Spirituality
Scripture for Life
Voices of Sisters
Spirituality



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November 4, 2023
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How many times have you heard St. Paul bashed for what he says about women? Today's selection from his first letter to the Thessalonians offers a very different take on Paul's attitudes. Sandwiched between two readings that berate religious leaders for failing their vocation, Paul's reflection portrays authentic ministry in distinctly feminine terms.

This, the first of Paul's letters, is probably the oldest text in the Christian Scriptures, giving us fascinating hints about the life and thought of our earliest Christian sisters and brothers. The Thessalonians, people of Greek heritage, were not steeped in the Hebrew Scriptures, so Paul was not concerned about connecting his preaching to them with Jewish traditions. Thessalonica was, so to speak, virgin territory for the Gospel — a situation that called Paul to discern about how to make the Gospel alive for cultures other than his own.

Thirty-First Sunday in Ordinary Time

Nov. 5, 2023

Malachi 1:14b-2:2b, 8-10
Psalm 131
1 Thessalonians 2:7b-9, 13
Matthew 23:1-12

Coming from Greek and Jewish patriarchal societies in which women's contributions were undervalued, his contemporaries might have thought Paul had gone off the deep end with his description of his mission. Presumably an unmarried man, Paul compares the way he and his companions approached the Thessalonians to the loving action of a nursing mother. Steeped in a religious tradition that prized dogmatic teaching and theological debate, Paul described his ministry as filled with gentleness and affection. Finally, closing the circle of images, he said that he and his companions longed to share their very selves with the community — an image of exactly what a nursing mother does for her child.

In contrast to the Lord's warning to the priests who "have caused many to falter" (Malachi 1), Paul thanks God for the way his word has reached the community as the very word of God. Unlike the officials Jesus criticized for posing as teachers without interiorizing the message they preach (Matthew 23), Paul and his companions strove to give witness by their lives as much as by their words. They rejoiced in the fact that their community has discovered the same power of God working in their own lives.

In this short segment of his letter to the Thessalonians, without necessarily intending to do so, Paul outlined a theology of vocation and ministry. He described his approach to evangelization as being as natural and wondrous as the way a mother's body produces nourishment for her hungry infant. Because she is willing to provide and because the child is hungry, she is capable of giving of herself in what is one of the most unique and intimate ways any creature can give to another. By describing his ministry as like that of the mother, Paul echoed the Last Supper scene in which Jesus offered his own body for others and commanded them to do the same.

We hear these readings at the beginning of National Vocation Awareness Week (Nov. 5-11). While the bishops' conference calls this "Vocation Awareness," the website of the U.S. bishops' conference concentrates on "religious vocations": vocations to religious communities, the diaconate and priesthood. In a video produced for the week, several women and men describe the joy they find in living their vocation.

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Augustinian Fr. Richie Mercado explains that the witness of his parents' joy in their married vocation inspired him to seek what would bring him the greatest joy. He added that anyone will be happy in life as long as they are authentic in their response to God's call. Highlighting the mystery of vocation, Sr. Vicki Lichtenauer of the Sisters of Charity of Leavenworth, Kansas, described the fit of her choice for religious life saying, "I don't know if I ever felt like I was falling in love, but essentially I was falling into something." Each in their own way, these people explain that their vocation has called the best out of them and led them to the service of others.

In today's Gospel, Jesus ended his tirade about hypocritical ministers with one of his pet themes: "The greatest among you must be your servant. Whoever exalts self will be humbled; but whoever humbles self will be exalted." Paul's self-giving response to others' needs reflects that. By using the image of the nursing mother, Paul assures us that the living of our vocation will come naturally as long as we are willing to be generous and responsive to others.

Paul didn't ask the Thessalonians to be missionaries like himself. He only asked them to allow the word of God to continue to work in them as it had in him. To say that no one could ask more is an understatement! Young or old, celibate or in a committed relationship, no matter our gender, all God asks is that we give of ourselves exactly as we are — and that we give our all. Then, as happens through the nursing mother, God's grace will flow through us for the good of all.

A version of this story appeared in the **Oct 27-Nov 9, 2023** print issue under the headline: Giving our all.