

Dear Friends...

At this moment within the parish boundaries of Pax Christi, there are probably millions of acorns buried beneath the snow. Every single one of them carries within itself the potential to become an oak tree some day. And 99.9 percent of them will fail in that endeavor, even though all of them will make the effort. Their fate will be mostly the result of bad luck; having fallen to earth in the wrong place, among the wrong critters (i.e. squirrels), or with the wrong amount of sunlight, moisture, temperature, or soil. One could say that the purpose, or “call,” of an acorn is to grow up to be exactly one thing, so when that doesn’t happen, we are correct to speak about “failure” in a certain sense. An acorn has two options for its destiny in life: to be a tree or to be a rotting acorn (or to be lunch for a squirrel, which I suppose is the same thing). Nature itself has built that calculation into its rhythm.

But the lowly acorn can be a helpful teacher to us humans, by way of contrast, as we think about our “call” in life, and that is for at least a

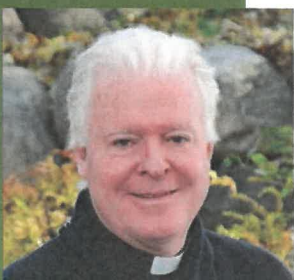
few reasons. First, unlike the acorn, at the moment of our birth not a single one of us is set up by God or by nature for failure. It is true that very many people are made to confront this life with enormous disadvantages and necessary struggles. But nobody was created

in order to fail. Neither God nor nature sends billions of human beings into the world in the hope that maybe a few of them will, by chance, succeed. Most acorns are expendable by design, but not a single human person is.

Second, unlike acorns, our futures are not determined by blind fate or dumb luck. We are all predisposed by circumstances or innate talents to excel at some things and not others. And often we confront challenges, even tragedies, that are not of our own making. But while the acorn has to just sit there and take in whatever happens, a human being does not. Even when the unavoidable and unplanned adversity confronts us, we can decide freely how to respond to it. There is no such thing as the human life that is consigned to “rotting,” unless that is our decision. We are not acorns.

And third, unlike the acorn, in our coming to birth and to baptism we are not thereby programmed to mature into exactly one thing. The “call” of our existence, both as persons and as Christians, does not already have a predetermined concrete ultimate outcome—quite to the contrary. Truly to be called is to recognize a summons into conversation with God (prayer), with others (community), and with life (the environment and activity around us). None of these three is experienced as completely stable throughout a person’s life, which is why responding to a call is a project that never ends. A call is never a once-and-for-all experience that has a specific-looking “product” in the end. It is, as I said, an open-ended conversation.

Fr. J. Michael Byron
Pastor





Sometimes people wonder and worry whether they have “missed their calling” in this world, by having made some singular choice along the way or having failed to recognize some specific opportunity. Or, alternatively, they can become grieved that what they used to think of as their call—as a spouse, a parent, a worker, a parishioner, a volunteer, a minister—must have been “wrong” because it seems to have changed over time. That’s not it. It’s in the nature of a conversation to open up new horizons and imaginations among those who are engaged in it.

When I was studying for priesthood in my twenties it seemed pretty clear that my call was to be a parish pastor some day. Then I got waylaid by higher education and it seemed pretty clear that my call was to be a theology teacher for the rest of my days. Then I moved

away from that and the call seemed to revert to pastoral ministry. It could be something else by this time next year (though I surely hope not!). I would describe all those shifts as a successful engaging of a call, because I think of it as being and doing what I am “supposed” to be doing right here and now. I believe that the same holds true for all of us, whatever our situation in life. The task is to listen.

All of us have a call, which is nothing other than to say that all of us need to be in those conversations in order to understand ourselves best, as well as our place and purpose among our community at that moment in time. This turning of the year is often a time to rededicate ourselves to the project of taking a good look at how we’re doing at that, and perhaps to help others do the same.