

## Session 23: God's Will

HYMN: Lord of All Power



Lord of all power,  
I give You my will  
in joyful obedience,  
Your tasks to fulfil.  
Your bondage is freedom,  
Your service is song,  
and, held in Your keeping,  
my weakness is strong.

Lord of all wisdom,  
I give You my mind.  
Rich truth that surpasses  
man's knowledge to find —  
what eye has not seen  
and what ear has not heard  
is taught by Your Spirit  
and shines from Your word.

Lord of all bounty,  
I give You my heart.  
I praise and adore You  
for all You impart —  
Your love to inspire me,  
Your counsel to guide,  
Your presence to cheer me,  
whatever betide.

Lord of all being,  
I give You my all.  
If e'er I disown You,  
I stumble and fall.  
But, sworn in glad service  
Your will to obey,  
I walk in Your freedom  
to the end of the way.

## PRAYER:

Let us pray:  
O God, Who,  
through Your Word  
reconcile the human race to Yourself  
in a wonderful way,  
grant, we pray,  
that with prompt devotion  
and eager faith,  
the Christian people may hasten

toward the solemn celebrations to  
come.

Through our Lord Jesus Christ, Your  
Son,  
Who lives and reigns with You in the  
unity of the Holy Spirit,  
God, for ever and ever.  
— Amen

## READING:

Mt 13:24-30

The Lord be with you.

— *And with your spirit*

A Reading from the holy Gospel  
according to Matthew

— *Glory to You, O Lord*

Jesus proposed  
another parable to them.

"The Kingdom of Heaven  
may be likened to a man  
who sowed good seed in his field.  
While everyone was asleep,  
his enemy came and sowed weeds  
all through the wheat,  
and then went off.

"When the crop grew  
and bore fruit,  
the weeds appeared as well.  
The slaves of the householder  
came to him and said,  
'Master, did you not sow good seed  
in your field?

Where have the weeds come from?'

"He answered,  
'An enemy has done this.'  
His slaves said to him,  
'Do you want us to go  
and pull them up?'

He replied,  
'No, if you pull up the weeds  
you might uproot the wheat  
along with them.

"Let them grow together  
until harvest;  
then at harvest time  
I will say to the harvesters,  
"First collect the weeds  
and tie them in bundles for burning;  
but gather the wheat  
into my barn."'"

The Gospel of the Lord

— *Praise to You, Lord Jesus Christ*

## Session 23

### IN BRIEF: WHAT THE CHURCH TEACHES

When we say,  
in the Lord's Prayer,  
"Thy will be done on earth  
as it is in Heaven,"  
we pray that God may enable us,  
in His graciousness,  
to do His will in all things,  
as the blessed do in Heaven.

When we say,  
"deliver us from evil,"  
we pray that God may free us  
from all evil,  
of both soul and body.

### BIBLE READING

Mic 1-7  
Zec 1-14  
Mal 1-3

This coming week,  
you will read  
three short books of prophecy.

All of them speak of the Messiah  
and are used by the Church  
in her liturgy.

"But you, Bethlehem ...  
from you shall come forth  
One who is to be Ruler in Israel,  
Whose origin is from of old."

"Rejoice heartily,  
O daughter Zion;  
"See, your King  
shall come to you...."

"His dominion shall be  
from sea to sea."

"Suddenly  
there will come to His temple  
the Lord Whom you seek."

It is appropriate  
to read these books  
as we prepare  
for the passion and death  
of the Messiah on Good Friday  
and His Resurrection at Easter.

Next week,  
we will discuss  
"The First Three Commandments"  
of God.

## God's Will

### Introduction

Through the Sacraments, God gives us supernatural life (*Zoë*).<sup>1</sup>

Now *Zoë* does not destroy our natural human life (*Bios*), but perfects it.<sup>2</sup> In this talk, we will see just how it affects the way we live our *Bios*.

### 'What must I do?'

"What must I do to inherit everlasting life?" a lawyer asked Jesus.

"What is written in the law?" Jesus countered.

The lawyer answered, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbour as yourself."

"You have answered correctly," Jesus said. "Do this and you shall live."<sup>3</sup>

On another occasion, when people asked Him, "What must we do to perform the works of God?" He replied, "Have faith in the One Whom He sent."<sup>4</sup> However, He stipulated that we must also live according to that faith, for "only the one who does the will of My Father in Heaven"<sup>5</sup> will enter God's kingdom.

We must love God and our neighbours, then, believe in Jesus, and do God's will.

But what *is* God's will?

"It is God's will" that we "grow in holiness,"<sup>6</sup> the Bible says. God's will is "that everyone who looks upon the Son and believes in Him shall have eternal life."<sup>7</sup>

But what is God's will *for me*? Does He want me to marry or enter a convent, become a teacher or go on studying, work in a public school or a Catholic school?

"My problem is not obeying God's will," one man said; "my problem is finding out what it is!"<sup>8</sup>

Does God have a "plan" for me? If so, why does He not tell me clearly what it is, instead of just giving me *signs*? What if I miss the signs or misinterpret them?

### Public Revelation

The Bible says that God did tell certain people explicitly what He wanted them to do: Adam and Eve,<sup>9</sup> Noah,<sup>10</sup> Abraham,<sup>11</sup> Moses,<sup>12</sup> Jeremiah,<sup>13</sup> Jonah,<sup>14</sup> Mary,<sup>15</sup> Joseph,<sup>16</sup> Matthew,<sup>17</sup> Ananias,<sup>18</sup> Paul,<sup>19</sup> and the apostles.<sup>20</sup>

But God spoke to them not just as individuals, but for the benefit of "humanity as a whole."<sup>21</sup> What He said to them is part of *Public Revelation*,<sup>22</sup> the "single Revelation of God addressed to all peoples."<sup>23</sup> That Revelation "came to completion with Christ and the witness borne to Him in the books of the New

1 See CCC 683, 739, 1076, 1155.

2 "Grace does not destroy nature, but perfects it" (Thomas Aquinas: *Summa Theologiae*, Part 1, Question 1, Article 8, Response to Objection 2). What he said (in Latin, *Gratia non tollit naturam, sed perfectit*) is sometimes mistranslated as "grace builds on nature."

3 See Lk 10:25-37.

4 Jn 6:29

5 Mt 7:21

6 1 Thes 4:3

7 Jn 6:40

8 See Timothy Dolan: *Priests for the Third Millennium*, 6

9 See Gn 1:28.

10 See Gn 6:11-22.

11 See Gn 12:1-9.

12 See Ex 3.

13 See Jer 1:3-19.

14 See Jon 1-3.

15 See Lk 1:26-38.

16 See Mt 1:2-25, 2:13-23.

17 See Mt 9:9.

18 See Acts 9:10-19.

19 See Acts 9:3-6.

20 See Mt 10:5-14, 28:19-20.

21 Joseph Ratzinger: *The Message of Fatima*; see Appendix 3.

22 See Appendices 3-4. "Public Revelation" comprises Sacred Tradition and Sacred Scripture, authentically interpreted by the Church's Magisterium; see the talk on "Divine Revelation."

23 Joseph Ratzinger: *The Message of Fatima*; see Appendix 3.

Testament."<sup>24</sup> It ended with the death of the last apostle, John, in about 100 AD.

At first, God spoke to us "through the prophets," but after the Incarnation, He spoke to us "through His Son."<sup>25</sup> In Him, He said everything, "and He has no more to say"; "there will be no other word than this one."<sup>26</sup>

If we want to discover God's will for us today, then, we must listen to Jesus.<sup>27</sup>

### God's assistants

The night before He died, Jesus told His apostles, "I no longer speak of you as slaves, for a slave does not know what his master is about"; that is, he does not know his master's mind, purpose, or intentions. "Instead, I call you friends, since I have made known to you all that I heard from My Father."<sup>28</sup>

Think of us as God's assistants. One kind of assistant says to his master, "What do you want me to do?" He goes and does it, and then comes back and says, "What do you want me to do next?" At each moment, he has to be told exactly what to do because he "does not know what his master is about."

The other kind of assistant seems to know what to do without being told. He watches his master, and from then on he is always in the right place at the right time; he sees what tool his master needs and hands it to him; he can even take over and finish the job himself. He does not have to be told continually what to do because his master has "made known" to him what he is "about."

Today, Jesus tells us what he is about through His Church, thus making us His friends rather than His slaves. Therefore, if we, like the lawyer, ask Him what we must do to inherit everlasting life, He does not quote the 613 laws of the Pharisees, nor the 27 chapters of the Book of Leviticus, nor even the Ten Commandments. All He says is, "Love God and love your neighbour."

In fact, if Adam and Eve had not fallen, we would know the answer to this question without asking it, for God, Who is love,<sup>29</sup> created us in His image and likeness.<sup>30</sup> Love, therefore, is "somehow rooted in man's very nature."<sup>31</sup>

St. Augustine summed it up — "You are given a short precept: Love,<sup>32</sup> and do what you will ... If love be the root within, nothing can spring from this root but what is good."<sup>33</sup>

### God's co-operators

Jesus's work — what He is about — is to carry out His Father's plan:<sup>34</sup> "essentially the salvation of men," but also the "renewal" of the world.<sup>35</sup> In both these jobs, we are His *co-workers*, not His slaves.

From the beginning, God wanted man to "seek his Creator" of "his own accord" and "cleave" to Him in love, thus attaining his full perfection "freely"<sup>36</sup> — as a friend, not a slave. Accordingly, He made man "subject to his own free choice."<sup>37</sup>

Moreover, God wanted to associate man with Himself in protecting, guiding, and governing the world, which He had created "good,"<sup>38</sup> but not "complete"; rather, "in a state of journeying" toward its "ultimate perfection."<sup>39</sup> Accordingly, He gave man

24 Joseph Ratzinger: *The Message of Fatima*; see Appendix 3.

25 See Heb 1:1.

26 See CCC 65.

27 See Mt 17:5; Mk 9:7; Lk 9:35.

28 Jn 15:14-15

29 See Jn 1:1.

30 See Gn 1:26.

31 Pope Benedict XVI: *Deus Caritas Est*, 11

32 Here, "love" means not affection, friendship, or *eros*, but *agape*: willed or committed love, the love of the "good Samaritan" that Jesus described when the lawyer asked, "And who is my neighbour?" (See Lk 10:30-35.) See the talk on "Love of God and Neighbour."

33 Augustine: *Tractatus 7, In Epistolam Ioannis ad Parthos*, 8. Also see Rom 13:8-10.

34 See Jn 6:37-40.

35 Vatican II: *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, 5

36 See CCC 1730.

37 Sir 15:14

38 Gn 1:4,10,12,17,21,25,31

39 CCC 302

"the responsibility of subduing the earth and having dominion over it"<sup>40</sup> so as "to complete the work of creation" and "perfect its harmony" for the good of all.<sup>41</sup>

God created humans, then, rational beings — persons who can initiate and control their own actions.<sup>42</sup> He gave them the power "to act or not to act, to do this or that, and so to perform deliberate actions" on their "own responsibility"<sup>43</sup> — to act on their own,<sup>44</sup> shaping their own lives by free will.<sup>45</sup>

God's plan is, "in Christ, to take the whole world up again and make of it a new creation."<sup>46</sup> He is the "sovereign Master"<sup>47</sup> of His plan, but He has made us "intelligent and free causes" in its accomplishment — initiators, whose actions really do make a difference. We *co-operate*<sup>48</sup> with Him: *work with* Him, not just *go along with* Him or *fall in with* His design.

### God is a Lover

When we say to God "Thy will be done," we usually think of stifling our own inclinations and *submitting* to His will. However, we *should* pray that we may not only patiently *suffer* His will, but also actively *do* it.<sup>49</sup>

Remember Christ's parable, in which a master gives one servant 5,000 silver pieces; another, 2,000; and a third, 1,000. On their own initiative — without being told — the first two invest their money and double it, but the third buries his in the ground. Their master commends the first two, but condemns the third.<sup>50</sup>

God's plan for us is to make us "share in His own blessed life" by adopting us into the Holy Trinity.<sup>51</sup> He wants our deliberate, willing, and free *co-operation*, not just our meek resignation, in its accomplishment.

"God is love."<sup>52</sup> He is a *Lover*. He *loves* us. And no lover is satisfied when his beloved initiates nothing, but says resignedly, "Whatever you like, dear."

Of course, resignation — willing, not slave-like or sullen — is also necessary. To live our *Zoë*, we must painfully correct the selfward leaning of our fallen *Bios*, enduring the pain "as the discipline of God," Who treats us "as sons,"<sup>53</sup> and responding whole-heartedly, "Thy will be done."<sup>54</sup> Such resignation is necessary even in prosperity, for we often "reject the good God offers us because, at that moment, we expected some other good."<sup>55</sup>

But we must not think of God's will for us as painful *per se*. "Would one of you hand his son a stone when he asks for a loaf, or a poisonous snake when he asks

40 See Gn 1:28.

41 See CCC 307. He settled Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden "to cultivate it and care for it" (Gn 2:15), telling them to "multiply" and "fill the earth" (Gn 1:28).

42 See CCC 1730. Also see Joseph Ratzinger: *God and the World*, Part I, 1, "Freedom."

43 See CCC 1731.

44 See CCC 306.

45 See CCC 1731.

46 Vatican II: *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, 5

47 See CCC 306.

48 From the Latin *co* ("with") plus *operor* ("to work").

49 See C.S. Lewis: *Letters to Malcolm*, V.

50 See Mt 15:14-30.

51 See CCC 1, 52, 1997, 2021.

52 1 Jn 4:8

53 See Heb 12:5-11; Prv 3:11-12. Also see the talk on "The Question of Suffering."

54 See Mt 26:39,42; Lk 22:42-44.

55 "We are always harking back to some occasion which seemed to us to reach perfection, setting that up as a norm, and depreciating all other occasions [in] comparison." But these other occasions "are often full of their own new blessings if only we would lay ourselves open to them. God shows us a new facet of the glory, and we refuse to look at it because we're still looking for the old one" (C.S. Lewis: *Prayer: Letters to Malcolm*, V).

"One goes into the forest to pick food and already the thought of one fruit rather than another has grown up in one's mind. Then, it may be, one finds a different fruit and not the fruit one thought of. One joy was expected and another is given." However, "the picture of the fruit you have not found is still, for a moment, before you. And if you wished — if it were possible to wish — you could keep it there. You could send your soul after the good you had expected, instead of turning it to the good you had got. You could refuse the real good; you could make the real fruit taste insipid by thinking of the other" (C.S. Lewis: *Peregrandra*, 5).

for a fish?" said Jesus. "If you, with all your sins, know how to give your children what is good, how much more will your heavenly Father give good things to anyone who asks Him!"<sup>5 6</sup>

In fact, God has filled the world with good things: "sleeping, washing, eating, drinking, making love, playing, praying, working."<sup>5 7</sup> Here — "in the realm of what is good" — there opens up before us "an infinite interplay of creative possibilities." Here our "freedom really finds its creative space," for here God invites us to take upon ourselves, of our own free will, the "potential" of our being.<sup>5 8</sup>

### Burden of freedom

God, then, gives us the freedom of sons and co-workers — but do we want it?

"Who is there who has not longed that the power and privilege of selection among alternatives should be taken away from him in some important crisis of his life, and that his conduct should be arranged for him, either this way or that, by some divine power, if it were possible; by some patriarchal power, in the absence of divinity; or by chance even, if nothing better than chance can be found to do it?"<sup>5 9</sup>

Like the Israelites after their liberation from Egypt, we sometimes long for the security of slavery.<sup>6 0</sup> We wish we could make a decision for God, once and for all, and then, relieved of responsibility, have Him tell us exactly what to do.<sup>6 1</sup>

This God *will not* do. He has made Himself our Father, not our *Baal*, or Master.<sup>6 2</sup> He has made us His sons, not His slaves.<sup>6 3</sup>

Nevertheless, in spite of God's explicit command,<sup>6 4</sup> we are still tempted<sup>6 5</sup> to try to discover "what is meant to be" — from clairvoyants, psychic readers, horoscopes, mediums, astrology, lots, omens,<sup>6 6</sup> tarot cards, *Feng Shui*, isolated Bible passages,<sup>6 7</sup> our own feelings, or flipped coins.<sup>6 8</sup>

We even try to *compel* God to give us signs. "I'm going to pray that if I'm not supposed to be working at the [abortion] clinic, I won't get the promotion... If I pray that way and still get the job, I'll know it's God's will that I run the clinic."<sup>6 9</sup>

We are *forbidden* to seek such signs — to try to "force God to act,"<sup>7 0</sup> so to speak. That is what Satan did in the desert when he urged Jesus to jump from the pinnacle of the temple.<sup>7 1</sup> Always, the proper reply is the one Jesus quoted: "You

56 Mt 7:9-11. Joy Lewis "was haunted all one morning as she went about her work with the obscure sense of God (so to speak) 'at her elbow,' demanding her attention. And, of course, not being a perfected saint, she had the feeling that it would be a question, as it usually is, of some unrepented sin or tedious duty." At last she gave in "and faced Him. But the message was 'I want to give you something,' and instantly she entered into joy" (C.S. Lewis: *A Grief Observed*, III).

57 C.S. Lewis: *The Screwtape Letters*, 22. Equally insulting to our divine Lover would be an outright refusal to accept joy or pleasure from Him. True, we must "deny ourselves" (see Mt 16:24, CCC 1434), but what lover wants all His gifts returned, however high-mindedly? Surely he wants to see them *enjoyed!*

58 See Joseph Ratzinger: *God and the World*, Part I, 1, "Freedom."

59 Anthony Trollope: *Phineas Finn*, LX

60 See Ex 14:12, 16:3, 17:3; Nm 11:4-6.

61 "Lord, hear my voice — my present voice, I mean: not that which may be speaking an hour hence (for I am legion) in an opposite sense.... Thou wilt not, though we asked it, quite recall free will once given. Yet to this moment's choice give unfair weight" (C.S. Lewis: *Poems*, "Legion").

62 See Hos 2:16-18; Mt 6:9-13; Lk 11:2-41.

63 See Rom 8:14-17.

64 See Dt 18:9-11. Also see the talk on "The First Three Commandments."

65 Like King Saul (see 1 Sm 28).

66 For example, estranged spouses meet by chance at a racecourse. "Will you come back to me?" he asks. "I don't know," she replies. The next race starts. "See," she cries: "If Lu-lu wins I will not go back to you; if Mascot does I will. That is my decision" (Lucy Maud Montgomery: *Kismet*). "Kismet" ("destiny," "fate") comes, via Turkish, from the Arabic *qismah* ("portion," "lot").

67 It is not wrong to consult the Bible. "All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching — for reproof, correction, and training in holiness" (2 Tim 3:16). However, in reading the Bible, we must "be especially attentive to the content and the unity of Scripture as a whole" (CCC 112), read it "within the living Tradition of the whole Church" (CCC 113), and keep in mind "the coherence of the truths of faith" among themselves and within the whole of Revelation (CCC 114).

68 It is not wrong to flip a coin to decide which soccer team will start a game upwind, or which cricket team will bat first; but it is wrong to take the result as "a sign from God."

69 Abby Johnson: *Unplanned*, Seven

70 CCC 2119. See Joseph Ratzinger: *God and the World*, Part I, 2, "Where is God?"

71 See Mt 4:5-7; Ps 91:12.

shall not put the Lord your God to the test."<sup>72</sup>

In setting God such a test, we challenge Him to prove His love, providence, and power. We doubt Him; we stop trusting His goodness, like Adam and Eve.<sup>73</sup> Thus we are left, like them, with "a sense of the master-slave relationship"<sup>74</sup> only, as expressed by the older son in Jesus' parable: "For years now I have slaved for You" and "never disobeyed" Your orders. God wants a different relationship, the one expressed by the father:<sup>75</sup> "My son,... everything I have is yours."<sup>76</sup>

In trusting to "divination and sorcery" to "unveil the future," we not only offend God,<sup>77</sup> but also deceive ourselves.<sup>78</sup> For example, when a farmer's horse ran away, he took it as a sign from God to stop farming; when the horse returned with three wild horses, a sign to expand; when his son broke his leg trying to ride one of the wild horses, a sign to sell; and when the broken leg excused his son from military service, a sign to continue.

Are the difficulties we encounter in any project signs to stop, or to try harder? We can always twist them to suit ourselves, like the old lady who "discovered" the way "God wanted her to go" by tossing up a stick and seeing how it fell. If it did not point the way she wanted, she tossed it up again until it did.

We can be deceived even by what the Church calls "private revelations."<sup>79</sup>

### Freedom and procreation

Shirking our responsibility as God's co-workers can masquerade as trusting God<sup>80</sup> — especially in the procreation of children.

"We're leaving it to God," one couple said. Father Vince said, "When you approach an intersection, do you close your eyes and 'leave it to God'?"

"We have left it up to the Lord in regard to more children," a woman wrote. "What a load off my mind!" Father Vince said, "What a cop-out!"

A devout couple told how they managed their time so as to keep Sunday holy and their finances so as to give to the Church, but "left their fertility to God."

No! said Pope John Paul II. "God the Creator invites the spouses to be not passive operators, but rather 'co-operators'" with Him.<sup>81</sup>

"Unfortunately," he said, "*Catholic thought is often misunderstood* on this point, as if the Church supported an ideology of fertility at all costs, urging married couples to procreate indiscriminately and without thought for the future.... One need only study the pronouncements of the Magisterium<sup>82</sup> to know that this is not so."<sup>83</sup>

In fact, the Church urges spouses to exercise "responsible parenthood"<sup>84</sup> — not through *contraception*, which ruptures their integrity and violates Matrimony as a sacramental sign of Christ's love for the Church<sup>85</sup> — but through 1) "knowledge" of the "biological laws" of procreation and 2) the "dominion" of "reason and will" over "instinct or passion."<sup>86</sup>

72 See Ps 78:18,41,56, 106:14.

73 See CCC 397, 2115, 2119.

74 "Original sin attempts ... to abolish fatherhood,... placing in doubt the truth about God Who is love and leaving man only with a sense of the master-slave relationship" (Pope John Paul II: *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, "Crossing the Threshold of Hope").

75 "In the Gospel of Christ,... the paradigm of master-slave is radically transformed into the paradigm of father-son" (Pope John Paul II: *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, "Crossing the Threshold of Hope").

76 See Lk 15:11-32.

77 See CCC 2115-2117. Also see Lv 18:24-27; Dt 7:1-5, 13, 18:9-12; Heb 1:1.

78 "I ... begin to doubt the equivocation of the fiend that lies like truth" (William Shakespeare: *Macbeth*, Act V, Scene V). "And be these juggling fiends no more believ'd, that palter with us in a double sense, that keep the word of promise to our ear, and break it to our hope" (Scene VIII).

79 See Appendix 4.

80 As in Satan's temptation of Jesus. See Mt 4:5-7.

81 Pope John Paul II: papal audience to participants in a Natural Family Planning course in Rome, December 14 1990, reported in *L'Osservatore Romano* (weekly edition) December 17 1990

82 That is, the teaching authority of the Catholic Church.

83 Pope John Paul II: *L'Osservatore Romano*, July 17 1994

84 Today, this is "rightly much insisted upon," but it "must be properly understood" (Pope Paul VI: *Humanae Vitae*, 10).

85 "Every marriage act must remain open to the transmission of life" (Pope Paul VI: *Humanae Vitae*, 11). See the talks on "Matrimony" and "The Last Seven Commandments."

1) The knowledge needed is *the exact time of ovulation*. Thanks to scientific research, we can now pinpoint it fairly easily.<sup>87</sup> "These methods are becoming more and more accurate," said Pope John Paul. "An honest appraisal of their effectiveness should dispel certain prejudices that are still widely held,<sup>88</sup> and should convince married couples, as well as health-care and social workers, of the importance of proper training in this area."<sup>89</sup>

2) Conjugal love "is first of all fully human": that is, "of the senses and of the spirit at the same time." It is not "a simple transport of instinct and sentiment," but "also, and principally, an act of the free will."<sup>90</sup>

The Fall<sup>91</sup> made human nature "subject to ignorance";<sup>92</sup> deprived the soul of "its control over the body";<sup>93</sup> and introduced "tensions," "lust," and "domination" into marriage.<sup>94</sup> However, Matrimony strengthens and consecrates spouses for their vocation even as far as "perfection."<sup>95</sup>

Spouses with the necessary training and will can say, as they come together, "It is the decision of the Holy Spirit, and ours too,<sup>96</sup> that we conceive, or do not conceive, a child at this time." By refusing the training or ignoring the knowledge it gives them, they decline the full dignity of God's co-creators and the sublime experience of coming together with the knowledge and the will that, under God, they are about to pro-create a new human being.

### God leaves us free

"One could say that confronted with our human freedom" — which He Himself has given us — "God decided to make Himself impotent," or powerless.<sup>97</sup>

God could, "if He chose, repair our bodies miraculously without food, or give us food without the aid of farmers, bakers, and butchers." He could even bring us into being without parents. "Instead, He allows soils and weather and animals and the muscles, minds, and wills of men to co-operate in the execution of His will," the fruition of His "plan." God seems to delegate to us everything He can. He lets us do "slowly and blunderingly what He could do perfectly and in the twinkling of an eye"; He even allows us to neglect what He would have us do.<sup>98</sup>

God the almighty left to the free will of a young girl the preparation of a Body for His own Son.<sup>99</sup> After that, can there be *anything* He will not delegate to us?

86 Pope Paul VI: *Humanae Vitae*, 10

87 "One may hope that science will succeed in providing this lawful method [of regulating births] with a sufficiently secure base" (Pope Pius XII: Talk to the *Family Front*, November 1951). Drs. John and Evelyn Billings of Australia provided that base in the 1960's. (See the talk on "Marriage and the Family," Appendix 1.)

88 For example, the mistaken idea that the term "natural family planning," in which the time of ovulation is pinpointed by the observation of reliable signs, refers to the "rhythm" method, in which the time of ovulation was estimated from the rhythm of the menstrual cycle.

89 Pope John Paul II: *Evangelium Vitae*, 97. See the talk on "Marriage and the Family," Appendices 1 and 2.

90 Pope Paul VI: *Humanae Vitae*, 9. Spontaneity, much desired in sexual relations, represents, at best, "a simple transport of instinct and sentiment," and, at worst, merely animal responses to sexual stimuli.

91 See the talk on "Creation and the Fall."

92 CCC 404. Ignorance gives occasion for trust in God, but it does not follow that God desires ignorance; "to instruct the ignorant" is one of the Seven Spiritual Works of Mercy (see *The Penny Catechism*, 322).

"When a husband and wife have intercourse, whether they are fertile or infertile, they are furthering the Creator's intention for human life. If they do so with full knowledge of their fertility, they co-operate in a more fully human way" (Dr. Lyn Billings, in an interview with *The BC Catholic*, October 1987; see the talk on "Marriage and the Family," Appendix 1).

93 See CCC 400.

94 See CCC 400. See also the talk on "Creation and the Fall."

95 Pope Paul VI: *Humanae Vitae*, 25

96 See Acts 15:28. Notice that this is, in effect, what spouses say when they adopt a child.

97 Pope John Paul II: *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, "Why Does God Tolerate Suffering?"

98 C.S. Lewis: *The World's Last Night*, The Efficacy of Prayer

99 Mary's freedom in this regard is dramatically stressed by Bernard of Clairvaux in his homily *In Praise of the Virgin Mother*, used by the Church in the Office of Readings on December 20:

"You have heard, O Virgin, that you will conceive and bear a Son; you have heard that it will not be by man but by the Holy Spirit. The angel awaits an answer; it is time for him to return to God Who sent him. We too are waiting, O Lady, for your word of compassion; the sentence of condemnation weighs heavily upon us. The price of our salvation is offered to you. We shall be set free at once if you consent. In the eternal Word of God we all came to be, and behold, we die. In your brief response we are to be remade in



God the all-loving left to the free will of humans the fate of His own Son.<sup>100</sup> After that, can there be *any* human decision He will not ratify?

In a Sacrament, like Matrimony or Holy Orders, He does it with a visible sign.<sup>101</sup> However, until that sign is given, He leaves us free to choose.

For example, bridegrooms waiting in the church often joke that they can still walk away — and they are right. Until mutual consent to Matrimony has been given and consummated,<sup>102</sup> they are free.

The late Monsignor Donald Neumann said that men sometimes take marriage difficulties as signs from God that they should have become priests. "No!" he would say. "God gave you free will. Until you married, He *left the choice to you*. When you married, He *ratified your choice*."

Cardinal Jean-Marie Lustiger<sup>103</sup> said that when seminarians asked him how they could be sure God was calling them to be priests,<sup>104</sup> he replied, "The sign that God is calling you will be my ordaining you."<sup>105</sup>

Father Vince says he was very aware of his own free will right up to the moment of ordination. "I lay there on the carpet thinking, 'I am not ordained yet. I can still get up and walk away. It's up to me. I have free will. I am not a priest yet. I am not a priest yet....'"

*Before* we choose, God holds back, as it were, relinquishing His power lest the weight of His influence diminish or destroy our freedom.<sup>106</sup> For the same reason,

order to be recalled to life.

"Tearful Adam with his sorrowing family begs this of you, O loving Virgin, in their exile from Paradise. Abraham begs it, David begs it. All the other holy patriarchs, your ancestors, ask it of you, as they dwell in the country of the shadow of death. This is what the whole earth waits for, prostrate at your feet. It is right in doing so, for on your word depends comfort for the wretched, ransom for the captive, freedom for the condemned: indeed, salvation for all the sons of Adam, the whole of your race.

"Answer quickly, O Virgin. Reply in haste to the angel, or rather through the angel to the Lord.

Answer with a word, receive the Word of God. Speak your own word, conceive the divine Word. Breathe a passing word, embrace the eternal Word.

"Why do you delay, why are you afraid? Believe, give praise, and receive. Let humility be bold, let modesty be confident. This is no time for virginal simplicity to forget prudence. In this matter alone, O prudent Virgin, do not fear to be presumptuous. Though modest silence is pleasing, dutiful speech is now more necessary. Open your heart to faith, O blessed Virgin, your lips to praise, your womb to the Creator. See, the desired of all nations is at your door, knocking to enter. If He should pass by because of your delay, in sorrow you would begin to seek Him afresh, the One Whom your soul loves. Arise, hasten, open. Arise in faith, hasten in devotion, open in praise and thanksgiving.

"Behold the handmaid of the Lord," she says, "be it done to me according to your word."

At the end of the closing Mass at World Youth Day 2008, before praying the Angelus, Pope Benedict XVI said, "The Covenant with Israel was like a period of courtship, a long engagement. Then came the definitive moment, the moment of marriage, the establishment of a new and everlasting covenant. As Mary stood before the Lord, she represented the whole of humanity. In the angel's message, it was as if God made a marriage proposal to the human race. And, in our name, Mary said *yes*."

100 Even though it involved a "turning of God against Himself" (Pope Benedict XVI: *Deus Caritas Est*, 12).

101 "As the nature of man demands" (CCC 1366). See the talks on "Grace and the Sacraments," "Mass: Sacrament and Sacrifice," and "Matrimony."

102 The consent and its consummation together constitute the sacramental sign of Matrimony.

103 The late Archbishop of Paris.

104 See Appendix 6 and the talk on "Consecrated Life," Appendix 3.

105 Cardinal Jean-Marie Lustiger: Homily at the Seminary of Issy-les-Moulineaux, May 13 1984. See CCC 1578.

106 Jesus came to us "meek," riding on "a colt, the foal of an ass" (Zec 9:9), leaving us free to accept or reject Him. When He returns, "coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory" (Mt 24:30), compelling our attention like a flash of lightning (see Mt 14:27), we will no longer have that freedom. (See C.S. Lewis: *Mere Christianity*, Book II, 5.) Similarly, God seems to "hold back" before an adult decides to be baptized or received into full communion with the Catholic Church.

"Christianity seemed probable to me, but I wanted proof. I wanted certainty. I wanted to see [Jesus] eat a bit of fish. I wanted letters of fire across the sky. I got none of these. And I continued to hang about on the edge of the gap" between "probable" and "proved" (Sheldon Vanauken: *A Severe Mercy*, IV, V). After Vanauken had finally "flung" himself "over the gap," C.S. Lewis wrote, "There must, perhaps, always be just enough lack of demonstrative certainty to make free choice possible; for what could we do but accept if the faith were like the multiplication table?" (Sheldon Vanauken: *A Severe Mercy*, V).

It is a "mistake" to expect an extraordinary sign from God before becoming a Catholic. That may be granted to some people, but certainly not to all. Most people have to "proceed" with merely a "strong human conviction"; only when they have acted on it does it become "the strongest certitude of their lives" (see Ronald Knox: Letter to Lawrence Eyres, August 1920, in Evelyn Waugh: *Ronald Knox*, III, One). "Take yourself by the scruff of the neck and say, '...I mean by such and such a date, after prayer and reading what I can, and thinking the thing out (not just brooding on it) ... to reach a *decision*'" (Ronald Knox: Letter to Lawrence Eyres, July 1920, in Evelyn Waugh: *Ronald Knox*, III, One).

Father Vince says he has often stayed out of discussions about, say, where to hold a staff party; his opinion has unfair weight simply because he is the pastor.<sup>107</sup>

But *after* we choose, God ratifies our choice. A couple in a valid, consummated marriage, then, can be certain that marriage is their God-given vocation. After ordination, a priest can "go ahead with objective confidence." He has been "taken by the hand and consecrated" by a successor of the apostles, whom Christ called, so he knows he has received his call "from Christ Himself."<sup>108</sup>

Even when we make choices that are wrong (*e.g.*, fornication<sup>109</sup>) or that seem right but turn out to be wrong (*e.g.*, adopting a drug-addicted child into a young family), God still ratifies them, giving us all the help we need to live with their consequences, like an illegitimate baby or the erosion of family life.

Our free will is a "terrible mystery."<sup>110</sup> How has God "made me so separate from Himself?" the Lady asks in *Perelandra*. "I thought we went along paths — but it seems there are no paths. The going itself is the path."<sup>111</sup>

\* \* \* \* \*

### Inside God's plan

Having given us free will, God ratifies all our choices in the sense that He builds them and all their consequences into His plan. We can never act outside His plan, therefore, but only within it.

To understand, think of a GPS unit. You input your destination and the GPS gives you a route. At any time you may choose to leave that route and go off in another direction. If you do, your choice does not take you outside the GPS's design; the GPS simply accepts your choice and builds it into a new route.<sup>112</sup>

Or take Alan Ayckbourn's play *Intimate Exchanges*. In each scene, a character chooses one of two options, so there are two possible versions for Scene One, four for Scene Two, eight for Scene Three, and sixteen for Scene Four.<sup>113</sup> Each choice is real, with real consequences. However, no possible choice can take the play outside the playwright's plan.

Only a brilliant playwright can give his characters such freedom. But think of the freedom God gives us! Ayckbourn has ten characters; God has billions. Ayckbourn's characters have four occasions for choice; God gives us continuous choice. In each choice, Ayckbourn's characters have only two options; God imposes no limit.

Or take Tolkien's idea: "Iluvatar" (God) "made the Ainur" (angels), "and He spoke to them, propounding to them a mighty theme. Then the voices of the Ainur began to fashion Iluvatar's theme to a great music. But as the theme progressed, it came into the heart of Melkor to interweave matters of his own imagining that were not in accord with Iluvatar's theme. And Melkor's music tried to drown the other music by the violence of its voice, but it seemed that its most triumphant notes were taken by the other and woven into its own solemn pattern.

"Then Iluvatar spoke: 'Mighty are the Ainur, and mightiest among them is Melkor; but thou, Melkor, shalt see that no theme may be played that hath not its uttermost source in Me, nor can any alter the music in My despite. For he that attempteth this shall prove but Mine instrument in the devising of things more wonderful, which he himself hath not imagined.'"<sup>114</sup>

107 In contrast, Daniel Thwaite decided that he would release Anna from her engagement, "but not without expressing to her his thoughts as he did so." However, "in making this resolution, he ignored the masterfulness of his own character. There are men who exercise dominion, from the nature of their disposition, and who do so from their youth upwards, without knowing that any power of dominion belongs to them," who are "unconscious that they use burning words to others whose words to them are never even warm. So it was with this man.... If Lady Anna asked for her release, she should be released, but not till she had heard his words. How scalding these words might be, how powerful to prevent the girl from really choosing her own fate, he did not know himself" (Anthony Trollope: *Lady Anna*, XII).

108 Cardinal Jean-Marie Lustiger: Homily at the Seminary of Issy-les-Moulineaux May 13 1984

109 Sexual intercourse between an unmarried man and an unmarried woman.

110 CCC 309

111 C.S. Lewis: *Perelandra*, 5

112 See Appendix 1.

113 See Appendix 2.

114 Condensed and paraphrased from J.R.R. Tolkien: *The Silmarillion*, "Ainulindalë"

Finally, consider how God built death, which had been "contrary" to His plan,<sup>115</sup> into the very centre of His design for our salvation.<sup>116</sup>

### Tool or son

But if we can do nothing outside God's plan — if everything we do contributes to it — why did Jesus say that "only the one who does the will of My Father in Heaven"<sup>117</sup> can enter God's Kingdom?

The answer is that, inside God's plan, we can make two different kinds of choice:

- like Mary,<sup>118</sup> we can "enter deliberately into the divine plan" by action, prayer, or suffering,<sup>119</sup> thus becoming full co-workers with God; or
- like Judas<sup>120</sup> and Melkor, we can try to spoil God's plan. We do not succeed: instead we become His "unconscious"<sup>121</sup> or even unwilling collaborators.

Both Mary and Judas did God's will in the sense that "God is at work in all the actions of His creatures."<sup>122</sup> However, Mary did, and Judas did not do, God's will in Jesus' sense. What Mary did was good; what Judas did was evil.<sup>123</sup>

We wonder why evil exists. "Why did God not stop Hitler?" we ask. We should also ask why He did not stop my uttering that "unkind slander" or signing my name to that "little bit of financial trickery,"<sup>124</sup> or looking at that pornographic picture, or taking that extra drink, or indulging in that "casual" adultery, *etc.*

The answer is that while God does not cause moral evil, directly or indirectly, He nevertheless permits it *because He respects our freedom* — and also because, "mysteriously," He "knows how to derive good from it."<sup>125</sup>

For example, a man who gives to his neighbour does something good, while a man who steals from his neighbour does something evil. However, the neighbour who forgives the theft does something good, so the thief "is used by God, without his own knowledge or consent," to produce something good. Both men serve God's plan: the first as a son, the second as a tool.<sup>126</sup>

However we act, we will certainly carry out God's plan, whether we like it or not, but it makes a difference to *us* whether we do it like Mary or like Judas.

### Good out of evil

In fact, God "would never allow any evil whatsoever to exist in His works if He were not so all-powerful and good as to cause good to emerge from evil itself."<sup>127</sup> For example:

- illness, a great physical evil, can help us discern what is essential in our lives and lead us to God.<sup>128</sup>
- Joseph saved Egypt from famine because his brothers sold him as a slave. "You meant evil against me," he said, "but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive."<sup>129</sup>
- God brought about the greatest of all goods, our Redemption, from the greatest of all evils, the murder of His Son.<sup>130</sup>

115 See CCC 1008.

116 See the talks on "The History of Our Salvation" and "Death and the End of the World."

117 Mt 7:21

118 See the talk on "Mary and Joseph."

119 See CCC 307.

120 The apostle who betrayed Jesus to the Jewish authorities (see Mt 26:14-16, 47-50).

121 See CCC 307.

122 CCC 308

123 Similarly, a child who chooses to tidy up is doing his mother's will; a child who chooses not to tidy up is not. However, the second child *is* doing his mother's will in the sense that he is exercising the freedom she has given him.

124 See Dorothy Sayers: *Creed or Chaos*, "The Triumph of Easter."

125 CCC 311

126 See C.S. Lewis: *The Problem of Pain*, VII.

127 Augustine: *Enchiridion* 11, 3 (see CCC 311).

128 See CCC 1500-1501.

129 See Gn 37-45.

130 See CCC 312.

Thus "evil labours with vast power and perpetual success — in vain; preparing always only the soil for unexpected good to sprout in."<sup>131</sup>

God cares for everything, "from the least things to the great events of the world and its history."<sup>132</sup> However, much of the time, His ways are hidden from us.<sup>133</sup>

The mother of a young man who fell to his death when a tennis bubble broke asked incredulously, "Are you saying it was God's will that my son died? Next you'll be telling me God *wanted* him to die!"

How can we answer? Only at the end of the world<sup>134</sup> will we see the whole of God's loving plan, and know fully how He has guided creation<sup>135</sup> to its perfection, even through evil and sin.<sup>136</sup> Notice — *through* evil and sin. God does not "uproot the weeds" when they appear, but uses them in caring for the good seed.<sup>137</sup>

"After the end of days," Iluvatar's themes shall be played aright, "for all shall then understand fully His intent in their part"<sup>138</sup> — what He is "about." Until then, insofar as we cannot understand, we simply trust Him. Only faith can "embrace" — not *understand* — "the mysterious ways" of His almighty power."<sup>139</sup> We believe that

- "in everything God works for good for those who love Him."<sup>140</sup>
- "nothing can come but that that God wills; and I make me very sure that whatsoever that be, seem it never so bad in sight, it shall indeed be the best."<sup>141</sup>

God made everything good,<sup>142</sup> but after evil He does everything even better.

- He "wonderfully created the dignity of human nature," but He "*still more wonderfully* restored it."<sup>143</sup>
- "Despite the increase of sin, grace has far surpassed it."<sup>144</sup>
- "Christ's inexpressible grace gave us blessings better than those the demon's envy had taken away."<sup>145</sup>

The Church, therefore, dares to say, "O happy fault, O necessary sin of Adam, which gained for us so great a Redeemer!"<sup>146</sup>

### Double effect

Out of evil, God always brings greater good. May we do evil, then, to bring about good? For example, may we kill abortionists to save unborn babies?

*No.* Paul, after admitting that "grace has far surpassed" sin,<sup>147</sup> adds, "What, then, are we to say? 'Let us continue in sin that grace may abound'? Certainly not!"<sup>148</sup> God always brings good out of evil, but evil never becomes good, and it is never

131 J.R.R. Tolkien: Letter to Christopher Tolkien, April 30 1944

132 CCC 303

133 See CCC 314.

134 When we see God "face to face" (1 Cor 13:12).

135 Including her and her son — for God's design, which incorporates the free decisions of all His creatures and all their consequences, is best for every single creature. See the talk on "Prayer."

136 See CCC 314.

137 See Mt 13:24-30.

138 J.R.R. Tolkien: *The Silmarillion*, "Ainulindale"

139 CCC 273. "Blessed are they who have not seen and have believed" (Jn 21:29).

140 Rom 8:28

141 Thomas More: *Correspondence*, 206 (see CCC 313). More was consoling his daughter Margaret in a letter he sent her shortly before he was beheaded for refusing to take the oath of allegiance to King Henry VIII as head of the Catholic Church in England.

142 Gn 1:4,10,12,17,21,25,31

143 Collect for the Solemnity of the Nativity of the Lord (Mass during the day)

144 Rom 5:20. "Tell me," Pope John Paul II asked Archbishop Exner the first time they met, "when you look at the world of today and all its problems — when you look at the Church of today and all its problems — tell me, are you optimistic and encouraged or pessimistic and discouraged?" When Archbishop Exner hesitated, the Pope went on: "I can't help but believe that our world of today has problems more serious, perhaps, than ever before. So does the Church of today — enormous problems — but," he said, "the reasons for hope, the reasons for courage, enthusiasm, and optimism are stronger and more convincing than ever" (Archbishop Emeritus Adam Exner OMI of Vancouver: often-repeated anecdote).

145 Pope Leo the Great: Sermon 73 (see CCC 412).

146 Easter Vigil: *Exsultet* (see CCC 412).

147 Rom 5:20

148 Rom 6:1-2

right to do evil so that good may come of it.<sup>149</sup>

However, our actions often do have bad effects as well as good. For example, in order to fill in for priests who are ill or away, Father Vince does a lot of driving, contributing to global warming and risking an accident. Should he drive or not?

We may lawfully do something that has a bad effect as well as a good effect provided

- 1) the act is not bad in itself; *and*
- 2) the bad effect is only a by-product of the act, not an essential factor in achieving the good effect; *and*
- 3) the bad effect is not intended; *and*
- 4) there is a sufficiently grave reason for permitting the bad effect.

Father concludes that it is lawful for him to drive, for

- 1) driving is not bad in itself; *and*
- 2) warming the earth and risking an accident are not essential to the good he does; they are by-products, which he would eliminate if he could; *and*
- 3) he does not *intend* to warm the Earth or risk an accident; *and*
- 4) it is important for people to have access to the Sacraments.

In contrast, it is *not* right for us to murder abortionists<sup>150</sup> in order to save unborn babies. We might think our reason for killing sufficiently grave, but

- 1) murder is bad in itself;
- 2) killing the abortionist would be essential to this way of saving babies' lives; *and*
- 3) the killing would be intentional.

Most of the time, we make such decisions easily, without invoking these rules explicitly. However, in "situations that make moral judgements less assured and decision difficult," we should ask the Holy Spirit for help<sup>151</sup> and seek advice from someone wise, prudent, and competent — perhaps a spiritual director.<sup>152</sup>

### Conscience

Usually, our "conscience" tells us how to decide, for "deep within" ourselves, we find the Law of Right and Wrong,<sup>153</sup> "inscribed" in our hearts by God.<sup>154</sup>

The Church teaches that we must always act according to our conscience.<sup>155</sup> However, we must understand what she means by "conscience."

Humans are reflexive: we think and speak of ourselves as two people. For example, we "tell ourselves," "love," "master," "fool," or "despise" ourselves.

The Latin *scio* means "I know." *Conscio* means "I know together with..." or "I share [with someone] the knowledge that...."

Our "conscience," then, is that "other self" who shares our knowledge of what we do. From deep within our "most secret core" where we are "alone with God,"<sup>156</sup> this "other self" tells us how to choose, approving right choices and denouncing wrong,<sup>157</sup> telling us "at the appropriate moment to do good and to avoid evil."<sup>158</sup>

However, what it "tells us" to do at any time depends on the principles of faith and reason already present in our mind. It uses these *general* principles (*e.g.*, murder is wrong) for *particular* conclusions (*e.g.*, I must not murder my employer).<sup>159</sup>

149 See Mt 26:24. In Lewis' *Peregrina*, Satan tells the Lady that great good came of the disobedience of Adam and Eve, including the Incarnation. Ransom counters with, "Of course good came of it.... Whatever you do, He will make good of it. But not the good that He had prepared for you if you had obeyed Him. That is lost for ever. The first King and first Mother of our world did the forbidden thing; and He brought good of it in the end. But what they did was not good; and what they lost we have not seen" (C.S. Lewis: *Peregrina*, 9).

150 As some pro-lifers have done.

151 Specifically, for His gifts of wisdom, understanding, counsel, and knowledge. See the talk on "Baptism and Confirmation."

152 See CCC 1787-1788.

153 See the talk on "The Contradictions of Atheism."

154 CCC 1776

155 See CCC 1781-1782.

156 See CCC 1776.

157 See CCC 1777.

158 CCC 1777

Our conscience cannot *determine* these general principles; nor can it *judge* them. Conscience is not "a supreme tribunal of moral judgement that hands down categorical and infallible decisions about good and evil." It is wrong to think that a "moral judgement is true" simply because "it has its origin in the conscience."<sup>160</sup>

Consider what St. Paul said: "I have nothing on my conscience, but that does not mean that I am declaring myself innocent"<sup>161</sup> — "I have not done anything that *my other self tells me* is wrong, but I may have done something that *is* wrong, just the same." His other self could have been ignorant, or misjudged the circumstances.<sup>162</sup>

The psalmist says the same thing: "Who can detect failings? Cleanse me from my unknown faults!"<sup>163</sup> — still faults, even if we do not recognize them.

The tax collector in Jesus' parable, "with all his undisputed sins, stands more justified before God than the Pharisee, with all his undeniably good works,"<sup>164</sup> because the Pharisee "has a completely clear conscience"; he is not aware that "he, too, has guilt."<sup>165</sup>

As our *other self*, conscience is our witness before God. If we did not obey it, we would condemn ourselves:<sup>166</sup> our conscience would testify before God that we had done something we thought to be wrong.

But conscience is not a *lawgiver*. To make right moral judgements, it must be educated: properly "enlightened" and "informed."<sup>167</sup> This "education" is "indispensable," for, as fallen creatures, we are inclined to sin. In fact, our consciences can become "almost blinded through the habit of committing sin."<sup>168</sup>

And to be blind to our guilt is "an even more dangerous sickness of the soul" than an evil habit we still recognize as such.<sup>169</sup> In fact, "confusion between good and evil" may be called "the most dangerous crisis" that can "afflict the world."<sup>170</sup>

Therefore, in order to give us "complete and certain understanding" of His law, God not only "inscribes" it in our hearts,<sup>171</sup> but also reminds us of it in the Ten Commandments, interpreted authoritatively by His Church.<sup>172</sup>

That is what we will talk about in the next two weeks. (In the introduction to this course, we said we would simply teach the truth rather than explicitly condemn error. The next two talks are exceptions, for the commandments are largely negative — "Thou shalt not!" However, God Himself saw them to be necessary.)

## Conclusion

So, to return to our question: how does our *Zoë* affect the way we live our *Bios*?

The answer is that after we acquire *Zoë*, what we do in our *Bios* is just what we did before — but now we do it *as members of Christ's Mystical Body*,<sup>173</sup> using "the good things that pass" so as "to hold fast even now to those that endure."<sup>174</sup>

An abbot advised a monk, a brother<sup>175</sup> who worked in the bakery, to study for the priesthood. After ordination, the monk asked the abbot for his new assignment.

"Why, return to the bakery!" the abbot said.

159 See John Hardon: *Modern Catholic Dictionary*, "Conscience."

160 Pope John Paul II: *Veritatis Splendor*, 32

161 1 Cor 4:4. See also Acts 23:1, 24:16; Rom 9:1; 2 Cor 1:12; 2 Tim 1:3.

162 See CCC 1790.

163 Ps 19:13

164 See Lk 18:9-14.

165 Joseph Ratzinger: *On Conscience*, "Conscience and Truth"

166 See CCC 1790.

167 See CCC 1783.

168 Vatican II: *Gaudium et Spes*, 16. Conversely, the conscience is educated by virtue; see the talk on "Virtue."

169 Joseph Ratzinger: *Conscience and Truth*

170 Pope John Paul II: *Veritatis Splendor*, 93

171 See CCC 1776.

172 See CCC 2068, 2070-2071.

173 See the talk on "The Communion Among the Saints in the Body of Christ."

174 See the Collect for the 17th Sunday in Ordinary Time; also see Preface II of Lent. Of course, if we are not already doing so, we must start obeying the Ten Commandments (see the talks on "The First Three Commandments" and "The Last Seven Commandments") and our conscience, properly educated.

175 Monks can be ordained priests or non-ordained "brothers."

"But that's what I was doing before," the monk objected.

"Yes, but now you'll be doing it as a priest," said the abbot.<sup>176</sup>

Similarly, an ordained deacon may well continue the same good work after ordination as before, but now he does it *as a deacon*.

Our identity in Christ's Mystical Body makes all the difference.

God's will for us is that we possess "eternal life"<sup>177</sup> and "grow in holiness."<sup>178</sup> Everything, even the humblest everyday action, will help accomplish that if we do it "in Christ."<sup>179</sup> Nothing, however noble or grand, will accomplish it if we do not.

Everyone has a "vocation"<sup>180</sup> to holiness.<sup>181</sup> However, we each respond to that vocation by the way we live our *Bios* — and we ourselves, in God-given freedom, using our God-given intelligence, determine how we live our *Bios* by consulting our talents, gifts,<sup>182</sup> upbringing, health, opportunities, and inclinations.<sup>183</sup>

Speaking of his own inclination toward "the pursuit of knowledge and beauty" in "the learned life,"<sup>184</sup> C.S. Lewis said, "An appetite for these things exists in the human mind, and God makes no appetite in vain."<sup>185</sup>

Whatever we choose to do, we should do it "for the glory of God,"<sup>186</sup> working at it with our whole being. We should "do it for the Lord rather than for men."<sup>187</sup>

Of course, that means doing it *well* in the ordinary sense.<sup>188</sup> Everything — sleeping, washing, eating, drinking, making love, playing, family activities, culture, economics, business, work, study, politics, international relations, *etc.* — is a way to get closer to God and thus attain the perfection He wills for us,<sup>189</sup> but also they each "possess a value of their own, placed in them by God."<sup>190</sup>

God plans, "in Christ, to take the whole world up again and make of it a new creation."<sup>191</sup> He calls us to collaborate in a way of our own choosing, in our own "specific manner," with our own "special competence," on our "own responsibility."<sup>192</sup>

So we are back where we started: "Love, and do what you will."<sup>193</sup>

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C.S. Lewis: *Perelandra*

C.S. Lewis: *The Weight of Glory*, "Learning in War-Time"

Joseph Ratzinger: *On Conscience*, "Conscience and Truth"

Vatican II: *Apostolicam Actuositatem*

Pope Paul VI: *Humanae Vitae*

176 See Timothy Dolan: *Priests for the Third Millennium*, 6.

177 Jn 6:40

178 1 Thes 4:3

179 See the talk on "The Communion Among the Saints in the Body of Christ."

180 Or "calling"; from the Latin *vocare* ("to call").

181 See Pope John Paul II: *Christifideles Laici*, 16.

182 Vatican II: *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, 4

183 Besides the will of God that is "signified unto us by His commandments, counsels, and inspirations" (Francis de Sales: *Treatise on the Love of God*, Book VIII), there exists "the will of God's good pleasure," "which is known to us by events" (Francis de Sales: *Treatise on the Love of God*, Book IX, Chapter I). See Appendix 6 and the talk on "Consecrated Life," Appendix 3.

184 Lewis tutored in English Language and Literature at Magdalen College, Oxford, for 29 years before accepting the Chair of Medieval and Renaissance Literature at Magdalene College, Cambridge.

185 "This is the teleological argument that the existence of the impulse and the faculty prove that they must have a proper function in God's scheme" (C.S. Lewis: *The Weight of Glory*, "Learning in War-Time").

186 1 Cor 10:31

187 Col 3:23

188 For example, it does not mean trying to make "intellectual inquiries work out to edifying conclusions." To do that would be "to offer the Author of truth the unclean sacrifice of a lie" (C.S. Lewis: *The Weight of Glory*, "Learning in War-Time").

189 See CCC 1730.

190 Vatican II: *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, 7

191 Vatican II: *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, 5

192 Vatican II: *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, 7

193 Augustine: *Tractatus 7, In Epistolam Ioannis ad Parthos*, 8

## Appendix 1

**"Heavenly Positioning System"**

"What must I do to inherit everlasting life?" a lawyer asked Jesus.

"What is written in the law?" Jesus countered.

"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbour as yourself," the lawyer replied.

"You have answered correctly," Jesus said. "Do this and you shall live."<sup>1</sup>

*And that is all.* "The will of God expressed in divine law"<sup>2</sup> — implanted in our hearts, written in the Ten Commandments,<sup>3</sup> and interpreted by the Catholic Church — does not dictate every detail of our lives. It is more like a GPS ("Global Positioning System"), which offers us guidance, but does not override our free will.

Let us compare God's HPS ("Heavenly Positioning System") with a GPS.

**"Warning"**

When we turn a GPS on, it gives us a general warning:

"During vehicle operation, the driver must comply with all traffic laws and disregard any hazardous, unsafe, or illegal route suggestions."

By moving to the next screen, we agree.

When we start using God's HPS, we indicate that we want His Commandments, written and spoken, to govern our journey through this world. They are His "traffic laws": speed limits, stop signs, red lights, turn restrictions, *etc.* which are there for our spiritual safety.

**"Configuration"**

From the beginning, a GPS offers us choices: the brightness of the screen, the volume of the spoken instructions, the frequency of the instructions, the tone of voice of the instructor, and the kind of language used.

By choosing the brightness of God's HPS screen and the volume and frequency of its commands, we decide how clear we want His governance to be. For example, we choose a spiritual director. We decide how often to attend weekday Mass and read the Bible. We choose other spiritual books: we may prefer the sonorous Latin arguments of St. Thomas Aquinas, the witty English paradoxes of G.K. Chesterton, or the straightforward English prose of C.S. Lewis.

**"Settings"**

We can set a GPS to indicate things like the strength of its reception and the amount by which our speed differs from the legal speed limit.

We should keep an eye on God's HPS to make sure that its reception is good. We should watch and listen for indications that we are travelling too fast or too slowly. We must travel patiently: not too fast, as if we want to become "saints in a day," nor so slowly that "God would gladly" see us speed up.<sup>4</sup>

**"Current location"**

A GPS can tell us our current latitude and longitude, our height above sea level, and our direction.

We should examine our consciences frequently, checking God's HPS to determine where we are and which way we are heading in our journey to Heaven.

**"Points of interest"**

A GPS can flag points of interest like restaurants, gas stations, and hotels.

Analogously, God's HPS can indicate churches, where we can get spiritual food,

<sup>1</sup> See Lk 10:25-37.

<sup>2</sup> CCC 1787

<sup>3</sup> See the talks on "The First Three Commandments" and "The Last Seven Commandments."

<sup>4</sup> See St. John of the Cross: *Dark Night of the Soul*, Chapter V.



drink,<sup>5</sup> and rest; or confessionals, where we can dump our garbage and face the fact that we have left the right route.<sup>6</sup>

### "Enter address"

On a GPS, we select the city, street, and street number of our destination.

God's HPS recognizes only one destination: the Kingdom of Heaven. (We will be told the city and the street address when we get there; all we know is what Jesus said: "In My Father's house there are many dwelling places."<sup>7</sup>)

### "Route method"

A GPS allows us to choose what kind of route we want: "shortest time," "shortest distance," "most use of freeways," "least use of freeways," "avoids toll roads," *etc.*

God's HPS gives us the choice of the consecrated life;<sup>8</sup> the married life;<sup>9</sup> or the single, unconsecrated life.

If we choose the consecrated life, we can choose the religious order<sup>10</sup> we enter or (as a priest) the diocese we will work in. If we choose the married life, we can choose our spouse and the number of our children. If we choose the married life or the single, unconsecrated life, we can choose our secular occupation.

And if we find our first choice blocked, we can always make a different choice.

\* \* \* \* \*

### "Proceed to route"

Now, having made our choices — some of which are irrevocable, others of which we can change at any time — we set out on the route the HPS indicates.

### "Freeway entrance on the right"

If it can, God's HPS will direct us to a freeway, where our life will run smoothly, with no turns, stop signs, or traffic lights.

### "Stay on the current route"

Nevertheless, there will be points where we might be tempted to stray off the route; *e.g.* where another major freeway branches off.

Here God's HPS reminds us of His commandments, warning us not to be allured by "other gods,"<sup>11</sup> not to steal,<sup>12</sup> not to commit adultery,<sup>13</sup> *etc.*

### "Prepare to exit on the right"

Eventually, however, a GPS will guide us off the freeway, on to much narrower streets, where our journey is complicated by traffic lights and stop signs and we have to make left and right turns — some of them "slight," others "hard." Here it is all the more necessary to trust the GPS.

Similarly, we must trust God's HPS. The roads that lead to our destination are not "wide" or "clear," but "narrow" and "rough," and we need God's HPS if we are to find them.<sup>14</sup> We must not waste time trying to find bypasses which avoid "the cross";<sup>15</sup> it is only by travelling "the way of the cross" that we can reach our destination.

5 See the talk on "Mass: Sacrament and Sacrifice."

6 See the talk on "Sin and Forgiveness."

7 Lk 14:2

8 See the talk on "Consecrated Life."

9 See the talk on "Matrimony."

10 See the talk on "Catholic Spiritualities."

11 The First Commandment: "You shall not have other gods besides Me" (Ex 20:3). See the talk on "The First Three Commandments."

12 The Seventh Commandment: "You shall not steal" (Ex 20:15). See the talk on "The Last Seven Commandments."

13 Sixth Commandment: "You shall not commit adultery" (Ex 20:14). See the talk on "The Last Seven Commandments."

14 See Mt 7:13-14.

15 See Mt 16:24.

**"Congestion ahead"**

Occasionally, we are slowed down or even stopped completely by road construction, narrow bridges, *etc.* or by heavy traffic in morning and evening rush hour. Here a GPS can detect a problem ahead and direct us into a detour that avoids it.

Similarly, God's HPS can detect "occasions of sin,"<sup>16</sup> where we could be slowed down or stopped on our journey to Heaven, and help us avoid them. Examples are pubs (for an alcoholic), brothels (for a sexaholic), large department stores (for a thief, a spendthrift, or a consumerist), and casinos (for a gambling addict).

**"Recalculating route"**

If we stray from the route at any point, a GPS recognizes what we have done and builds it in to a new route, which may guide us back to the original route or (if we have strayed too far) take us to our destination by a completely new route.

God never gives up on us. His HPS always accepts us where we are, no matter how far<sup>17</sup> or how long<sup>18</sup> we have strayed from the route, and patiently starts telling us anew how to get to our destination.

**"When possible, make a legal U-turn"**

God's HPS accepts us where we are, but it is not unrealistic. If we turn on to a road by which we cannot possibly reach our destination, it instructs us to turn around, go back in the opposite direction to the point where we made the wrong choice, renounce our wrong choice, and get back on the route.<sup>19</sup>

**"Cancel route"**

Left to itself, a GPS will never cease giving instructions. However, we can miss hearing it if we turn the radio up too loud or become distracted by conversation. We can also "mute" it, "cancel the route," or turn it off completely and try to reach our destination on our own.

Analogously, God never turns His HPS off. However, we can turn up the noise of "the world" so loud that we cannot hear it; we can deliberately stop listening to it; and we can even, by our own free choice, make ourselves incapable of hearing it.<sup>20</sup>

If we are killed in a car accident under these circumstances, we will never, ever, reach our destination.<sup>21</sup> However, as long as we remain alive, we can change our minds and turn God's HPS back on; it will always start patiently instructing us again.

**"Time remaining"**

A GPS indicates the "estimated time of arrival" at our destination, or the "time remaining" or the "distance remaining" in our journey.

God's HPS will not.<sup>22</sup> However, God guarantees that if we die with His HPS on, still trying to follow its directions, He will make sure that we reach our destination, however long it takes.<sup>23</sup>

**"You have arrived"**

When we reach our destination, Jesus Himself will welcome us and confirm that we have succeeded. "Well done!"<sup>24</sup> He will say. "Come. You have My Father's blessing! Inherit the Kingdom prepared for you from the creation of the world."<sup>25</sup>

16 See the talk on "Sin and Forgiveness."

17 "Though your sins be like scarlet, they may become white as snow; though they be crimson red, they may become white as wool" (Is 1:18).

18 See Mt 21:1-16.

19 See the talk on "Sin and Forgiveness."

20 See Mt 13:14-15.

21 See the talk on "Death and the End of the World."

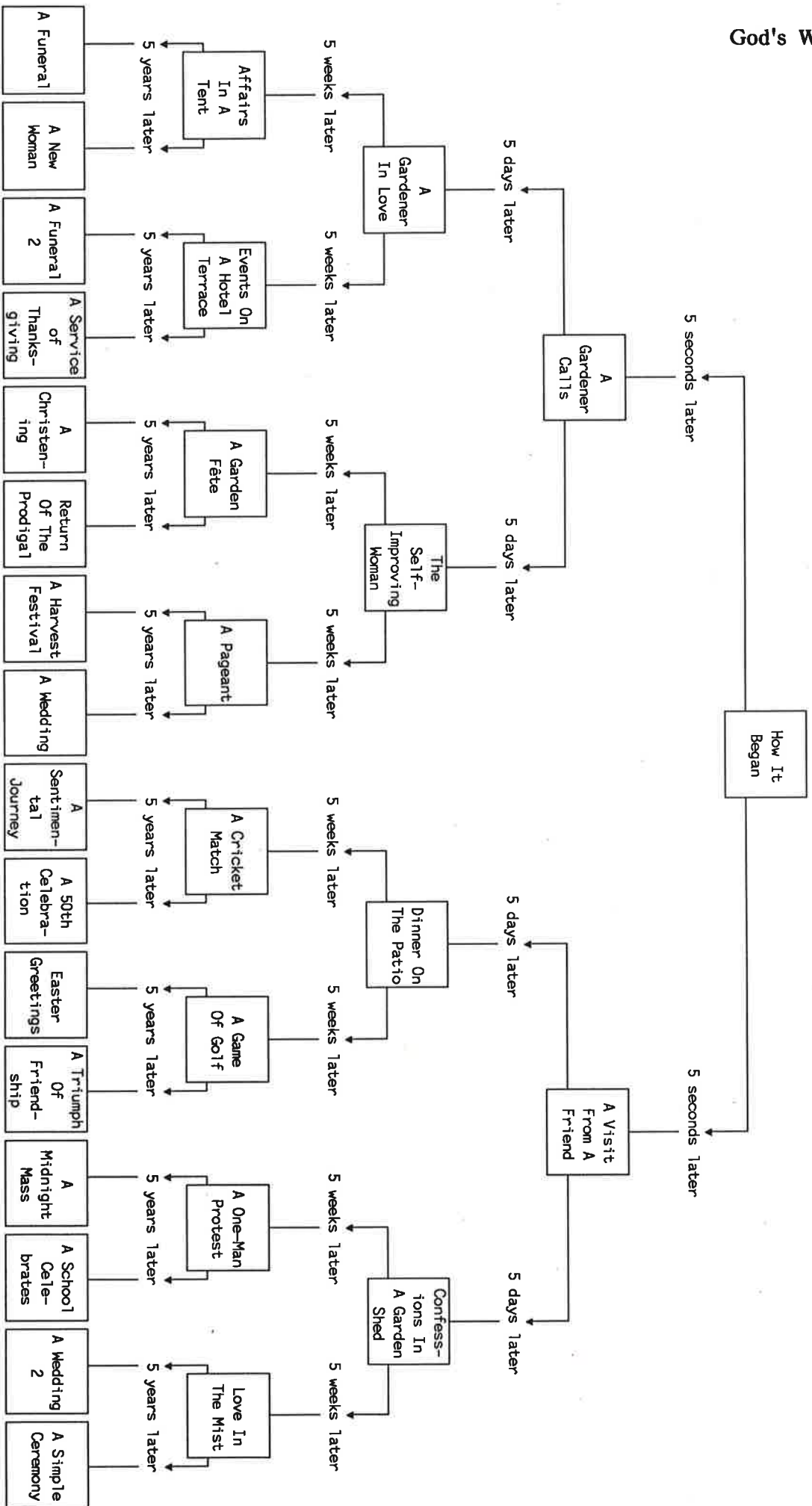
22 See Lk 12:40; 1 Thes 5:2.

23 See the talk on "Death and the End of the World."

24 Mt 25:21

25 Mt 25:34

Appendix 2: Intimate Exchanges  
By Alan Ayckbourn



### Appendix 3: Public Revelation and Private Revelations

Condensed from Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger: *The Message of Fatima*

Edited for ease of reading

The Church distinguishes between "public Revelation" and "private revelations." The two realities differ not only in degree, but also in essence.

#### Public Revelation

The term "public Revelation" refers to the revealing action of God directed to humanity as a whole. We find the written part in the Bible: the Old and New Testaments.

The single Revelation of God addressed to all peoples came to completion with Christ and the witness of the New Testament. Accordingly, the Church is tied to this unique event of sacred history and to the word of the Bible, which guarantees and interprets that event.

Public Revelation demands faith, for in it, God Himself speaks to us through human words and the living community of the Church.

Faith in God and His word is different from any other human faith, trust, or opinion. It is God Who is speaking, so we are certain that we are in touch with Truth Itself. Our certainty cannot be verified by any human way of knowing, but we build our lives on it and entrust ourselves to it when we die.

#### Private revelations

"Private revelation" comprises all the visions and revelations that have taken place since the New Testament was completed.

The authority of private revelations is essentially different from that of public Revelation. In fact, private revelations show their credibility precisely by leading us back to public Revelation.

Cardinal Prospero Lambertini, the future Pope Benedict XIV, wrote a classic treatise on revelation that eventually became normative for beatifications and canonizations. In it, he said that "the assent of Catholic faith" is not appropriate to a private revelation; in fact, "it is not even possible." All that is appropriate is a prudent "assent of human faith," which we give if the revelation seems to us to be "probable and credible to piety."<sup>1</sup>

Church approval of a private revelation has three elements. It assures us that

- the revelation contains nothing contrary to faith or morals.
- it is lawful to make the revelation public.
- the faithful are authorized to accept the revelation with prudence.

We should not disregard a private revelation, for it can be genuinely helpful as we try to understand the Gospel and live it better at a particular moment in history. Nevertheless, we are not obliged to use a private revelation.

The criterion for the truth and value of a private revelation is its orientation to Christ Himself. When it leads us away from Him — when it becomes independent of Him or even presents itself as a plan of salvation that is better and more important than the Gospel — then it certainly does not come from the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit guides us more deeply into the Gospel, not away from it.

A private revelation can offer new emphases, give rise to new forms of devotion, or deepen and spread older forms. However, it must always nurture faith, hope, and love, which are the unchanging path to salvation for everyone.

Private revelations often spring from popular piety and leave their stamp on the people's devotion, giving it a new impulse and opening the way for new forms. They might even affect the liturgy, as they have done in the solemnities of Corpus Christi<sup>2</sup> and the Sacred Heart of Jesus.<sup>3</sup>

1 Prospero Lambertini: *On the Beatification and Canonization of God's Servants*, Volume 2, Chapter 32, 11

2 Promoted by St. Juliana of Liège (1193–1258) and mandated by Pope Urban IV in 1264.

3 Promoted by St. Margaret Mary Alacoque (1647–1690) and mandated by Pope Pius IX in 1856.

## Appendix 4: Private Revelations

Condensed from Fr. Benedict J. Groeschel CFR: *A Still, Small Voice*

Edited slightly for brevity and ease of reading

### Keeping a perspective

Are there rules for dealing with private revelations?

Yes; well thought out rules have been formulated over the centuries, not only by serious spiritual directors and students of mystical phenomena, but also by the Popes. Some were devised by people with heavenly experiences, like St. Teresa of Avila and St. John of the Cross.<sup>1</sup> Others came from people who had carefully studied accounts of such experiences.

I am especially indebted in this writing to Father Augustin Poulain SJ, author of the classic in this field, *The Graces of Interior Prayer*. The norms here are drawn partly from Poulain and partly from classical writers.

#### *Rule 1. Keep all claims of revelations in perspective.*

The consistent and authentic pursuit of a holy life leading to a loving union with God is the essential element of true religion. Many great saints reported no unusual experiences at all. Among eminent non-visionaries in our own century are St. Thérèse of Lisieux<sup>2</sup> and St. Maximilian Kolbe.<sup>3</sup>

Private revelations have no significance apart from the Public Revelation of Sacred Scripture and Sacred Tradition, interpreted by the Catholic Church. As Pope John Paul II said on a pilgrimage to Fatima in 1982, "God's revelation was brought to completion in Jesus Christ.... The Church evaluates and judges private revelations by the criterion of conformity with that single revelation. If the Church has accepted the message of Fatima, it is above all because the message contains a truth and a call whose basic content is the truth and the call of the Gospel itself."<sup>4</sup>

For example, the promises made in certain private revelations (like the promises of salvation for those who wear the brown scapular or observe the first Fridays in honour of the Sacred Heart) can never be understood outside the context of Scripture and Sacred Tradition. As Pope Benedict XIV noted, Mary "did not say that those who have worn the scapular will be saved from eternal fire by this means alone, without having done anything else. Good works and perseverance are necessary to eternal salvation."<sup>5</sup>

Do you want a certain and direct revelation of God? Pick up a Bible and read it! Do you want to be speedily and mysteriously in the presence of Christ? Reverently and prayerfully visit the Blessed Sacrament! Do you want to see and touch Jesus Christ? Serve the poor!

Why, then, do we have private revelations at all? The obvious reply is: "Ask God." True revelations, public or private, are never contrived or planned by human beings. Their causes are beyond human control or knowledge.

Public Revelation is contained in Sacred Scripture and Sacred Tradition, interpreted by the Catholic Church. It is addressed to all people for all time. We must accept and believe it. Public Revelation, in this precise sense, ended with the death of the last apostle.

However, that does not mean that God no longer reveals Himself to His children. He continues to do so, but indirectly, or in what we call private revelations. Indeed, the practice of the Church with respect to devotions, prophetic figures, and acknowledged mystics presupposes the existence of genuine private

<sup>1</sup> See the talk on "Catholic Spiritualities."

<sup>2</sup> Born in France in 1873, Thérèse became a Carmelite nun and died in 1897.

<sup>3</sup> Born in Poland in 1894, Maximilian became a Franciscan friar. He died in the gas chambers at Auschwitz in 1941, having volunteered to take the place of another man.

<sup>4</sup> Pope John Paul II: Homily at Mass in Fatima May 13 1982

<sup>5</sup> Pope Benedict XIV: *De Festis Apostolorum*, Part II, 96

revelation. Private revelation may be said to encourage or guide individuals, or even the whole Church, at a particular time or in particular circumstances of history.

Most private revelations are unknown to others. Sometimes, however, they are intended to be shared. For example, Our Lady asked St. Bernadette to make known the message and the promise she gave her.<sup>6</sup> The visions of St. Joan of Arc altered the course of history.<sup>7</sup> The inspirations of St. Catherine of Siena resulted in Pope Gregory XI's return to Rome from Avignon.<sup>8</sup>

However, for those three women personally, these revelations were only incidents in their short lives. What is important about these women is their faith, their love, and their attempts to follow the path marked out by Christ in the Gospel for all who wish to be saved. They were not just visionaries; they were saints.

### Truth and private revelations

Public Revelation is true and, when properly understood, free from error. However, we cannot say this about private revelation — even Church-approved private revelation.

*Rule 2. No private revelation comes directly from God and therefore none can be assumed to be inerrantly true.*

Even if the alleged revelation has come from a canonized saint, even if its content has been approved by the Church for acceptance by all the faithful, even if it contains a prophecy that turns out to be true — still it may contain some personal element — and that element is subject to error or distortion.

The possibility of this kind of error does not mean that there can be no genuine private revelation. However, as Pope Benedict XIV said in his writing about private revelations that had been approved by popes, "Those revelations, although approved of, ought not to, and cannot, receive from us any assent of *Catholic* faith, but only of *human* faith, according to the rules of prudence."<sup>9</sup>

"Catholic faith" means the theological virtue of faith: the faith we put in Public Revelation or the Creed. "Human faith" is different; examples are our faith in democracy or a friend.

When I am asked if I believe in a particular private revelation (even my favorite, the one to St. Bernadette at Lourdes), I always reply that I *believe* in the Catholic Christian faith and I *think* that Lourdes is a special gift of God to us all. Although I have a very strong opinion as to the validity of Bernadette's testimony, I would be wrong to say I believe in the Lourdes phenomena with theological faith. I give this revelation only *prudent* acceptance as being *probably* true.

The content of a vision from God cannot be wrong, but it is filtered through the perceptive faculties of the human being who receives it. As an old Latin proverb says, "That which is received is received in the manner of the receiver."<sup>10</sup>

For example, when a woman and her young daughter watch the opera *Madama Butterfly*, the mother is deeply moved by an artistically powerful production of a familiar story, but the child may be bored by everything but the stage scenery. They perceive the same reality, but in very different ways.

6 Bernadette, born in France in 1844, saw the virgin Mary at Lourdes 18 times during 1858. Our Lady, who identified herself as "the Immaculate Conception," stressed the need for prayer and penance, ordered the building of a church, and told Bernadette to drink from a nearby spring, which at the time was non-existent, but which ever since has produced 123,000 litres of water per week.

7 Joan, born in France in 1412, heard the voices of saints from the age of 14. In 1428, they told her to go to the French Dauphin (later King Charles VII of France) and help him wrest his kingdom from the English. With a small army, she won a number of battles and enabled the Dauphin to be crowned in Rheims. In 1430, she was captured and sold to the English, tried and found guilty of sorcery, and burned at the stake.

8 Catherine, born in Italy in 1347, was an influential spiritual leader. Starting in 1375, she became involved with Italian politics, both secular and ecclesial. In particular, she joined others in urging Pope Gregory XI to return to Rome from Avignon, in France, where the Popes had lived since 1309.

9 Prospero Lambertini (later Pope Benedict XIV): *On the Beatification and Canonization of God's Servants*, Volume 3, Chapter 14, 15; see also Volume 2, Chapter 12, 11.

10 See Thomas Aquinas: *Summa Theologiae*, Ia, q. 75, a. 5.

The only complete, direct Revelation of God is His Son, Jesus Christ. He alone knows the Father as He is (Jn 14:8-11). However, in Scripture, you can see the personal traits of writers like Paul, James, John, and Peter. Nevertheless, the Church declares that what she included in Scripture is part of God's Public Revelation and she keeps it free from substantive distortion by the power of the Holy Spirit.

In contrast, the Church has made St. Catherine of Siena and St. Teresa of Avila Doctors of the Church, but she does not regard their writings as inerrant. It was the visions of St. Margaret Mary Alacoque that directed her attention to the image of the Sacred Heart of Jesus,<sup>11</sup> but subsequent encyclicals on this subject have hardly mentioned St. Margaret Mary. The Popes do not base their teaching on private revelations, but on Sacred Scripture and Sacred Tradition, clarified by theology.

Because even authentic or approved private revelations are so specific to the recipient, we should be careful not to use their content to decide matters with little or no relationship to them, like matters of history, science, philosophy, and theology. And it is quite permissible to dispute the content of private revelations, especially if we have good reasons to do so, such as reliable documents or definite experience.

### The scope of private revelations

Error occurs so often in private revelation that I would lay down the following as a general principle:

*Rule 3. A private revelation, by definition, is personal and therefore must be carefully applied by those for whom it was meant, and only within the limits of ordinary human prudence — never in an unreasonable way or against the teaching of the Church. It must never be considered an infallible guide in any situation.*

No one can admonish another person for refusing to accept a private revelation. The refusal may reveal attitudes of unbelief or worldliness that are spiritually unsound, and a devoted person will tend to take all authenticated revelation very seriously (although with only human faith), but the simple decision not to take account of a private revelation in one's own life is acceptable.

For example, Pope John Paul II said in his Apostolic Letter *Rosarium Virginis Mariae* ("On the Rosary of the Virgin Mary"), "Many signs indicate that still today the Blessed Virgin desires to exercise through this same prayer that maternal concern to which the dying Redeemer entrusted, in the person of the beloved disciple, all the sons and daughters of the Church: 'Woman, behold your son!' (Jn 19:26). Well known are the occasions in the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries on which the Mother of Christ made her presence felt and her voice heard, in order to exhort the People of God to this form of contemplative prayer. I mention in particular, on account of their great influence on the lives of Christians and the authoritative recognition they have received from the Church, the apparitions of Lourdes and of Fatima;<sup>12</sup> these shrines continue to be visited by great numbers of pilgrims seeking comfort and hope."<sup>13</sup>

However, he immediately added, "It is well known and bears repeating that private revelations are not the same as Public Revelation, which is binding on the whole Church. It is the task of the Magisterium to discern and recognize the authenticity and value of private revelations for the piety of the faithful."<sup>14</sup>

Private revelations do not entitle us to disobey legitimate Church authority. A

11 Born in France in 1647, Margaret entered the Convent of the Visitation in 1671. Here she had several visions of the Sacred Heart of Jesus: the first in December 1673 and the final one 18 months later. They revealed to her the form that devotion to the Sacred Heart should take: Holy Communion on the First Friday of each month, a holy hour on Thursdays, and the establishment of a feast in honour of the Sacred Heart. The devotion was officially recognized in 1765, under Pope Clement XIII.

12 Fatima is the town in Portugal where, starting in May 1917, our Lady appeared six times to three children, Francisco and Jacinta Marta and their cousin Lucia Santos. She told them to do penance and recite the rosary daily and asked for a chapel to be built in her honour. The Marta children died in 1919 and were canonized in 2017 by Pope Francis, but Lucia lived until 2005.

13 Pope John Paul II: *Rosarium Virginis Mariae*, 7.

14 Pope John Paul II: *Rosarium Virginis Mariae*, Endnote 11

revelation which claimed to do so would be certainly suspect.

Church authorities can, with good reason, state their opinion that an alleged revelation is contrary to faith or that the visionary is mentally unbalanced. They may also try to control the expressions of piety surrounding such a revelation.<sup>15</sup>

Church authorities need time to discern the evidence. Their diffidence and hesitation in making a pronouncement do not necessarily mean condemnation. Suspicion and outright rejection have sometimes changed to acceptance and support.

### Categories of revelations

Before stating Rule 4, we must make some distinctions among revelations. They may be classified as

- *authentic*: those that have been approved by the Church as probably being extraordinary divine manifestations.
- *questionable*: those that are still under consideration or in dispute.
- *false*: those that the recipient believes to be supernatural but are not.
- *fake*: those that are the ruses of charlatans.

### Authentic revelations

A revelation or vision may be approved by the local bishop, who says that after all the facts have been studied, the revelations can be accepted as probable. Usually he does so after the death of the visionary.

A less formal approval comes from the devout visits of clergy and laity over a period of time. The strongest approval of this kind comes from a papal visit. The establishment of a liturgical feast also constitutes approval, whether the feast is local or universal.

### Questionable revelations

There are more questionable revelations than approved. For example, of the 22 alleged Marian apparitions that were seriously studied between 1931 and 1950, only two were approved, while six remained undecided and the rest were rejected.

The disapproval of the local bishop is usually enough to move a reported revelation out of the doubtful into the rejected category — although, as in the case of St. Joan of Arc, the decision is sometimes reversed.

All private revelations begin as questionable. Those that are not approved or found false or fraudulent remain questionable; for example, because the content of the revelations is esoteric or trite, or because of the personalities of those involved.

### False revelations

There are many possible causes of false revelations. Severe mental illness — especially a certain kind of paranoid schizophrenia — may create in a subject's mind not only a grandiose need to make some monumental contribution to history, but also hallucinatory experiences of a pseudo-mystical type.

Once they are convinced of their divine call, such people may feel justified in fabricating evidence and imagining extraordinary spiritual experiences. They may even feel justified in misleading others. Because of their subjective sincerity, they tend to be very convincing.

False revelations may also arise from a very devout view of life, combined with a very suggestible type of personality, clinically called borderline histrionic.

Finally, false revelations may occur in a fairly well-balanced person who encounters some of the more atypical functions of the human mind.

### Fraudulent revelations

Religious frauds have a long history in Christianity, beginning with Simon Magus in the Acts of the Apostles (8:9). These people knowingly fabricate revelations and exploit paranormal phenomena. As the incredible story of Rasputin<sup>16</sup> indicates, they

<sup>15</sup> For example, the Vatican has warned Catholics against believing the "revelations" of Maria Valtorta (in 1994) or Vassula Ryden (in 1995, 1997, and 2007).

<sup>16</sup> Self-proclaimed mystic and holy man who gained considerable influence over the last royal family in



can do incalculable harm when they have influence over people in authority.

Religious frauds are interesting primarily because they can deceive large numbers of people. As Nazi propagandist Joseph Goebbels is said to have observed, many will believe a big lie, whereas few will believe a small lie.<sup>17</sup>

Because Christians are taught to think the best of others and not to judge, we are vulnerable to deceivers. Indeed, the genuine religious belief and fervour that may surround a fraudulent revelation is one of the things that misleads us.

The possibility of fraud should make us understand why Church authorities are slow and cautious in evaluating claims of private revelation.

### Sources of error in private revelations

With these distinctions in mind, we can state our fourth rule about private revelations:

*Rule 4. A person who is the recipient of an authentic revelation, even a canonized saint, may indeed make errors in understanding that revelation, or in reporting experiences that are not authentic revelations.*

No matter how unexpected and unsolicited they are, no matter how objective their origin, private revelations are all more or less defined within the subjectivity of the individual. In this subjectivity lies the possibility of misunderstanding and error.

The mystic St. John of the Cross, very aware of the likelihood of error and self-deception, suggested that private revelations may even be the work of Satan.

There are five general reasons why authentic revelations may contain errors:

- faulty interpretation by the recipient or others. (An example is the belief by St. Joan of Arc that God would deliver her from death by fire.)
- the visionary's tendency to write history rather than use it symbolically. (Examples are the long visions of Gospel events, often mutually contradictory, recorded by such mystics as St. Bridget, St. Frances of Rome, Bl. Veronica of Binasco, Maria of Agreda, Anna Katharina Emmerich, and Maria Valtorta.)
- the visionary's tendency to mix subjective expectations and preconceived ideas with the action of divine grace. (In particular, the subjectivity introduced by highly unusual natural talents, like those of (musician) Franz Schubert or (violinist) Yehudi Menuhin, can be very misleading.)
- alteration or amplification of the testimony after the revelation. (This opens the door for errors of memory.)
- errors made in good faith by those who record the testimony. (For example, the atmosphere of excitement, formerly called hysteria and now called media hype, which surrounds alleged visionaries makes it difficult for anyone to report accurately and without bias. In addition, editors may remove what turn out to be mistakes on the part of visionaries; for example, the statement by Anna Katharina Emmerich that St. James was present at the death of Mary, which disagrees with the chronology of the Acts of the Apostles.)

### Conclusion

If you are one who looks for signs of God, for some of His footprints<sup>18</sup> in the world (to use the words of St. Bonaventure<sup>19</sup>), then you might find it very helpful to meditate on the following poem.

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Russia.

<sup>17</sup> One of the sources of this story is something Hitler said: "In the primitive simplicity of their minds they more readily fall victim to the big lie than the small lie, since they themselves often tell small lies in little matters but would be ashamed to resort to large-scale falsehoods" (Adolf Hitler: *Mein Kampf*, Vol 1, Chapter X). Another is an article by Goebbels himself: "The English follow the principle that when one lies, one should lie big, and stick to it" (Joseph Goebbels: *From Churchill's Lie Factory*, article dated January 12 1941). A third is an American report on Hitler's principles: "People will believe a big lie sooner than a little one; and if you repeat it frequently enough, people will sooner or later believe it" (USA Office of Strategic Services: *Hitler as His Associates Know Him*, 1943, p. 51).

<sup>18</sup> In Latin, *vestigia* ("traces," "reflections").

<sup>19</sup> See *The Journey of the Mind to God*, Chapters 1-2.

## The Legend Beautiful

"Hadst thou stayed, I must have fled!"  
That is what the Vision said.

In his chamber all alone,  
Kneeling on the floor of stone,  
Prayed the Monk in deep contrition  
For his sins of indecision,  
Prayed for greater self-denial—  
In temptation and in trial;  
It was noonday by the dial,  
And the Monk was all alone.

Suddenly, as if it lightened,  
An unwonted splendour brightened  
All within him and without him  
In that narrow cell of stone;—  
And he saw the Blessed Vision  
Of Our Lord, with light Elysian  
Like a vesture wrapped about Him,  
Like a garment round Him thrown.

Not as crucified and slain,  
Not in agonies of pain,  
Not with bleeding hands and feet,  
Did the Monk his Master see;  
But as in the village street,  
In the house or harvest-field,  
Halt and lame and blind He healed,  
When He walked in Galilee.

In an attitude imploring,  
Hands upon his bosom crossed,  
Wondering, worshipping, adoring,  
Knelt the Monk in rapture lost.  
Lord, he thought, in Heaven that reignest,  
Who am I, that thus Thou deignest  
To reveal Thyself to me?  
Who am I, that from the centre  
Of thy glory thou shouldst enter  
This poor cell, my guest to be?

Then amid his exaltation,  
Loud the convent bell appalling,  
From its belfry calling, calling,  
Rang through court and corridor  
With persistent iteration  
He had never heard before.  
It was now the appointed hour  
When alike in shine or shower,  
Winter's cold or summer's heat,  
To the convent portals came  
All the blind and halt and lame,  
All the beggars of the street,  
For their daily dole of food  
Dealt them by the brotherhood;  
And their almoner was he  
Who upon his bended knee,  
Rapt in silent ecstasy  
Of divinest self-surrender,  
Saw the Vision and the Splendor.

Deep distress and hesitation  
Mingled with his adoration;  
Should he go, or should he stay?  
Should he leave the poor to wait  
Hungry at the convent gate,  
Till the vision passed away?  
Should he slight his radiant Guest,  
Slight this Visitant celestial,  
For a crowd of ragged, bestial  
Beggars at the convent gate?

Would the Vision there remain?  
Would the Vision come again?  
Then a voice within his breast  
Whispered, audible and clear,  
As if to the outward ear:  
"Do thy duty; that is best;  
Leave unto thy Lord the rest!"

Straightway to his feet he started,  
And with longing look intent  
On the Blessed Vision bent,  
Slowly from his cell departed,  
Slowly on his errand went.

At the gate the poor were waiting,  
Looking through the iron grating,  
With that terror in the eye  
That is only seen in those  
Who amid their wants and woes  
Hear the sound of doors that close,  
And of feet that pass them by;  
Grown familiar with disfavour.  
Grown familiar with the savour  
Of the bread by which men die!  
But to-day, they know not why,  
Like the gate of Paradise  
Seemed the convent gate to rise,  
Like a sacrament divine  
Seemed to them the bread and wine.  
In his heart the Monk was praying,  
Thinking of the homeless poor,  
What they suffer and endure;  
What we see not, what we see;  
And the inward voice was saying:  
"Whatsoever thing thou doest  
To the least of Mine and lowest,  
That thou doest unto Me!"

Unto me! but had the Vision  
Come to him in beggar's clothing,  
Come a mendicant imploring,  
Would he then have knelt adoring,  
Or have listened with derision,  
And have turned away with loathing?

Thus his conscience put the question,  
Full of troublesome suggestion,  
As at length, with hurried pace,  
Towards his cell he turned his face,  
And beheld the convent bright  
With a supernatural light,  
Like a luminous cloud expanding  
Over floor and wall and ceiling.

But he paused with awe-struck feeling  
At the threshold of his door,  
For the Vision still was standing  
As he left it there before,  
When the convent bell appalling,  
From its belfry calling, calling,  
Summoned him to feed the poor.  
Through the long hour intervening  
It had waited his return,  
And he felt his bosom burn,  
Comprehending all the meaning,  
When the Blessed Vision said,  
"Hadst thou stayed, I must have fled!"

— Henry Wadsworth Longfellow  
From *Tales of a Wayside Inn*

St. Thérèse of Lisieux wrote to her sister Pauline (Sister Agnes of Jesus) in May 1890, after Pauline had visited Lourdes, "I have no wish to go to Lourdes to have ecstasies. I prefer the monotony of sacrifice!"

## Appendix 5: Apparitions

By Father John Dietzen

*Question:* The flood of news some of us receive about appearances of the blessed virgin Mary and Jesus and saints is confusing. We have been told that none of these visions put obligations on us about what to believe or what to do, but some of them are so insistent: do this, or don't do that, or you will make Mary unhappy, or you will even go to Hell. Is there any way to tell whether any of these are really "messages from Heaven"?

*Answer:* Before anything else, let me say that it is good to hang on to what you said. None of these private revelations, or locutions as they're called, even the genuine ones, impose any new beliefs or obligations on us as Catholic Christians.

They may remind us of the importance of prayer and penance and good works, which we know already from the Gospels and from traditional practices of the Church. That is good, of course.

Two major observations or cautions may help you and your friends.

First, those who desire special revelations or messages from God beyond what we really have, or who rely on them, don't have very nice things said about them by the great Christian spiritual writers of our Catholic tradition.

Such searches and expectations of personal announcements from God are usually considered signs of a weakness of faith.

St. John of the Cross, for example, was second to none in the history of Christianity for his mystical experiences of God, and for his reputation as a spiritual director.

He knew God can speak to us any way He wishes. Yet, he claimed, God has spoken in total completeness in His Word; in His Son, He has given and said to us everything He would wish.

"Anyone who would seek some new vision or revelation from Him would commit an offence," according to this great authority on spiritual life. "No soul who does not deal with them (inner messages) as the work of an enemy can possibly escape delusion, in a greater or lesser degree, in many of them."<sup>1</sup>

Maybe that's putting it a little strongly, but such phenomena obviously didn't impress him much at all.

Second, one of the surest signs that some personal revelation is suspect, if not outright fraud, is that the recipient attempts to bind other people to obligations because of it.

In my opinion, the finest readable, authentic, and common-sense book available on this subject is *A Still Small Voice: A Practical Guide on Reported Revelations*, by Father Benedict Groeschel.<sup>2</sup>

A clear sign suggesting that a revelation is false or actually fraudulent is, according to him, "the recipient's insistence that the decisions of others must be made on the basis of what is allegedly revealed to the visionary."<sup>3</sup>

Those who, by every evidence, actually did receive genuine personal revelations from God — St. Teresa of Avila, for example — rarely made such demands.

These impositions on others are, however, a common tactic of those, past and present, who claim visions and revelations which eventually prove to have no supernatural foundation.

I sympathize with your frustration and wonder at the — at best — naïveté of so many people. It's important these days to keep your balance.

<sup>1</sup> John of the Cross: *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, Book II, Chapter XXX

<sup>2</sup> See Appendix 4.

<sup>3</sup> Benedict Groeschel: *A Still, Small Voice*, Chapter Nine, "Guidelines for Spiritual Directors"

### Appendix 6: Do I Have a Vocation?

By Father John Dietzen (from *The BC Catholic*, February 7 1988)

*Question:* I am interested in finding out how someone knows he has a religious vocation. I am 24 years old and have thought many times of being a priest. There is a particular monastery near where I live that I am interested in. But I have not felt any kind of a calling, which things I have read say I should feel if I really have a vocation. One priest told me God will give me a special sign if He wants me to be a priest. But I don't think I've had one. What should I be looking for?

*Answer:* Perhaps you need to take a different approach toward deciding whether you should consider entering the religious life. It seems to me that many young men and women have been put off the track toward a religious vocation by being told to look for the wrong things. They are told to pray that God will give them a vocation, that they will recognize it when it comes, and so on.

Even extremely generous young people might therefore say to themselves: I will pray and keep my eyes open for that; in the meantime I must look at my abilities and desires and ideals and decide what I am going to do with my life.

The fact is that this is also the way one determines whether one might have a religious vocation. Spiritual writers, not to speak of the Scriptures themselves, consistently tell us that there is one basic vocation shared by all Christians: to hear and be faithful to the message of the Gospel, to follow Jesus Christ faithfully in what He tells us to do, and to follow the example He gives of a model human life.

Any choices beyond that come from reflection on those truths and on our experience of ourselves. What are my abilities? What am I able to do well? What do I like to do? And, perhaps most important, what are my ideals, my dreams? What will I hope to have done with my life as it approaches the end? What do I think the world needs that I can give?

All thoughtful and sincere Christians ask themselves those questions in deciding what to do with their lives. People considering Holy Orders or the consecrated life should do so, too.

This is not to deny that all the graces necessary to live fruitfully in the consecrated life (or any life) are remarkable gifts from God. It is simply to put those decisions in the context of our entire life as disciples of Jesus Christ — which is, after all, the first and supreme call of God to all who share the title Christian, including Catholic Christian.

Placing the wrong kind of mystique around these particular Christian vocations [*i.e.* religious vocations] has perhaps only seemed to put them out of reach for ordinary Catholic young people who, we keep saying, should seriously consider religious vocations as real possibilities for themselves.

My view of religious vocations is not new. Catholic theology and canonical practice have consistently held that no religious vocation is final, and is therefore not fully present, until the individual is "called" by a bishop or a religious superior.

Bishops and superiors do not normally look for young men and women who have received supernatural messages or signs. They base their judgements on very down-to-earth criteria: the aspirants' physical, academic, and other abilities; their willingness and ability to fulfil the responsibilities of that kind of life and to grow spiritually toward holiness in that vocation; and their ideals — whether they see a religious life as sufficiently attractive and fulfilling for a permanent commitment.

If you present yourself to a bishop or a religious superior, these are the questions he will ask himself, many times over.

And you — with one eye always on the example and teachings of Christ — should be asking yourself precisely the same questions.

You have only one life, and you want to live it to the fullest. When you begin to perceive what will challenge you to give and use everything you have, you are probably moving in the right direction.