

4. Engaging in Christian Ethical Decision Making

By this point in the session, the discussion is hopefully very lively, needing more moderation than encouragement. Because we are ‘transplanting’ this approach to storylinking, we might ask the students how appropriate they think it is for the Central and Eastern European context. They might think, for example, that it helped ensure the discussion of discernment did not remain a consideration only of abstractions.

The main purpose of the fourth phase is to come up with plans for concrete action. Because of the time pressures and the newness of this approach, the main concrete action we might consider is whether or not the participants themselves would plan to use this method in their own respective settings. There may be varying levels of commitment to the idea, ranging from openness to enthusiastic commitment.

The participants might agree that for the rest of the seminar, if names of exemplars of the faith from their own respective countries occur to them, they would list these for all to see. The purpose of this activity is to get participants to think about heroes in the faith from their own cultural heritage. It is a bonus that they remain interested in the stories of such figures from other countries as well.

So we need to discuss and reflect upon people of faith in our own cultural tradition who would be helpful examples for our context: historical figures with whom we identify either nationally, culturally, linguistically, vocationally or because of gender. We might also consider whether this method has raised any insights for us; if this method brought to us something new; if insights arose in it; where we could envision applying this method (for example, in a Bible Study, during times of personal devotion or while counselling our peers), and the concerns we have before using it; whether we feel God calling us in any way to use this method; and whether there are barriers that might prevent us from doing so.

The question of what God is calling us to do is both important and challenging. What this paper has set out to show is that how to ask the question is a challenge in itself. We have considered how vocation must be put into a larger perspective than the person actually seeking it, and how in our changing world new ways of vocational discernment are worthy of attention. Finally, the African American model of storylinking is explored as one way of vocational discernment for the global Church in the XXIst century.

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Marriage as Vocation and its Value (Based on 1Cor 7,32–35)

“I should like you to be free of anxieties. An unmarried man is anxious about the things of the Lord, how he may please the Lord. But a married man is anxious about the things of the world, how he may please his wife, and he is divided. An unmarried woman or a virgin is anxious about the things of the Lord, so that she may be holy in both body and spirit. A married woman, on the other hand, is anxious about the things of the world, how she may please her husband. I am telling you this for your own benefit, not to impose a restraint upon you, but for the sake of propriety and adherence to the Lord without distraction” (1Cor 7,32–35).

I. Two Kinds of Anxiety

Most people are familiar with using the words “call” and “vocation” as part of religious terminology in areas that are related to the priestly and/or consecrated way of life. At the same time, marriage is usually regarded as something more “ordinary”, which does not fall under this type of terminology. Many people also believe that marriage is, in a certain way, an easier path, and even that it is less valuable and ranks behind the priestly vocation. Such claims appeal to Saint PAUL as if he had approved these ideas. They claim that PAUL, though not being directly opposed to marriage, still placed it somewhere after celibacy. This kind of thinking has existed throughout history and constantly pops up in different forms.

In order to discuss and challenge this point of view, I have chosen a text frequently quoted as supporting such a claim. The passage is taken from the First Letter to the Corinthians 7,32–35. A plain-face reading of this text seems to suggest, and even intensify, the negative idea about PAUL and his attitudes towards marriage.

The words “An unmarried man is anxious about the things of the Lord, how he may please the Lord. But a married man is anxious about the things of the world, how he may please his wife, and he is divided” make us think that PAUL prefers celibacy and, therefore, recommends not entering into marriage. He seems to have a negative attitude towards marriage – as if marriage were presented as less valuable or worse in regards to the possibility of attaining salvation (things of the Lord).

What is behind this way of thinking are two kinds of *anxiety*: anxiety for the things of the Lord and for the things of the world. The text uses the same Greek root in both instances – in a positive and a negative sense: first, being anxious, being unduly concerned; and second, being properly concerned for, devoting concern to.¹ Such a use of the same word in opposing senses is not unique: Phil 4,6 is a prohibition against anxiety (“have no anxiety at all”), while Phil 2,20 is an encouraging concern for other people (a genuine interest).

This concern is exemplified in caring for the things of the Lord and for the things of the world (how to please a spouse). Caring for something or somebody is a part of human life, and PAUL does not advise negating or removing it. The problem here is the division caused by this dual concern. It is like being pulled in two directions (parcelling out time, attention, energies and tasks).² PAUL’s concern is to reorient that care, so that a person is not torn apart by useless worry over things that do not matter. These fruitless concerns can be removed by trusting that God takes care of us. God knows what we truly need more than we do.³

In other words, caring for the things of the world (spouse) is not intrinsically bad. It only becomes a negative element if it prevents a person from being concerned about the things of the Lord (like every other concern or interest a person might have). PAUL does not criticise the kind of care one has for her or his spouse. Committing oneself to a spouse in marriage naturally involves a high degree of care and concern. It imposes demands and responsibilities that must not be neglected.

The problem is not marriage taken by itself, but the danger it might induce: becoming too distracted trying to please the partner.⁴ 1Cor 7,28 can be quoted as well (“If you marry, however, you do not sin, nor does an unmarried woman sin if she marries”) to show

that there is nothing intrinsically wrong with marriage: it is not a determining obstacle to “pleasing the Lord”.⁵

II. Concern for Holiness

The anxiety about the things of the Lord is combined with the concern for being “holy in both body and spirit” that is mentioned (34). This holiness is presupposed as proper to those who care for the Lord and is explicitly mentioned in the case of women.⁶ It is to be understood in the larger context of the Old Testament, where holiness is intended as belonging exclusively to God: “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts!” (Is 6,3). Another meaning of holiness is the sense of devoted attention and service to the Lord.⁷

Consequently, holiness is presupposed for those who serve God: “You shall make and keep yourselves holy, because I am holy” (Lev 11,44). Being holy in body is not equivalent to avoiding sexual relations which are presupposed to belong to marriage. There is no textual basis for drawing this kind of conclusion. One cannot make the proper use of sexuality responsible for the loss of holiness. It is, rather, its misuse which may have that effect.

All Christians, whether married or not, are called to and expected to live in holiness. PAUL expresses several times this important principle, valid for everyone without distinction: “May the God of peace make you perfectly holy and may you entirely, spirit, soul, and body, be preserved blameless for the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1Thes 5,23); “Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, Whom you have from God, and that you are not your own? For you have been purchased at a price. Therefore, glorify God in your body” (1Cor 6,19–20; see also Rom 6,12.19; 12,1; 2Cor 7,1; Phil 1,20; 1Thes 4,4).⁸ Whether mentioned independently or together, body and spirit are both intended to be preserved and kept in holiness. They describe the whole person, who should strive to be holy in every way and totally devoted to the Lord.⁹

⁵ THISELTON A. C., *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary*. Eerdmans, 2000. 588.

⁶ BARRETT C. K., *A Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians* (BNIC). Black, 1968. 181. The author explains this to be a “quotation from a Corinthian ascetical party”. COLLINS R. F., *First Corinthians*. Liturgical Press, 1999. 292. The author sees it as a “Corinthian buzzword used to describe a specific group of well-intentioned and zealous unmarried women in Corinth”. These claims are based mostly on conclusions without a firm textual basis, and therefore it seems more prudent to follow and explain the text.

⁷ THISELTON A. C., *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary*. Eerdmans, 2000. 591.

⁸ GARLAND D. E., *1 Corinthians*. Baker, 2003. 335.

⁹ SCHRAGE W., *Der erste Brief an die Korinther. Evangelisch-Katholischer Kommentar zum NT 7,1*. Neukirchen, 1995. 180.

¹ THISELTON A. C., *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary*. Eerdmans, 2000. 586.

² THISELTON A. C., *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary*. Eerdmans, 2000. 590.

³ GARLAND D. E., *1 Corinthians*. Baker, 2003. 332.

⁴ GARLAND D. E., *1 Corinthians*. Baker, 2003. 333–334.

PAUL is telling all that “for the sake of propriety and adherence to the Lord without distraction” (35). His primary concern is adherence and devotion to the Lord. If this goal of Christian life is preserved, being married is in no way to be seen in a negative light. A Christian wife and husband can also encourage and enhance each other’s devotion to the Lord, even though they might be distracted by family responsibilities.¹⁰

III. Different Vocations

For a proper understanding of this passage and PAUL’s attitude about marriage in general, we need to consider this text in the larger context of 1Corinthians and PAUL’s teaching on this matter. First of all, let us go back to 1Cor 7,7, where he states: “I wish everyone to be as I am, but each has a particular gift from God, one of one kind and one of another.”

PAUL is very realistic and is aware that people live differently, since they have different *vocations*: one for marriage, another for consecrated life or priesthood, and still another for the single life. This is in conformity with the principle stated elsewhere: “In one body we have many parts, and all the parts do not have the same function” (Rom 12,4). This teaching about the diversity of functions in favour of the whole body is developed in detail in 1Cor 12.

Marriage and married life is one of the options, one of the functions performed for the benefit of the Body of Christ – the Church – by some of its members. Though having equal dignity, various vocations and positions have different functions. But finally, all of them are supposed to be beneficial to the whole. This profit will be reached only if every part fulfils its function; if every person contributes according to her or his best abilities for the benefit of the whole.

Here is the basis for encouraging everyone to live according to one’s vocation: “I, then, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to live in a manner worthy of the call you have received” (Eph 4,1) – in the state to which she or he is called by God; this is the best place for her or him.

IV. Vocational Discernment

Another, more practical question arises now, and it is that of *vocational discernment*. Since there are different options, how does one know which one is the most fitting and which one to choose?

¹⁰ THISSELTON A. C., *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary*. Eerdmans, 2000. 593.



This question is large and complex, and it cannot be discussed in detail here. What is behind this is the Christian conviction that God holds the life of every person in God's hands.

We are not masters but only administrators. When discerning the concrete way of life and which position to take in human society and in the Church, one tries to determine the option intended for her or him by God and to pursue it to the best of one's abilities. All discernment rests on the following premise: God manifests his will both from within us and through the numerous circumstances which make up our lives.¹¹

In no way is human freedom negated here, since it is always and fully a human decision that is made. Human freedom is exercised in the moments of deciding and determining one's life. We are free to decide whatever seems best for us. On a deeper level, though, we believe that God knows what is best for us. Determining and choosing God's option does not negate human freedom, but is a simple protection from many painful errors committed by those who pretend to know everything themselves, while refusing insights from God Who knows us better than we do: "Lord, You know when I sit and stand; You understand my thoughts from afar. Even before a word is on my tongue, Lord, You know it all" (Psalm 139,2-4).

We are always free to follow or refuse the best option for us. By following it we exercise our freedom, while at the same time protect ourselves from dangers. This is a sign of wisdom on our part. Following and developing our vocation allows more space open for human freedom: there are no limits set on personal growth in perfection and holiness in accord with the chosen way of life – the vocation.

V. Guidelines for Discernment

In order to know concretely our vocation, we can follow a few simple *guidelines* that can be helpful and facilitate the process of discernment. It can be said that life in the state of grace is the basic presupposition for knowing and learning God's will. Grace is our state and/or our ability to live in fellowship with God. On a purely human level, the relationships we build and the closeness we gain to some people enable us to communicate with them intensely and share with them even personal information.

Similarly, when searching for an answer to the question about

¹¹ NEMECK F. K. – COOMBS M. T., *The Way of Spiritual Direction*. Liturgical Press, 1990. 51–94.

God's purpose for my life, it is important to live in friendship with God. It would not make much sense to ask questions of, and expect solid answers from, someone with whom we have no contact and no convergent points in common. If there is no regular contact, we can hardly expect to be on the same wavelength in extraordinary and once-in-a-lifetime situations, like that of vocational discernment, which has lifelong consequences.

Besides striving to know God's will, it is important to know ourselves – our own capacities and qualities – and to seek out where to use them. The idea behind this is that when God calls us to any position and/or task, God does not contradict Godself. God does not call us to tasks which we are not qualified for or capable of accomplishing. As the saying goes, *Gratia supponit naturam*¹²: when God chooses people, he makes sure they have the necessary talents.

Or in other words, God chooses those people who have the expected qualifications that are necessary in order to be able to perform the task they are chosen for. Life in the state of grace goes hand in hand with a particular effort to know oneself by understanding what one's strong and weak points are, understanding the talents one has received, gained or learned throughout the years, knowing the areas where these talents can be best exercised and where they can bring the most benefit, and how to facilitate growth and development of these talents.

VI. Perfection of Vocation

We cannot categorically say that one vocation is better or more valuable than another. We cannot claim that, for example, marriage or consecrated life is by definition better than any other vocation, for instance single life. It can even be misleading to speak about the *perfection* of a vocation. Rather, we should consider the perfection of a person who is actually living the given vocation, keeping in mind that our human scales for perfection might differ considerably from God's standards. Perfection does not depend on the vocation itself, but on the way it is lived. Perfection is not the vocation itself, or the circumstances surrounding it, but the person and her or his involvement is what counts.

A few examples illustrating this principle include: entering into marriage can be done with the best intention of sacrifice for one particular person and secondarily for a larger family. "Commitment in love between a wife and a husband is the symbol of the Lord's

¹² "Grace does not destroy nature, but perfects it." AQUINAS Thomas, *Summa Theologiae*. I. 1. 8. ad 2.

unremitting love for each of God's people. Growth in love between spouses is a unique embodiment of the Lord's transforming and purifying love for every person."¹³ On the other hand, life in marriage can also be understood as a means for one's own gratification: opting for marital life purely because of its physical and sensual dimensions is a misunderstanding and a degradation of the marriage and both partners at the same time.

Similarly, priesthood can be lived as a sacrifice involving a strong communal dimension: this is first of all the community of Father, Son and Holy Spirit as the source of Christian community; and second, it is a Christian community of people sharing the same faith and participating in the community of the Trinity.¹⁴ This way of life includes a special aspect of being ready to serve. It does not follow one's own choices or preferences as to whom one serves, or who are the fellow co-workers, or the methods to be used, or the place, time or duration of service.

Giving up the possibility of choosing these important issues, one expresses her or his readiness and acceptance to trust in the legitimate superiors and their decision of God's will for the given moment, and a desire to fulfil it to the best of one's abilities. If, however, priesthood is lived as a way of spending life without concerns for one's livelihood and without existential difficulties, it will hardly become a way to personal perfection.

There is also another alternative, and that is *single life*. Remaining single, avoiding all the concerns and toils of both married and consecrated life, can be a sign of selfishness and laziness. It can be lived as a way to obtain the most possible benefits and maximum profits with minimal effort (what would be called "efficiency" in modern language). But the advantages that go hand-in-hand with the single life can be put toward the service of others.

The increased availability for involvement and the constant readiness to choose the fields of one's activity according to one's qualities and desires is a great gift that a single person can give to the larger community. If the single life is lived in this way, it will be highly appreciated by those who profit from it.

¹³ NEMECK F. K. – COOMBS M. T., *Discerning Vocations to Marriage, Celibacy and Singlehood*. Liturgical Press, 1994. 54.

¹⁴ NEMECK F. K. – COOMBS M. T., *Discerning Vocations to Marriage, Celibacy and Singlehood*. Liturgical Press, 1994. 148.

VII. Sacrifice and Sanctification

Based on what has been covered, we can *conclude* that it is not the state of life itself that makes us more or less perfect, but the way we live our vocation. It is not something around us that guarantees us anything, but our sincere effort to live in truth our vocation with a spirit of *sacrifice*.

This leads us to move further: if marriage is intended as a true vocation, it offers a fully valuable means to grow in perfection, and it is a complete way to holiness. It is not a choice of an easier and more comfortable way of life, trying to avoid the challenges of priesthood and consecrated life. Marriage too can be, and frequently is, hard. There are many experiences and proof of this fact. It is exactly the thing that PAUL writes about:

"An unmarried man is anxious about the things of the Lord, how he may please the Lord. But a married man is anxious about the things of the world, how he may please his wife. [...] An unmarried woman or a virgin is anxious about the things of the Lord, so that she may be holy in both body and spirit. A married woman, on the other hand, is anxious about the things of the world, how she may please her husband" (1Cor 7,32–34).

When the effort to be pleasing to the wife or husband is mentioned, PAUL does not describe this as a sin or as something negative to be avoided. It is only his statement about the situation in which the biggest part of his audience lives, which is not always easy. Also, his intention is not to convince everyone to leave the married life and exchange it for consecrated life. Such a movement would cause uproar in society and possibly have far-reaching effects if applied on a larger scale.

PAUL does not have such broad intentions. His main concern is to give *guidelines for family life*. He is saying that striving to please a wife and husband in marriage is more difficult than striving to please the Lord. People are sometimes unpredictable, while God does not disappoint. From this point of view we could even say that marriage is presented as a more challenging choice, since it involves elements that are out of one's control.

Still, in spite of the possible obstacles that might occur in marriage, it is a fully legitimate and valuable way to perfection and holiness, even with all of its challenges. PAUL states a few verses earlier in this same letter that "the unbelieving husband is made holy through his wife, and the unbelieving wife is made holy through the brother"

(1Cor 7,14). If an unbeliever is sanctified in her or his believing partner in marriage, *a fortiori* it must be true if both of them are believers! Marriage is a way of sanctification – obviously for those who are called to this state of life.

Sanctification in a partner means being helped to sanctity: we do not become perfect just by and for ourselves, but together with others. And this is even truer in the closely shared married life. One partner draws the other one so that if one grows in holiness, the other partner grows, too. But balance has to be kept: not only can one take, but one also must give, since one can hardly pull both partners ahead; one cannot paddle on both sides of the boat for a long period of time.

It is true also the other way around: if one goes down, she or he sinks the other partner too. The beauty of a marriage consists in this: partners can help each other. On the other hand, it can also be challenging and arduous when one of them starts to misuse the advantages and fails to contribute to the common reservoir.

Life in marriage provides many occasions to grow in holiness. It is enough to open one's eyes and discover those typical situations and circumstances that enable one to grow and to pull her or his partner toward the good, as well. These all are small things, but in a global sense they are valuable and important.

Sacrifice for the good and comfort of a partner, readiness to listen and adapt and the desire to also help and fulfil the unexpressed needs of a partner are things that help to grow in holiness – and not only for the one who performs them. The reciprocal relationship in marriage makes each partner prosper through shared holiness. Such behaviour is possible only by keeping in mind the “introduction” to marriage: its goal is not to make oneself happy, but one's partner.

Pavel HANES

The Response of the New Testament Church to Material Needs and Materialism

Has not God chosen those,
who are poor in the eyes of the world,
to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom?
(James 2,5)

First of all, the period of the New Testament Church has to be defined. The “New Testament Church” – is it the Church in existence in the time of Jesus Christ and his disciples, ie. in the period before the beginning of Paul's mission to the Gentiles? Or does it also include the period of the Apostolic Fathers?

There is no universally accepted answer to this question. Different answers are given by different authors. For example, Adolf HARNACK offers a very dissimilar answer to any given by a Roman Catholic theologian. One possible solution is given in Rudolf BULTMANN's book Primitive Christianity.¹ BULTMANN maintains that Christianity is a syncretistic religion, but all his quotations describing early Christianity are taken from the New Testament. In spite of some reservations with BULTMANN's theology, I use his definition of the period, and limit the theological discussion to quotations from the New Testament. Other quotations are given for historical and illustrative purposes.

As I see it, the response of the New Testament Church to material needs was diaconate, and her response to materialism was warning against the spiritual and ethical dangers of wealth. The first consisted mainly in actions and the second consisted mainly in words. These two things – words and deeds – are inseparably united in the response of the New Testament Church to the problems of the world, although we

¹ BULTMANN Rudolf, *Primitive Christianity* (trans. FULLER R. H.). New York, 1956.