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Becoming a Holy People of Compassion, Reconciliation, and Hope

Our Vocation, Our Call: A Biblical Perspective

By Sr. Carol Dempsey, OP, Ph.D.

Introduction

The vocation to the priesthood and/or to religious life is an invitation to let go to God completely, to fall deeply in love with the One who has loved us first—so intimately, tenderly, and compassionately. This invitation is also a call to profound holiness that beckons us to be a people of compassion and reconciliation so that we can incarnate God’s healing presence in a world aching for right relationship, justice, and peace. As we become God’s healing presence in our world, we become standard bearers of hope, helping the blind to see, the lame to walk, and the deaf to hear, while turning hearts of stone into hearts of flesh. With the vocation to priesthood and to religious life also comes the invitation to participate in the work of our God, in the mission and ministry of Jesus, which is, ultimately, a ministry of healing and reconciliation. Always we need to remember, however, that while

what we do is important, more important is the person we are and the quality of presence we offer minute by minute, day by day. Throughout the Bible, the call to holiness—to being women and men of compassion, reconciliation, healing, and hope is clear. Let us turn now to the Scriptures that offer us not only a vision for our own lives but also challenges that we will have to face as we embrace and live out our vocation.

Holiness: Clothing Ourselves in Our Biblical Identity

In Lev 11:45, the ancient Israelite community received a divine call and a challenge: “You shall therefore be holy for I am holy.” A similar call and challenge was extended to the people of Jesus’ day: “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly father is perfect” (Matt 5:48). In early Christianity, perhaps no other letter is more concerned with the call to holiness than 1 Peter 1:13–2:10, a pastoral letter addressed to a broad and general audience of gentile Christians in Asia Minor, which offered

them a word of clarity about Christian self-identity. The letter also provided a message of hope and encouragement to Christians who faced real problems and crises in the course of their daily lives. In our lives today, the call to holiness is no less important than it was centuries ago.

The passage begins with a series of instruction that describe exactly what Christians are supposed to do (1 Pet 1:13-16). Christians are to attest to their holiness not only as a divine state of being but also as a way of acting and living. In doing so, they become the embodied presence and transparent glory of the Sacred One who is “holy.” Verses 17-21 call Christians to live in a state of awe and reverence toward God, and vv 22-25 make clear that the conduct proper to holiness is love, a way of life exemplified by the life of Jesus whose own life became a source of hope for all people. This life of love, this life of holiness is made manifest through righteous conduct whereby one rids one’s self of malice, guile, insincerity, envy, and slander. These vices go against the grain

of communal solidarity and inhibit the practice of mutual love (1 Pet 2:1-3).

The last segment of this passage describes Jesus in metaphorical terms. He is a “living stone” rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God’s sight (1 Pet 2:4). In 1 Pet 2:5 the focus shifts to the Christian community who, like Christ, are metaphorically referred to as “living stones” that need to allow themselves to be built into a spiritual house and to be a “temple” for all people. Hence, to become a living stone is to be changed into Christ’s own image (see 2 Cor 3:18) and to embody and live out a life of holiness in union with the Holy One who is God. Finally, this call to holiness heard in 1 Pet 1:13–2:10 is an invitation to embody the living presence of God who is a creative, healing, loving, forgiving, compassionate presence, whose compassion is for every living thing (Sir 18:13). As “temples,” Christians and especially those whose vocation is to the priesthood and/or religious life are called to a profound hospitality of heart that exercises genuine mutual love not only for one’s own (1 Pet 1:22) but also for those who are not members of one’s own specific community just as Jesus embraced the Canaanite woman (Matt 15:21-28) and loved the sinner into deeper life (Lk 7:36-50; Jn 7:53–8:11). Holiness, then, is a call to love deeply, profoundly, and inclusively. Holiness is a call to become women and men of divine compassion.

Compassion: Our Call to Embrace Life

One of the most consoling, renewing, and transforming words in both the Old and New Testaments is the word “compassion.” Derived from the Hebrew root *rm*, compassion is both a divine characteristic and a human sentiment. Compassion is an attitude and a way of life. Such a divine attitude and the actions that flow from it challenge us in ways that are most uncomfortable. If we are committed to being women and men of hope, then we have no choice but to be women and men of compassion who embrace wholeheartedly the challenge of ethical responsibility, ethical choices, and ethical decision-

making that will assure the quality of life and healing for all creation. Those committed to priesthood and/or religious life by virtue of their singular commitment to God are called to blaze the trail of holiness through a life of compassion. Such a life is characterized by acting justly, loving tenderly, and walking humbly with God who will make known what is to be done in our world today.

One story in the New Testament that exhibits the kind of compassion we are to have towards others is the story about the woman caught in adultery (Jn 7:53–8:11). The scribes and Pharisees are quick to bring Jesus a woman who was supposedly caught in the act of adultery. Such a crime warranted being stoned to death (Lev 20:10-16). Instead of condemning the woman, Jesus confronts her accusers who are ready to stone her. The confrontation causes them all to walk away, leaving only Jesus and the woman at the scene. Jesus does not condemn the woman. Instead, he tells her not to sin again and sets her free. Jesus’ sense of mission and ministry was characterized by his understanding of God as a God of compassion who cared for sinners.

When we compassionately confront those who do injustices to themselves and others and help them to see that their deeds are causing pain to themselves and others, then we are working for the recovery of sight to the blind. Because we are all fragile beings living in a fragile world that is holy but not yet fully transformed into God, we need to forgive one another as we forgive ourselves because many times, we do not realize what we have really done. God was always forgiving the people throughout Israel’s history. Jesus forgave his enemies as he hung on the Cross, enduring the pain caused by some power-hungry, wrathful people who were encouraged by fickle voices who cried out, “Barabbas” when asked by Pilate who should be released. The heart of compassion is forgiveness.

Reconciliation: The Step Beyond Forgiveness

Forgiveness is a divine gift initiated by

grace. This gift of forgiveness can be extended to another in actuality or in spirit. In other words, one can forgive another in one’s heart if actual forgiveness is not accessible because of the nature of a situation. The work of the heart begins with forgiveness, and forgiveness paves the way for reconciliation, a step beyond forgiveness.

In 2 Cor 5:16-21, Paul reminds us that in Christ God reconciled the world to God’s self (cf Col 1:15-20); trespasses have been dismissed (cf Mic 7:18-20); and the message of reconciliation has been entrusted to us. Reconciliation is the work of re-establishing right relationship with God and with one another. God remains reconciled to us but are we reconciled to God and to one another? As women and men committed to living out the Gospel, we are faced with the challenge of working toward reconciliation within our families, our circle of friends and colleagues, within our neighborhoods, and among all nations. Reconciliation is the cornerstone to lasting peace and a source of hope for all creation.

In Conclusion...

The call to holiness and the work of compassion and reconciliation have been entrusted to all God’s people and in significant way, to those who have been called to the priesthood and/or religious life. As women and men of the Gospel, we are called to be that city on the hill whose light shines bright and whose lives become a source of hope for others not so much by what we do but by how deeply we are able to love which is the greatest of all virtues (1 Cor 13:13) and the deepest expression of God’s abiding presence in the midst of all. ■



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