

take the whole world to enter upon this work now. On the other hand, when I regard him who called me, I would not take the whole world not to have begun it."⁹

The Madness of the Call

No matter how the call comes, it ascends to occupy the primacy of all of one's desires and goals. For those who hear the call, there is no other alternative. So compelling is the call that it has sent marching across the centuries an endless pilgrimage of those who—leaving family, fame or fortune—surrender everything to the call and the Caller. Those who do not understand may think this vocation is nice or comfortable or a waste of good talent, but for those who have heard the call it is the Pearl of Great Price, for which one joyfully sells everything. Is this a madness? Yes! There is a madness in the gospel that has to be lived with—when God calls. But for those mad ones who hear and accept the call, there could be no finer adventure.

Many believe God must have been mad to have called us. There are times when we believe we must have been mad to accept. The madness of the call is that it most often takes us along paths we do not prefer, and assigns duties for which we feel most ill-equipped. Gideon felt he was the weakest family member in the weakest tribe; Paul wanted to be a young Jewish scholar, not an apostle; Augustine did not want to be an overworked and overwrought bishop; Xavier wanted only to be with his beloved guide, Ignatius, yet at a moment's notice he was sent to India and never returned to Ignatius again; Henry Martin sacrificed the intellectual life of which he was fitted for the missionary life to which he was called.¹⁰

There is more than madness in the call; there is also paradox. Why must the call, so faithfully embraced, be so excruciatingly tested? Why isn't one yes enough? Does God, like a lover, yearn to hear our acceptance of his proposal over and over again? Or are the tests for our sake? Are not all the trials and doubts that dog the trail of the called one—and the coming out of them—but a sure and certain sign that God is with us? And is not new vision born out of the ashes of our disappointments? Is not, says James E. Dittes, "durable, vital ministry, recalled out of the debris of ministry?"¹¹

The call to a vocation of ministry encompasses all that we have and all that we are. It is more than performance and activity, however noble and grand our accomplishments may be. It is a call to utter obedience, which "can be a total, unconditional, joyous abandonment to our one King and Master: or it can be a school for cowardice and an *a priori* rejection of the thing that costs a [person] dearest: personal responsibility. . . . Nothing else matters any more and we ought to burn all our boats behind us. There is no going back."¹²

The call beckons. No matter how tough the situation, no matter what is done or said, no matter how intense the trial—one must obey. It is one thing to *begin* well. It is quite another to *finish* well. Only the one who has learned to obey and follow Christ—in all things and to the very end—will finish well.

Ultimately, the greatest bewilderment of the call prevails for the leader who remains faithful, who gives himself or herself to the demands of the call without reserve, only to realize that all along the way it is not our *work* that God desires, but *us*. Somewhere along the way the faithful leader hears God saying, "Well done, good and faithful servant. Now, I don't want your activity anymore; I want *you*."

The call is once and forever. But our commitment to it is often tested. Perhaps no one can give oneself completely to God in one grand moment. We give ourselves to God little by little—as we come to discover our deepest longings and temptations. We may be always thoroughly committed, but only to the extent that we know ourselves *at that moment*. As leaders, we are formed and reformed over a lifetime. All along the way, through our successes and our failures, our victories and defeats, our saintliness and sinfulness, our acceptance and resistance, God is at work to make us what we are, but not yet.

Our call to leadership is a formation process, through which God uses all of life's experiences to sharpen and expand our leadership capabilities. Far from condemning our failures and temptations, God uses them as grist for the mill in the formation process. In the mystery of God, our resistance and failures are essential to our formation. Thus Julian of Norwich asserts sin as honor and necessity, not impeding God's goodness; for the pain of our sin stabs us awake to our to-
wardness and our need to rely even more on God's love and grace.¹³