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Tim Zeelen. 2024. *Eine Berufungstheologie der Ehe. Vorschlag aus moraltheologischer Sicht*. Münster: LIT. ISBN 978-3-643-15593-1¹

For centuries, the category of vocation in theology was primarily associated with priestly life and religious orders, and was connoted with special gifts and a divine mission bestowed upon individuals, leading them along a path to God and holiness. This traditional theological view of Christian life was reshaped by the Second Vatican Council, which emphasized the universal call to holiness for all Christians, elevated the theology of marriage, and underscored the common priesthood of all the baptized. Despite these developments, Catholic theology has continued to predominantly, and at times exclusively, associate the term “vocation” with the priestly profession, often lacking a well-developed and theologically grounded understanding of marriage as a vocation. Inspired by a statement in the post-synodal apostolic exhortation *Amoris Laetitia*, which refers to marriage as a vocation (AL 72), Tim Zeelen developed a dissertation on this topic, which was submitted to the Faculty of Catholic Theology at the University of Augsburg and accepted in December 2023.

In his book, Zeelen reflects on vocation as a theological category for understanding marriage from a moral-theological perspective – making this work both compelling and truly unique. The dissertation includes reflections on the opportunities and limitations of the vocation category, biblical foundations of a theology

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of vocation as applied to marriage, interpretations of vocation theology throughout theological history, systematic considerations, and a proposed outline for a theology of marriage as vocation.

Although several theological studies and magisterial documents address the theme of vocation – and some link marriage to vocation and religious mission – Zeelen's book offers a comprehensive concept of marriage as a vocation rather than simply another study in the field of marriage theology. The central point of comparison in the study is not the vocational decision in everyday usage (e.g., choosing a career), but rather the theological concept of state of life: between priesthood, religious life, laity, and marriage. The author is not merely interested in mapping the diverse discourse surrounding vocation or marriage theology, but aims to build a bridge between the theology of marriage and the theology of vocation from a theological-ethical standpoint. He addresses fundamental questions such as how vocation can be understood theologically, and what it specifically means to speak of marriage as a vocation.

Due to the breadth of its subject matter, this study is extensive and structured into five logically organized chapters. The introduction outlines the topic, its relevance, the current state of research, and key contexts of the discourse. At the end, the study includes a list of abbreviations, as well as a bibliography of sources and literature.

The first chapter discusses the opportunities and limits of the vocation category, examines contemporary lived realities regarding marriage, and explores the tensions between orientation and idealization in marriage and sexual morality, as well as specific challenges in applying the vocation concept to marriage. The opportunities and problems identified point the author in a direction for developing a theology of marriage as vocation and define two guiding lines to observe: heteronomy and idealization.

Chapters IV and V, which dominate the study, have a historical-theological character. Zeelen first demonstrates that a theology of marriage as vocation is not an unproblematic concept and lacks theological independence. He substantiates this by analyzing understandings of marriage and vocation in key figures of Christian tradition from its beginnings up to the 20th century. Particularly noteworthy is his engagement with the theology of vocation as developed by Hans Urs von Balthasar, which he not only presents but critically interacts with.

Rightly, Zeelen asserts that a theology of marriage as vocation requires, in contrast to past trends, a greater theological appreciation of marriage as a form of life and a shift in paradigms within anthropology and the doctrine of grace. Steps in this direction were taken in the 20th century, which is the focus of the following chapter

(V). This part of the book explores how the theology of vocation evolved, how it was understood, and the extent to which marriage was integrated into this concept. Zeelen introduces the theological movements that laid the foundation for a theology of marriage as vocation, beginning with selected theologians prior to the Second Vatican Council. He then discusses conciliar impulses regarding vocation and marriage, and traces the post-conciliar ecclesial teachings up to the pontificate of Pope Francis. A section of this chapter – treated more as a digression than an integral part of the argument – addresses marriage as a vocation for the laity. The theological developments of the 20th century are presented as paths that have paved the way for a contemporary theology of marriage as vocation.

Only in the following chapter – appropriately so from a theological standpoint – does Zeelen offer a biblical foundation for a theology of marriage as vocation. He begins with hermeneutical considerations before turning to the biblical contours of the vocation concept. Zeelen presents vocation as a historical event in Christ, continuously renewed in and through Him as God's call and promise, aimed at a human response that should take concrete form in one's way of life. Thus, vocation is portrayed as a biblically grounded foundational concept of Christian ethics, which can become transparent in the marital state of life and represent a lived response to the call of Christ. Building on the insights gained, Zeelen formulates a proposal for a theology of marriage as vocation. At the heart of this theology is the view that spouses are competent moral subjects of their own history with God. The theology aims to enable couples to recognize their marriage as a vocation and to shape their shared life as a response to God's call in Christ.

The formal structure of the study is carefully developed. The arguments are logically constructed, well-reasoned, and clearly presented. The bibliography includes numerous magisterial documents and works by predominantly German-speaking theologians. While indexes of topics and names are missing, the detailed structure of the book makes it easy to locate specific discussions. At the beginning, Zeelen outlines his thesis, the context of the topic, the state of research, and the book's structure – although the methodological approach is not clearly specified. Each chapter includes an introduction and a brief conclusion; however, the study lacks a final summary conclusion encompassing the whole work. The last chapter, which elaborates the contours of a theology of marriage as vocation and offers theological-ethical insights, could be seen as fulfilling this function.

Zeelen's book is an important contribution to developing the category of vocation in theology beyond its traditional framework, applying it specifically to marriage. It provides not only a foundation and outline of a theology of marriage as vocation, but also a critical engagement with the traditional theological understand-

ing of well-known concepts. Zeelen's theology of marriage as vocation represents a development of the Second Vatican Council's teaching on Christian vocation, marriage, and the holiness of all the baptized. It is a significant contribution for further theological studies in this area.