

## Chapter 6: The Vows

*vow* = a serious promise to behave in a certain way, by which a person is bound to an act.

In 1981, Mother Paula made her first vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience within the Evangelical Orthodox Church. In 1982, Mother Pilar did the same. Then followed years of manifesting life under these novice vows to see if they were indeed called to such a life, and to see if others in the communion of churches saw a vowed-life appropriate for them. Not until they moved to Bloomfield was everyone ready for them to make a final commitment (the *profession*). October 12, 1997 was the big day. In a Eucharistic celebration on the monastery grounds, eighty family members and friends witnessed the event.



Mother Paula Seiple and Mother Pilar Callen

### VOW OF POVERTY

Following are some excerpts from their vow-taking ceremony:

“Do you renounce the world and all it holds dear, all its pretentiousness and vain pursuits, together with all its values? Are you prepared until death to endure all the difficulties of this life for the sake of the Kingdom of Heaven? Will you willingly and without murmuring endure all the stress and strain of this life in common, living for the love of Christ in poverty, claiming and reserving nothing for your own except what the common life permits?”

“Since you desire to dedicate yourself to God through monastic living, there are certain things you must embrace, and other things you must avoid. Foremost among the things you must embrace is the love of God, which you must prefer to all else. There are things you must avoid so that the love of God and your neighbor may flourish within you more easily. Your renunciation of all that the world esteems is nothing other than a promise of the Cross and of death. You are letting go of your own life in accord with Christ’s words: ‘*If anyone wants to follow in My footsteps, he must give up all rights to himself, take up his cross, and follow Me.*’ (Matthew 16:24) This renunciation enables you to place God first. It enables you to pursue the love of God and dedication to Him and His kingdom without encumbrance.”

Often in thinking about poverty, having few material goods or nothing at all comes to mind. However, the Mothers did not face that situation as often as they found themselves struggling to find the right frame of mind and heart when what they thought they needed didn't appear as quickly as they wanted or in the form they wanted. Covetousness and envy are very real enemies to conquer.

In a country with as much abundance as ours, what can be meant by a vow toward poverty? A friend who had been a monk for several years told the Mothers that his watch was a reminder of his poverty. It wasn't that he could not have a watch; but if another brother needed a watch, he would hand over the watch to the one in need. In a monastic community, everything is held in common, and no one personally owns anything. The point is to learn that everything belongs to the Heavenly Father, and His children are mere stewards caring for His things.

America is a culture in which personal possession is extremely important for security and status. That became evident when the Mothers began to train themselves to both view and talk about things as “ours” and not “mine”. They still struggle to do this. A part of the struggle in giving up ownership is losing control over making decisions about what happens to things, how we use our time, and where we expend our effort. Joint decisions can be more complicated than individual decisions, and curbing self-will is a hard, hard lesson.

Just the quantity of possessions can be a poverty issue because having many possessions impacts focus. The more things, the more is required to store them, maintain them, make decisions about them. Even necessities require money or some other means to acquire them. All of this calls for an expenditure of time, energy, and attention. It is possible for things to steal the time, energy, and attention needed for important non-material things.

It is the giving up of control, of ownership, that brings a sense of poverty. Embracing poverty may look like too much sacrifice, but there is also this promise in the Gospel: *“Everyone who has left houses, brothers or sisters, father or mother, children, or fields because of My name will receive 100 times more and will inherit eternal life.”* (Matthew 19:29)

## VOW OF CHASTITY

A question from the vow-taking ceremony was, “ Will you maintain yourself in chastity?”

Sexual chastity entails more than celibacy, for moral sexual behavior is expected of Christians whether married or single. Chastity in marriage has to do with faithfulness to a spouse and unselfish (pure) sexual conduct between husband and wife. Chastity for a single person also has to do with faithfulness, a commitment to unselfish sexual conduct outside of marriage—controlling the sexual appetite and abstaining from sexual experimentation. A choice for celibacy can be an interim time while awaiting marriage; or, celibacy can be a permanent choice.

The practical St. Paul in his first letter to the Corinthians urges those who are thinking about marriage to consider some of the consequences: *“I want you to be without concerns. An unmarried man is concerned about the things of the Lord--how he may please the Lord. But a married man is concerned about the things of the world--how he may please his wife--and he is divided. An unmarried woman or a virgin is concerned about the things of the Lord, so that she may be holy both in body and in spirit. But a married woman is concerned about the things of the world--how she may please her husband. Now I am saying this for your own benefit, not to put a restraint on you... so that you may be devoted to the Lord without distraction.”* (1 Corinthians 7:32-35)

The Mothers often explain their choice of celibacy using the analogy of a coin. The Lord created men and women as part of the animal kingdom, and the longing for a shared life is found deeply planted within human nature. Sexuality is like a two-sided coin. One side of the coin is marriage, and marriage is a celebration that Christ is betrothed to His Bride (the Church, His own Body). Sexual union within marriage is a hint of the intimate union between Him and His beloved. Celibacy is the other side of the coin. Celibacy is waiting for the Beloved, a reminder that the fullness of our union with Him is yet to come. Neither side of the coin is sweeter or better, and both reflect important truths about God's kingdom.

Here is a further excerpt from the vow-taking ceremony:

“What is this monastic life if not a wholehearted effort to live the Gospel heroically, filled with love of God and love of your brothers and sisters? What is this life if not a total dedication to attaining the divine purpose of human life in faith, hope, and charity? What is this life if not the intention to worship God in spirit and in truth, if not your persistent and unwavering pursuit of the things that are above? For while we are still here on earth, we are also citizens of heaven, so that our whole mindset must extend beyond this world to the hopeful expectation of all that is to come.”

Our vow to chastity is an absolute focus on the Beloved – no turning to the right or left, no flirtations with things that have to do with anyone or anything else. The Scriptures are full of warnings and exhortations and pleas for the Bride to stay with the Bridegroom and not give herself to another in any way. “...*You are to never bow down to another god because the Lord, being jealous by nature, is a jealous God.*” (Exodus 34:14) Singular devotion is the goal.

The way chastity is manifested for the single person is abstinence. To help explain, here we quote from John Kavanaugh's 2006 book FOLLOWING CHRIST IN A CONSUMER SOCIETY: “A celibate who lives a warm and affective life of intimacy which is not reduced to sexual relations, and a life of hope which is not reducible to the blood of offspring, says by this life-choice that human happiness, tenderness, compassion, and passion are made possible by our very humanness and a caring life of faith and hope. Such a life, of course, is more difficult in the doing than the saying. In our culture especially, people have found it dumbfounding that someone might find human intimacy and compassion while forgoing physical fatherhood or motherhood, and choosing to love without a lover, spouse, or sexual gratification.”

Also, from Susan Muto's 1985 CELEBRATING THE SINGLE LIFE: “We must have faith that our life is part of God's providential plan for our personal salvation. This faith makes possible our final commitment to the single life as a vocation, that is, as a calling from God and not merely a question of circumstances or the expectations of others. We believe we have been called to singleness because this is the best way we can fulfill God's providential plan for our lives.”

Each of the Mothers believes God presented this life-choice to her with a freedom to choose. The Lord Himself said this was not for everyone. “*Not everyone can accept this...but only those it has been given to.*” (Matthew 19:11)

## VOW OF OBEDIENCE

Other questions from the vow-taking ceremony included: “Will you remain obedient in Christ to the spiritual authority of your community? Will you accept the rules and regulations of the monastic common life as we have received them by tradition, as well as the admonitions of your spiritual authority? Will you cease anything that smacks of disobedience? Will you never be closed and unwilling to listen? Will you not be defensive and seek to justify yourself before others? Will you be on guard against arrogance and self-elation, against envy and jealousy, against anger and grudge-bearing? Will you never raise your voice against another or insist on having the last word? Are you done with useless quarrelling and grumbling, and with contentiousness of all kinds, at all times avoiding tale-bearing and gossiping? Will you not engage in any kind of divisiveness, taking care not to manipulate? Will you be

compassionate and merciful as the Lord is, mindful always of your own frailty? Are you ready to treat your brothers and sisters as you would yourself like to be treated? Then, acquire peace and tranquility of soul as you resign yourself to the will of God. At all times let your conduct be gentle and generous. In all things do your best, always mindful of being in the presence of God.”

Luke 2:51 says that in the early years of His life Jesus was obedient to Joseph and Mary. The Gospels tell us there was nothing He did that was not at the direction of the Heavenly Father. “...*the works that the Father has given Me to accomplish, these very works I am doing, testify about Me that the Father has sent Me.*” (John 5:36) Then at the end of His life, Christ asked that His children likewise be obedient: “*The one who has My commands and keeps them is the one who loves Me. And the one who loves Me will be loved by My Father. I also will love him and will reveal Myself to him.*” (John 14:21)

Because our Lord was obedient, we should be obedient. A commitment to obey the Lord is a promise to learn to set aside self-will and to grow in trust that He knows what is best. “*Not my will but Yours be done.*” (Luke 22:42) This is another lesson that is hard on pride. The Mothers' abbot friend from New York told them that the reason anyone ever left the monastic life was nearly always because they didn't want to be told what to do!

Learning to give direction in wisdom and love is as difficult as learning to obey that direction in a spirit of submission. For the first 17 years of Holy Redeemer, Mother Pilar had the responsibility of authority as abbess under the oversight of one of the EOC bishops. From 2004 to the move to Greenwood, the abbess role fell to Mother Paula. When the Mothers became part of the St. Paul parish, authority shifted to the local EOC bishop with Mother Paula operating less formally as the head of the Agape household. She also serves as the President of the not-for-profit corporation that is the legal structure for Holy Redeemer. Now that Agape house has grown into a household of three, each of the women who lives there is the final authority for different parts of home responsibilities and ministries.

## VOW OF STABILITY

There is a fourth area incorporated into the vows taken by the Mothers. The stability to which they commit themselves is a promise to stay where the Church plants them, and to stay together.

These comments were part of the vow-taking ceremony: “Are you prepared to remain in the monastic life and in this monastery or whatever monastery or place you might be assigned to in obedience? Stay close to your sister in the monastic life. Beware of engaging in all kinds of rationalizing whereby you would justify your leaving the monastery and her companionship.”

Holy Redeemer came into existence in a culture and at a time in which this kind of stability was not an aim for most Americans. Staying at one job is no longer a goal, or even a realistic possibility. Long-term relationships are rarer than fast acquaintances through social media, and long-term participation in marriages, community groups, and church families is more uncommon than common. Going to a new experience is usually easier than staying in a current situation and resolving difficulties when circumstances and personal interactions are stressful, disappointing, or challenging.

Beyond the hard work of applying love to the intricacies of human relationships, another aspect of stability can be boredom. To see the same people, to do the same things, to be in the same place day after day, with the possibility of change unknown, can be boring. If you live in a culture where new experiences are readily available everywhere, limiting yourself to the same people, the same activities, and the same place is a very big challenge. One of the results of this kind of boredom is coming to a time when the question must honestly be faced: “Is God enough for me?”

Regarding the Vow of Stability, the Mothers have had some pertinent questions. This is how they have answered:

**What if either of you were assigned to a different place?** It would have to be something very monumental that would cause our bishops to send one or both of the Mothers into the jurisdiction of another parish. However, the EOC has a discernment court system for such huge decisions, and the Mothers, all of the bishops, the Mothers' own priest, and others who might be involved would meet together for a time of discerning together God's will. Nothing would move ahead without consensus. By the time that happened, all would be secure in the decision made.

**How could you fulfill your vow of staying close to each other if the church separated you?** The vow could not be met. That's the whole point of the vow. The Mothers would have to be "officially" released from that vow by the Church, since it was within the framework of the Church that the vow was made. When Mother Pilar was given permission to go to Africa for the first time to see if she had a future there as a missionary, Mother Paula struggled with this very point because she knew she wasn't destined for Africa. They were at a point (because the monastery was not going to grow by the addition of younger women) when it looked like they would not have a life/work in common. At that point the Church was leaving it up to Mother Paula to decide what she wanted to do with the rest of her life. Her personal preference was to go off and do her own thing (MUCH easier), but the promise made under the vow wouldn't let her do that in good conscience. It never came to a court discernment because Mother Pilar's Africa work turned out to be as an ambassador for the EOC across East Africa rather than as a permanent missionary.

**If either of you, after much contemplation and prayer, felt that God wanted you to do His work in a different place in a different way, how could you disregard His will and be faithful to your vow of stability?** We do still have freedom of choice within the Church, and, depending on our conduct and frame-of-mind, the Church could release us with or without her blessing. But it is the nature of making this promise to stay that makes any decision to leave extremely difficult. Just as in a marriage, those who take seriously their intention to stay together more often stay than those who see the freedom to divorce as a ticket out.