

Rotheiser: Poverty, chastity, and obedience in a secular age

Cardinal Francis George was once asked what he thought of the radical pacifism of people like Dorothy Day and Daniel Berrigan, prophetic figures who believed in absolute nonviolence.

How can this be practical, he was asked, it's utterly naïve to believe that we can live without police and without soldiers.

This was his reply: The world needs pacifists in the same way as it needs vowed celibates: They're not practical. They're out of place in this world.

But they point to the eschatological world, the world of heaven, a world within which there will be no guns, where relational exclusivities will not exist as they exist now, where family will not be based on biology, blood, or marriage, where there will be no poor people, and where everything will belong to everyone.

I thought of that recently as I was conducting a workshop on religious life for a group of young people who were discerning whether or not to enter vowed religious life.

My task was not to try to persuade them to join a religious community but to help them understand what that life, should they join it, would entail. That meant, of course, long discussions on the three vows that people take to be in religious life: poverty, chastity, and obedience (classically termed "the Evangelical Counsels").

What's to be said about poverty, chastity, and obedience in a world that, for the most part, places its hope in material riches, generally identifies chastity with frigidity, and values individual freedom above all else?

Well, no doubt, poverty, chastity, and obedience are seen as radically counter-cultural; but that's mostly because they are generally not very well understood (sometimes even by those who are living them out). For the most part they are seen as a drastic renunciation, the sacrificing of a full life, the unnatural denial of one's sexuality, and the adolescent signing over of one's freedom and creativity.

But that's a misunderstanding.

Poverty, chastity, and obedience are not a missing out on riches, sexuality, and freedom. They are rather a genuine, rich, modality of riches, sexuality, and freedom.

The vow of poverty isn't primarily about living with cheaper things, not having a dishwasher and doing your own housework. It's also not about renouncing the kinds of riches that can make for the full flourishing of life.

A life of voluntary poverty is a lived way of saying that all material possessions are gift, that the world belongs to everyone, that nobody owns a country, and that nobody's needs are first. It's a vow against consumerism and tribalism, and it brings its own wonderful riches in terms of meaning and in the happiness and joy of a shared life.

Likewise for the vow of chastity: Properly understood, it is not a missing out on the joys of sexuality. It's a rich modality of sexuality itself, given that being sexual means more than having sex.

Sexuality is a beautiful, God-given drive within us for lots of things: community, friendship, togetherness, wholeness, family, play, altruism, enjoyment, delight, creativity, genital consummation, and for everything that takes us beyond our aloneness and makes us generative. And so the very real joys that are found in community, friendship, and service of others are not a second-rate substitute for sex. They bring their own sexual flourishing in terms of leading us out of our aloneness.

The same holds true for obedience.

Properly understood, it's not a missing out on real freedom. Rather it's a rich modality of freedom itself, one practiced by Jesus (who repeatedly says: "I do nothing on my own. I do only the Father's will.")

Obedience, as a religious vow, is not an immature sacrificing of one's freedom and adulthood. It's rather a radical submitting of one's human ego (with all its wounds, desires, lusts, private ambitions, and envies) to something and Someone higher than oneself, as seen in the human and religious commitments in persons from Jesus, to Teilhard de Chardin, to Dag Hammarskjold, to Simone Weil, to Mother Teresa, to Jean Vanier, to Daniel Berrigan.

In each of these we see a person who walked this earth in a freedom we can only envy but clearly too in a freedom that's predicated on a genuflecting of one's individual will to something higher than itself.

Our thoughts and our feelings are strongly influenced by the cultural software within which we find ourselves. Thus, given how our culture understands riches, sex, and freedom today, this may well be the most difficult time in many centuries to make the vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience and live them out.

Small wonder religious communities are not over-flooded with applications. But because it is more difficult than ever, it is also more important than ever that a number of women and men choose, voluntarily, to prophetically live out these vows.

And their seeming sacrifice will be amply rewarded because, paradoxically, poverty brings its own riches, chastity brings its own flourishing, and obedience provides us with the deepest of all human freedoms.