

# The Christian Vocation

*A homily given on December 2, 1951*

The liturgical year is beginning, and the introit of the Mass 1 invites us to consider something closely related to the beginning of our Christian life: the vocation we have all received. “Make me to know your ways, O Lord; teach me your paths.”<sup>1</sup> We ask the Lord to guide us, to show us his footprints, so we can set out to attain the fullness of his commandments, which is charity.<sup>2</sup>

In considering the circumstances surrounding your decision to make every effort to live your faith, I imagine that you, like me, will thank our Lord. I know too that, without falling into false humility, this thankfulness will leave you even more convinced that you have merited nothing of this on your own. Usually we learn to invoke God as a young child from our Christian parents. Later, teachers, friends, and acquaintances have helped us in many ways not to lose sight of our Lord.

Open your own hearts to Jesus and tell him your story. I don't want to generalize. But one day perhaps an ordinary Christian, just like you, opened your eyes to horizons both deep and new, yet as old as the gospel. He suggested to you the prospect of following Christ earnestly, seriously, of becoming an apostle of apostles. Perhaps you lost your balance then and didn't recover it. Your complacency wasn't quite replaced by true peace until you freely said “yes” to God, because you wanted to, which is the most supernatural of reasons. And in its wake came a strong, constant joy, which disappears only when you abandon him.

I don't like to speak of someone being singled out to be

part of a privileged elect. But it is Christ who speaks, who chooses. It is the language of holy Scripture: “He chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy,” Saint Paul tells us.<sup>3</sup> I know that such thoughts don’t fill you with pride nor lead you to think yourself better than other men. That choice, the root of our vocation, should be the basis of our humility. Do we build monuments to an artist’s paintbrush? Granted the brush had a part in creating masterpieces, but we give credit only to the painter. We Christians are nothing more than instruments in the hands of the creator of the world, of the redeemer of all men.

### *The Apostles were ordinary men*

- 2 I’m greatly encouraged whenever I consider a written precedent for what we have been talking about. We find it, step by step, in the Gospel’s account of the vocation of the first twelve. Let’s meditate on it slowly, asking those holy witnesses of our Lord to help us follow Christ as they did.

The first Apostles, for whom I have great affection and devotion, were nothing to boast about, humanly speaking. With the exception of Matthew, who probably earned a comfortable living which he left behind at the behest of Jesus, the Apostles were mere fishermen. They lived a meager existence, fishing all night to keep food on the table.

But social status is unimportant. They weren’t educated; they weren’t even very bright, if we judge from their reaction to supernatural things. Finding even the most elementary examples and comparisons beyond their reach, they would turn to the Master and ask: “Explain the parable to us.”<sup>4</sup> When Jesus uses the image of the “leaven” of the Pharisees, they think that he’s reproaching them for not having purchased bread.<sup>5</sup>

They were poor; they were ignorant. They weren't very simple or open. But they were even ambitious. Frequently they argued over who would be the greatest when—according to their understanding—Christ would definitively restore the kingdom of Israel. Amid the intimacy of the Last Supper, during that sublime moment when Jesus is about to immolate himself for all of humanity, we find them arguing heatedly.<sup>6</sup>

Faith? They had little. Jesus Christ himself points this out.<sup>7</sup> They had seen the dead raised, all kinds of sicknesses cured, bread and fish multiplied, storms calmed, devils cast out. Chosen as the head, Saint Peter is the only one who reacts quickly: “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.”<sup>8</sup> But it is a faith beset by limitations, which lead Peter to reproach Jesus Christ for his desire to suffer and die for the redemption of men. And Jesus had to upbraid him: “Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me; for you are not on the side of God, but of men.”<sup>9</sup>

“Peter was too human in his thinking,” Saint John Chrysostom comments, “and therefore he reasons that those things”—Christ's passion and death—“were unworthy of him, something deplorable. Consequently, Jesus reprimands him and says: No, suffering is not beneath me; you only think so because your mind is limited to human thoughts.”<sup>10</sup> And did these men of little faith at least stand out in their love for Christ? Undoubtedly they loved him, at least in word. At times they were swept away by enthusiasm: “Let us also go, that we may die with him.”<sup>11</sup> But at the moment of truth, they all fled, except for John, who truly loved with deeds. Only this adolescent, youngest of the Apostles, can be found next to the cross. The others didn't find within themselves that love as strong as death.<sup>12</sup>

These were the disciples called by our Lord. Such stuff is what Christ chose. And they remain just like that until they are filled with the Holy Spirit and thus become pillars of the

Church.<sup>13</sup> They are ordinary men, complete with defects and shortcomings, more eager to say than to do. Nevertheless, Jesus calls them to be fishers of men,<sup>14</sup> co-redeemers, dispensers of the grace of God.

- 3     Something similar has happened to us. With little effort we could find among our family, friends, and acquaintances—not to mention the crowds of the world—so many worthier persons that Christ could have called. Yes, persons who are simpler and wiser, more influential and important, more grateful and generous.

In thinking along these lines, I feel embarrassed. But I also realize that human logic cannot possibly explain the world of grace. God usually seeks out deficient instruments so that the work can more clearly be seen to be his. It is with trembling that Saint Paul recalls his vocation: “And last of all, as by one born out of due time, he was seen also by me. For I am the least of the Apostles, and am not worthy to be called an Apostle, because I persecuted the Church of God.”<sup>15</sup> Thus writes Saul of Tarsus, whose personality and drive fill history with awe.

As I said before, we have merited nothing. Before God called us, there was nothing more than personal wretchedness. Let us realize that the lights shining in our soul (faith), the love wherewith we love (charity), and the desire sustaining us (hope) are all free gifts from God. Were we not to grow in humility, we would soon lose sight of the reason for our having been chosen by God: personal sanctity.

If we are humble, we can understand all the marvel of our divine vocation. The hand of Christ has snatched us from a wheat field; the sower squeezes the handful of wheat in his wounded palm. The blood of Christ bathes the seed, soaking it. Then the Lord tosses the wheat to the winds, so that in dying it becomes life and in sinking into the ground it multiplies itself.