

“TRACES OF THE CHRISTIAN EXPERIENCE”

4. The Christian Existence

by Luigi Giussani*

VOCATION

Only in clarity and confidence can we find the energy to act.

The event of the Spirit overturned the apostles' faint-heartedness and inspired the most intense, courageous, and dynamic adventure that the history of the human spirit has known.

“You alone, Lord, make me rest secure.”⁵⁵ The discovery of Christ as the center of all things eliminates fear and makes us sense a capacity to “possess” everything we encounter: “all are your servants, but you belong to Christ and Christ belongs to God.”⁵⁶

More precisely, this new culture demands an extremely rich concept of life: unremitting activity, unavoidable responsibility, a true “service” in every moment, every word (“whether you are eating or drinking”⁵⁷); service to the *Kingdom*, that is, to that plan of the universe by which Christ heads all of reality. Everyone's existence has a meaning, which is to say that one truly exists insofar as one is in the service (a part of the whole, a “function”) of Christ's Kingdom, a function foreseen by the Ideal Himself who established the mysterious plan for all things. And *consciousness* is such insofar as it is aware that it is destined to a task, and this awareness is the encounter between God and the individual—the event of the *vocation*.

That encounter occurs fully in Christ. Everyone's vocation takes place within the ambit of the personal and mysterious reality of Christ: “You have been created in Christ Jesus.”⁵⁸

To become aware of one's own vocation, to understand one's life by following the calling, to conceive of one's existence as in service to everything: here is the vital commitment of one's very being which Christ's Spirit plainly demands, giving one the strength to begin and to remain faithful.

The modern conception of life never shows itself so far from the Spirit of Christ as in the whole question of vocation. Today's mentality accustoms us to look to the future with a criterion focused on profit, enjoyment, and comfort. The road to choose, the person to love, the profession to undertake, the faculty or department in which to enroll—everything is determined by the criterion of absolute utility for the individual. And this seems so obvious and taken for granted that the shock of the provocation seems to be a challenge to common sense, an infatuation, an exaggeration, even to many persons of integrity. These accusations are also heard among educators who conceive of themselves as Christians or parents who are worried about the worldly success of their children. Judgments in public and private life, advice for the good life, warnings and corrections—everything is dictated by a point of view in which the total devotion to, and preoccupation with, the Kingdom is completely absent, in »

⁵⁵ Psalms 4:8.

⁵⁶ 1 Corinthians 3:22–3.

⁵⁷ 1 Corinthians 10:31.

⁵⁸ Ephesians 2:10.

* Source: *The Journey to Truth Is an Experience*, McGill-Queen's University Press, Montreal 2006, pp. 78-82.

» which the reality of Christ is missing. "How can I make the world work to my advantage? How can I get the most out of everything and everyone?"—these are the criteria dictated by collective wisdom and pragmatism.

The Christian mentality overturns, contradicts, and represses those questions, forcing the exact opposite to the fore: "How can I give myself as I am, serve all things, the Kingdom, and Christ evermore?" This is the only educative criterion for the human personality as redeemed by the light and strength of the Spirit of Christ.

Simple, lucid, comprehensive sincerity and resolute magnanimity as a Christian concept of our own existence can develop easily and surely only in early youth.

The profound availability of our complete life to the service of all things is also extremely important for understanding *what* it is we are called to carry out, *for understanding our personal vocation*. What I must do, what I must be—my vocation—does not normally emerge as a specific command, but as a suggestion, a proposal, an invitation. Vocation, which is the meaning of one's life, introduces itself more as a glimpse of a possibility than as something absolutely inevitable. The more difficult the task to be accomplished the truer this is. In its purest and most evocative aspect, awareness is the most discreet cue: it is inspiration. Thus one confirms one's personal worth by readily agreeing to the subtlest of possibilities.

CHARITY

To accept life as vocation, as service to (a function of) the Whole, is to define existence as a profound destiny to *share* Reality (of which we are born and on which we continually depend) and to participate in Reality, accepting it and offering ourselves to it as to the will of God, to His Kingdom. To accept life as vocation engages our existence as *charity* (*caritas*).

Let us point out the most exceptional paradigms of love's richness and simplicity, at the origins of the new humanity redeemed by the Spirit of Christ: "May they be so completely one."⁵⁹

and they had the apostles called in, gave orders for them to be flogged, warned them not to speak in the name of Jesus and released them. And so they left the presence of the Sanhedrin glad to have had the honor of suffering humiliation for the sake of the name. They preached every day both in the Temple and in private houses, and their proclamation of the Good News of Christ Jesus was never interrupted.⁶⁰

As I said before, let no one take me for a fool; but if you must, then treat me as a fool and let me do a little boasting of my own ... Hebrews—my enemies—are they? So am I. Israelites? So am I. Descendants of Abraham? So am I. The servants of Christ? I must be mad to say this, but so am I, and more than they: more because I have worked harder, I have been sent to prison more often, and whipped so many times more, often almost to death. Five times I had the thirty-nine lashes from the Jews; three times I have been beaten with sticks; once I was stoned; three times I have been shipwrecked and once adrift in the open sea for a night and a day. Constantly travelling, I have been in danger from rivers and in danger from brigands, in danger from my own people and in danger from pagans; in danger in the towns; in danger in the open country, danger at sea and danger from so-called brothers. I have worked and labored, often without sleep; I have been hungry and thirsty and often starving; I have been in the cold without clothes. And to leave out much more, there is my daily preoccupation: my anxiety, for all the churches. When any man has had scruples, I have had scruples with him; when any man is made to fall I am tortured. If I am to boast, then let me boast of my own feebleness. »

⁵⁹ John 17:23.

⁶⁰ Acts 5:40–2.

» The God and Father of the Lord Jesus—bless him forever—knows that I am not lying. When I was in Damascus, the Ethnarch of King Aretas put guards around the city to catch me, and I had to be let down over the wall in a hamper, through a window in order to escape.⁶¹

The first apostles truly *followed* the Master, who was describing his own soul in the parable of the Good Shepherd, where charity reveals its deep need for initiative, creativity, and vigor. "Who among you with a hundred sheep, losing one, would not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the missing one till he found it? And when he found it would he not joyfully take it on his shoulders and then when he got home, call together his friends and neighbors? 'Rejoice with me,' he would say, 'I have found my sheep that was lost.'"⁶²

UNIVERSALITY

The very nature of Christian action, that is, to share, unquestionably demonstrates its boundless domain: a commitment to a genuine experience of charity signifies a complete openness towards the universe. All limitations to the breadth of our existence imposed from within suppress love. Love is not a matter of taste or measure, nor is it some intelligent plan of ours. It is a humble clinging to being as it offers itself to us. Hence the essential characteristic and the ultimate test of the Christian existence is its boundless openness, that is, its universality.

Even an authentically human attitude necessarily reaches out to everyone because humanity inevitably belongs to everyone. Attention to one's own experience is not authentic if separated—even unwittingly—from everyone else's experience. However, the clarity of a universal perspective and the energy to follow it in practice are more a gift than a conquest, more an encounter than a personal brilliance or intelligence: they are the fruit of the Spirit.

And so we understand why the first action of the apostles after Pentecost, Peter's speech to the Hebrews, bears witness to such a spirited and unambiguous devotion to a boundless ideal. The Church came of age as soon as the Lord's command, "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations,"⁶³ became an overwhelming and concrete reality through the Gift of the Spirit. Indeed we move from childhood into adulthood only when we begin to walk towards the universal.

A particularly human act, a fruitful work, is realized, for at last it has been brought back to its original dimensions.

No existence that does not emulate this simple openness to the universe is Christian. This openness does not manifest itself in an impossible contempt of, or inhumane disinterest for, the particular, but in the way in which the detail is lived. We may commit and genuinely dedicate ourselves to family or friendship, class or school, studies or profession, but the *motive behind the commitment* must transcend any particular desire for a higher mark or attachment to a particular person. It must not dwell on detail, however important. It is easy to enjoy or justify becoming involved with our immediate surroundings; however, any choice that has no other motivation but itself is only inflated selfishness, misguided sentimentality. Unfortunately, the modern attitude eloquently affirms—even in the pompous lies of its boastful universalisms—its incapacity to venture beyond a limited perspective, and soon proves itself utterly incapable of fidelity to the particular, which becomes perceived as petty and as narrow as a prison. »

⁶¹ 2 Corinthians 11:16–33.

⁶² Luke 15:4–6.

⁶³ Matthew 28:19.

» On the contrary, only the confident freedom of a Christian existence, its vigilant detachment from all particularism, its resolute readiness for any authentic freshness constitutes a sure promise, a prophecy of the coming of the Kingdom.

See what days are coming—it is the Lord Yahweh who speaks—
days when I will bring famine on the country,
a famine not of bread, a drought not of water,
but of hearing the word of Yahweh.
They will stagger from sea to sea,
wander from north to east,
seeking the word of Yahweh
and failing to find it.
That day, delicate girl and stalwart youth shall faint from thirst.⁶⁴

We remind you that it is possible to send questions and witnesses to the website
<http://eventi.comunioneliberazione.org/gscontributi/>

⁶⁴ Amos 8:11–13.