



# CALLINGS

A NEWSLETTER ABOUT VOCATIONS

## Jesuit spreads God's grandeur through the theatre

**"Lord...the talents of artists reflect your splendor, may their work give the world hope and joy"**

Liturgy of the Hours, Tuesday Evening Prayer, Week III

By Fr. George Drance, SJ

When people hear that I am both a priest and an actor, I am puzzled by one of their most common questions: You mean they let you do that? I'm never quite sure how to respond.

On the one hand is the idea that the theatre is so removed from God that a priest has no place in it; on the other hand is the idea that the Church is so rigid that it has no room for an actor. The issue does have some historical precedent. Overall, however, the history of the Church shows that the two are intimately related.



FR. GEORGE DRANCE, SJ (left) REVIEWS LINES WITH CLASSMATES AT COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY IN NEW YORK WHERE HE STUDIED FOR A MASTER OF FINE ARTS IN 1997.

Personally, I've come to see how being a priest makes me a better actor and how being an actor makes me a better priest. The skills required to be an actor have made my ministry effective, and the prayerful sensitivity of my priestly life has made my acting richer. This connection between these two areas of my ministry has been a real experience of St. Ignatius' ideal of "finding God in all things."

The theatre, as we know it, owes its very existence to the Church. After the barbarian invasions destroyed the Greek and Roman

theatres, there was no theatre in the West until the year 970. It came about in Church as part of the Easter matins, and a bishop produced it! Ethelwold of Winchester wrote stage directions in the margins of his breviary that made the Easter gospel come to life. And with this, the theatre was reborn after almost five centuries. Since then, the connection between the Church and the theatre has been maintained.

The medieval mystery and miracle plays, the morality plays of England, the autos sacramentales of Spain, and the Jesuit school theatre (which fostered such talents as Moliere and Calderon de la Barca), are all testimony to this "ecclesio-theatrical" tradition reaching all the way to the Enlightenment.

As a teenager, my passion for the arts came to me around the same time as my passion for Christ. Growing up in a devout family, I had always been attracted to the great gift that we have in Christ's sharing our human struggle: becoming human, vulnerable to all that we are vulnerable to, even death. Christ's power to transform our vulnerabilities and free us from death and the fear that comes with it inspired me.

But in my beginnings as a young actor, I felt →

→ FROM PAGE 1 the work I did in theatre was a similar work. Actors enter into the human struggle of life in the characters they portray. Responsible theatre offers hope and possibility, a hope that only comes from going beyond ourselves, which for me always pointed to Christ.

I was successful as a student actor, but felt that the focus on myself needed to develop my craft was making me a selfish person. I wanted to change that. Through meeting other Jesuits in the arts, I was able to see how they put their gifts to use for the service of others and for the love of God. It seemed like a perfect match for me and I began a process of spiritual direction, which led me to recognize and follow my calling.

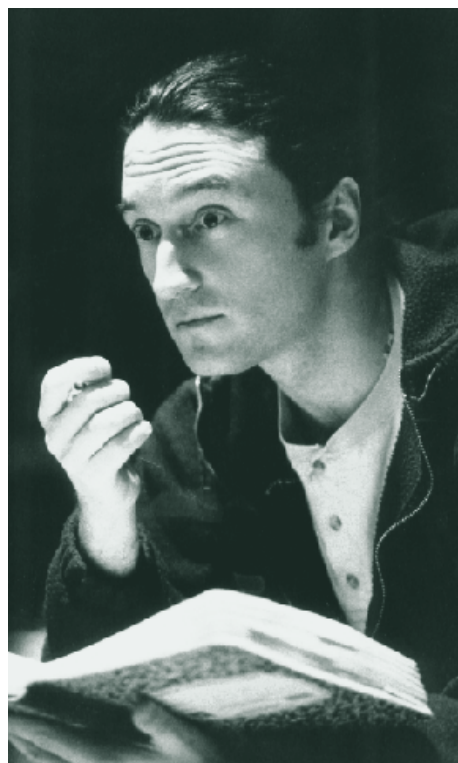
Ignatius' own journey in his autobiography inspired me to place my journey in God's guiding hands. The spiritual insights Ignatius received resonated with longings that I experienced both personally and in the characters I had portrayed. Becoming more inspired by the adventure with God that was opening before me, I was ready to give up the theatre. But God had other plans.



FR. GEORGE DRANCE, SJ DIRECTS THE CAST DURING A DRESS REHEARSAL OF *LIFE IS A DREAM* PERFORMED LAST YEAR AT MARQUETTE UNIVERSITY.

In my own work as an actor I have been inspired by many who have seen the theatre as a mission to serve God's people. In fact, John O'Malley, SJ in his book *The First Jesuits* considers the early Jesuit theatre as a ministry of the word. Fr. Jack Warner, artistic director of Teatro La Fragua in El Progreso, Honduras, has been working to continue to bring the Good News to the people of Honduras for the past 20 years, and he uses theatre to do so. "Art and religion spring from the same human roots.... They spring from the need to be in touch with something beyond us... something beyond the littleness we feel as human beings. And to me, at least in this context, I find no conflict in being priest and director, because the one and the other are working towards the same thing: to make people realize themselves."

One of the most awe-inspiring experiences of having worked with Fr. Warner was hearing an elderly woman speak at Mass when these young Honduran actors presented the Gospel. She said, "I have been coming to church all my life, but today I have heard the Gospel for the first time!"



**"Through meeting other Jesuits in the arts, I was able to see how they put their gifts to use for the service of others and for the love of God. It seemed like a perfect match for me..."**

There have been moments in my own experience of the theatre where God's work was just as clear. In a recent production of the 17th century allegory *Life is a Dream*, the subject of the drama is the creation of the universe and the redemption of humanity through the saving action of Christ. But through the power of image, the author tells the story in a way that affects the audience on many levels: intellectual, emotional, and experiential. The text interweaves scripture, Church doctrine, and mystical experience with theatrical dialogue, situation, and spectacle.

One Jesuit attending commented that it was like having four years of theology in one night. A theatre director who attended told me that he sees theatre almost every night of the week but had never been so moved by another piece of theatre to re-examine his own life and ponder again questions that he had already given up on. A student involved said it allowed her to bring God back to her art and offer her art to God. And a Jesuit artist told me that it changed the way he prays.

In my studies of the theatre there are moments where I can tell that the techniques employed by the actor come out of spiritual experiences. The basic exercises an actor does to develop the skills of observation and to call upon the memory of these observations are very close to the examination of conscience in The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius. The ways in which the imagination is employed by the actor to recreate a moment on stage is strikingly similar to Ignatius' application of the senses, also part of The Spiritual Exercises.

The person praying is asked to use the imagination to place him or herself in the scriptural scene and, through contemplation, to experience the reality of it rather than just thinking about the idea. The theatrical insistence that the actor remain in the present moment is like Ignatius asking the person praying not to rush from one point to the next, but to remain wherever there is spiritual fruit that profits the soul.

Exercises we do as actors to uncover our own patterns on stage often show me similar patterns in my prayer. As a Jesuit and a priest, I feel very blessed to have the artistic traditions of the theatre and the spiritual traditions of the Church come together in my ministry. The early Jesuits were clever in seeing how important it was "to teach as well as to delight." Hundreds of years later, one of the most influential figures in the theatre, Berthold Brecht, said that theatre must "teach but also entertain."

Pope John Paul II's letter to artists written on Easter Sunday 1999 encourages artists to promote a sense of wonder and enthusiasm for God's grandeur in the universe and in the human person. He writes: "May your art help to affirm the true beauty which, as a glimmer of the Spirit of God, will transfigure matter, opening the human soul to the sense of the eternal." •

## ANSWERING THE CALL

# What is a "vocation" anyway?

Fr. Warren Sazama, SJ

DIRECTOR OF VOCATIONS – WISCONSIN PROVINCE



A middle view comes out of my Jesuit, Ignatian tradition, which sees God as actively and personally involved in each of our lives. God speaks to us directly in our hearts, minds, and souls - through our thoughts and feelings, and through our inner movements and desires. However, not all of our inner thoughts, movements, and desires come from God. Therefore we have to discern which are from God and which are not. God is engaged in a life-long dialog with us. Our role in the dialog is to pay attention, listen, and try to respond.

In this Ignatian view we discover what God is calling us to by paying attention to what gives us the most life, energy and joy. Some might have a passion for art or science, or for being a teacher or actor. For others, having a family and raising children is their deepest desire. For others priesthood and/or religious life might be their deepest passion and desire.

So a vocation is literally "God's call" - a call that we hear by listening to God's voice within us as God speaks through our inner and outer experiences. Listening to God's call is an interactive process - a dialog - between God and us.

If we look at the major, archetypal calls in Scripture, we see this pattern born out. Whether it is Abraham, Moses, Samuel, Jeremiah, Mary, Jesus, or Peter, they all somehow hear God's voice, often in the interior of their hearts and sometimes through external experiences. Regardless of how they hear God's voice, each of these models from Scripture responds generously and openly. After a time, their calls seem obvious and literally define who they are. But this is not the case initially.

At first each one responds with confusion and doubt. Each one's first reaction is a variation on "Not me, Lord!" "I'm too young" (Jeremiah) or "I have a stutter" (Moses) or "I'm too sinful" (Peter and Isaiah) or "I

Since Vatican II we often hear it said that we all have a vocation - but what is a vocation anyway? I've thought a lot about this question since I've been vocation director. It's not a "thing" inside of us. Nor is it a "thing" outside of us that we search to find as on a treasure hunt. Sure, it means "God's call" to us, but that's merely a translation of the Latin root *vocare* (to call).

In trying to understand what a vocation truly is or what we're actually doing when we search to discover our vocation in life, it might be helpful to look at two extreme positions. As my novice director used to tell us, the truth is often somewhere in the middle.

One extreme position is that God has a blueprint for each of us. To discover our vocation in life is to figure out and follow that blueprint. If we deviate from God's plan for us we deviate from God's will, and we're lost. Most of us today see this model for understanding one's vocation in life as a bit rigid and implausible.

The other extreme is that God's call to all of us is the same - to be united with God and to use our gifts in service of our neighbor. The particulars of how we do this are up to us. In this view, God doesn't really care how we do it as long as we do it. This view makes God too remote and uninvolved, almost uncaring. This is certainly not the God in the Judeo-Christian Scriptures who is personally active in our lives and our history.

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haven't had sex, so how can I bear a son?" (Mary). But as they try to listen attentively, and respond generously and openly, they eventually discover what God is calling them to. And the more deeply they respond over time, the clearer their sense of having been called becomes. They develop a genuine, profound sense of vocation.

So when we say that we all have a vocation in life, what this means is that God speaks to each of us in a personal way and has a preference for us. If we listen and respond, we grow to possess a sense of clarity about what our vocation in life is.

It's a truly wonderful, joyful experience to grow vocationally aware in this way. At the same time, it's important to remember that one's initial intuition about a vocation rarely is accompanied by much peace and clarity. Usually it is accompanied by doubt and confusion - perhaps even anxiety. Staying faithful to the conversation with God in time brings a growing sense of clarity about what's right for you - what will bring you peace and joy.

If you're presently discerning your calling and are experiencing uncertainty, trust that God is speaking to you and that, if you try to listen and respond, you'll find your way.

Enjoy the journey. May God bless your every step! •

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## UP COMING EVENTS

### PLEASE NOTE:

There is no charge for any of these events, and we are happy to help men with travel costs to and from these events if needed. Please contact Fr. Warren Sazama, SJ, vocation director for the Wisconsin Province, if you are interested in any of these events.



### SHARE THE JOY

Please join us as Patrick Malone, SJ is ordained to the priesthood. The Most Reverend Rembert Weakland, O.S.B., Archbishop of Milwaukee will be the ordaining prelate. You are cordially invited to attend our Ordination Mass at 7:30 p.m., Friday, June 8th at The Church of Gesu, 1145 W. Wisconsin Avenue Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

### ALSO:

On Saturday, June 9 celebrate the First Mass of Fr. Malone at Marquette High School, 3401 W. Wisconsin Ave., Milwaukee at 10 a.m. Use the main entrance between 33rd and 34th on Michigan St. Then on Sunday, June 16 he will celebrate the Mass of Thanksgiving at IHM parish, 1550 Summit Ave., St. Paul, Minnesota at 6 p.m.



Come attend the Vows Mass for John Farrell, SJ (left) and Tom Neitzke, SJ at 10 a.m. Saturday, August 11, 2001 at Church of St. Luke, 1079 Summit Ave., in St. Paul, Minnesota. A reception will follow the Mass. All are welcome.

## Ongoing Vocation Discernment Groups

We have three discernment groups for men considering the Jesuits in Milwaukee, Omaha, and the Twin Cities. For information about the group in Milwaukee, contact Fr. Tim Lannon, SJ at Marquette University (414-288-6386, timothy.lannon@marquette.edu). For the group in Omaha, contact Fr. Dick Hauser, SJ at Creighton University (402-280-3010, hausersj@creighton.edu). For information about the Twin Cities group, contact Fr. Peter Etzel, SJ (651-644-9041, etzel@macalester.edu).

### MAY 31 - JUNE 9

DISCERNMENT RETREAT AT THE CREIGHTON UNIVERSITY RETREAT CENTER in Griswald, Iowa. This will be an 8-day individually directed, silent retreat based on the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius.

### JUNE 8

ORDINATION OF PAT MALONE, SJ in Milwaukee.

### JUNE 22 - AUG 5

SIX WEEKS A JESUIT PROGRAM in New York City. This is an opportunity for a more in-depth experience of Jesuit life. You'll live in a Jesuit Community with other men considering the Jesuits and working in a Jesuit ministry.

### JUNE 23-27

COME AND SEE VOCATIONS DAYS at our Jesuit vacation spot on the Chain of Lakes near Waupaca, Wisconsin. You can travel to central Wisconsin via the Appleton airport or by driving. Either way arrive in the early evening on Saturday and travel back home on Wednesday morning. The days will be a chance to learn about Jesuit life from young Jesuits in training as well as a few more experienced Jesuits in the relaxed atmosphere of the beautiful lakes of central Wisconsin.

### AUGUST 11

NOVICE VOW MASS in Minnesota.

### OCT 5-7

WEEKEND AT THE NOVITIATE in St. Paul, MN. This weekend is intended only for "late stage" discerners who are seriously considering applying in the next year or two.

### OCT TBA

Come and See weekend at the Jesuit House of Studies at Loyola U. in Chicago. This weekend experience is for all inquirers who are interested in learning more about Jesuit life and training and getting to meet young Jesuits in training.

### DISCERNMENT RETREATS

June 11-20  
June 25 - July 4  
July 16-25  
August 2-11  
September 2-7

All are 8-day retreats except for the 4-day September retreat. They are individually directed, silent discernment retreats based on the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius at our Jesuit Retreat House in Oshkosh, Wisconsin. These tend to fill up early, so let me know as soon as possible if you're interested.