

## Vows To Set You Free

Extracts from a sermon preached by Benedict SSF at the First Profession of Bart SSF at Hilfield Friary on 30 October 2005.

St. Francis was one of those whose eyes were opened fully to the true world: the presence of a loving God at the centre of a world full of hatred and violence. St. Francis saw that the created order was shot through with the glory of God - and that men and women are made in God's image. And as Franciscans we have glimpsed that truth for ourselves and we take our vows to help us to live out this reality, even if misunderstood as so much foolishness in the eyes of the secular world. Francis caught a glimpse of that great love which is like a fire always burning at the centre, the heart, of God. And he responded totally to that love with a lavish, extravagant, costly and reckless giving of his all.

This total response to the God who is at the centre and is the meaning of all life is not just for the favoured few - it is for all. Jesus said, 'If any wish to be a follower of mine, they must leave self behind; day after day they must take up their cross and come with me.' There is no second or economy-class Christian with lower standards; the vowed religious life isn't a superior one. The call and the invitation to follow Jesus is the same for us all - a call for a total commitment, in the way that is most appropriate for each one of us.

I am a Franciscan brother because I realised that for me this is the best and most total way I can respond to the Lord's love for me and his demand to leave self behind and come with him. Today Bart is taking his vows in our Society because he, too, is convinced that this is the particular way he can best make his response to the total love of the Lord for him and the world. And we make that response not in vague or sentimental terms but in very specific and practical ways - in terms of the vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. Each of these represents a liberation. Poverty: as St. Paul says, 'having nothing we own the world.' Not hemmed in by property we can be free to go where God wants us to be. Chastity means that we are more free to give ourselves to God and more available for all people. Obedience means we free ourselves from the slavery of self - free completely to do his will. But these freedoms can only be attained through first a giving up, a restricting, a renunciation. We will only be free to fly as a bird if we really do give up possessions and all the things we hang on to and clutch at. Chastity only brings us the freedom to love many people with openness and generosity if first we give up our right to the intimacy of sexual relations, marriage, and all exclusive and possessive friendships. Obedience seems the very denial of freedom, yet it is only as we do deny our own will very specifically that we discover the true freedom of God's children - and that the service of God is for us perfect freedom.

So as Bart openly sets himself on the road to renunciation - day after day taking up his cross and walking with Jesus - so he will discover, hopefully, the true freedom of God's children and make the response that is most appropriate to him to that great love which like a fire is always burning in the heart of God.

Some wag summed up the vows rather negatively - 'no money, no sex and do as you are told!' But the vows are far from being negative; they are meant to and do challenge, excite, be life giving. Living out the vows is not easy - but a married couple will tell you that too! We are such human, frail creatures, with feet of clay. Over the 30-odd years I have been in vows I have certainly found each of them a struggle. Mercifully, I have on the whole only had to struggle with them one at a time - but on occasion it seemed as if it were all three together! And we don't live them very well. The vow of poverty is one which can create a lot of guilt and uneasiness among us - especially as St. Francis was so adamant about it. Each brother views poverty from a different angle. As Guardian for seven years at Glasshampton I have seen quite a few brothers move to another house - but some have needed something like a Pickford's removal van to get them from A to B with all the books and papers,

clothes, and knick-knacks squirreled away over the years! It is a struggle to wrestle with how the vow of poverty ought to be lived out in our Franciscan community in our own day.

Chastity - well, there's a real humdinger! Our social and cultural background is not sympathetic to the idea of chastity and there is enormous pressure towards sexual expression. The celibate life is not seen as normal (and often I agree!) We are fully sexual beings: it is important that we are comfortable and at ease with our sexuality, and never try to suppress it; that will only damage us. I have at times wondered whether castration at profession might solve a problem or two! But celibacy isn't meant to destroy you, but in union with your brothers and sisters, and by God's grace, may you discover that channelled, disciplined and focused on Christ, it will help you to be ever warm and affectionate, tender and fully human. Celibacy is God's gift - but it can only be lived if you really want a deep intimacy with the Lord and that relationship you believe he is calling you to.

Obedience isn't about doing what you are told, which creates an infantile attitude which is degrading and obnoxious. The Latin root for obedience is *ob audire* which means 'to listen' - listening to God, who is the one to whom you have to be obedient, in your prayer, and through the community, which is the way God tends to work for us. It will involve dialogue and communication with your brothers and sisters as you listen together for God's will - participating in the decision making and shouldering your share of the responsibility that goes with it.

And as Bart makes his offering today with all the generosity that he can, we who have made our vows, perhaps many years ago, could be reminded to take a look at ourselves, and wonder: How much have I taken back of what I so much wanted to give? How much have I compromised and sought the best of both/all worlds? How much have I wanted the freedom without the renunciation? And we realise that our life is not a matter of a vow made once for all which will recede into history, but a day by day, every day responding, in many different situations, with a great YES to God.