

Obedience, Celibacy, Poverty: A Register Symposium

The Promises That Free Priests to Serve Christ

by Father Stephen Gemme, Dominican Father Brian Mullady and Franciscan Father Gregory Plow

"Priests share in the universal dimensions of the mission that Christ entrusted to the apostles," the Catechism states. "The spiritual gift they have received in ordination prepares them, not for a limited and restricted mission, 'but for the fullest, in fact the universal mission of salvation to the end of the earth,' prepared in spirit to preach the Gospel everywhere" (1565). "It is in the Eucharistic cult or in the Eucharistic assembly of the faithful that they exercise in a supreme degree their sacred office; there, acting in the person of Christ and proclaiming his mystery, they unite the votive offerings of the faithful to the sacrifice of Christ their head, and in the sacrifice of the Mass, they make present again and apply, until the coming of the Lord, the unique sacrifice of the New Testament, that namely of Christ offering himself once for all a spotless victim to the Father. From this unique sacrifice their whole priestly ministry draws its strength" (1566). Prior to ordination to the Catholic priesthood, men profess vows of obedience, celibacy and, in certain religious congregations, poverty. This Register symposium examines those vows and what they mean to the priests who promise to live them.

Obedience: To Live the Promise

by Father Stephen Gemme

"Do you promise respect and obedience to me and my successors?" Every man ordained a Catholic priest is asked this question by his bishop. The answer is always the same: "Yes." What follows afterward is the reality of living this beautiful promise. Why is this promise beautiful? When exercised faithfully, obedience gives the priest both freedom and peace. It is important to remember that the bishop possesses the fullness of holy orders, is heir to the apostles, and is called by the Holy Spirit to govern his diocese as chief shepherd. Obedience to one's bishop graces the priest with the love that comes from the Holy Spirit. This particular vow acknowledges the truth that God's hand guides our bishops and the Church. To be obedient is to trust God's will for us.

The culture we live in is rooted in self-absorption and consumed with satisfying the desires of the individual. Yet a self-absorbed soul has no place for God, no place to welcome Jesus Christ or the Holy Spirit. Such a soul will continue to be restless and rebellious, finding no peace. It is only when we surrender to God and welcome him into our hearts that we find what it is to be truly happy. This requires the exercise of humility in obedience to the teaching of the Church, to our Holy Father and to our bishops. In his Nov. 18, 2009, "Letter to Priests," Cardinal Mauro Piacenza, prefect of the Congregation for Clergy, wrote, "Even if they are not bound by a solemn vow of obedience, ordinands profess a 'promise' of 'filial respect and obedience' to their own ordinary and his successors. If the theological standing of a vow and a promise is different, the total and definitive moral obligation is identical, and likewise identical is the offering of one's will to the will of Another: to the Divine will, mediated through the Church."

So how does a priest keep his promise of obedience, or, for that matter, any of the promises made at his ordination? His preparation begins during the early days of his seminary training, as cited in the document for the Program for Priestly Formation: "The seminarian should articulate behaviors that manifest a healthy understanding of obedience. The exercise of authority and the response of obedience are works of grace, good will and human effort that play a part in the life of every priest." But all of this would be fruitless if not grounded in a life of prayer, which rests at the heart of every faithful priest. First, a priest should take part in the sacrament of reconciliation at least once a month, but possibly once a week. In making a good confession, the priest humbles himself before Christ and opens his heart to the Divine will. He is absolved of his sins. The grace we receive strengthens our resolve to stay faithful to our promises to the Church.

In my own priesthood, time spent in Eucharistic adoration is also essential to staying strong in faith. That, along with faithfully celebrating the Liturgy of the Hours, is part of my daily routine. I have also found great strength and solace in a devotion to our Blessed Mother through praying the Rosary on a daily basis, along with an ongoing novena to Our Lady of Lourdes and our parish's patroness, St. Bernadette. In a presentation given in La Crosse,

Wis., on July 31, 2010, Cardinal Raymond Burke said of Our Lady: "One of the titles by which we address Our Blessed Mother in the Litany of Loreto is Mirror of Justice, Speculum Justitiae. Simply put, the title reminds us that we see in Mary the image of how to live in obedience to God's law and thus grow in a likeness to Christ. That means to grow in a pure and selfless love of God and of our neighbor. It should not surprise us that, when the faithful have a strong devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary, they are also strong in their obedience to Christ and to those who act in his person as head and shepherd of the flock in every time and place, namely the Holy Father and the bishops in communion with him, together with the priests, their co-workers."

Our Lady teaches us to trust her Son — as she did with the miracle at Cana — to do whatever he tells you. In the same way, a faithful priest is obedient and respectful to his bishop, his superior, his abbot and his Pope. As a parish priest serves as a spiritual father to his parish, so too the bishop is a spiritual father for the faithful in his diocese, especially for his priests. How powerful it is when the bishop comes to visit a sick priest or a priest who is an invalid or in some need. During such errands, the bishop brings with him the love of Jesus Christ; he who possesses the fullness of holy orders lives St. Paul's own experience: "It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me" (Galatians 2:20).

At times, a priest's promise of obedience to his bishop can be put to the test. And because of a few cases involving popular priests and their bishops being at odds, many have asked: What if the judgment of the bishop is wrong or flawed? Why can I not disobey my bishop? If a priest questions a decision of his bishop, that priest has a right to meet with his bishop and express his concern. This is only reasonable. But at the end of the day, the bishop is heir to the apostles, and unless he is teaching a false doctrine — namely a heresy, or asking a priest to do something immoral or evil or acting contrary to Church teaching — obedience is still required. We are called to trust the Holy Spirit, as God can write straight with crooked lines.

No priest is greater than the Church, and a true priest will keep his vow of obedience and trust the Holy Spirit, which guides the decisions of the Church. We need to pray for all priests who may be struggling to maintain their vows, whether they're in the public eye or not. It must be said again: Please pray for our priests. We ask for the powerful intercession of Our Lady of Lourdes, St. Michael the Archangel and St. John Vianney, patron of parish priests, to pray that all Catholic priests grow daily in their promises of celibacy, obedience and prayer.

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Celibacy: Joyous Self-Restraint

by Father Brian Mullady, OP

There is a landmark pamphlet authored by an important Catholic psychiatrist titled *A Priest for All Seasons: Masculine and Celibate*. In this pamphlet, Dr. Conrad Baars examines some of the important reasons why transitional deacons preparing for the priesthood take promises of celibacy. In contrast, the tendency after the Second Vatican Council was to define celibacy as simply being "unmarried." According to Baars in *I Will Give Them a New Heart*, this is a serious misreading of the word, which should rather reflect "mature, masculine priests ready to do battle with evil for the sake of good, ready to be hurt, and also, if need be, ready to hurt."

To understand what Baars means and why the priest is normally required to promise celibacy (there are exceptions for married Protestant clergy converting to Catholicism and for those Eastern rites in union with Rome), it is instructive to consider two mistaken ideas. One comes from a popular but spurious history; the other from popular but mistaken ideas. The normal manner of presenting the requirement in the Latin Church of a celibate clergy runs something like this: From Christ's time, priests could be married or celibate. This was optional, though celibacy was recommended. In the ninth century, the Latin Church made celibacy mandatory because of sexual and financial problems in the clergy, but there is nothing especially fitting in this. Recent scholarship has shown that this manner of reading history is misleading.

From the time of Christ, there were both celibate and married priests, but the married priests and their wives had to make a promise of perpetual continence when the priest was ordained. They could have children before, but not after. In 692, the Eastern Church held a local council at Trullo at which this requirement was abolished. Priests for the first time could have conjugal acts after ordination. However, even this council determined at the time that the day after such an act, the priest could not celebrate the Eucharist. The Latin Church just decided a little later not to

abolish the original requirement, but simply make celibacy mandatory, perhaps because it was unreasonable to expect wives to live celibately — and the married state and family put too much pressure on the complete dedication of the priest to his people.

Why the connection of abstinence from sexual activity with the priesthood — a practice even upheld in some sense in the Eastern practice? Popular ideas in our sexually obsessed culture would hold it was because marital acts were in some sense considered evil. This is not the case. The reason for both practices was that the complete identification of the priest — as a consecrated person — with Christ in the Eucharist must be so intense that even the good sensual experiences of this world would detract from his spiritual focus. Given the weakness we all still experience toward egotism as a result of Original Sin, this would put too much stress on a vocation that demanded a total spiritual concentration of forces.

This reasoning is reflected in no less a source than the psychiatrist Richard Kraft Ebing, one of the first to study the subject, who said in *Psychopatia Sexualis*: "It shows a masterly psychological knowledge of human nature that the Roman Catholic Church enjoins celibacy upon its priests to emancipate them from sensuality and to concentrate their entire activity in the pursuit of their calling." The modern misconception that those who embrace celibacy must do so because they hate marriage or consider it evil has nothing to do with the requirement of embracing celibacy. Rather, the complete and total consecration of the self is the real issue. Nor can it be sustained that the vow of celibacy in any way constitutes an attack on the good of marriage. Both marriage and celibacy must be anchored in the same attitude towards sexuality.

Blessed John Paul II pointed out in his theology of the body that human sexuality is based on the "gift" of human love. The conjugal act must be a physical expression of the self-giving of the person and preceded by a complete commitment to the gift of self. Since this is a gift, it cannot be characterized by any kind of constraint. Before marriage, both spouses must experience joy in self-restraint in order to express the full truth of their subsequent commitment and conjugal act. In the same way, joyous self-restraint must be the hallmark of the celibate. If not, the spiritual integration which celibacy offers will elude the priest, and his life will be characterized by a constant and psychologically exhausting search for money, power, self-affirming relationships or other dependent activities. The proper use of the passions connected with sexuality in both cases is not sublimation by assimilation, as Freud would have it.

By experiencing true affection in self-restraint rooted in real love, the priest will be able to manifest the correct masculinity — that of a gentle and yet firm fighter who can defend the true and the good in the face of error and evil. In addition, the idea that the courage demanded of the priest includes being ready to hurt if need be must sound strange for a vocation connected with compassion and mercy. But following the image of Christ, affirmation of the good of another should take place on both an emotional and intellectual level. Intellectual affirmation includes telling the truth even when unpopular or even if a person's feelings might be hurt, provided one is sure that the person can take it. When Jesus said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan, you are trying to make me trip and fall," he was not being nice, but he was being affirming. He had prepared Peter for his role as head of the apostles, and this unpleasant truth was a means of maturing Peter himself in the truth.

The word *caelebs* means "singular," but this is to be alone in the proper sense of "alone with the Alone." Only when one looks on making love as a choice can one truly experience the joyous self-restraint that makes one love the other for his or her good and not for naked advantage. As Barrs says in *I Will Give Them a New Heart*, "In marriage, free to practice periodic continence in the joyful love of restraint. In religious life, free to abstain from genitality in joy and ease."

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Poverty: Unhindered Ministry

by Father Gregory Plow, TOR

"Religious priests" is a catch-all term to refer to those ordained men in various religious orders or congregations throughout the world. (They usually live in community, like Franciscans, Dominicans, Benedictines, etc.) Before religious priests are ordained, they profess the evangelical councils (vows) of the consecrated life, namely poverty, celibacy and obedience. These vows are to God in the hands of their legitimate superior or ordinary.

These vows precipitate a religious priest's ordination and, therefore, are the foundation for him to sell all he possesses, give to the poor and go follow Jesus Christ (Matthew 19:21). It is important to note here that religious or consecrated brothers (who are not ordained, yet live faithful lives of prayer, witness and service to God and his Church) profess the same vow of poverty as religious priests. The reason a religious priest is called to live a life of vowed poverty is precipitated and intertwined with his identity as a religious/consecrated man. Diocesan priests usually minister in diocesan parishes, and they profess promises of obedience and [celibate] chastity to the bishop at ordination. However, for a number of historical, practical and vocational reasons, they do not profess a promise of poverty.

Yet the priestly identity is a special icon of Christ (Catechism, 1142). And as the Holy See's Congregation for the Clergy states in its Directory on the Ministry and Life of Priests, Christ manifested his condition of poverty "by receiving everything from the Father, and all to him is restored in a complete offering of his life" (67). The Church continues: "The example of Christ should lead the priest to conform himself to him, with an interior detachment as to the goods and riches of the world." Any goods he does receive "he will use with a sense of responsibility, moderation, upright intention and detachment, precisely because he has his treasure in heaven and knows that all should be used for building the Kingdom of God (Luke 10:7; Matthew 10:9-10; 1 Corinthians 9:14, Galatians 6:6). Therefore, the priest will deny himself those worldly activities which are not in keeping with his ministry."

Finally, and most specifically, this section on the "Priestly Spirit of Poverty" concludes that, even though the [diocesan] priest has not assumed poverty as a public promise, he "must lead a simple life and avoid anything which could have an air of vanity, voluntarily embracing poverty to follow Christ more closely. In all aspects (living quarters, means of transportation, vacations, etc.), the priest must eliminate any kind of affection and luxury." A distinction and sensitivity should be observed when speaking of the evangelical council of poverty.

It is entirely different from the abject poverty in which so many persons live against their own will. That kind of poverty is a social sin — and all Catholics, Christians and people of good will must work to alleviate it in the world and solve it in more localized ways through charitable service and giving. Poverty for the priest, however, is that in which he frees himself of things that encumber his life. These things can take the form of personal material possessions or can encompass the immaterial (i.e. one's own will). With regard to personal property, the priest ought to follow Jesus' challenge to the Rich Young Man: "Go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come follow me" (Matthew 19:21).

Dispensing of possessions and giving to the poor is a prerequisite for following Jesus. Such voluntary acts foster an "evangelical poverty" to help a person to identify more with the poor (Vita Consecrata, 90). It is in this twofold act of selling what you possess and giving to the poor that one not only lowers his own status, in as much as any materialistic culture views success, but he also helps lift others up who are in genuine need. Of course, someone can own very little and still be spiritually poor. Hence, in practicing evangelical poverty, the priest must additionally imitate the Savior by the renunciation of his will: "Not as I will, but as you will" (Matthew 26:39-42). Poverty here is closely tied in with the other vows/promises of obedience and [celibate] chastity. In all of them, the priest must detach from a good that he wants as a sacrifice to grow more in the imitation of Christ. Many times this act of poverty (of the will) is more difficult.

The benefits of material simplicity and evangelical poverty can be a heightened sense of freedom for the priest. He is not hindered by distractions that might otherwise impede him from doing the Lord's work. In receiving a new assignment, a priest can more easily pack up, move and start doing his ministry more quickly. While material possessions (and one's own will) are not inherently bad, one can easily grow in dependence of or even become addicted to them. But the benefit of continuously "cleaning house" of personal belongings yields one to "clean house" of his spiritual self and forces him to, time and time again, give himself over to the One who will fulfill all one's well-ordered desires and needs. That "One" is God, who, in the person of Jesus Christ, "shares the life of the poor, from the cradle to the cross. He experienced hunger, thirst and privation" (Catechism, 544; Matthew 21:18; Mark 2:23-36; Luke 9:58; John 4:6-7, 19:28).

During his passion, Jesus emptied his own will and divorced himself of all material possessions by allowing himself to be stripped of his clothing and crucified. The only "things" that went to the cross with Jesus were all of humanity's sins. Jesus then interceded for forgiveness (Luke 23:34) and redeemed them with his own blood (Hebrews 9:12; 1 Peter 1:18-19). Personally, the vow of poverty I have professed as a Franciscan is something very meaningful to me. For it is one of the three vows that forms the foundation of my life in imitation of Christ and directed toward God.

The symbol of the vow of poverty, as one of the three knots on the cord that is visible to me and everyone everywhere I go, is a continuous reminder that in this vow, as is the case with any married or celibate vow, is both the cross and freedom. There is the cross of having my means limited more than when I was a layperson with my own salary and bank accounts. However, there is the freedom of not having to pay taxes or be worried about a home mortgage or car payments. Yet there is a much deeper and more expansive spiritually related cross and freedom tied to my vow of poverty.

When I am left wanting for anything — financial, spousal or familial or to be able to make big decisions for myself (as with obedience) — I feel the pinch that brings me closer to the living person of Jesus Christ, who had "no place to lay his head" and was absent everything (save the will of God) on the cross. I believe and hope that in growing in intimacy with Christ I may imitate him more with those to whom I minister. Please pray for all priests. Pray that we may imitate the poverty of Jesus, so that we may more faithfully depend on God for everything that is good and be more compassionate in attending to the spiritual and physical needs of his children. Instead of giving your priest a gift for Christmas, his feast day or his birthday, consider giving to a charity serving those persons in greater need than he.

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