



# THE SERVANT



*Special Focus Issue: Life Profession in  
the Brotherhood of Saint Gregory*

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*The Servant*

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## FOR THE BALANCE OF MY NATURAL LIFE



Each and every time I hold the hands of the brother making life vows, my mind centers on those words. We never know that balance! We never know how many years or days. But God does and God is the one to whom we make those vows. I am only the conduit. When our late brother Patrick Ignatius made his life vows, I had a real sense of the meaning of what that balance-time might be. Patrick was already on the way to the last of the balance of his years. He knew it and I did too. We

all did. But the important thing is that he made those vows not knowing for sure “how long” but knowing that every moment of that time would be lived under that vow, the time he had been given, the time we all have been given.

Grace Bush, a favorite poet of mine says:

“God turns each morning a new page for me,” and further in that poem, “One day may change the face of all the world.” And more: “Fear nothing, for I am with thee today.” In our life vows, God is there every day and we do our best to be sure that we are there as well. It’s serious business. One last verse: “One day, lived fearlessly, thy hand in Mine.”

*Richard Thomas*

### *A bit of history*

## LIFE PROFESSION IN BSG

In its earliest days, when the Brotherhood of Saint Gregory was conceived as a group of men devoted to the service of the church through liturgical music, life profession was not a part of the Rule. The only vow taken in the earliest Rule (1969) was the vow of obedience “first, to the Written Rule of the Brotherhood. Second, to the unwritten rules of good and sincere practice of the vocation as Church Musicians.” By 1970, the ethos of the community had already broadened to include other church arts in addition to music, and the vow of obedience was amended to state: “The Brothers will take one Vow, that of Obedience to the teachings of the Episcopal Church, and to this Rule.” The approach to life profession remained relatively casual, and a few brothers made what amounted to life profession in the intervening years, until 1978, when the policy of five years of annual profession before life profession was adopted and became normative.

This remained in place until 1983 when as part of a major overhaul of the community’s documents, Chapter amended the Constitution to allow a brother to continue

in annual vows for up to four additional years beyond the initial five prior to petitioning to make life profession; and at that point to withdraw or be dismissed from the community. This provision came to be seen as coercive, and was removed in 1996, thereby allowing a brother to remain in annual vows for as long as he chooses. Life profession since has been optional under the current governing documents, with brothers after five years of annual vows being eligible to make life profession with the consent of Council and the body of life-professed brothers, or to remain in annual vows for as long as they choose. Given the importance of Saint Francis de Sales in the founding ethos of the Brotherhood (through the work of our Founder with Mother Helen Joyce VHM at the Visitation Convent in Riverdale), it is well to adopt a practice more in keeping with his motto: “All by love, nothing by constraint.” As the following article by Karekin Madteos describes, the 2007 Chapter of the Brotherhood of Saint Gregory adopted further guidelines to assist brothers in making the decision to approach life profession of vows in the context of support and care.

Note: Throughout this issue you will see photographs of brothers who died while in life vows: they can truly be said to have lived “the remainder of their natural lives” under those vows, sanctified by that commitment. — TSH

*A reflection on life profession*

## **FOR THE BALANCE OF MY LIFE?**

*Introduction*

This reflection was inspired by the resolution passed by the Brotherhood of Saint Gregory’s Chapter in the summer of 2007 that sought to make more deliberate the process by which a brother seeks life profession of vows in the community. The passing of this resolution, after some debate, represented the community’s determination to address the issues raised by members who have left the community after having made their life profession. These were painful moments in the life of the Brotherhood. They were painful because we said goodbye to members that we thought would be a part of our experience for life. And they were painful because such departures sent confusing messages about what it means to be life professed.

The purpose of this reflection is to address exactly that question, “Why life profession?” How do we envision what it means, what are its realities, and more importantly, how do we decide when a brother should seek life profession. In the course of this reflection, I will look at some of the realities of such a choice and the questions that should be considered when contemplating it. I will look at some practical issues that a brother might wisely consider before leaping ahead. And I will talk a bit about the nature of the vows and of community life that any prudent person would weigh when looking at a life commitment. All the while, I will remind the reader that the decision to make a life profession in the Brotherhood of Saint Gregory is not a requirement but an option: a purely *voluntary* commitment; yet it is a choice that once made should be considered final and binding and non-negotiable. It is a decision that should never be made lightly or in haste. Nor should it be made under the pressures of expectation, either from one’s self or from others within or outside the community.

Since 1996, there are no longer any time tables to suggest that life profession should or need be made at a particular time. There is nothing to lose from not making a life profession, and there is everything to lose by choosing to do so for the wrong reasons or at the wrong time. So, let's look at what life profession is all about.

### *A colorful background*

Throughout the history of religious life, communities have allowed and in some cases required its members to take life vows. The Brotherhood of Saint Gregory has been no different in this regard. For a time in our history, we required members to make



*Edward Riley distributes Communion to his brothers.*

life profession some time after five years in annual vows and by their ninth year were asked to do so or to depart. We did so partly as an inheritance from communities that existed before us, and partly because we expected that anyone who was a member in the community should want to make such a life commitment. The inability or lack of desire to do so was seen as a deficit. By the late 1990s the community had come to regard life profession as something that should no longer be required but rather inspired by love and commitment, and so our Constitution was changed to allow for members to remain in annual profession for as long as they wished. Unfortunately, even though the legal requirement had changed, the *expectation* that a brother would begin to consider life vows at five years was never abandoned in the *culture* of the Brotherhood. This expectation has remained in our “kitchen talk” ever since, usually

taking the form of, “So-and-so is due to make life profession...” We know that unreasonable expectations surrounding life profession in our community still exist when a brother who decides to wait for life profession gets questioning looks while another who might be advised to wait feels somehow inadequate or as though held back a year in high school.

We have, in spite of the change in our regulations, in large measure continued to perpetuate the idea of life profession as an *expected* stage in the process of full life in the community beginning with postulancy and continuing through novitiate, first vows, and annual vows. Little notice is taken of the fact that a person's standing in community is



*Damian-Curtis Kellum signs the instrument of life profession.*



*John Peter Clark*

reckoned by the date of their *first* vows and not by the date of life profession, for it is the brother's *first* profession that marks the beginning of a journey in the vowed life. Also, as a community we have not yet internalized the question of life profession—in its permanence—not simply as an issue for the brother in question, but as an issue for the larger community. Life profession is a hugely important decision that has implications for the future of the individual and, indeed, for the future of the community. Many more individuals are touched by the choice to make life profession than simply the individual who makes this commitment of faith.

The question of life vows is compounded even further by the sometimes romantic notion that the discipline of religious life and the cultivation of the interior and spiritual life are inextricably linked—that somehow a life commitment to serve

God will inexorably lead to a deeper spiritual life—and, further, that there is some redemptive quality to this manner of living that will save us. While these goals are certainly admirable, their achievement does not depend upon religious life. One need not take on the discipline of religious life in order to pray, to seek God, or to cultivate a deep sense of one's interior life through meditation. Many a spiritual seeker has achieved deep spiritual satisfaction and maturity without the need for a community or a rule of life. This is not to say that a life lived in religious profession *cannot* lead to wonderful spiritual gifts; surely the discipline of religious life rightly lived cultivates the gifts of quietness, patience, humility, charity, courage and prayer. (BSG Rule, Of the life of a brother)

But to see the goals of personal redemption and spiritual development as the logical and expected ends of a life in religious vows causes us to miss the larger challenges inherent in committing the balance one's natural life to a rule, to the vows, to a manner of living, all the while bound up with the complexities of human relationships modeled in the community of faith. Without looking at the realities and challenges of life profession, it is easy to become disillusioned if and when the expected spiritual harvest fails to provide what we thought it would.

### *The symbols of religious life*

The symbols and traditions of religious life compound certain expectations about what our chosen manner of life represents. We wear habits and often take new names in religion, and there can be confusing perceptions on our own part and those of others about this shift in how we identify ourselves. The taking of a name in religion is a remnant of another time. The historical reasons for it have been largely forgotten. We no longer live in a monastery where we need simultaneously to standardize behavior and mitigate the conflicts of competing personalities while being able to distinguish one brother from among many others of the same baptismal name. While this tradition is still a wonderful symbol of our efforts to become a new kind of person, we need

to remember that upon taking a new name a brother is not suddenly a different person. While we are certainly and ideally changed in our actions and motivations as we engage the long-term discipline of religious life, a cognitive disconnect can arise when we feel that we need to integrate some new identity with the old one or conform ourselves to a new identity altogether. Rather than bifurcate our identity, the taking of a name in religion should be seen as a symbol of the expected and hoped for conformity to a new set of values and way of life. A brother contemplating life profession should at the very least have come to the realization that an unresolved double identity, one in the secular world and another in religious life, is unhealthy.

Speaking as one who took a new name, I believe it is a practice that has very likely outlived its usefulness in spite of the romantic symbolism some wish to attach to it. The practice should not be seen to perpetuate the understanding that the brother is, in fact, becoming a new person. If that were the case, we would need to ask ourselves “Was God wrong in calling the old one?”

The habit can be a wonderful tool for shaping our lives in accordance with the new set of responsibilities and purposes which we have taken on. All of us have exper-



*James Teets vests Thomas Joseph Ross with the scapular, as William Bunting looks on.*



*Charles Kramer makes his first vows to the Minister General, assisted by James and Bernard Fessenden.*

enced the fact that when the habit is first taken on in novitiate, those who see us in it begin to assume that we have the knowledge and skills and spiritual development associated with idealized images of what the habit represents. A better part of novitiate is either spent learning answers to the kinds of questions people ask expecting us to be capable of responding, or learning how to admit that we *don't* have those answers. These expectations do, indeed, help us conform ourselves to the new manner of life. But by the time a brother is ready to consider life profession, he should be fully aware of his own expectations and those of others about what the habit symbolizes and be willing to recognize that he may, in all likelihood, never live up to those expectations.



*Thomas Joseph and Edward label The Servant.*

Wearing the habit causes us to be substantially more vigilant about our behavior and even to modify it to accord with the perceptions of others. And while such diligence in monitoring our own behavior leads to good fruit in the long run, we all know what a burden this can be. There is nothing wrong with this necessarily. The issues arise when, again, there be-

gins to be a cognitive disconnect between our self-image in the habit versus that of our “street” image. After nearly fifteen years in this community, I have only in the recent past started to feel the same whether clothed in the habit or in street clothes. This is because I have come to understand after long struggle that the habit does not make me holy and, in the same way, street clothes do not make me any less of a vowed religious. That the habit forces us into a self-consciousness or a self-awareness is perhaps what makes it a useful tool. But the end result is that our conscious perception of the *way* we behave should ultimately lead to changes in behavior that accord with the new manner of life we have chosen.

It may seem as though these issues are more relevant to a brother making first vows or even entering novitiate. But such a view ignores the fact that these issues of self-image and the integration of the whole person (rather than the bifurcation of one’s identity as a religious living and working in a worldly context) can last many years into profession of vows. Hold this up against the expectations surrounding life vows and you can begin to imagine how disillusionment results from a failure to recognize that life profession will not resolve these internal conflicts.

Let’s take a more practical turn in looking at what a brother who is considering a life profession of vows might wish to consider before embarking on the journey. For while we dissuade ourselves of some of the historical attachments considered above, there are very real challenges ahead for the brother who decides to take this step.

### *Three earnest questions*

Imagine waking up one morning and making the commitment to work out at the gym *every* day for the rest of your life. Or imagine making a spur of the moment decision that every day, *for the rest of your natural life*, you will eat only cornflakes for breakfast. Of course, these examples are trivial and offered for a didactic purpose only. For even unlikely commitments such as these would lead to two very natural questions. In the first case, “Do I have the discipline necessary to live up to this commitment?” In the second, “Won’t I get bored of the same breakfast cereal every day?”

Of course, these hypothetical decisions are either a bit absurd or at the very least overly ambitious. More realistic is the decision to get married to someone that you love with the intention to spend the remainder of your life with that person. And while I don’t want to necessarily equate life profession with marriage (*the analogy*



*breaks down when one considers making vows to another person which are witnessed by God versus making vows to God which are witnessed by people*), there are some parallels that are suitable. Both decisions involve much deeper reflection on the nature of—and one’s propensity toward—commitment, and the open-eyed evaluation of one’s own answer to the third question, “Will I be able to forgo other more attractive choices in the future?” They both also embody the *intention* to a relationship for the remainder of one’s life, although some may assert that the intention in each case differs and, likewise, so do the personal and spiritual implications for abrogating the vows in each case, regardless of the original intention. Yet no one would or should take commitments such as this very lightly and certainly not without a great deal of introspection and discernment.

So why then, in religious life such as ours, do we sometimes rush toward the commitment of life profession without pausing to take stock of what it means for our future and, additionally, for the future of the Brotherhood? For surely, the three questions asked earlier should bear on a brother’s decision—the questions of discipline, boredom, and negation (the ability to say “no” to other options in the future.)

Let’s turn a critical eye to the practical considerations of life profession of vows so that a brother can better prepare himself for the challenges of such a commitment. I will take up the questions in reverse sequence.

### *Saying “no” to all other somethings*

The prospect of life profession of vows is perhaps not a question of rushing to say “yes” to something as wonderful as a life commitment to God through a community such as ours. It is, perhaps, more a question of evaluating what we will have to say “no” to in the future and appropriately mourning the loss of those other choices. In our rush to life vows we often overlook that it is an option and not a requirement, and as such fail to take stock of these deeper issues of self-reflection that we would not consider taking lightly with any other life long commitment—even the kinds of absurdities listed above.

No one will deny that life profession is a worthwhile goal. It requires courage, faith, self-knowledge, and deep trust. In recognition of this, our customary says:

While life profession carries with it no further authority, it is understood that those who have by the grace of God made this dedication of themselves are due respect worthy the dignity of their consecration.



*William makes his life profession.*



*Charles bears the cross.*

It is interesting to note our understanding that life profession carries “no further authority.” What does this say other than that nothing further is particularly bestowed on the brother who makes a life commitment other than respect for the choice. This respect is now offered because we understand the struggles inevitable for the brother who has made this lifelong commitment and we honor his decision to wrestle with them.

Again, our standing in community is reckoned from our *first* vows, not to life profession. Let’s examine a hypothetical situation. Under our current rules, a brother who enters the community may decide to stay in annual vows for many years. Yet another brother who enters some years later may decide to make life profession after five years. Making such a decision does not move this new brother to the head of any “line.” The senior brother is still the senior brother. Profession of vows is profession of vows. But what does it say if this brother who *has* made his life vows decides to depart? And further, what does it say when he can-

not articulate any particular reason for doing so other than the desire to do “something else” with his life?

When someone makes a life commitment and walks away after having done so, it sends a very painful message to the community as a whole: “Perhaps life profession doesn’t really mean anything?” Our community now understands in a deeper way that life profession is not to be undertaken without some very intentional reflection on the real sacrifices implied in the choice to commit the remainder of one’s natural life to the Gregorian Way. It is worth asking whether such a brother spent too much time contemplating saying “yes” to life profession without taking stock of what he was saying “no” to by making that commitment.

When I was a teenager, I decided to be a professional chef. That was something I was thrilled about accomplishing in my life. What I could not foresee was that it would prove to be a very dissatisfying choice later on in life. What I also failed to see was that in making the choice to be a chef, I was also saying “no” to being a ballet dancer, or an accomplished writer and Pulitzer–prize-winning novelist. Luckily, with a career choice, there is no harm in walking away. Yet, every choice we make necessarily involves laying aside other choices, and while some of those other alternatives may be pursued at a later date, the field grows narrower as we get older and time grows shorter. What we need to remember, however, is that in life profession certain “other choices” are not simply postponed. They are put away. Forever.

By committing the remainder of one’s natural life to being a servant of God, bound to the way of life of a specific community within a particular church called The Episcopal Church, you are saying “no thank you” to other communities and other churches and other alternatives that compete with the responsibilities of the manner

of life you have chosen. You are not committing your life to a particular prayer book, or even to a particular spiritual discipline without the implicit recognition that prayer books and disciplines might change as the church and community grow in wisdom and experience. And unlike other choices one makes in life, the path chosen becomes so clearly defined that anything that is not upon it is no longer available no matter how attractive it may seem in the future. This is true for any situation that interferes with our responsibilities such as praying the Office, meeting the tithe, serving the institution of the church, attending convocations, and attending faithfully and regularly to worship.

Consider the implications meeting these responsibilities have on choices such as where we decide to live, whether or not we decide to work and where, the support required of our spouses or partners, or the kinds of partners we must consider should we be single. Consider the ethical choices made necessary by binding yourself for life to a rule that envisions work as apostolate, details our responsibilities to our brothers, and requires our commitment to serve God and others by serving the church.

Further, a brother makes a life profession of vows to God and not to the community. The community receives these vows as faithful stewards and caregivers. Because of this, the community has no power to absolve us of the responsibilities entailed by that decision, should one come to regret it later in life—for the community receives our intentions in life profession believing that its primary responsibility is to help us honor the commitments we have made. What makes this system work is that we are all engaged in the same pursuit. We often forget that those who are in positions of authority—the ones who help us remain accountable and faithful to our decision—are also, in turn, accountable for their own decision to follow the same road. They are not exercising their responsibility in a vacuum but do so with an experiential understanding of what it means to struggle with living into the commitments of the religious life. The success of one is the success of all.

Seen against this backdrop, and given that there is no urgent requirement to make life profession, would it not seem prudent that the choice be deeply considered before making it? Because saying “yes” to life profession entails the laying aside of so many potential and unforeseeable alternatives for the future (and even some others that we may see beforehand), should we not perhaps spend some time mourning and letting go before leaping ahead to a life commitment?

### *Boredom and self-sacrifice*

Once we have made the commitment of life profession, the milestones and markers of “achievement” we become accustomed to from our postulancy through first and annual profession come to an end. There is no longer advancement except in years

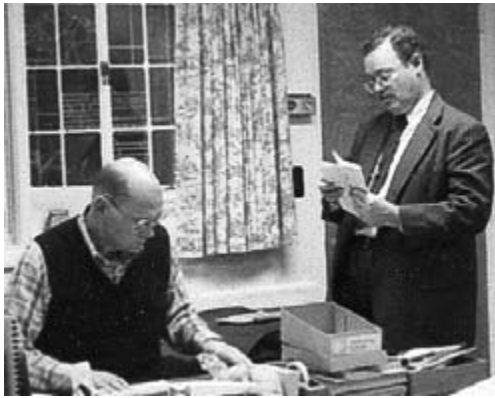


*Patrick Ignatius Dickson signs the instrument of profession.*

built of months and days and moments. So it is better to begin asking ourselves the question, “Is this all there is?” while still in annual vows. Because the answer should be unequivocally “Yes!” Life profession is not a magic moment where suddenly everything makes sense, becomes fulfilling, and provides us with immediate transformation. In my own experience that took place at first vows. Life vows, while deeply emotional and moving, was a quiet moment. It was the moment where I was able to say, “If this is all there is, it is enough.” In fact, it has proven to be more than enough. What we are saying in life profession is simply that we are willing to do what we have already been doing for some years and to be content that nothing more is necessary in the future—come what may.

From the moment of life profession, we must be capable of saying that the routine of our religious life is capable of sustaining us even when the Daily Office becomes tedious, even when Embertide reports seem unnecessary, even when going to church every day or every Sunday becomes tiresome, and most especially even when something else comes along that looks so enlivening that it entices us from our chosen path. The routine must be enough even when we are no longer “in love” with the freshness and vitality of our community.

The unexpected is also built in to the system to become a greater challenge. We have seen brothers leave because, quite frankly, the community evolved into something other than what they expected. The Gregorian Way will surely continue to do



*William and Charles work on labeling the newsletter.*

so. Customs change, the community will grow beyond our family model to include others we might not otherwise get along with (or even come to know well should the community grow to number in the hundreds rather than the tens), rules will be adopted with which we do not agree, and the temptation will be there to drift away. We have seen the church change, the threat of schism, new prayer books, the ordination of women, and distress in global Anglicanism which plays such a part of our

historical identity. In each case members of the community have left. A commitment to life profession which includes obedience to the doctrines and disciplines of The Episcopal Church means a commitment to live with even those changes that upset us, disturb us, and cause us to question our loyalties. It means staying the course when “the good old days” seem much more attractive than today, and even when periods of tumult and upheaval appear to challenge the community unexpectedly.

While jobs may change, social circles may shift, and even deep relationships may come and go, membership in the Brotherhood and the requirements of living the Rule will, in the case of life profession, be a constant. This constant can be a source of tremendous comfort through the years, and it will just as surely become a cause for

boredom. A pair of clear eyes is necessary to anticipate this fact before making a life commitment so that there is no surprise. Perhaps it would also be good if those in life vows would share about these times in their religious lives more frequently and openly. Such experiences with struggle hold no shame, but let each of us know that we are not alone when these experiences arise as they surely will.

*Self-discipline and the strength of more-than-one*

The engagement of religious life may certainly teach us discipline, but if we do not come into the doors of community life with some *self-discipline*, I am afraid we shall not do very well. In fact, it may do us harm. This is particularly true in our model of life “in the Diaspora” where accountability is largely self-regulated. By the time we reach the point of decision making as regards a life commitment, we would do well to ask ourselves with some integrity whether we are capable of the discipline required of us.

While none of us will ever be perfect in meeting every requirement of our Rule, we should at least be capable of meeting the daily requirements of prayer and reflection and reading without resorting to making excuses for why we haven’t done so. No number of years of practice is going to cause us to do what we haven’t done already. And like a broken New Year’s resolution, there is no small amount of guilt suffered by those who make a commitment and then, through lack of self-discipline, fail to follow through on it. We have all experienced that in our lives in one manner or another. But to take on a manner of life that requires diligence and discipline requires us to be honest with ourselves about our ability to meet it. It is not simply that we demonstrate this capacity to the community, but more importantly that we demonstrate it to ourselves, since we alone are responsible for self-regulation as we live in the world. Will I, in making a life commitment to follow this way of life, set myself up for a life of accomplishing the goal? Or will I set myself up for a life of self-disappointment for failing to do more than make excuses on a regular basis for why I cannot manage the discipline required of me?

Given that life profession is voluntary and not required, am I willing to look at whether I am fed by a sense



*Charles reads the Lesson at a liturgy for Christian Unity at Graymoor.*



*Edward and William serve together at God’s altar.*



Patrick Ignatius

of adequacy or a sense of falling short? Too many people in the world thrive on the latter, living lives of constant atonement for their shortcomings. So we should, therefore, approach life profession being aware of and comfortable with a sense of capacity in ourselves, coming from God and nourished by community, that is going to be sustained by self-discipline and not diminished by lack of it. Again, life profession is not a magic moment that will make us feel adequate if we are not already there.

It is important to remember that the community is there to help us live into our commitments, not to regulate them for us. This is the power of more-than-one—not that the community and its officials *force* us to meet requirements when we fall short, but *provide* us with the example of many individuals united in a common goal, help-

ing us to avoid setting ourselves up for the pain inherent in self-deception and excuses. The community serves as a collective conscience, to help us to stay accountable to ourselves and to God through the vow of obedience.

### *A life of obedience*

In speaking first of obedience before the other vows, there is an explicit acknowledgment that must be made. It is the vow that makes or breaks our success in life profession. What does it mean to lay aside self-will for the remainder of one's life? For is not the will the sum total of one's desires, preferences and intentions? Many of us come from a society with deep-seated issues around authority, autonomy, and independence. Individuality and freedom are guarded and upheld with nearly idolatrous zeal. And while we think we are willing to put aside our self-interests, idealism and practice often come to blows.

We can often get caught up in liturgical language in ways that diminish the plain meaning of the words we use and the intentions that they represent. We are capable of rationalizing that this liturgical language, in its loftiness, doesn't really mean what it says or that it represents an ideal and not a practical reality. In doing so, we can be tempted to reserve the right to reinterpret, at a later date, what significance the words have in a given situation. Obedience is the vow most commonly beset by these reinterpretations.

I have heard even the most seasoned of religious in different communities, including our own, argue over whether the community has any right to expect or require a member to do what is asked. If the answer is "no," then why do we bother with such a vow as obedience? Perhaps we should vow to conversion of life instead?

To vow obedience, one has to believe that the will of God can be and is operative in the community and that it is spoken through the voice of the Rule and the prayerful deliberation of the Council and the officials appointed over us. If we do not really believe this, then obedience will be well nigh impossible.

This is where the need for a deep trust becomes necessary. There is great responsibility required in the governance of the community, and the brother making the vow needs to believe that the intentions of its pastoral officials hold the brother's best interests at heart. Obedience is a two-way street where the brother submits his will and the bodies of oversight take great care not to abuse their resulting power and authority. But the brother making life profession needs to trust in the latter before making a choice to move forward. Obedience does not concern itself *after the fact* with an individual brother's interpretation of whether or not these governing bodies are acting in his best interest. For that interpretation is often largely dependent upon whether the brother is being asked to do something he does not want to do.



*John Nidecker*

When a brother is contemplating life profession of vows, it is up to him to have successfully worked through whatever issues with authority he may have prior to a permanent commitment and come to a place of trust. A brother who finds himself feeling put-upon by the call to obedience is not a good candidate for life vows. Likewise, a brother who assigns bad motivations to those exercising pastoral authority is not a good fit for life in a community with such pastoral oversight.

A willingness, however, to listen for the voice of Christ in what is asked of us—even when we don't agree with it—is an act of faith and an indicator of spiritual maturity. It says that such a brother is comfortable with himself and his own shortcomings and it says he is capable of acknowledging that he might not always be aware of what is best for him. It witnesses to the kind of humility spoken of in our Rule of life.

### *A life of poverty*

We spoke earlier of the faith and trust that Christ's will is operative in the discerned will of the community. In taking the vow of poverty we explicitly recognize that "it is only through Christ, who inspires both the will and the deed, that I am able to do any good at all." (BSG Rites) What shall we say, then, about the implications of the vow of poverty taken for the balance of one's natural life? What we are acknowledging is the fact that the spiritual riches necessary to accomplish the goal of life commitment to religious vows reside with the community and not with us alone. We cannot, on our own, provide the resources of strength, commitment and discernment necessary to live into the fullness of this vocation. Engagement with the life of the community is essential for our individual integration in this life. This is one of the larger implications of the vow of poverty taken in life vows.



*William*

Again, these are not goals to be accomplished in life profession, they are acknowledgments that need to be made and realized *prior* to making life profession.

The practical realities of our expression of poverty as regards the tithing need to be considered in life profession particularly for the long term. Tithing is not so difficult when one is gainfully employed. It becomes more of a challenge when one is on a fixed income, in retirement, or in some cases long-term disability. The practical con-



*John Peter and Edward*

considerations of tithing during these years of a brother's life need to be looked at. While there are mechanisms available to ease the financial burden of a brother in such circumstances, planning ahead for these financial realities is an important part of taking on a life commitment.

As with all of the vows, there is a need to let go of control of the process of our own ongoing formation in religious life. We do not know what the future will bring or how the vows and our manner of religious life will be shaped by events beyond our control. The only thing we can trust is the experience of those who have experienced them before us. It is the witness of these struggles over time in the individual lives of brothers that becomes

our hope and our empowerment. This is a part of the understanding of poverty—our willingness to embrace our own lack of adequate answers to the unforeseen complexities of a life lived in permanent religious witness.

### *A life of chastity*

We need to be vigilant in our understanding that the vow of chastity applies equally to our relationships within the community as well as to the ones outside of our fellowship. Chastity is not simply about our spouses or partners, not simply about relationships in the world outside. It is of paramount importance to the healthy function of our community life. A brother contemplating life profession in the Brotherhood should have effectively internalized this before deciding on a permanent commitment to the community, made up as it is of real human beings deserving to be treated respectfully.

Scattered as we are, there is nothing quite as exciting as our times together at Convocation. We rejoice in our time together and take opportunity to laugh, be playful, joke and engage in rigorous conversation. It truly is like a family reunion. We make much of the fact that coming together is an opportunity to be ourselves and recharge our batteries. We let our hair down, so to speak. Too often, we take this as permission to say things without thinking or banter in ways that occasionally shift from playful to quietly hurtful. Such playfulness, while not ill-intentioned, still too often results in laughing at another's expense or being dismissive of what another brings to the table.



Chastity requires that we not try to possess or control one another. In the arena of community life it means communicating without manipulation and triangulation, upholding one another's strengths rather than resorting to pointing out one another's failures, and it means avoiding the kind of machinations for power and control that ensure the outcomes that we desire in a given situation.

Because the nature of chastity deals with our interpersonal relationships inside and outside the community, and because of its long association with sexuality and intimate relationships or lack of them, we often become prickly when asked to talk about it. We get even more than a little disturbed when questions of accountability in our practice of it are raised. It is important to remember that a commitment to life profession is a commitment to accountability in our practice of all of the vows.

The community exercises great care and prudence in not wanting to intrude into the more delicate areas of our personal lives, but we must expect that it is not only justified but required of us in our care for one another to help us look into those places we might rather keep in the shadows. We cannot be obsessively private about our personal lives nor do we necessarily have to invite our brothers into those deeper places. We do, however, have a pastoral responsibility, made permanent in life vows, to help one another to live into the vows in a loving and sensitive way. Upon making a life commitment to this accountability, a brother must at the very least have demonstrated a willingness to share with the pastors of the community the *map* of the minefields of his personal life, so that they do not inadvertently step on one while exercising pastoral oversight. Even such a demonstration of self-awareness on the part of a brother goes a long way toward providing pastors with the knowledge that he is aware of his own interior geography.

Our pastoral responsibilities to one another are enormous, for not only do we feed one another with the joy of reunion that reaffirms and renews our ability to serve, we continue to serve one another by upholding one another in our common commitments. Just as we are responsible for nurturing and guiding a postulant or novice into an understanding and practice of religious life, we are likewise responsible for helping a professed or life professed member live into the promises each has made. It is not enough that we enter our time together in community with the enthusiasm of playful siblings, but we should also be faithful to one another by speaking up about our struggles and challenges in living the vowed life. Such energy and experience will prove to be more nourishing in the long run.



*John*



*Bernard bears the cross.*

## Authentic communication

One of the clearest indicators of readiness for life commitment to religious life is the way in which a brother is known to communicate with others in the community. A lack of communication or the failure to communicate directly with others about things that trouble one is always a danger sign. One reality of life profession is that we are committing ourselves to a community of real people for the remainder of our lives. This means that we had best understand how to foster healthy relationships rather than harbor resentment, recognize that we are not always going to get along with every person but do our best to love them anyway, and engage in healthy communication about our own shortcomings and issues.



*John Peter*

This does not mean necessarily that we have to wear our emotional lives on our sleeves. It does mean, however, that we try to be effective in communicating directly to individuals with whom we experience conflicts, and more importantly—to be open to reconciliation and forgiveness once we have done so. Other recognizable patterns of concern are the tendencies to become easily offended, to be argumentative, or to be overly contrary regarding the ideas of others. Community life is a school for learning how to be healthier in our communication and in our relationships. What we learn here we model

elsewhere. None of us is going to be perfect. But when we notice such behavior in ourselves we must be willing to see it for what it is and undertake to change behavior that tends toward conflict rather than harmony. By the time we are ready to consider life profession, again, we must be as aware of our own deficits as we are our gifts. We do not necessarily need to solve them, but we do need to own them.

In community life, we are responsible for listening to the collective wisdom of our brothers. It helps us to recognize where we may not be living up to what we've accepted as religious discipline. In order for the community effectively to do its job, however, there must be some level of self-disclosure on the part of its members. We can see this often in issues surrounding the tithe. It is not necessarily failure to meet the requirements that are at issue, but more often the failure to adequately communicate with those responsible for oversight about why we are not meeting those requirements. This is because of our all-too-human difficulty in acknowledging our own shortcomings to another.



*William and John Peter with  
Canon Edward Nason West*

One of the joys of religious life in community is that we agree to share a common agenda—service to God and others in the church through a life formed by a common Rule. This does not mean, however, that we do not continue to bring competing agendas to the table when we enter community. That is simple human nature. But the discipline of religious community is to try our best to subjugate our own personal agendas to those of the community as a whole. If we allowed every individual competing agenda to interfere with our common life, then the result would be chaos and a lack of cohesion in our communal expression of that life. Life profession also entails a willingness to continue to subjugate one's personal agenda to that of the larger community when necessary, and to do so for the remainder of one's natural life. That is a tall order! Even more tempting is the idea that the need to do so is only operative when we are together and that the return home means we can then move our personal agendas to the front burner.

There must be a constant willingness on the part of individual members to manifest our common life and our common goals to the extent possible in our individual lives. We have all heard that every member of the Brotherhood *is* the Brotherhood in their particular place. There is no need to fear that we as individuals do not get to pursue our own interests. We surely do! But life in community, especially when in life vows, calls us to make certain that our agendas do not compete with those of the religious life as embodied in our expression of it. This is what we take on in life profession.

### *The Rituals of Life Profession and what they don't say*

The interpretations that have accrued to the rituals of life profession are many and varied, but no two have more tenacity than the visions of the wedding and the funeral. While there are symbols in our rites held in common with each of these other rites, both of these interpretations are essentially and incidentally incorrect.

Life profession is not a marriage. It is an act of faith and a commitment to a vocation and, more importantly, it is a *response*. There is no mutual exchange of vows or symbols such as rings. There are no promises made by the Brotherhood either for themselves or on God's behalf. The language of marriage is not even remotely hinted at in the rites. There is nothing in the rituals of life profession that requires anything more on the part of a brother than he has already promised in annual vows except for permanence. Imagine a marriage working the same way? We do not make vows to a spouse which we only later decide to make permanent! The ring we receive is named explicitly as a symbol of God's love but, more importantly, it is named as a constant reminder of the vows "*made permanent*."

Marriage vows are made to an individual in the sight of God and others, with the intention of permanence. They are usually made when two people are deeply in love with one another. Most of us implicitly recognize that love is not always enough, and that down the road when



*Damian-Curtis and "the ring".*



*The funeral pall symbolizes death to self.*

fall “out of love” with one another and, by mutual consent, agree to terminate their agreement; such an option is impossible for us. God will never stop loving us and there is no court of appeals that has the authority to terminate the responsibilities taken on in life profession.

At the same time, life profession is not a funeral! While we are covered with the funeral pall, we do not emerge as newly reborn people. The image of the resurrection which inspires the symbol of the pall should be more closely evaluated for what it says at life profession. For even Christ resurrected was still Christ even with all of his wounds still intact! So while we may speak of being buried with Christ, we emerge from under the pall not as new people but as the same people with new purpose. The hearkening of this image to our baptism is meant to be *reminiscent* of and not indicative of the new death and rebirth already accomplished in our baptism. We emerge as Christ did, with our own wounds intact, however consecrated to the goal of life profession, and what remains beneath the pall are all of the other purposes, attitudes, agendas and self-deceptions that stand in the way of the life we’ve chosen for ourselves. That is what our consecration is about. And if we are not ready to let these things go, then perhaps it is not time to make life vows.

### *The joys of life profession*

Now that we have explored some of the unspoken realities and challenges of life profession, let’s take a look at the joys of entering into this long term commitment. For when one has thoughtfully and deliberately made the choice to commit to a life in vows, there is surely some benefit.

A life in God’s service is quite an accomplishment, especially when undertaken in the embrace of a community of likewise committed friends and family such as I have found in the Brotherhood of Saint Gregory. There is perhaps no greater comfort than the understanding that you are surrounded by such a gathering of witnesses who want nothing more than to see you successful in living the life you have chosen. In a world full of transient relationships, there is nothing more moving than someone making the decision to be your companion in the way for the remainder of their lives. To have a sense of who you will grow old with, who will nurture you when you are sorrowful, who will celebrate with you in your joy—such knowledge is too wonderful. To know

the love wears off, what will matter is the level of commitment between the two individuals. When that doesn’t work out, the mechanism of divorce, however unfortunate, is available. In marriage, two individuals promise to love, honor, cherish one another in all manner of circumstances. There are no such promises made or even intimated in life profession.

Life profession of vows is made to God in the sight of others. This is a hugely important difference. For while two individuals may eventually

and understand that the challenges you face in religious life have been experienced before you and will be experienced after you, and that you are part of a cycle of experience that will receive and pass on hope in the midst of these challenges is a wonderful gift.

If we have lived a life in religious vows and do not reach the end in awe and wonder at what the community of faith has taught us about ourselves, then we have done something wrong. I have learned more about myself in community than I thought possible about my gifts and strengths and shortcomings. I have learned more about forgiveness and reconciliation than I have learned in most other areas of my life. I have learned how often I can be wrong without knowing it, and have been amazed at the patience and love of my brothers who knew it long before I did.

In what other areas of our lives do we find ourselves surrounded by a group of people who know us deeply—all of our faults and all of our assets, gifts and strengths—and love us unconditionally nonetheless? If we have been open and honest

during our lives in community, our brothers will come to know us perhaps better than any others and allow us the freedom to be ourselves without expectations or judgment about who we are. This does not mean there will be no expectations about what we do. That is their responsibility.

There is great freedom in belonging to a community of faithful people who do not expect me to have all of the answers to life's deepest questions. They do not expect me to have skills I don't have, but instead elicit from me an understanding and acceptance of the gifts I do have and give me great encouragement in using them.



*Thomas Joseph, John Peter,  
and Bernard*

I have experienced the love of God in unexpected ways: not in the lightning bolts of revelation but in the simplicity and humility of hearing “yes” when I expected to hear “no” and in hearing “no” when I wanted to hear “yes.” God willing, I am still quite far

from the end of my life, but this far along after having made my life profession, I expect that I shall reach the end of my life sensing no great thunderclap of spiritual enlightenment but only the quiet joy of having done simply what was asked of me and of having accomplished what I committed to do.

### *Conclusion*

So let us return to a question we contemplated earlier. If this is all there is to life profession, is it enough? Before a brother commits the balance of his life to the Rule of the Brotherhood of Saint Gregory, he should first make sure that his eyes are wide open to what the sacrifices of such a decision are. The deeper issues of self-image and adequacy, of authority and communication should be well resolved in a brother's heart before taking such a step. A realistic understanding of what such a life commitment offers and, equally important, what it does not, should be deliberated upon be-

fore committing one's life. Most importantly, does the brother know himself and does he allow himself to be known? There are going to be difficult choices ahead.

We agree to love God and to love one another. We do not agree to love having to make all of the choices and necessities that such a manner of life entails. But the decision to make life profession of vows, to live this way of life for the remainder of our lives, should make us aware that it does not matter in the least whether we love the choices we may have to make or not. All that matters is that we love God and love one another. This may well be all there is! So, before we make our life profession we ask ourselves, "Is that enough?" If the answer is in doubt, then perhaps it is better to wait. God is patient.

*Karekin Madteos Yarian BSG*

*Here and there with the brothers*

## **COMMUNITY NOTES**

*Winter Convocation 2008*

Gregorian Friars from across the country gathered at Mount Alvernia Retreat Center in Wappingers Falls, New York in late January. A warm welcome was provided by the members of the Order of Friars Minor, and the cold and snowy surroundings ensured that all would stay indoors for this period of spiritual refreshment.

As with all convocations of the Brotherhood, worship and prayer were central to the daily life at Mount Alvernia. The schedule included the four-fold Daily Office said in the choir of the beautiful chapel, and the daily mass provided a central focus for each day. Preaching plays an important role in each day's Holy Eucharist, and this convocation called upon the talents of Christopher Stephen Jenks, Thomas Bushnell and Richard Matthias.

This year's Retreat was designed on a central theme of *Lectio Divina*, focused on the text of Genesis 3:1-7, the Fall of Adam and Eve. The two-day, three-session retreat was overseen by Thomas Bushnell, with workshop sessions convened by Karekin Madteos Yarian, Tobias Stanislas Haller and David Luke Henton, with time for individual study and prayer. The most unusual part of the retreat saw David Luke leading individual spiritual experiences through a variety of art projects governed by each brother's reflection on the text. The artworks are viewable on the Brotherhood's website ([www.gregorians.org](http://www.gregorians.org)) under "Features".

*Province 2*

The Brotherhood and Saint John's Parish, South Salem, New York sponsored a joint retreat on "What Does it Really Mean to be Free—The Liberation of Advent and the Paradox of Living a Vowed Life." Noted author and speaker the Rev. Barbara Crafton conducted the retreat sessions and meditations provided throughout the day. The closing Holy Eucharist was celebrated by Tobias Stanislas and the gospel proclaimed by Thomas Mark Liotta, and Mother Crafton summed up the day in the sermon. The day also provided opportunity for many to see the new parish hall and facility recently completed by Saint John's as part of a major capital improvement.

During a recent business trip to India, Stephen Storen was hosted for breakfast by the Pune Branch of the English Speaking Union. Both Richard Thomas Biernacki and Stephen are active in the ESU, Richard as President of the Monmouth County (NJ) Chapter and Stephen as Chair of the Audit Committee and as a volunteer in the English in Action program. The ESU is a non-profit, non-political, educational organization whose mission is to promote scholarship and the advancement of knowledge through the effective use of English in an expanding global community.



*The Rev Barbara Crafton*

#### *Province 4*

Ron Fender has been working on establishing The House of All Souls in Chattanooga, inspired by Brother Bernard Fessenden House in Yonkers and Common Ground, the work of Roseanne Haggerty in New York, and his experience at Saint Matthew's and with the city's Blueprint to End Chronic Homelessness. In connection with the Federal "Housing First Initiative" under the leadership of Phillip Mangano and the support of HUD, this initiative puts housing as a major priority for the homeless. As Ron says, "[Just] putting a homeless person in an isolated room or apartment without supportive services, or even furniture or household goods makes no sense whatsoever. Roseanne Haggerty has proven that the most successful model for ending homelessness is to create community for the homeless." The House of All Souls will be such an intentional community. Eight homeless men will be selected to live in this home with Ron as the director. The men will share a history of homelessness; mental illness or addiction will not prohibit them from entering the community as long as they maintain treatment and sobriety. In partnership with the boys at McCallie School, they will create and maintain gardens at the House. They will volunteer at various sites, including the Community Kitchen, the Chattanooga Zoo, and the Nature Center. There will be in-house AA/NA meetings and chapel. The founding group has entered a partnership with the Rosewood Foundation to procure and administer the House and have been approved for \$450,000 to construct or renovate a property. We wish Ron well in this wonderful venture in the Gospel.

#### *Province 5*

Ronald Augustine Fox began work in January as the Executive Assistant to the Dean, the Very Rev Dr Gary R Hall, at Seabury-Western Theological Seminary in Evanston. He has numerous responsibilities in administrative support to the dean and to the Rev Elizabeth S Butler, Vice President for Advancement and Administration, as well as attending meetings of the seminary Board of Trustees and its Executive Committee. In addition, Ronald Augustine serves on several seminary committees, and is chair of the Commencement Committee. He notes that it has been a great experience, especially being able to be a regular part of the daily worship of the seminary community. It has also given him an opportunity to introduce the seminarians to religious life as expressed by BSG.

# INTERCESSIONS

## The Brotherhood

Episcopal Visitor *Sun*  
Rodney R Michel

Episcopal Visitors Emeriti  
*Horace WB Donegan d 11.11.91*  
*Paul Moore, jr d 5.1.03*  
*Walter D Dennis d 3.30.03*

Life and Annual Professed  
Richard Thomas Biernacki  
*John Nidecker d 6.20.88*  
James Teets

Luke Anthony Nowicki *Mor*  
*John Peter Clark d 2.25.94*  
William Francis Jones  
Stephen Storen  
*Thomas Joseph Ross d 12.18.01*  
Tobias Stanislas Haller  
*William Bunting d 10.12.88*  
Edward Munro

*Charles Kramer d 10.23.06* *Tue*  
*Bernard Fessenden d 8.10.93*  
Donovan Aidan Bowley  
*Edward Riley d 9.15.05*  
Christopher Stephen Jenks  
Ciarán Anthony DellaFera  
*Damian-Curtis Kellum d 10.9.07*

Richard John Lorino *Wed*  
Ronald Augustine Fox  
Maurice John Grove  
Charles Edward LeClerc  
Virgilio Fortuna  
Gordon John Stanley  
Karekin Madteos Yarian

William David Everett *Thu*  
Thomas Bushnell  
Thomas Mark Liotta  
James Mahoney  
*Patrick Ignatius Dickson d 7.20.05*  
Robert James McLaughlin  
Peter Budde  
John Henry Ernestine  
Francis Sebastian Medina

Aelred Bernard Dean *Fri*  
Joseph Basil Gauss  
Mark Andrew Jones  
Emmanuel Williamson  
Richard Matthias  
William Henry Benefield  
Nathanael Deward Rahm  
Thomas Lawrence Greer

Enoch John Valentine *Sat*  
Ron Fender

## Novices

David John Batrick  
Michael Elliott  
David Luke Henton  
Will Harpest

## Postulants

Bo Alexander Armstrong  
Jason F Bullock

Postulant-Prospective  
Blane van Pletzen

## The Associates and Friends of the Brotherhood

Religious Communities  
Sacramentine & Visitandine Nuns  
Society of the Atonement  
Community of the Paraclete  
Companions of Saint Luke~  
Benedictine

Community of Celebration  
Congregation of the Companions  
of the Holy Saviour

Life in the Lamb Community  
Little Sisters of Saint Clare

Rivendell Community

Sisters of Saint Gregory

Third Order SSF

Worker Sisters & Brothers of the  
Holy Spirit  
Camaldolese Benedictines  
Society of Saint John the  
Evangelist

Anglican Oblates of Saint  
Benedict

Community of the Transfiguration  
Order of Julian of Norwich

## For the intentions of

Joseph Richey House  
Fessenden Recovery Ministries  
Baltimore Int'l Seafarers' Center;  
Saint Paul's Grayson St, San  
Antonio

Brothers Edward, Ronald  
Augustine, Karekin Madteos,  
William David, Thomas,  
Thomas Mark, Emmanuel, Luke  
Anthony, Charles Edward, James  
Mahoney, Aelred Bernard, John  
Henry, Ron, David John

Aldersgate UMC Dobbs Ferry,  
St Christopher's, Kileen TX  
White Plains Hospital  
Episcopal Parishes of Yonkers  
Ian, David, Dennis, Dean, Scott,  
Tim, Johanna, Virginia, Nancy,  
Kathleen, Debra, Steven,  
Anthony, Austin, Tom, Maureen

## For the Departed

Benefactors, Friends & Associates:  
Charlotte Morgan, Arsene &  
Louise Lemarier, Norman Hall,  
George Koerner, Henry Fukui,  
J Steward Slocum, James  
Gundrum, Cecil Berges, Marion  
Pierce, Helen Marie Joyce  
VHM, Kenneth Staples,  
Elizabeth Holton, Richard A  
Belanger, Brendan W Nugent,  
Sarah Elizabeth Wells SSG, Sue  
Bradley, Jack Merryman; Paul  
Power

Mona Stenswick  
Desiree Hardaway  
Angela Khoury  
Geraldine Rossier Babcock  
Mac

Murial Lof  
George Lof  
Eleanor Miller

Marjorie Hartmeyer  
Melvin Holland

Elliott A Saron  
Arthur Elms

Harry B Sherman Jr  
Larue W Bailey

C Eugene Erickson  
Mary V Edwards

Doug Drouin  
James Keating

Glen Huey Farmer  
Edith Stricker

Donald E Riggs  
Jacques Crosby

Larry Elrod

Thanksgiving

The Chicago Consultation