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**THE THREE VOWS OF MONASTICISM**

January 21, 2007

*In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, One God. Amen.*

**Monasticism Has Three Vows:**

1. Obedience
2. Celibacy
3. Voluntary poverty

**Imitate Christ Through Your Obedience:**

The most important aspect of monasticism is obedience, because as St. Anthony the Great said: “Obedience and lowliness gives men power over wild beasts.”[[1]](#footnote-2) The word “beasts” here refers to the devils. Notice that the Lord Christ, through His obedience to the Father, defeated the devil and his entire kingdom. (Of course, because He is equal to the Father in essence according to His divinity, there is no obedience or commands between Him and the Father.) Obedience means that He “*made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross. Therefore God also has highly exalted Him and given Him the name which is above every name*.”[[2]](#footnote-3) Through this obedience Jesus Christ overcame Satan, destroyed Hades, and freed the captives therein. Thus, one who is obedient imitates the Lord Christ in His obedience to the heavenly Father. Obedience must be carried out within the boundaries of the commandments of God. One must obey monastic canons; however, one certainly should not obey precepts that are against God’s commandments.

Monasticism entails dying to the world, and dying to the world entails dying to the self; dying to performing one’s own will. In monasticism, “Release from all is bondage to the One.”[[3]](#footnote-4) One cannot return to feelings of longing for the family and being attached to them. The relationship with the family must be spiritual; and if the family comes to visit, they should benefit from the monastic, feeling that this one is living in heaven. The monastic should draw the family towards heaven. If you become attached to your family, they will pull you down towards the earth.

**Celibacy Requires Spiritual Watchfulness and Struggle:**

Celibacy is extremely important in the monastic life. Satan warred against the saintly fathers like St. Anthony to whom he appeared in the guise of women, dancers, and the like. But St. Anthony was firm in his war against the devil, as the Bible says: “*Resist the devil and he will flee from you*.”[[4]](#footnote-5) The war against St. Anthony was fierce but he persevered with apostolic steadfastness; when they snatched his cowl and tore it, he sewed it again. We place a cowl on the heads of the monks and nuns (with its twelve crosses) as a sign of the apostolic struggle. “*He is not crowned unless he competes according to the rules*,”[[5]](#footnote-6) so the path of celibacy requires struggle, vigilance, and spiritual watchfulness. These are required constantly, not only for a certain period of time in life, after which a person may slacken. The devil can wage war against you even if you are near old age, therefore you must be continually alert, awake, and watchful for satanic wars.

**Voluntary Poverty Must Persevere:**

As for voluntary poverty, upon entering the monastic life, one abandons her position, possessions, inheritance, and indeed everything. These may be left to the church, or if the family desires them, they may be retained. This is not important; what is important is that she leaves everything. Inside the monastery voluntary poverty must continue. For example, if she is forgotten by those distributing the rations and does not receive her share, she should ask: “If I have become upset because I have been forgotten, then where is voluntary poverty?” We must ask: “Is voluntary poverty simply an external appearance or is it something living inside the heart?” Furthermore, in voluntary poverty, the devil may exit through the door, but enter again through a window. For example, one who works in the monastery’s gift shop might start negotiating with visitors concerning the price of items. And if asked about this, she may say: “No, but this is God’s money. This is the monastery’s money.” The more money she accrues the happier she is for having sold for higher prices. This is not voluntary poverty. Voluntary poverty is reflected in a person’s entire behavior. If one is dealing with the monastery’s goods, one should feel indifferent towards money, treating gold as worthless dirt. One who has abandoned possessions, but all the while seeks to collect money and extravagance for the monastery, convinces herself of being abstinent to the world, but in reality, for the sake of the monastery, she actually is not abstinent. This is not right.

Voluntary poverty is not about wearing torn clothes so as to appear before people as one who has reached a high level of spirituality. Voluntary poverty means being able to easily forgo anything, not being inclined to store objects in one’s cell, not being attached to any possessions, and being willing and able to surrender anything with great ease. If any objects, such as a pot, a pan, or a plate, are taken from you, you should not cause a commotion in the monastery, asking, “Where did it go?” You would not turn the whole world upside down, or interrogate the one who took it. Thus, you would not be attached to anything. If someone were to take your possessions and forget to return them, you would say: “It makes no difference, we are all one.” But, one who comes to argue, saying, “No, but I need these things for my work,” has possessiveness in her work. Perhaps, if you had surrendered the possession, God would have sent you twice as much. By this I do not mean that you should be careless – that is, if an object falls on the floor, for example, you do not look for it – however, arguing over possessions does not indicate voluntary poverty.

Furthermore, if voluntary poverty is strongly rooted inside the heart, you feel in want for God also; you always feel poor. Regarding such a person, the Holy Bible says: “*Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven*.”[[6]](#footnote-7) You would feel needy for God’s work in your life, impoverished for God’s help, and you would have no feelings of ownership. St. Paul the Apostle says: “*If you did indeed receive it, why do you boast as if you had not received it?*”[[7]](#footnote-8) In other words, if you have received something, why would you act as though you did not receive anything? If you have received gifts, why would you boast? You should say, “I am a beggar.” A beggar never boasts about begging. Voluntary poverty does not only apply to material objects, but also to spiritual matters and gifts in a person’s life.

*May God bless your way.*

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*The New King James Version.* Nashville: Thomas Nelson, Inc, 1982.

Ward, Benedicta, trans. *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers: The Alphabetical Collection.* Revised Edition. Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1984.

1. Saint Antony (Ward 1984), 8 {36}. *Lowliness* replaces *abstinence*, for consistency with the Arabic. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. (The New King James Version 1982), Phil 2:7-9. All Biblical References are from the New King James Version (NKJV), unless otherwise stated. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. St. Isaac the Syrian (Miller 1984), 411. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. Jam 4:7. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. 2 Tim 2:5. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. Mt 5:3. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. 1 Cor 4:7. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)