
TRUTH IS NOT IN SUCCESS

VOCATION IS AN EXPERIENCE GOOD AND SHOULD BE “CONSUMED”

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“I am pure, I am pure! These words that the dead of ancient Egypt carried with them as a viaticum for their last journey are perhaps suitable for the mummies of the necropolises, but no living person could pronounce them in good faith.”

Vladimir Jankélévitch, *The Pure and the Impure* (rough translation)

The first and most precious dowry that those who join in a community bring with them is the experience of the voice that called them. The nature of this wonderful dialogue, made up of a few words and a lot of body, is the spiritual *fingerprint* of the person. It is formed in the "mother's womb"

and then does not change for the rest of one's life. Even if there are wounds, the skin grows again with the same unique and unrepeatable characteristics. And it is not unusual that when we met a person in the time of their first vocational encounter and then again after decades: although they have changed a lot, before recognizing them in their changed somatic traits we recognize them from the spiritual imprint that has remained in them beyond the events that have transformed their body and soul. Indeed, we can become very different, sometimes even very ugly, but that imprint is there, it will be there in us until the end, and even if we decide to cancel it or remove it through surgery, it remains tenaciously, waiting for us faithfully, being more faithful than us.

True vocations are never abstract: "Go to the land that *I will show you*"; "Go and free my people *enslaved in Egypt*". There is nothing more concrete than a vocation - and when it is abstract it is almost never authentic. Your calling is not to art in general, but to poetry - you are an artist *because* you are a poet, not vice versa. Your calling is not to become a nun, but to become a Salesian sister - even if sometimes it takes a little time to understand it.

In vocations, in *all* true vocations, *everything* is in the voice. It is an *auditory* event. There is a real, mysterious and very concrete experience of a voice that calls and speaks to us and asks us to do something. A vocation is this dialogue between voices: the one that calls and the one that responds to it or that of the community that welcomes it. There is almost never certainty about *who* is calling, only about the presence of a voice. It is a plural voice that never calls us to become *just one thing*. It calls amidst life's ordinary conditions, with all its

beauties, contradictions and wounds. Some who marry are no less fascinated by mysticism and spirituality than some cloistered nuns. Those whom the voice asks to be a celibate do not have a different psychological structure than those who marry. They have, on average, the same desires, the same passions, the same eros of all. They were not called *because* they had an anthropological predisposition for chastity or obedience: *they were called and that's it*, without prior motivational and aptitude interviews. And it is not true that the voice that calls also provides the means to be able to carry out the task that it asks for. It would be too simple, and therefore trivial and not true - these things happen when it comes to company assignments, but not when carrying out our assignment for the world. *Inadequacy* is the ordinary condition of every vocation, and perhaps of every honest person.

Thus, among those who have received an authentic vocation, there are some balanced and some neurotic people, there are healthy and sick, holy and sinful ones: generally they aren't any wiser or more intelligent than the average population. Sometimes the honest response to a vocation makes people acquire some virtues over time and people improve ethically, at other times not. These calls coexist with and within chronic illnesses, depressions, accidents, wounds, and some people remain nailed to crosses on an eternal Good Friday and await a resurrection that does not come at all. In the best communities there are some people who are brought to spirituality and others who are not, some who love long prayers, some who do not love them at all. Others who started with great religious needs and after decades found themselves with a vocation that became a civil commitment among the poor, where learning to listen to the voices of the victims forgot the timbre of the first voice - to discover at the end that the voice of the first meeting has got lost because it has become the voice of the pain of others.

This biodiversity of the population of communities raises important, sometimes decisive, questions about the processes of *selection* and *discernment*. The only authentic and essential discernment that would serve at the dawn of a call is to ascertain the *presence of the voice* that is calling, which tends to be confused with other voices that, at a young age, are very similar to it. But the "masters" capable of these discoveries are very rare, today more than yesterday. And so, in the inability to find the only true indicator of the authenticity of a vocation, some secondary criteria are used to capture secondary and accidental aspects, but not the vocation. This inauspicious outcome depends entirely on the - nowadays deeply-rooted - idea that the *pre-conditions of the call* must be sought in people. We tend to seek (in the context of consecrated life, for example) presumed predispositions for chastity, for community life, or perhaps for obedience. As if it was possible to identify an abstract attitude for community *before really living* in a concrete community, or for chastity forgetting that the experience of chastity at forty or fifty years old is radically different from that *imagined* at twenty, in the age of enchantment.

Vocations are always "experience goods", that is, goods whose true value can only be known after they have been "consumed". We begin a journey with the *idea of vocation*, and until we are inside a vocational experience we know almost nothing about our concrete vocation. That is why every true vocational experience is tragic, because it carries the possibility of its failure within itself. Among those who leave an ideal-driven community there are not only those who have been "wrong about their vocation". There are also many who had a true call, but in the

experience they have gone through they have understood that they could not live in the concrete condition in which that call placed them existentially - because of their own weaknesses or because of community neuroses and errors of government. Therefore, the failure of a concrete vocational experience does not say much about the presence or absence of a true call at the beginning. There are people who remain, feeling very well within a vocational experience for the whole of their lives without ever having had a vocation, and others who leave even though they had a true call that accompanies them throughout their lives. Just as there are communities saved by reformers who had ugly characters and great weaknesses, but had simply been called.

However, if in order to prevent failures (a noble and dutiful intention) we try to identify the psychological or character-related predispositions of the people who have been called, and we neglect to understand if at the beginning there was a true vocational experience, we prevent people with weaknesses but a calling, too, to be able to occupy their place in the world, even when this place seriously risks, because of those weaknesses, to be uncomfortable and painful, even to have to deal with failure. Because no one can know, either before or after the event, the spiritual and moral value of a year, ten or thirty years lived trying to be faithful to a true call, even when that experience was interrupted, sometimes by the errors and wickedness of those around and above us. Something very similar happens in every marriage experience: if there was a real call at the beginning, the love we felt for each other, the children we gave birth to remain a blessing even if we have not been able to live together forever. At the same time, there are also some existences lived without traumas and failures the reason for which may be that we followed only the incentives and interests, and at the beginning of these there was no real voice. Success is not the indicator of the truth of an existence - even here the prophets are our eternal and infinite masters. It is the truth of what we are living and what we have lived that says the value of an experience and a life.

We must not make the cognitive error of "peak-end effects" in the evaluation of our existential experiences. We make these mistakes when, for example, we listen to a symphony with the old vinyl, and after an hour of listening to Beethoven, towards the end, the record is damaged and starts to make ugly and annoying sounds. Generally, when we evaluate that experience we forget the hour of heavenly music and extend the last-minute nuisance (the end) to the whole listening experience, expressing a negative opinion on the whole event. In fact, we had a wonderful hour and a strenuous ending. The beauty and truth of years spent kindly following a real voice are not to be measured by the unhappy final "minute", by the damaged record or by the old, broken record player. No one can and must ruin the truth and the beauty of having spent that first hour in Beethoven's company.

When, on the other hand, we look for vocational signs in character and personality, we end up identifying *predisposed* people who, however, are almost never those called by a real voice, but attracted by the *sociological aspects of the vocational profession*. Because if to enter communities it is the people who love community life very much and/or do not have the same affective desires as everyone else, have less eros and human passions than others, then we end up with communities poor in terms of anthropological normality, having little biodiversity and generativity. In such communities people are too similar and have a "reduced humanity" because they have already entered similar and reduced - but life is

generous, and even if we entered a community with the wrong motivations we can always receive a true call until the last day, provided that we really desire to be called by name on the day before.

In ideal-driven communities we are *together* because *each one of us* is called. One does not enter because we like the notion of *we*, but because we say yes to a *you*. In Galilee no community was created because the apostles were attracted by some form of common life or a state of life - and we don't know if Peter or Judas was the one more sociologically and psychologically *predisposed* for community life. The most lively and true community experiences almost always happen among people who would not have the ideal character traits to live together, but it is there, among them that an authentic, improbable fraternity flourishes, which has the capacity to convert and generate. Communities formed by people who are all equally attracted to the community itself almost always become communities that attract no one - communities with little biodiversity do not go beyond the second generation.

Many painters did not know painting techniques the day they received their vocation. They learned the techniques later but were *already* artists. You can *learn* community life, you can even learn to live in poverty and chastity, but you can't learn a vocation. You can only listen to it, and then begin the journey.