

“Marvelously Called” . . . to What?

Eileen D. Crowley

Insights from the RCIA can be put into dialogue with currents in Roman Catholic teaching and reflection on the vocation of the laity to provide new directions for the development of an expanded theology of vocation.

What’s Your True Calling?” In bright red letters, this question leaped at me from the November 2010 cover of *The Oprah Magazine* as I stood in line waiting to buy my groceries. What did Oprah and her editors have to offer if one were to buy that issue? I wondered. Then I saw the subtitle: “An Easy-Does-It Guide to Finding and Fulfilling Your Life’s Purpose.” I bought the issue. Who wouldn’t want help with that venture?

Upon reading the articles inside that issue, I discovered that a “calling” revolves around discerning where one’s passions lie and following those passions into areas and activities that bring one a sense of fulfillment. This magazine’s secular understanding of “calling” is a mixed bag of existentialism, psychology, and practicality. It assumes that life is meaningful, that we each have a purpose, and that based on our abilities and talents, we can find employment or other activities that will affirm our “true calling.”

I became uneasy reading this “Easy-Does-It Guide.” Since the economic downturn of recent years, an understanding of one’s “calling” that is tied too tightly to employment can be painfully problematic, financially, existentially, and spiritually.

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The U.S. Department of Labor's Bureau of Labor Statistics most recently reported that almost fifteen million Americans who seek employment cannot find full-time work, regardless of their education, abilities, and talents. Another 9.6 million are involuntarily working part-time because of work-day or work-week reductions. Another almost four million were "marginally attached to the labor force" or were so "discouraged" that they had stopped looking for a job (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2010). Does being unemployed and underemployed mean a person has no purpose, no calling?

I liked the idea of everyone coming to know his or her "life's purpose," but my unease continued as I read further. What if you *cannot* find that purpose? What if your life has more than one purpose? To buy into the belief that we each have a preordained "life's purpose" is bound to lead some people to disillusionment if what they think of as their "purpose" is suddenly taken away—through illness, a loved one's death, changed circumstances, or unemployment. For example, in discussing Christians' callings in the world with members of my parish, one woman told me that, because of her husband's death a few months previously, she had no idea what her "life's purpose" might now be. And what is a person to think when fulfilling that "purpose" remains ever out of reach or—when reached—that "purpose" does not bring fulfillment? What then?

In this article, I first review the secular and religious understandings of "vocation" and "calling" and note the misunderstandings that can arise when Roman Catholics use these words in discussion. Then I propose that the *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults*, in dialogue with Roman Catholic teachings on the vocation of the laity, can provide new directions for the development of an expanded theology of vocation.

What is Your Vocation?

In Roman Catholic contexts, discussion about one's "purpose" or "calling" in life inevitably leads to someone speaking about vocation (from the Latin *vocare*, "to call"). Vocation is a word perhaps more familiar to Catholics than Protestants. I have used both terms—calling and vocation—over the past two years as I have conducted small group discussions with laypeople like me on the topic of "What's Baptism Got to Do with Me Now?"

During the course of our conversations I gradually got around to asking the participants an admittedly loaded question, "What is your vocation?" Catholics baptized as infants commonly look a bit baffled by the question. Silence often follows. Then, tentatively, the participants begin to work their way toward a response. This question can lead to two dead ends, though. The first dead end is the common understanding and use of the word *vocation* in church settings:

Catholics are often asked to “pray for vocations,” and they know priests, nuns, and brothers have vocations. The church does not have enough of these vocations. For those who do not see themselves as responding to that kind of call to ordination or religious life, “vocation” does not apply, right? The second dead end comes when the word “vocation” reminds them of the term “vocational school.” They equate some people’s *jobs* with “vocations.” A garage mechanic, a secretary, or an information technology specialist who has gone to a vocational school has a “vocation.” What about people who have not gone to one of those schools? Do they have a “vocation,” too? Does an accountant, a chemist, a journalist, a farmer, a writer, a sales person, or a systems analyst have a vocation? After some discussion, participants can see that “vocation” can take on additional dimensions as pertaining to one’s work, whatever it may be. In that occupation-oriented discussion, though, “vocation” does not necessarily have any religious dimension, and it does not include anyone without a job. What’s more, the vocations that people live out in their relationship with others—as children, parents, grandparents, wives, husbands, aunts, uncles, siblings, cousins, partners, neighbors, and friends—do not get explored at all.

For Roman Catholics, a great gulf yawns between “vocation” understood as applying to consecrated and ordained life and “vocation” as referring to a job. “Vocation” as a descriptor for aspects of their *daily life* and as something related to the *fact of their baptism* does not compute.

Having a Calling

However, in popular parlance, the related concept of someone having a “calling” is not unknown. That is why the editors of *The Oprah Magazine* could feel confident that if they put on the front cover of their magazine, in bright red letters, “What’s Your True Calling?” someone might buy the issue to find out.

Obviously, for their secular publication, Oprah Winfrey’s editors are not and cannot be operating from an explicit New Testament understanding of calling—“the fundamental call of Christ to discipleship and salvation,” in Edward Hahnenberg’s succinct definition (6). Hahnenberg’s review of the historical and contemporary Roman Catholic and Protestant understandings of “vocation” and “calling” is highly informative and thought-provoking. His vision of what “vocation” could mean today is inspiring and challenging. Hahnenberg concludes that God’s “unrelenting call” is a call “to be ourselves” and to go “beyond ourselves—we are challenged to respond to Christ, to the needs of others, to our own need for conversion. . . . By responding to Christ’s call to move beyond who we are, we come to see who we *really* are. The call beyond ourselves helps us to discover our *true selves*” (232). Hahnenberg goes on to describe the destination of “vocation”:

The *whither* of vocation is neither an abstract role nor a particular career; it is—first and foremost—presence to the suffering, the oppressed, the marginalized, and the forgotten. . . . Like the Good Samaritan, we are called to “love thy neighbor” by becoming a neighbor, by going over and drawing close to the abused and neglected one on the side of the road. This movement toward the other is . . . a spirituality of solidarity—a fundamental stance of openness that draws us into the world of history’s victims, the place where we learn to cry with the crucified people. This is the *whither* of Christ’s call today. (233)

Hahnenberg qualifies that coming to live this “spirituality of solidarity” as not the end of the process of Christians’ discernment of their call. Rather,

it is the beginning. It is the start of a journey of learning how to listen, a practice of presence and openness to others that trains us, over time, in the openness to God’s special and particular call in our lives. Alongside the practices of prayer and worship, service and advocacy, fellowship and forgiveness, the practice of solidarity works on us. It chips away at all those self-centered and alienating delusions [about “our call”] that have such a hold on us. Slowly, solidarity helps us to see ourselves more honestly, and thus hear our callings more clearly. If we expect a quick and easy answer to the question, what am I to do with my life? we will be disappointed. For discernment demands nothing less than the long and difficult path of discipleship. (233)

Hahnenberg does not take sacramental or liturgical theology as one of his starting points for developing his theological project. Consequently, “baptism” is not a term found in the index, and the word itself rarely appears in the book. The reality of baptism is assumed, but the multivalent liturgical rite itself does not appear as a source for his theologizing. I propose that the rites of and insights of the *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults* (RCIA) can also serve the church as a source for theologizing about our “true calling.” This sacramental, liturgical dimension should not be missing from a systematic theology of Christian call.

The Rite of Acceptance

The RCIA is officially the norm for initiation of adults and children of catechetical age in the Roman Catholic Church today. The RCIA ritual book used in the United States runs more than 350 pages. In reading through its pages, one finds a complex order of initiation with multifaceted theological explanations offered, a variety of liturgical rituals outlined and detailed, pastoral instructions provided that acknowledge diverse contexts for celebration, and ceremonial rubrics

to guide local liturgies. Reflection on the sacraments of initiation themselves—baptism, confirmation, and eucharist—as foci for developing a theology of vocation would be an obvious choice as a theological point of departure. Less obvious, though, would be to start theological reflection from a rite of the RCIA process that precedes the sacraments of initiation: the Rite of Acceptance (RCIA 48–68) that launches unbaptized people into the period of the catechumenate.

In parishes committed to celebrating the rite well and fully, the ritual actions and words *do* suggest implications for daily living that naturally arise from one's new life inaugurated in baptism, confirmation, and eucharist. If the local celebration of the RCIA liturgies were preceded by whole parish catechesis; were performed with great care, using ritual language and action to their fullest potential; were accompanied by fulsome assembly singing and silence; and were evoked and broken open in vibrant liturgical preaching, then these rites could potentially cause members of the assembly to ask themselves, "What's baptism got to do with me now?" Asking that question might prompt the baptized themselves to begin to work toward their own theology of Christian call.

The rite involves ritual gestures that can be profoundly moving for the newcomers and for the members of the assembly who surround these newcomers in prayer. A very important part of both of the rites calls for a sponsor (or catechist) to make the sign of the cross on various parts of the body of the newcomers. (This rite is also found in the Rite of Welcome for previously baptized candidates for reception into the Catholic Church, RCIA, nos. 411–433.) After each signing, the community adds its voice through a sung acclamation, such as "Glory and praise to you, Lord Jesus Christ." The presider may declare before the Signing with the Cross, "The whole community welcomes you with love and stands ready to help you" (RCIA 55b).

Performed lovingly and solemnly, the ritual action of the signing of the forehead and other senses and parts of the body (e.g., ears, lips, eyes, hands, feet) speaks volumes. Christianity is an *embodied* faith, not one only of doctrinal assent of the intellect. Christianity calls for people putting their bodies on the line—literally—and these rites do just that. In the Signing with the Cross, one cannot miss the importance of bodies, and one should not miss the implications of those bodily signings. People mark with and are marked by the sign of the cross of "Christ crucified, a stumbling block" to some (1 Cor 1:23).

These bodily rites remind us what our calling as a disciple of Christ crucified entails. Consider the ritual texts (RCIA 55–56) that accompanies the various signings (the emphasis is mine):

*[T]he ritual actions
and words do
suggest implications
for daily living*

Receive the sign of the cross on your forehead.
It is Christ himself who now strengthens you
with this sign of love.
Learn to know him and follow him.

Receive the sign of the cross on your ears,
that you may *hear the voice of the Lord.*

Receive the sign of the cross on your eyes,
that you may *see the glory of God.*

Receive the sign of the cross on your lips,
that you may *respond to the word of God.*

Receive the sign of the cross over your heart,
that *Christ may dwell* there by faith.

Through mystagogical reflection on these rituals, members of the worshiping assembly may make new connections with the Christians' callings in the world. That calling entails knowing and following Christ, listening to the Word, seeing God in all things, responding with love, and dwelling in Christ.

When the church has celebrated the Rite of Acceptance with the unbaptized, they become catechumens. The RCIA explains, "From this time on the Church embraces the catechumens as its own with a mother's love and concern. Joined to the Church, the catechumens are now part of the household of Christ . . ." (RCIA 47). What does it mean to be an inhabitant of that "household"? The RCIA explains that all who belong are expected to live a new way of life, one that involves knowing and growing in their relationship with the Holy One. They are invited to open their eyes to see the world as permeated with God's grace. They are called upon to be people who actively respond by following the promptings of the Holy Spirit heard and experienced in their encounter with scripture. They are expected to live a new way of life that invites them to open their hearts to the One who calls out, "Come and see!"

As this signing of the senses progresses, the hearts of the *assembly* might likewise be opened to a deeper relationship with the Triune God, be moved to respond in action to the scripture they hear spoken and sung, and be assured that Christ dwells within them, too, every moment of their lives. The assembly, too, hears:

Receive the sign of the cross on your shoulders,
that you may *bear the gentle yoke of Christ.*

As they watch this action and respond in song, the assembly might link to this liturgical moment whatever burdens they may be carrying on their shoulders and imagine Christ bearing that yoke with them every day.

Receive the sign of the cross on your hands,
that *Christ may be known in the work that you do.*

“Known in the work that you do”: This line alone could launch a splendid homily that could help the assembly connect literally making bread and earning their daily bread with being the Bread of Life for others at home, in the workplace, and in the community.

Receive the sign of the cross on your feet,
that you may *walk in the way of Christ.*

As the sponsors bend down to sign the feet of the person whom they are sponsoring, the assembly can let this hope—that they, too, might walk in the way of Christ every day—sink into their consciousness. Taking the Rite of Acceptance—and its signing with the cross in particular—as a theological starting point, pastoral ministers can teach, preach, and reflect on how Christians can embody their many “true callings” in the world.

The “Four Ways” of Christian Life

After catechumens complete the ritual step of the Rite of Acceptance, they enter into an extended period called the catechumenate. In the section that outlines the substance of the catechumenal period, the RCIA speaks of “four ways” through which the catechumens’ “dispositions manifested at their [rite of] acceptance into the catechumenate are brought to maturity.” Paragraph no. 75 offers a very comprehensive overview of what comprises “the Christian way of life.” While most Roman Catholics never see this material, it could truly enrich their understanding of the connection between their having been called by God to plunge into the living waters of baptism and how they plunge into every moment of their life. Exposing the faithful to the contents of RCIA no. 75 can help them to come to insights that might nourish their own theology of Christian call.

Paragraph no. 75 outlines “four ways” that need constant nurturing and attention before and after baptism:

(75.1) “suitable catechesis” that leads “not only to an appropriate acquaintance with dogmas and precepts but also to a profound sense of the mystery of salvation in which they desire to participate”;

(75.2) experience of the example and support of the entire Christian community from whom “the catechumens learn to turn more readily to God in prayer, to bear witness to the faith, in all things to keep their hopes set on Christ, to follow supernatural inspiration in their deeds, and to practice love of neighbor, even at the cost of self-renunciation”;

(75.3) participation in “suitable liturgical rites,” which include celebrations of the word of God in their weekly gatherings; minor exorcisms, blessings, anointings, and the Ephphetha rite that can be offered as part of those celebrations; the Liturgy of the Word at Sunday Eucharist; and other parish liturgical celebrations and devotions;

(75.4) life of witness: “Since the Church’s life is apostolic, catechumens should also learn how to work actively with others to spread the Gospel and build up the Church by the witness of their lives and by professing their faith.”

If no. 75 describes “the Christian way of life,” the connection between one’s baptismal call and one’s callings in the world can potentially be worked out in the multifaceted matrix of *didascalia*, *koinonia*, *leitourgia*, and *diakonia*. If one were to extrapolate from these four ways the implications for Christian daily living, the baptized are called to a life of learning and of plunging into mystery, a life of prayer with and within the midst of the community, a life lived from the liturgy, and a life of service and evangelization in collaboration with others.

“Marvelously Called”

These insights from the RCIA can be put into dialogue with currents in Roman Catholic teaching and reflection on the vocation of the laity to provide new directions for the development of an expanded theology of vocation. Key passages from Vatican II’s *Lumen Gentium*, the U.S. bishops’ 1995 pastoral, *Called and Gifted for the Third Millennium*, and Edward Hahnenberg’s theology of Christian call offer a starting point for further reflection.

Lumen Gentium

Chapter four on the laity in *Lumen Gentium* (Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, 1964) describes the lay faithful as being called to offer their daily lives to God:

. . . the laity, dedicated to Christ and anointed by the Holy Spirit [through baptism and confirmation], are marvelously called and wonderfully prepared so that ever more abundant fruits of the Spirit may be produced in them. For all their works, prayers and apostolic endeavors, their ordinary married and family life, their daily occupations, their physical and mental relaxation, if carried out in the Spirit, and even the hardships of life, if patiently borne—all these become “spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ” [1 Pet 2:5]. (no. 34)

According to chapter five of that same document, God's first call to all the baptized is the "universal call to holiness" (LG 39). What does that call involve? We can take a cue from the Letter to the Colossians: "Whatever you are doing, whether speaking or acting, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, giving thanks to God the Father through him" (Col 3:17).

Called and Gifted

In 1995, the U.S. bishops drafted a pastoral on the laity, "Called and Gifted for the Third Millennium." A prayer opens this document:

God of love and mercy,
you call us to be your people,
you gift us with your abundant grace.
Make us a holy people, radiating the fullness of your love.
Form us into a community, a people who care,
expressing your compassion.
Remind us day after day
of our baptismal call to serve with joy and courage.
Teach us now to grow in wisdom and grace
and joy in your presence. (1)

Here the "baptismal call" is succinctly stated: "to serve with joy and courage." That service is to be played out in one's relationships, in one's home, in one's parish, and in one's work. "In their work—teaching, cosmetology, medicine, the arts, house painting, real estate—laity discover both meaning and a sense of mission, relating their work to their spiritual life. Their work paths, no matter how diverse, often help them to move beyond self-absorption toward active caring for others" (USCCB 2). This attention to the "witness of holy lives" resonates with *Lumen Gentium* and with the Rite of Acceptance's vision of discipleship.

Moreover, the bishops point out that the call to holiness is "formed in suffering":

Beyond acts of holy compassion—blessed as they are—the laity are called to confront unjust elements in various social systems. They are called by God to apply Christian principles to government, medical research, social services, education, the media—in short, to those institutions that exist to help human persons realize their inherent dignity." (6)

The bishops call the baptized to examine how they use material resources and to help "to establish an economy that is just, sustainable, and ecologically responsible" (10). No aspect of life escapes the implications of God's call.

Theology of Christian Call

Edward Hahnenberg's theology of Christian call also offers an expansive vision for further reflection. In particular, he notes that our acts of caring for others should include especially those who are suffering. Living a Christian life full of love and care for others in a spirit of solidarity is liberating, writes Hahnenberg.

[T]he great good news of the Christian call is that following Jesus frees us. As disciples we discover ourselves—our true selves, our unique, unfinished, and incredibly beautiful selves. It is not just an idea that is awakened. *We* are awakened. We wake up and step out into a great procession, joining a sea of unique and beautiful selves surging forward into the reign of God. To live one's life as a response to God's call is a pilgrimage, a shared journey of faith, solidarity, and transformation in the light of Christ—the marks of a very different kind of quest. (233)

Through serving others, we shall discover who and whose we truly are. We shall come to know what is our life's "true calling." Our "true calling," however, is not *one* calling or *one* vocation. We may have *many* callings over the course of our lives. It involves not only one's occupation or ministry. Our callings are not confined to action only in "the household of God"; the playing field extends beyond ourselves and our church to the farthest reaches of God's creation. In living in that larger horizon of Christian call, we may gradually come to discern the whither of our own vocation as children of God.

Lifelong Reflection

The rites and insights of the RCIA in dialogue with the church's teaching on the vocation of the laity are untapped resources for communal development of a theology of vocation and Christian call. Ideally, this important reflection would last a lifetime. Yet, with so many demands these days on parish formation curricula, how might we get the conversations started? Perhaps a simple addition to our worship spaces might suffice. It would communicate succinctly *to what* and *to whom* we the baptized are "marvelously called." A plain sign, located above the exit doors of every church, would contain two words: "Servants' Entrance."

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