

COUNSELS AND BEATITUDES IN RELATION TO THE PROMISE

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“Inspired by the Holy Spirit, in response to God’s call (I) sincerely promise to the Superiors of the Order of Teresian Carmel and to you my brothers and sisters, to tend toward evangelical perfection in the spirit of the evangelical counsels of chastity, poverty, obedience, and of the Beatitudes, according to the Rule of the Secular Order of Discalced Carmelites for three years (rest of my life). I confidently entrust this, my Promise, to the Virgin Mary, Mother and Queen of Carmel.”

I. THE HOLY SPIRIT MOVES US IN ALL THAT IS HOLY

The Promise is made under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, in response to a call from God. It is under the Spirit’s inspiration that a person desires to make the Promise as a response to God’s call. As a person matures in the Christian life, they receive certain calls from God who patiently and gently calls them to a closer imitation of Christ, the Beloved: “This is my Beloved, listen to him.”(1) Enlightenments and inspirations come from the Holy Spirit inviting the person to respond with closer attention to Christ’s teaching. The candidate aware of a call from God, comes to make the Promise drawn by the Spirit. The two year initial formation is designed to make the vocation clear.

II. THE COMMITMENT

The Promise itself does not bind under pain of sin (just as the Rule of Life does not bind under pain of sin). These rules are taken up, not under pain of sin, but as means of finding in them a more secure and fuller way of serving God, as they provide a fuller expression of God’s will.(2) The Rule is freely embraced, not to provide more occasions of offending God, but as a means of more generous love. However, if a person freely undertakes something for God, especially in a public way, and lightly puts aside fulfillment, he ought to ask himself: what was my motive? If on occasion what has been promised is set aside because of charity towards a neighbor or because of obedience to a duty of one’s state, then there is no loss but gain. This reflects what St. Teresa said in chapter five of her Book of Foundations, “for then one is still engaged in the love for God.”

III. EVANGELICAL PERFECTION

Evangelical perfection for us is to imitate Jesus Christ in His love for our heavenly Father and for our fellow human beings, as far as this is possible in our particular state of life. This evangelical perfection is expressed in St. John’s Gospel as living “in Christ” or drawing life from Him as He draws life from the Father.(3)

Clearly, we cannot live exactly as Jesus did for we live in a different time and culture. As the saints in every age show us we must make practical application of His life to our individual state of life and concrete circumstances. We must STUDY His life in order to know how to imitate Him and behave in all events as He would. The Holy Spirit comes to teach us to know Jesus in this practical way.(4) To know Jesus - in the measure in which one really knows Him and not merely knows about Him, but knows Him in Love - is to know the Father who sent Him.(5) This is Gospel or Evangelical perfection.

One can never assume they have attained the likeness of Christ but they must always strive toward this goal. Joyfully you are taking up certain approved means of tending towards that to which you were called in baptism: THE IMITATION OF JESUS CHRIST.

IV. GOSPEL COUNSELS

It is in this context that the Church, in the Constitution *Lumen Gentium* on the nature and universal mission of the Church, declares her faith concerning the evangelical counsels: “The evangelical counsels of chastity dedicated to God; of poverty and of obedience, founded as they are on the words and example of the Lord, are a divine gift which the Church received from her Lord and ever safeguards by His grace. It belongs to the Church’s authority, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit to interpret the counsels, moderate their practice and also establish stable forms of living them.”(6) The Council also asserts that “the state constituted by the profession of the evangelical counsels, although not part of the hierarchical structure of the Church, belongs inseparably to her life and holiness.”(7)

In this document, *Lumen Gentium*, the Church is reasserting her faith and her doctrine that life, according to the evangelical counsels, is a precious part of the Gospel which she must uphold and that it contributes in important ways to the purpose of the Church, which is the sanctification of men and women. The basic reason for the counsels is that Jesus Christ our Savior taught them and exemplified them in His own life. He alone can know how fully their practice fits into His purpose in the mystery of salvation.

V. BEATITUDES

The candidate makes the promise “in the spirit of the Beatitudes.” The word “beatitude” translates a Greek word which means both “blessed” and “happy”. True happiness of the human heart arises from being blessed by God. The beatitudes listed in chapter five of Matthew sum up teachings which must have been given by our Lord on many occasions and with varying imagery, to describe the kind of person who receives the “word” and brings forth fruit in plenty - some thirty-fold, some sixty, some a hundred. They are persons who are given power to become children of God.(8) One must seek to be the last and the servant of all, if one really wants to be blessed and exalted in the kingdom Jesus founds. Here St. Thérèse of the Child Jesus will be a sure guide.

VI. THE PROMISE OF CHASTITY

This Promise binds the secular Carmelite to observance of this virtue in accordance with his state in life and does not in any way impede a change of state.

The call to perfected love, inherent in our baptism, demands that constant endeavor to control one of the deepest drives of nature. Sexual attraction is a good and God-given one. But what a disturbed state it is in from Adam and Eve onwards! Lack of control in this matter not only hinders the calm and peace needed for growth in love for God but leads to immeasurable miseries within families as well as in society at large. The cultivation of chastity prepares the soul to see God: “Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God.” This is true even in this earthly life. In a certain way the person who cultivates a pure heart for love of Jesus and his kingdom comes to see the presence of God with a gentle awareness and a delicate perception of faith granted to the pure of heart.

The promise of chastity is made to express a conscious intention to respect the law of God in a way proper to the unmarried, married or widowed state, as the case may be, and to bear special witness to the beatitude “Blessed are the pure of heart for they shall see God.” In making this promise, according to one’s state of life, a person is not undertaking anything over and above that to which he or she is already obliged as a follower of Christ. But by making the promise in a public way, in the presence of the brethren, a person is bearing witness to the Christian call to cultivate chastity for the sake of the kingdom of heaven.

In making the promise of chastity according to your state in life, you can rightly have the intention of reparation for the grave disorders in this matter in present day society, and of being a witness to the right order. However, the promise is made primarily with the intention of tasting that blessedness and happiness promised to the pure of heart.(9)

VII. THE SPIRIT OF POVERTY

The beatitude: “Blessed are the poor in spirit, theirs is the kingdom of heaven” is addressed to all members of the Church. The righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit, in which the kingdom consists, as St. Paul says, is possessed by those who out of love for God turn from the chase after earthly goods and know how to live with sufficiency.(10) Hence the Church says: “All the faithful are invited and obliged to pursue holiness and the perfection of their state in life. Accordingly, let all of them see that they direct their affections rightly, lest they be hindered in their pursuit of perfect love by the use of worldly things and by adherence to riches, contrary to the spirit of evangelical poverty”(11)

When we promise to tend toward perfection in the spirit of poverty we hope to be strengthened by grace to live the Gospel message concerning the proper value and right ordering of temporal wealth. This embraces, according to the teaching of the Vatican Council, the appropriate use of goods for the life of the home, at work and in social activities, including proper recreation.(12)

The meaning of the Gospel’s spirit of poverty is to be seen in its purpose. This is effected in two stages: First, to free the heart from too great a love for earthly possessions in order to find one’s true treasure in God: “lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal.”(13) Second, we must school the heart in the experience of how poor we really are before God.

As to the first step in freeing the heart from the overwhelming desire for things, we have to note that we are not speaking of the mere absence of things. Things themselves do not enter the heart, but the desire for them does. These desires can enslave the heart, even if one lacks the things themselves. Therefore the man one wants to be rich has the same problem as the man who is rich. It is in controlling these desires for earthly possessions that we free the heart to desire heavenly goods and the kingdom of God. We must DETACH our hearts from desiring earthly possessions and desire God above all.

The second step refers to poverty of spirit or the acceptance of the knowledge of oneself before God. Through various trials, temptations, failures, darkness of intellect and dryness of will, a person comes to know, not as a mere intellectual concept, but as experienced reality, one’s own nakedness and poverty of spirit and that “God alone is Good.”(14)

VIII. PROMISE OF OBEDIENCE

Of Jesus it is written that “He became obedient unto death” and the letter to the Hebrews represents his coming into the world saying “I have come to do your will, O God.”(15) It would be impossible to overstate Jesus’ desire to do His Father’s will.

“The Promise will provide the secular Carmelite with the grace to become interiorly more responsive to the will of God.”(16)

This is how we tend towards or strive towards perfection in the evangelical counsel of obedience: we promise to obey the legitimate authority of the Order thereby becoming more responsive to the will of God through human spokesmen. God manifests His will many ways through circumstances of life but more especially through human intermediaries who are endowed with some share of His authority in guiding us in life. We need however, to develop a disciple’s ear, as the prophet said, if we are to hear the voice of God, that is, we must have a willingness to know the will of God.

The legitimate authority is the General or Provincial of the Order or the Council of a Community which lay down directives within the Rule. In the various levels of authority Holy Church, as seen from the Rule, does not allow us to commit ourselves by the promise to an unlimited authority, and much less to the mere caprice of whoever happens to be the leader. The obedience required is limited to the directives in the Rule. The ordinary way in which God guides people, especially in His Church, is through our fellow human beings, by reason and faith. The Holy Spirit dwelling in the Church calls for submission of heart to persons in authority. But the Spirit also speaks to us in many subtle ways through others. The disciple, however, must have a ready ear to listen for the promptings of the Spirit. The virtue of obedience is linked very closely to the virtue of humility.

The person who desires to taste the blessedness of this virtue of obedience should endeavor to follow the advice of St. Paul to the Philippians: “Have this mind among yourselves, which you have in Christ Jesus, who though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself taking the form of a servant being born in the likeness of men . . . He became obedient unto death.”(17)

IX. LIKENESS TO CHRIST

The evangelical counsels of chastity, poverty and obedience dispose us to receive all the other beatitude and virtues. The one who is hungering and thirsting for the holiness that comes through imitating Jesus Christ will surely experience the value of these beatitudes. It cannot be but that one who humbles oneself like Jesus, will be meek and learn how to bear trials, sorrows and oppositions, which are so often the lot of “the just one” who being a child of God must expect to suffer from the ungodly.(18) Great persecutions may not be the lot of many, but St. Paul says: “All who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.”(19) To stand firm for Christian values and morals in the modern age, in the home, in business and in play will often occasion some sufferings and minor persecutions and will demand patience. Often too, God allows His friends to encounter difficulties and misunderstandings from good people who do not understand the why of the person who is endeavoring to serve God more generously. And more painful still, He allows even His saints to cause each other pain. But the grace and love of Christ brings blessings and an inner happiness in having something to suffer for Christ.(20)

X. ENTRUSTING MY PROMISE TO MARY, MOTHER AND QUEEN OF CARMEL

To belong to Mary more closely and to be led, through this devotion to her, to know and imitate her Son better, is the purpose in joining her Order.(21) Mary will always be at the side of the one who seeks to live in the spirit of her Son's counsels and beatitudes. This was her life.(22)

XI. BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. Please refer to the OCDS Rule of Life, Articles 12, 13 & 14. (Replaced by OCDS Constitutions)
2. Be Holy, by Father Hilary Doran, OCD.
3. Commentary on the Rule, by Father Michael Griffin, OCD.

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3. John 6:56-57.
4. John 16:14-16.
5. John 16:1; 2:3-6; 14:9-10.
6. LG 43.
7. LG 44.
8. John 1:12.
9. Matthew 5:8.
10. Romans 14:17.
11. LG 42.
12. Decree on Apostolate of the Laity: 4.
13. Matthew 6:20.
14. Mark 10:18.
15. Philippians 2:8; Hebrews 10:7; Psalms 39.
16. Article 14 of the Rule.
17. Philippians 2:5-7.
18. Wisdom 2:10-20.
19. 2 Timothy 3:12.
20. Matthew 5:11-12.
21. LG 60, 66.
22. Article 7.