

Vocation

A funny thing happened to me when I finally passed Retirement 101, after flunking it twice before. I asked myself questions I hadn't asked for years, "What now? What are you going to do with the rest of your life?" Gradually I realized that despite my age, I was asking the same question many of my students had been asking. I also found that any thinking I could do on the matter involved the word "vocation."

About the same time I was wandering on another road, one that led me to the Spanish philosopher Ortega y Gasset. He had some powerful things to say about doing what you are really good at. That was authenticity; it was also your vocation. You could see that, he thought, in Goethe's life. I thought that was also true in other settings, not least in the Aeneid.¹

But I am no philosopher. So, with my weakness for philology, I turned to the word itself. The etymology of 'vocation' is clear enough: our word is derived from the Latin verb *voco*, *vocare*, to call. But when I turned to the Latin texts that use *vocatio* I was in for a surprise. Some writers used it for a summons to appear in court. No thanks! More often, however, it meant an invitation to dinner or a party. I liked that idea – our vocations were really invitations to have a good time, with like-minded friends, old and new.

That may sound too light-hearted, but it is not totally antithetical to the idea of vocation in the Gospels, where Jesus spends a lot of time calling people, and a lot of time turning water into wine at wedding feasts, and dining with publicans and sinners. Then in Revelation (3.20) the two themes get brought together. "Behold, I stand at the door and knock," Jesus says. But the text goes on not with more threats of being "spewed out of my mouth," or a lecture on authenticity, or a scolding for things done and left undone, but "if anyone hears my voice I will come in to him and dine with him and he with me."

Such an approach to vocation didn't last very long. The word soon entered its Babylonian Captivity, restricted to ecclesiastical vocations, as if only that kind of work had true dignity. Ordinary working people had no real vocation. I suppose it was Martin Luther who more than any one else

¹ The result of this perambulation was "We Must Call the Classics before a Court of the Shipwrecked" [Classical World](#) 104 (2011) pp. 483–493.

ended this ecclesiastical monopoly of the word.² But in English we don't see the change until the sixteenth century when the word took on a wider application, as it did in Thomas Wilson *Art of Rhetoric* (1553) and more memorably in 1596 when Shakespeare wrote *Henry IV Part One*:

PRINCE HENRY

Where shall we take a purse tomorrow, Jack?

FALSTAFF

'Zounds, where thou wilt, lad; I'll make one; an I do not, call me villain and baffle me.

PRINCE HENRY

I see a good amendment of life in thee; from praying to purse-taking.

FALSTAFF

Why, Hal, 'tis my vocation, Hal; 'tis no sin for a man to labour in his vocation.

And so, with Falstaff's light-fingered guidance, "vocation" could now roam the streets looking for an unbuttoned pocket to pluck or purse to snatch.

But this liberation of 'vocation' from its long captivity was a mixed blessing. It came to be a synonym for "occupation," anything that filled your time. Any kind of occupation would do, as long, I suppose Falstaff would add, as it paid good money.

That seems to me where many students – or their parents -- are right now: it's all about a job, any job, so long as it pays enough to maintain a 'life style'. That's not good enough. They deserve better. If in our day and age vocation cannot be an invitation to a Roman banquet, let it at least include excitement and anticipation. If it's not celebratory and nourishing, and deeply satisfying, it's not a true vocation. It has to be something that brings one in touch with good colleagues, and, yes, of course, with the authenticity of doing what you can do really well.

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² Brooks Graebner has called my attention to Gustav Wingren *Luther on Vocation* (Philadelphia, Muhlenberg Press, 1957). L

