

Mansions at the Edge of the World

One image I have of the priesthood is that the vocation of each priest is like a mansion at the edge of this world, bordering the next. This image is part of a larger view of the kingdom of God on earth as a land rising up to the edge of this world and into the next. On this land each soul is a different estate. Married couples are like farmland, meant to be fruitful and have lush crops that provide for the people. Their witness and fruitfulness expands the kingdom of God on earth. For in farmland, the earth, water, the air, and the sun combine to bring about fruitfulness. I believe it no coincidence that in most languages that divide their nouns into masculine and feminine, the words for water and land are generally feminine, while the words for sky and sun are generally masculine. In nature these masculine and feminine elements on creation, the land, water, sky and sun combine together to support life. Likewise in marriage, a man and a woman stand at the high point of creation and come together to bring about unity and fruitfulness beneficial for themselves, for the world and for the Church.

Consecrated single life can be compared to roads and rivers running throughout this kingdom, giving the person freedom to move about in the kingdom in the service of the Church and of other people. Religious life can be compared to gardens, groves, hills, and mountains that are near or at the edge of the world, showing forth the beauty and the mystery of the kingdom beyond. Such things are not strictly necessary for life, but precisely because they are not necessary, because they are a free gift of God and those who have chosen to be consecrated, they are in a way more glorious. Sherlock Holmes in “The Navel Treaty” said that the rose is a sign of God’s Providence because it is not strictly necessary, but rather is an extra gift. St. Thomas says in the Summa that the prayer of praise is the highest prayer in

part precisely because it is also not about things that are strictly needed, but is rather more offered for God in Himself. In an analogous way, religious life can be compared to such areas of land that are not strictly needed for any pragmatic reason, but rather are meant to give glory to God. Some such lands, which represent the active religious life, are more accessible to the world and to citizens of the kingdom. Other such areas, representing contemplative life, are closer to the heavenly kingdom, and almost in it. To the world, they are mysterious areas, only occasionally seen, and only then with effort, but they serve continually to draw a connection between the kingdom of God an earth and in heaven.

In this world, the vocation of each priest can be compared to a mansion in these lands, a mansion that stands on the edge of the world that draws people into the eternal kingdom beyond it. And each of the seven vows a priest takes can be compared to one aspect of this mansion. The vow of celibacy can be compared to the grounds of the estate. If such grounds, which represent the masculinity of the priest, are kept in good order, they show forth the grandeur of God and attract people towards the mansion and beyond. This vow allows all manners of people to walk freely across the estate towards the mansion of the priest's life in the Church and all around it and see how the priesthood helps them arrive at these heavenly lands beyond that are vaguely perceivable through mists and clouds. Likewise, the lands of other Christian lives can be compared to the masculinity and femininity of other vocations. In married couples, this land if well kept produces the fruitfulness of children, good deeds, love and faithfulness that most lands are meant to bring forth. But if neglected, it will be filled with thorns and weeds, and become home to vermin. The grounds of the gardens, groves, hills and mountains of religious life likewise represent

the masculine and feminine bases for their own vocations, which if kept orderly, show forth the glory of God in a different and special way.

The vow of respect and obedience to the bishop can be compared to the foundations of the mansion, which are set in rock keep it secure. The need to set a secure foundation in respect and obedience can at times seem frustrating because it slows the process down. There may be some cases in which a bishop does not give the authority for a good project, that is, does not allow the foundation for an addition to the mansion or some other building to be laid. In such cases, it may be tempting to go ahead anyway or to lose respect for the bishop. But, of course, such an attitude would result in a building with no foundation or with a foundation on sand. Such a structure, such a vocation would be unstable and eventually fall. Such was the error of the likes of Martin Luther and the “spiritual Franciscans” as they called themselves of the mid-thirteenth to fourteenth centuries. They may have had many good ideas regarding the reformation of the Church. But once they broke from the foundation upon which the priesthood and the faith are based, all future projects were bound to depart further from the faith and eventually fall. And, it is noteworthy that these so called “spiritual Franciscans” are no more and the Lutheranism that Luther believed in has a rather small following today. On a more practical level, few priests disobey their bishop to the point of schism, but many still do what they can get away with and indulge in backbiting or cynicism regarding the bishop. Such an attitude is like having a foundation with cracks in it. They can be repaired, but as long as they remain, they threaten the whole structure, for they make it depend only on the human effort and thought of the priest. In addition, if a priest does not respect the authority of the bishop, there is no compelling reason why the faithful should respect the authority of the priest.

On the positive side, the unity in the Church that is supported by this vow of respect and obedience creates a sure foundation for the rest of the mansion, for the ministry of the priest. For, through the bishop, the priest is connected to the Pope and through the Pope to Peter, to whom Jesus made His promise that the jaws of death would not prevail against the Church, built on that sure rock of Peter and the faith. And, to draw this analogy further, the vocation of the bishop is like the castle that oversees the neighborhood, including the mansions that surround him. And the Pope is like the royal palace, through whom Christ governs His whole kingdom on earth. This vow of respect and obedience keeps the palace, the castles, and all of the mansions together to help establish peace and mutual love in His kingdom. In conclusion, like the strong foundation of a building, the operation of this vow is not generally seen by the public, but makes the whole structure rest secure in the stable rock of the earth.

The next vow is to discharge faithfully the office of priesthood in the presbyteral order as a fellow coworker with the bishop to care for God's flock. The reference to being a co-worker with the bishop and in the presbyteral order reflects that fact that there is a neighborhood of such mansions in an area, which are (as stated above) united under a castle, who is the bishop. And the owners of these mansions should know each other as neighbors and work together, both for each other and for the people, rather than being effectively on their own with no sense of neighborliness, as unfortunately too many households are in the modern world. The aspect of shepherding God's people can be compared to the paths that guide people to the mansions and around the grounds, as well as the doorway and entrance hall at the front of the mansion and the pathways between the mansions. These pathways guide people around to receive the gifts that the priest offers them, such as the faith and the

sacraments (discussed below.) The pathways, the doorway and the entrance hall are also meant to be attractive and clear, making it as likely as possible that the faithful will travel them. But they do need definitely to be directed towards the mansion and towards the kingdom, and not towards the easier land of ignorance and ease.

Likewise, a priest should try to be personable and courteous to people, but make sure that he does not, in an effort to do so, water down the faith or lead people to an easier but false path.

To attract people towards the kingdom, the pathways should be grounded in the solid earth of purity, have the smoothness of humility and patience, and be paved with the polished stones of good works and joyfulness of spirit. The entrance should have the solid pillars and arch of courage, honesty and righteous conduct and a door locked to vices and tempters but open to all who wish for the riches of the faith. The entrance hall should have the bright light of availability and compassion and show people clearly towards the rest of the mansion.

Two wings are on either side of this hall, the wing of mysteries and grace and the wing of knowledge and faith. For the next vow that a priest takes is that of celebrating the mysteries of Christ faithfully and religiously in accordance with the instructions of the Church. As the Catechism states, the liturgies and especially the sacraments are these celebrated mysteries that make the kingdom of God more present on this earth. See Catechism 1066-68. In this wing is the room where new members of the kingdom are welcomed in the hall of baptism. There is the room of healing where the wounds of sin are treated and medicines and advice given in Reconciliation; and there is the room of strength where people receive grace and courage through anointing of the sick. There is the joyous room of marriage and also the room of mourning for the dead. There is the gallery of saints and angels, where

we see the images of saints and angels and through which we invoke them and they invisibly join us and enter the kingdom on earth. And there is the great banquet hall, where the Mass is celebrated. This hall is connected to the gallery of angels and saints, for they join us in this celebration. At one end of this hall is the window of eternity, which opens in the Eucharist through which Christ becomes present and people can experience in every age anew the love, glory and triumph over sin and death He won for us on Calvary and receive Him now risen from the dead under the appearance of bread and wine.

The next vow is the vow to teach the faith worthily and wisely. This vow is represented in the wing of knowledge and faith. At the center of this wing are the two rooms of revelation, the room where Sacred Scripture is presented with the reverence it is due, surrounded by wise commentary throughout the ages, and the room of Sacred Tradition, which presents in writings and images of practices the traditions upon which the Church was built. One goes from those rooms to the room that contains the magisterial teachings of the church, and from that room onto others: libraries of theology, history and spiritual reflections; galleries of art, literature and poetry, which teach truth in a different form; studies for reflection and contemplation; and halls and sitting rooms for teaching and discussion, in which the priest teaches his people and listens to them. All of these rooms represent different ways in which the priest deepens his understanding of the faith and presents this faith in all her glory to the people.

Another vow, taken at diaconate and carried over into priesthood is to maintain and deepen a spirit of prayer and, in accordance with the priest's vocation, to pray the liturgy of the hours for the Church and the world. This vow is represented by the upper chambers of the mansion, which are the living quarters and the balcony.

of the mansion. In prayer the priest returns to his living space and receives rest, refreshment and grace. Many of these quarters are private, reflecting the fact that much of a priest's prayer life is in private, alone in the upper rooms with God. But at other times, the priest prays from the balconies, inside and out, and is the public in prayer. At one end of these quarters, above the banquet hall is the hall of the hours, where the priest prays the Divine Office, the Liturgy of the Hours. On one side, this hall has a window that connects this prayer to the heavenly land beyond, for this liturgy contains many of the same prayers that Jesus and the saints have prayed throughout the ages. On another side, there is an entrance and stairway to the public grounds, through which the public can join the priest in this liturgy and through which the priest can see the kingdom of God on earth, for whom he is praying.

In such prayer, whether public or private, the priest not only receives strength for his duties, but can also look out in all directions. He can look out over his own grounds to see how he is doing, look out over the rest of the kingdom to perceive the needs of his people, and look out in the other direction towards that kingdom of heaven that he and his people hope to enter. The kingdom is, as stated before, surrounded by clouds and mists, but sometimes, from the high towers of prayer, the priest may see a little further towards glories that inspire him further and help him see the way to go.

These upper chambers are connected both with the wing of mysteries and grace and the wing of knowledge and faith. For, a priest's prayer life should both prepare him for the celebration of the mysteries of the faith and be enriched by them. And likewise, his prayer and his reflections and teaching should support each other. For, without prayer, without a sense of the glory of God, the celebration of the sacraments often becomes routine and rote, and teaching even true theology turns into

what T.S. Elliot once called “a skeleton dance of fleshless dogmas.” But with an active prayer life, sacraments really convey a sense of the mysterious grace they give. And the teaching and the learning receive an aura of glory that is attractive, even when people do not know understand them, the splendor of truth that has throughout the ages allowed even relatively uneducated apostles, missionaries, and saints to draw people into the truth of the Gospel.

And, at the center of the mansion, connected to all of these areas, is the great courtyard of the King, which represents what is in many ways the central vow, to consecrate one’s life to God for the salvation of his people and to unite oneself more closely every day to Christ the High Priest, who offered Himself in sacrifice. At ordination, the new priest goes into this court and receives from Jesus Christ the keys to the mansion and the authority to represent Him, to act in the person of Christ. Each person goes into this court at the end of his life to meet Christ. For at the end of this court there is a gate of death that for the faithful leads to the never-ending kingdom of God. In the hall of mysteries, the priest gives the faithful graces through the last rites to prepare for this meeting. In the hall of knowledge and faith, he teaches them so that they will be prepared for that day. The upper chambers of prayer look out over this court, for in them the priest comes into contact with Jesus and thus with God and His angels and saints. And each day, especially in the examination of conscience, the priest is meant to enter this hall and present to Christ the results of the day, asking forgiveness for lapses, thanking Him for successes, and receiving the graces for the next day. And, at the end of his life, each priest enters this court one final time to present his life to the King. If he has been true to his vocation, the priest hears from Jesus the final accolade, “Well done, thou wise and faithful servant, come share in Thy master’s joy.”