

Toward the end of novitiate, as the first day of summer drew near, we made a five-day retreat in order to reflect on the vows of chastity, poverty, and obedience.

The brothers passed the mornings in prayerful silence while meditating on the meaning of the vows in Capuchin life. Among other helps for our meditation were Capuchin documents like the Constitutions and the documents of the seven Plenary Councils of the Order. We spent the afternoons in gentle quietude or in one-on-one conversations until gathering in small groups for deep sharing. This was not a silent retreat, but given the opportunity to make much of it a time of hermitage, I made myself scarce, remaining in solitude to the maximum extent possible. By the end of our retreat, I felt renewed and eager to take vows.

In preparation for the group conversations I jotted a few notes. I share them here with you, to show you how God moves me to affirm the Gospel way of life Francis of Assisi accepted.

1. As to chastity, lived in celibacy and fulfilled in fraternity:

Celibate chastity is emotional poverty, accepted solely out of love for Christ, for the sake of others. Celibacy is the state through which I respond to the summons to love. It is the way I embody the love of Jesus Christ. For me it is the ordinary mode of relating to others as a fully human, fully sexual person.

I believe I would be unmarried even if I never knew God. But God knew me and loved me in this state, and God bids me to love precisely in this state. God has redeemed my loveless life and put love in it. God makes me, in my unmarried state, chaste—that is, free from lust, jealousy, domination, and exploitation—and makes me, in my relationships, capable of communion and generativity.

Celibacy frees me to have healthy and fulfilling female friendships. It safeguards our relationships. It empowers me to seek justice in solidarity with all women and to fight misogyny and patriarchy in society (and the Church).

God has blessed and chosen this state for me: not primarily because it is good for me (although it is), but mainly because it is good for others. I believe I would be celibate even if I were not a Capuchin. But in giving me the gift of celibacy, God is both challenging and helping me to love with this particular religious family. Thus I choose to make a home, a life together, with brothers I did not choose personally, trusting that God will show us how to give and receive more perfectly the love of Jesus Christ.

2. As to poverty, lived in solidarity with the poor and fulfilled in minority:

I find myself tongue-tied. Words have dried up. Once, as an editor, I made a living on words, stacking them, bricking them, describing other people's lives from a fair distance. From the privileged perch of the journalist, my voice resounded, naming and shaping reality for others. Later, as a community organizer, I helped oppressed peoples, especially workers and immigrants,

recover and use their voice, and I used my own to amplify theirs. We worked together to shape a better world, a shared reality. Now as a friar about to vow poverty, I seek to surrender myself totally to the Voice who is utterly beyond my power to command or create. This Voice summons me to let go of control. This Voice I can hear in the cry of the poor—it is the voice of the God of Jesus Christ. It will shape my reality with its absolute and unconditional claim on my soul, my being, my life. If today I hear this voice—and it is always today, and it is always sounding—and if I heed it, then I will know the poverty of spirit Jesus called blessed.

3. As to obedience, lived in humility and fulfilled in ministry:

Obedience is listening faithfully. The only one to whom I must listen absolutely is God. God's word is the cry of the poor, commanding me to love my neighbor and do justice. Jesus, the Messiah, is that word, the cry of the poor. The Gospel of Jesus Christ is the way to hear the word and obey the word.

To live the Gospel is to listen to God. To live the Gospel is perfect obedience.

My ministry is to live the Gospel. I will do anything that enables me to hear the cry of the poor and do justice for them in neighbor-love. I will listen to any brother whose need or request gives me occasion to fulfill the command, the new and old command, to love neighbor. And I will resist any brother whose command goes against the Gospel, or the Rule of Saint Francis by which we live the Gospel, or my conscience.

I take seriously the fact that, because Jesus Christ has come, died, and risen, we are living at the end of time. It is already here; that it is not yet fulfilled is a sign of our lack of faith and our disobedience. I will struggle faithfully with my brothers to live into the reign of God here and now. Nothing less than total commitment to the word-made-Messiah in the cry of the poor, to bring about love and justice for all people, now, today, matters. As Francis and Clare have done their part, now may I listen and do for others wisely!