

SOLEMN PROFESSION OF BR. IGNACIO GONZÁLEZ
May 24, 2014

Today is unquestionably a very happy one for all of us, especially for our monastic community and for all the members of the González family, many of whom have traveled here from Texas for the occasion. But since we refer to the making of final vows as a "solemn profession," I want to begin this homily on a solemn and even sobering note. What Br. Ignacio is doing this morning, and what all of us who are in solemn vows have already done, seems to many people today as strange, imprudent, even foolhardy or impossible. Let me give a sad example relating to another kind of vow that traditionally is considered equally final and solemn, that of marriage.

About forty-five years ago, a man and woman approached Abbot Alban Boulwood and asked permission to hold their non-denominational wedding ceremony beneath the beautiful tree that overlooks our playing field. Abbot Alban was reluctant and even somewhat suspicious, but after further meetings with the couple and consultation with some monks here, he decided to grant their request. It was with considerable dismay that we subsequently found the ceremony featured in the weekly magazine of the *Washington Post* in an article that highlighted the fact that this couple had composed their own vows and that these gave each of them the right to have intimate relationships with other persons if either of them so desired. I have no idea how common this practice may have become, but it surely derives from a mindset that considers a permanent, faithful, exclusive commitment to be beyond what can reasonably be expected of persons today.

How totally different is what our entire Christian tradition asks and expects, whether the vows be ones to consecrated life, as in monasticism, or to marriage. At several key places in his monastic rule, St. Benedict speaks clearly and unabashedly of faithful perseverance. Thus, in the final sentence of the prologue to his rule, he writes: "Never departing from [God's] instruction

but *persevering* in his teaching in the monastery until death, we shall by patience share in the sufferings of Christ that we may also share in his kingdom" (Prologue, 50). Similarly, his chapter on receiving members into the community speaks of the newcomer's promising "*perseverance* in his stability" (RB 58.9), and in the longest chapter of the rule, the one on humility, Benedict says that if and when a monk meets with difficulties and contradictions, he is to endure it "without growing weary or running away, for Scripture say, 'Whoever *perseveres* to the end will be saved'" (RB 7.36).

The teaching is clear enough, but a person might still ask, "How can this be expected, given that I have no way of knowing just what lies ahead, no way of knowing what challenges, what difficulties, what other enticing opportunities might come my way?" Well, the short answer is that you *cannot* know, but that is no reason at all not to make the commitment. I once read a marvelous essay by my fellow Kentuckian Wendell Berry that focused on some very valuable points about the limitations of knowledge. Even though he was speaking primarily about marriage vows, what he said is every bit as true for the vows we will be witnessing today. Here are the key sentences:

I am proposing that knowledge, like everything else, has its place, and that we need urgently now to *put* it in its place. If we want to know and cannot help knowing, then let us learn as fully and accurately as we decently can. But let us at the same time abandon our superstitious beliefs about knowledge: that it is ever sufficient; that it can of itself solve problems;...

... It is simply true that we do not and cannot *know* enough to make any important decision. Of this dilemma, we can take marriage as an instance, for as a condition

marriage reveals the insufficiency of knowledge, and as an institution it suggests the possibility that decisions can be informed in another way that *is* sufficient, or approximately so. I take it as an axiom that one cannot know enough to get married, any more than one can predict a surprise. The only people who possess information sufficient to their vows are widow and widowers--who do not know enough [if they wish] to *remarry*....

...And this is true of the other human connections. We can commit ourselves fully to anything--a place, a discipline, a life's work,... a community, a faith...--only in the same poverty of knowledge, the same ignorance of result,... the same final forsaking of other possibilities.¹

Well, if knowledge--specifically knowledge about the future--is not sufficient, what *can* adequately inform our decisions? Berry suggests two things, with which I think we can all readily concur. One is the whole set of patterns of value and restraint that promote character and culture that have come down to us from the best of our kind, both living and dead, the persons whom the Letter to the Hebrews calls a vast "cloud of witnesses." This means that "we are not [and never will be] alone in the bewilderments of the human condition."² Precisely for this reason today's ceremony includes a rather lengthy Litany of the Saints, included not because we want the ceremony to be of an appropriate, stately length but rather because the saints are among our most important supports and guides, not only interceding for us before the throne of God but also providing precious, irreplaceable models of how to act in good times and bad, in seasons of gladness and times of adversity. Such a saint was Br. Ignacio's own patron, Ignatius of Antioch, who fearlessly went to a martyr's death in the Roman Coliseum because of his great desire to be

quickly and fully with his beloved Redeemer. Another and even greater model is Mary of Nazareth, of whom it is worth noting that today, May 24, is her traditional feast day under the title Mary, Help of Christians. This is, in fact, the patronal feast day of two monasteries of our own English Benedictine Congregation: Curzon Park Abbey of nuns in the city of Chester, and Buckfast Abbey, a community of monks in Devonshire. We join with them in calling on Mary's intercession for their communities as well as our own, and in particular for Br. Ignacio, who has always had a particularly strong devotion to Our Blessed Lady.

Beyond the intercession and example of even the greatest saints, we can also count on the support of God, the one who loves each one of us with an everlasting love. As a university chaplain recently wrote: "The good news is not that the Lord of love delivered us from difficulty and failure, but rather that he permitted, by his death and resurrection, our own entry into these experiences with hope. Herein lies the power we have to risk the impossible We are not condemned to a life of petty and possible dreams; rather, we are free to lift our sights to the humanly impossible and there to wager the accompaniment of God."³ This is the Lord who "is the shield of those who walk honestly" (Prov 2:7), as we heard in our reading from the Book of Proverbs, and who, as our second reading told us, has called us "out of darkness into his wonderful light" (1 Pet 2:9).

Along with such support, the second great reality that can inform and strengthen our decisions and promises is our love for the Lord, to whom each of us is called in his or her own way to make a firm and persevering commitment. Such love does not originate in ourselves, but is our grace-filled response to the one who loved us first, loved us into being, and who calls and commissions us to share that love with others. It is not too much to say that this is the distinctive commandment of our Christian faith, what Jesus himself called "a new commandment," namely,

that we love one another as he has loved us, as we heard at the very beginning of today's Gospel (Jn 15:12). This word "love" gets bandied about so often, even in ways that are saccharine and superficial, that we must always recognize what down-to-earth, nitty-gritty demands it makes on us. St. Benedict is altogether clear about this when, near the very end of his rule, he writes that it requires "supporting with the greatest patience one another's weaknesses of body or behavior" and regularly pursuing "not what one judges better for himself but rather what he judges better for someone else" (RB 72.5,7). A couple months ago, in a talk I gave to our monastic community one evening, I quoted a contemporary abbot who spelled this out in still greater detail in words that I would like to repeat here. He said:

... My relationship to God is determined by the way I live with and treat those whom God in his providence has brought into my life. Incarnation is about reality, not romanticism or idealism. Those who are seeking God in their daily prayer and work are not angels, but people with ordinary flaws: the monk who forgets to return what he borrows, the one who tracks mud on a clean floor, the one who forgets liturgical assignments, the one who is never on time, the one who never signs up to help but is first in the food line. Somehow God in his providence has brought this motley group together for an eternal purpose, and how the brothers ... treat one another now will determine their eternal destiny.⁴

This might not sound very elegant or inspiring, but it's a crucial part of monastic spirituality, and indeed of all Christian spirituality. There may be days, Br. Ignacio, when those inevitable challenges that St. Benedict calls by the strong Latin term *opprobria* might make you wonder

what you were thinking of in making this solemn commitment. If and when that happens, if and when you might be the one who never got back what you lent to one of the brethren (who probably lost it in the meantime), when you might be the one who has to clean up the mess that another caused by his mindlessness or carelessness, when the quirks of this or that brother threaten to drive you batty, then be sure to think back on the verse from Psalm 119 that you will soon be singing on three successive tones, a verse that assures you of the Lord's ever-present support: *Suscipe me, Domine, secundum eloquium tuum et vivam*--"Sustain me, O Lord, according to your promise, and I shall live." Do count on that support all the days of your life here among us--support not only from the Lord but from your very imperfect brethren--for this is assuredly your way of preparing for the eternal life promised to all who commit themselves to the school of the Lord's service.

1" Wendell Berry, "People, Land, and Community," *Sierra*, Sept.-Oct. 1983, pp. 48-49.

2" *Ibid.*, 49.

3" Donna Schaper, "Marriage: The Impossible Commitment," <http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=1243> (accessed May 18, 2014).

4" Jerome Kodell, OSB, "Mutual Obedience: My Brother's Need is the Voice of God," *The American Benedictine Review* 64:3 (December 2013), 410-11.