

Secularism or Heroism

The Crux of the Vocation Crisis

By Rev. Emmanuel Charles McCarthy

Quo Vadis Domine is the name of my favorite church in Rome. It lies just outside the gates of my favorite place in Rome, the Callistus Catacombs. It is a tiny church, easily missed by tourists looking for “the grandeur that was Rome.” It commemorates that time in the life of Christianity when St. Peter decides to remain in Rome, rather than go to another city and avoid persecution and death. While the historical environment of that time (54-68 AD) is well known, the precise historical details of Peter’s choice are not. However, the spiritual drama of Peter’s decision has been illuminated and immortalized by the Nobel Prize Laureate, Henryk Sienkiewicz, in his 1905 masterpiece *Quo Vadis*.

The *Room of Tears* is a short distance from the Sistine Chapel. It is the place where a newly elected pope is brought in order to don for the first time his white papal garments. John Paul II recalls that while in this room he was surprised that he kept thinking about *Quo Vadis*.

In the climactic moment of this novel Peter is leaving Rome with his friend, Nazarius, at the height of Nero’s persecution of Christians. He meets Jesus on the outskirts of the city. However, Jesus is walking into, not out of, Rome: The traveling staff fell out of Peter’s hand.



Church of “Quo Vadis” in Rome

His eyes were fixed immovably ahead. His lips were open, and his face reflected unbelievable surprise, immense joy, and rapturous exaltation.

Suddenly he threw himself on his knees, his arms lifted upward and stretched to the light, and his lips cried out: “Christ! O Christ!” His head beat against the dust as if he were kissing the feet of someone only he could see.

Then there was silence.

“Quo vadis, Domine?” his voice asked at last, punctured by his sobbing. “Where are you going, Lord?”

Nazarius heard no answer. But a voice of

ineffable sweetness and abundant sorrow rang in Peter’s ears, “When you abandon my people,” he heard, “I must go to Rome to be crucified once more.”

The apostle lay still and silent with his face pressed into the dust. Nazarius thought he had either died or fainted, but he rose at last, picked up his pilgrim’s staff, and turned again toward the seven hills.

“Quo vadis, Domine?” the boy asked like an echo of the apostle’s cry.

“To Rome,” Peter murmured.

Common sense in people demands a consistency between word and deed before they take seriously a proclamation that asks a sacrifice from them. Imagine if after having taught, “Love your enemies,” for three years,

Jesus, instead of saying to Peter, “Put up your sword,” had said, “Peter get the other ear!” would people say of Him, “He teaches with authority” (Lk 4:32)? If on the cross instead of praying, “Father forgive them for they know not what they do” Jesus cried out, “Father, have no mercy on those who have done this to me,” would His teaching of “Love your enemies” possess any credibility?

Jesus was aware His teachings on the Way to Eternal Life would forever sound hollow if left unenfleshed. He had to walk through the furnace of His own truth

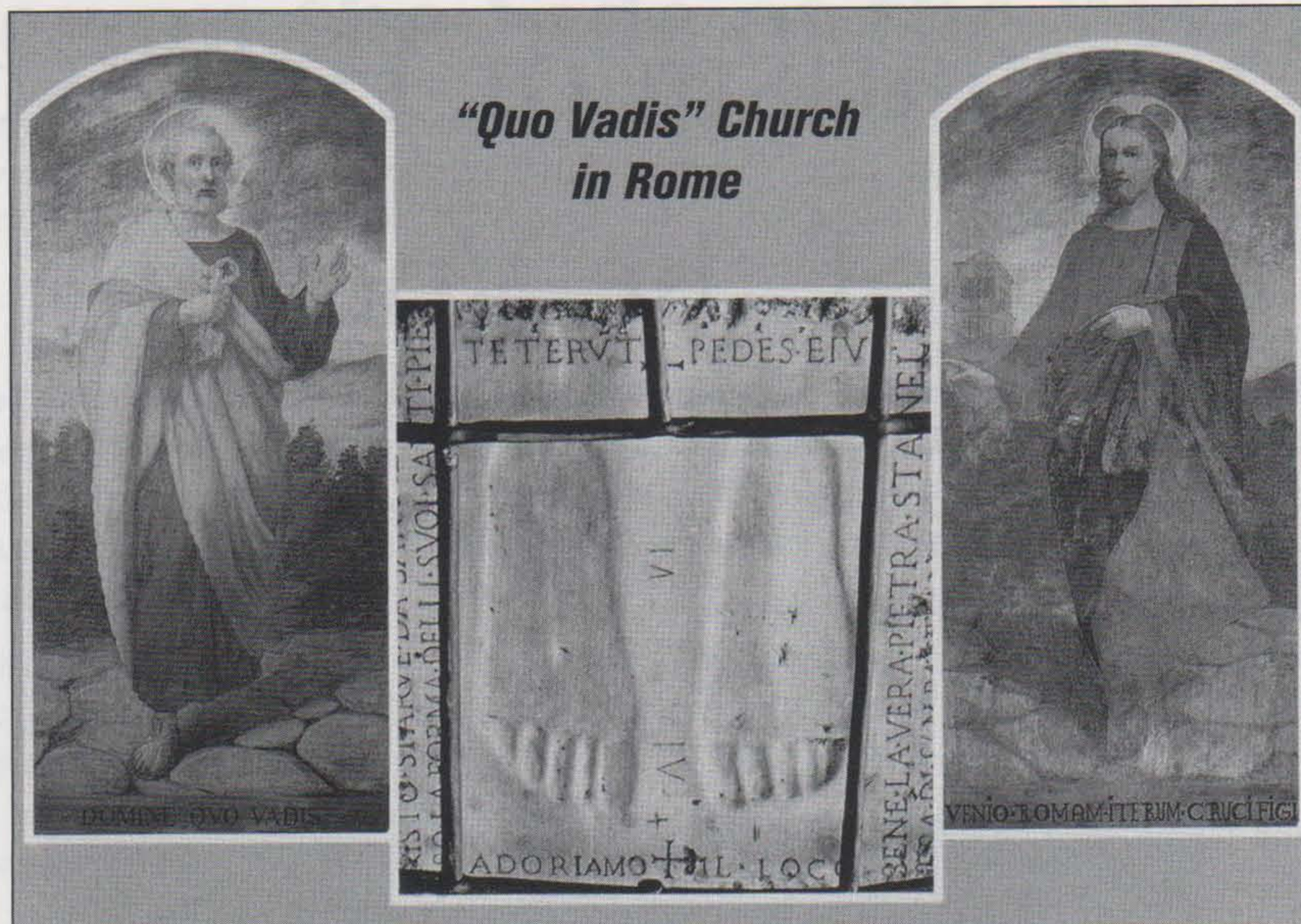
before He could expect others to live what He proclaimed as the will of God. Verbal witness alone was sterile. "If he does not believe in his own truth enough to live it, why should I?" would be a reflex reaction to Jesus, or to anyone else, proclaiming the Gospel by words alone. As the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche framed it: "You will never get me to believe in a redeemer, until you act redeemed."

In *Quo Vadis*, Peter visited Christians who were soon to be martyred. A Roman soldier, Vinicius, in love with a Christian woman, clandestinely placed himself among the Christians in order to locate her. Peter spoke:

It's not enough to love just one's own kind; God died a man's death on the cross, he spilled his blood for all mankind, and even the pagans are turning toward him now,And it's not enough to love only those who love and treat you well. Christ forgave his executioners. He removed all blame from the Jews who turned him over to Roman justice to be crucified and from the Roman soldiers who nailed him to the cross."Only love is more powerful than hatred," the teacher said simply. "Only love can clean the world of evil."

By the time Peter finished Vinicius was perplexed and disoriented:

These ideas were a completely new way of looking at the world and totally rearranged everything known before. He sensed that if he were to follow the teaching, he would, for example, have to make a burnt offering of everything that had made him; he would have to destroy his thinking, crush all his perceptions, excise every habit, custom and tradition, erase his whole acquired character and the driving force of his current nature - burn it all to ashes, consign it to the winds, and fill the void with an entirely different soul and a life on a wholly different plane. A philosophy that taught love for Parthians,



**"Quo Vadis" Church
in Rome**

Syrians, Greeks, Egyptians, Gauls and Britons seemed like lunacy; love and forgiveness to an enemy and kindness in the place of vengeance were simply sheer madness...What he heard seemed totally divorced from reality as he understood it, and yet it made his reality so insignificant, it was hardly worth a passing thought.

Everyone has heard the arguments for entering the priesthood. However, there is only one argument that will be listened to - the argument of heroic sanctity! By this is not meant simply a vow of celibacy. Celibacy is no more a guarantee of sanctity or a promoter of heroism than marriage. Heroic sanctity is freely laying down of one's life, moment to moment, in order to love the Father and all of His children as Jesus loved the Father and all of His children. It is Jesus and only Jesus who is the incarnation of absolute Holiness. In all creation there is not a clearer manifestation of Holiness than Jesus. Jesus is Holiness. It is by following Jesus, it is in loving one another as Jesus loves us, that a person fulfills "the entire law of the Gospel" (New Catechism, sec. 1970), that a person walks in the way of sanctity.

However, the way of sanctity is a heroic way because every step on this way is a step of love. Not a step of love as Caesar defines love, nor as Aristotle defines love, nor as Hugh Hefner defines love. It is love as Jesus defines love. It is love that has a

cross not a sword at its core and as its means. It is a love that in the words of Vinicius is, "simply sheer madness." Yet, it is a love that renders every other love "so insignificant, it (is) hardly worth a passing thought."

Fr. Zossima, Dostoyevsky's primary symbol in *The Brothers Karamazov* for what it means to be a Christian, says that Christ-like love "in action is a harsh and dreadful thing compared with love in dreams." To

voluntarily enter the dynamic of Christ-like love for others, friends and enemies, is heroism in the superlative. It is, as the song says, being "willing to go into hell for a heavenly cause" - and to go there with Christ-like love as one's sole weapon. It is risking responding to hurt, hate, cruelty, calumny, violence and injustice exclusively with that love made visible by Jesus. It is bearing the "unbearable burden" of the cross of nonviolent, self-sacrificial Christ-like love every minute of every day because Love Itself has asked that it be done for the salvation of the world. To commit one's life to this cross-centered love in a world drenched in evil takes boldness and courage. To act on this choice is to unite with the Holy.

Christ-like love can be very costly, but expensive or not, it is the power of God given to the Church. It has no more need of social status, coercive power, connections in high places, prestige, badges of distinction, money, intrigue or prerogative than a rose has a need to give a sermon to attract people. Humanity naturally gravitates to Christ-like love because humanity was made for Christ-like love and made by Christ-like love. Yet, heroic love is not auto-salvation; it does not depend on its own strength to face the satanic, as a nation would rely on its weapons to vanquish an enemy. Heroic Christ-like sanctity and love rest secure in

the faith that regardless of how dreadful life may seem to be as a whole, or in a moment, God is love, almighty and present, whether called upon or not - and He is encompassing each one and all as a prodigal Father embraces a beloved child. Therefore, regardless of projected fearful outcomes, one can venture to love as Jesus loves, to be holy as Christ is holy.

Let us return for an instant to *Quo Vadis*, the classic that so filled John Paul II's mind immediately after his election. It was now only minutes before the Christians were to be herded into the arena of horror. Sobs, silence and desperation alternately punctuated the air. An anguished widow pleaded to God, "Give my son back to me, O Lord." A Christian father repeated and repeated, "The hangmen raped my little daughters and Christ let it happen." For another soon to die Christian, "the hair lifted on his head in terror" when he thought, "What if the Caesar of Rome was mightier than Jesus of Nazareth?" Peter quietly sat praying among the tormented faithful. Then he began talking, so low at the outset that hardly anyone heard him: I tell you in Christ's name you've nothing to fear! Life waits for you, not death. Joy without end, not torments. Song waits, not tears and moaning.....

"I tell you as God's apostle, widow, that your son won't die but will be born in glory to a new life, and you will be together. I tell you, father, whose innocent daughters they've soiled, they'll be as unblemished as the lilies of Hebron when you meet again. I say in Christ's name to all you mothers who'll be torn away from your orphaned children, all you who'll lose your fathers, all who cry for pity, all who'll witness the death of those they love, all who are sick at heart, unfortunate and fearful, and I say again to you who must die: You will wake as if from a dream into eternal light, and the Son of God will shine in your night."

Of all the dangers to the integrity of the presbyterate and the episcopacy the greatest probably is secularization. (Latin: *saecularis* - worldly, temporal, as opposed to eternal) By **secularization is meant the adoption by the Church, its leadership or its laity, of the values, attitudes,**



Jesus led to walk through the furnace of His own truth before He could expect others to live what He proclaimed as the will of God.

beliefs, needs and means of a society or societies that are concerned exclusively with worldly or temporal ends, which values, attitudes, beliefs, needs and means are hostile to or obfuscating of that Christ-like love that is the power of God given to the Church to lead people to Eternal Life.

The secularization of the Church, its leadership and laity, is the axial problem that the First World Church must confront and solve if it is to have a renewed priesthood. Secularization is a process that is not decades old but centuries. It is no longer creeping through the First World Church, it is galloping. It also has become, due to literacy and mass media, more and

more noticeable to more and more people — including Catholic men of seminary age.

The pretense can no longer be sustained that the "baptism" of secular methods of operation has served the Church well or even adequately. Can anyone look candidly at the Twentieth Century Church and maintain that the pastoral leadership of that Church is equal to the attacks that evil mounted against Christianity and humanity during the last hundred years? In 1916 as the Christian nations of Europe were savaging each other and justifying it as an acceptable and even noble pursuit for the followers of Jesus, Mahatma Gandhi remonstrates, "I know I am walking on eggs but European Christianity does not understand the Asiatic Jesus." The diabolical monstrosity between 1914 and 1918 that Church leaders in each nation ratified as conforming to the will of God as revealed by Jesus metastasizes into the satanic abomination of 1939 to 1945. Now that this Century of Cain is over, it is known, for example, that Catholics killed more people in war in the Twentieth Century than they had in all the centuries since the time of Jesus. Catholics also have destroyed each other in unprecedented numbers during the last century. Abortion rates among Catholics in Europe and North America are sky high. How much more evidence is needed to verify that the long-term secularizing of the Church and its leadership has been a pastoral calamity? To deny that a secularizing of the Church's leadership ministries has occurred one must walk with blinders on along the road of Twentieth Century Church history from Sarejevo in 1914 to Rwanda in 1994.

Unless the past has been perfect, the future should be different from the past. Archbishop Charles Chaput writes in *Priests for a New Millennium*, "Much of the western world may still appear to be Christian, but it is not — at least not in any real sense of the word 'Christian.'" No reasonable observer of the scene would disagree. But, who is responsible for this situation? It would be hoped that no Catholic would become hostile or resentful toward those who raise the specter of

entrenched secularism lurking beneath so much of what the Church's leadership and laity has done. Evasion is preposterous when salvation is at stake. Holy Scripture and Catholic spirituality are in accord: a sin left unnamed will propagate itself indefinitely with zeal. Denial only assures a future that mirrors the past — and that is outright unacceptable.

The taproot of the spiritually toxic problem of secularization is veiled but not entirely concealed. Worldly leaders are concerned with the survival of their societies or institutions. Secular leaders are denounced or deposed if they fail in promoting the survival of their group and its interest. With a few moments of thoughtfulness it can be perceived how fundamental the issue is that is created when the Church or its leadership is secularized. Why?

If there is one thing bishops or priests never have to worry about, it is the survival of the Church. Survival, which is a primary concern in the realm of the secular, is a non-concern in the realm of the Church. The Church survives, not by superb administration, financial acuity, clever PR, coercion, catering to elites, secrecy, anathemas nor by anything human beings do to assure the survival of worldly institutions. The Church survives for one reason only — Christ guarantees its survival. Jesus Christ has never left the Church. He still lives in the Church and exercises His headship. There is never any need to recruit men to be priests or bishops to oversee the Church's survival. In fact, a superabundance of priests, celibate or married, in a secularized priesthood fighting for the survival of the Church, would be an ignominious failure under the guise of a brilliant success.

All that has been said so far is essential in order to properly comprehend the current vocation crisis in the First World - and its solution. Shepherds (Latin: pastor) of Souls are urgently needed. This is self-evidently the dire reality facing the Church and it is far from a mere matter of quantity. To teach, nurture, lead, encourage, empower, and enflame Catholics to freely chose to struggle to be

Holy as Jesus is Holy, to love as Jesus loves and to build Church communities of Christ-like holiness and love by the means of Christ-like holiness and love is the foremost pastoral duty of a bishop and by extension of his priests. Without bishops and priests who are capable of doing this, it won't get done! It is a work of eternal value and therefore worth giving one's life for. It is a heroic mission, because if such Shepherds are to be more than what St. Paul calls "a gong booming or a cymbal clashing," they must imitate The Good Shepherd, who heroically lays down his life and anything else that is needed in order to bring those in his care to the verdant pastures of Eternal Life.

This is a vocation for which a person must be willing to "burn to ashes and consign to the wind" every trace of secularism. It is a call to which a person can perpetually commit, once he grasps the totality of loss, the ontological gravity contained in Jesus' words, "What good does it do a person to gain the whole world and lose his immortal soul?" (Mt. 16:26, Mk. 8:36) In a world of tragic unseriousness, organized mercilessness and smug indifference to what Jesus teaches, it is a magnificent use of earthly life. A bishop or a priest as exclusively a Shepherd of Souls is a vocation without parallel. However, it makes a secularized interpretation and implementation of these ministries, "so insignificant, it (is) hardly worth a passing thought" - and it is not given a passing thought by most Catholic men of seminary age.

"My business is fidelity. God's business is success," explains Mother Theresa. This truth has to be deep in the heart of Jesus in Gethsemani, as well as, deep in the heart of those Christians Peter speaks to on their way to Circus Maximus. Likewise, it must reside deep in the heart of anyone who wishes to be a Church leader. Note, the saying is not, "My business is success, God's business is fidelity." The Church requires not one "pragmatic" sin, not one inch of departure from the way of Jesus, not one act that is not an act of Christ-like love in order to complete the mission Jesus committed to

Her. The power the Church has been given to fulfill Her mission is the power of God, and that Jesus tells us is the power of love as He makes it visible in time and space. "One act of pure love," teaches St. John of the Cross, "is more valuable to the Church than all other acts combined." St. Paul would concur. (1 Co 13) If a person wants access to a power superior to this, or to a power different from this, then he should not be a bishop, a priest or a seminarian.

For a bishop or a priest, the question always is "Quo Vadis, Domine?" Only those who are interested in following Jesus and hence in undertaking the anonymous martyrdom of a billion micro-acts of Christ-like love toward both friends and enemies should be ordained a bishop or a priest, or apply to be a seminarian. Such a commitment can only be incarnated by dying daily to the secularized self that is nurtured over decades of life. However, this does not mean that a bishop, priest or seminarian is condemned to chronically live on the edge of sadness just because he has renounced the power, gratuities and tacky glory that the kingdoms of the world offer. On the contrary the self-sacrifice is made with magnanimity because it is required to love Christically, which is the sine qua non for proclaiming the Gospel with authority. Proclaiming the Gospel with authority is how a bishop or a priest fulfills his most cherished goal, which is to co-operate with Jesus whose supreme desire is to insure that all who must die "will wake as from a dream into eternal light, and the Son of God shine in their night." (Jn 12:31; 1 Tm 2:4; Tt 2:11)

What a love! What a life! What a vocation! ■

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