

## Called to Be Saints: Our Personal Vocation to Participate in the Mission of the Church

By William E. May

May 18, 2014  
Fifth Sunday of Easter

Readings: Acts 6.1-7;  
1 Peter 2.4-9;  
John 14.1-12

*Brothers, select from among you seven reputable men, filled with the Spirit and wisdom, whom we shall appoint to this task, whereas we shall devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.*

– Acts 6.3-4

*You are “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people of his own, so that you may announce the praises” of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.*

– 1 Peter 2.9

*Amen, amen, I say to you, whoever believes in me will do the works that I do, and will do greater ones than these, because I am going to the Father.*

– John 14.12

Today’s readings invite us to dwell on the fact that each and every one of us is called to be holy – indeed, to be a saint – no matter what our state of life. To this end, it is helpful to take a moment to distinguish the common priesthood of all the faithful and the sacramental priesthood of the clergy. The *Catechism* and Pope John Paul II’s Apostolic Exhortation *Pastores dabo vobis* provide in-depth commentary on the Church’s teaching in these areas. Here I offer a summary of some key passages from the latter document.

### Jesus as Our Model

To begin, we look to Jesus as our model. Jesus has revealed in himself, especially in his passion, death, and resurrection, the definitive features of both the priesthood of all the faithful and the sacramental priesthood.

With regard to the sacramental priesthood, Jesus conferred on Peter and the Twelve, by a specific paschal outpouring of the Holy Spirit, the same messianic authority which he himself had received from the Father: “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you” (Mt 28.18-20).

Just as Jesus has a mission that comes to him directly from God and makes present the very authority of God, so too the apostles have a mission which comes to them from Jesus. All this is possible not as a result of any human talents or abilities, but only through the gift of Christ and his Spirit, in the sacrament he gives the apostles. The apostles progressively carried out their mission by calling other men as bishops, priests, and deacons, in order to fulfill the command of the risen Jesus who sent them to all people in every age.

Our priests are called to prolong the presence of Christ, the one high priest, by embodying his way of life and making him visible in the midst of the flock entrusted to their care. This is the ordinary and proper way in which ordained ministers share in the one priesthood of Christ. By the sacramental anointing of holy orders, the Holy Spirit configures them in a new and special way to Jesus Christ, the head and shepherd. He forms and strengthens them with his pastoral charity. He gives them an authoritative role in the Church as servants of the proclamation of the gospel and the fullness of Christian life to all.

## All the Baptized Enter the Divine Family

Certain responsibilities are still ours to take up, however, even if we are not ordained. For through the sacrament of baptism, each of us has entered into the paschal mystery of Christ. We have – in, with, and through Christ – died to sin and risen to a new kind of life. We have “put on Christ,” become incorporated into his body, the Church, and been made truly children of God, members of the divine family. We have been divinized, for now we truly share in Christ’s divine nature, just as he shares in our human nature, as the familiar words remind us: “Through the mingling of this water and wine may we come to share in the divinity of Christ, just as he humbled himself to share in our humanity.”

Moreover, as the Fathers of Vatican Council II declared in a text that was often on the lips of Pope John Paul II, who himself repeatedly emphasized it as indispensable for properly understanding who we are:

*it is only in the mystery of the Word incarnate that light is shed on the mystery of man. For Adam, the first man, was a figure of the future man, namely, of Christ the Lord. It is Christ, the last Adam, who fully discloses man to himself and unfolds his noble calling by revealing the mystery of the Father and the Father’s love. (Gaudium et spes, 22; emphasis added)*

## Baptism and the New Law of Love

Commenting on the Ten Commandments, the law given to Moses which summed up the natural moral law given “on creation,” John Paul II notes that this gift to the Jewish people “was a promise and sign of the New Covenant, in which the law would be written in a new and definitive way upon the human heart, replacing the law of sin which had disfigured that heart” (*Veritatis splendor*, 12).

Through our baptism Christ gives us this New Covenant, the new law of love, which enables us to walk worthily in the vocation to which we have been called – the vocation to be perfect, even as the heavenly Father is perfect – so that we may attain an end not achievable by any human action, an end utterly beyond our human nature and powers: life eternal in the divine family.

Saint Thomas explains matters this way:

Through baptism a person is reborn to a spiritual life, one proper to Christ’s faithful, as the Apostle says (Gal 2.20), ‘The life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God [who loved me and gave himself for me].’ But this life belongs only to the members who are united with the head, from whom they receive sense and movement. And therefore it is necessary that through baptism a person is incorporated into Christ as his member. For just as sense and movement flow from the natural head to its [bodily] members, so from the spiritual head, who is Christ, flow to his members both a spiritual sense, which consists in a knowledge of the truth, and a spiritual movement, which operates through the inspiration of grace. Hence John says (1.14, 16), ‘we have seen him full of grace and truth . . . and of his fullness we have all received.’ And therefore it follows that the baptized are enlightened by Christ regarding the knowledge of the truth, and they are impregnated by him with an abundance of good works through the infusion of grace. (*Summa theologiae* III, q. 69, a. 5)

Speaking of the persons made new by God’s grace, John Paul II emphasizes that, through baptism, the very depths of our being are touched so that we are conformed to Christ, who dwells in the hearts of his believers. All this, he says, in company with Saint Thomas and the entire Catholic tradition, “is the *effect of grace*, of the active presence of the Holy Spirit in us” (*Veritatis splendor*, 21).

Through baptism, in short, we are given the gift of what Saint Josemaria Escrivá calls *divine filiation*: we are “children of God, brothers of the Word made flesh, of him of whom it was said, ‘In him was life, and that life was the light of man’ (Jn 1.4). Children of the light: that is what we are. We bear the only flame capable of setting fire to hearts made of flesh.”

## Made New to the Depths of Our Being

Thus the persons to whom the new law of love is given, Christ's faithful, are human persons who have been made new to the depths of our being. While remaining human we are now divinized, summoned and empowered to live not merely as beings made in the image and likeness of God but also as his very own children, persons begotten anew in baptism who can now, with Jesus, call God their Father, their Abba. Our hearts, in which the natural moral law was originally inscribed, have been made new precisely because the new law of love and grace is now engraved on them, making us to be other Christs. Thus the mission of Christ becomes the mission of each and every one of us who is baptized.

How are we equipped to carry out this mission? Before our baptism, the natural moral law enables human persons to know the moral truth needed in order to make true moral judgments. But it does not empower us to choose to do what we come to know we are to do. The new law of love, however, whose purpose is to enable us to be fully the persons God wants us to be – his loving children, brothers and sisters of his only-begotten Son, Jesus Christ – gives us the capacity both to know and to do all that must be done if we are to fulfill our vocation as his children, who, like Jesus, will to do only what is pleasing to the Father.

### *About the Author*

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### **FOR FURTHER READING**

*Christopher J. Carstens, "What Is the 'Priesthood of the Baptized'?" available at:*  
<http://www.dioceseoflacrosse.com/sacredworship/Files/Resources>

*Catechism of the Catholic Church ##871-945; 1533-1600.*

*John Paul II, Pastores dabo vobis, available at:*  
[http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul\\_ii/apost\\_exhortations/documents](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_exhortations/documents)

*"Prayer to Know One's Vocation," United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, available at:*  
<http://www.usccb.org/prayer-and-worship/prayers/prayer-to-know-ones-vocation.cfm>

*Russell Shaw, "What Vocation Shortage?" America (March 29, 2004), available at:*  
<http://americamagazine.org/issue/479/article/what-vocation-shortage>

*"The Common Priesthood of the Faithful and the Ministerial Priesthood," The Catholic Liturgical Library, available at:* <http://www.catholicliturgy.com/index.cfm/FuseAction/documentText>

### **IN SHORT . . .**

- ***Each and every one of us is called to be holy – indeed, to be a saint – no matter what our state of life.***
- ***Jesus is our model: He reveals in his passion, death, and resurrection the definitive features of both the priesthood of all the faithful and the sacramental priesthood.***
- ***Our priests prolong the presence of Christ, the one high priest, by embodying his way of life and making him visible in the midst of the flock entrusted to their care.***
- ***Through baptism Christ gives us the new law of love, which enables us to walk worthily in the vocation to be perfect, even as the heavenly Father is perfect.***
- ***We may attain an end not achievable by any human action, an end utterly beyond our human nature and powers: life eternal in the divine family.***
- ***The new law of love gives us the capacity both to know and to do all that must be done to fulfill our vocation as God's children.***