

MESSAGE OF HIS HOLINESS POPE FRANCIS FOR THE 2019 WORLD DAY OF VOCATIONS

The courage to take a risk for God's promise

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

After the lively and fruitful experience of the Synod devoted to young people last October, we recently celebrated the Thirty-fourth World Youth Day in Panama City. These two great events allowed the Church to be attentive both to the voice of the Spirit and to the life of young men and women, their questions and concerns, their problems and their hopes.

Building on what I shared with the young people in Panama, I would like to reflect, on this World Day of Prayer for Vocations, on how the Lord's call makes us bearers of a promise and, at the same time, asks of us the courage to take a risk, with him and for him. I will do this by reflecting briefly with you on these two aspects – promise and risk – as they appear in the Gospel account of the calling of the first disciples by the sea of Galilee (Mk 1:16-20).

Two pairs of brothers – Simon and Andrew, and James and John – are going about their daily tasks as fishermen. In this demanding work, they had learned the laws of nature, yet at times, when the winds were adverse and waves shook their boats, they had to defy the elements. On some days, the catch of fish amply repaid their efforts, but on others, an entire night's work was not sufficient to fill their nets, and they had to return to shore weary and disappointed.

Much of life is like that. Each of us tries to realize his or her deepest desires; we engage in activities that we hope will prove enriching, and we put out on a "sea" of possibilities in the hope of steering the right course, one that will satisfy our thirst for happiness. Sometimes we enjoy a good catch, while at others, we need courage to keep our boat from being tossed by the waves, or we are frustrated at seeing our nets come up empty.

As with every call, the Gospel speaks of an encounter. Jesus walks by, sees those fishermen, and walks up to them... The same thing happened when we met the person we wanted to marry, or when we first felt the attraction of a life of consecration: we were surprised by an encounter, and at that moment we glimpsed the promise of a joy capable of bringing fulfilment to our lives. That day, by the sea of Galilee, Jesus drew near to those fishermen, breaking through the “paralysis of routine” (*Homily for the XXII World Day for Consecrated Life, 2 February 2018*). And he immediately made them a promise: “I will make you fishers of men” (Mk 1:17).

The Lord’s call is not an intrusion of God in our freedom; it is not a “cage” or a burden to be borne. On the contrary, it is the loving initiative whereby God encounters us and invites us to be part of a great undertaking. He opens before our eyes the horizon of a greater sea and an abundant catch.

God in fact desires that our lives not become banal and predictable, imprisoned by daily routine, or unresponsive before decisions that could give it meaning. The Lord does not want us to live from day to day, thinking that nothing is worth fighting for, slowly losing our desire to set out on new and exciting paths. If at times he makes us experience a “miraculous catch”, it is because he wants us to discover that each of us is called – in a variety of ways – to something grand, and that our lives should not grow entangled in the nets of an ennui that dulls the heart. Every vocation is a summons not to stand on the shore, nets in hand, but to follow Jesus on the path he has marked out for us, for our own happiness and for the good of those around us.

Embracing this promise naturally demands the courage to risk making a decision. The first disciples, called by Jesus to be part of something greater, “immediately left their nets and followed him” (Mk 1:18). Responding to the Lord’s call involves putting ourselves on the line and facing a great challenge. It means being ready to leave behind whatever would keep us tied to our little boat and prevent us from making a definitive choice. We are called to be bold and decisive in seeking God’s plan for our lives. Gazing out at the vast “ocean” of vocation, we cannot remain content to repair our nets on the boat that gives us security, but must trust instead in the Lord’s promise.

I think primarily of the call to the Christian life which all of us received at Baptism. It teaches us that our life is not a fluke but rather a gift: that of being God’s beloved children, gathered in the great family of the Church. It is precisely in the ecclesial community that the Christian life is born and develops, especially through the liturgy. The liturgy introduces us to God’s word and the grace of the sacraments; from an early age, we are taught the art of prayer and fraternal sharing. In the end, the Church is our mother because she brings us to new life and leads us to Christ. So we must love her, even when we see her face marred by human frailty and sin,

and we must help to make her ever more beautiful and radiant, so that she can bear witness to God's love in the world.

The Christian life thus finds expression in those decisions that, while giving a precise direction to our personal journey, also contribute to the growth of God's kingdom in our world. I think of the decision to marry in Christ and to form a family, as well as all those other vocations associated with work and professional life, with the commitment to charity and solidarity, with social and political responsibilities, and so forth. These vocations make us bearers of a promise of goodness, love and justice, not only for ourselves but also for our societies and cultures, which need courageous Christians and authentic witnesses of the kingdom of God.

In encountering the Lord, some may feel the attraction of a call to the consecrated life or to the ordained priesthood. It is a discovery that can excite and at the same time frighten us, since we feel called to become "fishers of men" in the barque of the Church by giving totally of ourselves in commitment to faithful service of the Gospel and our brothers and sisters. Such a decision carries the risk of leaving everything behind to follow the Lord, to devote ourselves completely to him, and to share in his work. Many kinds of interior resistance can stand in the way of making this decision, especially in highly secularized contexts where there no longer seems to be a place for God and for the Gospel. Places where it is easy to grow discouraged and fall into the "weariness of hope" (*Homily at Mass with Priests, Consecrated Persons and Lay Movements, Panama, 26 January 2019*).

And yet, there can be no greater joy than to risk one's life for the Lord! I would like to say this especially to you, the young. Do not be deaf to the Lord's call. If he calls you to follow this path, do not pull your oars into the boat, but trust him. Do not yield to fear, which paralyzes us before the great heights to which the Lord points us. Always remember that to those who leave their nets and boat behind, and follow him, the Lord promises the joy of a new life that can fill our hearts and enliven our journey.

Dear friends, it is not always easy to discern our vocation and to steer our life in the right direction. For this reason, there needs to be a renewed commitment on the part of the whole Church – priests, religious, pastoral workers and educators – to provide young people in particular with opportunities for listening and discernment. There is a need for a youth ministry and a vocational promotion that can open the way to discovering God's plan, above all through prayer, meditation on God's word, eucharistic adoration and spiritual accompaniment.

As was made clear several times during the World Youth Day in Panama, we should always look to Mary. Also in the story of this young woman, vocation was both a promise and a risk. Her mission was not easy, yet she did not allow fear to

prevail. “It was the ‘yes’ of someone prepared to be committed, someone willing to take a risk, ready to stake everything she had, with no more security than the certainty of knowing that she was the bearer of a promise. I ask each one of you: Do you see yourselves as bearers of a promise? What promise do I bear within my heart to take forward? Mary’s would undoubtedly be a difficult mission, but the challenges that lay ahead were no reason to say ‘no’. Things would get complicated, of course, but not in the same way as happens when cowardice paralyzes us because things are not clear or sure in advance” (*Vigil with Young People, Panama, 26 January 2019*).

On this World Day of Prayer for Vocations, let us join in prayer and ask the Lord to help us discover his plan of love for our lives, and to grant us the courage to walk in the path that, from the beginning, he has chosen for each of us.

From the Vatican, 31 January 2019
Memorial of Saint John Bosco

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