

*Catholic Church of Eastern Montana*  
DIOCESE OF GREAT FALLS-BILLINGS  
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# LENTEN LETTER TO PRIESTS

From

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Dear Brothers in Christ,

Last January, I was on my annual retreat with the other bishops of Region XII. The retreat director was Bishop Bob Carlson of Saginaw. During one of his presentations, he recommended that we discuss the meaning of priestly obedience with the priests in our respective dioceses. While I do recall a number of conversations with other priests on the topic prior to my becoming a bishop, I do not recall having had that many conversations with priests on obedience since I have become a bishop. In reality, it is a sensitive topic. Nonetheless, I thought Bishop Carlson's advice to be good advice. Priestly obedience, after all, is not so much a matter of taking orders from the bishop (or even the Pope) but about being disposable for pastoral service and being faithful to the Gospel and the teachings of the Church. It is in this sense that I offer this Lenten reflection on an essential aspect of our priestly commitment.

For many a priest, the notion of obedience is a more difficult evangelical counsel to embrace than celibacy or simplicity of life. It is, however, an essential commitment that every priest makes prior to ordination. The question is asked, "Do you promise respect and obedience to me and my successor?" In the case of religious, the question is, "Do you promise respect and obedience to the Diocesan bishop and your legitimate superior?" Like the other promises a newly ordained makes, it is a sacred promise to God made before God's people. But what does the promise of obedience and respect to the bishop and to his successors actually expect?

Pope John Paul II, writing in the apostolic exhortation, *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, wrote the following: "First of all, obedience is 'apostolic' in the sense that it recognizes, loves and serves the Church in her hierarchical structure... [It] ...is in no way a kind of humiliation. It flows instead from the responsible freedom of the priest who accepts not only the demands of an organized ecclesial life, but also that grace of discernment and responsibility in ecclesial decisions which was assured by Jesus to his apostles and their successors for the sake of faithfully safeguarding the mystery of the Church and serving the structure of the Christian community along its common path toward salvation" (#28). Though it is a mouthful of words, they are words worth pondering! *Pastores Dabo Vobis* goes on to note that it is those who understand the role of authority who are most free from falling into the temptation of "authoritarianism" in their own settings as priests. While it is important to have authority, authoritarianism has no place in pastoral ministry. It is those who know how to stand under authority who most likely understand authority.

*Pastores Dabo Vobis* likewise speaks of obedience as having a 'community' dimension. The obedience of a priest is one "...which is deeply a part of the unity

of the presbyterate, which is called to cooperate harmoniously with the bishop...” This demands a “marked spirit of asceticism” in order not to get “too bound up with one’s own preferences or points of view...” In other words, priestly obedience is an evangelical counsel that serves solidarity. It is based on the premise of belonging to a single presbyterate. Because it has the common good of the diocese in mind, it embodies a certain availability that allows each priest to respond pastorally to a multitude of needs.

As a term, however, (and especially within an American context), “obedience” is a pejorative concept. Interestingly, at its roots, it comes from two Latin words: “ob” and “audire”, i.e., “to listen to.” To listen is to attend to. It is more than just hearing sounds, it is actively to be engaged in what is being said so that through hearing, a person might take a certain course of action. One of the better Scriptural models for listening is Mary, especially as she struggles to try to understand what the Archangel Gabriel invites her to do. Her docility to the call of God stands as a model for how priests must attend to the voice of God. Wrestling with the challenge of what we hear is often a struggle in our lives, pitting personal preference against a greater good envisioned by someone else. The danger is that we may give up the struggle and either become indifferent or hostile to what we hear.

In order truly to be obedient, we must learn to listen well and to listen prayerfully. In our society, we usually have lots of noise in our environments, e.g., the T.V. or radio, books on tape, various kinds of music and talks played on CD players and I-pod’s. They fill the background with noise as we go about other tasks such as working, exercising, driving, shopping, cooking, dining, etc. Most of what produces sound in the background is ignored. Unfortunately, we sometimes do the same when people speak to us. How well do we listen to what people say? And what kind of attention do we give to that which we do choose to hear? We likely have all had an experience in which we were reading a newspaper or watching a football game while someone was trying to hold a conversation with us. They talked while we said something to the effect of, “Uh huh!” We didn’t really attend to the other person or what they were saying. The real question is never what we hear, but whether or not we choose really to listen to what we hear. If we choose really to listen, it will likely impact our thoughts and actions.

The first words that St. Benedict uses to begin his *Rule* for monks are “Listen, my son, to your master’s precepts and attend to them with the ear of your heart.” What Benedict is concerned with is whether or not his monks truly were attentive to what came into their ears. He speaks of the “ear of the heart,” that which is at the center of affections, the source of self-giving love, the most sensitive part of the human person.

Using the metaphor for heart, our hearts must be humble before God in order to understand what obedience expects. As the psalmist says (Psalm 51:10), “...a humbled contrite heart, O God, you will not spurn.” A humble heart is one that

knows its need of God and willingly submits to God. When our hearts have become hardened, indifferent or broken it is difficult for us truly to listen. Of course, obedience to God is one thing while obedience to the bishop is another! With regards to the promise of obedience to the bishop, however, there is an understanding that God is essentially involved. This is why it is a promise that cannot be ignored.

An analysis of what a priest's promise of obedience and respect to the bishop expects, points to the importance of dialogue. The dynamic of honest dialogue is an element that should be present. It is within the context of conversation, in which both bishop and priests listen to each other that the place of obedience may best be appreciated. They dialogue about needs of the people of God within the Diocese and about how their needs might best be filled by a particular priest (or priests) with certain skills and abilities. Being told, "Be quiet and do what you are told!" hardly invites a mature or positive response on the part of the priest. Nor does it build rapport between the bishop and a priest or any sense of partnership or collaboration for the common good. On the other side of the coin, it is hardly in keeping with a priest's promise of obedience and respect to ignore a reasonable request of the bishop for the good of the diocese. To refuse a legitimate request altogether with an attitude of "Nobody is going to tell me what to do!" or "I know theology better than he does!" does little to serve the people of the Diocese. The vision of the priest must be not just "what's good for me," but "what's good for the people of God."

The promise of obedience of a diocesan priest finds its motivation in his experience of a loving God. It involves a surrender of himself to the will of God as modeled by Christ on the cross. It understands that such surrender leads, not to death, but to resurrection. It is the great Christian paradox. The cross, as all priests know, is central in Jesus' teaching. And Jesus reminds us that we must pick up the cross and follow him if we would be his disciples. Basically, what he says to his disciples is, "This is the way to the kingdom. Are you coming or not?!" Because the cross is important to understanding obedience as well as embracing the Gospel, it must be appreciated within the context of God's love.

It is important to understand that priestly obedience is always ecclesial, i.e., it is mediated within and through the Church. When we were baptized, we were baptized into the Body of Christ, not just into a private relationship with the Lord. While personal, our life in Christ is never solely an individual reality. As members of the Church, we have many sisters and brothers.

When we were ordained, we were ordained to serve this same Body of Christ. As such, it is within the structure of the Church that we must understand obedience. The obedience of a priest is always ecclesial and mediated because it is directed to the communal identity of believers. Governing styles that allow priests to do whatever they want, whenever they want to do it, easily leads to chaos and disunity within the Diocese. At the same time, governing styles that

force all priests to do this or that without any possibility of dialogue and understanding affects the quality of obedience and likewise leads to disunity between the bishop and priests. The “sacred cow” has then become a “white elephant”. Avoidance in addressing “the elephant”, (i.e., the problem) sometimes results. A basic attitude of brotherhood among all priests in union with the bishop is essential for the Diocese. A good model of the relationship between authority and obedience, bishop and priests, is not that of parent and child, but of two mature and responsible adults in faith.

Pope John Paul II points out in *Pastores Dabo Vobis* that a three fold relationship needs to exist in order to understand the purpose of obedience in the life of each priest. As is true for celibacy as well as the simplicity of life, we are called to: 1) a uniquely personal experience of God’s love in the Risen Lord; 2) a commitment to a communitarian form of interdependent living, especially among the presbyterate; 3) a ministerial dimension to priesthood that strives to be of service to all members of the Church. When these three elements are present in a majority of the priests in a diocese, God’s people within the diocese are, not only better served, but more equally served.

Reflecting on the notion of this three fold relationship, it is important to be available to God through prayer and reflection. A priest must be someone who takes his spiritual life utterly seriously. Likewise, it is important to form bonds of relationship with other priests within the diocese. Without these relationships in place, a priest becomes isolated from a shared mission of pastoral service for God’s people. Unless these two relationships are in place, the third one, i.e., ministry on behalf of God’s people, will suffer significantly and be quite limited in scope.

The promise of obedience also has the purpose of assuring that members of the Church receive the fullness of what the Church teaches. There are any of a number of doctrinal or moral matters that are difficult to address given cultural attitudes in today’s society. There are likely to be elements of Church teaching, especially on moral matters, that a given priest may not wholly embrace. There are also requisites for sacramental preparation and celebration with which a priest may disagree. The promise of obedience helps to assure fidelity to the Church’s magisterium. Basically, the members of the Church have a right to hear and experience the fullness of Church teaching and practice.

I believe it is important to emphasize the presbyteral dimension of priestly ministry. In the Gospel, we hear of the Apostles being sent forth on mission. In John’s Gospel, 20:21, Jesus says, “As the Father sent me, so I send you.” The words of Jesus are not singular in nature but plural. And the Apostles go forth with a shared mission. It is with this communal attitude that we, as bishop and priests, may best determine how to serve God’s people within the Diocese. Ideally, all significant decisions should come about as the result of prayerful insights shared among the bishop (and/or his representative) and the priests of

the Diocese. The prayer I refer to is prayer that has developed over years and has continued to grow in both the bishop and priest. It is never just an “ad hoc” prayer to meet a challenge in one parish and a crisis in another.

Prayerful initiatives require an honest, unselfish inquiry to God’s will in the here and now. In order to accomplish this, a priest needs to inform the bishop (and/or his representative) what he thinks, what he feels and what his personal judgments and insights are! It demands looking at needs in the diocese together while asking who is the right person, right now, for that place or this ministry and who has the right gifts and capabilities to meet the need. It comes from quality time spent in discernment before God.

Obedience for a priest demands an active spiritual life in Christ, one that appreciates he was ordained to serve the people of God. A priest who understands priestly obedience understands that “Lone Ranger” ministers and “Individualists” are out of sync with ministry as envisioned by the Church. If a priest solely makes private decisions with regards to ministry, with or without good will in his heart, he does so, not in the sense of mission, but as a private practitioner. If he determines what ministry he is supposed to be doing solely by himself, he can only “send himself” which is contrary to being sent as a member of the Church. A “Loner” priest does little to unify a diocese or bring about an experience of catholicity. To the contrary, “Loners” often end up causing disruption and fragmentation.

Every act that fosters Christian unity among the presbyterate is important. It has been a central focus of the diocesan priest assemblies in January 06 and January 08. Though some priests may not like the designation “intentional presbyterate” the reality is that unity is never an accident! It must be sought, fostered and nurtured.

This doesn’t mean that all the priests of the diocese will meet with each other frequently. That would not be practical. It doesn’t mean that all the priests of the Diocese will like each other. It does mean that there will be a sense of corporate membership and fraternity that comes about only through a commitment to gathering and sharing issues and concerns substantively with other priests. Planned gatherings such as assemblies, study days, support groups, shared retreats or just time spent together for meals, vacations, days off, personal letters, phone calls, e-mails help to create a sense of priestly companionship and commitment to the presbyterate. These kinds of activities make us more effective in our priestly ministry and pastoral service. It is why I expect priests actively serving in the Diocese to be at specially scheduled events such as assembly’s and retreats.

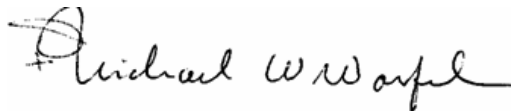
When there is a corporate sense of who we are as a presbyterate, each priest knows that he has been missioned to a specific ministry in a specific place in order to share with his brother priests in Jesus’ mission from his Father. Where

he ministers is not a matter of it being just “his own choice.” In the case of a diocesan priest, he is sent by the bishop. In the case of a religious, he is sent by the religious community. In both cases, knows that his parish does not “belong” to him but is an entity of the diocese and that he serves there as a member of the presbyterate. There are plenty of examples of priests around the country who have assumed an unhealthy attitude of ownership, refusing to move to a new place even though there is sufficient and compelling reasons for the move.

Sharing life and ministry as one presbyterate helps to overcome the perception that some ministries are more important than others or that some parishes are more important than other parishes. In some instances, certain priests may have unique talents that allow them to serve particularly well in a given location or ministry, e.g., as a campus minister, a hospital chaplain, a pastor on a reservation. Where ever a priest is assigned, however, the assignment is of equal importance. A competitive stance or an ambitious attitude can be a wedge between priests. Priestly ministry belongs to the whole diocese, to the whole presbyterate, and is not the possession of any individual priest.

As we conclude the Lenten Season and enter the 50 days of Easter, I pray that we all have walked the way of the cross so that we may better witness to the risen life of Christ. Without sharing in the passion and death of Christ, there is no resurrection in Christ. The Paschal Mystery must permeate our lives as priests. The service we render as priests is never just to offer ourselves to others. It is about offering Christ to others through us. I pray that in our efforts to serve God’s people, we may be able to say as once St. Paul acclaimed so eloquently in his Letter to the Galatians: “I no longer live, but Christ lives in me” (Gal. 2:20).

Sincerely in Christ,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Michael W. Warfel". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned above the printed name and title.

Michael W. Warfel  
Bishop of Great Falls-Billings