Christopher Jamison (ed.)


This book originated in a seminar on vocation organised by the National Office of Vocation of the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of England and Wales. It highlights both the rich vein of reflection on vocation that has characterised Roman Catholic theology since the mid-twentieth century and also the practical concerns about church life to which this reflection is in part responding. Contributions range widely in terms of historical periods and theological approach, and it can be commended as a significant resource both for students and academics working in the field and for those who hold responsibilities for fostering and discerning the vocations of others. On the other hand, one could question whether it meets the aim set out by the editor in his introduction, namely to underpin the manifold treatment of ‘particular vocations’ in contemporary Catholicism by a theology of vocation as such. Although he confidently announces that ‘This collection of essays offers a sustained reflection on the Christian understanding of vocation in the singular’ (p. 2), it is not evident that this entirely corresponds to what follows.

The essays are divided into three parts: ‘Foundations of a Theology of Vocation’; ‘Conversing with the Tradition’; and ‘Discerning Vocation Today’. The three chapters in the first part might be better described as prolegomena to a theology of vocation, rather than as foundations for it. The opening exploration of scriptural narratives of call may well stimulate thought, prayer and action, but it does not establish a firm exegetical framework for theological work. The important essay by Lennan locates the theology of vocation firmly in the context of a missional ecclesiology, which it proceeds to sketch out using the church as sacrament as its point of departure; it does not however give much attention to just how this might then shape the church’s practical teaching on vocation. In between them, Price’s at first sight more limited subject, ‘Did the early monastic tradition have a concept of vocation?’, in fact opens up critical issues for the rest of the collection: first, the debate between ‘subjective’ and ‘objective’ understandings of vocation within modern Roman Catholicism; and second, the absence of any notion of ‘particular vocation’ in the early centuries of the church. The roots in tradition of our thinking about vocation may be more shallow than we find it comfortable to acknowledge.

This becomes particularly evident in the second part of the book. Bolin’s essay on Aquinas sets out an approach that is in clear continuity with Price’s account of early monasticism: all are called to turn from sin, to be faithful to Christ and to keep God’s commandments, and the religious life provides the
 safest and most direct route for responding to that call. If therefore someone offers themselves for the religious life, it is prudent to ensure that there are no impediments to their participation and to test their seriousness, but there is no need to hunt for a specific kind of interior motivation or experience. Bolin proceeds to give a careful defence of such an ‘objective’ understanding of vocation as of continuing value in the present context. This is followed immediately by an equally affirmative essay by Simmonds about Ignatius Loyola, which, while an effective exposition of his approach for a contemporary audience, does not address the question of how we move from Anthony and Aquinas to a more characteristically modern focus on attending to interiority in order to discern one’s ‘personal vocation’, which would be one version, and perhaps the most influential, of the ‘subjective’ understanding that Bolin seeks to counter.

The next chapter is the only contribution from a non-Roman Catholic: the Anglican Dean of Bristol writes about the theology of vocation in the Protestant Reformation, outlining the shift made by Luther, Calvin and their followers to claiming the concept of particular calling for every Christian believer. It would be hard to overestimate the significance of this development, but it is not much discussed elsewhere. In his concluding chapter, Jamison comments on it only to explain that the Catholic Church’s understanding of universal vocation today is quite different from the Reformed reduction of vocation to work and occupation. It is unfortunate that there is no attempt to engage with contemporary Protestant thought here – no reference to Brueggemann on covenanting as human vocation in the Scriptures, for instance, or to the important critique of classic Reformation thought on this subject developed by Volf and others. The point is also pertinent to the final chapter in this part of the book, on the profound theology of vocation developed by von Balthasar. Von Balthasar’s exploration of the relationship between person, identity and mission as response to God’s call grounds the theology of vocation not just in ecclesiology but in the doctrines of creation, humanity, revelation and grace. This has also been fertile territory for Protestant and Anglican theologians, and it has the potential both to integrate the different strands of Catholic tradition evident in the collection and to open up the wider ecumenical conversation.

The book’s third part, however, on ‘Discerning Vocation Today’, shows how that task is always liable to be eclipsed by what might seem to be more pressing concerns, not least the perceived gap between the Roman Catholic Church and contemporary culture on this issue, and its relation to the decline of the religious orders on the one hand and of the number of priests on the other. That said, there is much excellent material in this section. In chapter eight, Jones illuminates the bewildering diversity of religious life in the Roman Catholic