

Fr. Tom's Celestial Musings

The Year of the Priesthood

Part 6: Poverty¹

This month, we look at the last of the three evangelical counsels that priests are called to live. Having looked at celibacy and obedience, we now turn to poverty. This counsel is lived a little differently in diocesan priesthood as compared to priests belonging to religious orders. In most religious orders, the members do not own anything. Any money or gifts that they receive are passed on to the community. The head of the community gives the members money as various needs arise, like new clothing or office supplies. The religious community loans its members cars and pays for things like insurance and health care. While some aspects of life are provided by the parish for diocesan priests, many are not, which requires them to live the counsel of poverty in a slightly different way.

Diocesan priests all get paid the same amount, regardless of the size of their parish or the rank of their ministry. While the amount we get paid is below the poverty line, it is more than adequate to pay for our needs and even many of our wants due to the fact that our housing, food, and gas are paid for by the parish. We are responsible for such things as buying a car, paying for auto insurance, medical bills, and clothes. Unlike priests in religious orders, we must manage our finances individually and plan and budget for such things as tithing, vacations, some retreat or continuing education expenses, and hobbies. As diocesan priests, the responsibility of managing our finances means poverty must be lived in a different way than priests in religious orders.

Diocesan priests are called to live the evangelical counsel of poverty in two important ways—by maintaining a particular simplicity of life and by fostering an ever-deepening love for the poor. This happens on two levels—practically and spiritually. Practically speaking, diocesan priests can live the counsel of poverty in numerous different ways. Rather than falling into the habit of living a type of bachelorhood where we surround ourselves with a lot of possessions, we can tithe a significant amount of our salary to various charities, ask permission from God before making any significant purchase, and double the price of anything that is a “want” rather than a “need” and give the extra amount to the poor.

Father Gisbert Greshake, in his book, The Meaning of Christian Priesthood, explains a the practical poverty of diocesan priesthood asking—

Can, for example, the poorest man in the parish feel at home in the priest's presence, or when he comes to him does he find in the priest's house and dress and conduct a different sociological world? To what extent does the priest himself feel something of the insecurity which the following of Jesus involves, as we read in the Gospel? Or, is the motto to be all-round security and insurance? When does he renounce something which he could quite properly have?²

In addition to the practical ways that priests are called to be in solidarity with the poor, there is also a spiritual component—a detachment from possessions. The counsel of poverty invites diocesan priests to *own* some things rather than *be owned* by things. This is a disposition of the heart more than the wallet. It involves the renunciation of absolute security, as Fr. Greshake mentioned above. It means that we must be able to *enjoy* the things God created without trying to *possess* and *manipulate* them. The counsel of poverty ultimately invites us to reverence the fact that nothing in this world can satisfy the cravings of our heart because this world is not our home, we are merely pilgrims.

¹ In honor of the “Year of the Priesthood,” announced by Pope Benedict, this is a twelve part series on the priesthood

² Gisbert Greshake, The Meaning of Christian Preisthood, 1989, pg. 142.