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“Simplicity for the sake of the Kingdom”

“I am a diocesan priest I don’t have a vow of poverty!”

“Poverty doesn’t apply to me, I am not a religious!”

While these two statements may be true, they are misleading. While the “vow of poverty” applies to those in religious congregations, the call to “be poor” for the sake of the Kingdom is one of three Evangelical Counsels offered by our Lord; He presents it as the first of the Beatitudes: “Blessed are the poor in spirit, theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (Mt. 5:3). In addition, the *Code of Canon Law* reminds Diocesan Priests: “Clerics are to follow a simple way of life and avoid anything which smacks of worldliness (*vanitatem*). Goods which they receive on the occasion of the exercise of an ecclesiastical office, and which are over and above what is necessary for their worthy upkeep and the fulfillment of all of the duties of their state, they ought to use for the good of the Church and for charitable works” (CIC 282).

Well, that debunks the myth that somehow the diocesan priest is somehow not called to a life of poverty or simplicity. Our Lord and our Church beckon us to respond to the invitation of greater freedom from the things of this world in order to live completely unfettered for the world to come. The Evangelical Council of poverty, or for our sake what we normally refer to as “simplicity of life” is not an end in itself but a path to greater freedom and joy. Simplicity of life allows us to be less weighed down; ultimately not possessed by our possessions so that we can serve the Lord with greater freedom and credibility.

We are to be witnesses to Christ to the world – thus set apart and different in the manner in which we live. The most important reason for our simplicity is the example of the Savior Himself who was born poor in a manger, who had “no place to lay his head,” and who died naked on the poverty of the Cross – if it was good enough for the Master, it should be good enough for us. St. Paul rightly summarizes: “For you know the gracious act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that for your sake He became poor although He was rich, so that by His poverty you might become rich” (2 Cor. 8:9). Hans Urs von Balthasar reminds his readers of the importance of the evangelical counsels: “This becomes particularly clear where poverty is concerned: Jesus’ poverty was not one of crying need, for such poverty would not have allowed him to fulfill his mission. It was a question of not worrying about material things – his only concern and care was for the kingdom of God – expressed in his request for that which was sufficient for each day. It was a spirit of loving squandering of oneself with its final expression in the Eucharist: this is the proof that his poverty is perfect. Of course it is true that the poverty of those who have been called should be a witness for the Church and the world and should therefore have a credible visible form. But it will gain, in credibility – even in the power house of our present prosperous society – from its readiness to be disposed of: nothing of my possessions is reserved, out of reach” (*Elucidations*, 143).

Our poverty lies in the realization that everything we have belongs to the Lord – truly nothing is “mine” – “I” possess nothing. As the *Sucipiat* prayer of St. Ignatius of Loyola states: “Take Lord receive all I have and possess, all is yours now, you have given all to me, now I return it.” As diocesan priest our poverty lies on so many different levels, but for it to be grace-filled, it must be freely offered as a sacrifice to the Lord: it is the poverty at times of physical possessions, our time, our sleep, our privacy, our own family, even our will, and ultimately as every person on earth our health and life. The world needs us to show them how to surrender and abandon ourselves, our temporalities, our desires, in fact everything as a testimony that Christ is our “all.” That is why simplicity of life is so important, and that is why it is so attractive. Isn’t our whole life about attracting people to God? We are to be bridges, pontiffs, and we pray that our lifestyle and actions are never obstacles to the Lord (cf. *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, 43).

Our newly elected Holy Father, Pope Francis, stated quite succinctly: “How I would like a Church which is poor and for the poor!” (“Address to the International Media,” 16 March 2013, *ORE* 20 March 2013, 6). The Pope knows of the importance of combating the materialistic and consumeristic society in which we live by our own personal example of simplicity. We are to stand as a counter balance to society, and our lifestyle in some way is meant to be different. Evangelical poverty is attractive: St. Francis of Assisi drew hundreds of thousands of souls to Christ in his own lifetime by his free choice to embrace the simplicity of the Gospel message in an era of complexity. *Il Poverello* – the Poor One – made Christ’s love present through his poverty in three ways: 1) The joy and interior freedom of a simple lifestyle; 2) Generosity to others and 3) Credibility of witness.

Let’s take a moment and look at each of these three areas for our own lives.

1) The joy and interior freedom of a simple lifestyle. St. Paul reminds the early Church: “We seem to have nothing, yet everything is ours” (2 Cor. 6:10). This is the inner freedom we are looking for! We are fools for Christ (cf. 1 Cor. 4:10). Voluntary and evangelical simplicity really does give us an inner freedom that the world or possessions cannot give. Whenever I simplify and get rid of things I feel more liberated and joyful. The evangelical council is given to us by the Lord for exactly this reason; life, light, and joy are His desire for us (cf. Jn. 10:10). Simplicity of life combats the vices of greed, avarice, and self-indulgence which hinder our freedom of spirit and hold us back from true Christian living. We are always to point to the “true riches” to which Jesus directs us. “Store up for yourselves riches in heaven that neither moth nor rust can destroy” (Mt. 6:20). In addition, as opposed to every other man our age, we do not have to worry about our own personal finances. The Church provides for all of our needs: food, housing, and an adequate salary are automatic given to us regardless of our reviews and performance or lack thereof. We are free from the worries of our own finances so that we can be available to help carry the burdens of others. Think of your seminary education alone – a \$300,000 scholarship that we could never pay back! We must not take for granted these priestly “luxuries,” but rather they should free us to be more aware of the needs of our people.

2) Generosity to others: The diocesan priest who is striving to lead a life of simplicity is able be a man of great generosity and magnanimity. He models for the people entrusted to him the good stewardship of what has been entrusted to his care: the temporal goods of the parish and even his own personal possessions. Trust me when I say that people very often give according to the way they see us live. When you stand up in the pulpit and ask your people to tithe it is important for them to know that you do the same – we never ask people to do that which we are not willing to do ourselves. The generous priest is other-centered and not self-centered; he is grateful and does not consider himself entitled. In jest we sometimes say: “Only the best for father!” But be careful, because many a truth is said in jest!

At this year's Chrism Mass in the Basilica of St. Peter, Pope Francis challenged all of us:

A priest who seldom goes out of himself, who anoints little – I won't say “not at all” because, thank God, our people take our oil from us anyway – misses out on the best of our people, on what can stir the depths of his priestly heart. Those who do not go out of themselves, instead of being mediators, gradually become intermediaries, managers. We know the difference: the intermediary, the manager, “has already received his reward”, and since he doesn't put his own skin and his own heart on the line, he never hears a warm, heartfelt word of thanks. This is precisely the reason why some priests grow dissatisfied, become sad priests, lose heart and *become in some sense collectors of antiques or novelties* – instead of being shepherds living with “the smell of the sheep”, shepherds in the midst of their flock, fishers of men. True enough, the so-called crisis of priestly identity threatens us all and adds to the broader cultural crisis; but if we can resist its onslaught, we will be able to put out in the name of the Lord and cast our nets. It is not a bad thing that reality itself forces us to “put out into the deep”, where what we are by grace is clearly seen as pure grace, out into the deep of the contemporary world, where the only thing that counts is “unction” – not function – and the nets which overflow with fish are those cast solely in the name of the One in whom we have put our trust: Jesus” (“Chrism Mass Homily,” 28 March 2013, *ORE*, 3 April 2013, 5 [*emphasis mine*]).

This is the heart of a priest – a generous heart, a big heart, that has room for others. But if we are satisfied with this world's goods, we will not always have room for others. The generous priest lives in such a way that he is able to help others and model tithing for his parish. Because most of what we make could be considered “disposable income,” the priest is afforded the privilege of being able to tithe 10-30% of his income back to the parish, to local charities, to their *alma mater* (hint!), and at times even help out our own families. Conversely, you will be extremely humbled, inspired, and edified as you learn how generous the people around us are – I had a meeting with one of our benefactors yesterday who has given \$30 Million to charity – I know for a fact that this is beyond 10 % of his net worth – that is generosity.

3) Credibility of witness – our very lifestyle is meant to be a proclamation of the Gospel; again, that is what made St. Francis so attractive in his own day. In his Pastoral Letter on “Priestly Simplicity of Life,” Bishop Warfel from Montana wrote:

“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 Ministry and Life of Priests from Vatican Council II. 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 poverty’ (No. 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” (Bishop Michael W. Warfel, 24 February 2009, as found in *Origins* 12 March 2009).

How do we do this? First of all we must have a heart for the poor – what the Church calls a “preferential option for the poor.” Our parishes should have outreach programs for the most needy in our midst. Our promotion and involvement in such programs teaches others to do the same (e.g.

the St. Vincent de Paul Society, soup kitchens, Catholic Charities, CRS, parish twinning opportunities in the third world).

We should also live in the constant tension of needing to simplify our lives. A healthy practice is a quarterly “poverty check.” This means looking through our closets, drawers, and shelves and whatever is an unused or unneeded possession is then purged. Pope Francis has reinvigorated me to renew this practice in my own life. On Good Friday I went through my closet to get rid of all of my “extras.” Our men were able to take my two bags to St. Anne’s Place last week and I was so humbled to hear the story that when they arrived a man immediately pulled out a pair of my black shoes and put them on. Indeed, the words of St. Basil the Great ring true: “The bread which you do not use is the bread of the hungry; the garment hanging in your wardrobe is the garment of him who is naked; the shoes that you do not wear are the shoes of the one who is barefoot; the money that you keep locked away is the money of the poor; the acts of charity that you do not perform are so many injustices that you commit.” In a similar vein, another practice I have learned from those more wise and holy, is that when we are given something, give something away. In other words, if I get a new sweater, then I give one away – otherwise we end up with 25 golf shirts, sweaters, shoes, etc. In reality, we need very little. Ask the Lord to help you purge your possessions: “What do I really need O Lord? Help me to give what I have to those who really need it.”

We are also given the privilege of not having to worry about an extensive wardrobe. What freedom and witness there is in knowing what we are going to wear to work tomorrow! Black is in and ever fashionable! The Roman Collar is always in style, and is universally recognized as a sign of Christ’s priests. That is why the Church invites us to embrace this public witness (*cf. CIC 284*). This is the reason for the dress code in the seminary, that you might assimilate the practice into a “habit.” Not only does the Roman collar allow the priest to foster simplicity of life, it allows him to be ever more a servant of all. It is more a form of asceticism than of clericalism, if worn with humility and service as the driving force. Over the course of time, the “art” and balance of knowing when to wear the collar will be developed. Obviously one need not worry about wearing the collar while on the golf course, at the beach, on the lake, in the woods, and moments of rest and recreation with priests and family. As always, the exterior must mirror the interior reality and disposition of a true servant of the Lord. The people of God are thirsting to see visible signs of God’s presence in the world today. To see a Roman collar around the parish, in the airport, at the store, at a restaurant, around town – wherever the priest may find himself – is a comfort and a reminder of God’s presence. The visible priest is always an eschatological sign which points well beyond himself. Priests who avail themselves in this way experience the extraordinary joy of their fatherhood in the ordinary moments of daily life. The priest, who is a hoarder of clothes and is always in the latest fashions, risks losing his identity and many grace-filled moments both for himself and the people of God.

We could go on and on about the various ways we can further embrace voluntary simplicity of life: cars, toys, vacations, electronics, restaurants, an obsession with the pop-culture, etc. This does not mean that nice things are bad, but we need to be free enough to say with St. Paul in honesty that we can be happy with or without: “I know indeed how to live in humble circumstances; I know also how to live with abundance. In every circumstance and in all things I have learned the secret of being well fed and of going hungry, of living in abundance and of being in need” (Phil. 4:12). Can we be just as happy if someone takes us to Denny’s as to the Capital Grille, or serves us meatloaf as opposed to filet mignon? As Mother Teresa would tell her sisters: “Give whatever God takes and take whatever He gives, with a big smile.” There is nothing wrong with the finer things in life; the danger is when we come to expect it. We also should not grow

accustomed to having everything paid for by others – never presume on others generosity; offer to pay for your share – remember we do get paid a salary! Also, how do we are called to be servants treat “the help”? Are we kind, helpful and courteous to those who wait on us in restaurants, in the refectory and in the rectory? You can learn a lot about a person by speaking with the parish housekeeper.

While we are not supposed to live a life of apparent luxury or vanity, the opposite also can lose balance. Cardinal Dolan used to quote the Jewish proverb: “Poverty doesn’t mean dirt.” We are to be good stewards of our possessions. When your shirt is threadbare, trade it out; when your blacks fade to “off-white” call Almy; and when your jeans are “wholier” [*sic*] than you are, buy new ones. As diocesan priests we do have the “right of ownership” – be an example of care, cleanliness, modesty, humility, and simplicity – this allows your lifestyle to point to Christ. Our interior disposition is the core of all of the externals of simplicity of life – remember it is not an end in itself. Ask yourself, do I foster an interior simplicity of heart? Am I a complicated person and friend? Can people take me at my word in a spirit of integrated simplicity? Is what you see what you get?

Listen to the following four stages of maturation in growing in simplicity that will be a part of our Human Formation rubric next year. Where do you fit right now? Are you headed in the right direction?

- A. Foundational: Struggles with detachment from material things or with sense of entitlement. Connection between prayer life and outward manifestations in service and solidarity beginning to develop.
- B. Developing: Lives simply; learning to appreciate the benefits of a less material and consumerist lifestyle while deepening appreciation for the value of earthly goods. Demonstrates a growing generosity to others, including the poor, and is increasing in his compassion for others.
- C. Well-Developed: Comfortable with simplicity of lifestyle; reasonable detachment from material things; good stewardship of and balanced appreciation for earthly goods. Exhibits a spirit of service, charity, and generosity towards others, especially the poor; a commitment to justice and peace.
- D. Exemplary: Exhibits a spirit of generosity, simplicity of lifestyle, a reasonable detachment from material things, and a balanced appreciation for and stewardship of earthly goods. Exhibits an ardent effort to serve and be in solidarity with others, especially the poor; seeks justice and peace.

May each of us hear the call of the Lord which he spoke to St. Francis: “Rebuild my church, which as you see is falling into ruin.” Simplicity of life for the sake of the Kingdom leads us to greater joy, freedom, generosity, and allows us to be ever more credible witnesses for the New Evangelization. As Pope Francis said in his homily last Sunday: “Let us all remember this: one cannot proclaim the Gospel of Jesus without the tangible witness of one’s life. I am thinking now of some advice that Saint Francis of Assisi gave his brothers: ‘Preach the Gospel and, if necessary, use words.’ Preaching with your life, with your witness. Inconsistency on the part of pastors and the faithful between what they say and what they do, between word and manner of life, is undermining the Church’s credibility” (Homily at St. Paul Outside the Walls, 14 April 2010).

Let us together ask for the intercession of “Il Poverello” and of the lowly Virgin of Nazareth that we might be transformed from complexity to simplicity; into an icon of Christ, who for our “sake became poor although He was rich, so that by His poverty you might become rich” (2 Cor. 8:9).