Dear People Whom God Loves,

**COULD WE CALL GOD**

**OUR LOVER AND SERVANT?**

**COULD WE CALL GOD HUMBLE?**

I

Could we call God our lover and servant? Could we call God humble? At first blush that may sound blasphemous; on the other hand, we may think it sounds blasphemous because our worldly values are upside down. Let us keep an open mind by listening to the scriptures.

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“Have among yourselves the same attitude that is also yours in Christ Jesus, Who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God something to be grasped.

Rather he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, coming in human likeness, and found human in appearance, he humbled himself, becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross.

Because of this, God greatly exalted him and bestowed on him the name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.” Phil. 2:5-11.

At that time the disciples approached Jesus and said, “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” He called a child over, placed him in their midst, and said, “Amen I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.” Mt. 18:1-4.

But Jesus summoned them and said, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and the great ones make their authority over them felt. But it shall not be so among you. Rather, whoever wishes to be great among you shall be your servant; whoever wishes to be first among you shall be your slave. Just so, the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many.” Mt. 20: 25-28.

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This says to me that entering and deepening in the reign of God means being willing for the love that is God to transform us into a deeper love. This love moves us to relieve the suffering that comes from sin and other suffering. This love knows that what we have received, is a gift that allows us to have the privilege of being a servant and allows us to serve not for any ego need, but just because it is good and loving. God is transforming us by helping us to become more like God.

All this is good and beautiful. Here is the problem for me, and I am quite sure that this is a universal problem because it comes from being human. Being human means that we have certain energies we call the seven capital sins. These of course are not sins. The word capital comes from the Latin word “caput” which means source. What we call the capital sins are good, natural, human energies. These energies, we might use the word pulls for some of them, are so strong that we at times choose to use them in ways that are unloving and hurtful to others and/or to ourselves.

These energies or pulls come from two older parts of our brain. Dogs and cats also have these two brain parts. We humans alone have the newest part of the brain which includes the pre-frontal cortex. This third part of our brain allows us to think, reason, and know right from wrong. This is why we humans can make moral choices and this is why we are capable of sin. These three parts of our brain all influence each other. The newest part has the job of not eliminating the energies of the other two but at the same time of keeping them moving in the direction of what is good. This is a long and difficult path. There are two things that I know help us on this path. The first is developing good habits. Good habits: This is making choices where the newest part of the brain is in control, but not to the extent of eliminating the older parts. In contrast, Bad habits: This is making choices where the older parts of the brain are in control and the newest part of the brain has insufficient or no influence. The second help to staying on a good path is to make sure we have enough quiet time. It is important to take time for meditation (there are various types) and also time for quiet prayer. When God is part of our prayer it is essential that our image of God is one of love and mercy, one of believing that God is with us and wants what is best for us. A vengeful scary image hurts rather than helps. If the quiet time is not with God, it is still essential that our image be of love and peace and not one of hate and vengeance.

Over time our brain becomes properly integrated and we live with more goodness and peace. For me, having God as a part of it is valuable, because then, it is not just about me but about everything. I believe that good habits and meditation help our brain to become integrated and open to receive the spiritual gifts that God has for us. I also believe the bad habits tend to block us from receiving these gifts.

The traditional capital sins are: pride, anger, lust, greed, gluttony, envy, and sloth. There are of course more. There is no sin in having them. The sin is when we knowingly and willingly choose to use these natural human energies in unloving, hurtful ways. My experience is that this is a lifelong struggle. I know that I have lots of company. I am relieved that God is patient and persistent.

II

I now want to move into some beautiful and good things about being a Christian and also talk about a possible dark side. Baptism and ordination are two of the three sacraments that have what is called a “seal.” This is a spiritual seal that remains with us for the rest of our lives.

When we are baptized we become members of the community of people who follow Jesus Christ. This reminds us that while we all sin, we can always be aware that when we sin, we can repent and with the grace of God move toward having a more loving life. This is why we can call ourselves a community of sinners and a community who follows Jesus Christ.

What is the dark side? We can take this gift and use it to foster our ego and pride. We then look down on people who are not Christians and think that we are superior to them. We may also look down on people who belong to a different Christian denomination. We may even look down on people of our own denomination who don’t see things in the same way we do. We then have forgotten that Jesus told us that living in the reign of God includes being a servant to others. Ego blocks our spiritual growth and makes our pride in being Christian sound hollow. However, with the grace of God, we too can repent and learn to walk the walk.

We need the love that God is to remember what one saint said when he saw a seemingly worthless person: “There but for the grace of God go I.” Another saint said: “There go I.”

We now turn to sacrament of ordination. It also has a seal that remains with us. It does not go away when the priest or bishop sins. What does this seal mean?

(1) Baptism and Holy Orders are said to impart a seal because, no matter what happens on life's journey, they can never be repeated. (2) *In persona* means the priest is authorized to speak to the people the words and actions that Christ their savior intends for them and to speak to God in the name of the people.

The sacrament of ordination gives the priest the authority to do this. The seal reminds us that this authority remains with the priest. It is not lost when he sins. This is a beautiful gift to be cherished, but the priest is still a human being with the same human frailties we all have.

The seal of the sacrament has been explained by saying that it means that the priest is ontologically different from other people. I know that this word is used to remind us that the priest has authorization that those who are not ordained do not. However, because priests are human, it can be a temptation to use it to build their egos. Having been a priest for many years, I know it can easily draw us into the trap of thinking that we are more valuable, more important, and above other people. When our ego is in charge, we can easily think that it is okay to lord it over others and we can easily forget that Jesus told us that to be the greatest we must be servants. When our ego is in charge we don’t live the reign of God very well and we are not likely draw others into the reign of God.

“Jesus summoned them and said to them, ‘you know that those who are recognized as rulers over the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones make their authority over them felt. But it shall not be so among you. Rather, whoever wishes to be great among you will be your servant; whoever wishes to be first among you will be the slave of all. For the Son of man did not come to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many.’” Mk 10:42-45

The unearned privilege of being a priest can make it more difficult to live the reign of God. We so need to allow God to help us recognize our frailty.

Let us look at what we can learn from the realization that in the celebration of the Eucharist the priest stands in the persona of Christ and at the same time in the persona of the community.

*In the persona of the community* says to me that the priest is part of the community, not above the community nor foreign to it. We are all in this together.

*In the persona of Christ* says to me that the priest is called to have the values of Christ for himself and to draw the community into those same values.

Let us take a further look at the meaning of the priest speaking in the persona of Christ. This is not only to draw people into the reign of God but also to remind them when they are not following Jesus. This of course will likely not be effective if the priest is not following Jesus. The priest must remember that if he speaks in the persona of Christ he is talking about following Jesus and not about following his own preferences and values.

What are those values? What does this call the priest to do?

Go back to the beginning of my reflection and look at Jesus’ words to the disciples in the Gospel of Matthew. Now look at Jesus’ words in the Gospel of Mark: “Whoever wishes to be first among you will be the slave of all. For the Son of man did not come to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for man.” Mk: 10-43b-45a.

We priests need the grace of God to keep from falling into the trap of prestige and power. While this is a trap that is so human, it is a trap that keeps us from being good servants, and a trap with which I still struggle.

III

Some of the challenges priests face:

* Careerism – valuing career over the reign of God
* Celibacy – not just the sexual part but also not having someone who knows you and loves you to tell you the truth about yourself
* Seeking prestige
* Seeking money
* Seeking power and control
* Confusing blind obedience with spiritual growth

IV

Finally, there is something else that is good and valuable but that is also open to a dark side. We priests are encouraged to be brothers and help and support each other like family. We need that. What is the dark side?

There is a natural and valuable tendency to protect those in our family. That is good. The problem is that it can easily become a protection of family to the point of unjustly harming other people.

This isn’t limited to clergy. We see it throughout society. We see it in police, doctors and all of the places where there is a common bond. I first noticed this shortly after I was ordained. An older priest said to me, “Welcome to the club.” Fortunately, my first assignment was to be an assistant to a good and wise pastor, Fr. Bill Brand. He said to me, “John, don’t ever demand respect because you are a priest.” He knew the temptations and he wanted me to know the dangers. I have not always lived up to his wise counsel, but that memory has helped me from being worse. I thank God for Bill.

Smile, God Loves You

Father Clay