



Boston Catholic Journal

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Gird yourselves and weep, O priests! Wail, O ministers of the altar! Come, spend the night in sackcloth, O ministers of my God! The house of your God is deprived of offering and libation.

Joel 1:13



9-5 Vocations The Priesthood and a Parable of the Absurd

It is rather true that I am married. It is equally rather true that I am a father.

From roughly 7 AM to 5 PM (and later into the night occasionally) I am a married man with all the obligations incumbent upon that state of life. This is undeniable.

As a father from roughly 7 AM to 5 PM (and later into the night occasionally) I am obliged to embrace the duties of fatherhood, and this, too, is equally undeniable. After all, I am a husband and a father. That is my vocation.

Typically, however, the hours *after* 5 PM are mine to do with as I wish, and the erstwhile obligations that bind me to wife and child no longer obtain. After 5 PM I am no longer married or bound to the obligations of my vocation to marriage or to fatherhood. My life is then my own to do with as I please – whatever the plight of wife and child. It must wait until 7 AM --- until I *resume* my vocation.

What is more, I have 3 to 4 weeks vacation every year in which I am totally free, 24/7, from marriage and fatherhood, and any of the obligations that had attended either or both.

Wife, child, both will have to await my return. I am not to be troubled, accessed, vexed, or in any way deterred from my vacation from my vocation.

After all ... I am only a man.

The terribly odd thing about this predicament, however, is sorting out who and what I am between the hours of 5 PM and 7 AM – and, of course, while on vacation. I do not hold the obligation to marriage or fatherhood – to a sick child at an unwelcome hour or a distraught wife "after hours" – to be universally binding upon me. That is to say, my putative vocation as husband and father can only be predicated of me *conditionally*, and not ascribed to me indefeasibly.

Something clearly is askew.

Considered carefully, we find that the distinction of which we speak is precisely the distinction between a "job" and what we have always understood as a "vocation".

Apart from some dusty and discredited corners of academia, Marxism has largely fallen into disrepute, and with it the curious notion that man articulates his meaning through work. It nevertheless remains the closest proximation, in a profane sense, of our understanding of the relationship between a job and a "vocation" as articulating the axis around which our lives revolve, and in light of which they become coherent. In either case, considered as a job, or as a vocation, we are left empty-handed – at least for 14 hours of each day (vacations apart) – as to what we really are if we are not "fathers and husbands".

Most sane men will argue that such an assessment is more than absurd: it is a mockery. Fatherhood is not a job. It is a vocation. Marriage is not a job. It is a vocation. The priesthood and Religious life (the lives of consecrated nuns, of friars, of monastics) are not jobs. They are *vocations*.

The difference, simply put, is that jobs are essentially *temporal* in nature, which is to say, they are defined, circumscribed, by *time*: by hours, days, constraints, contracts, vacations, wages, provisos – in a word, they are delimited. One is not an engineer the way in which one is a father. One can cease being an engineer. One cannot cease being a father. An engineer closes the door to his office at 5 PM. A father's door is always open. A contract can be deferred, but not an ill and crying child. A priest can always recapture the highlights of the football game, but not the soul desperate for Christ who rings at the door in need of the Sacrament of Penance or spiritual guidance in a crisis overwhelming his life --- and whom Christ Himself has brought to the door as the last measure. One can be recaptured. One can be lost.

Do we agree that there is not just a distinguishable difference, but an essential difference between a job and a vocation?

We hold this to be true of parents and spouses, of priests and Religious. There is no *time*

when they cease being "fathers", mothers", "priests", "nuns", "friars", "monks". There is no "time off" in a vocation – in *any* vocation. Ask any parent. Ask any consecrated nun.

To bring the point to absurd relief, visualize the following: Jesus Christ calls Peter, Andrew, and John from their boats, and this is His commission to them: "Come follow me – 9 AM-5PM – lunch hour excluded – and I will make you fishers of men – except on your "days off" as Apostles, and of course, excluding your vacation days. See how reasonable I am. I know that you are, after all ... just men ..."

To whom, then, is this absurd parable addressed?

To anyone --- and especially priests --- whose *vocation* has become just a *job* ... a mere obligation ... to fools who cherish time as their own, as though they could wrest it from God, use it to their own ends, and keep both in the bargain ...

The next time you peek before you answer the door, you may find that it is God knocking ...



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