

“Edward Hahnenberg brings the best insights from his recent works on ministry and vocation into a resource that is accessible and delightful to read. Weaving personal stories, references to pop culture, classical questions, history, and a good introduction to Catholic theology, this work is an invitation to think about ministry in light of the core convictions of our faith. No better place to ground the discernment of the vocation to Christian service than in the contemplation of the mysteries of the Triune God, Jesus, the Spirit, and the Church! *Theology for Ministry* is an excellent guide for such discernment.”

—Hosffman Ospino
Boston College School of Theology and Ministry

“This volume is the fruit of a gifted theologian’s deep reflection on the lived life of the Church, in particular, lay ministry, in light of our theological tradition. The preposition *for* in the title is central: this work is at the service of lay ministers, inviting deep reflection on ‘their own’ experience, and the theology which grounds it more deeply. Discussion questions encourage a pondering of experience, as well as the themes of vocation, God, Jesus Christ, the Spirit, the Church and ministry, each presented with great lucidity. Many sources inform Hahnenberg’s work, including varied ecclesial documents, spiritual writers, theologians old and new, contemporary artists, but most especially stories of lay ministers (and his own stories) of the wellsprings of their faith and commitment to service. This is a rich resource for spiritual growth, and for a deepening of identity as lay ministers.”

—Zeni Fox
Professor of Pastoral Theology
Seton Hall University

“In chapter 4, Hahnenberg says he has the gift of explaining things—to which I say ‘Amen!’ This book simply explains why we do what we do. The chapter titles: *Called . . . By God . . . Through Christ . . . In the Spirit . . . With Others . . . For Others* provide a framework and a context in history, theology, and community for ministry. The reflection questions in each chapter anchor his themes in the reader’s lived experiences, making this a valuable resource for formal and informal formation programs and for varied ministry settings.”

—Robert J. McCarty, DMin
Executive Director
National Federation for Catholic Youth Ministry

Theology for Ministry

An Introduction for Lay Ministers

Edward P. Hahnenberg



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“Be transformed by the renewal of your mind.”

—Romans 12:2

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Preface

God is at work in your life.

The fact that you are holding this book in your hands is a sign that you *know* God is at work—and that you want to respond.

For many Christians, this recognition leads to a deepening of faith. For some, it prompts a desire to serve. It awakens a call to ministry.

Since the Second Vatican Council (1962–65), Catholics have come to the realization that the mission of the church belongs to *everyone*—clergy and laity alike. One of the clearest signs of this new awareness is the growth of various forms of lay ministry over the past fifty years. Tens of thousands have stepped up to serve. They are women and men, volunteers and full-time professionals, people working in parishes and out in the community. Their ministries range from education and liturgy to chaplaincy, administration, and advocacy. Virtually no area of Catholic life today has not been touched by the presence of generous and committed lay ministers.

You are a part of this story.

You also have your own story to tell.

This book is an opportunity to reflect on your story—to reflect on your own call to serve—and to place that call within the context of the church and its two-thousand-year-old tradition. The following pages invite you to think about your experience in light of your faith. They offer an introduction to theology.

An Introduction . . .

Theology for Ministry is written for laypeople interested or involved in ministry who have little or no theological background.

If you are a volunteer hungry to learn more about your faith, a student just beginning a ministry program, or a seasoned lay ecclesial minister looking for a deeper grounding for your work, these pages offer a basic introduction to several important areas of Catholic theology—always with an eye to what it means for ministry. Given its broad definition of ministry, this book could also serve the needs of parish discussion groups, small faith communities, retreat teams, lay leaders within Catholic institutions, high school and elementary school teachers, young adults preparing for service programs, and anyone interested in knowing more about his or her faith and finding ways to serve more fully the mission of Christ.

Ministry, as I take it, is any activity done on behalf of the church community that proclaims, celebrates, and serves the reign of God. This little definition raises some big questions. Who is God? What did Jesus mean by the reign of God? How do we understand the church? Whose activity are we talking about and what do they do? As soon as we start thinking about our ministry, we become theologians. We begin to explore the major themes of our faith.

The following chapters introduce six of these themes: the notion of vocation, the doctrine of God, Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit, church, and ministry. Each chapter begins by inviting reflection on one's personal experience, then surveys the history and church teaching on the topic, and ends by exploring the implications of all of this for the work of ministry.

. . . To Theology

The decision to start each chapter by reflecting on experience flows out of the very nature of the theological task. The word *theology* literally means "the study of God." But that definition is not so helpful. How can we study God? We cannot invite God to sit down for an interview. We cannot bring God into a lab or put God under a microscope. God is the infinite mystery who always eludes our grasp, transcending all our powers of

comprehension. We cannot study this mystery. The best we can do is study *the human experience* of this mystery.¹

Therefore, a more helpful definition may be one that goes back over nine hundred years to the medieval bishop St. Anselm of Canterbury: theology is “faith seeking understanding.”

We start with the human experience of faith. And then we try our best to understand it. Faith is not just a set of beliefs or a kind of blind trust. According to the Bible, the belief and trust associated with faith flow out of something far more fundamental: a personal encounter with God. At its heart, faith is an encounter—an *experience* of divine mystery.

This mystery permeates our lives. We catch a glimpse of it whenever we awaken to a moment of genuine clarity, or feel in our bones the absolute goodness of life, or hold out hope in the face of despair, or sense some deeper meaning and purpose behind our daily routine. Encounters with God are not limited to a burning bush or a voice from heaven. Anyone who has ever experienced “something more” to life has already brushed up against the divine mystery. Theology is simply the attempt to make sense of these experiences of “something more.” We almost can’t help but do theology! When we feel God at work in our lives, we want to know more. Faith (the encounter with divine mystery) seeks understanding.

Reflecting on the encounter with divine mystery is a profoundly personal activity. But it always takes place in a larger communal context. The Catholic tradition has long held that we can learn a lot by bringing our individual experiences into dialogue with the experiences of others. The church is a place for that to happen. Through the church community, we engage not only those who are alive today, but also those who lived centuries ago. We join in on a lively conversation that has been going on for more than two thousand years.

The following pages hope to continue this conversation. We bring together the past and the present by encouraging a dialogue between our *religious tradition*, on the one hand, and our *contemporary lives*, on the other.

Theology done in the academy today is marked by a variety of different methods. The approach of this book is simple: We lift up what the tradition has taught and hold it alongside what we have experienced ourselves. And we ask how the two illuminate one another.

Insight emerges from this back and forth dialogue between tradition and experience, between past and present, between doctrine and life. Sometimes this dialogue leads to a deepening of what we already believe. Sometimes it leads to a whole new way of thinking. Often ancient ideas become surprisingly relevant. We start to notice things about our lives we never noticed before. We learn to pay better attention. We come to see how God is at work.

Acknowledgements

I owe the overall framework for this book to Part One of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* and its more readable companion, the *United States Catholic Catechism for Adults*. Both of these texts lay out basic Catholic beliefs according to the order of the Creed. First comes the experience of faith (“I believe . . .”), followed by God, Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit, the church, and its mission. Thus the following chapters place our call to serve within the same pattern. We are: (1) Called . . . (2) By God . . . (3) Through Christ . . . (4) In the Spirit . . . (5) With Others . . . (6) For Others.

Each chapter includes recommended reading. There you can find references to the catechism sections that correspond to the material covered in the chapter. (A quick internet search will take you to the websites of the Vatican and the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, which contain access to these texts, as well as other resources.) The recommended reading also includes additional titles for those readers who would like to go deeper. Rather than catalogue classic works or suggest heavy volumes, I list short, accessible works of theology—books that I think would serve well as a “next step” for exploring the ideas introduced here.

As I look over these ideas, and think about the chapters that follow, I am painfully aware of how much I have left out, of how much my own experiences limit what I am able to see and what I am able to say. I hope you can take these shortcomings as an invitation. Fill in your own experiences. Ask your own questions. Add your own insights. You really don't need much to get started doing theology—just an openness to mystery and to your own graced experience.

My own experience has been graced by many people who have helped bring this project to completion. I thank, first and foremost, my family—my wife, Julie, and our three girls, Kate, Meg, and Abby—who remind me every day just how much God is at work in my life.

I am grateful for the support and encouragement that comes from my colleagues at John Carroll University, particularly for the concrete assistance offered so generously by Kathy Merhar and my graduate assistant Meagen Howe. Thanks too to the whole team at Liturgical Press, especially Hans Christoffersen, Barry Hudock, and Andy Edwards.

As many of the stories below suggest, I have learned a lot from my students. And I thank them. In a special way I want to thank the many lay ministers I have come to know over the years. Early in my career, my academic work called me out into parishes, ministry associations, and dioceses across the country. There I met a community of incredible people—faithful disciples and dedicated, gifted ministers. These lay women and men became my teachers, my mentors, and often my friends. Their commitment, hope, and good humor remain an inspiration. As a small sign of gratitude, I dedicate this book to them.

1

Called . . .

In the sixth month, the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a town of Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man named Joseph, of the house of David, and the virgin's name was Mary. And coming to her, he said, "Hail, favored one! The Lord is with you." But she was greatly troubled at what was said and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. Then the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. Behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall name him Jesus." (Luke 1:26-31)

God called Mary. And in that call were all the features of a genuine vocation. The call came from God. It deepened a relationship. It led to transformation. It gave a mission. This pattern of call can be found again and again in the Bible. It extends over the course of Christian history. And it continues in our own lives.

When Mary heard the angel's words, she was startled. She doubted. How can this be? It's impossible. When Gabriel reminded her that "nothing is impossible for God," Mary accepted. She said *yes* to God's call. "May it be done to me according to your word" (Luke 1:38).

With that *yes*, Christ came into the world.

Starting with Experience

In the middle of class a few years ago, one of my students, Christine, shared the story of how she got into ministry.

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Christine had been a successful corporate trainer. She loved what she did, and she was paid well to do it. But in the midst of it all, something was missing.

Christine said she would get angry with God. Why couldn't she just be happy? Things were going great. Why wasn't she satisfied? She would lie in bed at night arguing with God, shouting up at the ceiling, "What, God? What? What do you want?"

She gradually came to a realization, "I knew in my heart I had to help others."

So Christine took a terrifying leap of faith: She quit her job and entered a ministry program. When I met her, Christine had already been working for several years as a chaplain in a state prison for men.

After class that night, I thought about Christine. I thought about the way she said *yes* to God's invitation. And it occurred to me that her story was not so different from Mary's story. Just like Mary, when Christine said *yes* to her call, Christ came into the world.

Every *yes* to God's call is an incarnation of Jesus Christ. He "takes on flesh" (*in carne*) in our lives of love and service to others. Christine would often share stories of the men she knew in prison—men who are invisible to the rest of us, forgotten by our society, locked out of sight. Christine was there with them, listening to their problems, challenging their stubbornness, caring for their needs. She was Christ to them. She was awakening Christ *in* them.

That night I wrote in my journal, "Christ enters the world again and again!"

After Christine shared her story, the other members of the class thanked her. One student started to worry out loud that he had never felt such a clear call, or made such a radical decision. He said he had no idea what God's plan was for his life.

Another student responded that she didn't like the idea of "God's plan." It felt too fixed, too final. She said God's call is not like a detailed roadmap with the whole journey laid out in advance. It's more like GPS, she said. When we get lost, God is right there to get us back on track, "Recalculating . . . Recalculating . . ."

We all laughed.

In the end, we concluded that every call is unique. As Christine put it, “If you’re not up at three in the morning talking to the ceiling, then God is probably not calling you to a radical change!”

Christine’s insight encourages us to turn from her story to our own.

How have you heard the call to serve?

Why are you reading this book? Why are you engaged in ministry? Why are you thinking about theology?

What got you on the path that you are on? What events led you to where you are now? The story of your call to serve is as unique as you are. Did God’s call come as an invitation out of the blue? Or did it come through the constant encouragement of a friend? Was it a sudden life change? Or years of volunteering that led, step-by-step, to greater and greater involvement? Is God stirring you in prayer? Is something missing at work? Do you see a need that no one else is addressing? Are you finally acknowledging a gift that, until now, you have been too shy to share?

Pause and reflect on your own experience. How would you tell your “vocation story”? If it helps, write it down. Prepare a two- or three-page narrative that begins, “I first felt the call to serve. . . .” Name the people who mentored you along. Describe the places that shaped your decisions. Explain the events that stand out. Share the emotions that you felt.

Revelation

This chapter offers an introduction to a theology of vocation. Here we take vocation, or “calling,” in a broad and inclusive sense. God calls every single one of us. And God calls us in a variety of ways. *Vocation* can refer to one’s ministry. It can also mean one’s state of life. It can also describe the more general

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call to discipleship—what the Second Vatican Council termed “the universal vocation to holiness.” Our vocations are multiple, interrelated, and overlapping. They include lifelong decisions and more modest commitments. They evolve. They change. But what every vocation shares is a sense of meaning that comes when we live our lives as a response to God’s invitation.

The idea that God *calls* us raises the question of how God *communicates* with us. Thus before talking about vocation, we have to say something about one of the most fundamental concepts of theology: Revelation.

The word *revelation* means “to remove the veil.” It refers to God’s act of disclosing God’s self to humanity—an act that lifts the veil between us and the divine.

For a long time, Catholic theologians assumed revelation was all about *words*. Revelation seemed to be a process by which God transmitted to us a long list of facts—interesting information that God thought we ought to know: the Trinity is three persons in one nature, Jesus is fully human and fully divine, there are seven sacraments, and so on. In such a scheme, *faith* was simply the act of intellectual assent. It was accepting these facts without any evidence. Because this approach reduced revelation to statements, or propositions, it could be called a propositional theology of revelation.

We see an example of this approach in a funny scene near the beginning of Mel Brooks’ irreverent film *History of the World: Part I*. In the scene, Brooks comes down from a mountain dressed like Moses, wearing a long robe and white beard. He is carrying three stone tablets.

Brooks looks out on the crowd and, in all biblical seriousness, proclaims: “Hear me, O hear me. . . . The Lord, the Lord Jehovah has given unto you these fifteen—”

At that moment, one of the tablets slips from his arms and shatters into pieces on the ground. Brooks looks down, looks up, and without missing a beat, continues: “Ten. . . given these *Ten* Commandments for all to obey!”

There is a lot that is silly in this scene. But at root, its humor lies in its theology. The joke works because it relies on a propositional

theology of revelation. It presumes that revelation is secret information from God. We laugh at the joke (or we groan!) because we wonder what words were lost in that shattered third tablet.

Recent church teaching has not denied the importance of words, but it has placed these words in a broader context. God is not primarily interested in sharing information, God is interested in sharing *God's very self*. Revelation is first and foremost God's offer of friendship. It is about a relationship. Faith is our response. It is trusting our whole selves to this friendship. Words are important, but only insofar as they help us name and deepen our relationship with God.

The Second Vatican Council affirmed this more relational approach when it taught: "By this revelation, then, the invisible God, from the fullness of his love, addresses men and women as his friends, and lives among them, in order to invite and receive them into his own company" (*Dei Verbum* 2).¹ God wants to be our friend, and so creates us and comes to us. That simple insight is the heart of the Catholic theology of revelation.

The distinction between propositional and relational approaches offers a clue to a proper understanding of vocation. In discerning our vocation, we should not be looking for a lot of words—clear instructions from God. Instead we should be opening ourselves to a relationship. We should be looking for the ways in which God loves us and looking for ways to love back. To discover our unique way of loving God and loving others is to discover our vocation.

The Bible: The Story of God's Call

With the words "Let there be light," God called the world into existence. God called Adam and Eve to dwell in the Garden of Eden. God called Abraham and Sarah to leave their homeland and journey toward an unknown future. God called Moses to lead the people of Israel out of Egypt and into the Promised Land. As Israel became a great nation, God called kings and prophets to guide the people. When the time came, God called

Mary and Joseph and John the Baptist to prepare the way for the Messiah. Through his life, death, and resurrection, Jesus extended God's call to the whole world. From beginning to end, the Bible is a story of call.

A propositional approach to revelation can lead to a literal approach to the Bible, which Catholicism tries to avoid. God did not pick up the phone and dictate the words of scripture to its authors. Rather, God invited the people Israel into a relationship. The people responded. And the Bible tells that story. But it does so through a variety of narratives, written over the course of a thousand years, by many different authors, in many different genres and styles.

In the Old Testament, for example, we find three broad types of writings: *historical books*, which describe God's interactions with Israel (these include, among others, the first five books of the Bible, known as the Pentateuch); *prophetic books*, which recount the prophets' warnings against sin (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and more); and *wisdom books*, which offer prayers and reflections on life (the most well-known is the book of Psalms). The New Testament is also made up of different kinds of literature, including: *the four gospels* (stories of Jesus' life); *the Acts of the Apostles* (a history of the early church); and *the epistles* (a series of letters written by St. Paul and other early Christians).

The Old Testament

In the book of Genesis, God extends an improbable invitation to Abraham and his wife Sarah. In their story, we discover the basic features of the biblical notion of vocation.

First of all, God selected Abram from among all people not because of anything Abram had done. God's call came out of God's pure generosity and love. The initiative was God's alone. "No longer will you be called Abram; your name will be Abraham, for I am making you the father of a multitude of nations" (Gen 17:5).

Second, Abraham was called to a relationship. God desired a lasting bond—a covenant—with Abraham and his family. God

also pledged to remain close: I will be your God, and you will be my people. This relationship was transformative—a third feature of the biblical call. When Abraham was told that he would become the father of a great nation, with more descendants than the stars in the sky, he burst out laughing. When his wife Sarah later heard the news, she laughed too. “We are too old to start anything new,” seemed to be their shared sentiment. But the grace of God’s invitation opened them up to new life. They were transformed by God’s trust in them.

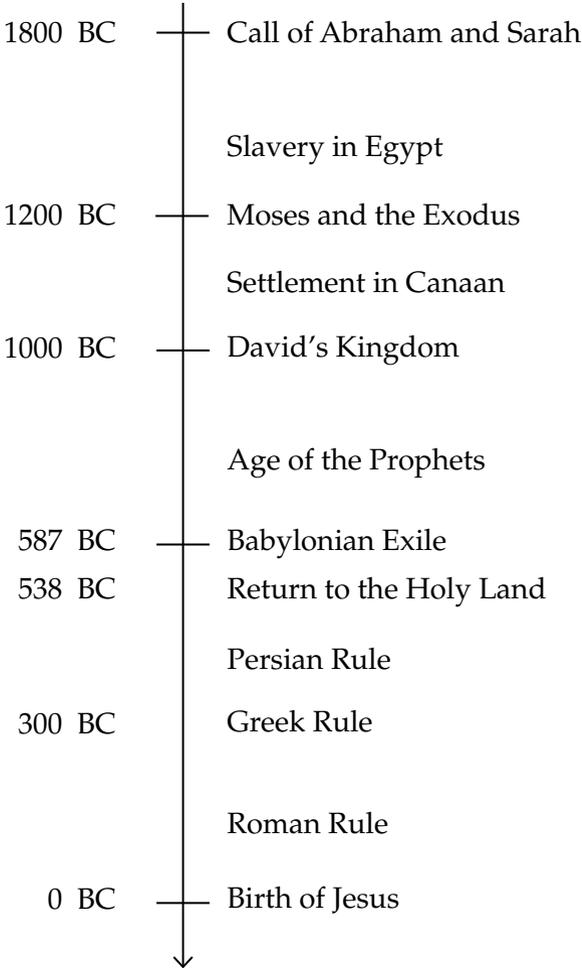
Finally, God’s call implies a mission. Like all authentic vocations, Abraham’s call extended outward. It drew him into God’s saving purpose. Abraham was called not for himself, but so that, through him “all the families of the earth will find blessing” (Gen 12:3).

As the Bible stories continue, the descendants of Abraham and Sarah multiply. These descendants migrated to Egypt and were eventually enslaved. When God called Moses to lead the Israelites out of Egypt, Moses resisted. He stalled and searched for an excuse: “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh? . . . What if they will not believe me? . . . I have never been eloquent . . . Please, Lord, send someone else!” But God saw in Moses something Moses did not see in himself. God sent him ahead with the promise that he would not be alone: “I will assist you in speaking and teach you what you are to say” (Exod 4:12).

After Moses led Israel across the Red Sea, on to Mount Sinai, and through forty years of wandering in the desert, the people of God finally entered into the Promised Land. God called first Saul, and then David to serve as king. Israel became a great nation, fulfilling God’s promise to Abraham long ago. But Israel did not always live up to its vocation. When Israel failed in its faithfulness, God called up prophets to both challenge and console.

At times, the prophets described their own call as sudden and dramatic—much like Moses at the burning bush. At other times, the prophets acknowledged that God had been at work from the beginning, slowly shaping them for the task ahead. Jeremiah saw his whole life pointing towards his prophetic vocation. God

reminded him: “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I dedicated you, a prophet to the nations I appointed you” (Jer 1:5). The prophetic vocation flows out of the identity of the prophet, the demands of the present, and the love of God who draws these two together.



Bible Timeline
(approximate dates)

These biblical stories of God's call to individuals are powerful. But they depend on the broader context of God's call to the whole people of Israel. For Israel, God's call is primarily a corporate invitation. It is a communal vocation. God entered into covenant with a people—who became a royal priesthood and a holy nation. "For you are a people holy to the LORD, your God; the LORD, your God, has chosen you from all the peoples on the face of the earth to be a people specially his own" (Deut 7:6). The prophet Isaiah spoke for all of Israel when he said, "Before birth the LORD called me, from my mother's womb he gave me my name" (Isa 49:1). Like Abraham, Moses, and the others, there is nothing Israel did to deserve this special relationship with God. The call came entirely out of God's own love and fidelity. It was pure gift, the grace of being drawn into friendship with God.

While Christians affirm that this gift endures, and that the people of Israel always remain dear to God, Christians also claim in faith that this covenant finds its fulfillment in Jesus Christ. In Christ, God's call to humanity was finally answered in a way that brings salvation to the whole of history and to the entire human family.

The New Testament

At the very beginning of his ministry, Jesus issued a call. Walking by the Sea of Galilee, Jesus saw Simon and Andrew fishing along the shore. He called out to them, "Come after me, and I will make you fishers of men" (Mark 1:17). In the Gospel of Mark, the men responded immediately. They left their nets and followed him. A little later they came across two brothers, James and John, fixing their own fishing nets. Jesus called them. They too dropped everything and followed Jesus.

The Gospel of John, however, suggests a more gradual response to Christ's call. At the very beginning of the gospel, John the Baptist pointed out Jesus to two disciples, "Behold, the Lamb of God." When they approached him, Jesus issued not a command but a question: "What are you looking for?" Here the

call of Christ came as an invitation to these two men to reflect on their own experiences and their own deepest desires. They responded only that they wanted to know more, “Rabbi, where are you staying?” Jesus replied, “Come, and you will see” (John 1:38-39). Time with Jesus transformed these men into disciples. They would go out and invite others to come and see.

In these different stories, the same features appear—features we have already seen in the Old Testament stories of call. Discipleship begins not with a choice but with a *call*. This call is a call to *relationship* with Jesus. And this relationship leads to inner *transformation* and outward *mission*.²

After Jesus’ death, resurrection, and ascension into heaven, the Holy Spirit descended on the apostles. This experience transformed these frightened followers into bold missionaries, who went out to spread the Good News of Christ to the whole world.

One of the most important of these early missionaries was Paul. Paul (or Saul as he was known) was not with the apostles at that first Pentecost. The Acts of the Apostles describes his call coming later, and describes it in dramatic fashion. Saul was literally knocked to the ground as Christ spoke to him from heaven. In a blinding flash, Saul became Paul. In a moment, the enemy became the advocate.

In his own writings, however, Paul described his calling in the language of Isaiah or Jeremiah: “But when [God], who from my mother’s womb had set me apart and called me through his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son to me” (Gal 1:15-16). Paul seemed to place his conversion within the longer context of God’s plan for his life. Only in hindsight did Paul see what God had always intended for him. Throughout his letters, the notion of call appears again and again. Paul described Jesus as “the one who calls.” He referred to Christians as “those who are called.” Indeed the New Testament word for “church” is *ekklesia*—which means “the assembly of those who are called.” The whole church, and everyone in it, is called to follow Christ.

Variety in Vocation

Everyone has a vocation! After centuries of neglect, Catholics have reclaimed this ancient biblical truth. God calls every single one of us.

Within this inclusive view, we continue to talk about vocation in a variety of ways. Take for example the definition offered by the *United States Catholic Catechism for Adults*:

Vocation: The term given to the call to each person from God; everyone has been called to holiness and eternal life, especially in Baptism. Each person can also be called more specifically to the priesthood or to religious life, to married life, and to single life, as well as to a particular profession or service.³

In this single definition, “vocation” is applied to at least three different levels: the call to holiness and discipleship, the call to a state of life, and the call to serve. These levels are interrelated and often overlap in the life of an individual.

Years ago, two theologians, Marie Theresa Coombs and Francis Kelly Nemeck, OMI, decided that when Catholics talk about vocation they usually use the word in one of these three ways.⁴ Vocation can refer to:

1. *Who* God calls me to be,
2. *How* God calls me to live, and
3. *What* God calls me to do.

The first speaks to our *self-identity*, the unique way each of us embodies and lives out the universal call to holiness. The second speaks to our *state of life*, whether that be the ordained, the consecrated, or the lay life. The third speaks to our *ministry*, the particular way each of us is called to serve God and others. All three are important. All three are intertwined. All three come together in the lives of those serving or seeking ways to serve the church as lay ministers.

Who God Calls Me to Be

The Second Vatican Council taught that, prior to any particular vocation, there is a general call to salvation, discipleship, and holiness. Vatican II dedicated an entire chapter of its Dogmatic Constitution on the Church to the “universal call to holiness.” There the council proclaimed with confidence: “Therefore, all in the church, whether they belong to the hierarchy or are cared for by it, are called to holiness, according to the apostle’s saying: ‘For this is the will of God, your sanctification’” (*Lumen Gentium* 39).

For many of us the language of “holiness” can be off-putting. It can evoke images of pious churchgoers or heroic saints. It can seem distant from our ordinary, everyday lives. This is an unfortunate misunderstanding. As Vatican II makes clear, holiness is, at its root, “the perfection of charity” (*Lumen Gentium* 40). The word perfection implies growth. Charity means love. Thus to be holy is *to grow in love*. This is our first and foremost calling. And it extends to all.

But just because the call to holiness is universal does not mean that it is generic. The call extends to all. But it is not the same for everyone.

This point was brought home to me several years ago when I returned to my old high school for my younger sister’s graduation.

Before commencement, a baccalaureate mass was held in the white frame church next to the school. All the seniors arrived early wearing their caps and gowns. They processed in at the start of Mass. They filled the pews in front. Several of them served as lectors, gift bearers, and eucharistic ministers.

When it was time for the homily, Fr. Charlie came down from the altar and stood before the seniors. They sat there, proud as peacocks on the day of their graduation, with all of us family and friends beaming behind them.

Father began, “What a beautiful day! What a happy day! There is so much to celebrate and enjoy today.”

He continued, “But as your pastor, I feel that it is my responsibility to remind you graduates—on this day—of an important truth.”

“Your parents never wanted you.”

He said it with a straight face. But we all laughed. And after we quieted down, Fr. Charlie repeated solemnly:

“Your parents never wanted you.”

He went on, “Now don’t get me wrong, maybe your parents wanted a baby. I am sure they wanted a healthy baby. Maybe they wanted a boy or they wanted a girl.”

“But your parents never wanted . . . *you*.”

After a pause, he said, “Only *God* wanted . . . *you*.”

Father Charlie said it again and again, pointing to each individual graduate in the front row, “Only *God* wanted . . . *you*.”

I feel like I have spent almost twenty years now trying to take those words seriously. What does it mean to believe that God wanted . . . *me*? Not me without all my faults and imperfections. Not me without all my insecurities and inner doubts. God wanted *me*. Just as I am.

God’s call to me is rooted in God’s love for me—a love that is utterly personal. According to our Catholic faith, the billions and billions of human beings spread around the world and scattered across history are not the result of some mass production scheme. We are the astonishing gift of a God who chooses to love again and again and again. Each of us is the result of a unique act of love that has never been seen before and will never be seen again. As the story of Fr. Charlie reminds us, God *wants* every single one of us.

Centuries ago, St. Augustine prayed, “By loving me, Lord, you have made me lovable.” Discovering *who* God wants me to be begins in a basic act of self-acceptance. God loved me into existence. God not only designed me, God *desired* me. And because of that *I am lovable*.

Too often we imagine God’s call as “out there” and apart from us. We treat our vocation as some kind of riddle that we have to decipher or some secret message that we have to decode. Such an approach transforms God’s plan into a set of arbitrary instructions—directions for life that are hidden from view.

The twentieth-century spiritual writer Thomas Merton suggested another way. In a brief essay from his collection *Seeds of*

Contemplation, Merton wrote: "For me to be a saint means to be myself." To be holy, Merton argued, is not to imitate someone else's ideal. It is not to look for my vocation "out there." Rather, holiness is the slow unfolding of one's own God-given identity. It is the process of coming to accept the call of God written in my heart before I was born. According to Merton, what separates human beings from the rest of God's creation is that we can *choose* to be what God created us to be. We are free to sin, but sin is simply a turning away from our true self. "Trees and animals have no problem. God makes them what they are without consulting them, and they are perfectly satisfied. With us it is different. God leaves us free to be whatever we like. We can be ourselves or not, as we please."⁵

Discernment, then, is not a spiritual treasure hunt. It is less about looking out and more about listening within. To discover a calling is to hear a certain harmony between *who* I am as a child of God, on the one hand, and *how* I live and *what* I do, on the other. When faith-filled people say that they have discovered their vocation, they are not saying that they found some hidden plan. Rather, they are saying that they have felt a profound resonance between their deepest sense of themselves before God and a particular path forward.

How God Calls Me to Live

Growing up, I often heard the word "vocation." And I always knew what it meant. To "have a vocation" was to be called to be a priest or a nun.

My childhood pastor, Fr. Francis, was always talking about vocations. Every chance he got, he worked it into his homilies. Every visit to our classroom, Father brought it up. Every prayer he led, it seemed, ended with a prayer for vocations.

I later learned that this was unusual. When a new pastor arrived, he did not seem as preoccupied with the subject. Still, Fr. Francis left a lasting impression. On the one hand, his constant preaching about "the vocation crisis" instilled in me a sense that

the church needed me—that *God* needed me—and that I had the ability to respond. On the other hand, there seemed to be only one way to respond: become a priest. That was the only vocation that really mattered.

With Vatican II's affirmation of the universal call to holiness, Catholics began to see that there are many ways to respond. There are many vocations that matter. Increasingly, *marriage* was described as a vocation alongside priesthood and religious life—although this often left single people in a kind of no-man's-land. Pope John Paul II offered a more inclusive framework by placing alongside priesthood and religious life the vocation to the *lay life*. His many writings encouraged and affirmed a diversity of callings: married and single, mothers and fathers, young people and old, theologians and political leaders, the sick and those who care for them. But he described three states of life as foundational: "The vocations to the lay life, to the ordained ministry and to the consecrated life can be considered paradigmatic, inasmuch as all particular vocations, considered separately or as a whole, are in one way or another derived from them or lead back to them, in accordance with the richness of God's gift."⁶

In his emphasis on the lay vocation, Pope John Paul II was developing the teaching of the Second Vatican Council. Vatican II stands out from all previous church councils for the attention it gave to the laity. Vatican II affirmed both the essential role of the laity in the life and mission *of the church* and their particular vocation *in the world*. Overcoming centuries of Christian spirituality that had reduced "the world" to a site of sin and temptation, Vatican II saw the world as the positive context that both informs the life of the laity and, in turn, is transformed by their Christian witness.

The laity are *secular*—and that is not a slur. For the secular is understood here not as some godforsaken wasteland separate from the church. Instead, the bishops at Vatican II used the word to talk about ordinary life. In the world of family and friends, work and recreation, politics and culture, God must be present.

[The laity] live in the world, in each and every one of the world's occupations and callings and in the ordinary circumstances

of social and family life which, as it were, form the context of their existence. There they are called by God to contribute to the sanctification of the world from within, like leaven, in the spirit of the Gospel, by fulfilling their own particular duties. (*Lumen Gentium* 31)

The laity are not left behind as priests and religious go off to follow their vocations. The laity have their own vocation: to transform the world in the light of Christ.

This emphasis on the lay vocation in the world should not be understood in an exclusive sense. And it would be a mistake to think that Vatican II set up a dichotomy between clergy and religious “in the church” and laity “in the world.” After all, the council documents describe a number of church ministries for the laity, just as they admit that priests and nuns sometimes have secular jobs.

Vatican II’s description of the laity in the world has to be read in the context of its larger teaching that it is *the whole church*, and not just the laity, that exists “in the world.” It is *the whole church* that has a mission to transform the secular. Vatican II’s Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World states:

Thus the church, at once “a visible organization and a spiritual community,” travels the same journey as all of humanity and shares the same earthly lot with the world: it is to be a leaven and, as it were, the soul of human society in its renewal by Christ and transformation into the family of God. (*Gaudium et Spes* 40)

The whole church is to be leaven in the world. The call of the laity to transform the secular is thus an intensification of the vocation of every single member of the Body of Christ.

Some have argued that *lay ministry* should be discouraged because it is not proper to the lay vocation. Laity belong in the world, not in the church. Such an argument twists Vatican II’s description of the laity into a prohibition that was never intended. A path more faithful to the council has been suggested by the U.S. Bishops. Speaking positively of the role of lay ministry in the church, the bishops wrote:

All of the baptized are called to work toward the transformation of the world. Most do this by working in the secular realm; some do this by working in the Church and focusing on the building of ecclesial communion, which has among its purposes the transformation of the world.⁷

To minister in and on behalf of the church is not to step away from the lay vocation to transform the world. It is simply to serve this mission in a different way.

What God Calls Me to Do

The final question, “*What* does God call me to do?” brings us back to where we began: the call to serve. Here we reflect briefly on what is in fact the concern of the whole book, the vocation to minister as a layperson within and on behalf of the church.

Over a decade ago, a subcommittee of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops undertook a wide-ranging study of lay ministry. Early on in this process, the bishops arranged a consultation that included several lay ministers who worked on different parish staffs in a variety of ministerial roles. As the conversation unfolded, a few of the lay ministers began to share their experiences of being called to ministry. They spoke of the ways God had worked in their lives, and the ways God was still at work in their lives. They told their vocation stories.

The bishops present were clearly moved by this personal testimony. For some, it was the first time they had heard lay ministers speak about their call to ministry with the same kind of spiritual depth, gratitude, and personal conviction that the bishops were used to hearing from their priests. Afterward, the bishops discussed what they had heard. They asked: Is lay ministry a new vocation in the church? Is it comparable to the call to ordained ministry? Is it more like the consecrated life? How does the call to lay ministry relate to the broader vocation of the laity?

In this exchange, the bishops were being forced to move beyond a notion of vocation as “state of life.” They were being

stretched by the lived experience of these lay ministers. Lay ministry is not a state of life in the traditional sense. It does not entail the same kind of permanence or totality that has been historically associated with priestly or religious vocations. And yet, these elements are not entirely missing. Many lay ministers *do* make a significant commitment to ministry—some even leave jobs or move in order to take a new ministerial position. Those who minister full-time experience God’s call as a life-orienting vocation, one that profoundly impacts their faith, their families, and their future. Those who volunteer or who serve in more occasional or part-time ministries also experience a call. They feel drawn by God to respond to a need or to use a gift. And they describe it in the language of vocation—not a state of life, but a call to serve.

To their credit, the bishops listened. They sought out ways to acknowledge and affirm this new way of talking about vocation. In their initial report, the bishops on the subcommittee wrote:

Lay ministers speak often and reverently of their call or vocation to ministry, a call that finds its origin in the call of God and its confirmation in the appointment to a specific ministry within the Church. These ministers often experience such a call within, and sometimes transcending, a vocation to married, single, or religious life. . . . We conclude that this call or vocation is worthy of respect and sustained attention.⁸

Such honest reflection offers a glimpse into the way new experiences challenge us as a church, drawing us in new directions. The process is always ongoing.

The end result of the bishops’ work was their 2005 document *Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord: A Resource for Guiding the Development of Lay Ecclesial Ministry*. Its particular focus are those lay ministers who have been professionally prepared and who serve in leadership positions, usually on a parish staff, such as directors of religious education, outreach coordinators, pastoral associates, liturgical coordinators, and youth ministers. But the document is sensitive to the variety of different kinds of lay ministries that have taken shape in our time. They affirm these

new forms of ministry—claiming that God is at work in calling forth these ministers to serve. The document invites the whole church to continue to work to support and sustain these new vocations to ministry. It calls for greater attention to the formation, authorization, and coordination of lay ministers.

Co-Workers in the Vineyard also reflects on the lay minister's experience of vocation: "The call may come in a dramatic moment. More often, it comes over time, as the person grows—within the community of faith—in love for God and a desire to do his will."⁹ Discerning this call, the document continues, is always both a personal and a communal process. Clarity comes through prayer and reflection, as well as through conversations with family, colleagues, and mentors. The document concludes with a call for "a more thorough study of our theology of vocation"—acknowledging that we are still "on the way" toward understanding how God is calling lay ministers to serve the church and the world of today.

Theology for Ministry

Our brief survey of biblical stories suggests four elements of God's call. First, a vocation always arises out of *God's initiative*. It may confront us suddenly or it may grow slowly over time. It may take form in some external need we feel compelled to address, or it may be felt as a deep desire within our hearts. Regardless, no vocation is self-starting. No matter how much it flows through me and is a part of me, my vocation originates beyond me. It is God who calls.

Second, vocation draws us into *relationship* with the triune God. Through Christ and the Spirit, we are drawn into the communion of the Trinity. We accept—in a specific and concrete way—the friendship that God always offers us. We find a particular way to love.

The love that accompanies any genuine vocation leads to personal *transformation* and always extends outward in *mission* toward others—the third and fourth elements of the biblical

notion of call. Even the act of accepting oneself as the person God always intended us to be can be a profoundly transformative event. It can realign one's whole life. Even if it doesn't seem to change a thing, it changes everything—deepening a life already well-lived. Usually, interior transformation bursts out into our relationships with other people. God's call moves us to love our neighbor, it sends us forth, it gives us a mission. In his interactions with others, Jesus was always drawing people in and then sending them out. This dynamic continues into the present.

Vocation speaks to various realities—discipleship, state of life, and ministry. The rich way in which these realities come together in the life of an individual points toward an approach to discernment that takes seriously a simple truth: The same God who made us is the same God who saves us. We begin to hear our various callings by reflecting on our true identity, the person God made each of us to be, what Thomas Merton termed the "true self."

Merton knew from his own experience that accepting one's true self can be a difficult journey. He was not naïve about the way in which sin can so easily distort and distract us from our true identity. We so often confuse who God made each of us to be with who *I* want me to be. That is the reality of sin, what Merton called the "false self." In a brief, but beautiful passage, Merton explains that the false self is the attempt to live outside the radius of God's love and will. The great irony, however, is that *nothing* can exist outside the radius of God's love. So the false self is a kind of illusion. It is the attempt to live where there is no life. Sin, then, is self-destruction. It is a denial of who I am.

What the Christian tradition reminds us again and again, however, is that where sin grows, grace overflows (Rom 5:20). And so vocational discernment ultimately comes down to a question: Will I choose to go with the grain of my being or to grate against it? To answer *yes* to God's call is to strike a resounding chord rising out of my deepest and truest self. All authentic and particular vocations flow out of this *yes*.

Coombs and Nemeck suggest that the more we mature, the more the *who*, the *how*, and the *what* of our vocations interconnect.

They compare the three to the interdependence of our lungs, heart, and circulatory system. We may separate one from another for careful examination. But each functions as an essential part of an integrated and complex whole.

Moreover, each of these three dimensions of vocation are themselves multifaceted. My identity (*who* God calls me to be) cannot be summed up in a single, all-encompassing definition. My state of life (*how* God calls me to live) is neither singular nor static. And my ministry (*what* God calls me to do) may not be the same today as it is tomorrow. We grow. The needs of the world and of our church change. Circumstances conspire. And God continues to call.

The chapters that follow are not meant to uncover the “one thing” you were always meant to do. They are not designed to help you discover your once-and-for-all vocation. Rather, these pages hope to draw you into an ongoing process of reflecting on yourself, your life, and your experiences of service in order to appreciate more deeply the God who—through it all—gently calls your name.

For Reflection and Discussion

1. Share your vocation story—the narrative you wrote at the beginning of the chapter. What elements of the biblical pattern of call (divine initiative, personal relationship, inner transformation, and outward mission) are present? What elements are hard to see?
2. Discernment involves listening for harmony between your true self and a particular path forward. Think of a big decision you faced in your life. How did you know what to do? How did you make your decision?
3. What does it mean to be leaven “in the world”? How does your life and ministry serve to transform the world in the light of Christ?
4. How does your state or stage of life influence your ministry? How does your ministry influence the rest of your life?

Recommended Reading

United States Catholic Catechism for Adults (Washington, DC: USCCB Publishing, 2006), chapters 1–4.

Catechism of the Catholic Church, second edition (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2000), nn. 26–184.

Hahnenberg, Edward P. *Awakening Vocation: A Theology of Christian Call*. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2010.

Pope John Paul II. On the Vocation and the Mission of the Lay Faithful in the Church and in the World (*Christifideles Laici*), http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_30121988_christifideles-laici_en.html.

Neafsey, John. *A Sacred Voice is Calling: Personal Vocation and Social Conscience*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2006.

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Second Vatican Council. Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation (*Dei Verbum*), http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/.