

**MESSAGE OF HIS HOLINESS POPE FRANCIS
FOR THE 2023 WORLD DAY OF PRAYER FOR VOCATIONS**

Vocation: Grace and Mission

Dear brothers and sisters, dear young people!

This is now the sixtieth time that we are celebrating the World Day of Prayer for Vocations, established by Saint Paul VI in 1964, during the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council. This providential initiative seeks to assist the members of the People of God, as individuals and as communities, to respond to the call and mission that the Lord entrusts to each of us in today's world, amid its afflictions and its hopes, its challenges and its achievements.

This year I would ask you, in your reflection and prayer, to take as your guide the theme "Vocation: Grace and Mission". This Day is a precious opportunity for recalling with wonder that the Lord's call is grace, complete gift, and at the same time a commitment to bring the Gospel to others. We are called to a faith that bears witness, one that closely connects the life of grace, as experienced in the sacraments and ecclesial communion, to our apostolate in the world. Led by the Spirit, Christians are challenged to respond to existential peripheries and human dramas, ever conscious that the mission is God's work; it is not carried out by us alone, but always in ecclesial communion, together with our brothers and sisters, and under the guidance of the Church's pastors. For this has always been God's dream: that we should live with him in a communion of love.

"Chosen before the creation of the world"

The apostle Paul opens before us a remarkable horizon: in Christ, God the Father "chose us before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight in love. He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will" (Eph 1:4-5). These words allow us to glimpse life at its fullest: God has "conceived" us in his image and likeness and desires us to be his sons and daughters. We were created by love, for love and with love, and we are made for love.

In the course of our lives, this call, which is part of the fibre of our being and the secret of our happiness, comes to us by the work of the Holy Spirit in ever new ways. It enlightens our minds, strengthens our wills, fills us with amazement and sets our hearts afire. At times, the Spirit comes to us in completely unexpected ways. So it was for me when, on 21 September 1953, as I was on my way to an annual school celebration, I was led to stop by a church and go to confession. That day changed my life and left a mark that has endured to the present day. God's call to the gift of self tends to make itself known gradually: in our encounter with situations of poverty, in moments of prayer, when we see a clear witness to the Gospel, or read something that opens our minds. When we hear God's word and sense that it is spoken directly to us, in the advice given by a fellow brother or sister, in moments of sickness or sorrow... In all the ways he calls us, God shows infinite creativity.

The Lord's initiative and his gracious gift call for a response on our part. Vocation is "the interplay between divine choice and human freedom", [1] a dynamic and exciting relationship between God and the human heart. The gift of vocation is like a divine seed that springs up in the soil of our existence, opens our hearts to God and to others, so that we can share with them the treasure we ourselves have found. This is the fundamental structure of what we mean by vocation: God calls us in love and we, in gratitude, respond to him in love. We realize that we are beloved sons and daughters of the one Father, and we come to see ourselves as brothers and sisters of one another. Saint Therese of the Child Jesus, when at last she "saw" this clearly, exclaimed, "At last I have found my calling: my call is love. Indeed, I have found my proper place in the Church... In the heart of the Church, my Mother, I will be love". [2]

"I am a mission on this earth"

God's call, we said, includes a "sending". There is no vocation without mission. There is no happiness and full self-realization unless we offer others the new life that we have found. God's call to love is an experience that does not allow us to remain silent. Saint Paul says, "Woe to me if I do not proclaim the gospel!" (1 Cor 9:16). And the First Letter of John begins with the words, "What we have heard and seen, looked at and touched – the Word made flesh – we declare also to you, so that our joy may be complete" (cf. 1:1-4).

Five years ago, in the Apostolic Exhortation *Gaudete et Exsultate*, I spoke to every baptized person, saying, "You need to see the entirety of your life as a mission" (No. 23). Yes, because each and every one of us is able to say: "I am a mission on this earth; that is the reason why I am here in this world" (*Evangeli Gaudium*, 273).

Our shared mission as Christians is to bear joyful witness wherever we find ourselves, through our actions and words, to the experience of being with Jesus and members of his community, which is the Church. That mission finds expression in works of material and spiritual mercy, in a welcoming and gentle way of life that reflects closeness, compassion and tenderness, in contrast to the culture of waste and indifference. By being a neighbour, like the Good Samaritan (cf. Lk 10:25-37), we come to understand the heart of our Christian vocation: to imitate Jesus Christ, who came to serve, not to be served (cf. Mk 10:45).

This missionary activity does not arise simply from our own abilities, plans and projects, nor from our sheer willpower or our efforts to practice the virtues; it is the result of a profound experience in the company of Jesus. Only then can we testify to a Person, a Life, and thus become "apostles". Only then can we regard ourselves as "sealed, even branded, by this mission of bringing light, blessing, enlivening, raising, healing and freeing" (*Evangeli Gaudium*, 273).

The Gospel icon of this experience is that of the two disciples journeying to Emmaus. After their encounter with the risen Jesus, they said to each other, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the Scriptures to us?" (Lk 24:32). In those disciples, we can see what it means to have "hearts on fire, feet on the

move”. [3] This is also my fervent hope for the coming World Youth Day in Lisbon, to which I joyfully look forward, with its motto: “Mary arose and went with haste” (*Lk* 1:39). May every man and woman feel called to arise and go in haste, with hearts on fire.

Called together and convened

The evangelist Mark relates the moment when Jesus called to himself twelve disciples, each by name. He appointed them to be with him and to be sent out to proclaim the message, to heal infirmities and to cast out demons (cf. *Mk* 3:13-15). The Lord thus laid the foundations of his new community. The Twelve were people from different social classes and trades; none of them was a person of influence. The Gospels speak too of other callings, like that of the 72 disciples whom Jesus sent out two by two (cf. *Lk* 10:1).

The Church is an *Ecclesia*, the Greek word for *an assembly of persons called and convened*, in order to form the community of missionary disciples of Jesus Christ committed to sharing love among themselves (cf. *Jn* 13:34; 15:12) and spreading that love to all others, so that God’s kingdom may come.

Within the Church, all of us are servants, in accordance with the variety of our vocations, charisms and ministries. Our common vocation to give ourselves in love develops and finds concrete expression in the life of lay men and women, devoted to raising a family as a small *domestic church* and working as a leaven of the Gospel to renew the different sectors of society; in the testimony of consecrated women and men who are completely committed to God for the sake of their brothers and sisters as a prophetic sign of the kingdom of God; in ordained ministers – deacons, priests and bishops – placed at the service of preaching, prayer and fostering the communion of the holy People of God. Only in relation with all the others, does any particular vocation in the Church fully disclose its true nature and richness. Viewed in this light, the Church is a vocational “symphony”, with every vocation united yet distinct, in harmony and joined together in “going forth” to radiate throughout the world the new life of the kingdom of God.

Grace and mission: a gift and a task

Dear brothers and sisters, vocation is a gift and a task, a source of new life and true joy. May the initiatives of prayer and of activity associated with this Day strengthen an awareness of vocation within our families, our parish communities, our communities of consecrated life, and our ecclesial associations and movements. The Spirit of the risen Lord dispels our apathy and grants us the gifts of sympathy and empathy. In this way, he enables us to live each day born anew as children of the God who is love (cf. *1 Jn* 4:16) and in turn to offer that love to others. To bring life everywhere, especially in places of exclusion and exploitation, poverty and death, in order to enlarge the spaces of love, [4] so that God may reign ever more fully in this world.

May the prayer that Saint Paul VI composed for the first World Day of Vocations, 11 April 1964, accompany us on our journey:

“O Jesus, divine Shepherd of souls, you called the apostles and made them fishers of men. Continue to draw to yourself ardent and generous souls from among the young, in order to make them your followers and your ministers. Give them a share in your thirst for the redemption of all... Open before them the horizons of the entire world... By responding to your call, may they prolong your mission here on earth, build up your Mystical Body which is the Church, and be ‘the salt of the earth’ and ‘the light of the world’ (Mt 5:13)”.

May the Virgin Mary watch over you and protect you. With my blessing.

Rome, Saint John Lateran, 30 April 2023, Fourth Sunday of Easter.

FRANCIS