

## **“The Priest’s Relationship to His Bishop: Cooperation in Pastoral Unity for the Proclamation of the Gospel”**

*Rector's Conference Given to Students at St. Patrick's Seminary*

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### **Introduction**

I would like to begin by reflecting on a gospel passage that is foundational to our call to ordained ministry: John 15:12-17. This is Jesus’ farewell discourse to his apostles at the Last Supper – a passage familiar to you all, but allow me to read it once again since it really will serve as the basis of what I would like to share with you this evening:

This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.

Notice what Jesus does here: he gives his apostles a commandment, here on the night before he dies. This, in effect, is his dying wish, a commandment that is the *ultimate* commandment: that they love one another, *as he has loved them*. He can give them this commandment because he himself fulfills it first. Now, they in turn are to do likewise, to love one another to the point of giving up their life, giving their all. They are, then, to *love* one another, not compete with each other!

### **Cooperators with the Bishop**

This has profound implications for our own ministry, ordained ministry, inasmuch as the ordained – and most especially priests and bishops – have inherited the commission/ordination of those first disciples: to love each other – that is to say, the Church – by giving their lives completely to her as Christ himself. The priest lives out this call in a whole network of relationships. The Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests of the Second Vatican Council, *Presbyterorum ordinis*, lays out the three primary relationships of the priest in three consecutive subsections within section two: “Relation between Bishops and the Priestly Body”; “Brotherly Bond and Cooperation Among Priests”; “Relation of Priests with Lay People”. In each of my three remaining rector’s conferences with you this academic year I would like to treat each of these three sets of relationships, beginning with the priest’s relationship to his bishop in this talk.

Canon 757, inspired by n. 7 of *Presbyterorum ordinis*, states that priests are cooperators with bishops in the ministry of “proclaiming the gospel of God.” This sense of mutual cooperation in pastoral ministry naturally flows from the mutual respect and

obligations between bishops and priests of which the decree itself speaks – some examples:

- “All priests share with the bishops the one identical priesthood and ministry of Christ. Consequently the very unity of their consecration and mission requires their hierarchical union with the order of bishops.”
- “On account of this common sharing in the same priesthood and ministry then, bishops ... should be glad to listen to their priests’ views and even consult with them and hold conferences with them about matters that concern the needs of pastoral work and the good of the diocese.” It is at this point that the Council mandates presbyteral council in every diocese, in order to facilitate such consultation. In order for this mandate to be effectively implemented, it was translated into the form of legislation and received into the revised Code of Canon Law of 1983. The Code also gets specific at times, and requires the bishop to consult the presbyteral council on certain particular questions affecting the life of the diocese before he can make a decision, such as – among other things – erecting, suppressing or notably altering parishes (can. 515, par. 2), deciding to hold a diocesan synod (can. 416, par. 1), requiring parishes in his diocese to establish pastoral councils (can. 536, par. 1), and giving consent for the building of a new church (can. 1215, par. 2).
- “Priests for their part should keep in mind the fullness of the sacrament of Order which bishops enjoy and should *reverence* in their persons the authority of Christ the supreme Pastor. They should therefore be attached to their bishop with sincere charity and *obedience*” (emphasis added).

### **Virtue of Obedience**

There is something worth noting that sets the promise of obedience apart from all of the other promises made in the rites of ordination. All of the other promises are made with the candidates standing before bishop, with all responding together; the promise of obedience, however, is made by each one individually, kneeling before the bishop, placing his joined hands between those of the bishop. Moreover, the promise of obedience is the only one that is repeated: it is done exactly the same way at priesthood as at diaconate. Why would this be?

I don’t think it’s to make the point that the promise of obedience is extra hard – after all, the promise of celibacy isn’t repeated! In fact, the promise of celibacy is treated the same as the other promises, standing before the bishop responding in the affirmative with the others to a whole list of promises. Now, there are those who for good reason teach that, of the three evangelical counsels, obedience is really the hardest. But I don’t think that’s why this promise is singled out in the rites of ordination. Perhaps we can find the rationale in two other concerns, one reflected in the unique way the promise is made (each candidate kneeling individually before the bishop with his joined hands between the bishop’s) and the other in the fact that it is repeated.

With regard to the former, this rather dramatic way of promising obedience highlights the paramount importance that this promise and virtue has for the communion and overall good of the Church. Have you ever noticed the human tendency toward division, especially when it comes to religion? When one becomes disaffected, the temptation is always to go off and do things the way one sees fit. In the Protestant world, that means starting one's own church, which, I believe, they don't necessarily see as a negative thing; it's just part of their ecclesiology. For us Catholics it's different. Among priests this quirk of human nature is characterized by the tendency to be a "lone ranger," to run one's parish according to one's own lights rather than in keeping with the doctrine and discipline of the universal Church and in harmony with local diocesan policies. This is how we risk devolving into a congregational church. Our people in the parishes sometimes mention this concern to me; they notice it, in teaching and, especially, in the liturgy. They notice that in some places the Mass is celebrated in a way that is way different from what they know to be what the Church asks us to do. While the Church now allows for a certain legitimate diversity in our style of worship, there is still just one General Instruction of the Roman Missal and one set of rubrics that all are expected to follow. The observance of obedience, then, helps to foster unity in the Church; without it, everything eventually descends into chaos. And remember, God created the universe by bringing order out of chaos: order and unity is of God, chaos and division are of the evil one.

Okay, but why is the promise of obedience repeated at priesthood, after the candidate has already pledged this at his diaconate ordination? The answer, I believe, can be found in the fact that, as a priest, his relationship to his bishop now changes. He now shares in the same Priesthood of Christ with his bishop, he has become a "cooperator" with the bishop in a unique way, unlike the lay faithful and even deacons. The Decree *Presbyterorum Ordinis* underscores this aspect of obedience in the following sentence: "This priestly obedience, imbued with a spirit of cooperation is based on the very sharing in the episcopal ministry which is conferred on priests both through the Sacrament of Orders and the canonical mission" (n. 7). This unique relationship is expressed sacramentally most of all through concelebration, when the college of presbyters gathers at the altar to offer the sacrifice of Christ around their bishop, who enjoys the fullness of the Priesthood and in whose Priesthood they share.

Granted, obedience is, for sure, sometimes difficult, and not just in the sense of doing what the bishop asks you to do (accepting a change of assignment or taking on an added job, following certain policy decisions, etc.), but also in the sense of keeping communion with the doctrine and discipline of the universal Church, with all of the moral, pastoral and emotional demands that this places on us. All of this, though, is really incarnated in the person of the bishop, which is why, I believe, bishops seem to be the favorite target of the venom of the disaffected, within the Church as well as from the outside. But I digress!

## **Pastoral Unity**

As I mentioned a moment ago, the bishop has the pastoral, and sometimes canonical, obligation to listen to his people and especially his priests. But the final decision resides with him, because the bishop is the one with the full, broad vision of the diocese and its needs, and often has privileged information to which others are not privy. As one very appropriate image of this I can cite what we read just last Wednesday in the second longer reading from the Office of Readings. In a homily attributed to St. Macarius we read the following: “Woe ... to the pilotless ship, storm-tossed and sinking. Woe to the soul without Christ as its true pilot; drifting in the darkness, buffeted by the waves of passion, storm-tossed at the mercy of evil spirits, its end is destruction.” I found this image of the “pilotless ship” and Christ as the “true pilot” to be very provocative. I noticed that in the Latin breviary, this word “pilot” is translated with the word meaning, literally, “governor”: “*Vae navi, si destituatur gubernatore*” (emphasis added).

This a little and very apt lesson that the Church gives us in her liturgy on the true meaning and purpose of pastoral governance: piloting the Church – the “barque of Peter”, the community of believers – toward the horizon of the encounter with the risen Christ, especially piloting her safely through the storm-tossed waters of persecution, division, confusion and chaos. And all of this certainly applies to the situation of the Church today all throughout the world – in different ways sometimes from one place to another, but still, everywhere. We cannot possibly hope to guide our people through the current fierce storms in which we find ourselves toward holiness in Christ if we do not do so together, in unity, in communion, each of us in our local churches and all of us with the universal Church.

That means that all of us have mutual obligations toward each other. This requires a lot of trust, which will not happen unless all those involved prove themselves trustworthy. On the human level, this means cultivating the quality of teamwork. We certainly hear a lot of praise of teamwork in the form of lip-service, but to live it means swimming upstream in the culture of extreme individualism in which we are now living. This mentality has become so far-fetched that, already way back in 1996, the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals, in its decision upholding Washington State’s physician assisted suicide law, could get away with asserting the following philosophical absurdity: “At the heart of liberty is the right to define one’s own concept of existence, of meaning, of the universe, and of the mystery of human life.” Certainly liberty means making decisions for oneself. But to decide the meaning of the universe? The universe, then, is not a given, which we must use our minds to discover and understand, so we can order our lives and our society accordingly; rather, everyone can decide for themselves. If everyone is living in their own universe (and when I look around that does, indeed, seem to be the case at times!), then not even community – let alone teamwork – is possible. It reminds me of an observation a former coworker of mine once made: the more something is talked about, the less of it there actually is. On the other hand, still fresh in our memories is a very happy counter example which demonstrates how effective teamwork succeeds: the San Francisco Giants! Their success came about not because a bunch of superstars got together to show off in their respective positions, but because they play truly as a team, a single cohesive unit with each making the unique contribution he can to the greater good.

For this to happen in the Church, the priests, on their part, must be honest, open and loyal. I don't want to hear from my priests what they think I want to hear; on the other hand, I also don't want to hear what their own personal likes and dislikes are when it comes to pastoral decision-making, as if all that matters is getting one's own way. What I want to hear is their honest perspective on an issue based on a serene and objective analysis of the situation as best they can determine. Indeed, the priests I respect the most are the ones who say the hard things but in charity and respect. The way I would put it is that the priest is not to be a "yes man" but a man of the Church.

The bishop, for his part, must listen seriously, and must seek input from as wide a spectrum of sources as he can, both official channels of consultation (especially) and from those who may be in a position to know sensitive information which must be held confidentially. That means that I sometimes have to hear things that I don't like; I also sometimes have to make decisions that I would rather not, and for reasons that I cannot always disclose. I believe, though, that if the priests and people feel that the bishop has honestly listened to them and seriously considered what they had to say, it will help to build up a culture of trust even though he cannot always decide according to what they might recommend. In a climate of mutual trust, obedience moves from a mere external observance to a true virtue, moving us to an evermore perfect obedience of intellect and will to the person of Jesus Christ.

### **Man of Communion**

In responding to the need for unity in piloting the ship that is the Church through the storms of this world, it is the priest who is uniquely positioned to foster the communion of the local church that is called for. The priest, and especially the parish priest, is really the connecting point between the bishop and the lay faithful of the diocese. It is for this reason that the Instruction issued by the Congregation for the Clergy on August 4, 2002, entitled, "The Priest, Pastor and Leader of the Parish Community," refers to the priest as a "man of communion." It states: "He is charged with promoting and maintaining unity between the members and the Head, and among the members" (n. 9).

This is where being a cooperator and not a competitor is so critically important. Because of his unique canonical and sacramental bond to the bishop – signified and effected by his promise of obedience and his sharing with the bishop in the sacrifice of the altar – he serves this role of communion, the role of connecting his parish with the particular Church and the wider universal Church. The same Instruction states: "The particular Churches, in and with the universal Church, must be open to the reality of a true communion of persons, charisms, and spiritual traditions which transcends geographical, psychological or intellectual boundaries. It should be perfectly clear to priests that the Church is one. Universality or catholicity should always pervade the particular" (n. 17).

This service of communion is not just theoretical but also very practical and experiential; communion, or lack thereof, is experienced in a very real way on the pastoral level. I already made reference to what I sometimes hear from people in our parishes. It is also

the reason why the Directory for the Ministry and Life of Bishops requires bishops to make pastoral visits to their parishes at least once every five years, that is, to foster the sense of communion on behalf of mission in the local church. When I make pastoral visits to the parishes in the Archdiocese, I'm always heartened to see the warm reception that the priests and people give to me, but not because of any special honor or special treatment given to me; rather, the fact that the people feel honored by a visit from their bishop tells me that they do, indeed, have a sense of connection to the wider local church. And I use the occasion as an opportunity to teach them about this in the homily at Mass. I explain precisely that point about ecclesial communion having a very practical side to it: the ministries of our parishes are what is most important, because it is there that the vast majority of our people are formed in the faith, but the parishes don't have all of the resources they need to sustain their ministries; for many things they rely on the central offices of the diocese, which in turn relies on support from the people in the parishes so that it can have the resources it needs to in turn offer the services the parishes need to sustain their ministries. As I tell them, communion on behalf of mission is not meant to be left on the pages of theology books, but is to be translated into very real, practical action; communion is "the basic operating principle of the Church." And the priest is the critical hinge in all of this: he must instill respect for the bishop among his people so that "universality or catholicity" may "always pervade the particular."

## **Conclusion**

One can ask, though, at the end of the day, what is, really, ultimately, the point of it all? In one brief, simple sentence, one that would be easy to skim over, *Presbyterorum Ordinis* states it quite forcefully: "Since no one can be saved who does not first believe, priests, as co-workers with their bishops, have the primary duty of proclaiming the Gospel of God to all" (n. 4). There it is: there is nothing less at stake than people's eternal salvation. In the passage I cited from St. Macarius, he was speaking of the soul, not the Church as a whole – albeit what he has to say does apply to our corporate identity as Christians. But the point to heed here is that one must first master self-governance (or at least be mature in it) before he can effectively govern others (and this applies at any level in the Church).

While this is a life-long project, your years here in the seminary are a special grace you have to work on it. So make the most of your years here, in all four pillars of formation, to grow into the kind of man who can lay down his life for his flock when you one day, God willing, share in the commission first given to the apostles to proclaim the gospel, in word and sacrament, for the salvation of the world. Communion on behalf of mission makes this possible, a communion shared with and under the bishop, but also shared through the sacramental and fraternal bonds of the priests who form the local presbyterate. That will be the topic of my third rector's conference with you later this academic year.