

PRIESTS AND RELIGIOUS AS FRUITS OF THE FAMILY

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ABSTRACT

After an attempt to articulate the fact that priests and religious are uniquely, fruits of the family in keeping with Divine Ordinance, the paper makes use of what is articulated to further show that the continuity of humanity and the church consists in the family. By way of conclusion and submission, it invites all men and women of goodwill to an ever proactive resurgence against the dictatorship of the “culture of death” which more than ever threatens our collective existence – to fight and rediscover the glory of humanity which consists in the family being a domestic church.

INTRODUCTION

Priests and religious are not necessary being which God is. They are biological fruits of the natural family ordained by God as comprising of father, mother and their children. The family traditionally understood as such is key to understanding the co-creative role of husband and wife in the entire scheme of creation insofar as it takes the husband and his wife to achieve the procreation reality for the continuity of humanity and the church in keeping with God’s ordinance.² In this connection, priests and religious become an even more fruitful extension of this Divine ordinance by the very reality of their being set apart as special servants of God to gather the scattered children of God to that eternal kingdom, that one great family where God will be all in all. Such is the pulsating nuance in understanding priests and religious as fruits of the family which this paper seeks to articulate.

For the purpose of fruitful reflection, this paper shall explore the dialectic of love and life in situating priests and religious in the discourse on the family whilst integrating the necessity of the evangelical counsels in this regard. It shall proceed to show albeit an excursus, that the continuity of humanity and the church rests on the family and conclude by inviting all men and women of good will to an even more proactiveness against the “culture of death”.

THE DIALECTIC OF LOVE AND LIFE IN SITUATING PRIESTS AND RELIGIOUS IN THE FAMILY DISCOURSE

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² Genesis 1:28; 2:22-24. Psalm 127:3 speaks especially of children as a gift from Yahweh and a real blessing, a point clarified by *Familiaris Consortio* when it taught that “...the fruitfulness of conjugal love is not restricted solely to the procreation of children...”

The family is a nursery of love and life. John Paul II teaches that “the fundamental task of the family is to serve life, to actualize in history the original blessing of the Creator—that of transmitting by procreation the divine image from person to person”³. In his *Evangelium Vitae*, He goes even further to speak of the family as the “sanctuary of life.”⁴ The centrality of the sanctuary of life which the family is, is intrinsically linked to the prior centrality of love which God is⁵, insofar as “Love begets life and life is brewed in love.” Here, the interplay of love and life in situating priests and religious in the family discourse stirs a fruitful reflection. The family is the fruit of conjugal love. Priests and religious are primary products or rather, fruits of this consummated conjugal love. As fruits of love, they freely assume the vocation of unique and radical witnessing to that Supreme Love which God is by the very reality of their vocations.⁶ In simple terms, priests and religious, primarily, bring God to souls and souls to God who is love. For, “Man cannot live without love. He remains a being that is incomprehensible for himself, his life is senseless, if love is not revealed to him, if he does not encounter love, if he does not experience it and make it his own, if he does not participate intimately in it.”⁷ Pope Francis underscores this missionary dimension of the family which Priests and Religious men and women eloquently testify to precisely in their being set apart when he taught that “the Christian family is missionary: it announces the love of God to the world.” To better dedicate themselves to this service of love and life, Religious men and women profess the evangelical counsel. But, while the evangelical counsel is native to the religious life, it cannot be said to be alien to the priesthood. To the essentiality of the counsels to the priesthood as well as the religious life we wish to now turn.

THE EVANGELICAL COUNSELS: A TESTAMENT TO LOVE AND LIFE⁸

The evangelical counsel is grounded on the truth that God is the one good and treasure who can fulfil and satisfy his people as no created good can.⁹ Understood as such, the essentiality of the evangelical counsel to the priesthood and religious life

³ *Familiaris Consortio*, 28

⁴ *Evangelium Vitae*, 6, 11, 59,88,92,94

⁵ 1 John 4:8

⁶ See, CIC 573 §1; *Vita Consecrata*, 3. See also, *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, 22-23

⁷ *Redemptor hominis*, 10

⁸ I am indebted to my brothers, Basil and Paul for shaping my understanding of how the evangelical counsels cannot be said to be alien to the priesthood in their book, Basil Cole,OP and Paul Conner,OP, *Christian Totality Theology of the Consecrated Life*(Mumbai: St Paul Press, 1997),p. 326-329. Hereafter: *Christian Totality Theology of the Consecrated Life*.

⁹ *Vita Consecrata*, 16 . see also, *Christian Totality Theology of the Consecrated Life* ,p. 328

becomes evident while the reductionism that sees the counsel as an exclusive preserve of the Religious life diminishes. To me, the distinctions usually made between radical poverty, chastity and obedience embraced by the Religious on the one hand and then, clerical poverty, celibate-chastity and obedience embraced by secular priests is more of a technical distinction than a real distinction. For, in effect, the counsels aids Priests and Religious to conform their lives more and more to the example of the Poor, Chaste and Obedient Christ their spouse. John Paul II echoes this fact when he teaches that, "Jesus Christ, who brought his pastoral charity to perfection on the cross with a complex exterior and interior emptying of self, is both the model and source of the virtue of obedience, chastity and poverty which the priest is called to live out as an expression of his pastoral charity for his brothers and sisters..."¹⁰ Hence, every Priest whether a secular or religious need to cultivate what theology calls the "evangelical counsels of ease": obedience, chastity and poverty. For even when these counsels are not professed as vows, the virtues they represent greatly assist especially the diocesan or secular Priests to live up to the dignity and mission to which he has been consecrated by the imposition of hands and the prayer of consecration.¹¹ Speaking of the evangelical counsel vis-à-vis its native audience that is, the consecrated persons, John Paul II reiterates that,

the profession of the evangelical counsels makes them a kind of sign and prophetic statement for the community of the brethren and for the world; consequently they can echo in a particular way the ecstatic words spoken by Peter: "Lord, it is well that we are here" (Mt 17:4). These words bespeak the Christocentric orientation of the whole Christian life. But they also eloquently express the radical nature of the vocation to the consecrated life: how good it is for us to be with you, to devote ourselves to you, to make you the one focus of our lives! Truly those who have been given the grace of this special communion of love with Christ feel as it were caught up in his splendour: he is "the fairest of the sons of men" (Ps 45:2), the One beyond compare.¹²

Speaking of the necessity of the counsels as the surest and securest means to eternal bliss vis-à-vis the new law and the states of life being considered in this discourse, the robust and clarificatory teaching of the Angelic Doctor of the church is noteworthy. Aquinas teaches us that,

... man is placed between the things of this world, and spiritual goods wherein eternal happiness consists: so that the more he cleaves to the one, the more he withdraws from the other, and conversely. Wherefore he that cleaves

¹⁰ *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, 30g

¹¹ *Christian Totality Theology of the Consecrated Life*, p. 326. See also, CIC 1009 §2

¹² *Vita Consecrata*, 15

wholly to the things of this world, so as to make them his end, and to look upon them as the reason and rule of all he does, falls away altogether from spiritual goods. Hence this disorder is removed by the commandments. Nevertheless, for man to gain the end aforesaid, he does not need to renounce the things of the world altogether: since he can, while using the things of this world, attain to eternal happiness, provided he does not place his end in them: but he will attain more speedily thereto by giving up the goods of this world entirely: wherefore the evangelical counsels are given for this purpose. Now the goods of this world which come into use in human life, consist in three things: viz. in external wealth pertaining to the "concupiscence of the eyes"; carnal pleasures pertaining to the "concupiscence of the flesh"; and honors, which pertain to the "pride of life," according to 1 Jn. 2:16: and it is in renouncing these altogether, as far as possible, that the evangelical counsels consist. Moreover, every form of the religious life that professes the state of perfection is based on these three: since riches are renounced by poverty; carnal pleasures by perpetual chastity; and the pride of life by the bondage of obedience.¹³

Again, addressing it to its native audience, the consecrated persons, John Paul II summarizes the necessity of the counsel and its place in the human and ecclesia family thus:

By professing the evangelical counsels, consecrated persons not only make Christ the whole meaning of their lives but strive to reproduce in themselves, as far as possible, "that form of life which he, as the Son of God, accepted in entering this world." By embracing chastity, they make their own the pure love of Christ and proclaim to the world that he is the Only-Begotten Son who is one with the Father (cf. Jn 10:30, 14:11). By imitating Christ's poverty, they profess that he is the Son who receives everything from the Father, and gives everything back to the Father in love (cf. Jn 17:7, 10). By accepting, through the sacrifice of their own freedom, the mystery of Christ's filial obedience, they profess that he is infinitely beloved and loving, as the One who delights only in the will of the Father (cf. Jn 4:34), to whom he is perfectly united and on whom he depends for everything. By this profound "configuration" to the mystery of Christ, the consecrated life brings about in a special way that *confessio Trinitatis* which is the mark of all Christian life; it acknowledges with wonder the sublime beauty of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and bears joyful witness to his loving concern for every human being.¹⁴

¹³ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I-II, q. 108 a. 4.

¹⁴ *Vita Consecrata*, 16

ON EVANGELICAL OBEDIENCE

We shall dwell a little more on this counsel because Thomas Aquinas teaches us that obedience is chiefest of the counsels and gives us three reasons for saying so thus:

First, because by the vow of obedience man offers God something greater, namely his own will; for this is of more account than his own body, which he offers God by continence, and than external things, which he offers God by the vow of poverty. Wherefore that which is done out of obedience is more acceptable to God than that which is done of one's own will,..."Secondly, because the vow of obedience includes the other vows, but not vice versa: for a religious, though bound by vow to observe continence and poverty, yet these also come under obedience, as well as many other things besides the keeping of continence and poverty. Thirdly, because the vow of obedience extends properly to those acts that are closely connected with the end of religion; and the more closely a thing is connected with the end, the better it is. It follows from this that the vow of obedience is more essential to the religious life. For if a man without taking a vow of obedience were to observe, even by vow, voluntary poverty and continence, he would not therefore belong to the religious state, which is to be preferred to virginity observed even by vow; for Augustine says (De Virgin. xlvi): "No one, methinks, would prefer virginity to the monastic life."¹⁵

John Paul II affirms Aquinas' teaching in reiterating that obedience is "a priestly value of primary importance" for "obedience to the father is the very heart of the priesthood of Christ...made servant, obedient to death on the cross(Phil. 2:7-8)"¹⁶ John Paul II speaks of three dimensions of clerical obedience but of my interest in this paper is the apostolic and communitarian dimensions of obedience because of its existential relevance to harmonious pastoral coexistence and solidarity between the diocesan clergy and the religious clergy working in their diocese – their fellow workers in the vineyard of the Lord. Obedience is *Apostolic* says John Paul II because it "recognizes, loves and serves the church in her hierarchical structure."¹⁷ Here, the priest is enjoined to develop a *habitus* of conscientious submission to his ordinary and to Peter's successor, the Pope. In this connection, "the obligation to follow the magisterium in matters of faith and morals is intrinsically united to all the functions which the priest must perform in the church. Dissent in this area is to be considered grave, in that it produces scandal and confusion among the faithful."¹⁸ Evangelical

¹⁵ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, q. 186 a. 8.

¹⁶ *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, 61

¹⁷ *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, 28b

¹⁸ *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, 62

obedience is also *communitarian* in the sense that the priests' mission is a collaborative one. Of striking interest in this regard is the emphasis on the pastoral solidarity and collaboration that ought to exist between the diocesan priests and the religious priests working in the diocese and who according to this manual "represent a spiritual enrichment of the entire diocesan presbyterate, to which they contribute specific charisms and special ministries, stimulating the particular church by their presence to be more intensely open to the church throughout the world."¹⁹ In our own time when religious men and women are somewhat perceived as expatriates in their diocese of residence by the diocesan clergy, this message of salvation speaks to such an unhealthy existential reality. Today, more than ever, evangelical obedience yearns to be lived as the proper antidote for the idolatry of power. Evangelical obedience conquers the love of power whilst enthroning the power of love without which no one can behold God.

ON EVANGELICAL CHASTITY

The order of presbyterate may be conferred "Only on men who have given proof that they have been called by God to the gift of chastity in absolute and perpetual celibacy."²⁰ Hence, the priest is obliged to embrace celibate-chastity especially in our own time where it would seem that celibate-chastity is an alternative forgone to amass material wealth and live opulently. The discipline and virtue of clerical celibacy is "a sign of communion with Jesus Christ in his complete gift of self to the church."²¹ "the church as spouse of Jesus Christ, wishes to be loved in the total and exclusive manner in which Jesus Christ her head and spouse loved her. Priestly celibacy, then, is the gift of self in and with Christ to his church and expresses the priest's service to the church in and with the Lord."²² "Celibacy frees the priest for the ministry of generous and undivided love." It is "that liberating novelty which the world, especially today, demands as a radical testimony that following Christ is a sign of the eschatological reality...sacred ministers can more easily adhere to Christ with an undivided heart and dedicate themselves more freely to God and to the service of man."²³ Addressing this counsel to its native audience, the Religious, the canon law affirms thus: The evangelical counsel of chastity embraced for the sake of the Kingdom of heaven, is a sign of the world to come, and a source of greater fruitfulness in an undivided heart. It involves the obligation of perfect continence

¹⁹ *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, 31d

²⁰ *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, 29b

²¹ *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, 29a

²² *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, 29d

²³ *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, 58

observed in celibacy.²⁴ Today, more than ever, evangelical chastity beckons to be lived as the proper antidote for the idolatry of sexual gratification plaguing our times.

ON EVANGELICAL POVERTY

Priests and religious more than ever experience that constant tension between prodigality and frugality (simplicity of life) in living this counsel in a world plagued by a trendy idolatry of materialism. In fact, nowadays, it is not uncommon to find some priests and consecrated persons who perceive celibate chastity as an alternative forgone to amass material wealth—living prodigally. This way of life is radically incompatible with evangelical poverty which derives from the Poor Christ to whom Priests and Religious are now wholly configured to. Nowadays too, it cannot be wished away any longer that there seems to be a causal connection between the trendy spate of abducting priests for ransom and the opulent lifestyle of some Priests. Poverty in spirit and in reality becomes a necessity therefore, in stemming this ugly trend. Priests and religious must strive for the simplicity of life. “the Priests use of created “goods with a sense of responsibility, moderation, upright intention and detachment ...will help conform him to Christ”, who “through his condition of poverty manifested that he has received everything from eternity from the father and all to him is restored in a complete offering of his life ...Any kind of affectation and luxury....will be eliminated by leading a simple life, and the priest will more easily be the friend , by preferential option, of those most in need.”²⁵ For secular priests, evangelical poverty “indicates a freedom from undue attachment to material things as well as a responsible use of them.”²⁶ “Such poverty assures God’s people and the priest himself that he is not using the church for his own needs. The priests’ poverty opens his heart to the truly poor and keeps him ready to sacrifice his own comfort for the sake of those whom Jesus sends him to serve.”²⁷

ON THE CONTINUITY OF HUMANITY AND THE CHURCH IN THE FRUIT OF THE FAMILY:AN EXCURSUS

Just recently, the Supreme Court of the United States of America passed into law the bill that makes same-sex marriage legal. And the President of America, Barack Obama reacting to this Supreme Court ruling speaks of it as “victory for America.” To me, this ruling comes to all men and women of goodwill as a brutal reminder that

²⁴ CIC 599

²⁵ *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, 67

²⁶ *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, 30a

²⁷ *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, 30c. quoted in *Christian Totality Theology of the Consecrated Life* , p. 328

mankind's wicked resilience to annihilate itself against the will of God is still very much alive—that humanity has not lost its Cainine vestiges.²⁸ Pope Francis in keeping with the ever ancient and yet ever new teaching of the Church reminded humanity of the looming danger that such a ruling portends for her thus: "Let's not be naïve; we are not talking about a simple political battle; it is a destructive pretension against the plan of God. We are not talking about a mere bill, but rather a machination of the Father of Lies that seek to confuse and deceive the Children of God...Gay marriage discriminates against children, in advance, depriving them of their human development given by a father and a mother and willed by God. At stake, is the total rejection of God's law engraved in our hearts and the very survival of the human family, which he defined as father, mother, and their children."

Indeed, the family is the nursery of life—that great womb of life in which God deigns to ensure and secure not just the continuity of humanity but the continuity of his Church. For, through this sanctuary of life, God continually nourishes his church with sacred vocations to the priesthood and religious life. Priests and religious in turn, sanctify our world and indeed all God's creation through the exercise of their ministry and unique witnessing. "...in a world often alien and even hostile to faith, believing families are of primary importance as centers of living, radiant faith. For this reason, the Vatican Council II...calls the family the *Ecclesia domestica*²⁹. It is in the bosom of the family that parents are by word and example...the first heralds of the faith with regard to their children. They should encourage them in the vocation which is proper to each child, fostering with special care any religious vocation." For "the fruitfulness of conjugal love is not restricted solely to the procreation of children, even understood in its specifically human dimension: it is enlarged and enriched by all those fruits of moral, spiritual and supernatural life which the father and mother are called to hand on to their children and through the children to the church and to the world."³⁰ *Familiaris Consortio* goes on to reiterate that "in its own way the family is a living image and historical representation of the mystery of the Church." Quoting St Thomas Aquinas, Pope John Paul II wrote: "The sacrament of marriage gives to the educational role the dignity and vocation of being really and truly a 'ministry' of the Church at the service of the building up of her members. So great and splendid is the educational ministry of Christian parents that Saint Thomas has no hesitation in comparing it with the ministry of priests: 'Some only propagate and guard spiritual life by a spiritual ministry: this is the role of the sacrament of Orders; others do this for both corporal and spiritual life, and this is

²⁸ See Genesis 4

²⁹ *Lumen Gentium*, 11; *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, 11

³⁰ *Familiaris Consortio*, 28

brought about by the sacrament of marriage, by which a man and a woman join in order to beget offspring and bring them up to worship God"³¹

As we think about the family as the domestic church vis-à-vis the place of priests and religious in the entire scheme, we also think of the contemporary challenge of raising a homely-family—a family that “prays together and stays together” in a world largely plagued by the culture of individualism; we also think of the family in the words of Pope Francis as “a school of solidarity and sharing for the overall benefit of the society.” To the extent that our families are homely, to that extent shall our families be a concrete witness to the here and now and yet to come eternal home where God will be all in all; that home church where the dignity and fundamental human rights of every member at every stage is respected and treasured; where Christian traditions, virtues and values are handed on to the progeny in daily living for the continuity of the church and the betterment of humanity. On this journey of building a homely-family amidst contemporary anti-family currents, the holy family of Nazareth remains for us an irreplaceable model of a true Christian home. The holy family of Nazareth remains a school where we learn the PTF of family living—Patience, tolerance and forbearance grounded in love.

As we think about Priests and Religious as fruits of the family vis-à-vis the continuity of the church and humanity in the fruit of the family which children is, we also think of the many anti-family currents threatening family life today. The necessity of family life is grossly challenged and threatened by the dictatorship of the “culture of death.” The monstrous philosophy of “might is right” has become the very grounding of human relationality. While Boko-Haram[ISIS] and indeed, our political leaders plot our extinction, euthanasia, abortion, contraception, same-sex marriage, murder has not ceased to punctuate and conjugate the trends in family life. These trends unequivocally contradict the sanctuary of life which the family is. These trends, in the final analysis, reduce the family to a sanctuary of death. To challenge the necessity of family life is to challenge the continuity of the human race and God’s salvific plan for her through his church. And given the sacredness of human life, any generation that loses the sense of the sacred is headed to doom. The human family as we have it today is headed to extinction and doom if it does not collaboratively rediscover its identity and mission which consists in being a domestic church. The reality of our common humanity can become our common grounds for resisting these common enemies of family life in these trying times.

CONCLUSION

This paper has shown that Priests and Religious are uniquely, biological fruits of the natural family in keeping with Divine ordinance. And, that the pulsating nuance of their fruitfulness consists in gathering the scattered children of God to that one great family

³¹ *Familiaris Consortio*, 38

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where God will be all in all consistent with the embrace of the evangelical counsels proper to their unique vocation.