

The Vocation Story of St Charles

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EACH OF US HAS A VOCATION. We are all called by God to share in his life. This is what the Second Vatican Council calls the universal call to holiness. But, although the call is universal and is addressed to all people, it is at the same time particular and personal: each of us lives out the vocation to holiness in our own life situation and with our own character and personality. This makes the vocation story of each person a unique story.

In the Bible we find examples of people who were called by God in different ways. Two of the best examples of vocation in the Bible are the call of Samuel (1 Sam 3: 1–10) and the story of the rich young man (Mark 10: 17–27).

Samuel was a young man ministering in the Temple who one night heard a voice calling ‘Samuel, Samuel’. He thought it was the High Priest, Eli, but when Samuel went to him, Eli said ‘No, go back to sleep. I didn’t call you’. This happened again and then a third time. Then Eli realised that it was God who was calling the young man, and he said to Samuel ‘When the voice says “Samuel”, say “Speak, Lord; your servant is listening.”’ And, when the voice called him again, Samuel replied: ‘Speak, Lord; your servant is listening.’

Samuel teaches us that sometimes, in the beginning of a vocation story, the person doesn’t understand what is happening. It can take a while to realise that

The Passionist Community at Mount Argus in 1864. St Charles is first on the left of the top row.

it is God who is doing something in my life, and to reply: 'Speak, Lord; your servant is listening.'

But even when the servant is listening, he or she still has to decide how they will respond and whether or not they will do what the Lord says. We see this in the Gospel account of Jesus meeting the rich young man. The young man is a good person: he is not someone who is living a bad life or who is far from God. When he comes to Jesus and asks for advice, Jesus says, 'Keep the commandments,' and he replies, 'I have kept all these from my earliest days'; in other words, I've always tried to do what is right. Jesus then says to him, 'There is one thing you lack. Go, sell everything you have, give the money to the poor, and come, follow me.' The evangelist, St Mark, says that at that point his face fell, he was so disappointed. This was a step he couldn't take; he was a man of great wealth.

At this point the rich young man disappears out of the pages of the Gospel. We never see him again; or at least, if we do, we don't realise it. Maybe he went home, thought about what had happened and decided, 'Well, what's money, after all?' Maybe he went home and didn't think about it, because he had already made up his mind. We don't know what he did later. But we see that when Jesus speaks to him, he listens but is not yet ready to take the step.

We see a great variety of vocation stories when we read the lives of the saints. In the life of every saint there is a vocation story; by reflecting on their life experience, we can discover the ways in which this person's vocation had unfolded. The lives of the saints teach us how people with different personalities, living in different times and situations, have taken the Gospel and put it into practice. They show us the great variety of ways there are of following Christ. They also help us to understand how a vocation develops within the context of a person's life.

Fr Karl Rahner, a German Jesuit and theologian, once wrote: 'Let each one of us look for the experience of grace in the contemplation of our life.' As an example of God's grace being revealed through life experience, I want to look at the call of Christ in the early life of St Charles of Mount Argus and reflect on the story of his vocation.

St Charles was born in the Netherlands, the second son in a large family. His father was a miller in the



small village of Munstergeleen, a place with a strong Catholic culture. His family was a family of faith, and Charles' vocation grew out of his experience of Catholic family life. Often today, people who consider a vocation to the religious life have lived, perhaps for a number of years, without an awareness of God or have grown up in families where there was no religious practice or perhaps no religious faith. But, in the case of St Charles, we can see that he grew up in a family where God was very much present. The first vocation of every believer, the vocation to follow Christ, was a part of his experience of life in his family. In a letter to his family, in which he encourages his newly-married brother and sister in their faith, he recalls what his own family life was like. He writes:

I pray for them, that if God grants them children, they will bring them up to know his peace, have them pray every morning and every night, and teach them to recite the rosary in the evening, and that the welfare of their souls will be the most important thing in life for them. We should be thankful to God for having given us such good parents.

Here we see him thanking God for his parents, and also reminding his brother and sister about what they learned from their parents: to pray morning and evening, to say the rosary together as a family, to make the love of God the most important thing in the life of their family.

St Charles grew up in an atmosphere of faith and prayer. In keeping with the customs of the time, he was thirteen when he made his First Communion and was confirmed shortly after that. One of the first things he did after making his First Communion was to join the Confraternity of Perpetual



Eucharistic Adoration. Coming back from school each day, even as a fourteen year old, he would always call into the church. Throughout his teens and into his twenties, he would come to the church each day and spend some time praying there in silence before Jesus in the Holy Eucharist. In Charles' vocation story, the desire for silent time in the presence of Jesus in the Eucharist was an expression of his loving response to the invitation to a deeper relationship with God.

God's voice is often heard in our lives through the voices of other people. When you talk to someone who is following a vocation to the priesthood, and you ask them 'How did this happen?', more often than not you find that a significant element in their story was the example of a good priest. For many people who feel called to the priesthood, God's voice has been heard, perhaps through being an altar server or through contact with a college chaplaincy or a Catholic organisation, when they got to know a priest whose example was an inspiration to them. When St Charles was growing up, because his family was so big, he and his older sister Sibyl had to go and live a couple of doors down the street with his uncle, the mayor of the little village of Munstergeleen, who had a big house with some empty rooms. The new curate at the parish also came to live in the house, as the parish priest had no room for him. This meant that St Charles spent his teenage years living in a house where there was a priest as a lodger. He met the priest every day and could talk to him, learning about his life and work; if he had questions, he could ask the priest directly. In this way, the priesthood was not something remote from him.

At some point Charles began to think about the priesthood and the religious life. Somehow he learned about the Passionists. This was around the time that he was called up for military service. Whether he learned about the Passionists from the curate or whether it was, as some say, from another conscript who was with him during the three months he spent in active military service, or from his teacher, is not known for sure, but in some way or another he discovered that a Passionist monastery had recently been founded in Belgium. An account of the life and ministry of the community, who had recently arrived from Italy, had been placed in a Catholic magazine. It said this:

The purpose of this institute, founded by Venerable Paul of the Cross almost a hundred years ago, is to bring about the conversion of sinners. In particular the Passionists devote themselves to hearing confessions and giving retreats in villages, towns, seminaries and religious communities.

For Charles, the time he spent in active military service was important because it was the first time he lived away from his family. Often, when a young person is trying to find a direction for their life, the pressures of home and friends can make it difficult for them to discern clearly. A time of work or study away from home, family and friends can be a very significant moment in which they feel more free to think about their life and what they are going to do with it, perhaps helping them to reflect more deeply on their faith and their relationship with Christ. For St Charles, his military service was a time like that where he was able to ask himself, 'What am I going to do with my life?'

When Charles came back from the army, although he was no longer in active service, he was still a reserve for another four years. During this time, he continued his studies. He had not been a quick learner at school, but now he went to a different school where he found a new teacher who was very sympathetic to what Charles wanted to do with his life. This new teacher encouraged him and helped him with the things he had to learn to enter the



St Charles during his military service

Passionist community; this would have included Latin, which he needed to study for the priesthood, and French, the language spoken in southern Belgium where the Passionists were living. Charles now had a sense of focus in his life and applied himself seriously to his study. He was able to see where his life was going and what it was that God wanted him to do: he had a specific aim in life. Like the rich young man in the Gospel, he knew that this was going to cost him. He was going to have to work long and hard to achieve his aim. It would mean leaving his family behind, giving up all that he had and all that might be his. He would be due a share in the family business and property, but he was prepared to leave that behind. When he was about to leave home to join the Passionists, his sister Sibyl, the one who was closest to him, asked him 'Are you really going away of your own free will?' He said to her 'Ah Sibyl, for our Lord I would do anything; I would even go and live at the bottom of a well.' His response shows that he had reached the point where he was ready to take the step: he had decided to follow Christ.

Charles' vocation journey had been influenced by different experiences and people, but it was his own response that shaped his direction in life. The faith environment of his family; his discovery of silent prayer and Eucharistic Adoration; the example of a good priest; learning about the Passionists; the experience of being away from family and friends for a time; a new commitment to studies when his aim in life became clear; the encouragement of someone who understood what he wanted to do with his life: all of these elements were important in his vocation story. But the most important element was his growing desire to give his life to Christ. What made the difference was the generosity of his response to his vocation.

When Jesus invited Charles to leave everything behind and follow him, he didn't go away sad like the young man in the Gospel. Charles' response was to do what Jesus asked of him: 'For our Lord I would do anything.'

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TO FOLLOW JESUS

SOMETIMES JESUS CALLS US, he invites us to follow him, but perhaps we do not realise that it is he who is calling, like what happened to the young Samuel.... Have you sometimes heard the Lord's voice, in a desire, in a worry, did he invite you to follow him more closely? Have you heard him? Have you wanted to be apostles of Jesus? Ask Jesus what he wants of you and be brave! Be brave! Ask him this!

Behind and before every vocation to the priesthood

or to the consecrated life there is always the strong and intense prayer of someone: a grandmother, a grandfather, a mother, a father, a community.... This is why Jesus said: 'Pray therefore the Lord of the harvest', that is, God the Father, 'to send out labourers into his harvest' (Matthew 9:38). Vocations are born in prayer and from prayer; and only through prayer can they persevere and bear fruit.

Pope Francis

Angelus Address, Vocations Sunday 2013