

15th SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME (July 12, 2009)
(Fr. Jerry Kopacek)

The call of God: something experienced by both Amos in the first reading and the apostles in the gospel. Amos was an unlikely candidate for the role of prophet; he was a simple shepherd and a dresser of sycamores. And the apostles, as we know, were a rather motley group of fishermen, tax collectors, political zealots and others who Jesus nevertheless called to himself and then sent out to preach the coming of God's kingdom and the need for repentance. They may not have been our first idea of good candidates to prophesy or to preach the gospel, but they received the divine call, and they answered.

When we hear about getting a call, we may first think of getting a telephone call. We are all aware of how quickly this technology is moving forward, and how more people are talking on more kinds of phones than ever. From Reader's Digest comes this story about a woman named Addy who once visited the ladies' room. She heard the woman in the next stall suddenly ask: "So how are you?" Addy was startled, but said "well, ...fine..." The woman continued "So what's new?" Still confused, Addy said "Not much. What's new with you?" The woman then snapped back: "Do you mind? I'm on the phone!" Nothing more to say about that....

Actually, there are a number of parallels between some of the phone options that exist these days and the various ways we might respond to God's call. I realize that may sound more than a little far-fetched, but let's see where this might go. First of all, we need to remember that God is always calling us: to a deeper love for him, to a greater willingness to follow his Son Jesus, to a more authentic love of neighbor as ourselves. St. Paul reminds us in the second reading that our God and Father "chose us in [Jesus]...to be holy and without blemish before him." Again, God is always calling us—not to nag us, but it's a call to holiness based on his love and desire for us. The crucial question for us then becomes: how do we answer that call? Or do we even hear and answer the call in the first place?

1. Do you always answer your telephone right away (cell phone or whatever else)? Probably not. You might not even hear it ringing or you are away from it—you're busy with other things, you left your phone elsewhere, you turned it off (like I'm sure you always do before you come to Mass...that's a hing, by the way...). I dare say there are times when we don't hear God's call, what he may want of us in a particular situation. We may be so frantic and busy at work, so focused on our own interests and desires, so caught up in material or other this-worldly pursuits, that we forget about God, his presence in our lives and his desire for us and our love. If that's the case, the solution is obvious: be more attuned to God so you can hear his call. Make a place for some quiet; take some time (or a little more time) for prayer. Read a few passages from Scripture (maybe the readings for weekday or Sunday Mass) and let that word of God settle in your heart and mind. We will never be able to answer God's call if we don't give ourselves a chance to hear it in the first place. And that requires deliberate effort on our part to open our eyes and ears. And don't use the excuse "I don't have time for prayer". We always manage to make time for what's important to us; if developing our spiritual life and our relationship with God is important to us, we will find the time—even if just for a few moments to begin with.

2. One popular phone feature these days is Caller ID that enables you to know who is calling you before you answer the phone. If it is someone you've been waiting to hear from, you'll answer right away; if it's someone you want to avoid, you may just let the phone ring on and not answer it at all. How often do we sense that God is calling us to reach out to this person or to say 'no' to that temptation or whatever else it may be...and we choose not to answer that divine call because we are afraid of what God may ask of us? Or we just want to indulge our favorite sins or our spiritual laziness? Later this month the Church celebrates the feast of St. Ignatius of Loyola, the founder of the Jesuit order. In his youth, Ignatius was all about satisfying his own interests and ignoring God's call to service. Then he suffered an injury that required a long period of recovery. He loved to read, but at one point all that was available to read was a

collection of lives of the saints. He found himself more and more inspired by their example; that led then to his desire to follow their example and serve Christ more faithfully. God finally got his attention; Ignatius finally answered the call of God and became the great saint that the Church now honors.

St. Augustine (whose feast we celebrate next month) is another example. He is one of the greatest theologians and intellects the Church has ever known, but in his earlier life he struggled to resist lust and to live the virtue of chastity—and his struggles weren't always successful. He knew God was calling him to holiness, but for a long time he just didn't want to answer that call. The story goes that at one point Augustine prayed: "Lord, make me chaste...but not yet!" Ultimately he came to the gift of faith and the grace of conversion and thus responded most admirably to God's call. The saints are wonderful examples of weak, sinful creatures (just like us) who nonetheless give us great examples and models of how to hear and respond to the call of God. I strongly recommend becoming more familiar with these heroes of our faith; allow yourselves to be inspired to follow their example just as Ignatius did.

3. Another feature of modern telephone life: call waiting. You are visiting with someone, and then you hear that 'click' that tells you that you have another call coming in—so you put the first person on hold. It can be convenient, but it can also be frustrating for the one who is on hold. This feature sometimes should be called "call waiting...and waiting...and waiting"! How does this relate to our life in God? We may be serious and sincere about living the gospel and following Jesus, but then we allow something or someone else to distract us from our good intentions. In a sense, we get another call and put God 'on hold'. St. Peter comes to mind here—he was the rock upon which Jesus built his Church, at times he spoke and acted as a truly dedicated disciple. At other times, however, he wasn't so successful. Remember the time he saw Jesus walk on the surface of the stormy waters? Peter wanted to do the same thing, and Jesus enabled him to do so. But once Peter let his attention drift from Jesus and noticed how stormy it was, Peter became very frightened and started to sink. Jesus, of course, saved him and then gently rebuked him for his falling back into doubt and fear. Prayer for a desire to remain connected and focused on Jesus can help us to do just that, and that will in turn enable us to weather the storms and carry the crosses that will inevitably come our way.

4. The best strategy, of course, is simple—just answer the call! As we can answer the phone when it first rings, we can answer God's call to holiness, virtue, discipleship and service...and we can do so in faith and joy and without excuses. Think of the Blessed Virgin Mary: the angel Gabriel came to tell her that God wanted her to be the mother of his Son Jesus who would be Savior of the world. After being told how God would accomplish this seemingly impossible thing, Mary said: "I am the servant of the Lord; let it be done to me as you say." God called Mary; Mary answered right away and said "Yes, Lord." Think of Blessed Teresa of Calcutta: remember how she was living her earlier life as a teaching sister, but then she heard God's 'second call' to her—to devote herself to serving the poorest of the poor. She didn't ask a lot of questions or raise doubts; she didn't try to pretend she didn't hear God's call; she didn't try to 'put God on hold'. She simply said 'Yes, Lord'—and went on to accomplish incredible things by the grace of God because she allowed herself to be an instrument of that grace.

There is no reason that we can't do the same thing; it simply depends on our desire and willingness to hear and answer the call of God—God will give us all the help we need to take it from there. Do we really want to do the will of God? Do we mean it when we say those most familiar words of the Our Father: "thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven"? If we mean what we say about wanting to be a disciple of Jesus and to live the Christian life, then we will truly want to answer that call—a call that is always being extended to us every day of our lives, a call that is based on God's immense love for us and his equally immense desire that we live and rejoice in that love in this life and in his eternal kingdom as well.

