

Vocation and Discernment

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I remember in law school, they would always talk about taking a contextual approach to the law, right? So, certainly details are important. So, the letter of the law is always important, but at the same time, they would always hammer into our heads this idea of taking a contextual approach, so, like, in terms of the legislature, like, you know, why would they even try to come up with a law like this? And so, and knowing the context, it helps you understand the particulars of, in terms of, like, you know, this statute or this piece of legislation.

So, not to get over, like, technical or legal here, you know, but the same principle kind of applies when it comes to discernment and vocation in particular, right? So, just to kind of clarify, I think a lot of times people tend to be somewhat reductive when it comes to our vocation, you know, so, just to kind of like, you know, call a spade a spade type thing, right? Like, I think a lot of people look at vocation in terms of strictly our marital status, right? And so, like, you know, am I called to be single, am I called to be married, am I called to be a priest or pursue some other religious vocation? And that's certainly relevant, and you can see why people would have those types of conversations, but at the same time, just to kind of have it clear in the back of your mind, that can be reductive and it can kind of take away from your own kind of dignity as a human person, right?

Our Vocation and Discernment

So, to kind of use an analogy to kind of explain that, think about, like, sacramental theology, right? So, as we all know, right, a sacrament is a visible sign instituted by Christ to convey grace. But, on a very simple level, a sacrament is a visible sign which points to an invisible reality, right? So, we think about baptism points to spiritual rebirth. You think about the Eucharist points to the body, blood, soul, and divinity of Jesus Christ. You think about marriage, it points to the spousal love between Christ and His church. But what's interesting is that when it gets to, like, the real thing on the other side of Heaven, no more sacraments, right? So, no more baptism, no more Eucharist, no more marriage, right? So, that's why you have that famous passage in the Gospel, "There's no marriage in heaven," right? And that might seem like a negative thing, but, you know, it's like, okay, visible sign which points to an invisible reality. So, once you have the invisible reality made manifest, namely, like, Christ the Lord, you realize, "Okay, this is the one which corresponds with the deepest desires of my heart," right? So, Christ alone is the way, the truth, and the life. So, you know, it's not so much the sacraments alone are provisional, but even our vocation in terms of the vehicle we use to get to the Lord, that's provisional as well, right? So, that's really kind of important to know the starting point.

And, so, like, I guess, like, on a related note, you know, like, if we don't have clarity about that point. That, you know, our vocation is meant to run a little deeper than our marital status, our vocation can become almost like an idol, if you will, right? So, you think about how we hear in the Gospel, you can't love both God and mammon. And mammon isn't strictly money, like, mammon is like anything less than God. And just because you're kind of focused on spiritual things, you got to really got to be worried about the temptation to turn even spiritual things into idols, which are kind of anything less than God, right?

Is it Just Life?

So, a couple examples come to mind in this regard, right? So, I remember talking to another seminarian back when I was at St. Augustine Seminary myself, studying to be a priest, and he was kind of saying in passing, you know, like, "You know, Eric, a lot of guys here in the seminary, the way they think of their seminary formation is, like, 'Okay, four years 'til I'll get ordained, three years 'til I'll get ordained, two years, and so on and so forth.'" And he was like, "That's how people look at jail." And his whole point was like, okay, like, what happens, like, once you get, you know, ordained, or once you get married, or once you like clarify your vocation, like, there's just life, right? And that's where people kind of get into a crisis mode. Like, okay, my whole sense of my happiness and well-being was founded on me discovering my vocation. And then once you discover it, then you discover it as just life, then, you know, a lot of people get kind of depressed by that, right?

Wild at Heart

So, you know, you see that a lot, for example, in marriage. But to realize, well, no, I mean, the vocation was never meant to be the thing which replaces God, right? It was always meant to be a means to an end. So, I'll give you another example to kind of further illustrate that, right? So, there's this really famous Christian writer named John Eldredge, right? And so he wrote this book called "Wild at Heart," and it's basically, you know, just touching all different issues pertaining to men in particular. And he talks about, like, the journey of a young man to become, like, an actual man, right? And so, he kind of, like, names these different categories, and obviously they're kind of made up, but, like, they help us to kind of understand something about the journey of a young man to full maturity, right? So, I think the categories are, like, boyhood, cowboy, warrior, lover, king, and then sage, right? So, just to kind of run you through it, right? So, like, basically, like, you know, for each stage, the boy, the young man, is supposed to kind of like gain something in each stage and change in a particular way, right? Before progressing onto the next stage. And it's not to say these stages are, like, mutually exclusive, there's some overlap, but, like, you get the point, right?

So, basically with boyhood, the whole idea with boyhood is that I learned that I'm unconditionally loved. It goes back to that dignity thing, right? I'm not a human doing, I'm a human being, right? And more to the point, you know, in a situation of boyhood or at that stage, I learn that I'm cherished and beloved by my Father, right? So, I believe in my bones that I'm unconditionally loved. That's the goal, if you will, when it comes to boyhood. When it comes to the cowboy stage, the idea of the cowboy stage is that basically I learn competence, right? So, I learn that I have gifts and talents and strengths and weaknesses, and when I apply these gifts and talents to particular situations, to issues facing the world or facing myself, I learn that I can accomplish things, right? So, I learn that I have competence. I learn that I have what it takes, right? So, that's the cowboy stage. The warrior stage is that I learn to give myself to something bigger than myself, right? So, I'm not caught up in my own egotism, but I learn to find joy through the gift of myself to something bigger than myself. And then there's a king stage where it's sort of, like, ordering society, you know, based according to God's providential designs, right? So, you think about the kingly office, if you will. And then finally there's the sage, stage, where it's just, like, you teach people to be, for example, a cowboy, a warrior, or king.

Now, you notice that when I listed those things, I kind of, like, skipped over the lover stage. And the reason why is because, like, that's kind of the point I'm trying to make here, right? And the point that Eldredge makes. So, the lover stage, it's meant broadly speaking to kind of indicate the stage at which the young man learns to be awakened by beauty. So, shades of Hans Urs von Balthasar, right? I'm named and claimed and sent forth on mission through simply the encounter with gratuitous beauty, right? So, I notice beauty, it changes me, and it sends me forth on mission, right?

And, certainly, a common way that plays out in the life of a young man is through marriage, right? So, you imagine the whole classic scenario of boy meets girl, right? So, I see a beautiful girl, her beauty, the beauty of her physicality and her personhood awakens me, and it propels me on to greater things, right? But, this is the thing, right?

So, long background, but this is the point, right? Eldredge says that a lot of times what happens is that when young men reach the lover stage, they haven't actually properly developed in a sense of the boyhood stage, the cowboy stage, or the warrior stage, and so on and so forth, right? And so, when they reach the lover stage, they kind of heap unreasonable expectations on the girl, right? So, the girl is meant to be the one to give me a sense of meaning and purpose and fulfillments, right? And so basically what you're doing is that you're turning the girl or the woman into some variation of mammon, right? So, something less than God, like, no knock against the girl or the woman, like, that person's, like, amazing, right? But, they were never meant to give you this ultimate sense of meaning and purpose and all these different things. But, you see the point, right?

To Share in God's Blessed Life

A lot of times when it comes to our vocation, we kind of turn it into a variation of that, right? So, once I discover, like, you know, my vocation as a married person or as a priest, and I enter into that mode, then, okay, it fills this void in my heart. It's important, but you always got to keep in mind that this thing is meant to be a vehicle, which is meant ultimately to lead you to the Lord Jesus Christ, right? So, given all that, like, what's the proper way to kind of look at it, right? I think one way to look at it is to focus on our overall purpose in life, but also the mission of the Church. Like, so, how's the Church live out her mission in terms of the world, right? So, first of all, in terms of our purpose, right? Again, this might be rudimentary for a lot of people, but it's helpful to revisit these things.

So, in the catechism of the Catholic Church, right? Opening line, like, what's our purpose in life, right? It's to share in God's blessed life. To share in God's blessed life. And it falls in the category of one of those statements where everyone knows and they dismiss it because it's, like, commonly known. But it's, like, it's foundational, right? So you really got to get to the guts of that statement, right? So, to share in God's blessed life. Again, the primacy of being as opposed to doing, right? Like really, really important.

When I was in the seminary, we had a bishop living with us, Bishop Attila Miklósházy. He was the bishop for all Hungarians living outside of Hungary, right? And, so, it was just a real privilege to have a guy like that, of great experience and a bishop, no less, like, just to be in the seminary community. And I remember he was talking to us as a group of, like, transitional deacons, right? So, we were already ordained to the diaconate and he was giving us a talk about the priesthood, right? And so he said, "Okay, like, what's a priest? What's a priest?" And we're all going back to, like, catechetical knowledge, right?

So, people were like, "Well, you know, a priest is, like, one who offers sacrifice, one who offers the sacraments, one who is a mediator between God and man." And all correct. Like, all correct, right? But then he was obviously trying to make a point. In retrospect, it was a rhetorical question, right? So, what he said to us was like, "Okay, a priest, first and foremost, is a friend of Jesus Christ. A priest, first and foremost, is a friend of Jesus Christ." And we were kicking ourselves thinking, like, "Ah! I should have said that," right? First and foremost, a friend of Jesus Christ. And you see that in one variation of the story of the calling of the disciples. It doesn't show up in all the Gospel variations of that story, but in one version of that story, it's like you hear explicitly in the Gospel that Jesus calls these guys primarily to be with Himself.

Now, what's implied in that is that, you know, everything flows from that. Everything flows from just abiding in the Lord Jesus Christ, in His presence, in His very being, right? So, even the mission. The mission flows from just, like, being with the Lord. Now, the thing I want to clarify: it's not simply being with, in a stance of friendship. It's sharing in His very being. In His way of life, in His very being, right? So, sharing in His blessed life.

And you see that again when it comes to sacramental theology, right? So, baptism, right? Sanctifying grace, like, you know, "Christ dwells in me." You know, shades of, like, "The Lion King," right? "He lives in you." Think about the Eucharist, right? So, it is the body, blood, soul and divinity of Jesus Christ. But, the idea is that I receive the Eucharist to become the Eucharist. So, real intimacy, like, you know, the purpose of my life is to share in God's very being. To be as friends. But, on top of that, to share in His very being.

The Mission of the Church

Now, that takes us again to the mission of the Church, right? So, like, what's the mission of the Holy Catholic Church? You see this when it comes to the Great Commission. I think you also have Matthew, chapter 28, right? So, a lot of times when people are asked, like, "What's the mission of the church?" People tend to rely on anecdotal evidence or personal opinion, but if you're ever asked that question, like, the answer is given in the Great Commission, right? So, basically the Lord comes back from the dead, right? So, He's, you know, in the aftermath of resurrection, He appears to His remaining disciples, because Judas, of course, has killed himself.

And He says, "Go forth and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. And teaching them, basically everything I've commanded you," right?

The Finite Verb of the Great Commission

Now, before I became a lawyer, I got my BA with an English lit emphasis. So, this involves grammar. So, I find this kind of interesting, but you might find it colossally boring. But, anyways, a verb is an action word, right? So, "Run, Spot, run." But if you have a sentence with multiple verbs, there's only one which is primary, right? So, it's commonly known rather as the grammatical hinge of the sentence, right? So, again, multiple verbs in the same sentence. One is always primary, right? The grammatical hinge of the sentence. And that particular verb, technically, is called the finite verb. And other verbs, if they exist, they're called participles. So, they modify the overall meaning of the sentence, but they only make sense in light of the finite verb, right? And the reason why that's relevant is because when you identify the verbs in the Great Commission, there's four of them, right? So, "go," "make," "baptize," and "teach." Only one is the finite verb. The rest are participles, right? And once you identify the finite verb, the grammatical hinge of the sentence, you know the mission of the Holy Catholic Church.

Now, as a funny kind of side note, apparently, whenever even bishops and priests are asked this question, maybe it's changed now, but there was a study way back when where, you know, not just lay people, but again, bishops and priests and deacons, whenever they were asked this question, "Which is the finite verb in the Great Commission?" Most people would give basically the same answer as, like, everyone else, right? Most people would guess "baptize" and "teach." And the reason why is because that's what we do, typically, on a local level. You think about parish community, right? So, we're really good at baptizing or administering the sacraments. We're really good at, like, teaching, like, imparting information. But the answer is "make," right? So the finite verb in the Great Commission is "make".

Discipleship and Being

In service of which, is the going and the baptizing and the teaching, right? So, the mission of the church is to make disciples of all nations. Now, terminology, right? So, we're used to the terminology of being a student. The goal of a student is to simply, more or less, know what the teacher knows, right? So, it's simply an intellectual thing, it's simply a head thing. But, discipleship runs a little bit deeper, right? So, discipleship is not simply a head thing, it's not simply an intellectual thing, it's an entire being thing, right? So, being as opposed to doing, right? And the whole goal of discipleship in terms of being, is to become the rabbi. To become the master, right? So, here's the Lord Jesus Christ, right? So, in terms of the Christian context, right? So, I'm called to become another Christ in this world, right? So, the mission of the Church is to make disciples of all nations, to make other Christs in this world, beginning with myself, right?

Now, who is Jesus Christ? Jesus Christ is the son of God, He's God Himself, but, as we hear in one of John's letters, you know, God is love, right? So, the ultimate goal is to make the world composed of persons of love beginning with myself, right? That's the mission of the Church. Now, that gives us clarity in terms of what we're trying to achieve, right?

So, what's my vocation then, right? It's not the thing in which I'm called to kind of find myself, it's meant to be a means to an ends, right? So, what comes to mind? Think about, you know, the Ordinandi Dinner, right? Probably, you know, one of my favorite events in the archdiocese,

right? So, Serra Club International, they put together this recurring thing. And the highlight, obviously, is the testimony of transitional deacons talking about how they were called to the holy priesthood, right? And it's obviously preceded by this really fancy dinner. If you have a chance to go, definitely check it out, right?

But, I remember Father, now Father Rick Davis, he was giving his vocation story, and he said, like, "My vocation is not what God does for me." You're expecting kind of like a haiku, right? So, "It's not what God does for me, it's what I do for God," right? But he didn't say that, because he's a lot more clever than that, right? So, he says, "My vocation is not what I do for God. It's rather how God calls me specifically out of my selfishness," right? So, my vocation is not what I do for God, it's how God calls me specifically and uniquely out of my own selfishness, right? So, it's a purposeful thing, right?

So, okay, what's the point of my vocation? To lead me to become a person of love. And the vehicle He gives you, in terms of your particular vocation, is the best way to call you out of your selfishness to become a person of love. This idea of making a gift to myself through which I find life and the world finds life, right? Now, again, this is one of those things that might sound kind of obvious, but you've got to realize that it's, again, it's basic, but also foundational. So, to kind of, like, make this real, like, think about the story of the rich young man, right? So, the rich young man, he goes up to Christ, right? And he says, "What good deed must I do to inherit eternal life?" Right? And you remember what the Lord says, first of all, He's like, "You follow the commandments, right?" And you realize, in terms of the rich man's response, that he's done all these things since his youth.

The Meaning of Discipleship with Jesus

Now, the reason why there's that preliminary answer before we get to the real answer, is because the gospel is meant for everyone. You know, the gospel's eternal. The gospel is timeless. And so, the gospel is speaking not just to the rich young man, but He's speaking to everyone, right? And so, you know, just to quote Bishop Robert Barron, "The Lord has to tell, like, the world throughout history through this particular story, that an important prerequisite to having, like, eternal life is to avoid egregious violations of love." And that's what the commandments are all about, right? So, honor your mother and father, don't lie, don't cheat, don't steal, all those different things, right? But, to go back to his question, right? What good deed must I do to inherit eternal life? Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI talks about this, right? So, he's like, "Eternal life. You got to keep it clear on your mind, right? It's not just duration. It's not just duration. It's not just like, you know, living forever and ever and ever, right?" Because, he says, "In a certain sense, like, that would be Hell," right? But it's also quality, right? So, it's not just the continuation of this life. This broken, you know, suffering life for all eternity. It's also quality, right? So, in this image of swimming in an ocean of infinite joy.

So, you get the rich young man, right? And he's, like, following all the commandments, right? He's followed all the commandments since his youth. He asks this question, "What good deed must I do to inherit eternal life?" Basically, he stands in the place of all those, you know, practicing Catholics who go to Mass, who belong to parish groups, who attend parish events, who maybe even, like, pray and tithe, and do all these different things, and yet don't feel that

quality of joy that they think that they want to have, and they think the Lord wants to give to them, right? So, it's like the idea is, like, "What's missing?" Right? And you remember the Lord's response, right? So He says, okay, "Sell everything, you know, sell your possessions, give the money to the poor. Then, come follow Me." And everyone gets tripped up by that. They're like, okay, "Is this gospel reserved for people who are called to be like, you know, poor," basically. Like, you know, like, monks or nuns or something? Or does the Lord really mean everything? "Oh, surely he can't mean everything, right?"

But, to kind of bring it back to what we're talking about today, right? The Lord is going to this idea of, like, what is your ultimate calling? To share in God's blessed life, right? Not as an arbitrary thing, but because that's the way that you find joy. So, here's a rich young man, he goes up to Christ and he's like, "look, I'm doing all these things. Like, again, like, "I visit the temple, I tithe." Maybe he calls his mom, like, whatever, right? And so, like, "What am I missing?" And it's, like, "Well, what you're missing is discipleship. What you're missing is friendship with the Lord. You're missing this habitual abiding in Christ's presence." And so, you know, "Rich young man, what you're basically looking for is religion without discipleship, and Christianity without Christ." And like, that's not the way it works. That's not the way it works, right? And the takeaway message with regards to the story of the rich young man is that, even though it sounds strange, it's possible to get caught up in all the external trappings of, like, the spiritual life and, you know, cultural Christian practice, and kind of forget that, like, the way I'm meant to find joy is to be in deep intimate relationship with Jesus Christ, to share in His blessed life. Not simply being with, but also sharing in His very being. So, really, really important, right?

The Cross Leads the Way of Life

And so, obviously, you know that what we're ultimately getting at is joy, right? So, again, that's, like, one of the key points of the story of the rich young man. But to recognize that as paradoxical. Like, there's a reason why the rich young man goes away, grieving, because he has many possessions, right? The promise is, like, you know, to trust, okay, so if I trust in the Lord, He promises to give me life, even though the path to new life is not what I expect. And even though His proposed path seems to lead to destruction. Shades of the Beatitudes, right? Blessed are the meek, blessed are the poor in spirit. Blessed, basically, are people who seem to be pathetic and are losers, right?

So, it's a paradoxical thing, right? The narrow way of the cross is the only way that leads to new life. The narrow way of the cross is the only way that leads to new life, right? And the idea is that, "Do I trust that? Do I believe that?" And I think a lot of times we fall into the pattern of our first parents, you know, Adam and Eve, right? So, you know, you can eat of any tree in the garden, but the one thing you can't eat from is the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, right? So the idea is that, okay, "You have tons of freedom, there's a lot of flexibility. I'm not trying to cramp your style, right?" But, in terms of, like, you know, what's right, what's wrong, what's true, what's false, and, more to the point, how to find life, as opposed to like, you know, other ways proposed by the world, you need to trust the Lord. And obviously, you know, when it comes to original sin in the context of that story, original sin comes about because they don't trust, like, God the Father. Like, "Not only do I not trust your truth in the abstract, I don't trust

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you when you say that, you know, this is the way that leads to life, and this is the way that leads to death." Choose life, reject death, right?

And isn't it true that we follow that pattern all the time, right? If we don't trust that, you know, the Father proposes this way which leads to new life, and that's actually the way to find new life, then what do we do? We cling, right? We try to control, we try to possess, we reach for those, you know, classical substitutes for the reality of God, wealth, pleasure, power, and honor, right? As opposed to trusting that the way to find life again is through the narrow way of the cross.

So, like, John Paul II, you know, he has this really great way of expressing it. It's the law of the gifts, right? So, how do I find life? You know, my being increases in so far as I give myself away to the point of sacrifice for the sake of God, for the sake of other people, right? And to think about how counterintuitive that is, right?

So, how does the world propose that we find life? Again, through clinging, controlling, having, taking, right? Wealth, pleasure, power, and honor. And the Lord says, "The only way you can find life is to die to yourself." The only way you can kind of like, you know, take and receive the fullness of life that you actually want is to give yourself away. That's the paradox of the Christian life. But again, that's the only way you can find life. And when the Lord proposes to you your vocation, that's the vehicle through which you're called to give yourself away. So, really important to know.