

Pope St. Hormisdas and Pope St. Silverius: God's Solution to the Vocation Crisis?

By Rev. Emmanuel Charles McCarthy

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The word vocation as most people know is derived from the Latin verb "vocare," "to call." A vocation is a call from someone to someone to do or to be something. In the context of religion it is a call from God to be married or to be a priest or to be a missionary or to be a parent or to be a doctor, carpenter, artist, etc. But, the primal call from God is the call to be a human being — God calls us out of nothingness to be human before He calls us to anything else. After, and only after this call "to be," does God call the person to be this or to do that.

For a Christian the most glorious post-creation call God can utter is a call to be one with Jesus Christ, to be baptized into Christ, to be a follower of the Son of God, to enter into the Family of Jesus and become by adoption what Jesus is by nature. Why God calls one rather than another to this vocation is beyond the competency of the mind to grasp in this world. In the second paragraph at the beginning of her spiritual classic, *The Story of a Soul*, St. Therese of Lisieux, a Doctor of the Church, ponders this mystery:

Then opening the Holy Gospels my eyes fell upon these words: "And going up a mountain, he called to him men of his own choosing, and they came to him." (St. Mark, chap. III, v. 13) This is the mystery of my vocation, my whole life, and especially the mystery of the

privileges Jesus showered upon my soul. He does not call those who are worthy but those whom He pleases or as St. Paul says: "God will have mercy on whom he will have mercy, and he will show pity to whom he will show pity." So then it is not a question of him who wills nor of him who runs, but of God showing mercy. (Ep. to the Rom., chap. IX, v. 15 and 16)

For the Christian, then, God's call to be a Christian is an act of Divine Mercy — a Mercy on behalf of the individual and on behalf of the world. Sometimes — dare I say most of the time — in discussing vocations and the vocation crisis this

fundamental truth is so ignored or so de-emphasized that it winds-up having almost no operational, motivational, analytical or spiritual significance in the dialogue. Yet, it is the truth of a Christian theology of vocation. In the first sentence of his Encyclical, *Dives in Misericordia*, John Paul II states, "It is God who is rich in mercy, who Jesus Christ has revealed as Father." When the Pope was asked if he had to define Jesus in one word what would that word be, he responded, "Mercy." The entire Christ event begins and operates and culminates in an atmosphere of mercy. A Christian vocation is a call from Mercy itself to "Be merciful as your heavenly Father is merciful." A particular vocation within the Christian vocation is a call to an individual Christian to be merciful as Christ-God is merciful — in this particular place, at this particular time, with these particular talents.

This means that in discerning whether one has a particular vocation or not, e.g. doctor, carpenter, priest, mother, etc. a Christian must not only ask whether he or she is endowed with the complex of human competencies necessary for performing the task, but also, does he or she have the wherewithal to meet the daily requirements of his or her more fundamental vocation, being merciful as Jesus is merciful, while fulfilling his or her particular vocation. If the latter discernment is not truthfully arrived at, then a Christian could easily end up being

a highly competent secular bull in people's fragile spiritual china shops. A vocation that a Christian cannot do in a Christ-like way is a vocation that a Christian does not have.

A chronically mean-spirited or angry or revengeful or greedy or lustful or violent or prestige-seeking or power-craving carpenter or priest is a carpenter or priest who has no vocation to be a carpenter or priest — despite the fact that she or he can build a stairway better than St. Joseph or preach a sermon with the theological eloquence of an angel. Human talent is a necessary ingredient for properly discerning and fulfilling a Christian vocation but it is by no means a sufficient ingredient. Pope Paul VI has said, "The genius of the apostolate is knowing how to love." Pope John Paul II echoing this truth notes "that in human history, which is at the same time the history of sin and death, love must be revealed above all as mercy, and must be actualized as mercy." The primary Christian call from God is to live a Christ-like life of merciful love toward friends and enemies. Vocational discernment enters when a person evaluates whether he can live this baptismal vocation in the context of a particular vocation, e.g. carpenter or priest. The two-fold discernment must be candidly undertaken in order to be morally certain that one is hearing a call from God and not simply a call from his or her own sin-sculptured ego.

When the Church prays for an increase in vocations, it is certainly not praying that God change His mind and call more men to the priesthood than He had intended to call from all eternity. When the Church prays for an increase in vocations it is praying that more of those people whom God calls will say, "Yes!" to His call and that whatever obstacles stand in the way of their responding affirmatively will be removed. The obstacles normally considered as hindrances to accepting a vocation to the priesthood are fear of celibacy, loneliness, fear of commitment, the desire for material comfort, the diminished status of the priest in the world, selfishness, etc.

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But, could it be that the greatest obstacles to the Church being blessed with an abundant number of priests lie elsewhere?

To locate where this elsewhere may be, let us look at the map given to us in our foundation document, *The New Testament*. In St. Paul's First Letter to Timothy (1 Tm. 3:2-5) he says that the bishop (Greek: episcopos)

must not have been married more than once, and he must be temperate, discreet and courteous, hospitable and a good teacher; not a heavy drinker, nor hot-tempered, but kind and peaceable. He must not be a lover of money. He must be a man who manages his own family well and brings his children up to obey him and be well-behaved: how can any man who does not understand how to manage his own family have responsibility for the church of God?

St. Paul is here suggesting standards by which to evaluate a man to determine if he has a vocation to be a bishop. His list of qualities fits quite nicely into the two-tier discernment process discussed earlier. His instruction assumes that the candidate would be or would have been a married man, although the possibility of a single man is not explicitly excluded. However, St. Paul's question, "How can any man who does not understand how to manage

his own family have responsibility for the Church of God?" may be a key to much insight.

For some segments of Catholicism these are "fighting words" even though they are New Testament words. But, is it a mere irrelevancy of salvation history that Jesus chose a married man to be the first pope, that He chose mostly married men to be His apostles, that most bishops in the early churches were married? Mahatma Gandhi taught that "the primary school for "ahimsa" is the family." He defined "ahimsa" as "the same as love in St. Paul." In the family the primary teachers of Christ-like love by word and more importantly by example are the parents. Is St. Paul saying in his letter to Timothy: If you do not know how to effectively teach your own children in a small group like a family how to love as Jesus loves, how are you ever going to be able to do it with a larger group? And, of course, for St. Paul anything without love, e.g. faith, martyrdom, religious oratory, social service, etc. is nothing more than a "gong booming or a cymbal clashing." (1 Co 13)

Almost anyone can teach that type of love that Dostoyevsky writes about in *The Brothers Karamazov* when a character confesses: "I become hostile to people the moment they come close to me. But it has always happened that the more I hate men individually, the more I love humanity." This is not the love a bishop or priest is called to learn, teach, live, nurture and proclaim in his Church. This is the love of the CEO who puts on a fashion show at the Ritz Carlton to aid the poor, but who cannot tolerate being at a table where someone does not know how to hold his fork properly. Perhaps this is the best this CEO can do. So be it. Judging people is not part of the Christian vocation. But, a bishop or a priest is not a CEO. Everything a CEO would do to secure the financial security of his company, a bishop or priest would throw overboard to save a soul. Why? Because the Church's fundamental project in this world is to help people become saints. Anything that interferes with this must be jettisoned. If a CEO fails, some money is lost. If a bishop or priest fails, souls may be lost. A CEO is

accountable only to his stockholders. A bishop or priest is accountable to God. Even when a CEO fails he usually walks away with a “golden handshake”, i.e. a large amount of money in severance pay, stock options, etc. If a bishop or priest fails, if through his fault a sheep is lost, what becomes of the shepherd? I certainly do not know. What I do know is that being a bishop or priest can be a frightening responsibility because of what is at stake for oneself and others. Married or celibate, it is the one vocation a person must not be in if he has not truly received a call from God.

The criteria and the processes by which Catholic bishops are selected today are a better-kept secret than the formula for Coca-Cola. The norms for ordaining a priest are fairly transparent. However it is self-evident that the standard that is powerfully and precisely set forth in The First Epistle of St. Paul to Timothy has been discarded for both ordinations: “He must be a man who manages his own family well....How can any man who does not understand how to manage his own family have responsibility for the Church of God?” Perhaps the standards used today are better than St. Paul’s. We just do not know! But, from the pastoral evidence left to us by the Church’s episcopacy in the Twentieth Century, a respectable doubt can be raised whether the current norms are superior to the Apostle’s.

So the basic questions this article would like to open up are these: Is it possible that God wants a 100,000,000 Catholics to be deprived of Eucharist every Sunday because of lack of priests? Is it possible that He is not calling a sufficient number of men to the priesthood? Is it possible that the principal obstacle impeding men from answering God’s call is not the often repeated “weakness of Christian character today in the First World,” but a spiritually unhealthy, indeed pastorally demeaning, understanding of the Sacrament of Matrimony?

Let me get beyond the first two questions in a sentence. Jesus does not want those He has chosen to be chronically deprived of the Eucharist and

He has not miscalculated regarding the number of men He needs to call in order to have enough priests and bishops. To answer the third question requires a little more than a sentence.

To begin with, how is it possible ontologically, theologically or morally for one Sacrament to be an impediment to another? How can one authentic encounter with the true God through Jesus be a hindrance to another encounter with God through Jesus? How can grace be an obstruction to grace? Is it really a sound witness for the Church to maintain a policy, that unequivocally suggests to the average Christian and non-Christian mind, that the Sacrament of Matrimony so defiles a person that at some mysterious sub-oceanic level he is made less worthy of the Sacrament of Holy Orders? Can all the exalted rhetoric that appears in contemporary Church documents authored by Church leaders on the beauty and glory and goodness and sanctity of the Sacrament of Matrimony, be anything but undercut by these same Church leaders ruling that marriage is an impediment to the priesthood? Is there any practice on earth that more denigrates the sanctity of marriage than proscribing it as a bar to Holy Orders? Is it really the unrefracted Holy Spirit of Truth behind such a stance? To insist that married men be as prepared as celibate men in the areas of spirituality, philosophy, theology, psychology, etc. before receiving Holy Orders is sanity. But, to declare that hundreds of millions of the men in the Church are not worthy to enter into Holy Orders because they have worthily received another Sacrament is something else, and that something else must be prayed over in faith, analyzed by reason and considered in love because much, much more than the maintenance of a rule of Canon Law is at stake here.

My explicit suggestion is that the Church along with praying for an increase of vocations to the sacerdotal priesthood, must also pray diligently to discern if the prohibition on married men entering the presbyterate and the episcopacy is really helping the Barque of Peter navigate as God desires or is it just taking the wind out of its sails. I would suggest further that

this universal discernment be made through the intercession of Pope St. Hormisdas and Pope St. Silverius. Hormisdas is a married pope (d. 523) who became a saint. Silverius (d. 537) is a pope who became a saint and who is the son of Pope St. Hormisdas and his wife. Who in heaven is better situated to intercede on this type of discernment than a pope who was married and is a saint and his son who was pope and is a saint? Of course, it could be argued for this specialized discernment a most appropriate selection of an intercessor would be the married man selected pope by Jesus Himself – St. Peter.

It is essential that the Universal Church pray sincerely and perseveringly for vocations. Without prayer God’s call will not be heard. A din of obstructions will render the chosen all but deaf to the Divine Summons. Without the prayer of the Church, even when God’s call is heard, those called will not have the help they have a right to in struggling to answer Eternity with an inviolable, “Yes!” Without universal and persevering prayer for clear-eyed and clear-headed discernment on the matter of the intrinsic relationship between the Sacrament of Matrimony and the Sacrament of Holy Orders there is no way that the institutional Church can be morally certain that it is not the hidden barrier to more men hearing God’s calls and saying with vigor, “Here I am, Lord.”

No one has a right to be a priest. The call to the priesthood is a gift from God given to the person for the mission of the Church, which is the salvation of souls. It is the free choice of God. However, does anyone have a Divine mission to repudiate someone God has called before the foundation of the world? The understanding today among those who rule the Church is that in the Western Church God is calling absolutely no one who has received the Sacrament of Matrimony to receive the Sacrament of Holy Orders, that God wants the reception of the Sacrament of Matrimony to function as a block to the Sacrament of Holy Orders. Yet, hundreds of millions of ordinary Catholics, through whom the

Holy Spirit of Truth also operates, do not share this understanding, that God intends the Sacrament of Matrimony to be the unclouded, incontestable sign-certain that a person has no vocation to the presbyterate or episcopacy. They do not see why the Sacrament of Matrimony which, to say the least, does not produce a defect in sanctity, should produce a defect under Church law. Sorrowfully, there are hundreds of millions of other Catholics who cannot share weekly in the Bread of Mercy and the Chalice of Salvation because of the current rule and because of the inability of those who espouse this rule to operate in a pastorally effective fashion

within it.

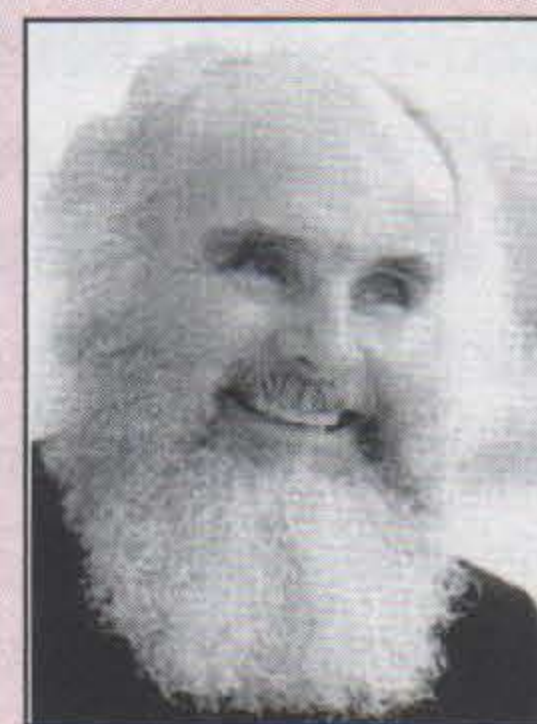
Cognizant of the passionate intensity with which diverse views are held in the Church regarding the solution to the vocation crisis and equally cognizant of the dreadful implications of an erroneous discernment, I would nevertheless recommend, without reservation, to those who govern the Church, the following criterion for properly and rightly fathoming the will of God on this matter:

Be faithful to your primary Christian calling: Be merciful as Christ is merciful. This is the only guide that ultimately will serve you well, serve the Church well and serve humanity well.

Oremus.

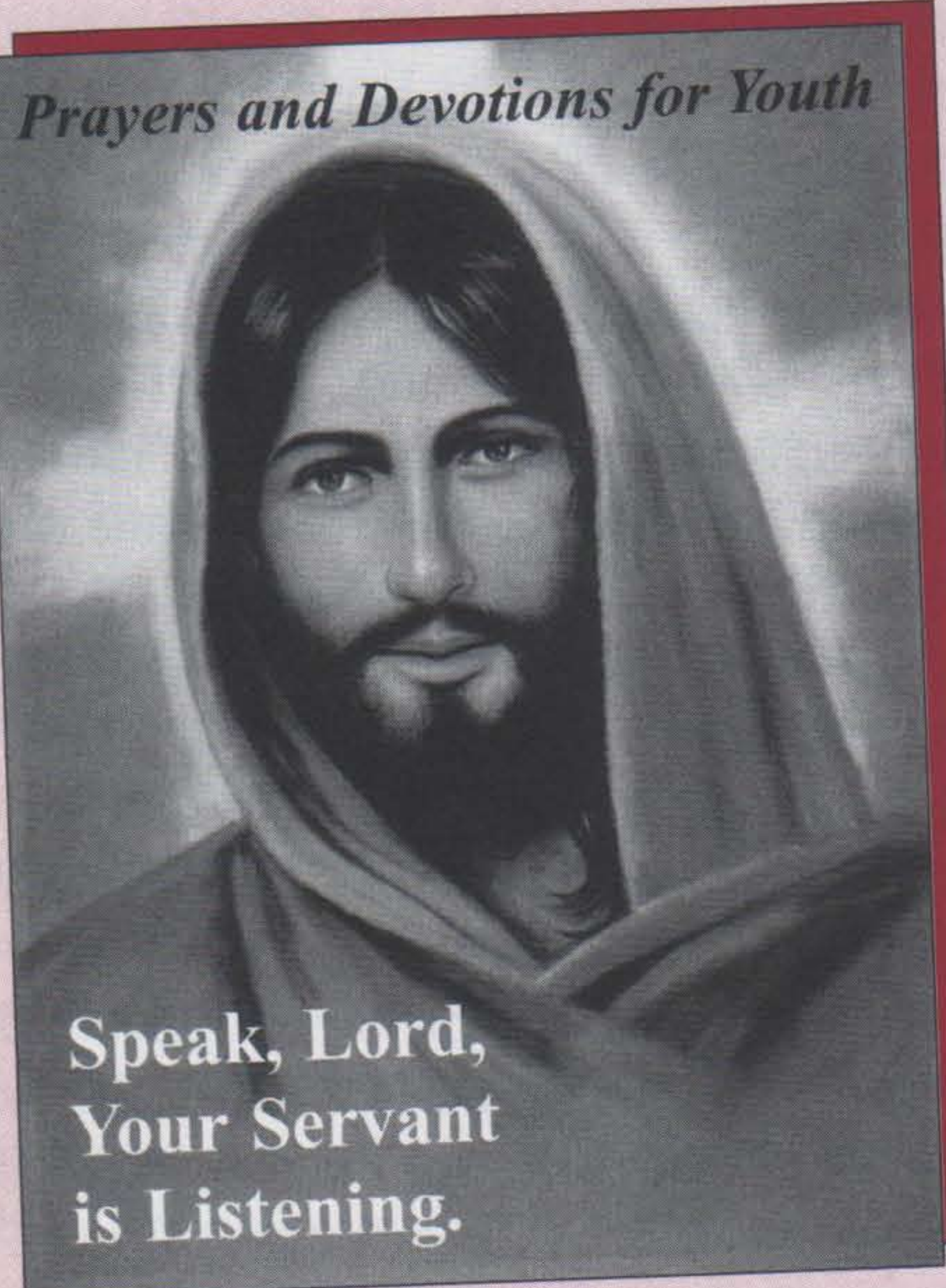
Pope St. Hormisdas and Pope St. Silverius, please pray for a greater acceptance of God's call to the Sacrament of Holy Orders within the Family of Jesus.

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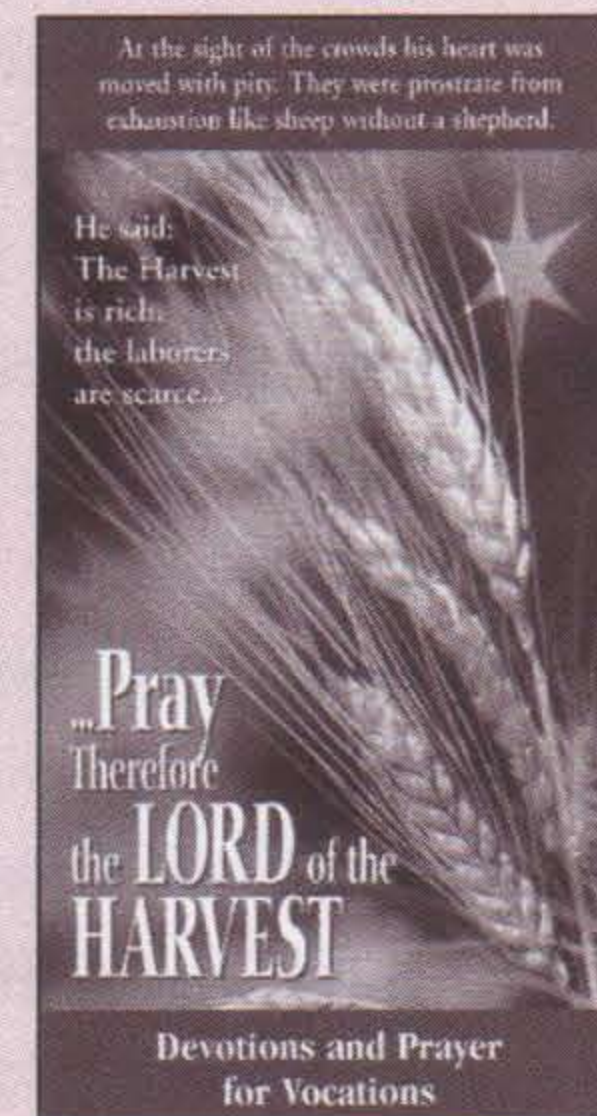
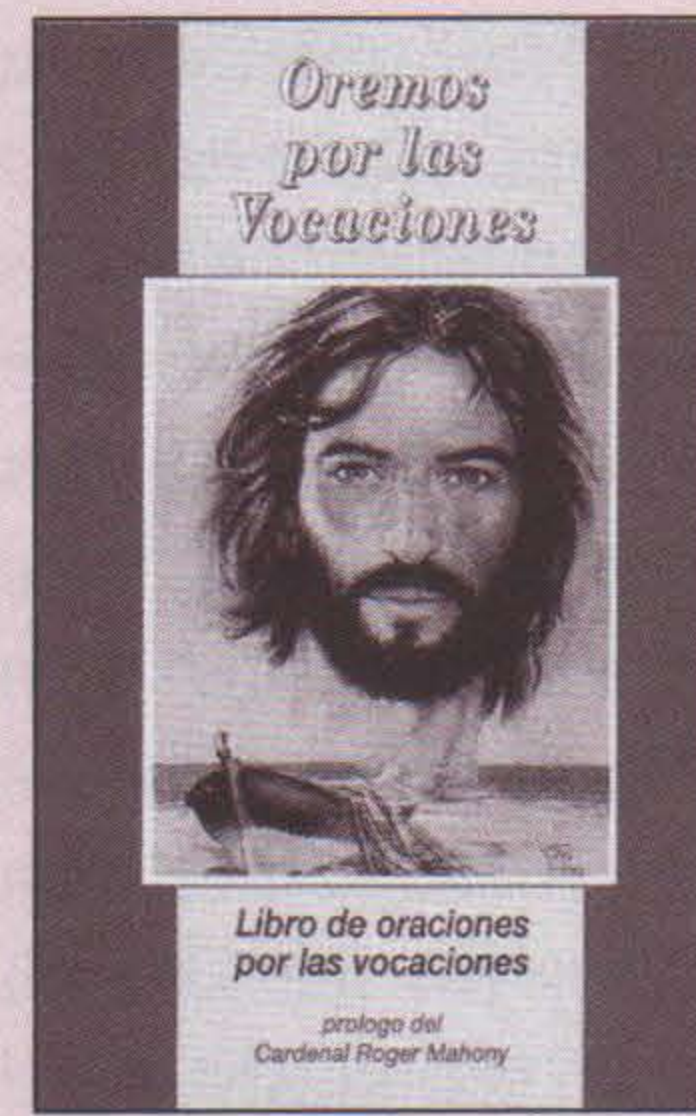
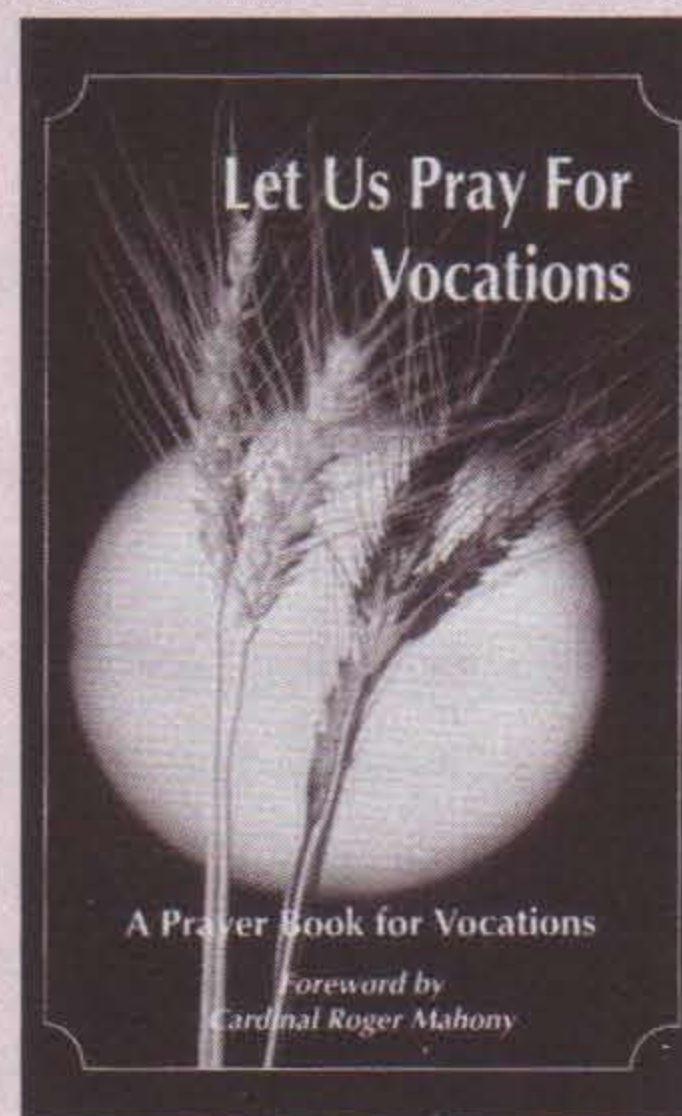
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