



**"Here I am,  
for you called me."  
(1 Samuel 3,5)**

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Pastoral letter  
of Bishop Peter Kohlgraf of Mainz,  
Lenten season 2022

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Herzlichen Dank für alle Hilfe bei den Übersetzungen!

Sisters and Brothers in the diocese of Mainz,

"Here I am, for you called me" (1 Sam 3,5)

This verse from the first book of Samuel opens my pastoral letter for this year's Lenten season. Young Samuel practices his service in the temple under the supervision of the priest Eli. This was a time when "words of the LORD"(1 Sam 3,1) were rare. It requires old and experienced Eli to help Samuel understand God's call as a personal word to him. Eventually, Samuel has to give his answer and instead of a one-time commitment, Samuel puts a request before God: "Speak, for your servant is listening." (1 Sam 3,10). In the course of the story, we realise that his 'listening' is lifelong and active: "As Samuel grew up, the Lord was with him and let none of his words fall to the ground. " (1 Sam 3,19)

The following thoughts might encourage you to expect God and his call. God talks to us. This is self-evident in the texts of the scriptures where a personal God who enters into a relationship with men is presupposed. God acts as "thou", as a counterpart for us. He is interested in every individual and approaches him or her with a concrete and unique calling. God's talking is as unique as any of ours. There is an experience of God's talking that can change life's direction radically from one moment to the next.

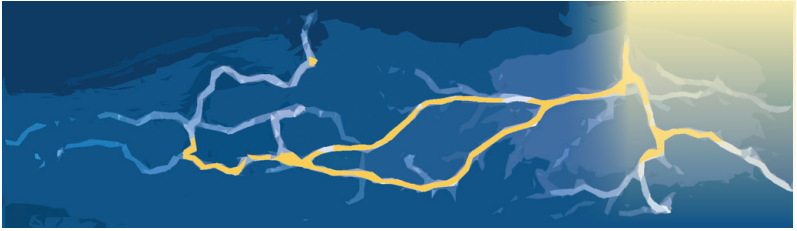
## Unexpected vocation

The most prominent example of an unexpected calling is that of the Apostle Paul (Acts 9, 1-22). He is a loyal expert of the law and zealous in his faith. He goes so far as to persecute those new followers of Jesus Christ who recognise him as the Messiah. He even witnesses and approves of the killing of Stephanus (Acts 8, 1). We know the course of the story: On his way to Damascus, he is hit by a light and hears a voice asking: "Why do you persecute me?" The voice is that of Jesus himself (Acts 9, 5). Paul changes his life in this moment. It is not only through Acts that we know of this radical conversion. Paul himself recounts it in detail in his letter to the communities in Galatia (Gal 1, 10-24). One thing is clear to him: He is not changing his actions after a long inner struggle or set of moral questions. He is rather struck by the light and the voice of Jesus, distinctive and inescapable. It is difficult to put this experience into words, but this is a unique calling: "Outside Damascus, we did not see a tortured man being raised, but rather a self-righteous man being thrown down by the self-revelation of Jesus."<sup>1</sup> From this moment on, his entire preaching is based on the mercy of God in Jesus Christ, who calls sinners not because of their religious or moral achievements, but because of grace. Paul's theology is based on calling and experience, not on speculation.

Others in the long story of God and his people report something similar and this does not just apply, as one might suspect, to religiously sensitive individuals. I'd like to remind you of an example from more recent times: French journalist and

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1 Ernst Dassmann, Kirchengeschichte I, Stuttgart, Berlin, Köln 1991, 48.



essayist André Frossard (1915–1995) wrote about his faith experience and vocation.<sup>2</sup> One day in 1935 at 5:10pm, the young man enters a church in Paris to wait for a friend. He refers to himself as a religious sceptic and atheist or even as religiously absolutely indifferent. Five minutes later he leaves the church with an indescribable experience of joy. He gets baptised and becomes a confessed Catholic. It is important for him to stress the fact that there had not been anything to prepare him for this experience. The divine love struck and called him freely and suddenly.

Sceptics might not be convinced by either of these experiences. They might look into psychological explanations for these religious developments. I am afraid that such an explanation might fail in these contexts. Paul and André Frossard are obviously not mentally ill and both emerge from the experience of been called as strong personalities. As a faithful Christian, I can only assert that God talks to us – direct, unmistakable and distinctive. God may only do this since he is a living person, a “thou” and not a construct of the God-searching men nor a projection of unfulfilled wishes. It is realistic to take him into account. No atheist should be too sure of their rejection of God. But neither does the faithful ‘own’ God. God approaches

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2 André Frossard, *Gott existiert. Ich bin ihm begegnet*, Augsburg 2013 (deutsche Erstveröffentlichung 1970).

the individual freely. He is never an instrument of men, but rather he is the one who keeps us in his view.

## **Growing vocation**

There are other experiences of vocation. In many texts of the scriptures, we read about people hearing God's voice. Let us think of Abraham and Sarah, our ancestors in faith. God calls them from their home into an unknown future, but with a wonderful promise. We do not know how Abraham hears God's voice. I cannot preclude that it might have been a long process of praying, inner struggle, and gradually growing certainty. His wife will have played a decisive role. This is another way of God's talking and probably the one most common for believers to reflect and decide upon their own vocation. However, once again, the searching and wrestling happens in the context of a personal relationship with the living God who addresses each person individually and thus requires a personal answer.

## **Concealed Vocation**

A third form of being close to God seems important to mention, since it is for many people the overwhelming experience of God. Even for people who believe, God might conceal himself and stays in the dark. A few years ago, Mother Teresa's diaries were published. She writes that she experienced God for many years of her life as obscurity, either as a deep belonging, but also as someone who kept her in inner darkness. She associated her faith with a deep sadness, even depression. This obscurity, however, was for her the motivation to turn to the suffering people in their life's darkness – yet another form

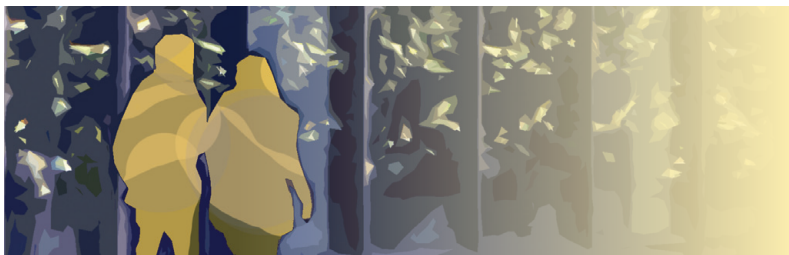


of vocation. When the calling happens in God's freedom, we should not apply a system after our own liking. We might have to take into account God's freedom and his calling, and his silence. In short: God has his own idea for everybody, a unique melody of life. We are called to listen to it and to play it. If God is „thou“, then every person is his counterpart that he cannot do without. This constitutes the greatness and dignity of every individual.

The story of Samuel resonates in us, since the words of the Lord seem as rare today as they were in Samuel's time. It is helpful to acknowledge that there will always be such times. Vocations cannot be made and the calling of God cannot be forced. His seeming absence must be endured in faith. And yet, we are reminded by the Second Vatican Council that every individual has their own unique calling, a vocation to true personhood (*Gaudium et Spes* 3). Every person is called to build a world of sisters and brothers. Irrespective of whether we identify as Christians or not, this calling is the basis for our personhood, because every human is made in the image of God.

## Vocations in the community of the church

Baptism explicitly calls the individual into a relationship with Christ in the community of the church. Not many are aware today that baptism is a vocation: Receiving the sacrament is a personal answer to an individual calling. When we notice the decline of the people's church in Germany and in that context a reduced number of baptismal sacraments, we might see this as a chance to find a new understanding of baptism as a conscious decision and answer in faith.



The community of the faithful – the church – is questioned today, often because of its own failures. However, just as in the times of Samuel and the priest Eli, we need people who can be companions to those seeking their vocation and those who are trying to understand God's voice in their lives. This is the deepest sense of a community of the faithful: to listen together and interpret God's will in the signs of the time. The community needs to be interpreter, companion, and dialogue partner for the individual in their quest.

Three years ago, we implemented the 'Christian year of orientation' in the diocese of Mainz.<sup>3</sup> Young people between the age of 18 and 25 share their lives for one year, working in

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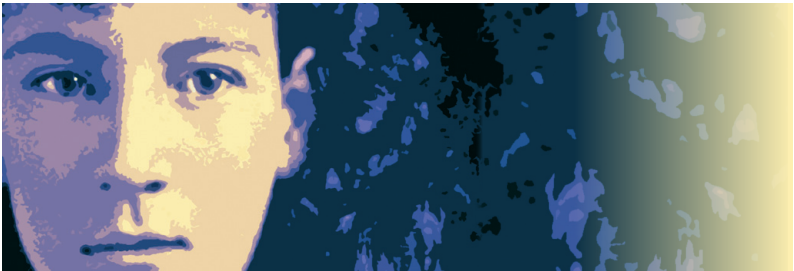
<sup>3</sup> More at: [www.coj-mainz.de](http://www.coj-mainz.de)



fields of pastoral or social professions, embarking on their own individual paths of vocation with personal and spiritual guidance. This is just one example of how we can accompany and encourage individual vocations. We use the term of charisms today, the gifts of the spirit that are essential for the church. This does not just relate to talents, but more to spiritual gifts that help everybody, and not just the individual, to achieve fulfillment. If we are searching for the meaning of vocation, it is important to understand it as a lifelong quest. The word of God may not "fall to the ground", as it is written of Samuel. It should, however, work and remain alive in every one of us.

### **Special vocations**

Besides the vocation to personhood and Christ, we also know the vocation to a special service in the church. The prayer for vocation must not wane. We cannot, however, keep silent about one issue that we face today: A majority of people cannot accept that women are categorically denied the vocation to a sacramental service. The theological reasons behind it are not understood nor accepted. This conflict occupies me as bishop, and it is by no means only a German issue. Without trying to

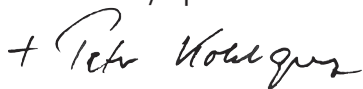


play the issue down, I would like to point out that other forms of vocation are by no means inferior to the sacramental office.

Let us strengthen people in their own vocations! Let us encourage them to invest in a humane society and in a church that listens to God's word and remains empathetic. This is the aim of the pastoral process in the diocese of Mainz and also that of other synodal processes in Germany and worldwide. We are about to enter the second phase of our pastoral process and are facing the tasks of creating new parishes and church spaces. I hope that we will inspire the new quests for vocations that God has called for in every individual. As the church of Mainz, I would like to encourage everybody to assist and accompany individual callings. Vocation can only be understood in community, never in isolation. Thus, the church remains a necessary sacrament – sign and instrument – for the discovery and realisation of vocation.

“Here I am, for you called me”- during this Lenten period, I want to invite everybody to hear their calling and use their charisms. Let us take God and his voice into account but let us also endure his silence! In all this, I invite you to bring your own personal answer and your charisms – for a humane society and a benevolent church.

In these weeks, the triune God may bless us – the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.



+ Peter Kohlgraf  
Bishop of Mainz

Mainz, First Lenten Sunday 2022



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