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The Renewal of
Priestly Promises

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Each year at the Chrism Mass, celebrated in cathedral churches across the world on the occasion of Holy Thursday, priests come together at the invitation of the diocesan ordinary, their bishop, to concelebrate the Mass with him and, in his presence and that of the lay faithful, renew their priestly promises. There is every reason to believe that many priests make what is often a long journey to the cathedral precisely to renew the commitment to the priesthood first undertaken on the day they were ordained.

The Chrism Mass itself is a unique expression of priestly solidarity between the diocesan bishop and his clergy. It gathers together in the mother church, just once in the year, the diocesan family and is a corporate expression of its unity in its diversity of ministries (ordained and lay). It links the specific ministry of those ordained to the Last Supper, at which the Eucharist and the priesthood were instituted by the Lord, and to the life of the local church. There could be no more fitting nor apposite context in which priests could renew the promises they made on the day of their ordination.

This year there will be an appreciation of the fact that in 2019 on the occasion of the feast day of the patron of the diocesan clergy, St. John Marie Vianney (the *curé* of Ars), Pope Francis addressed all of us who exercise that particular pastoral/parochial ministry. In his address he saw that service in terms of commitment and fidelity. It is precisely in those terms that our bishop addresses us, his priests, at the Chrism Mass.

THE DAY OF ORDINATION

Those being ordained to the Latin Rite priesthood (the majority of the world's Roman Catholic priests) will have already made two of the promises that impact most significantly on their lives in the ministry and one which shapes their spiritual lives on becoming

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deacons. They will have made a solemn promise to observe lifelong celibacy and to be obedient to their local ordinary/bishop; they will also have pledged themselves to recite the Liturgy of the Hours in full every day. Only those who have made these solemn promises in public during their ordination to the diaconate qualify to be ordained as priests.

It is common for a bishop to outline what the Church expects of its priests and the duties incumbent on those in Holy Orders during his homily following the guarantee provided by those responsible for preparing the candidates that they are worthy to receive the Sacrament and discharge the duties involved in the priesthood. One can sum up the promises that these celibate men, their philosophical, theological and pastoral formation behind them, make to their bishop as follows.

The future priests promise to faithfully do what the Church expects and demands of its priests as co-workers of the bishops. They promise to preach and teach the word of God, the Good News, and explain Christian doctrine to their flocks as the Church understands it. They will celebrate the liturgy, especially the Eucharist and the Sacrament of Reconciliation, and they will pray daily for the people entrusted to their care and for the universal Church by fidelity to the Liturgy of the Hours. They promise to draw ever closer to Jesus Christ. The lynch-pin of this litany of promises is the pledge they undertake, their hand firmly in the bishop's hands, of respect and obedience to him and to his successors.

These, therefore, are the promises the priest renews each year at the Chrism Mass.

CELEBRATING AND ACKNOWLEDGING YEARS OF MINISTRY

The bishop frequently uses this yearly gathering of his clergy and this one Mass they all concelebrate together *d'office* as an occasion to congratulate the Diamond, Golden and Silver jubilarians in the ranks and salute their respective years of their ministry. At last year's Chrism Mass in St. Chad's Cathedral, Birmingham (the one the present author attended), Archbishop Bernard Longley reflected in his homily on the way the promises each year may be couched in the same words but how for priests with such a variety of years of ministry under their belts the implications of the promises will differ widely across the diocesan presbyterate and how experiences, pastoral or personal – some of them life-changing – radically alter the individual priest's understanding of the promises he is making in unison with his brother priests *anno 2019*.

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Married couples frequently avail of a Silver or Golden Wedding to renew the vows they made to one another when they celebrated the Sacrament of Matrimony. Many of them will have recognised even then that there were many ways the wheel of fortune or the design of providence could turn: sickness/health, poverty/wealth, children and family. The knowledge, experience and circumstances prevailing at the time of the Silver or Golden Wedding will affect the implications of the renewal of promises and the understanding of how they can be implemented with integrity.

The situation of the celibate priest in the context of the spousal relationship with the Church, the custodial relationship with his flock, the fraternal relationship with his brother priests and the paternal relationship with his bishop is analogous to that of spouses renewing their marriage vows. The Sacrament of Matrimony and the Sacrament of Holy Orders, profoundly incarnational in their theology as well as in their ecclesial standing, have evolved at a breath-taking speed in the half-century since Vatican II; preparation for both sacraments and the way in which we conceive how they fit into the universal call to holiness, one of the key insights of *Lumen Gentium*, have altered radically since Popes Pius XI and Pius XII taught definitively on these subjects before the Council.

Just as our understanding of contemporary marriage is deepened by reflection on what the nuptial vows imply in a changing world, so too our insight into what it is today's priest is promising at the Chrism Mass can only but help our understanding of the opportunities, challenges and disappointments involved in the priesthood today, especially as seen by those very priests who at the Chrism Mass are so determined to re-commit themselves to the ministry with the same enthusiasm they experienced on the day of their ordination. It might be instructive to look at what those who taught philosophy and theology in the Scholastic tradition were fond of doing, deductive analysis of the *cas d'école*. A closer look at those vows as renewed by Golden and Silver Jubilarians at the Chrism Masses of 2020 might enable us to understand how the priests of today view themselves, consider the demands of their specific ecclesial calling and shed light on *what it is* they are promising in terms of service to the contemporary Church and to the people of God in the fractured post-modern world of today.

THE GOLDEN JUBILIARIANS

This year's Golden Jubilarians were ordained priests in 1970. Many of those reading this article will have been ordained by Dr. McQuaid. They will have entered the seminary as Vatican II opened, yet the Church in which they grew up, the liturgy they

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were familiar with as altar boys and later as seminarians will have been what we now call the Tridentine Mass, they will have come from a Catholic world of universal practice and – an important point to emphasise in the present climate – they will have enjoyed the support of their families and the esteem of their peers. Their enthusiasm for the priesthood and what it promised them in terms of personal fulfilment and social relevance will have been boosted by Pope John XXIII's forecast of the Council heralding "*a springtime in the Church.*"

At the time of their ordination in 1970 new priests in the English-speaking world were looking forward to a new Roman Missal, a hugely expanded lectionary drawing on the Jerusalem Bible translation and a new Liturgy of the Hours, adapted particularly to the time-table of the secular clergy but one which was designed so that lay Catholics too could join in the Church's prayer. They were to be the generation which would usher in the reformed, vernacular liturgy into the lives of parish communities. They too would be the first to preach homilies. Those who were ordained to the priesthood in continental Europe in 1970 belonged to the first generation of priests since Napoleon's time who would not wear the soutane all day, in church and in the street. Fatefully too, they were the first battalion of new priests to be ordained after the publication of *Humanae Vitae*.

Five pontificates later (one of them being exceptionally long); five if not more episcopates later in most dioceses; five if not more assignments, ministries, promotions later in many cases; and all having reached the normal retiring age in civvy street, the Golden Jubilarians of 2020 are using the identical words to make the same promises they made on the day of their ordination and at every Chrism Mass in the intervening fifty years. Those fifty years witnessed the enlargement of the European Union from six to twenty-seven/eight member states, the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Iron Curtain, divorce, abortion and same-sex marriage in virtually every country in the Western world and, among other world-changing developments, the mobile phone and the internet.

In terms of the Church to which the Jubilarians have given their lives, those same years have seen it racked by the scandal of child-abuse, its mismanagement and the affront to Gospel values it has entailed. The public profile of the Church has been severely discredited and that weakening of its moral authority has directly impacted on the day-to-day lives of those in front-line ministry. The world the priest inhabits in the West of today is unrecognisable when compared with the world he entered as newly-ordained at the end of the 1960's.

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When the Golden Jubilarian promises continual commitment to his spiritual life focused on a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, of whom he is the iconic presence at the altar and in the chancel, to what does he engage himself in practical terms? He undertakes to pray for the Church the Liturgy of the Hours, to nourish himself on the scriptures he continually proclaims in the liturgical assembly and elucidates for his people, and – supported and fortified by an annual/biennial retreat – to be that *alter Christus* which the Church expects from him. When he undertakes to celebrate the liturgy according to the rites of the Roman Church, he may still be ill at ease with the language of the 2011 Missal and apprehensive about the new lectionary which is in the pipeline, and again there may be reluctance to abandon the tried and tested for yet another reform which threatens considerable upheaval. When he pledges himself to have as his unique motivation in his ministry the zeal for souls, he may ask where have all those for whose spiritual welfare he summoned up so much zeal over the years gone.

The soft footfall of those who have walked away, not to return, during his years of ministry may haunt him. His lay contemporaries are grandparents, they have retired, they winter on the Costa del Sol, and their pensions are fat. Many of those to whom he is most attached have parted company with the Church. And yet the rewards of his ministry over half a century and the perpetual yearnings of the human spirit to which he believes Jesus Christ, as celebrated and proclaimed in his Church, provides the unique answer encourage him to renew the promises he made fifty years ago.

THE SILVER JUBILARIANS

Younger men, fewer in number year on year, with a quarter century of ministry behind them and a longer life expectancy than their older confrères, also renew their priestly vows. They were ordained with a vision of Jesus shaped by the Christology of Walter Kasper. Their concept of the Church, will have been formed above all by coping with the pastoral and organisational challenges of decline and/or down-sizing. The modern world and, at a stretch one can also say the virtual world, is the one they have inhabited throughout their adult lives and it is precisely there that they set out to preach the Good News and bear witness to gospel values.

The identity with Jesus Christ which the Church expects of its priests is also an ideal to which younger priests aspire. The retreat opportunities, the culture of spiritual direction and the priestly support groups (Jesus-Caritas, Sacerdotal Society of the Holy Cross, Ministry to Priests, etc.) all suggest that younger priests

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take very seriously that relationship with the Lord with which they re-engage at the Chrism Mass. The only liturgy they have known is the *Novus Ordo* and perhaps their commitment is to celebrate with greater fidelity the Mass and sacraments as the rules the Church prescribes dictate. The “new” Mass deserves to be celebrated with dignity, decorum and style.

The egalitarian culture of today, the privatisation of personal belief and the heightened awareness of freedom when it comes to matters of choice in the areas of conviction, may temper a little the priest’s zeal for souls and certainly suggest alternative strategies in making his ministry to people effective. The Silver Jubilarians will be particularly aware of just how radically the mobile phone, the internet and social media have altered the context within which news – be it Good, bad or indifferent – is communicated and shifted out of all recognition the parameters within which community is created. Church is, after all, family; it is community; it is people and the priest is father, builder, friend and leader. Commitment to those identities in 2020 presents many challenges.

THE ENTIRE PRESBYTERATE

The ideas that will run through the heads of the jubilarians and the challenges their renewal of promises present them will apply *mutatis mutandis* to all diocesan clergy, regardless of age, diocese, ecclesial setting or country, concelebrating at the Chrism Mass.

Many will contextualise their own vocations and their on-going commitment to a life of priestly ministry in a wider ecclesial and social setting. The shifting priorities of the current Holy Father in his sense of the Church’s mission, his desire to reach out to those on the margins and his understanding of the relationship between Church and society in light of insights adumbrated in *Lumen Gentium* – not least our collective responsibility for creation and “our shared home” in the light of climate change - combine to situate priestly service in a setting which is new and hitherto unexplored by those in ordained ministry in the Catholic Church.

Many too, renewing their own vows, will think of and pray for the not inconsiderable number of their confrères who have either voluntarily left priestly ministry – some to embrace the more arduous sacramental commitment of Matrimony – or have been removed from ministry, in some cases very unjustly. The words so many heard chanted during the liturgy of Ordination when the bishop laid hands on them and they were welcomed into the fraternity of the priesthood, *tu es sacerdos in aeternum secundum ordinem Melchisidech*, can have an uncomfortable and disquieting ring when confrères who have left the ministry or been removed

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from the priestly ranks are air-brushed out of the collective memory.

The Chrism Mass, celebrated on the occasion of Holy Thursday each year, offers diocesan priests an annual opportunity to commit themselves as celibate men to support with joy and serenity the sacrifices the priestly life in the age-old tradition of the Latin Church ask of them. They undertake, supported by the prayers of the laity specifically requested by the bishop as part of the renewal ceremony, to configure themselves ever more closely to Jesus Christ, Saviour and Lord. They pledge themselves to minister to the people confided to their care through the celebration of the Mass and sacraments in the way that the Church intends, and to continue to support the fundamental mission of the Church which defines all others, the salvation of souls. The priests might remember too at the moment of renewal of promises that their bishop is a fellow-priest, only that what the promises imply for him might well involve an even heavier burden than they, his priests, are asked to carry.

Towards Healing. Our three spiritual principles of healing can be summed up simply: First, we recognize our powerlessness over the loss of our loved one and the effects of grief upon us. Second, we pass over the “bridge of trust” in Jesus the Divine Mercy, to the shore of hope that Jesus can restore manageability in our lives. Third, given this assurance of hope, we make a decision to entrust our will, and our loved one to Christ, the Divine Mercy.

– CHRIS ALAR, MIC and JASON LEWIS, MIC, *After Suicide* (Stockbridge, MA: Marian Press) p.142.