

# SELF-SURRENDER TO THE WILL OF GOD: KEY TO SPIRITUAL DISCERNMENT OF ONE’S VOCATION IN A SELF-SEEKING WORLD

Andrew OTU, STD

## **Introduction**

During one of my one-on-one interactions with some young people recently, one of them posed this question to me: “Father, how do I know my vocation?” This necessitated this paper to help people like my young questioner. In this desire, the meaning of the word “vocation” will be studied especially as it relates to this topic. Therefore, I shall then proceed to study the biblical perspective of calls or vocations. The Church's teaching on vocation will be studied. Then effort will be made to study the will of God and surrendering oneself to it to aid discerning of vocation. Finally, to achieve this self surrendering, some recommendation will be made then a conclusion.

The word “vocation” comes from the Latin word “*vocare*” which means “to call”.<sup>1</sup> Consequently, this word is often interchangeably used with the word “Call”. Since our context is within our relationship with God, the study will not go into all the usages of the word but limits itself to this context alone. Therefore, there are three types of vocations that will primarily be of concern. First is vocation or Call to states of life such as marriage,

priesthood, religious life and single. Second is “call” to professions such as medicine, engineering, farming etc. Thirdly and finally, there is the daily and spontaneous Call to do one thing or the other within the community as need arises. This final one is not often noticed as a Call or vocation probably due to the fact that it is spontaneous by nature to meet short time needs.

### **Biblical Perspective of Vocation**

From the beginning of human existence, God has always called. First, having made them in His image and likeness, unlike with other creatures, He engaged them straightaway in interaction, by calling them to multiply, fill the earth and subdue it. The call to multiply is a Call to be co-creators with God to bring fellow human beings into existence. Other creatures were entrusted into their hands (Gen. 1:28-30) and this is symbolised by the power to give names to them (Gen. 2:19-20). They were equally called to live in the Garden and as well care for it (Gen. 2:15). All these initial biblical Calls therefore were Calls to take life in the image and likeness of God, and be co-partners with God on matters of the earth.

After the fall of our first parents, the nature of God's call came clearer as Call to salvation, call to be closer to God. In the Old Testaments especially, God's call was presented as always in form of a voice calling, that is heard loud and clear by the called.<sup>2</sup> In this line, we see the Call of Abraham to go to an unknown land (Gen.12:1-7) which eventually led to entering into a covenant relationship with God. This Call and covenant formed also the foundation for the relationship of Abraham's descendants, the Israelites with God. Furthermore were the Call of Moses and the Call of the prophets. In the case of Moses, it was not just a matter of a clear voice heard loudly by the called, it happened within an extraordinary experience, the burning bush. God equally introduced Himself within this experience (Ex.3:1ff). While in some instances the one calling was easily and clearly known as God, there were other instances the called need to be helped to know it is God. For instance, while Moses was helped by God, Samuel was helped by Eli (1Sam. 3:1-10). There were also some

who received their Call through visions or dreams. This was the case of the prophets like Isaiah and Jeremiah.

In the New Testaments, the Call through visions and dreams were only pronounced in the case of Mary and Joseph. While Mary's Call was presented through a vision (Lk.1:26-38), Joseph's was through a dream (Mt.1:18-24). However with the advent of Jesus Christ, God-incarnate the form of God's Call changed. He, God-Incarnate began to call as a human being calls a fellow. He called the twelve to follow Him. Then after Jesus' earthly sojourn, Call took another form with the advent of the Holy Spirit, the promised advocate and it was within the Christian Community. An individual is called and the Christian community recognises the Holy Spirit as the one calling him/her. The first among these Calls is the call of Matthias to take the place of Judas Iscariot (Acts. 1:15-26). In this, two things surfaced: the qualities or conditions were given by Peter for the choice of persons to fill the space of Judas Iscariot. Two people, Matthias and Barsabbas who met the conditions were presented. Beyond meeting the conditions, there was the need to confirm God's choice among the two. Eventually it was Matthias. Even though Paul had his Call within an extraordinary experience on his way to Damascus, he needed the acceptance of the Christian community as one truly called by the Lord. There is need for the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit both for the individual and for the Christian community that the Call is really from the Lord.

It is very clear that biblical Calls are for salvation. Either one is called to leave the path of damnation to salvation or one is called to participate in the task of calling and helping others to be saved. The call to salvation, life with God is seen from the beginning to the end of the Bible. While at the beginning, it was a call to dwell in the Garden of Eden (Gen. 2:15), at the end it is the call to enter the New Jerusalem (Rev. 21:2).<sup>3</sup>

The entire Christian Assembly is an assembly of people called to salvation through life of holiness or perfection and have agreed to respond by taking the step of baptism. Within this general Call,

each is given a specific Call to engage in the service of helping the Christian assembly. It is within this specific Call that each responds adequately to the call of God to salvation. Within this context, Paul taught the different gifts meant for service (1Cor. 12: 5-11). Then he further taught about the various offices that each is specifically called to and their hierarchical order within the Christian assembly (1Cor. 12:27-28). Finally, he taught the greatest gift and service that all are called and should strive for. In other word, for Paul while each has specific gift for service and Call within the body of Christ, the entire body is called to charity or love. It is this that all should strive to respond to while at service in their specific Calls.

### **The Church's teachings on vocation**

The Church teaches through her Catechism that God's Call or vocation is embedded in the reason for the creation of human beings. It states:

God, infinitely perfect and blessed in himself, in a plan of sheer goodness freely created man to make him share in his own blessed life. For this reason, at every time and in every place, God draws close to man. He calls man to seek him, to know him, to love him with all his strength. He calls together all men, scattered and divided by sin, into the unity of his family, the Church. To accomplish this, when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son as Redeemer and Saviour. In his Son and through him, he invites men to become, in the Holy Spirit, his adopted children and thus heirs of his blessed life.<sup>4</sup>

This embedded Call is to seek God and to share in His life. This continues to resound in the soul of all humans. It is such that our souls are made to be ever in longing state for God and find rest only in total response to this call. This response is expected to be given with our entire life.

While we all have one general Call within the Church, the Fathers of the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council like St. Paul, in their teaching on the Universal Call to holiness, acknowledge the various specific vocations both within and outside the ecclesial circle. These specific vocations include vocations to states of life and to various professions. The Fathers state clearly that: “it is...quite clear that all Christian in any state or walk of life are called to the fullness of Christian life and to perfection of love, and by this holiness a more human manner of life is fostered also in earthly society.”<sup>5</sup> All vocations are in pursuit of one goal: holiness and salvation. Within this same pursuit they are to be embraced. Any vocation that will not enable one to grow in holiness and as well attain his/her eternal goal is not worthy of acceptance or embrace. In fact, it is clearly the first that such is not his/her divine vocation.

### **Theological Reflection on vocation**

While in the Old Testament, the issue of hearing God's voice calling an individual was very clear, it diminished in the New Testament to become a thing through the Christian community. Not many speak of hearing a voice of God loud and clear similar to human voice to embrace a particular state of life or to carry out certain tasks. God's call is mostly known through an individual's life history and events, and individual's capacity like the Parable of the Talents where each is given based on his capacity or ability (Mt.25:14-15), and the confirmation of the Holy Spirit through the Christian Community. While the history of individual reveals the direction God has been calling him/her, the level of one's capacity confirms the direction because God will not call one to anything He has not granted the capacity or grace to respond adequately. Even if the grace is not there He would provide it especially if one asks Him for it (Ex. 4:10-17). The Christian community plays a great role in this confirmation of the Holy Spirit. The Church always prays along with individuals especially for vocations such as the priesthood and religious life. It is good to state that one cannot rely alone on his/her interpretations of his/her history and experiences, there is need to allow the assistance of others. This assistance would help against

misinterpretations capable of misleading one but help to see clearly both the presence of God and the direction of vocation He is leading him/her. It is good to ask for competent assistants such as Spiritual Directors, Pastoral Counsellors or an experienced and gifted person based on the type of situation.

Vocation is always in service of God's glory and in service of others. It is always in service of the Christian community and the larger human society. It does not respect one's personal or self interests. The story of the call of few people in the Patristic period would help to explain this point. Paul D. Holland said:

Post-NT Church witnessed the transition from a plurality of ministries to a relatively uniform and fixed structure of official ministry. Though the actual process of selecting candidates for such ministry is unclear, the community and its leaders called their *episcopoi* ('He who governs all should be selected by all.'-Gregory the Great; 'It comes from divine authority that a bishop be chosen in the presence of all the people before the eyes of all, and that he be approved as worthy and fit by public judgment and testimony.'-Cyprian); and those chosen had to accept the office freely. Occasionally monks, like Gregory of Nazianzus (330-390), were made bishops by popular acclaim against their will; and Ambrose was only a catechumen when the crowds in Milan made him bishop. Though the selection was the community's task, this selection was understood as an expression of divine call.<sup>6</sup>

God's call is all about what God wants us, wills us to do. If we really know what God's call or vocation is, we may not be crazy about it. This is because it is always a call to service which may often go against our will.

## **Signs of God's will for Vocation**

God's will is not about being successful which many have taken as the sign of our vocation. One can still fail along the line that is God's will, yet such failure does not negate the fulfilling of His will. In this direction Groeschel said: "Success has never been a sign of God's will. As Mother Theresa of Calcutta had observed, 'God calls us to fidelity not to success'. It seems to me a sure sign that a certain project is the work of God if we have the grace to struggle on without bitterness in the face of difficulties and frustrations."<sup>7</sup>

Therefore, sometimes, what is important is that once one feels the call, feels a passion, he/she should respond and move on. If he/she feels lack of the grace or the capacity, he/she should ask for the grace. If God is really the one calling, He will grant it to keep on with the vocation. The granting or the presence of the grace constantly confirms that it is one's vocation. However it is good to state that we cannot rely only on our personal knowledge about ourselves. Sometimes even our self-perception of our capacity may be quite different from the truth about us and as known to others. Therefore others which include our family members, the community we belong either (religious or non-religious), friends and all other acquaintances that we have may be of help on this matter of knowing our vocation. Their experiences of how good we are in a particular vocation and their level of patronage tell much about whether such vocation is ours. Besides, the assistance of a guidance and counsellor professional may be helpful too.

## **Self-surrender to the Will of God**

The will of God simply means God's plan, intention or desire. God does nothing outside His will. In this vein the creation of the world and human being are acts of His will. Human beings were equally created to fulfil His will as shown earlier in the Church's teaching through the Catechism of the Catholic Church. Vocation or Call, therefore, is God's invitation of the called to fulfil His will for which he/she was made. In this, he/she finds the

meaning and purpose of his/her being. It is imperative therefore for him/her to respond to the Call.

### **The Struggle of self-surrender to God's will**

The fall of the human person is the fall from living true to the call to God's will. Since then, human beings have lived with the struggle between personal will and God's will. St. Paul brought it out clearly as he experienced it. He said the good he wants to do he is not always doing and the bad he doesn't want to do, he finds himself doing (Rm. 7:14-19). But he found hope in Jesus, the perfect human being who lived faithful to God's will. Jesus having lived, taught and declared His heavenly Father's will as His will, surrendered to this will at the Garden of Gethsemane and on Calvary. He said: "My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet, not as I will, but as you will" (Mt. 26:39-44). By this He fulfilled the purpose of His coming into this world. This act of Jesus at Gethsemane forms example for humanity in self-surrendering to know and to live faithfully to the vocation God has given. However the struggle between God's will and our personal will is compounded by the challenges of today's world. This affects adversely the ability to discern one's vocation.

### **The Challenges of our time against self-surrendering to God's will**

Pope St. John Paul II presenting the situation of today's world with regard to formation of candidates for the priesthood taught about the challenge of this Age in his Apostolic Exhortation *Pastores Dabo Vobis*. He called it "The lure of the so-called 'consumer society'." He said:

The lure of the so-called 'Consumer Society' is so strong among young people that they become totally dominated and imprisoned by an individualistic, materialistic and hedonistic interpretation of human existence. Material "well-being", which is so intensely sought after, becomes the one ideal to be striven for in life, a well-being which is to be attained in any way and at any price. There is a refusal of anything that speaks of sacrifice and a rejection of any

effort to look for and to practice spiritual and religious values. The all-determining “concern” for *having* supplants the primacy of *being*, and consequently personal and interpersonal values are interpreted and lived not according to the logic of giving and generosity but according to the logic of selfish possession and the exploitation of others. This is particularly reflected in that *outlook on human sexuality* according to which sexuality's dignity in service to communion and to the reciprocal donation between persons becomes degraded and thereby reduced to nothing more than a consumer good. In this case, many young people undergo an affective experience which, instead of contributing to an harmonious and joyous growth in personality which opens them outwards in an act of self-giving, becomes a serious psychological and ethical process of turning inward towards self, a situation which cannot fail to have grave consequences on them in the future.<sup>8</sup>

*Having* is what now counts, not *being*. What have you or what have I are what now counts, not who are you or who I am; this is Materialism. With sexuality, the self-giving it signifies is lost. It is now mainly for search of pleasure and some other form of psychological gratification that it grants. Both the act and the partner are goods to be acquired, used and forgotten. Related to this is the poor vision of vocation to Fatherhood and Motherhood. It is no longer viewed as a call to responsibility, self-giving or sacrifice for the family but mainly for the conjugal act of procreation. What this has produced in the society are children who in turn are not able to be responsible parents. Within this same Consumerism and Materialism driven society context, the choice of priesthood, religious life and single state is often not motivated by the desire for self-donation in service to God and others. It is rather very much motivated by what one would get out of it and not what one would give through it. It is becoming awkward not to be able to give account of what one has made for himself/herself in these vocations.

The desire to stick to these self-interests driven without shift to embrace vocations for the right reason has often led some to leave the priesthood, the religious life and even breakdown of marriages. It is equally having adverse effect on vocation to various professions in life. There is much preference for what is gotten within them than the service to be given through them. The statement of Jesus that the harvest is plentiful but the labourers are few is very much true for Nigerian society of today. Few are those who are ready to respond truly to the nature of vocations.

Another challenge of the Age is the quest for self-fulfilment. This is taken as the ultimate good and pursued without due respect even to God. Many no longer ask the question of whether their self-fulfilment really fulfils God's will and the good of their neighbours. This accounts for the immoral choices about states of life that do not respect God's will. Among these choices are marriage between a son and his mother, between daughter and father, homosexual and lesbian relationships taken to the altar of marriage and sexual relationships between human beings and animals. The practice of taking self-fulfilment as definition of one's vocation yet without reference to fulfilling God's will is self-destructive, unproductive and against both God's glory and the good of the human society. Every genuine vocation serves both God's glory and the good of others. Self-fulfilment according to Benedict J. Groeschel is found in coming to God, "the unchanging, all-fulfilling Reality. Augustine's warning to those who seek happiness in less is worth noting here. '.....Do not look for life in the land of death'."

In addition, another challenge of our time is the desire to live according to what is in vogue, what our society and our family approve as definition of one's vocation. For example, it means that if it is the priesthood, or religious life or marriage, medicine or engineering etc that is approved by all these, we cannot go against it even if it is against the will of God and be accepted. It has driven many into embracing certain vocations without careful discernment.

Unfortunately, the present day Nigerian society's religious climate, rather than serve as solution to these challenges, promotes them. The reign of Gospel of prosperity promises a God that meets all we desire to have. In fact, within the Churches, how much one has counts and even seen as a sign of Godliness. This Gospel presents our human self-fulfilment as God's fulfilment. Within this context, what is preached is not necessarily the divine truth but what makes people happy. Also, one is to live to the admiration of his/her family members and the general human society, most especially supposed enemies. This is not necessarily according to the standard of the Gospel as given by Christ, but in terms of social status and material well being. In this vein, prayers are offered for promotion not necessarily in the sight of God but in the sight of the human society. It is not one's being that is celebrated but what he/she has.

Within these social and religious contexts, the will of God is no longer respected and consequently one's specific divine vocation is difficult to discern. What many people call their vocation often times is the area of life that fulfils their personal interests not where God is truly calling them to serve Him and the human society.

### **Vision of one's Vocation through self-surrendering to God's will**

Self-surrendering means letting go all that is self-craving, for to dispose oneself to recognise what God wills. These cravings are as shown earlier in the study about the challenges of the present time. Though self-surrendering is not easily attained, the experiences of Christ all through His life offer helpful example. These include His experiences from His forty days and nights in the Wilderness to the final struggle at the Garden of Gethsemane. While in the wilderness, the matter of choosing self or His Father's will was presented in form of choice of seeking self glory or His Father's glory (Mt.4:1-11), at the Garden of Gethsemane, it was a matter of choosing life or death. Faced with death, the natural survival instinct was to seek living. While He acknowledged this natural instinct and in fact did plead for the

possibility of satisfying it, He prayed that nevertheless let His heavenly Father's will be done (Mt.26:36-46). The fact that Jesus had it as struggle all through His life and even became fiercer towards the end means self-surrendering to God's will is all life-long and attained fully at the point of death. This is clearly shown in the teachings on spiritual growth or development as taught by the mystics like Sts. Theresa of Avila and John of the Cross. However as one engages in the struggles to surrender self, he/she grows in the vision of God's will for him or her, his/her vocation. Due to the fact that surrendering self is gradual, virtually there is nothing we do without some elements of self. Our choices in life therefore are hardly total response to satisfy God's will alone but partially self interest driven most especially at the early stages of our lives. This applies even in the noblest choices. But in life, as one continues to rid one's choices of the elements of self to be entirely God's, he/she grows in the vision of God's will.

This fact of struggles account for the reason God permits motives that are not entirely His in people's embrace of vocations. God can even use these motives to attract us to embrace our vocations. However, when God permits them He hopes to guide us beyond them to the truth of our vocations at the end. Our response to a call, therefore, does not necessarily remain only at the initial consent but in our continuous consent as He guides us and we grow in understanding the true nature of His will and Call. The case of James and John, the two sons of Zebedee (Mk.10:35-45) explains the whole point. Though, following Christ was noble, their initial motivation was self-driven. But in their willingness to leave all and to journey along with Him, their gradual growth in understanding of Jesus' mission and the reason any should choose to follow Him enabled them to purify themselves of self-seeking motives.

This applies not only to the general Call to follow Christ, to holiness and salvation, it applies both to Vocation, to states of life and professional Calls. Interests for them, need to be subjected to constant checks to ensure purification of self-interests too. Such will enable a clearer vision of God's will or Vocation.

## **Recommendation for self-surrendering to God's will**

One of the teachers in self-surrendering to God's will so as to get the vision of one's true vocation is St. Ignatius of Loyola. In the process of seeking to know God's will, we need to pray to be rid of self-centred love that blocks the vision of God's will, the love of God's glory, and salvation of others. Among the obstacles in our nature against surrendering to God's will are the desires for earthly things, things that do not bring us closer to God. Ignatius suggested developing love for God's glory and for the salvation of other. This is borne out of the realisation of God's tremendous love for us. In addition, St. Alphonsus Liguori in his teaching on resignation to God's will on the twelve steps to Holiness and salvation said:

There are many who desires to attain to perfect union with God; but they are unwilling to bear the contradictions that God send them.....According to St. John of the Cross, 'we must mortify our senses and desires'. With regard to the senses we must, from love of Jesus Christ, reject every gratification that does not refer to the honour of God. For example, should a desire arise within us to see or hear things that are not calculated to bring us nearer to God, we must suppress such a desire. Moreover, our preference must be for the uncomfortable, the disagreeable and the bitter things that nature tries so hard to avoid. In one word, he who sincerely loves Jesus Christ will banish from his heart all attachment to earthly goods, and divest himself of everything in order to be perfectly united to his Blessed Redeemer. All his desires are to be centred in Jesus Christ. He is ever thinking of Him, ever yearning for Him. In every place and on all occasions he wishes to please Him alone. But to arrive at this sincere love it is necessary to banish from the heart all inclinations and attachments that are not for God.<sup>10</sup>

This means we should cultivate the desire for what will bring us closer to God and effort needs to be sincerely made to prefer such

if we are to overcome obstacles against God's will; God-given vocation to us. We need to be prepared to accept going against the preferences of our human nature.

Due to the fact that the world today is dominated very much by self-seeking interests, our prayer to be rid of it is needed both to know our vocation and to be faithful to it. Within this context, we have helpful prayers on self-surrender. Among these prayers is the prayer as taught by the Lord (Mt. 6:9-13). This needs to be prayed frequently and meditatively. Also it is good to embrace as ejaculatory prayer the famous statement of the psalmist: "Here I am Lord, I come to do your will". In this same vein is the counsel of Eli to Samuel: "Speak Lord, your servant is listening". Furthermore is the prayer of self-surrendering: "Jesus, I love you, all I have is thine, yours I am, yours I want to be, do with me whatever is your wish". This needs to be prayed more frequently.

### **Conclusion**

In this study, "self-surrender to God's will: Key to spiritual discernment of vocation in a Self-Seeking World", efforts have been made to research through biblical perspective, the teachings of the Church, theological reflection on vocation, and signs of God's will, self-surrender to God's will and the struggles, the challenges of our time against surrendering to God's will. Finally, recommendations were made that would help imbibe the spirit of self-surrender to God's will. Through these studies, it came out clearly that vocation or divine Call began with creation of human beings. God continues to call through biblical history. Though the advent of sin in human history changed the direction of the Call to salvation, the purpose of God's Call has always remained the same. It is to partner with God, to share in His life. While this is the general Call for all, there is the specific Call for every individual within this general Call. This specific individual Call is for the service of the general Call within the Christian community. The specific Call encompasses the various states of life such as priesthood, marriage and religious life and to profession such as medicine, engineering etc. Specific individual Call is judged as coming from God and worthy of one's embrace

as much as it enables him/her to be closer to God, to be holy and as well attain his/her eternal salvation. It is also judged as much as it enables one to serve the good and salvation of others and not only self-interest. But the ability to discern this properly is mainly through self-surrendering to God's will, which disposes one from self-seeking to do whatever the will of God may be for one. This enables a clear vision of God's will and making the choice for it. The disposition is not easy. It calls for both prayers always to be realised and conscious effort to rid one's self of self-interest drives.

All life long, there must be the readiness to sustain self-surrendering to whatever be God's will for one. Only in this can we find our vocation and the ability to fulfil it to the end. This applies not only to vocations to states of life and professional vocations, it equally applies to every little and spontaneous call to do one or two things within the community at a particular time within a short duration. Vocation is not about what we want, like or being disposed to do, but what God is calling us to do or live.

## ENDNOTES

---

1. Laurence J. O'Connell, "Vocation" in *The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality*, ed. Michael Downey (Bangalore: Theological Publications in India, 2003), 1009.
2. Cf. C. Drago, *Holistic Guidance: A Manual* (Bombay: St. Paul society, 2002), 170.
3. Laurence J. O'Connell, "Vocation" in *The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality*, ed. Michael Downey (Bangalore: Theological Publications in India, 2003), 1009.
4. *The Catechism of The Catholic Church* (Nairobi: Paulines Publications-Africa, 1994), 1.
5. Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium* (21 November, 1964), 40.
6. Paul D. Holland, "Vocation" in *The New Dictionary of Theology*, eds. Joseph A. Komonchak, Mary Collins and Dermot A. Lane (Bangalore: Theological publications in

- India, 1999), 1088.
7. Benedict J. Groeschel, *Spiritual Passages: The Psychology of Spiritual Development* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2009), 156.
  8. John Paul II, *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, 8.
  9. Benedict J. Groeschel, *Spiritual Passages: The Psychology of Spiritual Development* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2009), 95.
  10. Alphonsus Liguori, *The 12 Steps to Holiness and Salvation*, Adapted from the German of Rev. Paul Leick by Rev. Cornelius J. Warren (Illinois: Tan Books and Publishers, 1986), 87.