God has given us: *Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, in proportion to our faith; if service, in our serving; he who teaches, in his teaching; he who exhorts, in his exhortation; he who contributes, in liberality; he who gives aid, with zeal; he who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness (Rom 12:6-8).*

Peter left behind that fisherman from Bethsaida who was so sure of himself. And God made of him a mediator, with Christ, between heaven and earth. His life story has been repeated many times throughout the centuries. And this continues being true today. The first young people who joined Opus Dei placed their talents in God's hands, and they yielded an abundance of fruit they could never have imagined. As Saint Josemaria assured them: "Dream and your dreams will fall short." Or as the Pope told the

young people taking part in a prayer vigil: “May the Lord bless your dreams.”[7]

Jesus’ call draws out the best from each young man and woman, in order to place their life at the service of others and lead it to fulfilment. We see this in Peter. We too have discovered how much He loves us and is counting on us, and we want to be attentive to his call: today, and each day in our life. And thus, when we come face to face with Him, He will give us *a white stone, with a new name written on the stone which no one knows except him who receives it* (Rev 2:17). And we will recognize our true name.

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[1] Cf. *Furrow*, no. 290; *Friends of God*, no. 206; “Passionately Loving

the World,” in *Conversations*, nos. 113 ff.

[2] Pope Francis, Address at World Youth Day Prayer Vigil, Krakow, 30 July 2016.

[3] Benedict XVI, General Audience, 17 May 2006.

[4] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 936.

[5] Saint Josemaria, *Furrow*, no. 32.

[6] Saint Josemaria, *Furrow*, no. 964.

[7] Pope Francis, Address at World Youth Day Prayer Vigil, Krakow, 30 July 2016