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DIOCESE OF GREAT FALLS-BILLINGS

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**LENTEN LETTER TO PRIESTS
DIOCESE OF GREAT FALLS-
BILLINGS**

From

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My Dear Brothers in Christ,

In previous Lenten Letters to Priests I have written since becoming Bishop of Great Falls-Billings, I have focused on a singular element associated with our life and ministry as priests. I have done so mostly as a personal reflection and do so again this year as I offer this reflection to you. It is my hope that you would use the Season of Lent to ponder celibacy of priestly life and how it impacts our ministry as well as priestly ministry over all. As I say at every ordination to the priesthood, our ministry is never about us. It is about serving God's people. We sometimes forget this. The more we are in touch with the primary focus of ministry, the more effective we will be as priests.

Of the promises made by the vast majority of priests, I believe the commitment to a celibate life stands out more so than does the expectation of living a simple life or having a solid prayer routine or being appropriately obedience to authority. Celibacy is often the major issue in a young man's life when deciding whether or not to embrace a vocation to priesthood in the Roman Catholic Church. Even after a man has embraced such a call, faithfully living as a celibate priest, as most of us know, is not always so easy.

We all know that celibacy is a commitment most priests are required to embrace. While it does have some advantages in helping us to focus on our relationship with the Lord, there are ample examples of married couples who have far deeper relationships with God than celibate priests. Celibacy, in and of itself, is not a guarantor of great holiness. It certainly can be an aid to finding holiness in that it often allows more time and availability for prayer. The purpose of celibacy as I understand it, however, is directed mostly toward effective priestly ministry.

Generally speaking, there are three key reasons for the requirement for celibacy. First is the ecclesial reason. Being celibate provides a priest a level of freedom to serve God's people wholeheartedly, unencumbered with the responsibilities associated with marriage and children. Secondly, there is the incarnational reason. As Christ, the Word of God, lived his life as a celibate man, we who share in the ministerial priesthood follow his own example in our lives. This leads to the eschatological reason. By the lives we lead as celibate priests, we witness to an ultimate reality – the kingdom of God. While life on this good earth is filled with many benefits and blessings, it is not in this life where we find ultimate peace and joy. As St. Augustine so wonderfully noted in his Confessions, "Our hearts are restless, O God, until they rest in You."

In Mark 10:28ff (just before the third prediction of Jesus' passion), Peter tells Jesus, "We have given up everything to follow you." To paraphrase Jesus' reply (cf. Mark

10:29), “There is no one who has given up everything who will not receive even a 100 times more!” Our call, our vocation, is to radical discipleship. We are more than “church men” who have an 8 to 5 job. We have a call from God that demands our witness to a great reality. It is our shared conviction that the kingdom of God is, in fact, the greatest reality.

Celibacy is associated with the three evangelical imperatives – poverty, chastity and obedience. None are self-evident and each requires a level of faith in God. Though they are connected in a certain way to the vocation we share as Catholic priests, these evangelical imperatives really apply to anyone who is a disciple of Jesus, including married people and consecrated religious women and men. As priests, we embrace them in a very intentional and specific way that allows for our witness and our service. They expect and point to total dependence on God. As the Gospel of Mark affirms (Mark 1:15), our response to the kingdom must be now, for the kingdom is “at hand.”

I think it safe to say that celibacy, as most people think of it, is not all that normative. But then, neither is fully living out Christianity by the standards advanced within our society. Fr. Ron Rolheiser, in his book *Forgotten Among the Lilies*, notes that “...normalcy identifies itself with idiosyncratic preference, the good life: a good job, a good romance, a good house, good sex, a good body and lots of money, leisure time and opportunity to enjoy it all” (p.256). Then he points out: “To consecrate something is to displace it from normal use: an ordinary cup is set aside to become a chalice, an ordinary table is set aside to become an altar, or an ordinary building is set aside to become a church” (p. 257). Following his train of thought, we are ordinary men who are set aside to witness to the kingdom of God.

My assumption here is that celibacy is connected with the vocation of most priests. I realize well that there are exceptions and that celibacy is a discipline and not a doctrine and there are examples of married priests throughout the history of the Church including this diocese. At the same time, I realize and accept that celibacy is a longstanding discipline as well as the norm of the Roman Catholic Church. Recalling the evangelical imperatives, I believe there is much to affirm about celibacy as a lifestyle that is positive. It may be a way of living that can be challenging, but it is also a way of living that can be life giving.

In his reflection, *The Challenge of Diocesan Priestly Spirituality*, Fr. George Aschenbrenner, S.J. asserts that to appreciate celibacy as a genuine charism, it must be understood within “three essential relationships: a distinctive companionship with God; a life and faith shared appropriately in the presbyteral community; and a ministry shared with other people” (p. 111).

Fundamentally, celibacy entails our forgoing of all genital sexual expression: with members of the opposite sex; with members of the same sex; with ourselves. It entails giving up romantic behavior and marriage. This doesn't mean that we won't ever have "romantic feelings." Affectivity is a normal part of human existence and it is normal to expect that we would have a "romantic attraction" to some people through life. But if we "fall into romance" we must reorient our feelings in light of our priestly commitment. Good healthy loving relationships (especially solid friendships) are an important part of being human and being a healthy priest. A priest ought to find great richness in human relationships, but these must be truly celibate relationships. This is what allows us to be of service to the many. As someone once said, celibacy does not mean that a priest has lost something, but rather that he has found Someone.

There is a chapter in Fr. Ron Rolheiser's book, *Forgotten Among the Lilies* entitled "Staying Home on a Friday Night." It wasn't written with a view of celibacy in mind, yet I think what he wrote fits: "The idea is all too present that we can only be happy if we somehow fulfill every hunger within us, if our lives are completely whole, consummated and we are never alone on a Friday night. Unless every pleasure that we yearn for can be tasted we cannot be happy... We stand before life and love in a greedy posture and with unrealistic expectations, demanding the resolution of all our eros and tension. However, life in this world can never give us that" (p. 14-15). He continues, with a bit of sarcasm, "In a culture that tells us that no happiness is possible unless every ache and restlessness inside us is fulfilled, how hard it is to be happy. How tragic it is to be alone! How tragic it is not to be filled romantically and sexually! How tragic it is not to be good looking! How tragic it is to be unhealthy, aged, handicapped! ...How tragic it is to go through life and not be able to taste every pleasure on earth! It almost isn't worth living" (p. 16).

As embodied in the life of a priest, celibacy must be understood as more than an attitude or, negatively, as a tragic "doing without." It is an embodiment of the kingdom of God! It flows out of that threefold relationship: our companionship with God, our shared life and faith in the priesthood and our ministry with and for the people of God. All three of these elements are inter-related and required if celibacy is going to be a witness to the kingdom of God.

The first and most important dynamic in these essential relationships is a distinctive companionship with God in Jesus Christ. Pope Francis addressed this element early on in his Apostolic Exhortation, *The Joy of the Gospel*. He wrote, "I invite all Christians, everywhere, at this very moment, to a renewed personal encounter with Jesus Christ, or at least openness to letting him encounter them..." (EG #3). I believe faithfully living as a celibate demands personal encounter with the Lord, for it is those who become

personally aware of God's grace-filled invitation to life who will necessarily respond in a definite way.

As I noted earlier, the response of those called to priesthood generally includes a commitment to celibacy. This commitment has to be embraced within the context of the virtues of faith and hope, for there is no one concretely to "provide us with a good night kiss" or to "share our bed." In a sex obsessed, materialistic, narcissistic culture like our own, living the life of a celibate may seem abnormal. This is why it holds such a counter-cultural value. And it is why we must maintain our focus on Christ.

Fr. Henri Nouwen in his book *Clowning in Rome* (which I believe is out of print) thought that every human heart has a space and an emptiness that is available to no one besides that unique human person and God. This empty space is a special space. It is reserved solely for God and ourselves. It is at the core of our beings, our souls. Mature spiritual identity comes from gradually discovering and accepting and living out of this core. Fr. Nouwen believed that celibacy is actually an essential element in the life of all Christians because it is what allows us to encounter God at the core of our being.

A celibate priest, who in a certain sense, is disengaged from a singular relationship with another person, has a different way of being engaged with many other persons. On their behalf, his life points to a special engagement with God. By his life he announces to all other Christians and to all other people that their truest identity ultimately is not in and of this world but is fulfilled solely in Christ. It is why a priest must witness to it authentically, honestly, generously and as second nature.

Our relationship with God requires time to be alone with God. This is not the same as being lonely, though most of us do have times when we may be lonely. But then, loneliness is often a part of life. Not every time we feel lonely do we automatically need to fill in the space with noise or activity. Those occasions can be opportunities to move into the intimacy of aloneness with God. The danger, in an encounter with loneliness, is that we may move into destructive and unhealthy behavior instead. If this latter happens, it indicates (at least at some level) that we have never discovered what it means to be alone with God so we can end up covering up the loneliness in a variety of ways. Some of these ways may be acceptable to most people though quite contrary to what it means to be a celibate. Of course, some ways may be illegal and immoral. Any time we cover up a charism, we are being dishonest. The key to authenticity is finding a time and a place and a space for God regularly in our lives!

The second dynamic of the essential threefold relationship within celibacy is our bond with brother priests with whom we serve. The Vatican II document *Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests* advances this: "Established in the priestly order by

ordination, all priests are united among themselves in an intimate sacramental brotherhood” (#8). While this may not be the same as calling all priests to a religious or monastic life, an appropriate experience of community among diocesan priests makes a difference and is important for priestly ministry.

Today, in many dioceses, brotherhood and community among priests is often more a matter of personal choice and selection than an intentional desire among priests to join together for fraternity as one presbyterate. Too often we fall prey to the view that our parishes are our possessions, i.e., “my” parish, “my” ministry, “my” mission. Our concern must always be about the Church’s mission! When we develop an overly possessive attitude, it becomes an obstacle to what should be a shared vision and mission we ought to have as a communitarian body of priests. When our vision includes an appreciation that we are collaborators with the bishop in the mission of the Church, we work to support each other as we strive to accomplish the mission of the Church together. This kind of communitarian life does not happen by accident. It comes about by an intentional effort to be in union with all the priests of the local church.

John Paul II wrote in *Pastores Dabo Vobis*: “The ordained ministry has a radical ‘communitarian form’ and can only be carried out as a ‘collective work.’ The council dealt extensively with this communal aspect of the nature of the priesthood, examining in succession the relationship of the priest with his own bishop, with other priests, and with the lay faithful” (PDV#17).

A third element is our relationship to ministry. Interestingly, while ministry is central to our role as priests, it is not what proves our worth, e.g., only when I am an effective preacher or administrator am I of worth. Or, I am worth more than my brother because I am a better homilist or parishioners like me better. Our identity as priests as well as our worth as persons is far more tied with the first element – a personal encounter with the Lord. It is vital that we understand this because it is solely when we are grounded in Christ that the ministerial dynamic of our priesthood truly can flourish and bear fruit.

In the ministerial dimension of our lives, we enter into various kinds of relationships with all sorts of people. We encounter them within a variety of situations and conditions. Some of these individuals and some of the contexts in which we deal with people can be a danger to the commitment to celibacy. Knowing and admitting the kinds of relationships and situations that may entice us to cross over boundaries in advance avoids lots of problems. With regard to sexual expression, even a celibate priest can “send off” the wrong signals and, in a sense, inform another person that he is “available.” We must know proper boundaries and proper behavior. Knowing and adhering to celibate ways of being in relationship give the kind of witness that celibacy

is intended to give. A celibate way of relationship embodies selflessness, honesty, generosity and maintains a concern to help this or that person move toward the kingdom of God.

Most people likely think that celibacy mostly is concerned solely with sexual behavior, but there are other, non-sexual ways, by which a priest can violate a commitment to living celibately such as addictive behaviors associated with gambling, alcohol or drug abuse. Essentially, anything that draws us away from our primary relationship with God is harmful to honest and healthy relationships with others or effective priestly ministry. I heard Fr. Stephen Rossetti once mention that he likes to apply the grandmother rule, i.e., “What would someone’s grandmother say if she saw a priest engaged in such behavior?”

Some behaviors that may seem “acceptable” or, at least, “tolerable” are not consistent with our commitment to celibacy. A priest can embrace a very self-focused lifestyle, become a workaholic or fall into clericalism. Essentially, this means we become more of a “bachelor” than we do a celibate. We act as if life and our priesthood really is “about us.” Our energies become more and more focused on self-concerns than on people with whom we actually can relate.

A workaholic attitude can be harmful in the sense that it is really an escape. It is an escape because we concentrate on things more than relationships with persons. While a workaholic may appear to be the most dedicated of priests, we can end up being men who have missed life as a love affair with God and God’s people. The emphasis of a workaholic is on doing things and not really serving God’s people. Hard work is important for priestly ministry, but we must do our work within a context in which we truly are serving the people of God.

Clericalism is based on an unfounded sense of superiority, of privilege, of entitlement. The emphasis is more on being served than on serving. Jesus rightly insisted that the disciples wash his feet at the Last Supper. He was, after all, their Master. What he did, however, was show them how they were to live and minister by his own example, i.e., washing the feet of others. While parishioners genuinely want to show their appreciation for what we do and who we are as priests, we need to provide genuine leadership. We must be careful that we never fall into an arrogant attitude by which we think we’re owed more respect than our parishioners. In the best sense, we should be demonstrating our mutual appreciation and our common bond as sisters and brothers in Christ.

Being celibate never eliminates our need to have true friendships, i.e., relationships with people with whom we can be appropriately vulnerable. Friends share their joys and

their burdens with each other. They tell their friends of their struggles and their burdens knowing that they can expect support and encouragement. A friendship is nurturing and mutually supporting. Think of a time when you had a physical, spiritual or emotional struggle! Were you able to share it with anyone? While it is nice when a brother priest reaches out to us for fraternity and friendship, each one of us has to do our part in taking the initiative for friendships, especially with our brother priests.

I wrote at the beginning of this letter about my hope that you will take some time in Lent to reflect on this element of our common priesthood. You might want to look into some of the references I include at the end of the letter. I have found them helpful over the years and believe they have much to offer for further reflection. Basically, most of what I offer in this letter flows from them.

References:

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