

## Apostolic Poverty

Amos 7:12-15  
Psalm 85  
Ephesians 1:3-10  
Mark 6:7-13

As most of you probably know, Pope Benedict declared this year to be the “Year of the Priesthood.” This special year began on June 19<sup>th</sup>, the Feast of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, and will end on that feast in 2010. During the “Year of the Priesthood,” the pope has invited us to reflect on the unique life and ministry of ordained priesthood in our Church. Several members of our parish celebrated priesthood in a special way Saturday by attending the ordination of Eddie D’Almeida and James Melnick. Another way that I intend to celebrate the “Year of the Priesthood,” is by occasionally preaching on aspects of priestly life. Today’s Gospel reading provided me with a wonderful opportunity to start!

What vows do diocesan priests take at ordination? Many Catholics would mistakenly answer, “Poverty, chastity, and obedience.” The answer to this “trick” question is—diocesan priests do not take *any* vows. Instead, we make promises and resolutions. In fact, there are promises and resolutions in *both* rites of ordination, for both deacons and priests.

At a man’s diaconate ordination he promises obedience to his bishop and his bishop’s successors. Then, if he is being ordained a *temporary* deacon,<sup>1</sup> he resolves to “remain celibate for the sake of the kingdom and in lifelong service to God and mankind.” The final three resolutions apply to both permanent and transitional deacons and include a willingness to proclaim the Gospel in word and deed, resolve in being a man of prayer, and modeling one’s life on the example of Christ.

The rite of ordination to the priesthood begins with four resolutions to “discharge without fail the office of the priesthood.... to celebrate the mysteries of Christ faithfully and religiously.... to exercise the ministry of the word worthily and wisely....” and “to unite [oneself] more closely every day to Christ the High Priest.” Following these resolutions, the candidate for the priesthood renews his promise of respect and obedience to the bishop and his successors.

Just because diocesan priests do not take the vow of poverty does not mean that we are free to be wealthy and materialistic. Rather, our resolution to unite ourselves “more closely every day to Christ the High Priest” is a call into a different type of poverty than a monk or nun; a poverty that I like to call “apostolic poverty.” We heard about apostolic poverty in the Gospel reading today.

When Jesus sent the Apostles out on their first missionary trip, He specifically instructed them not to take many possessions. The author of the Gospel of Mark wrote, “[Jesus] instructed them to take nothing for the journey but a walking stick--no food, no sack, no money in their belts. They were, however, to wear sandals but not a second tunic” (Mark 6:8-9). There are a couple of important reasons why Jesus sent the Apostles out empty-handed. He was inviting them into a deeper trust and freedom.

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<sup>1</sup> A *temporary* deacon is a man who is in the process of being ordained a priest while a *permanent* deacon is not and often is married.

Apostolic poverty is founded on trust in God the Father. Jesus taught His Apostles to find security in God rather than in their reserves. This is a similar lesson that God taught the Old Testament priests, the tribe of Levi, in the book of Numbers. We read—

Then the LORD said to Aaron, “You shall not have any heritage in the land of the Israelites nor hold any portion among them; I will be your portion and your heritage among them.”

-Number 18:20

Apostolic poverty invites us to trust in God’s providence and love. We are called to allow Him to be our heritage and our reserve rather than trusting in material wealth.

Freedom is another important reason for apostolic poverty. Apostles—people who are sent to spread the Good News—must have a certain level of freedom in their lives in order to fulfill their mission. Remember the lack of freedom the rich young man had when Jesus invited him to sell everything and follow Him.<sup>2</sup> He couldn’t do it! When we don’t have much, we often have a greater freedom to let go of the little we have in order to be sent where the Lord needs us to go. The fact that the Apostles in our Gospel reading today had very few material possessions with them on their missionary journey meant that they could move around from city to city quicker and more freely.

There are particular ways that the Church today invites diocesan priests into apostolic poverty. I’ll mention a couple that have to do with trust and freedom. The first invitation into apostolic poverty is a priest’s salary. Unlike ministers in most other Christian communities, a Catholic priest’s salary is not based on the size or wealth of his parish. Every diocesan priest gets paid the same amount regardless of his position—whether he is a bishop, pastor, or assistant pastor. All priests within a diocese also get the same pay regardless of the size or wealth of his parish. Our salary is adequate for our lifestyle while often challenging us to make compromises regarding what we spend money on. Our salary, as well as our tithing back to the parish, gives us wonderful opportunities to trust in God rather than in wealth.

Another way the Church invites her priests into apostolic poverty is by limiting the amount of time we serve at a particular parish. We all know how easy it is to accumulate stuff! We also know how “purging” it is to have to move—we sell things, give things away and downsize our lives. Every time a priest is moved to a new parish, he is given an opportunity to re-evaluate his apostolic poverty. I’ve always thought it would be easier if the bishop simply provided each of us with a Winnebago and we could simply drive to our new parish, plug in the power and throw the sewer line out the door. However, this would keep us from the blessings of apostolic poverty, which helps provide us with a freedom to move to where the Lord needs us.

### **SUGGESTED PRAYER EXERCISES:**

- ✚ Read Matthew 19:16-22 and put yourself in the place of the young man in the story. What material possessions would you be the saddest about giving up right now in your life? If you’re able, pray for a deeper freedom from those particular possessions.
- ✚ Think of one time in your life when your attachment to something or someone kept you from doing what you felt like God desired for you to do. Talk to God about the feelings associated with that memory.

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<sup>2</sup> Matthew 19:21-22