

The Vows - A Position Paper by the Rev. Bonnell Spencer, OHC

A fresh restatement of the monastic vows emphasizes a significant shift in interpretation and points toward a greatly enriched life for today's Religious. The Chapters of the Order of the Holy Cross and of the Order of St. Helena this summer adopted this statement as an accurate interpretation of the Vows as both Communities now understand them

Poverty is reverence for the integrity of creation. God himself has that attitude toward the work of his hands.

Creation by evolution, rather than by fiat, confirms it. God does not manipulate the universe from outside to accomplish his will.

He works from within it, obeying the laws, allowing life to proliferate into all possible forms. Yet through the process he brings forth man in his image.

Poverty, then, is the God-like refusal to exploit or manipulate the natural world to one's own ends.

It recognizes the beauty, the goodness, the sanctity of things. It values them too highly to reject or despise them, for it receives them as the works of God.

Yet it seeks not to possess them, but to use them for God's glory and for the welfare of man and the universe itself.

The wrong attitude toward creation can be expressed in one word – *mine*. It signifies exploiting things for one's own pleasure, using things for one's own advancement, hoarding things for one's own security.

Our vow of poverty allows us to change mine to ours. We must then strive to make that ours mean belonging to the Community, not as a society that seeks its own comfort, perpetuation, or aggrandizement, but as an organ of the Church, the Body of Christ.

Hence our ours should become his through whom in the end, since he is the Omega as well as the Alpha of creation, all things become God's.

Chastity is the reverence for the integrity of persons. Not only does it refrain from exploiting them or using them as things; it always seeks a person-to-person relationship as far as possible, one that respects to the full the personality of the other.

Accordingly, it never tries to do good to or for the other, to dominate, control, or manipulate him, even for his own advantage. Rather it so humbly serves the other as to help him find for himself and develop through himself his own potential.

A mutual relationship of this kind is love. The supreme opportunity for such mutual self-giving between human beings in this life is to be found in Holy Matrimony.

Those who are called to celibacy, however, forgo the exclusiveness which inheres in that relationship, in order that they may be free to establish a similar, though slightly less intimate, relationship of love with as many persons as possible.

For the celibate, the person-to-person relationships are not merely spiritual or intellectual, but engage the whole personality, emotional and physical as well.

Celibacy in no way involves a fear, repudiation, or repression of sex. Sexual attraction, when present,

can and should be for the celibate both an invitation to and a part of the love relationship with other persons.

But since the more intimate forms of the sexual relationship demand the exclusiveness of Holy Matrimony for their expression in love, the celibate must forgo them and maintain such safeguards in his person-to-person relationships as will protect against their occurrence.

And the celibate will always remember that he is called to a love relationship with as many persons as possible, not just with those for whom he feels a physical, emotional, intellectual or spiritual attraction.

Obedience is reverence for the integrity of oneself. God has created man to fulfill two functions in the universe.

First, he is to be its priest, offering for himself and on behalf of all creation the sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving to its creator. That sacrifice must take the form of obedient love.

The first man refused to make that sacrifice from the beginning, and has thereby frustrated the purpose of his existence and impaired his integrity.

The new man in Christ has offered that sacrifice of obedience, even unto death, and continues to offer it on earth, through those who are baptized into his new humanity, in the oblation of the Eucharist.

Second, man is called to co-create with God within the universe a society of love.

Man has an essential part in this process because such a society cannot, even by God, be established from without by force, but can only be developed from within by lovers.

It does not, however, have to be initiated by us. It is the kingdom of God which has already been brought to earth in the man Christ Jesus.

We can enter it here and now by the surrender of faith and commitment to him. To the extent we do, he can use us as the agents through whom he extends his love to others.

That surrender, be it noted, involves the gift of the total personality with all its capacities.

Obedience, therefore, is not fulfilled in a passive acceptance and execution of other's directives.

It means taking one's full part in the development of the common life, contributing not only one's abilities, but also one's initiative to the creation of a society of love, both within the Community and in the world around it.

And in order that all may make their true contribution, those in authority, and indeed all the members of the Order, must remember that all other members and aspirants to membership are adults with a responsibility to themselves, society and God, which they alone can discern and exercise.

They must be treated as such, not as children or slaves whose only obligation is, in the narrowest sense of the word, to obey.

Neither should the individual act like a child or a slave by refusing to take adult responsibility.

Obedience, then, is the acceptance of our vocation to be lovers – lovers of God and of our fellow men – by which we can achieve the integrity and fulfillment of ourselves.

In its monastic form it is expressed, in its first instance, through the Community and its vows.

Poverty makes possible the provision of that which is needed for both our common and our individual life and work, without the onus and responsibility of private ownership.

Chastity makes possible an enduring family life in which are provided the opportunities and safeguards for a celibate person-to-person relationship of love.

Obedience to the Rule inculcates the principles on the basis of which the pattern of communal life can be constantly worked out in terms of current circumstances.

Obedience to the Community provides both hierarchical authority and corporate consultation by which the will of God for the group and for individuals can be determined, provided that each will by mediation, intercessory prayer, and study, and is humbly, charitably, but articulately, contributing his insights, talents, and initiative toward the formation of a common mind.

The community however, being an organ in the Body of Christ, does not exist for itself or for its members.

It is a school of love in which the individual may learn the art of self-surrender and service. It is a society of love which should reflect in microcosm what God intends for all mankind.

It is a fellowship of love which guides and supports its members as they go forth, singly or in groups, to share in Christ's ministry of reconciliation to the world.

Insofar as these purposes and ideals are accomplished and embodied in the Community, it reflects and manifests, corporately and individually, the image of God in which man is created, the fecundity of the self-giving love of the Holy and Eternal Trinity.