

THE VOCATION APOSTOLATE

May 21st, 1981 - Letter - Rome

God continues to call. - Each one of us has a responsibility. - Have faith in our vocation. - Openness to new ministries.

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From the 10th to the 16th of May, I had the good fortune of taking part in the International Congress on Vocations. This Congress had been organized by the Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education and brought together representatives from nearly all countries. It dealt with the pastoral effort for vocations in the various local Churches; its purpose was to take stock of the situation over the last ten years, and to promote a new thrust into the future.

As I took part in this Congress, I had in mind the entire Church, what the world expects from her in terms of ministries at the service of people and of witness to consecrated life. At the same time, thoughts of the Congregation, of the many appeals being addressed to us and of our vocation situation were constantly with me.

God continues to call

The spirit of the Congress was one of optimism. It manifested a great awareness of the major challenges that today's world presents to us. More than ever this same world needs mediators and witnesses. God continues calling men and women to follow him. Our world, and especially the youth, though often disposed to welcome Christ, experiences greater difficulty in relating itself to the Church and her institutions. It dreams of a Church that would exclusively be a service of love, mercy, sharing, and communion. Its faith crisis is often a credibility crisis, and we ourselves are in large part responsible for it because of our infidelities and the weakness of our witness.

In places where the Church has made a clear option for the poor and for a life-style of poverty, where she suffers for justice, where she prays and gives an example of unity in faith, of missionary commitment and community sharing, vocations are generally more numerous.

The attempt on the Holy Father's life, which took place two days after the opening of the Congress and only a few steps away from our meeting room, made the power of witnessing all the more eloquent. "United with Christ, Priest and Victim, I offer my sufferings for the Church and for the world" (*Message of May 17, 1981*). We are looking for witnesses who are willing to give their life for their faith and out of love for their brothers.

It seems to me that the spirit of the Congress illustrated our own outlook very well. In general, we are more optimistic than we were eight or ten years ago. In some Provinces, as in Poland, Zaire, Italy, vocations are relatively numerous; in several others, a slight increase is evident. Everywhere, however, – and this is the most important element – interest as well as confidence has resumed, and there now exists a real determination to do something. We are "bestirring" ourselves more, as the Founder had urged a Father in Ireland in 1856 (*Letter to Father G. Richard, April 17, 1856*).

Our new Constitutions give us excellent orientations in this area (CC. 51-53 and RR. 46-48). I invite you to re-read them, and also to read the Congress conclusions when these have been published. Here, I will limit myself only to three or four observations.

Each one of us has a responsibility

And first of all, pastoral efforts for vocations is a ministry addressed as a challenge to all of us. "The problem of vocations is the fundamental problem of the Church", the Pope said at the opening of the Congress. It concerns us all; and we can affirm, without any fear of being mistaken, that the vocation dimension ought to be present in all the ministries of the Church. "Life generates life" (*ibid.*).

A first attitude to be cultivated is this: we must be open to all the vocations of ministry and consecrated life in the Church: priesthood and permanent diaconate, contemplative life and missionary commitment, secular institute and religious congregation. We must be disposed to promote all of them, according to our means. What matters is that each person who contacts us will through us be able to hear the call God is addressing to him/her and be helped in discerning it and in responding to it.

Have faith in our vocation

The second attitude deals with Oblate vocations. We must have a deep faith and a great fidelity to the charism that is proper to us. The charism of evangelizing the poor in the Oblate manner remains currently valid. It is not by covering up this charism or by watering it down that we will have vocations; rather, it will be by living this charism fully and openly with its Gospel totality and Marian spirit, its community life and fidelity to the Church, its complete commitment to serving the poor and the most abandoned. It will also be by proposing it to people, especially to the young, discreetly, to be sure, but nevertheless without being afraid to invite them to "Come and see!". As it has been said, they may be too young for a commitment, but they are not too young to think about it. Some need, only a clear invitation from us to begin seriously thinking about it.

Openness to new ministries

A third attitude is that of openness to the new ministries in the Church. During the Congress, I often entertained the following question: "How can we assure the Christian life and sacramental practice among small and isolated ethnic groups who, after more than one hundred years of missionary activity and in spite of repeated efforts, have not succeeded in giving themselves a local clergy?". I was thinking especially of the Indian peoples and Inuit of Northern Canada.

In a number of places the option has been taken of promoting the ministries of the laity: catechists, community leaders, prayer leaders, ministers for Holy Communion, and permanent deacons. I want wholeheartedly to encourage this line of action, and not only for the Canadian North. Without delay, we must do all we can within the scope of today's possibilities. Future solutions will flow from the initiatives we take at the present time, no matter how limited these may appear to be.

Before concluding, I would like to greet in a special way the scholastics, the novices, and those aspiring to Oblate life. The future of the Congregation is in their hands; moreover, their influence is considerable in the pastoral effort for vocations. Not only do they bear within themselves the aspirations of today's world, but they have also discovered a reply to these aspirations in the values of the Oblate life. Not having experienced the changes and tensions that their elders have known, they are internally more free. They approach the future with a new outlook and with "great desires", just as the Founder did before them. May they find the understanding, the missionary daring and the religious fervour they have come to seek in our midst!