

Catholic Church of Eastern Montana

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LENTEN LETTER TO PRIESTS

From

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Dear Brothers in Christ,

It is hardly a secret that the present economy in the United States is a cause for great concern. Unemployment levels have not reached their present level in decades and continue to rise. While the level of unemployment in Montana may be lower than other locations in the country, it is yet a concern for many. Hopefully, the stimulus bill recently passed by Congress and signed by the President actually will prove to be effective in turning around the economy. Even if the stimulus package works there will still be families trying to get by with less. They will continue in their struggle to make house payments, will remain without a way to pay for appropriate health care and find it difficult to buy basic necessities. Many of these individuals are people we encounter week after week in our parish communities.

Given the state of the economy, I thought the relevant area to address this Lent would be the notion of simplicity as it applies to our lifestyles as priests. Many of us could benefit from a good examination throughout this Lent about the meaning of Gospel poverty and its presence in our lives. The lifestyles we live as priests say much to the people we serve.

I certainly do not pretend to have embraced a level of simplicity of life to the degree that I probably should. Often, the situations I find myself in as a bishop place me in a rather "cushy" context. It is highly unlikely that I could ever find myself homeless, unable to purchase food or without a way to receive health care. I suspect that most of you could say the same. Nonetheless, that we are priests does presume we will embrace a type of lifestyle that manifests a level of detachment from the things of this earth. The purpose is so we truly may be available for service on behalf of the Lord and provide witness to the kingdom of God as the greatest of all values.

Unless we are a member of a religious community, it is not likely that we have taken a religious vow of poverty. When Jesus called the first disciples, we are told that they "...left everything and followed him" (Luke 5:11). My interpretation of this section from Luke, is that it has more to do with detachment. It portrays using possessions on behalf of the Kingdom of God. For instance, when Levi is called later in this section, Luke mentions that he too left everything behind in order to follow the Lord (Luke 5:28). And yet, in the very next line, Luke informs us that "Levi gave a great banquet for him (i.e., Jesus) in his house, and a large crowd of tax collectors and others were there at table with them" (Luke 5:29). Obviously Levi did not physically give up everything! The call involves detachment from what we own so as to be available for service. Detachment allows the Lord to be our first priority. The Sermon on the Mount from Matthew's Gospel likewise provides thought provoking words. In it, Jesus reminds us that we "...cannot serve God and mammon, i.e., possessions" (Matthew 6:24). And he informs us not to be overly anxious about material goods and to trust in God's providence (Matthew 6:25-34).

There are many noteworthy places in Sacred Scripture that could be cited to support the importance of simplicity of life. I urge everyone to consider them during Lent and make them a part of their prayer and reflection. To some degree, every priest is called to embrace a simple lifestyle, even those of us who have not taken a religious vow of poverty. The code of Canon Law 282 §1 states, "Clerics are to foster simplicity of life and are to refrain from all things that have a semblance of vanity." It is a canon based on *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, the Decree on the Life and Ministry of Priests from Vatican II Council. The decree affirms that priests "...are invited to embrace voluntary poverty. By it they will be more clearly likened to Christ and will become more devoted to the sacred ministry. For Christ became poor for our sakes, whereas He had been rich, so that we might be enriched by His poverty" (#17). In light of the situations of poverty that grip so many in our world, country, state and local communities, it is important to put flesh and blood on the words of the Lord for it makes our witness stronger.

Poverty generally signifies an economic state of not having what a person needs to live a dignified human life. On this level, it describes economic insufficiency usually as a result of some kind of injustice. Deprivation of a basic human need truly is injustice and an evil, something which we must work to abolish. This kind of poverty, which is really more a situation of destitution, can tempt people to despair of life, strike out in anger at society and turn to destructive ways to fill the want in their lives. Situations in which persons lack basic necessities can hardly be called human or dignified. There is nothing holy about these situations. Paradoxically, many people in such situations truly are holy.

Pope John XXIII strongly affirmed the right of all people to certain goods in his encyclical letter, *Pacem in Terris*,

First we must speak of man's rights. Man has the right to live. He has the right to bodily integrity and to the means necessary for the proper development of life, particularly food, clothing, shelter, medical care, rest, and, finally, necessary social services. In consequence, he has the right to be looked after in the event of ill health; disability stemming from his work; widowhood; old age; enforced unemployment; or whenever through no fault of his own he is deprived of the means of livelihood (#8).

Understanding poverty as simplicity of life means something altogether different. On this level, poverty is viewed as an evangelical imperative and refers to a vision and a lifestyle that is motivated by the Gospel and a personal experience of God's love for us in Christ. It has both an exterior and interior dimension. It is never a matter of rejecting material goods, as if they were somehow evil in themselves. We call possessions goods because material things are created by God and needed for life. We all need a certain amount of goods to exist and to know a dignified life. All human beings, as Pope John XXIII noted, have a right to those goods that allow them to live in dignity. Embraced as an evangelical imperative, simplicity of life understands the relative value of material goods. Material goods, as gifts from God, are destined for all people. The

priest, as a model for others, knows he is to use them responsibly and with a mind towards others. To embrace poverty as an evangelical imperative is to form an interior attitude by which we know we may be possessed only by God and not material things. This gets at the root of the issue for we who serve as ordained ministers. All too often, the things we believe we possess can end up possessing us! This can cause much of what we do as priests to be counter-productive. While I do not want to overstate this, embracing a greater simplicity of life provides us freedom to serve however and whomever we may be asked to serve.

As with celibacy and obedience, simplicity of life must be viewed with an eye to its essential threefold relationship: a personal experience of God's love in Christ; a communitarian form of living, especially among the presbyterate; a ministerial dimension to life rooted in ordained priesthood. Interestingly, ordination to the diocesan priesthood does not require an explicit promise of poverty in the same way that it does celibacy and obedience. Nonetheless, simplicity of life is an essential component to effective priestly ministry. With celibacy and obedience, it is like the third leg of a stool and necessary in the life of one who would serve as an ordained minister in the Church.

Pope John Paul II wrote in *Pastores Dabo Vobis* (#30):

“Poverty alone ensures that the priest remains available to be sent wherever his work will be most useful and needed, even at the cost of personal sacrifice. It is a condition and essential premise of the apostle's docility to the Spirit...

...The priest should also offer the witness of total 'honesty' in the administration of the goods of the community...by which he will be held accountable by God and his brothers and sisters, especially the poor.

...Evangelical poverty will help the priest to stand beside the underprivileged; to practice solidarity with their efforts to create a more just society...”

Although we may find it difficult in a day and age and in a society that prizes autonomy so much, we are not all that autonomous. Christ on the cross provides a striking reminder of this fact. From the cross, Christ reminds us that we are not really in charge of our existence. Each breath we breathe is a gift given to us by God. We have not brought ourselves into existence nor can we do anything to keep ourselves alive forever. All life is a gift! As St. Paul says it, “What do you have that was not given to you!” (1 Corinthians 4:7). And the way to keep the gift paradoxically is to surrender ourselves totally to God. From the perspective of faith we share in a loving God, such surrender and dependence becomes our greatest blessing.

Since a gift is never something we deserve or have a right to, the ability fully to appreciate the gift of life becomes possible when we admit our vulnerability before God. As creatures in need of redemption, we honestly admit that we do not deserve anything

from God. This posture of radical poverty should be a part of priesthood. Rather than being self-denigrating, it is a welcoming posture that allows us to receive everything as a gift.

Admitting that we deserve nothing and that all is a gift runs counter to the predominant view of society. After all, this is a society that prizes rugged individualism and picking oneself up by the bootstraps. And yet, when we believe that all is a gift in our heart of hearts, the fruitfulness of our priestly ministry is increased a hundred fold. To embrace a spirit of simplicity in our lifestyles allows us to be more available as an instrument of the Gospel. It almost goes without saying that our ministry will bear greater fruit. It must be real and rooted in Christ, however, for a Gospel sense of simplicity of life will not be evangelical unless it is deeply rooted in Christ.

As alluded to earlier, evangelical poverty is rooted in the experience of Christ on the cross. With the cross in mind, it is clear that Gospel simplicity can never be sufficiently motivated by causes, even good and important causes. Its foundation is located in one place – the heart of God.

A priest friend of mine, who has been serving in the city of Magadan in the Russian Far East for close to 15 years recently sent me a reflection. He wrote about what he has learned during his time in Russia. The area in Russia where he serves is harsh and steeped in poverty. In many ways it is unwelcoming toward Christians, especially Catholic priests. It is a region in which over 6 million people died in forced labor work camps during the era of Stalin. He necessarily has lived quite simply. At the same time, his life as a priest has been enriched. He wrote:

What have I learned in Russia? I have learned to be quiet and let God speak to me in Russia. I have learned to love Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament. I have learned to love, and to pray to Our Lady in Russia. I have learned about the spiritual battle in Russia. I learned that Satan is real and wants to destroy me, the church, fatherhood and motherhood. The family is a favorite area of his attack and yet families keep struggling to be families. I have learned to love my weaknesses and depend on God. I have learned that my strengths can also lead me away from God. I have learned I can be too independent and live as if God is my helper not my Savior. I have learned about real evil that destroys souls and real good that reveals God's face in another, especially in the poor and broken. I have learned to hope when it seems hopeless; to love when I don't feel like it; to forgive when I don't want to and I am right. I have learned my faith is weak and still miracles happen all the time around me. I have learned that people can't be trusted but I still trust them. I have learned to embrace the cross and love the Eucharist, which is the salvation of the cross given to us to eat. I have learned falling isn't the hard part; it is having enough humility to get up again and start over. I have learned the sacrament of Confession is one of my greatest joys to receive and to give. I have learned that I love poorly and God loves perfectly.

I think what is most important for priests is to have a deep loving honest and open relationship with our Savior, Jesus Christ, who is also our brother priest. Everything changes when we have this deep friendship with Jesus. If we don't have a personal deep friendship it is a dead definition. And so is priesthood.

Simplicity must be concrete if it is to be real. It must be embodied. It involves actually giving up things, good things, legitimate things, for love of God and God's people. By sacrificing these things our hearts rely more immediately, more directly, more readily on God for fulfillment. But what should we give up, when should we give it up, and how much should we give up in order to be most effective in the context in which we serve as priests? There are many legitimate answers and levels of response. Examples might be the décor of our residences, the type of hobbies we have, the number of "men toys" we own, the availability of our time, things pertaining to style such as food, dress, cars and recreation. These can all have an impact on ministry. The issue here is not that there is something inherently wrong with nice living conditions, going out to dinner, having a hobby or pursuing recreation. It is more a matter of where we place our priorities and the context in which we serve; more a matter of honestly admitting that we may be more attached to a material pleasure than is good for our ministry. Of course, there is a kind of attraction to some material things that is destructive such as being addicted to gambling, alcohol, pornography, etc.

Priests do not create an income as others do. They are supported by people who work hard and often make great sacrifices to support priests who have been sent to serve them. It truly is a sacrifice for families to direct some of their hard earned money toward the support of a parish priest. And yet, they do so gladly out of the conviction of their faith and love for the life of the Church. They do so because of the sacramental life they are able to celebrate because of the priest's ministry. When a priest lives with a sense of entitlement and as a person of privilege, it is an insult to the faithful who sacrifice so much. And it can seriously damage the priest's ministry. It certainly causes doubt and distrust among the faithful entrusted to his care. Living a simple lifestyle demonstrates an appreciation of the sacrifice made by God's people. It adds immensely to the credibility of the priest's ministry and the extent to which he desires to serve God's people.

Living evangelical poverty can be difficult depending on the circumstances of our place of ministry. An important element of evangelical poverty is our association with the materially poor. As many of us know, material poverty breeds all sorts of social, emotional, physical and spiritual ills. But it is often the very place Christ situated himself. It is in the midst of poverty - whether social, physical, spiritual, emotional - that a priest must be willing to situate himself. It is here that he can witness God's love in a way that cannot happen in a situation of comfort and abundance. Like Christ who died on the cross for all people, we must allow ourselves to be poured out for the sake of others.

An April 17, 2006 Article from *America* by Roberto S. Goizueta provided the following challenge.

“The refusal to acknowledge Christ’s wounds, wounds that appear on his raised body, is the mortal sin (in the most literal sense of the term), for it leads inevitably to the death of others and, indeed, to our own death. All pain, all suffering appear in our lives as unwanted reminders that we are not in control of our lives, that we are indeed vulnerable. Death is the ultimate threat to our sense of security and invulnerability. So too are all those partial deaths that foreshadow our common end: illness, old age, poverty, failure, abandonment. Our consumer culture is driven by the promise that all these forms of human vulnerability are avoidable – if we have a large enough bank account, the right kind of insurance, the latest model automobile or the most effective deodorant (“Never let them see you sweat”).

Authentic human relationships of mutual love and trust are also suspect since they involve a dimension of vulnerability and even pain in the face of another who, however much we may seek to control, always remains beyond our control. So we surround ourselves with things that promise security and invulnerability. We run from persons, who will demand vulnerability and the possibility of pain. We fall in love with cars, houses, mobile phones and computers, even as we remain ‘unattached’ to human persons.”

I read once about a priest who truly lived this evangelical imperative, and did so in a manner in which it was second nature. This is how the writer recalled the young priest:

“He never had a bank account, never wrote a check, never had any personal money. He slept on the floor and practiced other forms of self-discipline and self-denial. Possessions meant nothing to him, with the possible exception of the skiing and hiking equipment he accepted from his friends. [His friend] now a priest, once threw his friend’s rusty old razor away and gave him a new one for a name-day present. If he hadn’t thrown the old one out, he was sure [he] would have given the new one away, as he did with most gifts. He always wore an old cassock and old shoes. Looking at him, you might think he was a beggar, a nobody. He loved his priesthood and yet spent the bulk of his free time, which turned into a different kind of ministerial time, with laypeople...” (*Witness to Hope* by George Weigel, p. 119).

The young priest was Karol Wojtyla, later Pope John Paul II. I’m not suggesting that every priest should emulate the late Pope, but such descriptions do offer a challenge to those of us who believe we are entitled to a more than comfortable lifestyle, one more geared toward privilege than ministry.

The call for simplicity in lifestyle and embodiment of evangelical poverty empowers us to enter life at a much deeper level for it leads to a level of security that is focused not on what we can do, but in what God has done for us in Christ. This is the very core of our ministry of service. This is the very heart of what it means to be a priest.