

# Faith and the Christian Vocation

*by Alphonse H. Clemens*

This paper, replete as it needs to be with theological implications, is presented with a degree of trepidation. It is written by one who cannot profess being a theologian—not even what Bishop Sheen recently labeled a “magazine theologian.” However, the role of the theologian is not only to elaborate principles but also to apply them to existential phenomena; the emerging role of the behavioral scientist would seem to indicate his need to furnish the theologian with a clear awareness of the specific, concrete, realistic facts and attitudes of our contemporary culture. In this context this paper pretends to offer nothing more than perspective on the Christian vocation as seen by lay men and women, immersed as they are in mundane preoccupations.

There are, it seems, in our Catholic subculture, despite its apparent spiritual affluence, alarming symptoms of deterioration. We have more Catholics than ever before but proportionately fewer converts to Catholicism. The dearth of vocations to the priesthood and religious life in specific instances is such as not to furnish replacements. The number of “drop-outs” before and after ordination or the taking of vows is increasing. Mentalities and practices which favor contraception and divorce have made serious inroads into the Catholic pattern of living. These and similar symptoms which cause dismay evidence the decline of a living, vital faith by those professing the Christian vocation. Doubtless this is attributable to the fact that while greater numbers have the faith and the Christian vocation, fewer are faithful to this vocation.

With the upward mobility of the Catholic subculture we have more Catholics who are doctors, psychiatrists, lawyers, teachers, business men and laborers, but do we have more *Catholic* professional men, business men, working men? If not, doubtless it is due to what social scientists have found basic in all of our contemporary problems, the sheer incapacity to love.<sup>1</sup>

Every human being has as his first vocation a vocation to love. The whole of Trinitarian theology seems epitomized in the statement "God is love" (I Jn 4:9). Being made in the image and likeness of God, can it not be said that we are love? We were created out of the diffusive creativity of God's love; our role in this world is simply to love, while our final destiny is one of eternal love! So intensely is the socio-psychosomatic nature of man oriented toward this one goal—love—that deprived of it infants die, adolescents turn delinquent, and adults suffer the throes of neuroses and psychoses. Modern psychiatry assures us that every mentally ill person feels unloved and unloving and will enjoy the restoration to normalcy only when they feel loved and can impart love to others. Such is the human condition; such is the human vocation.

The waters of baptism initiate the faith and the Christian vocation. By this incorporation into Christ our vocation now is to love in a supernatural manner with a Christ-like love as becomes partakers of the Divine nature. Father Leen says: "In baptism we become children in the supernatural order, and the vast majority of us remain stunted and underdeveloped spiritually up to the very end. . . . We live and die infants as far as our spiritual life is concerned."<sup>2</sup> Viewed from one aspect this supernatural vocation craves union with God in love and the diffusion of this love through the apostolate. Pope Paul, while still Cardinal Montini, in addressing the Lay Apostolate Congress, affirmed:

The essential attitude of Catholics who want to convert the world is one of love. This is the genius of the apostolate: to know how to love. I should like this Christian precept to become for us a resolution and a program here in Rome, center of the Catholic apostolate.

We will love our brothers whether they be close or distant.

We will love our own fatherland, and we will love other fatherlands.

We will love our friends, and we will love our enemies.

We will love Catholics, and we will love schismatics, Protestants, Anglicans, the indifferent, Moslems, pagans, atheists.

We will love all social classes but particularly those which have most need of help, of assistance, of betterment.

We will love the very young and the very old, the poor and the sick.

We will love those who mock us, who despise us, who stand in our way,  
who persecute us.

We will love those who are worthy of love, and those who are unworthy.

We will love those who fight against us; we do not want any man to  
be our enemy.

We will love our times, our community, our technical skills, our art,  
our sport, our world.

We will love, and we will try to understand, to have compassion, to  
think well of others, to serve them, to bear with them.

We will love with the heart of Christ: "Come to me, all you . . ."

We will love with God's good measure: "God so loved the world . . ."3

From another point of view love, the essence of holiness, is a three dimensional thing. A contemporary theologian reminds us that this Catholic way of life is not so much a set of laws as it is a *person*—Christ.<sup>4</sup> Because of the current tendency to reduce Catholicism to legalism and a minimal morality which (in fear rather than in love asks, "Is it sinful?" rather than, "Is it Christ-like?"), there are few aspects of the Christian vocation which need to be preached more than this personal relationship to Jesus. To reduce the Catholic way of life to the laxist moral position would seem to reduce Catholicism itself to being just an ethical society. This myopic vision so wide-spread in our Catholic subculture must give way to the more integral concept of a vocation which is Christian because it is predicated upon the Christ Who said: "I am the way, and the truth, and the life" (Jn 14:6).

Without the way, there is no going; without the truth, there is no knowing; without the life, there is no living. I am the way which thou must follow; the truth which thou must believe; the life which thou must hope for.<sup>5</sup>

When this integral perspective of the Christian vocation is restored, we can hope once again to recognize the meaning of "I am the truth" in its fullness. Not only will formal dogmas be upheld, but the informal teachings in the Church's magisterium will be accepted. The derivatives of dogma, often termed the "mind of the Church," will once again be given assent as they apply to the existential innovations of a new and quickly changing culture. Dogma will be made relevant to contemporary conditions and situations, affording sermons which will specify the Catholic point of view on matters such as modesty in dress and posture, roles of men and women, working wives and mothers, etc. This, in turn, should engender Christ-like attitudes for transcending the narrow limits of minimal moralistic positions. It will, hopefully, engender a lessened desire, in the words of Bishop Sheen,

for "adaptation to the world" and a heightened desire for "attachment to Christ." Withal there may come again a contemplative mood to our Catholic subculture which will induce us to put aside the mad, competitive noisiness of worldly preoccupations for a greater recollection of spirit. We may even wrest Sunday from commercial interests and amusement, and once again "restore Sunday" to the Lord as Pius XII and John XXIII so strenuously urged. Above the din of modernity we might even hear again the words of St. Paul: "If you be risen with Christ, seek the things which are above . . . mind the things that are above, not the things that are on earth" (Col. 3:1-3).

The Christian vocation, predicated on the person of the Christ Who is the way, implies the fact (contradicted today by some Catholics) that love is explicated in morals. To love Christ is to love His laws. "How I love thy law, O God! it is my meditation all the day" (Ps. 118). "If you love Me, keep my commandments" (Jn 14:15): Is not modern theology stressing the significance of the moral way by deploring the negative morality of yesterday and re-emphasizing the positive system of the virtues?<sup>6</sup>

Beyond a system of virtues there is the continuing need to formulate and to preach positive moral positions on the existential realities of our contemporary culture. If economists decry the overextension of installment buying, why should not preachers do the same? If psychiatrists decry the rising tide of immodesty in dress, license in amusement, suggestiveness in dance, and obscenity, why should not preachers do the same? If sociologists decry the absenteeism of fathers with the corresponding growth of "momism" (and with it alcoholism, homosexuality, male passivity), why should not preachers do the same? If thinking persons in our culture decry the absence of asceticism in the flight from sacrifice to the "soft life," why should not preachers do the same? If Pius XII repeatedly admonished married couples that they would need to be heroic because love means sacrifice (as the Nuptial rites reaffirm several times), why should not preachers do the same? If marriage counselors recognize that every marriage failure is due to objective sin (though often not subjective sin), why should preachers not expound this to married couples? If the virtues are mediations of love, and if virtue cannot be genuine without love, and if charity without the practice of virtue is sheer illusion, why should not preaching explicate this for lay people?

The Christian vocation finds its fullness in the realization of Christ's statement "I am the life." This life finds its beginning and its end in the liturgy. Vatican Council II spoke of the liturgy as the "summit

toward which the activity of the Church is directed . . . ; at the same time it is the fountain from which all her power flows."<sup>6a</sup> This would seem to be the converse of a widespread lay mentality which envisions Sunday attendance at Mass as a sort of adjunct to the mundane cares of daily family living, or at most, an interruption of worldly preoccupations for a weekly act of formal worship. Doubtless more saintly couples would be found were it made clear that the Sunday Mass (as all the liturgy) is the source of grace which will supernaturalize their every good action regardless how mundane and which while ennobling the persons, will make their actions beneficial to others. Only in this correct context will married couples again find holiness in the mother's doing the family washing or the father's driving a truck to his family support. In this context every good act becomes a religious act oriented toward worship through its "grace-ful-ness."

It is through the liturgy, the source and summit of the Christian vocation, that holiness is:

Joy and sadness, boredom and excitement, tears and laughter . . .

Holiness is the prideful joy of a grandfather who has grown wise and strong in love, who understands that his vocation as parent is not ended, only changed.

Holiness is the work of the housewife who finds meaning and joy fulfillment in every-day routine.

Holiness is the boredom of motherhood as well as the glory. It is the endless attention, the dirty diapers, the spilled food, the ear-shattering and soul-wringing cries and demands of her child.

Holiness is the loneliness of age, the loss of family, friends, the serenity, and even the dependence of years; at last, perhaps the leisure to be a saint.

Holiness is the boredom of endless waiting that is part of service—to be there in case of need, to see so much of man at his worst and still love because of what he can be at his best.

Holiness is a woman in pain who can laugh with courage because she knows she never suffers alone or to no purpose.

In other words human holiness is all, and only, the real and the now—all that is I, all that I can share with God, all that is not sin.<sup>9</sup>

The Christian vocation to supernatural and natural love is then an integral and all-embracing process. It is not just intellectual union with Christ and His Church even when this implies an assent opposed to one's predilections; it is not just volitional union in the practice of a virtue system and ascetical self-sacrifice so difficult in an age committed to minimal ethics and soft-living; it is chiefly the union of

life—a life together with God here and now through grace—which permeates the existential acts of daily mundane care elevating them to worshipful acts. The Christian vocation is all of this, or it is nothing.

If I speak with the tongues of men and of angels but have not charity, I have become as sounding brass or a tinkling cymbal. And if I have prophecy, and know all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith so as to remove mountains, and yet do not have charity, I am nothing. And if I distribute all my goods to feed the poor, and if I deliver my body to be burned, and yet do not have charity, it profits me nothing (I Cor 13:1-7).

Implicit in the Christian vocation to love as a human being and as a supernatural being is the need to channel this love through sex differentiations and the roles of masculinity and femininity. For a man and a woman cannot maintain their dignity as equal human beings “except by respecting and activating the characteristic qualities which nature has given each of them: physical and spiritual qualities which cannot be eradicated.”<sup>10</sup> If men are more creative, their spirituality will reflect this; if they are more action-inclined, theirs will be less a contemplative and more a pragmatic love; if men are given more to large projects and great causes, their spirituality will plunge them into conquering nations for Christ, as did St. Francis Xavier; if men are more aggressive, their love will evidence itself the more in Catholic Action. In these and other attributes masculine expression and applications of love will supply a distinctive pattern of virility.

On the other hand, if women are more passive, theirs will be a love of greater abandonment to Providence; if more affective, a love of intensified warmth; if more receptive, a greater readiness to unquestioning obedience; if more tender, a greater tendency of charity toward the weak, the helpless, the distressed; if more person-oriented, a greater dedication to individual persons, especially the person of Christ; if more given to detail, a greater emphasis upon the spiritual significance of minute actions. It would seem not a mere accident that Therese of Lisieux gave us a “Little Way,” replete with nothing but *tiny* actions done with *great love*, characterized by a total abandonment. It is not surprising that the Little Flower wrote in her autobiography “My vocation is love.”<sup>11</sup> This is akin to Pius XII’s positing woman as the heart of the family rather than its head.

This confrontation with masculine and feminine expressions and applications of the Christian vocation discloses them as strengths rather than weaknesses. While it is obvious that any virtue driven to extreme becomes a vice, yet the fact remains that men and women will pattern

their vocation of love somewhat differently. To dissuade this process would be merely to encourage the cultural trend toward defeminizing women and emasculating men.

In fact were it not for these distinctive qualities men and women could scarcely be expected (because they would be incapacitated) to fulfill the distinctive *roles* Providence has marked out for them. If "every woman is made to be a mother in the physical sense of the word, or, indeed, in a more spiritual and exalted but no less real sense,"<sup>12</sup> is it not equally true that every man is meant to be a father in either the physical or spiritual sense? While the very nature of love and, therefore, of the Christian vocation is creativity in both men and women, the note of initiatory, active creativity seems to characterize the male, and cooperative activity the female. "She is called upon to cooperate with man in the propagation and development of the human race, and in this task she assumes the delicate and sublime role of maternity."<sup>13</sup>

The Christian vocation to love through spiritual paternity can be seen in the priest's co-initiatory action with Christ in the Mass; in his dedication of his time, energy, and money to his flock; in his parochial planning which embraces the spiritual and temporal needs of each family in his parish; in his *personal* interest and identification with his families. It seems a truism to reiterate that when there is this type of paternal love in the rectory, it can also be found in the homes of the parish.

In married love Christian paternity will, according to the Second Vatican Council, evidence itself in "generous fruitfulness," in a dedication of resources (time, energy, money) primarily to family needs, especially the education of the children. This implies desisting from over-occupation with career and giving greater personal attention to wife and children; it implies desisting from an exaggerated quest for status and even higher standards of material living and a greater expenditure of one's resources for child-rearing and charitable purposes. Christian paternal love implies the initiatory action of leadership in all areas of family living, including religion and education; it further implies the male role of involvement in social and political action so imperative in a culture as conspiring against Christian family values as is ours.

Spiritual maternal love, on the other hand, will effect an expressive role: one of cooperativeness, support, implementation, and nurturing of the spiritual and charitable projects in the Church's mission. Unencumbered by physical motherhood through consecrated or unpreferred virginity, spiritual maternal love will grasp to her womanly

heart for their fulfillment the many unrequited needs of those who are underprivileged: the spiritually impoverished, the uneducated, the infirm and defective, the weak and exploited, the lonely and the rejected. Being confined to none, spiritual maternity is extended to all.

In the Christian vocation of the married state, maternal love will find its expression not only in a generous fecundity but also in a sacrifice of self in the rearing of God's children and the temporal and spiritual prosperity of her spouse. Ever since Eve was created to dispel Adam's lonesomeness through companionship and complementation, to help Adam "dress the garden" (Gen 2:18) and became a helpmate to man; ever since Adam's preter-naturally perfect mind saw in Eve's nature "the mother of all things living," the nurturing role of maternal love has indicated woman's vocation. Mary at the foot of the cross remains the sublimated expression of the companion and helpmate (co-redemptrix) and the maternity (mediatrix) for women in all ages, cultures, and places who would understand their Christian vocation.

Yet despite the mother's internalized role in the bosom of the family, the vocation of maternity in the modern world extends its vision and action beyond the confines of the home. The hostility of our contemporary cultural milieu to the values of the Christian vocation in marriage urged Pius XII to signal this extension of maternity to the area of social and political action.

The fate of the family, the fate of human relations are at stake. They are in your hands. *Every woman has then, mark it well, the obligation, the strict obligation in conscience, not to absent herself but to go into action in a manner and way suitable to the condition of each so as to hold back those currents which threaten the home, so as to oppose those doctrines which undermine its foundation, so as to prepare, organize, and achieve its restoration (italics ours).*<sup>14</sup>

This position was reaffirmed by John XXIII in his admonition:

The progressive rise of woman to all responsibilities of associated life requires her active intervention on the *social* and *political* plane. Woman, no less than man, is needed for social progress especially in all those fields that require tact, delicacy, and maternal intuition (italics ours).<sup>15</sup>

The Christian vocation is one of LOVE: a love is at once both natural and supernatural; a love of a *person* who is Christ; a love of a human being sex-differentiated for the roles of paternity and maternity. Those striving to forge better the pattern of their Christian vocation in an alien culture await the explication and application of these truths to contemporary living through further preachment.



FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Sorokin, Pitirim, *Altruistic Love, a Study of American Good Neighbors and Catholic Christian Saints*, Beacon Press, Boston, 1950.

<sup>2</sup> Leen, Edward, *In the Likeness of Christ*, Sheed and Ward, New York, 1950, p. 328.

<sup>3</sup> Montini, Cardinal Giovanni Battista, *Theological Digest*, X:3, Summer, 1962, p. 141.

<sup>4</sup> Gilleman, Gerard, S.J., *The Primacy of Love in Moral Theology*, Newman Press, Westminster, Md., 1959, p. 168.

<sup>5</sup> Kempis, Thomas a, *The Imitation of Christ*, Ch. I.

<sup>6</sup> *The Liguorian*, Vol. 51, No. 8, August 1963, p. 57.

<sup>6a</sup> *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, Number 10.

<sup>7</sup> Gilleman, Op. Cit.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 284, 288.

<sup>9</sup> Phelan, John, S.J., "Holiness," *The Sacred Heart Messenger*, July 1966, pp. 34-44.

<sup>10</sup> Pius XII, "Questa Grande," *AAS*, XXXVII (1945) p. 285.

<sup>11</sup> Taylor, Thomas N. (translator), *Saint Therese of Lisieux, the Little Flower of Jesus*, P. J. Kenedy and Sons, New York, 1926, p. 203.

<sup>12</sup> Pius XII, "Questa Grande," *AAS*, 37 (1945) p. 287; *DR* (1945) p. 231.

<sup>13</sup> Pius XII, "Poussees par," *AAS*, 49 (1957) p. 909; *DR* 19 (1957-8) p. 428.

<sup>14</sup> Pius XII, *Woman's Duties in Social and Political Life*, Paulist Press, New York, p. 14; also *AAS*, 37 (1945) pp. 284-295.

<sup>15</sup> John XXIII, "The Role of Women in Modern Society," *Social Action Digest*, Vol. 4, No. 11, November 1961, p. 2.

*The seam of time and the tolling of bells can no longer be the criterion. Rather are we caught up in love for an eternal, unseen mystery who refracts the light of our gaze—now from crescendos of shimmering, silver-blue ideals held softly yet dearly on pillows of burgundy allegro—then to the dark and distant pressure of the stars' gaze, our loved ones' dim solicitude, and the unchartered cartography of our own freedom.*

*Yet must it ever be—maranatha!*

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