

Saying Yes to God

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There is a one-word identification and qualification for everyone's genuine vocation. That word is "Yes." Vocation comes from the Latin word meaning "to call," and the priestly and religious vocations have been defined by the Church in her official teaching, her defined theology of vocation, by Pope Pius XII.

The Church teaches that there are two elements to every vocation to the priesthood and religious life: the divine call from God and the ecclesiastical call from the appropriate Church official. The divine call of each individual vocation is to be discerned as real. Then the ecclesiastical call is given to make the corresponding commitment, and the vocation is valid and complete.

Very interesting is the last statement of the Church in the power-packed first paragraph. Pius XII states, ". . . the call of God to enter upon a religious or priestly state must be considered so necessary that if it is lacking the very foundation on which the edifice rests must be called wanting." The Church is making clear that a person could be validly in final religious vows and not have a religious vocation, because the all-important divine call is missing. A man can be a validly-ordained priest and yet not have a vocation to the priesthood, because he lacks the defining Divine call.

Any one of a number of human failings, such as ignorance, prejudice, false ideas, bad mentalities, can result in a Church official giving the ecclesiastical call to a divine call that was never there. How many times has this happened in the experiences of those of us who have been around for a long time? Was everyone who left priestly and religious life unfaithful to their vocation, unfaithful to God? No. Surely there were infidelities, but in many cases of departure, fidelity to their true vocation was finally beginning to be realized.

The meaning of the Church's teaching is that we have to be careful about saying yes to what may come our way. The spirit must be discerned, because not everything comes from God. The importance of the yes that we give to a valid vocation determines our success in that vocation, because the yes must be ongoing, persevering. The yes we all made at final vows and at our ordinations was not complete. It was a promise, a self-imposed and Church-imposed obligation to live out, for the rest of our lives, the initial promise that we made to God.

The value of our promise to correspond with our vocational grace is determined by how unconditional that promise is. The commitment to religious obedience is usually a primary case in point. There have been individuals who obey all right, but only in the cases when their will happens to coincide with the will of their superior. They do not give up their own will, which is the purpose of the vow, in order to practice the corresponding virtue. Obedience for them is not a virtue. It is an expedient; they do it when they want to. They do what they want, not

necessarily what God wants.

This is a particularly dangerous position, as stated in the parable of the talents that we read in the Gospel. The call to vows that we have been given will not be our ticket to heaven. There will be an accounting for each of us for how we lived out our promise, for the virtue that we practiced, in response to the many instances of obedience, for example, that came our way. Did we give up our will to God, which is to say, did we give up our love to God, because the will is the faculty of love? Those who gave nothing but excuses not to obey forfeit their reward for obedience.

There is a natural resistance to the sacrifices necessary to correspond with our religious commitments. Sacrifices go against the natural grain. They carry a psychological hurt with them. We are always tempted to say little no's that detract from our promise to say yes. Saying yes to God's invitation is clearly not a one-occasion statement, made at the time of lifelong commitment. There are many subsequent messes that must be made in order to validate the first yes as authentic, an expression of persevering love.

The things that get in the way of our ongoing commitment can be looked at as enemies, or they can be opportunities. There are barriers to love in the form of temptations to disobedience, violations of poverty, and violations of community living such as uncharitable speech. Each temptation-barrier to love that is overcome is a great victory, because it is the acquisition of a greater virtue of obedience, poverty, community, prayer. Each victory over the opposite of our commitments is a new level of love, and therefore a greater unity with the God who is love.

The basis for the things that get in our way has to do with identity. We like to think we know who we are, but we cannot fully know ourselves. As the Scholastic philosophers teach, we cannot know essences, that is, what a person or thing is in itself. We can only know their characteristics at any one time, and those can change. The second basic barrier is that we cannot know for certain who God is intending us specifically to be at the end. There have been many surprises along the way already, and we expect more to come.

How can you implement God's will if you do not know it? The person without the construction plans should not be entrusted to do the building. He does not know what he is doing. There is much room for prayer, discernment, and trust.

God's plan for our lives does not always conform to our ideas. "Higher than the heavens are above the earth are my thoughts above your thoughts." There is a lot of giving up, a lot of obedience that we have to do in order to realize the Lord's plans for us. Our initial yeses oblige us to follow them with many others.

We can take our examples of good living from Our Lady. Her initial yes has become famous for all ages, "Be it done unto me according to your word." Her yeses after that are not so famous, but they were very essential, for her union with God and for ours. Would she have planned her life to include the cross of seeing her cherished Son rejected throughout His life and then

brutally killed at the end? Hardly, and neither would we, but without the cross, there is no growth and no salvation.

Each yes that we make to God, whether it goes against our will or agrees with it, is an act of the will, an act of love. We can believe that God appreciates our lives and our prayers, but it is primarily love that He is looking for and so He looks at our will and the yeses it produces. God looks at the responses we make to the opportunities we experience throughout life.

If there ever should be another vow in addition to the ones we already have, it is openness. Perhaps openness comes under obedience, but it is essential in cooperating with God's will, what His plan is for us. We all have plans for ourselves, at least provisional ones, and they can be potential barriers to God's will, when they get in the way of His plan. Everyone also has some idea what holiness is and looks like, but are those ideas identical with God's ideas for each of us?

We are given the examples of the saints and the yeses they made to the Lord. Would you really like to become another St. Bernard, St. Aelred, St. Isidore, or whomever? Then you are not doing God's will, you are not saying the yes to Him that He wants. No matter what our efforts, we are not the people they were. We have been given different personalities and characters, different bodies, and we have been chosen to live in different times. The yeses we make to the guiding circumstances in our lives, carefully created by God are designed to make us saints in our own right.

Doing God's will means becoming the person He wants us to be, accepting the circumstances, assignments, and events He wants. The clay in the hands of the divine potter will resist every effort, until it gives up its desire to be what it wants to be and yields to the much better ideas and choices of infinite knowledge and infinite love.

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