

Homily, January 14, 2018

I recently finished reading George Weigel's massive biography of St. John Paul II. It provided a detailed look at this extra-ordinary Pope. However, perhaps what is extra-ordinary about this 21<sup>st</sup> century saint is the relative ordinariness of his life in some sense. His life, at least until his papacy, was not marked by visions, dramatic signs or miracles. He was not groomed for a future Church career by enrollment in private schools and association with people of influence. He grew up in a middle class, urban environment, the child of a retired army officer and a seamstress. There were events along the way that challenged him, events that could have disrupted spiritual journey, but they seem only to have deepened his formation. He lost his mother at an early age, but was all the more guided by a caring and spiritual father. He lost an older brother while still a young man. He went to high school, and as Germany occupied his homeland, he became a laborer in mine and factory, all the while studying, albeit in secret. As a student he also began to write and to act. His studies were eventually in the underground seminary. In post war Poland, under communism he was first an ordinary priest and then professor and a bishop. It was then that he became more visible in efforts to inspire people to use their spiritual strength to confront injustice. Throughout his life there was an apparent steady progression forward. It was a progression in which he was open to the guidance, first of a father and then a series of intellectual and spiritual mentors. The common thread of his life was the constant openness to the spiritual, the Holy Spirit, relationship with God, all of which depended on his willingness to seek, to listen and to respond in faith and action to the God who constantly called him forward. It wasn't as if there was one dramatic moment, but a continuous series of moments of saying "Yes."

The Gospel tells of the call of the first apostles. They too were ordinary men, most of whom worked as fishermen. They were also believing, practicing, worshipping Jews. And it was their openness and seeking that lead them to first listen and respond to the words of John the Baptist, God's great prophet. And because they were open and listening, they were able to turn and begin to follow Jesus when John the Baptist pointed Him out. And the next steps in their being open, seeking and responding are brought out in their dialogue with Jesus. And each response of the apostles would only call them to a next step at which they had to be open, seeking, responding, believing and acting.

This is pretty much the description of vocation or call. It is the message of this week's scriptures. Our first reading from the Old Testament relates the call of

the young Samuel while he was working as an apprentice in the religious worship site. Although it describes a special moment for Samuel, it was just a moment. Samuel already was in the service of the Lord. He was already open, seeking, listening and attentive to the direction of his mentor Eli.

Today the Church reminds us that all of us are called by God. All of us have a vocation from God. Each one of us is being called forward on a step-by-step journey in the fulfillment of God's plan for ourselves and the world. It is a journey that has us cast our vision in the distance as well, with visions, aspiration and goals. But it is a matter of individual steps. Without the moment by moment experiences of openness to God, seeking of God, listening to God, responding to God with faith and action, we will never recognize God's call. Without the consistent attention to God in prayer, worship and study, we won't recognize the more specific call to be a priest, to be a religious brother or sister, to be a parent, to choose the profession that will allow us to serve God most effectively, to choose the relationship, the partnership, that will allow us to serve God most effectively, to be the instrument of a priestly or religious vocation for others.

Although there were special moments along my own journey to accept a call to the priesthood, I realize the call was the product of a moment by moment openness, seeking, listening and responding in faith and action. It began with the earliest nurturance in prayer and knowledge and example from my parents. It was aided by nuns, priests and lay people along the way. There were times when the journey stagnated. Those were the times when I preferred to regard God vaguely and do my best to keep him at a distance. I can still recall those occasions when I would avoid praying too much, lest I once again hear God calling me to the next step in the journey of saying "Yes." I most distinctly recall attending Mass, while in the Navy on the Aleutian island of Adak. I did not regularly receive Holy Communion, I knew that would not be honest given my own state of spiritual conflict and resistance. I remember reading the eucharistic prayer, understanding the meaning of the words, and saying to myself - someday I will say these words and really mean them. I thank God the day has come.

My vocation as a Christian, as a Catholic as a priest is still a journey from moment to moment. Each day I must renew my openness to God's presence in my life, each day I must seek anew and respond anew in faith and in action. "You want me to do what?" "I don't think I can." "OK, I'll try!" "Thank you." ...That's the way it is for me, and that's the way it should be for all of us.