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Something Great That Is Love (II): What your life could be

"Today, at this very moment, God continues to seek and knock at the door of every person." Second article in a series on discerning one's personal vocation in life.

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Mesopotamia saw the rise and fall of some of the world's oldest civilizations: the Sumerians,

Babylonians, Chaldeans... Although we might study them in school, these cultures seem distant and irrelevant to us today. And yet this geographical landscape was the home of a person who forms a part of our own family. His name was Abram, until God changed his name to Abraham. The Bible says he lived 1850 years before the birth of Christ. Four thousand years later we still remember him, especially at Mass when we invoke him as “our father in faith,”[1] because he began our family.

“I have called you by your name”

Abraham is one of the first persons to go down in history for responding to God’s call. In his case, the request was a very special one: *Go forth from your land, your relatives, and from your father’s house to a land that I will show you* (Gen 12:1). After him came others: Moses, Samuel, Elias and the other prophets... All of them

heard God's voice inviting them in one way or another to "go forth" from their land and begin a new life in his presence. As with Abraham, God promised each of them that they would do great things in their lives: *I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing* (Gen 12:2). Furthermore, he called each of them *by their name*; therefore, besides recounting God's actions, the Old Testament includes the names of those who have responded to God's call. The letter to the Hebrews showers them with praise (cf. *Heb* 11:1-40).

When God sent his Son into the world, the dynamic of his calling changed. Those called not only heard God's voice; they also saw a human face: Jesus of Nazareth. God called them too to begin a new life, and to leave an indelible mark on history. And we know their names: Mary

Magdalene, Peter, John, Andrew...
And we also remember them with
gratitude.

And then what? It might seem that, with Jesus' Ascension into heaven, God retires from human history. But not only does He continue acting: his action increases. During his passage on earth He chose only a small group of people. But in the last two thousand years God has "changed the plans" of thousands upon thousands of men and women, opening up new horizons that they themselves would never have imagined. We know the names of many of them, for they have been inscribed by the Church as saints. Then there is an immense multitude of men and women *of all nations, tribes, peoples and tongues* (Rev 7:9), unknown saints who are the real "protagonists of history."[2]

Today, at this very moment, God continues to seek and knock at the door of every person. Saint Josemaria liked to consider this text from the prophet Isaiah: *I have redeemed you; I have called you by name: you are mine (Is 43:1)*. He said that for him meditating on these words was “as sweet as honey from the comb,”^[3] because they made his heart sense how much God loved him, in a personal, unique way.

These words can be like honey from the comb for us as well, because they show us how important our life is for God. He counts on every person, and invites each man and woman to follow Him. The dream of every Christian is to have their name written on God’s Heart; and this dream is within everyone’s reach by responding to his call.

“Look up at the sky and count the stars, if you can.”

It might seem excessive to look at our lives in this way, as a continuation of the lives of the great saints. We have experienced our own weakness. So did Moses, Jeremiah, and Elias, who all had bad moments.[4] Isaiah himself, for example, once said: *I thought I had toiled in vain, for nothing and for naught spent my strength (Is 49:4)*. It is true that sometimes life can feel like this to us, like something without meaning or interest, on seeing how easily our efforts are cut short. The question “what am I living for” seems to come to shipwreck on experiencing failure, suffering and death.

God knows our weakness perfectly, and how disconcerted we can be by it. And nevertheless He seeks us out. The prophet doesn't let himself give into cries of complaint, but recognizes the voice of the Lord: *I will make you a light to the nations that my salvation may reach to the*

ends of the earth (Is 49:6). We are weak, but this isn't the whole truth about our life. As the Pope wrote: "Let us acknowledge our weakness, but allow Jesus to lay hold of it and send us too on mission. We are weak, yet we hold a treasure that can enlarge us and make those who receive it better and happier."[5]

The divine call is a great mercy of God: a sign that He loves me and that I matter to Him. "God counts on you for what you are, not for what you possess. In his eyes the clothes you wear or the kind of cell phone you use are of absolutely no interest. He doesn't care whether you are stylish or not; he cares about you, just as you are! In his eyes, you are precious, and your value is inestimable."[6]

With his call, God frees us. He allows us to escape from a petty life dedicated to small satisfactions that can never quench our thirst for love. "When we make up our minds to tell

our Lord, 'I put my freedom in your hands,' we find ourselves loosed from the many chains that were binding us to insignificant things, ridiculous cares or petty ambitions.”[7] God frees our freedom from its pettiness, opening it up to the great horizon of his Love, where each man and woman is a protagonist.

“Our calling discloses to us the meaning of our existence. It means being convinced, through faith, of the reason for our life on earth. Our life, the present, past and future, acquires a new dimension, a depth we did not perceive before. All happenings and events now fall within their true perspective: we understand where God is leading us, and we feel ourselves borne along by this task entrusted to us.”[8] For those who hear and respond to God’s call, no deed is small or insignificant. Everything in our life is ennobled by

the promise: *I will make of you a great nation* (Gen 12:2)—with your life I will do great things; you will make an impact, you will be happy by spreading happiness. Therefore “when He asks us for something, in reality He is offering us a gift. We are not the ones doing Him a favor. It is God who illuminates our life, filling it with meaning.”[9]

At the same time, the light of a vocation allows us to understand that the importance of our life isn't to be measured by the *human* grandeur of the things that we do. Only a small handful of people get their names included among history's great figures. However *divine* grandeur is measured by our relation to the only plan that is truly great: the Redemption. “Certainly the most decisive turning points in world history are co-determined by souls whom no history book ever mentions. And we will only find out

about those souls to whom we owe the decisive turning points in our personal lives on the day when all that is hidden is revealed.”[10]

“The Redemption is taking place—now!”[11] How can I help to further it? In a thousand different ways, knowing that God Himself will give us light to help us discover the specific way of assisting Him. “God wants the person’s freedom to intervene not only in the response, but also in the shaping of each one’s vocation.”[12] And the person’s response, while still free, is also prompted by actual graces sent by God. If we begin walking, starting from wherever we find ourselves, God will help us see what He has dreamed for our life. It is a dream that “takes clearer shape” as we go forward, because it also depends on our own initiative and creativity. Saint Josemaria said that if we dream, our dreams would fall short,

because those who truly dream, dream with God. And God encouraged Abraham to “dream big”: *Look up at the sky and count the stars, if you can (Gen 15:5).*

Shared between two

God enters Abraham's life to stay, uniting Himself in some way to Abraham's destiny: *I will bless those who bless you and curse those who curse you. All the families of the earth will find blessing in you (Gen 12:3).* Abraham's story is one of “shared protagonists.” It is the history of *Abraham and God*, of *God and Abraham*. So much so that, from this moment on, God presents Himself to other men and women as “the God of Abraham.”[13]

The call consists, above all, in living with Him. More than doing special things, it means trying to do everything with God, doing “everything for Love!”[14] The same

thing happened to the first disciples. Jesus chose them, above all, *that they might be with him*; only afterwards, the Evangelist adds: *and (that) he might send them forth to preach* (Mk 3:14). Therefore we too, when we hear God's voice, shouldn't view it as a "mission impossible," something that is extremely difficult, imposed from on high. If it is a true calling from God, it will be an invitation to enter into his life, his plan: an invitation to abide in his Love (cf. *Jn* 15:8). And thus, from God's Heart, from an authentic friendship with Jesus, we can bring his Love to the whole world. He wants to rely on us, while being with us. Or rather: He wants to be with us, while relying on us.

Hence we can see why those who experience God's call and follow Him seek to encourage those who in turn are beginning to sense his call. Often they may feel afraid at first. This is

only natural in the face of something unexpected, the unknown, a much broader horizon, the reality of God seeking us, which can at first overwhelm us. But this fear is not meant to last; it is a very common human reaction, and shouldn't surprise us. It would be wrong to let ourselves be paralyzed by it: rather, we need to face our fear, finding the courage to analyze it calmly. Great decisions in life, projects that leave a lasting impact, have almost always been preceded by fear, which is overcome by calm reflection; and yes, by a good dose of courage too.

Saint John Paul II began his pontificate with an invitation that still rings out today: "Open the doors to Christ ... Do not be afraid!"^[15] Benedict XVI referred back to these words upon his election, pointing out that "the Pope was speaking to everyone, especially the young." And he asked himself, "Are we not

perhaps all afraid in some way? If we let Christ enter fully into our lives, if we open ourselves totally to him, are we not afraid that He might take something away from us? Are we not perhaps afraid to give up something significant, something unique, something that makes life so beautiful? Do we not then risk ending up diminished and deprived of our freedom?”[16]

And Benedict XVI continued: “The Holy Father wanted to assure us: No! If we let Christ into our lives, we lose nothing, nothing, absolutely nothing of what makes life free, beautiful and great. No! Only in this friendship are the doors of life opened wide. Only in this friendship is the great potential of human existence truly revealed. Only in this friendship do we experience beauty and liberation.”[17] And uniting himself to that advice of Saint John Paul II, he concluded: “And so, today ... on the

basis of long personal experience of life, I say to you, dear young people: Do not be afraid of Christ! He takes nothing away, and he gives you everything. When we give ourselves to him, we receive a hundredfold in return. Yes, open, open wide the doors to Christ—and you will find true life.”[18] Pope Francis also often reminds us: “He asks you to *leave behind what weighs down your heart*, to empty yourself of goods in order to make room for him.”[19] Thus we will experience what all the saints did: God does not take anything away from us, but rather fills our heart with a peace and joy that the world cannot give.

By following this path, fear eventually yields to a deep gratitude: *I am grateful to him who has strengthened me, Christ Jesus our Lord, because he considered me trustworthy ... I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and an*

arrogant man, but I have been mercifully treated (1 Tim 1:12-13). The fact that we all have a vocation shows how God's mercy is not hindered by our weaknesses and sins. He presents Himself to us as *Miserando atque eligendo*, the episcopal motto of Pope Francis. Because, for God, choosing us and being merciful with us—overlooking our littleness—is one and the same thing.

As with Abraham, Saint Paul, and all of Jesus' friends, we know that we are not only *called and accompanied* by God, but also *sure of his help*, convinced that *the one who began a good work in you will continue to complete it until the day of Christ Jesus (Phil 1:6)* We know that our difficulties, although serious at times, do not have the last word. Saint Josemaria assured the first faithful of Opus Dei: “when God our Lord plans some work for the benefit of

mankind, he first thinks of the people he will use as instruments... and gives them the necessary graces.”[20]

God’s call therefore is an invitation to trust. Only trust allows us to live without being enslaved by dependence on our own strength, our own talents, since we open ourselves to the marvel of living with the strength and talents of the One who called us. Just as when scaling a high mountain peak, we need to trust the one above us, with whom we might even share the same rope. The one who goes ahead of us shows us where to step and helps us when, if we were alone, we might let ourselves be overcome by panic or vertigo. That is how we walk along our path in life, with the difference that our trust isn’t placed in someone like us, nor even in the best of friends; our trust is now placed in God Himself, who always “remains

faithful, for he cannot deny himself” (2 Tim 2:13).

You will blaze a trail

Abram went as the Lord directed him (Gen 12:4). Thus began the stage in his life that would change his existence forever. From that moment on, his life was guided by successive calls from God: to go from this place to that place, to flee from wicked men, to believe in the possibility of having a son, to see that son become part of his life, and then even to be willing to sacrifice him. Abraham’s free response was always essential in order to keep saying yes to God. Likewise the life of those who follow God is not only marked by closeness and communion with God, but also by a real, full and continuous freedom.

Responding affirmatively to God’s call not only gives our freedom a new horizon, and its fullest meaning:

“something great that is love,” as Saint Josemaria said.^[21] It also requires that we exercise our freedom continually. Giving oneself to God is not like getting on a “conveyor belt” that is directed by others, and that carries us along—without our wanting it—until the end of our days; or like getting on a railway with the track perfectly set out in advance, with no room for any surprises for the traveler.

Rather, throughout our lives we will find that fidelity to the first call requires new, sometimes costly, decisions from us. And we will realize that God’s call spurs us to grow in our freedom each day. In order to fly high—as with any path of love—one needs wings clean of mud and a great capacity to take responsibility for one’s own life, which is so often enslaved by little things. In short, the greatness of God’s invitation calls for a freedom

that is just as great, enlarged by our response to grace and our growth in virtues, which make us more truly ourselves.

In the early years of the Work, Saint Josemaría used to tell the young people who came to him that everything still needed to be done, including the trail they needed to blaze. They were called to open up in the world the path that our Lord was indicating to them: “There are no paths made for you. You yourselves will make them, through the mountains, with the impact of your footprints.”[22] He was pointing to the “open” nature of every vocation, which needs to be discovered and cultivated.

Now as then, responding to God’s call means, in a certain sense, blazing a trail with our own footsteps. God never gives us a perfectly scripted plan. He didn’t do so with Abraham

or Moses. Nor with the apostles. At the Ascension, he only told them: *Go into the whole world and proclaim the gospel to every creature*” (Mk 16:15). How were they to do so? And where? All this will only become clear little by little. Also in our case, the path will come into clearer focus as our life advances, built thanks to the wonderful alliance between God’s grace and our own freedom. Throughout our lives, the vocation is “the history of an inexpressible dialogue between God and human beings, between the love of God who calls and the freedom of individuals who respond lovingly to him.”[23] Our history will be an interweaving of our attentiveness to divine inspirations and our creativity to carry them out in the best way we can.

Our Lady is an example for all of us by her “Yes” to God in Nazareth. And also because of her permanent

attentiveness and obedience to God's Will throughout her whole life, which was also marked by the "light-filled obscurity" of faith. *Mary kept all these things, pondering them in her heart (Lk 2:19)*. Alongside her Son, our Mother discovered what God wanted from her at every step of the way. That is why we also call Mary the Perfect Disciple. We entrust ourselves to her, so that she may be the Star that always guides our steps.

Nicolás Alvarez de las Asturias

[1] *Roman Missal*, Eucharistic Prayer I.

[2] Francis, Prayer Vigil with Young People, Krakow, 30 July 2016.

[3] *Friends of God*, no. 312.

[4] Cf. for example, Num 11:14-15: *I cannot carry all these people by myself, for they are too heavy for me. If this is the way you will deal with me, then please do me the favor of killing me at once, so that I need no longer face my distress.* And Jer 20:18: *Why did I come forth from the womb, to see sorrow and pain, to end my days in shame?* And also 1 Kgs 19:4: *Enough, Lord! Take my life, for I am no better than my ancestors.*

[5] Francis, Apost. Exhort. *Gaudete et Exsultate* (19 March 2018), no. 131.

[6] Francis, Homily at Closing of World Youth Day, Krakow, 31 July 2016.

[7] *Friends of God*, 38.

[8] *Christ is Passing By*, 45.

[9] Fernando Ocáriz, “Light To See, Strength To Want To,” in *Aleteia*, 20 September 2018.

[10] Saint Teresa Benedicta of the Cross (Edith Stein), *Verborgenes Leben und Epiphanie*: GW XI, 145.

[11] *The Way of the Cross*, Station 5, no.2.

[12] Fernando Ocáriz, “The Vocation to Opus Dei as a Vocation in the Church,” in *Opus Dei in the Church*, Scepter Publishers.

[13] Cf. *Ex* 3:6; *Mt* 22:32.

[14] Saint Josemaria, *Intimate Notes* IV, no. 296, 22 September 1931 (cited in *The Way*, critical-historical edition, commentary on no. 813).

[15] Saint John Paul II, Homily at the beginning of his pontificate, 22 October 1978.

[16] Benedict XVI, Homily at the beginning of his pontificate, 25 May 2005.

[17] Benedict XVI, Homily at the beginning of his pontificate, 25 May 2005.

[18] Benedict XVI, Homily at the beginning of his pontificate, 25 May 2005.

[19] Francis, Homily at a canonization, 14 October 2018. Cf. *Gaudete et Exsultate*, no. 32.

[20] *Instruction*, 19 March 1934, no. 48.

[21] Cf. Andres Vazquez de Prada, *The Founder of Opus Dei*, vol. I, p. 86.

[22] *The Way*, no. 928.

[23] Saint John Paul II, Apost. Exhort. *Pastores dabo vobis* (25 March 1992), no. 36.

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