

Poverty, Chastity, and Obedience

The Big Three

Poverty. Chastity. Obedience. There they are: the “big three.” According to canon law, every member of a religious order must profess publicly these three vows (canon 654). My congregation, the De La Salle Christian Brothers, requires its members to profess two vows special to the order: to associate for service of poor people through education, and to ensure stability in the institute.

The first special vow calls the brothers to associate and to strive constantly to make their schools and educational works accessible to those who are poor. This is the work not of a single brother but of a community of brothers and Lasallians who together make this happen. This vow challenges all Lasallians to serve economically disadvantaged people in all schools, including those that enroll students from the middle and upper classes.

The vow of stability reminds the brothers to be faithful to their worldwide institute and to its members and traditions. Stability is a fitting response to the faithfulness of God, who guides the global institute to serve as a stable force in the life of hundreds of thousands of young people.

Other congregations may also have particular vows, but the bottom line for nuns and monks, sisters and brothers, and priests who are members of a religious order (i.e., Jesuits or Dominicans) is the three fundamental vows. *Fundamental* is a good word to describe them, because the vows touch almost every meaningful aspect of life.

How is a vow different from a promise? The difference is similar to how discerning differs from deciding. Vows are promises made for life and made in a spiritual context. For example, I promise to call you later, or I promise to do my best. But two partners vow to be true to each other throughout their married life, or I vow to be a brother for the rest of my life.

Vows are made in the presence of a community. They are a public profession witnessed by many people. Just as a couple who is saying its marriage vows does so in the context of a celebration with family and friends, a brother professes his vows in a similar setting.

Poverty, chastity, and obedience are heavy words. They are, in a way, old-fashioned terms that seem almost out of place in twenty-first-century American culture. You don't hear them too often on commercials or see them printed on glossy magazine covers. They are words that people can easily dismiss as irrelevant and outdated. After all, who wants to be poor? Isn't obedience for pets? What does *chastity* mean anyway?

Poverty

Let's start with poverty, which is a somewhat confusing concept. In Luke's Gospel, Jesus says, “Blessed are you who are poor, / for the kingdom of God is yours” (6:20). But if it is a blessing to be poor, why does the nation spend so much time, money, and energy trying to get rid of poverty?

Perhaps *simplicity* is the word to use. This is the goal, after all. How can you live more simply, especially in the midst of a culture that is doing its best to convince you that you always need more? The words *new* and *improved* are the two most common descriptors in advertising. Look at how quickly a computer becomes outdated, a car depreciates in value, or clothes become unfashionable. It is a struggle just to keep up.

Although some brothers live with very little and in extremely poor areas of the world, the vast majority seem to have a pretty good life. They have their basic needs taken care of, are well educated, and live in a comfortable residence. For me it comes down to the issue of how I handle the money I earn.



Other congregations of brothers may operate differently from a financial standpoint, but let me share how my Midwest District handles money. Brothers who draw a salary for their work—which is true for most brothers in active ministry—receive a paycheck made out to the brothers' community rather than to the individual brother. The money the brothers earn is not their own but belongs to the community. So, they turn in the check to their local community, which deposits it into an account.

At the beginning of each school year, when the brothers determine their Community Annual Program (CAP), they discuss the budget, among other things. The community—like any household—must budget its income and expenses. A significant portion of the budget goes toward paying the tax to the district. Although the De La Salle Christian Brothers, like all religious congregations, are tax exempt with respect to the government, they do pay taxes to the district to fund ministries, graduate study, novitiate, housing, retirement, health needs, administrative expenses, and so on. The district guarantees each brother an annual stipend through his local community. Most communities allocate a monthly amount for each brother's personal use.

Exceptions to this policy are the brothers who are working in mission areas where the local school or other ministry cannot afford to pay for their services. Some recent educational initiatives in the United States—for example, to serve people who are underprivileged—do not provide a salary to the brother but are instead subsidized by the district.

The bottom line is this: a brother's money is not his own; it belongs to the community. This is not to say that he has no personal money at his disposal. Like most people, brothers have to live within their means. I like going to movies, for instance, and I like to have popcorn during them, so I try to hit matinees whenever possible. This helps my monthly stipend last a bit longer. Generally, brothers use their stipend to purchase personal items, including toiletries, clothing, and cards and gifts for friends and family. Purchases such as groceries and household supplies, which benefit the whole community, are not considered personal items.

The goal is to try to live simply and to realize that it is easy for money to control us rather than the other way around. In this sense the brothers' community life is countercultural. Today's money-driven culture insists that we need to make more and more money to get all the things it says we must have. The pursuit never ends.

At times I am down to a dollar or two by the end of the month, a situation not much different than that of millions of Americans. The big difference is that I have a community to support me. I will not get evicted at the end of the month for not paying the rent.

The constant challenge for individual brothers and particularly for their local community is to witness to a simple, shared life. Some houses and congregations are better at this than others. Witness is not easy. Take the simple fact that in my district brothers live together in community but do not work in the same ministry, so it is not practical to share one or perhaps even two cars.

It all comes down to a simple but continually challenging question: How much is *enough*? This is a question for brothers to ponder as a group and as individuals. As the saying goes, "I will live simply so others may simply live."

What do I really need? How do I draw the line between wants and needs? I will never forget the words of a young man who was hosting a group during a mission service trip to Tijuana, Mexico. I had accompanied some college students who were spending their spring break there. The young man explained that whenever he receives a new shirt as a gift or buys one, he gets rid of two old ones. His clothing collection stays minimal. He has what he needs rather than a closet full of clothes he seldom wears.

His comment had an impact on me. Since then I have tried to avoid impulse buying. Do I really need this item, or am I getting it because I like it? Such questions keep me honest and focused on trying to live



simply. I have the hardest time with books and music because I like both a lot. I do try to find the lowest price I can, which helps. It is not easy to live simply in contemporary America.

A brother's needs will always be taken care of. It is the wants that are the challenge!

Chastity

This word sounds so old-fashioned, doesn't it? For a lot of people, it means "not having sex"—but this limited understanding robs the word of its beauty and significance. Yes, it is true that a brother's vow of chastity means that he will remain celibate; he will not engage in sexual intercourse. But *chastity* means more than just not having sex. The fact is that all Christians are called to live a chaste life. You and I are called by our faith to live out our sexuality as the gift from God that it is. For married persons, *chastity* means sexual intercourse only with the spouse; for everyone else it means not having sexual intercourse.

This moral ideal does not mean that you and I are not sexual people. You cannot separate out your sexuality any more than you can separate out your emotions or your faith. Everything is blended within you to make you a unique person. If you try to separate out certain parts of your identity, you do damage to who you are.

Every part affects every other part. For instance, no matter what you are doing, when you see a particularly attractive person walking by, it is very hard not to notice. You can't help it. It's similar to when you walk into a room and smell freshly baked bread or chocolate chip cookies: your attention is immediately drawn to whatever smells so good.

Sexuality is a great, powerful, and often confusing gift from God, but it is a gift. We brothers live as celibate men because we have vowed to live a life of community and to refrain from loving any one person exclusively so that we can better love many people. The freedom of our commitment means that we are able to be more available.

Relationships are essential for everyone. To grow as a human being, you need other people. A brother strives to develop relationships with others that are not sexual in nature but loving and freeing. The celibate life is a mystery in a lot of ways.

Just like anyone else—married or single, religious or lay, young or old—brothers need to reflect continually on the quality and quantity of their relationships. Brothers are called to be loving persons—persons who love the people God sends into their lives, especially young people, many of whom feel unloved and unworthy of love.

You and I live in a society obsessed with sex. It is easy to get the impression that everyone is having sex and that if you are not, something is wrong with you. This is a sad situation because sex, like so much else in today's society, has become a commodity used to sell products, to manipulate others, and to reduce a person to an object with a value based on appearance only.

Brothers are called to be witnesses to the fact that there is another way to approach sexuality and that it is possible to be healthy, loving men who have meaningful relationships that are not based on genital interaction. This is not to say that men who enter the community of brothers have not had sex. Virginity is not a requirement for entering a brothers' community, but celibacy is obligatory. In other words, a man who becomes a brother is expected to refrain from having sexual intercourse, no matter what his background or sexual orientation is.

I realize that out of all the aspects that make up a brother's life, celibacy is probably the biggest hurdle for anyone, especially a young person who is looking at this way of living the Christian life. My friends who are not Catholic find celibacy difficult to understand.

When I speak to student groups, this question invariably arises: "Can you get married?" Many young and not-so-young people cannot imagine not being married at some point. They certainly can't understand deliberately choosing celibacy over the joys of marriage and family.



I try to explain to them that living my life as a brother is incompatible with being married. It's not so much that I'm choosing celibacy but that I am choosing to be a brother, and being celibate is an integral part of that call.

Is it easy? Not always. But then neither is marriage or the single life. I have to make the choice over and over again because throughout my life I meet people I am attracted to. It is only natural, and it happens to everyone.

Another important thing to realize is that just because I am a celibate brother does not mean I do not have friendships with people who are not brothers. My closest friends are not brothers; several of my best friends are female. I cherish the friends in my life—both male and female—just as I cherish my family.

All of us need people in our lives that we can confide in, trust, and just plain have fun with. Some of my friends are married; some are in relationships, and some are single. They are all special, and our friendship transcends the paths we have chosen for our lives. In fact, the different vocations make our friendship that much richer.

All Christians are called to chastity. For brothers, priests, and sisters, chastity means taking a vow of celibacy and knowing that loving others involves much more than sexual intercourse.

Obedience

You and I learned early on that we ought to obey our parents. We might not have been very good at it, but we knew that it was important. If you are a teacher, you expect—or at least hope—that your students will obey you. But to whom does an adult need to be obedient? maybe to a boss or to a police officer? or perhaps to God?

Think back to the Gospels and to how often Jesus would do something because it was his Father's will. He was simply obeying God, his Father. Aren't you and I called to do the same—to do the will of God?

The vow of obedience is a public acknowledgment of the fact that I am not really in control of my life. Oh, I think I am. I am even told that I should be, and in some ways this is good advice. No one else can make certain decisions for me about my health, my future, or my relationships. I need to make these decisions and live with the consequences. But in a larger sense, I know that much of what happens to me and within me is beyond my control.

When a brother takes a vow of obedience, he is saying, "I admit publicly that I am not entirely in charge of my life. I admit that a Higher Power is truly in charge. I need to listen to God working within me and around me."

Obedience is about *listening*. It is also about realizing that I alone do not make significant decisions about my life; I make them in the context of my community. In other words, the decisions are not just about me; I always need to acknowledge that I am part of something bigger.

For instance, when I am discerning a change in ministry, I begin talking it over with my community, my friends, my family, and especially with God. Where can I best serve? How can I best use my God-given talents and strengths? Discernment is an area where I have been stretched and have grown a lot. Every new place I have gone to has involved a process of obedience. I have listened to what is going on inside of me, to what others are saying about what I might be good at, and to where the needs are. In the end I try to obey the call of the Spirit in my life as that call is mediated through other persons. In your life, as you listen, talk, and pray, where do you feel called?

Obedience is much more than just saying, "Yes, sir!" It is anything but blind. Obedience helps me to see more clearly and focus more sharply on where I am and where I am hoping to go. Maybe I can sum it up best by reminding you of what you hear your coaches and teachers say: "Now listen up!"



The vows are designed to help my brothers and me get our priorities right. God is number one in our lives; no other relationship is more important. Because of the example Jesus set for us, we strive to live simply; he called the poor blessed. The Church invites us to pay special attention to the needs of those who are poor while we work to remove the conditions that contribute to poverty. We are called to love everyone who comes our way, to see the face of God in people, especially in those who are young and those who are poor. We are called not to obey our own will but to follow God's design expressed through the events and persons in our lives and the stirring in our hearts.

All Christians are called to poverty, chastity, and obedience; brothers and other religious are summoned to profess these virtues publicly and to live them intensely and with integrity. All that being said, living the vows is a constant challenge. The "big three" help keep brothers on the path toward God, the only path worth following and worth giving my life for.

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