

# Vocation Goes to the Movies

BY JILL PELAEZ BAUMGAERTNER

**At a time of rampant individualism in popular culture, how surprising it is to find that occasionally Hollywood gets the idea of vocation right in films like *THE APOSTLE*, *DEAD MAN WALKING*, or *WISE BLOOD*. These films direct us toward God the Caller and link vocation to our struggle with obedience and acceptance of God's forgiveness.**

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**I**n my experience on the Lutheran-Evangelical frontier, as a Lutheran teaching at Wheaton College, “vocation” is a word heard more frequently on the Lutheran side of the hyphen than on the Evangelical. My evangelical students are much more likely to talk about “trying to follow God’s will for their lives.” While that may sound similar to the concept of vocation as God’s call, it actually puts all of the emphasis on our efforts to discern and almost none at all on God’s actual call. Vocation for the Lutheran involves more than occupation and more than human response. As Marc Kolden defines it,

It refers above all to the whole theater of personal, communal, and historical relationships in which one lives. The eschatological situation of struggle and ambiguity, the sense of the need for the Christian’s sinful self to be put to death within and by the demands of daily life in vocation, the choice involved in life lived in the freedom of being called by Christ, and the way in which this view holds creation and redemption together if it is to make any sense at all—these themes give a most promising basis for understanding Luther’s position. They should make it possible to include both his radical emphasis on Christian freedom and his insistence on the depth of human sinfulness, one or the other of which is often muted in discussion of vocation.<sup>1</sup>

Given the rampant individualism in a culture in which this complex understanding of vocation does not exist, how surprising it is that occasionally Hollywood gets it right in films like *The Apostle*, *Dead Man Walking*, or *Wise Blood*. The directors of these films give every evidence that they know the theological traditions that direct us toward God the Caller and link vocation to our struggle with obedience and acceptance of God's forgiveness.

### **FORGIVENESS AND OBEDIENCE**

Earlier artists were even more likely to get it right. The seventeenth-century metaphysical poets, for example, wrote graphically about the Christian's struggle with submission and obedience—in particular with how to get the self out of the way in responding to vocation, which they would have broadly defined as God's call. John Donne's efforts are legendary. He desperately wanted a position at court, but his elopement with Anne More cut off his chances for political appointment. Finally, after years of poverty and dependence on the generosity of family and friends, Donne acceded to James I's urgings to enter Holy Orders in the Church of England. Donne's initial motives for forsaking his Catholic roots and giving in to the exigencies that poverty presented to his growing family are suspect; what is clear, however, is that he became in time one of England's greatest preachers, leaving at his death ten volumes of sermons which are arguably as interesting for the patient reader as his extraordinary poetry. It is as a poet that most contemporary readers encounter Donne, but it was as a preacher that he found his lasting vocation. Notably, in his poetry, especially his *Holy Sonnets*, Donne often seeks God's violent intercession in his life and when it does not occur, he feels trapped and betrayed. "Batter my heart, three person'd God" he pleads, but there is rarely any indication that God responds to him with the violence he seeks. There is, however, every indication in Donne's biography that God pursued him until finally he could resist no longer.

Another metaphysical poet, George Herbert, also responded to the call to become an Anglican priest. Poised for a brilliant political career, he chose, instead, to become a pastor at Bemerton, a tiny parish outside Salisbury. The common misconception about Herbert is that his response to God's call was more settled and less tortured than Donne's. All one has to do is look carefully at his poem "The Collar," however, to discern serious spiritual struggle. The poem's title does not refer to the clerical collar, which was not yet in use when Herbert wrote his poem, but to the general image of restraint. Submerged puns on "choler" (anger) and "caller" also provide a more informed reading of the poem—especially the latter, to which the whole poem leads in the last few lines where after the torment of rebellion, the spirit responds simply and immediately to God's call:

But as I rav'd and grew more fierce and wilde  
At every word,

Me thoughts I heard one calling, *Child!*  
And I reply'd, *My Lord.*<sup>2</sup>

Most notable in this poem and most important for a focus on the theme of vocation is the speaker's initial inability to accept the forgiveness available to him through the Eucharist. Here is one who does all he can to evade the grace offered to him. In the end, the call he hears and responds to is God's sovereign call of ownership concomitant with the offer of forgiveness.

Herbert's poem provides a compelling exploration of the meaning of "vocation" and brings to the foreground significant differences between two Protestant understandings of the concept. Herbert's call, a gift from God, as free as grace, seems more Lutheran than Calvinist. It is not a duty or a sacrifice or a conscious effort to reflect the glory of God in his work. It is, however, a response to the forgiveness of sins. The focus is not on the resultant actions of the individual to the call but on the individual's condition before the call—a condition which requires the forgiveness of sins.

Einar Billing has pointed out that our calling is to our professions *and* to belief, a Reformation idea which Luther invented.<sup>3</sup> Luther says in the Third Article of his *Small Catechism* that it is the Holy Spirit that "has called me through the gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, made me holy, and kept me in the true faith, just as he calls, gathers, enlightens, and makes holy the whole Christian church on earth and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one common, true faith. Daily in this Christian church the Holy Spirit abundantly forgives all sins...."<sup>4</sup> The Holy Spirit issues the call, and the call comes through the forgiveness of sins.

#### SCREENING VOCATION

Several contemporary films illustrate versions of this understanding of vocation which links belief and atonement with occupation. *The Apostle* (1997)

is, perhaps, the most notable. Eulis 'Sonny' Dewey, played by Robert Duvall, is a Pentecostal Texas preacher, filled with both swagger and conviction, who loses everything—family, church, and position—when he gives in to wrath and beats his wife's lover with a baseball bat at a Little League game. He leaves town and sheds all signs of his identity in order to evade police, settling finally in a backwater town in the Louisiana bayous, earning a few dollars as an auto mechanic while he follows the Spirit's irresistible

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lead in his attempts to form a new congregation for poor, rural people. "This way to heaven" the illuminated sign reads on an arrow pointing upward over the church's roof, and Sonny Dewey reclaims his identity as a child of God and as a preacher. He is a sinner responding to God's call to preach the redemptive word to a world hungry for the gospel. Like Arthur Dimmesdale in Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, Sonny's secret awareness of his own sinfulness makes him a powerful witness for others. Through the betrayal of a congregant who overhears Sonny's confession to his associate minister, Sonny is eventually arrested, but the Spirit has him so firmly in its grip that even as the credits roll, we see that Sonny's future in a prison chain gang will only provide him with more opportunities to live out his vocation. He cannot keep from responding to the call. He cannot keep from preaching the gospel. He is always alert to the need for forgiveness and always ready to accept God's lead in whatever place he lands. One cannot help but think of Herbert's quick response in the midst of his ravings: "My Lord."

*Dead Man Walking* (1995) provides a different angle on the problem of vocation. That Sister Helen Prejean has received a call and is living out her vocation selflessly as a nun in inner-city ministry suggests that she has a mature understanding of servanthood and what it means to respond sacrificially to the Spirit's urging. Whereas Sonny Dewey's primary sins are intemperance and wrath, Sister Helen, typifying, according to many feminist theologians, the core sin for women, struggles with feelings of inadequacy. But she responds anyway to the letter from the rapist and murderer Matthew Poncelet, a death row prisoner, and stepping forward boldly, she becomes his spiritual director in the last days of his life. Her readiness to accept a role thrust upon her, even though she is inexperienced and unprepared, is a sign of her willingness to rely on the promptings of the Holy Spirit, but it also reveals a certain naiveté about the challenges of the journey she is about to undertake. What Sister Helen discovers is that the situation is not as simple as either the capital punishment proponents or the opponents say it is. It is much more spiritually complex than she had ever imagined. She recognizes the complete depravity of the acts Poncelet committed and the unredeemed spirit of this murderer and rapist, and she is deeply conflicted over her own role in his final days, but she also bears the responsibility of a spiritual counselor who must look upon Poncelet as reachable and potentially redeemable. In other words, she stands in the center of a paradox with sin and death on one side and the offer of grace and life on the other. Poncelet is a very unattractive candidate for grace, but that of course is the point.

The families of the victims feel only the loss of their children; when one family realizes that Sister Helen is not "on their side"—that is, prepared to wash her hands of Poncelet—they throw her out of their home. She is, ulti-

mately, confronted with the reality of the scandal of her choice to stand by the killer—related to the scandal of the One who chose the cross to redeem all sinners. In such a position, giving love to one who is particularly unlovable, she is finally able to break through Poncelet's posturings, lies, and sarcasm. In the final hours of his life he confesses the truth to her and she is able to offer him forgiveness. In his final seconds, as he receives the lethal injection, he looks through the glass separating him from the observers and locks onto her eyes which are filled with love. Sister Helen has been challenged to live out the gospel, and she realizes that her vocation means that she must love not only the children in her inner-city ministry but the criminal who has committed unspeakable acts—and that her role is not only to offer the message of salvation, but to offer it with love for the unrepentant. In this instance the forgiveness linked with vocation is that which the one who is called to serve offers others. It costs the giver.

Flannery O'Connor's *Wise Blood* was adapted for film in 1979 by John Huston and is remarkably faithful to the novel by the southern Catholic writer, known for both her religious vision and the violence of her stories. O'Connor's characters are, like Matthew Poncelet, unredeemed and grotesque in the various creative ways they devise to resist the leading of God. Several years ago in a Religion in Literature group I was chairing in my local congregation, a Unitarian woman in search of a group that would challenge her in her choice of reading material, joined us the month the reading selection was *Wise Blood*. "These characters are so grimy and nasty that they do not deserve grace," she announced to the group, an observation that O'Connor would have appreciated in its unwitting display of the Christian understanding of the human condition. *Wise Blood*, in fact, is not only about an unlovely, unrepentant character, it is about a character insistent on creating his own "vocation" diametrically opposed to his calling from God.

Like so many of O'Connor's characters, Hazel Motes has been running from God's call ever since he was a child. Released from the Army, he heads to Taulkinham and his new profession: preaching the Church without Christ. Purposely set to follow his anti-vocational inclinations, Hazel's choices may seem to be clear-cut, but they are on the contrary always shot through with contradiction and ambiguity. Arriving in Taulkinham, he tells the taxi driver that he has chosen to believe in nothing instead of in sin (which would lead him circuitously to Jesus), and he asks to be left at a local prostitute's house. He says he believes in nothing, but he very purposely chooses evil, and in so doing inadvertently puts himself in a position in which God can woo him. To stand against God, one must first of all recognize that there is Someone to stand against. As O'Connor wrote in her note to the second edition of the novel, "Free will does not mean one will, but many wills conflicting in one man. Freedom cannot be conceived

simply.”<sup>5</sup> It is only after Hazel commits murder that he realizes how unclean and how undeserving he is. Finally responding to God’s irresistible call, Hazel commits the rest of his short life to acts of penance in full recognition that he desperately needs God’s forgiveness. He has found his true vocation.

The complexity of the relationship among free will, forgiveness, and vocation is ignored in the highly popular film, *The Mission* (1986), which presents a simplistic rendering of the concept of the call. The film is peopled by characters who are either completely virtuous, totally evil, or converted from evil to a kind of virtue that transforms violent motivations to purely good acts. Father Gabriel, a Jesuit called to serve the mountain natives of Brazil, is able, through hard work and sacrifice, not only to bring Christianity to the unredeemed, but actually within their civilization to recreate Eden before the Fall. This improbable setting is invaded by Mendoza, a slave lord, who, overtaken by wrath, has killed his brother. Under Father Gabriel’s influence, the evil Mendoza converts to Catholicism and becomes a virtuous priest. When the Portuguese reclaim the land the Church has cultivated, Mendoza renounces his vows and prepares the natives to fight in spite of Gabriel’s entreaties for him to minister to the people as a priest, not lead them as a warrior. Mendoza, now dedicated to fighting for the natives, not against them, does not save the people he loves. Neither does Father Gabriel. The totally evil Portuguese vanquish the natives and create martyrs out of the purely virtuous Gabriel and the highly-conflicted Mendoza, whose motives for violence are now entirely pure. This film masquerades as an exploration of the ambiguity of good and evil. It actually presents a much more dualistic picture of both missionary zeal and imperialistic aggression. Here one certainly sees that vocation is costly. But in the form vocation takes in *The Mission*, it is highly debatable if it is worth the cost. The message is that those who are true to their vocations lose, and those who are not, lose, too. Vocation seems entirely beside the point. It brings an entire civilization to destruction, and viewers can shake their heads over the evils of hegemony without confronting the deeper issues linking forgiveness, vocation, creation, and redemption.

#### **PARADOXICAL FREEDOM OF THE CROSS**

In *Bird by Bird* Anne Lamott tells the story of a young child whose blood is a perfect match for his sister, who needs a blood transfusion to save her life. He is asked by his parents if he is willing to give his blood to her, and his response is to ask if he can think it over. The next day he announces to his parents that he has decided that yes, he is willing to donate his blood to his sister, so later he is put on a gurney next to his sister and his blood travels through an IV straight into his sister’s arm. After a little while the boy asks, “How soon until I start to die?”<sup>6</sup>

Ah, such innocence, Anne Lamott says.

I'm not so sure about that. This child was conscious in a way most of us are not. This child was aware of consequences. He was fully prepared to go the whole way—to give not just a little, but his entire self, to lay down his life for his sister—and he had to think about it only overnight. A child who has not yet reached the age of accountability provides an example of the purest response. He was given permission to give himself, and what he did was something he had never done before, even though, of course, it had been done before, in cosmic terms, on the cross.

It is the cross that gives us eyes to see the truth that in a world where tragedy is inevitable for all of us and where death yells defeat, the surprise of joy, the happy ending is lurking just around the corner. The cross, an instrument of torture, is transformed into the sign of hope. The blind see—and better than before. What a surprise the gospel is for us.

*Mariette in Ecstasy* by Ron Hansen addresses this question better than any film or book I know. At the end of the book the main character, a rather lonely woman ostracized even by her Christian community, talks about her freedom in Christ and she says, "We try to be formed and held and kept by Christ, but instead he offers us freedom. And now when I try to know his will, his kindness floods me, his great love overwhelms me, and I hear him whisper, Surprise me."<sup>7</sup> For the Apostle, for John Donne, for George Herbert, for Sister Helen, and for Hazel Motes vocation offers not the security of a known and familiar routine. It offers, instead, forgiveness hand-in-hand with a most radical freedom.

## NOTES

1 Mark Kolden, "Luther on Vocation" *Word & World*, v. 3, n. 4 (1983), 383-84.

2 *The Works of George Herbert*, edited by F. E. Hutchinson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1941), 153-54.

3 Einar Billing, *Our Calling* (Rock Island, IL: Augustana, 1958).

4 *Luther's Small Catechism* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2001), 35.

5 Flannery O'Connor, *Wise Blood*, second edition (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1962), unnumbered page.

6 Anne Lamott, *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life* (New York: Doubleday, 1994), 205.

7 Ron Hansen, *Mariette in Ecstasy* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991), 179.



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