Listening and Service as Prayer

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What is the essence of the human vocation? The exalted dignity of each person, created in the divine image, should be the basis for evaluating the meaning of life. Would that this truth were shared by all! No knowledge is worth more to people than this insight into our profound relationship with God. Grasping that we share a common destiny, we should be motivated to treat each other with the profound respect that is the foundation for justice and peace.

The very term "vocation" expresses the concept of "calling", which implies that God draws each person into the divine plan. This Word of God may be misinterpreted or stifled at times, but unless a person obstinately blocks out the divine nudgings or whispers, the persistence of God's voice will evoke a response. We "pray for vocations", not only to the priesthood and religious life, but more fundamentally that all people develop their capacity to hear God's Word, making it the basis for their daily lives.

The books of Samuel begin with the narrative of this prophet's marvelous birth and dedication from childhood to God's service at the Tent of Meeting (Tabernacle) in Shiloh. The Ark containing the tables of the Decalogue was housed in this Tent; as footstool of the invisible God and receptacle for the Ten Words, the Ark provided a focus for Israel's faith that God indeed dwelt in her midst. The boy Samuel gradually learned that God, not the elderly priest Eli, was calling him. The response was an indication of his readiness to serve: "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening."

The Fourth Gospel begins with a profound reflection on the hymn of creation (Genesis 1:1-2:4); it shows that the Word of God desires to convey life and light to every human being. To achieve this goal in the manner most consistent with the social dimension of our human nature, this Word and life-giving Wisdom tabernacle in Israel (see Sira 24:7-12). Then, in the fullness of time, "the Word became flesh and pitched his tent among us..." (John 1:14). Jesus offered a new opportunity for people to experience the divine presence and to hear God's Word. This was coupled with his role as the Lamb of God, offering himself to take away the sins of the world (John 1:29, 36).

The Baptist knew that, like every human educator, he had to point beyond himself to the greater Teacher. His role was to stand and listen for the Bridegroom, rejoicing greatly at the sound of his voice (John 1:38). Were they looking for happiness, success, a better life? They sensed that his very person embodied all that human beings might be searching for. They wanted to have access to him rather than tangible goods or theoretical answers to life's questions. “Where are you staying?” Jesus did not provide an address but made an invitation. “Come and you will see!” Initially they called Jesus by the honorable title "Rabbi" (my great one), designating him as
Teacher. After Andrew has spent some time with Jesus he told his brother Simon: "We have found the Messiah," which in Greek is rendered "the Christ" (Anointed One).

To develop the capacity for listening to God's Word in the varying circumstances of human life, we need to cultivate the habit of quiet, attentive prayer. Like Samuel and the disciples we must seek the dwelling-place of the Lord. Of course, we may find this quiet in our home, perhaps even on the way to work... However, the Church offers a unique privilege for experiencing the Word, both to challenge and to heal us, in the Eucharist, the other sacraments and prayers of the Liturgy. In the chapel of the seminary where I studied, the altar cloth bore an inscription: "Magister adest et vocat te". The English translation is "The Teacher is here and calls you" (John 11:28). The Eucharistic presence of Christ is the precious gift that marvelously continues the indwelling of God that Israel and the disciples of Jesus experienced. May Catholics of our generation develop the listening attitude that characterized Samuel and those who heard John the Baptist describe Jesus!