

The Evangelical Counsels in the Secular Vocation

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“We have neglected the more basic and universal biblical theme of ‘personal calling’ in favor of priestly and religious vocation. The most courageous thing we will ever do is to *bear humbly the mystery of our own reality.*” [Richard Rohr, *Everything Belongs: the Gift of Contemplative Prayer*]

Below is a short reflection of my own on the evangelical counsels. I have taken it in part from the opening of the talk I had intended to give at the Regional Congress in Houston this past September—the one Hurricane Ike had other plans for. In it I simply raise the question: Are the evangelical counsels in any way relevant to a secular vocation? How so? What significance, if any, do they have for life in this very secular world? Here I raise the question. What would your answer be?

The evangelical counsels are sometimes thought to create a separate category of Christian. They are counsels, intended not for everyone, but only for a select few, those who have the special grace and call to live them. In such a case, you have to wonder what the evangelical counsels can possibly witness to, in the church or in the world, except the *special* nature of the grace and call given to those who live by them. And if that grace and call are not mine, might I not, then, just as well ignore these counsels? Indeed, if I don’t happen to have this special grace and call, then what concern are the evangelical counsels to me?

Thus, if we ask after the sort of witness the practice of the evangelical counsels can give in the world—to Christian or even to non-Christian—the answer would seem to be that living them makes visible a certain exceptional vocation. Those called to live the evangelical counsels are Christians in an exceptional way. We can admire them and hold them in respect. They can inspire us with their dedication and self-sacrifice as they keep a certain ideal of holiness before us. But otherwise, the evangelical counsels have little to tell us about life in *this* world. They are all about dedication to an explicitly religious vocation and lifestyle, not a secular life in the real world, so to speak.

Yes, our relationship with God takes place along certain explicitly religious channels or moments. We go to mass and receive the other sacraments. We have our set times of prayer, attend days of recollection and retreats, practice works of charity, maybe even engage in some kind of regular apostolate. We belong to prayer groups, Bible studies, what have you. But then there is the secular side of our lives. I have in mind here all that shapes the other 90% of our lives, outside of church and devotion, things like—career, marriage, family, neighborhood, lifestyle, shopping habits, eating habits, even driving habits, what we watch on TV, the movies we see, the music we enjoy, the magazines, books, newspapers we read, our attitudes about societal responsibility, about other nations and peoples, about war and peace, wealth and poverty—I could go on. Amid all of this, the secular dimension of our lives, what have the evangelical counsels to say, if anything? Here seems to me the really substantive question for those called to live the evangelical counsels in a secular vocation.

What kind of witness is God asking of those who profess the evangelical counsels and are called to live them out *precisely* in the midst of the secular world?

The evangelical counsels do define a vocation, of course. Or at least the public profession of them does. One commits oneself by a public promise to strive to live a life shaped by certain ideals and practices, among which are, crucially, the evangelical counsels as understood in a particular interpretation or application—namely, in the case of a Carmelite Secular, as set forth in your *Constitutions*. In this sense the evangelical counsels do set one apart as possessing a special vocation.

Yet the fact that one lives the evangelical counsels as part of a vocation does not mean that they are not relevant and perhaps deeply significant for life in this world and the first task we all have in God's all-embracing love—which is the task of our secular existence—namely, the task of living humanly, spiritually, morally good lives. In fact, something of this sort must surely be true especially for those called to a secular vocation, since the significance of that vocation lies in living out one's relationship with God in Christ precisely in the secular world. The evangelical counsels must have the potential of giving witness in the world to something spiritually meaningful and, indeed, life-giving for any and everyone. They must have something to do with living fully God's intention for all of us, not just for some, the chosen few. What, then, might that universal significance be?