Divine summons: Working in the horizon of God’s call

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I have learned over the years that students, wearily carrying out a writing assignment, often have recourse to the dictionary. Assigned to write on a specific topic, they will begin with a dictionary definition. Let it never be said that I have learned nothing from reading their papers all these years. Look up the word *vocation* in a dictionary, and you will find that the first two meanings given will be something like the following: “1. a summons or strong inclination to a particular state or course of action: esp: a divine call to the religious life; 2. the work in which a person is regularly employed: occupation.”

It was in part the genius and in part the danger of the Reformations of the 16th century that they tended to collapse the first of these into the second. One’s vocation became simply one’s work. To be sure, for the Reformers this was a wider concept than what we have come to mean by work—which is, roughly, a job for the doing of which one is paid, a way to make a living. For example, familial responsibilities, though they do not belong to the sphere of work, were clearly understood by the Reformers to be part of one’s vocation. Hence, a man could be very conscientious in the duties of his occupation and still fail terribly in his calling as a father.

Even granting such qualifications, however, it is true to say that for the Reformers vocation came to be associated with the responsibilities of everyday life, rather than with a divine summons to do something extraordinary. To that sanctification of everyday work—and to the dangers of such sanctification—I will return in a little while. It is one of the tensions built into our concept of vocation.

Even if we connect vocation not only with work but also with the domestic and familial responsibilities so essential to life, there may be other duties that call us as well. When Ken Burns produced his much acclaimed series of public television shows on the Civil War, one of the most powerful moments for many listeners was the reading of a letter written by Major Sullivan Ballou of the Second Rhode Island regiment to his wife, Sarah. Believing that his regiment would engage in battle

within a few days, and reckoning with the fact that he might not return alive to her or to his sons, he wrote to Sarah, using quite naturally the language of vocation: “I have sought most closely and diligently, and often in my breast, for a wrong motive in thus hazarding the happiness of those I loved and could not find one. A pure love of my Country and the principles I have often advocated before the people, and ‘the name of honor that I love more than I fear death’ have called upon me, and I have obeyed.” In such an instance we may find it harder to say whether we are still talking about the duties of everyday life, or whether a sense of vocation is here associated with something more heroic and extraordinary. In any case, this example begins to push us in the direction of the first—and deeper—tension I want to explore.

Students writing their papers tend to look simply at the several dictionary definitions of a word, but an unusually diligent student might also find ways to make use of the etymological information supplied in a dictionary entry. In the instance of the word *vocation*, this is not very complicated. Our English word has its root in the Latin *vocare*—to call or to summon. A vocation is a calling—which implies a Caller. It is a summons. Taking this seriously will, I think, draw us into reflection upon a disturbing problem built into the idea of vocation. It reminds us also that—however often the concept of vocation has been connected especially to the Reformers, Luther and Calvin—the concept also has other important roots in Western culture.

It is, after all, Aeneas, depicted by Vergil as the destined founder of Rome, who says, in Robert Fitzgerald’s translation: “I am the man / Whom heaven calls.” The *Aeneid* is, among other things, a poem about vocation. In their recent book, *Heroism and the Christian Life*, Brian Hook and Russell Reno have noted how Vergil’s poem, certainly one of the formative epics of our culture, compels us to ponder what is the deepest problem in the idea of a vocation—namely, whether obedience to a divine summons diminishes or enhances the one who has been called. So I begin there.

Of the *Aeneid* C. S. Lewis once wrote that no one “who has once read it with full perception remains an adolescent.” What he had in mind was the Vergilian sense of vocation, which distinguishes the *Aeneid* from Homer’s equally great epic, the *Iliad*. Homer’s subject is not really the great contest between Greeks and Trojans; it is the personal story of Achilles’s refusal to fight and of the events that bring him, finally, to change his mind. It is a story about the personal glory and honor of an heroic figure, and in such a story there may be fate but not vocation. There are personal triumphs and personal tragedies, but not a calling or a destiny in service of which

greatness is exhibited. There is fate, but she is blind and, in her blindness, establishes a kind of equity among the warring parties. Both the nobility and the tragedy of heroes such as Achilles and Hector are set against a background of meaningless flux. Thus, Simone Weil writes that “the progress of the war in the *Iliad* is simply a continual game of seesaw.” What is absent is divine purpose—and, therefore, as Lewis notes, none of the events in the *Iliad* can have the kind of significance that the founding of Rome has in the *Aeneid*.

Aeneas’s story is quite different. He is, Vergil tells us at the very outset, one who “came to Italy by destiny.” Suffering countless setbacks both on land and sea—“so hard and huge / A task it was to found the Roman people”—still he was “a man apart, devoted to his mission.” To be the man whom heaven calls exacts a great price. Having already endured the ten-year siege of Troy and its fall, having lost his wife while making his escape with a small band of surviving Trojans, Aeneas must still suffer the wrath of Juno—storm, plague and warfare—as he journeys from the ruins of Troy (on the western coast of modern Turkey) to Italy.

Seven summers after Troy’s fall, Aeneas’s company—still on the way—takes refuge from a storm at a port in Sicily. There they hold a festival to commemorate the death of Aeneas’s father, Anchises. But in the midst of these games the Trojan women are moved to consider how long they have been wandering and how many hardships they have suffered.

> But on a desolate beach apart, the women
> Wept for Anchises lost as they gazed out
> In tears at the unfathomable sea.
> “How many waves remain for us to cross,
> How broad a sea, though we are weary, weary?”
>
> All had one thing to say: a town and home
> Were what they dreamed of, sick of toil at sea.

The women set fire to the ships, hoping—though unsuccessfully, of course—to compel the company to settle permanently in Sicily. They force Aeneas himself to wrestle with “momentous questions.”

Should he forget the destiny foretold
And make his home in Sicily, or try
Again for Italy?

Finally, he accepts the advice of Nautes that those “too weary of your great quest” should be permitted to remain behind and settle in Sicily. “Set them apart, and let them have their city / Here in this land, the tired ones.”

A vocation exacts a price, and not all can pay it. Even though it may seem to draw us, its point is not happiness. It is, as C. S. Lewis notes, the nature of vocation to appear simultaneously both as desire and as duty. “To follow the vocation does not mean happiness; but once it has been heard, there is no happiness for those who do not follow.” The price of a calling had been made clear to Aeneas himself even earlier. In one of the most famous books of the *Aeneid*, Vergil recounts the love affair of Aeneas and Dido. Their ships buffeted by a tremendous storm at sea, the Trojan company has made it to shore on the coast of North Africa, where the new colony of Carthage is being founded by a group of immigrants from Tyre and their queen, Dido.

Weary of the endless journeying to which Aeneas’s destiny has committed them, the Trojans are glad to stay for a time at Carthage while they repair their ships. Aeneas, in particular, finds happiness and seeming fulfillment in overseeing the work of building Carthage, and, ominously, he and Dido fall passionately in love. But when Jupiter learns this, he commands Mercury to remind Aeneas of the task he has been given.

What has he in mind? What hope, to make him stay
Amid a hostile race, and lose from view
Ausonian progeny, Lavinian lands?
The man should sail: that is the whole point.
Let this be what you tell him, as from me.

“The man should sail.” In the Latin, one word: *naviget*! The divine summons—which wounds even as it lures.

Mercury delivers the message, Aeneas hears and obeys. He gives orders to prepare

the ships to sail, but, of course, Dido learns what is happening and begs him to stay.

> Duty bound,
> Aeneas, though he struggled with desire
> To calm and comfort her in all her pain,
> To speak to her and turn her mind from grief,
> And though he sighed his heart out, shaken still
> With love of her, yet took the course heaven gave him
> And went back to the fleet.

Her sister Anna brings Dido's pleas to Aeneas, asking him at least to postpone his departure and not to leave so abruptly. "But no tears moved him. . . . God's will blocked the man's once kindly ears." Aeneas has for the first time in a long time been happy and content in Carthage—sharing Dido's love, overseeing the work of construction. Dido seems finally to have found new love, years after the death of her husband Sychaeus. The Trojan company seems to have found a place to settle.

But it is not the homeland to which they are called, and it is not the city Aeneas has been summoned to found. This is not his calling. "The man should sail." As Hook and Reno write, Vergil "does not wish us to cast our lot with Dido and our anachronistic ideas of authenticity." Do you want to know what is your vocation? Then the first question to ask is not, "What do I want to do with my life?" It is not as if I first come to know myself and then choose a vocation that fulfills and satisfies me. For it is only by hearing and answering the divine summons, by participating in my calling, that I can come to know who I am. We are not who we think we are; we are who God calls us to be. "The man should sail."

And sail he does—away from Carthage, willing to participate in his destiny. But perhaps for all readers, and certainly, I suspect, for at least some, a question presses insistently upon us. Hook and Reno sharpen the point when they write: "Aeneas sails away from Carthage changed, a greater hero in potential, but in most ways obvious to him and to us, a lesser man." That's the issue: Does obedience to his calling enhance or diminish Aeneas? That calling has drawn him away from ordinary human loves, it has compelled him to harden himself against quite natural emotions, it has brought upon him and those who accompany him countless hardships. That calling requires not that he seek to be himself, not that he ask first what he wants to do, not that he authentically determine his being—but that he

obey. He says to Dido: “I sail for Italy not of my own free will” (*Italiam non sponte sequor*). One way to put all this is to note that for many readers Aeneas seems to become an almost divine figure, more than human, as his person is folded into his calling as founder of Rome. The other way to put it is to note that it can sometimes be hard to distinguish between one who is more than human and one who is, simply, inhuman. Especially for us, devoted as we are to authenticity and autonomy, the divine summons to obedience may seem to have left Aeneas diminished rather than enhanced. Such may be the price of a calling.

Is the price too great? Has Aeneas, in turning from authenticity to obedience, diminished his humanity? How we answer that question will tell us a good bit about ourselves. “I have read,” C. S. Lewis writes, “that his [Vergil’s] Aeneas, so guided by dreams and omens, is hardly the shadow of a man beside Homer’s Achilles. But a man, an adult, is precisely what he is: Achilles had been little more than a passionate boy. You may, of course, prefer the poetry of spontaneous passion to the poetry of passion at war with vocation, and finally reconciled. Every man to his taste. But we must not blame the second for not being the first. With Virgil European poetry grows up.” In an effort to understand, make sense of and confirm Lewis’s judgment we may recall another reader of Vergil.

In Book I of his *Confessions*, Augustine remembers how, as a boy, “I was forced to learn all about the wanderings of a man called Aeneas, while quite oblivious of my own wanderings.” How sinful must he not have been, Augustine suggests, to care more about the wanderings of Aeneas in search of a homeland than about the wanderings of his own soul away from the One for whom he was made. “What indeed can be more pitiful than a wretch with no pity for himself, weeping at the death of Dido, which was caused by love for Aeneas, and not weeping at his own death, caused by lack of love for you, God . . .?” And yet, at a deeper level, we must suppose that what Augustine learned from Vergil may have reinforced what he was eventually to learn from the scriptures, from his mother Monica and from Ambrose.

The wanderings of Augustine’s soul find their pattern in the story of Aeneas. “I came to Carthage,” Augustine writes at the outset of Book III, conscious certainly that this was Dido’s Carthage, “and all around me in my ears were the sizzling and frying of unholy loves.” And years later, having decided to teach rhetoric in Rome rather than Carthage, a decision opposed by his mother, Augustine stole away on ship at night, going—like Aeneas—from Carthage to Rome, and leaving a weeping woman behind.

This is the Augustine of whom, in that great scene in the garden, Lady Continence asks what is essentially a vocational question: “Why do you try and stand by yourself and so not stand at all? Let him [God] support you.” This is the Augustine who, having been converted from the false ideal of personal authenticity and having handed over to God his broken will, torn between desire and duty, concludes that he can be an authentic self only in submission to God’s call—concludes, indeed, that only God can catch the heart and hold it still, that only God can know him as he truly is. “There is still something of man, which even the spirit of man that is in him does not know. But you, Lord, know all of him, you who made him.”

Thus, Augustine learned—more from the story of Jesus than from that of Aeneas—“what the difference is between presumption and confession, between those who see their goal without seeing how to get there and those who see the way which leads to that happy country.” That way was not anything Augustine had done, his own hard and huge task; it was something that had been done for him. What he found in the story of Jesus that he had not found elsewhere was “the face and look of pity, the tears of confession, your sacrifice.” The story of Jesus’s own obedience makes clear that what looks like an annihilation of the self may, in fact, be its enlargement. We flourish as we answer obediently God’s call. And this, in turn, has an important effect on our understanding of vocation. As Hook and Reno observe, the more we believe that God has himself done whatever needs to be done and that our task is simply to answer his call, “the less room appears to be left for our greatness, our achievement, and accomplishment.” Vocation, it seems, need no longer be heroic—which brings us back to the other issue I identified at the outset.

Consider, for example, the following passage from John Galsworthy’s novel *One More River*, in which a character named Dinny reflects on the death of old Betty Purdy.

> Death! At its quietest and least harrowing, but yet—death! The old, the universal anodyne; the common lot! In this bed where she had lain nightly for over fifty years under the low sagged ceiling, a great little old lady had passed. Of what was called “birth,” of position, wealth and power, she had none. No plumbing had come her way, no learning and no fashion. She had borne children, nursed, fed and washed them, sewn, cooked and swept, eaten little, travelled not at all in her years, suffered much pain, never known the ease of superfluity; but her back had been straight, her

> ways straight, her eyes quiet and her manners gentle. If she were not the "great lady," who was?

Perhaps there is something heroic here, but nothing extraordinary. There is no quest for the great deed required by God. There are only the everyday tasks, infused with the sense of duty and dignity that may make it appropriate to describe them as a calling.

When less room is left for our greatness and our achievement, this is what ultimately happens to the idea of vocation. If the seeds were already there in Augustine's rereading of the story of Aeneas, it took centuries for this leveling or democratizing of vocation to work itself out in the thought of the 16th-century Reformers. "The affirmation of ordinary life finds its origin," Charles Taylor writes, "in Judaeo-Christian spirituality, and the particular impetus it receives in the modern era comes first of all from the Reformation. . . . The highest can no longer be defined by an exalted *kind* of activity; it all turns on the *spirit*in which one lives whatever one lives, even the most mundane existence." That spirit is eloquently captured in George Herbert's poem "The Elixir," which reads in part:

> Teach me my God and King,
> In all things thee to see,
> And what I do in anything,
> To do it as for thee. . . .
>
> A servant with this clause
> Makes drudgery divine;
> Who sweeps a room, as for thy laws,
> Makes that and th' action fine.
>
> This is the famous stone
> That turneth all to gold:
> For that which God doth touch and own
> Cannot for less be told.

This sentiment, both beautiful and powerful, intensifies our sense of vocation not by drawing us away from ordinary duties to some great quest but by drawing us more deeply into them. The strength—or, at least, one strength—of this shift is that the

demands and the blessings of a calling are placed on every person. When a vocation is something as extraordinary and heroic as the huge labor of founding Rome—or, even, to take the example that more concerned the Reformers, something as extraordinary as the monastic life—it cannot be generally accessible. So, for example, in his well-known essay, “Our Calling,” Einar Billing, a Swedish Lutheran theologian of the early 20th century, wrote: “The more fully a Catholic Christian develops his nature, the more he becomes a stranger to ordinary life, the more he departs from the men and women who move therein. But in the evangelical [he means Lutheran] church it cannot, it should and may not be. The evangelical church does not seek to create religious virtuosos, but holy and saintly men and women in the call.” Now, Billing writes, “the demand to become a unique Christian character is put on each and every individual.”

As those who have read Gustaf Wingren on Luther or Max Weber and Ernst Troeltsch on “innerworldly asceticism” will know, the power of such an understanding of vocation—sanctifying the work of every life, however humble—is undeniable, but it is by no means free of danger. The beauty of Herbert’s poem notwithstanding, we should be hesitant to sanctify drudgery—as if one should not retire from it if one could. Still more, there is sometimes backbreaking and dangerous labor, or tedious and boring work, that must be done if we or our loved ones are to live, but the language of vocation imbues such work with a kind of meaning and significance that may seem unbelievable to those who must actually do it. They work to live; they do not live to work. Taken seriously, the sanctification of such laborious or tedious work with the language of vocation would suggest that we should struggle to find more time for it, not plot ways to escape it.

More important still, this sanctifying of ordinary work, this sense that it becomes exalted if only approached in the right spirit, may cause us to forget that a divine summons must not only hallow but also transform whatever we do. When the difference between a carpenter and a Christian carpenter, a historian and a Christian historian, a father and a Christian father, an artist and a Christian artist, a soldier and a Christian soldier—when all these differences are reduced to a matter of the “spirit” in which the work is done, we are well on our way to making the divine summons largely irrelevant. Whatever work we want to do—we’ll just call that our vocation.

This is to nod at the call of God and go on our way; it is to lose the infinite,

transforming horizon of God's call. To the degree that we collapse the divine call into the work we regularly do, work pretty much like that done by many others, we really collapse the two love commandments into one. We suppose that in loving the neighbor—and in no more than that—the love of God consists, as if we were made, ultimately, for work and not for rest in God.

If we try to unify our lives through the idea of vocation—by supposing that God summons us only to good work pretty much like everyone else's work—we lose the infinite horizon of God's call. It was Augustine—again—who saw clearly that such a unified life cannot be ours in this world. When, at the beginning of Book XIX of his *City of God*, Augustine enumerates Varro's 288 possible answers to the question, "What is the good life?" and rejects them all, his rejection, as Peter Brown has written, "marks the end of classical thought." In place of the classical ideal of a unified life actually available to us here and now, Augustine substitutes the image of a pilgrim who must live in hope.

We should be equally clear that a life faithfully committed to the responsibilities of our vocation is not itself "the good life." God calls us not just to that but to himself—beyond every earthly joy or responsibility, beyond any settled worldliness which places its hope for meaning in those we love or the work we do. This lesson is taught unforgettably in Dante's *Divine Comedy*.

The engine that drives Dante's desire for the beatific vision is not simply love for God. It is love for that particular woman, Beatrice, whose beauty has drawn him every step of the way and through whose beauty he is being summoned beyond himself and toward the One who is Beauty itself. On his journey through hell and purgatory Dante has had Vergil as his guide. By the time we come to the end of the *Purgatorio*, in fact, Vergil has come to seem a permanent fixture on Dante's way. Then, in Canto XXX of the *Purgatorio*, Beatrice finally appears. And instantly, Dante writes,

> There came on me, needing no further sight,
> Just by that strange, outflowing power of hers,
> The old, old love in all its mastering might.

Overcome by emotion, Dante turns, as he has so often along the way, to Vergil for reassurance—and Vergil is gone. He has taken Dante as far as he may, as far as

human wisdom is able, but now love—love for that particular woman Beatrice as the image of a still greater Beauty—must take Dante the rest of the way. Tears come unbidden to his eyes, and Beatrice says:

> Dante, weep not for Vergil's going—keep
> As yet from weeping, weep not yet, for soon
> Another sword shall give thee cause to weep. . . .
>
> Look on us well; we are indeed, we are
> Beatrice. How hast thou deigned to climb the hill?
> Didst thou not know that man is happy here?

The loss of Vergil, his master and guide, is a sword that pierces Dante's soul—a necessary pain if he would see God. But an even greater renunciation awaits Dante in Canto XXXI of the *Paradiso*. In preparation for that renunciation we might recall the scene in Book VI of the *Aeneid*, when Aeneas, journeying in the underworld to see his father Anchises, confronts Dido among the souls of those who have taken their own life. He weeps as he speaks to her:

> I left your land against my will, my queen,
> The gods' commands drove me to do their will, . . .
> And I could not believe that I would hurt you
> So terribly by going. Wait a little.
> Do not leave my sight. . . .
>
> But she had turned
> With gaze fixed on the ground as he spoke on,
> Her face no more affected than if she were
> Immobile granite or Marpesian stone.
> At length she flung away from him and fled,
> His enemy still, into the shadowy grove
> Where he whose bride she once had been, Sychaeus,
> Joined in her sorrows and returned her love.

Dido turns away from Aeneas—but not in hope for any new and greater love. Instead, she returns to an old love, and Aeneas takes up again his huge and hard task.

Not so for Dante as he journeys toward the vision of God. Beatrice has now taken him as far as she is able. She has brought him to the very brink of that final mystical vision shared by all the redeemed, she has prepared him to look upon the face of God. And now, if he is to answer the divine summons, he must turn from image to reality. As Dante gazes at the snow-white rose that is filled with rank upon rank of the redeemed who look upon God, he turns to Beatrice that she may explain it to him.

And she is gone—returned to her place within those heavenly ranks. Looking up, Dante sees her "in her glory crowned, / Reflecting from herself the eternal rays," and he utters a plea that she continue to pray for him.

> Such was my prayer and she, so distant fled,
> It seemed, did smile and look on me once more,
> Then to the eternal fountain turned her head.

The austerity of that moment is overpowering. When we consider all that Dante has endured to find her, when we consider that it was she who had charged Vergil to be his guide, she who, as Dante says, "to bring my soul to Paradise, / Didst leave the imprint of thy steps in Hell," and when we consider that now—at last—he has come to her . . . seeing all that, we must see yet one thing more. It has, finally, been the beauty not of Beatrice but of God through Beatrice that has been summoning Dante all along the way. Having accomplished that, she turns her face away from him, once more to the eternal fountain. She does not leave him, nor he leave her behind, but together they are to gaze at the love that moves the sun and the other stars. It is not simply the beauty of Beatrice that has been summoning and drawing Dante, but God, and in looking away from him to God she does no harm to his joy or her own. "Didst thou not know that man is happy here?"

C. S. Lewis's *A Grief Observed*, written after the death of his wife Joy, ends with an evocation of this scene from the *Paradiso*. Lewis writes: "She said not to me but to the chaplain, 'I am at peace with God.' She smiled, but not at me.'" Likewise, in his powerful and astringent chapter on charity in *The Four Loves*, Lewis writes that "there is no good applying to Heaven for earthly comfort. Heaven can give heavenly comfort; no other kind. . . . We were made for God. Only by being in some respect like Him, only by being a manifestation of His beauty, lovingkindness, wisdom or goodness, has any earthly Beloved excited our love. . . . It is not that we shall be

asked to turn from them, so dearly familiar, to a Stranger. When we see the face of God we shall know that we have always known it.”

Beyond and through every earthly love and every earthly duty, we are to hear the call of God. On the one hand, we are called to the God who can put an end to our work and bring fulfillment to our loves and labors. “Didst thou not know that man is happy here?” But on the other hand, this call will often exact a price along the way—the price of renunciation, of huge and hard labor. At times, to be sure, by God’s grace, our calling may bring considerable joy and satisfaction, but it cannot offer settled contentment. For, as Augustine says, “It is one thing to see from a mountaintop in the forests the land of peace in the distance . . . and it is another thing to hold to the way that leads there.” Which is to say: For now, “The man should sail.”