

Called by the Spirit

'The energy of the Spirit has not been exhausted,' says Pope John Paul II in speaking about vocations in the Church.

Just as the early apostles were led to do extraordinary and new things for the mission of the Church, so does the Spirit and the Church speak again to the people of our time: Come!

Come and explore the unique and wonderful plan God has for your life.

Come and discover the joy of embracing God's call.

Come and be part of something ancient, something new; traditions which have withstood the test of time and yet invite fresh expression for a new millennium.

This issue of *Landmarks* is based on a 1998 papal reflection on the role of the Holy Spirit in raising up new vocations.

1. Jesus was led by the Spirit

The whole of Jesus' life unfolded under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. The Pope's message begins by noting key Spirit-led moments in the life of Jesus:

- When Mary said 'Yes' to receiving the Word-made-flesh, the Spirit was there (Lk 1:35).
- At Jesus' baptism in the Jordan, it was the Spirit who gave witness (Lk 15:21-22).
- It was the Spirit who led Jesus into the desert (Mt 4:1).
- In his powerful teaching in the synagogue at Nazareth Jesus testified: 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me' (Lk 4:18).
- Jesus told his disciples that the Spirit would guarantee his continuing presence in their midst (Jn 14:16).
- On the Cross, as Jesus gave everything of himself to the Father, the Spirit was there (Lk 23:46).
- At Pentecost the Spirit was poured out on the early Church, consolidating it in faith and sending it forth (Acts 2:4).

Ever since then, says the Pope, the Church 'travels along the pathways of time supported by the wind of the same Spirit, lighting up history with the burning fire of the Word of God', purifying hearts and lives.'

In this way we, the faithful, realize our vocation to live as a people of faith:

- Created by the Father,
- United as one body in the love of Jesus Christ,
- Consecrated for mission by the Holy Spirit.

2. We are led by the Spirit

You are a letter from Christ ... written with the Spirit of the living God ... on tablets of human hearts (2 Cor 3:3).

Through baptism in Christ, Christians begin a new life 'in the Spirit'. The World Day of Prayer for Vocations is an occasion for celebrating the fact that 'the Spirit of God writes in the heart and life of every baptised person a project of love and grace' which is the gateway to true meaning, freedom and life to the full.

If baptism is our fundamental calling, what are the details of that calling? The discovery of one's vocation starts with questions like: *Where do I come from? Where am I going? Who am I? To whom do I belong? What is the purpose of life? How should I spend my time?*

The Spirit, says the Pope, not only prompts such questions but opens us to the possibility of a courageous response. Each person has a special place in God's heart and in human history. Each has a unique contribution to make to Church and society. Grounded in this realization we can begin to discover 'a new culture of vocations'.

Signs of hope

"In talking to seminarians or engaged couples I will often ask 'What do you want to be doing in five years time?' I am interested to know if they have hope for the future. Can they imagine a way forward? Are they people with ideals? Generally speaking, healthy vocational choices are not made by people who just bob along with the current. I get excited by people who ask, 'Will the world be a better place, will God's love be made visible, because I was here, because I made this choice?'" - vocations director

Come!

"The energy of the Spirit has not been exhausted."

3. The Spirit and the Church say 'Come!'

The Spirit and the Bride say Come (Ap 22:17).

These words lead us to explore the relationship between the Holy Spirit and the Church (the latter is referred to as 'the Bride of Christ' in the Book of the Apocalypse).

It is through the Spirit and the Church that all the different vocations emerge. While the source of a person's calling is God, the coming to an awareness and acceptance of that vocation occurs in and through the Church.

'The energy of the Spirit has not been exhausted,' says John Paul II. Just as the Holy Spirit led the early apostles (like Barnabas and Paul) to do extraordinary and new things for the sake of the gospel, so too does the Spirit and the Church speak again to the people of our time: Come!

Come to meet Jesus, who wants to immerse you in his life!

Come to welcome God's call, venturing beyond all fear and hesitation!

Come and discover 'the history of love which God has woven with humanity' and which God wishes also for you!

Come and savour the joy and freedom of God's forgiveness!

For the disciple, the only answer to God's loving invitation is an unhesitating 'Yes!' Or, as the Pope puts it: 'Blessed are they who, attracted by the Word and moulded by the Sacraments, speak their "Here I am!" They are setting out on the path of total and radical belonging to God...'

What do we mean by 'vocation'?

The English word 'vocation' comes from the Latin *vocare* which means 'to call'. The word 'vocation' was traditionally used to refer almost exclusively to the priesthood and consecrated life. Today 'vocation' is understood to be the call to holiness for all Christians by virtue of their baptism. Married, single, ordained and consecrated life are all responses to this baptismal call to live in the spirit of Jesus Christ and to embody the Good News in the world.

Steps along the journey

In my second year of studying to be a teacher I worked part time in a restaurant. One evening I met a man who offered me a job as a waiter on a luxury liner. It was an exciting, glamorous and amazingly well paid position. For a week I agonised over whether or not I should defer from uni and take the job. My friends said I was mad if I didn't.

I can remember going into one of the city churches and seeing a poster on the back wall which said 'The choices we make determine the person we become.' I knelt and prayed for some time. I noticed some tourists walking through the old building looking around aimlessly. At that moment I imagined myself as an itinerant wandering the globe with no particular direction. 'Is this what I want of myself?' I remember asking. And then, 'What do you want of me, Lord?'

I received my answer as I walked out into the bright sunshine. There in the park opposite was a group of primary school children with their teacher examining the new spring flowers as they ate their lunch. I recall the intensity of two distinct feelings within me as I compared the faces of the tourists with the look of involvement and satisfaction on the face of the teacher. One was a feeling of unease. The other was a sense of completeness and purpose.

I reaffirmed my decision to become a teacher. (Chris)

The World Day of Prayer for Vocations has been an annual celebration in the Church since 1964. Traditionally, and still today, the focus of this day is on vocations to the priesthood and consecrated life.

In recent years this day has been placed in its proper context: the many and varied ways in which the Spirit calls people to love and serve God and Church. While highlighting the importance of vocations to the priesthood and consecrated life, the Pope's message reflects this wider context.

His message has particular significance in that it coincides with the Church's preparation for the Great Jubilee of 2000 in the Year of the Holy Spirit.

4. Many gifts, one Spirit

It is possible to generate new vocations, says the Pope, but only when a Christian community lives in a spirit of fidelity to the Lord. Charisms, ministries and the different forms of consecrated life thrive in an intense climate of:

- Faith and prayer;
- Unity amidst the diversity of the many gifts of the Spirit;
- Missionary zeal that involves a total gift of self.

The local Christian community is called to develop the gifts and charisms of its members. In this way each of the baptised can discover his/her unique vocational calling. It is this broad understanding of 'vocation' that has shaped John Paul II's message to this point.

The call to priesthood and consecrated life

The focus of the *World Day of Prayer for Vocations*, however, is the call to priesthood and consecrated life. It is to these that the Pope now turns.

The ordained priesthood and consecrated life have a fundamental role in the life and mission of the Church.

The work of Christ that was accomplished through the service of the twelve apostles is continued today through the bishops and priests who are a sacramental representation of Christ the Head and Shepherd.

Throughout Church history the Holy Spirit has also raised up different forms of consecrated life. Like 'a plant with many branches, which sinks its roots into the Gospel and brings forth abundant fruit in every season of the Church's life,' these vocations are with us even today.

Consecrated life is at the heart of the Church, giving clear witness to the single-minded commitment that is asked of every Christian.

Vocations to the priesthood and consecrated life, necessary in every age, are even more necessary today in a world of contradictions that has a tendency to ignore God in the fundamental choices of life.

The harvest is plentiful but the labourers are few; pray therefore the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers to his harvest! (Mt 9:37-38)

Let us welcome the challenge of the 'Lord of the Harvest'. May this prayer day for vocations arouse in our hearts:

- Intense prayer for vocations to priesthood and religious life;
- A sense of responsibility for encouraging such vocations.

Vocation: a call to love

At the heart of every vocational choice is a capacity and willingness to love and be loved.

The basic training ground for learning to love is family life. The influence of strong marriages and family relationships on a person's vocational choices cannot be stressed enough.

This point is reflected in the Pope's message when he says: 'Understood as the domestic church, the family, sustained by the sacramental grace of matrimony is the permanent school of the civilisation of love...'

Seeds of commitment

"Do they have some runs on the board? That's one of the things I look for in prospective seminarians. I look for evidence that a person has persevered with a goal.... It's not just a question as to whether he will 'last', but whether he will put his heart and soul into his vocation - especially during the tough times. You can gauge that capacity in people now... Do they follow up their commitments? Do they keep their promises, even in the little things?"

- seminary staff member

The Pope speaks to young people preparing for Confirmation

My dearest young people. You are entering a privileged time during which you are invited to question yourselves and question the Christian community on the full meaning of your lives. It is a time of prayerful consideration and vocational choices. Listen to Jesus when he says 'Come and see.' Give witness to the Church in the special and unique way that God wants for you. Let the Holy Spirit guide you in truth and freedom and love. Don't be swayed by the glamour of fleeting material success and riches. Don't be afraid to follow the demanding and courageous paths of gospel love and generous commitment. Learn to always give clear witness to the faith and hope that is within you.

"From the free and sincere gift of self flows the fullness of life."

Spirit, lead on!

5. Call forth vocations

Now for the action part. John Paul II issues a challenge to specific members of the Church:

To bishops, religious, priests, and deacons

Give witness to the spiritual and human journey which has led to your own vocation in God's love.

Live your vocation in appropriate relationships with others, esteeming and collaborating with the different vocations raised up by the Spirit in your communities. Give your own contribution with joy so that your example will attract others to a radical life dedicated to Christ in the ordained ministry or consecrated life.

Christian couples

Give witness to the value of your own vocation, the Sacrament of Matrimony. Build harmony in the home, a spirit of faith and prayer, the practice of Christian virtues, openness to others - especially the poor. Be active contributors to the life of the

Church, and show courage in the face of adversity. All these qualities create a vocation-friendly climate in which children grow up grasping the fundamentals of the Christian calling and therefore find themselves in a position to respond to whatever the Spirit might ask of them.

Teachers, catechists, pastoral workers and all educators

In cooperation with the Spirit, work to help young people free their minds and hearts of whatever impedes their ability to respond to the call of the Holy Spirit. In their journey in faith and life, urge them to give their best. With the light and strength of the Gospel Word, build up in them a profound sense of love and faith so that they will readily respond to their unique vocation.

6. A final word and prayer

After a special word to Confirmation candidates (see previous page), the Pope concludes his message with a prayer to the Holy Spirit.

Part of this prayer is highlighted below.

It is a prayer we can all say; in fact we could say it right now, perhaps with a particular person in mind.

Choices

In all the joys and sorrows of life, we are being invited to draw closer to God.

A healthy vocational choice is fuelled by prayer - not just at one critical, decisive moment, but in all the little choices and decisions we make throughout our lives.

A lifestyle that includes regular prayer and a willingness to ask 'What does God want of me?' is a cornerstone to every Christian vocation.

*"Account for the hope that is in you"
(1 Pet 3:15).*

Personal prayer

Holy Spirit,

*I give thanks for the vocation of (name)
and all the ways he/she has contributed to my life.*

Gift me with new vision for a new millennium. Deepen my awareness of my own vocation and the courage to say 'Yes' to all you ask of me.

*Bring to my mind and heart now a particular person to whom your call is directed.
How do you wish me to respond to this person as your instrument?*