

The Evangelical Counsels

By Fr. Matt Blake OCD

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A vocation is a constant journey. When we are not open to change we have stopped living our vocation. So like rock formation we don't see anything happening, but rocks are constantly being changed and formed. We think we haven't changed at all but God's work of formation goes on. We will take a look at the Promises. Fr. Anthony will focus on the Beatitudes this afternoon. Both of these are at the heart of a vocation. (Fr. Matt suggested we look at the Secular Carmelite Constitutions and went on to address parts of the formula).

The first word in the promise is 'I'. The spotlight is on me, I can't hide, I stand out in front and do this, a vocation is public. In the RCIA, Christian commitment is public. There are various ceremonies in the RCIA. One can't be in one's own little corner, it's public and personal, saying one's own name. I'm not doing this because I enjoy it. I do it in response to God's call. God called me, I'm responding. This is part of my response. It's God's initiative. God takes the initiative in my life. I'm not forced. It's the compulsion of love. We can refuse to accept it and we can run away from love. But in love there is a conviction God's will. The call is like this I can run away but it comes back. This is my response to God to live a particular way of life; a journey towards evangelical perfection. None of us can say we are living it. Jesus says only God Our Father is good.

The more we live a Gospel way of life, the more we live in it. In the light of the Gospel, the evangelical counsels are about living the Gospel. The Gospel is always lived in the way it is right for a particular person; the right way to live the Gospel as a Carmelite. If we live as Carmelites we will grow into these counsels, it takes place in us. We can never say we are living the counsels of Poverty, Chastity and Obedience to Perfection. We have our whole life to live towards these. None of us can live them, but the grace of God leads us in the direction.

Abraham was called on a journey to leave his own land, an enormous leap in faith. The evangelical counsels are a great Gospel journey, we are brought into the depths to grow and mature in every aspect of our lives.

The formula for making the Promises is rich. All of this we commit ourselves to. The promises are rooted in the Constitutions of the Secular Order. So let's look at the Constitutions. They are very rich and challenging. They give us a broad interpretation of the evangelical counsels.

(Fr. Matt picked out a selection)

Reference Section 12 of the Constitutions

One can't train someone, yet one has to be trained. One requires an education, and formation goes on all our lives. Three dimensions picked out....the reason, the content and purpose. No one is called for a reason, but there is always a reason. This is the mystery of God. The depth and purpose is here. A purpose to be fulfilled, rarely do we see this; it is a mystery of God.

The commitment to the promise to live the spirit of the evangelical counsel of chastity

Section 13. The Constitutions try to help us to see the reason, content and purpose of the evangelical lifestyles. Ideas are given about charity; to love God and our neighbour, unselfishly. One can say this for all of them. Freedom and unselfishness is shown by Jesus. He is free and unselfish. As the gospel goes on he grows into this freedom. Not my will but yours. Gospel chastity is about the inner freedom to love, which puts the other first. Love is not compromised or distorted.

The next statement in Section 13. *'The promise of chastity is a commitment to Christian love in its personal and social dimensions in order to create authentic community in the world'*, not Carmelites or the Church, but community in the world, chastity to help build authentic community. Those who do this are builders of Community. We can develop this in all directions; the kind of Christian love which is personal and social.

The Evangelical Counsels always have a purpose an act of service to all of humanity. They commit to a life of service. Those who live Gospel chastity become an authentic builder of community.

There is a conscientious desire to respect each person, life itself.

Poverty; a wealth of generosity is required. The person living Gospel poverty shows a wealth of self-denial, rich in generosity and interior liberty, an over abundance of the three, an evangelical use of them in the world. The Gospel has a bearing in how the goods of the world are used, not just goods but also personal talents. These have a much richer and deeper value than property. I can ask is there a wealth of liberty in how I use my personal talents. This brings us to a Gospel way of life, our personal talents are a gift to God given for a purpose.

Section 14. Another dimension of personal poverty is responsibility, a willingness to take responsibility. Only those truly poor can take responsibility. We require this Gospel poverty to live Gospel responsibility; carrying the Cross, the pain of this world and the burden of humanity. The acceptance of responsibility a willingness to live true Christianity needs Gospel poverty.

To live for the cause of justice we can have an ambivalent attitude when we look at the courts etc. God acts with justice. Its having an attitude of dealing with the world as God was dealing with the world. God is just. If we deal with the world like God we require a constant need to respect each person. Chastity gives us an inner attitude. Poverty gives this commitment to do something.

Another dimension recognises personal limitations and gives this to God. We need to recognise and surrender them to God as they are gifts from God. We can let the limitations become an imprisonment. We mustn't let our limitations compromise our inner freedom. We focus on what we haven't got. I can't work for justice because I don't have what it takes. We can be imprisoned by limitations. Poverty, evangelical poverty is about inner freedom. What I don't possess doesn't control me, neither what I have can't control me. Limitations can be a bigger bind. The situation is not quite right when we can have lists of reason for not doing something. These must be surrendered to God. God is strongest when I am weakest. Paul could embrace his weakness.

Section 15. **Obedience** is a pledge to live open to the will of God. We can be very happy to do the will of God. What does it mean? It means an exercise of faith to the challenges in my personal life. In practical living it is embracing life, searching for God's will (we are always doing it), in events and challenges and our own personal life. God is in both, the world and in our lives. In the 21st Century He is in all dimensions of it, our personal life not bits, but the entire dimension, whatever the contradictions. We can say if only I was free from this or if only the circumstances were different. Obedience then to search for God's will here and now.

Obedience takes our vocations to places we choose not to go to. The Bible is full of these people. God can't possibly ask me to go there, to Nineveh, or sing his praises in Babylon; to sing to pray in front of these alien people, God can't possibly ask me to do this, or Jeremiah who says 'There seemed to be a fire burning in my heart.'

Obedience freely co-operates with those in the Order. Our Obedience is Carmelite. Obedience never comes top down, there is a free choice. I choose to obey and obey in a literal sense. I choose to listen. Sometimes I check myself, who do I listen to or who do I allow to influence my life; who do I listen to and how do I live? We choose who we listen to and obey. Fashion and Advertising know, 'We can influence people to obey'. We have a free choice, to freely co-operate to the voice which guides us as Carmelites; the Carmelite Community, the Order as a whole. An illustration is reading and listening to Teresa. In rereading Teresa in the times and circumstances for today, we do so with a deep listening of Teresa together, we are all her daughters and sons. It is a true sense Carmelite obedience happening at this time.

We need to live what we are called to live; the evangelical life style. We can ask what does this mean for me now at this present time in my life. We have to trust that God has called me. At times we have to question ourselves, but we have to see that the hand of God is in the question. In listening to Teresa the listening is not to be superficial. In one of the convents Teresa asks one of the nuns to plant a cucumber at their meal. The sister obeys though Teresa knows no plant will grow. There is sincerity in both. God brings about something wonderful when we have the sincerity to trust.