

CHAPTER 4

"The first thing I require is for you to have a prior, one of yourselves, who is to be chosen for the office by common consent, or that of the greater and maturer part of you; each of the others must promise him obedience--of which, once promised, he must try to make his deeds the true reflection--and also chastity and the renunciation of ownership."

Does it mean something that the 'First' thing Albert requires of the hermits on Mt. Carmel is to have a prior? In some ways, it may seem to us today to be a natural starting part: Organize yourselves into group first with at least some basic structure around a common cause (i.e. "to live in allegiance with Jesus Christ") and then proceed to make rules and discern the day-to-day means of life. However, this first step is not necessarily so basic. Why was building a chapel as a place to come together for Mass each morning not the first thing that Albert required? or the designation of individual cells? or the pledge of allegiance to Jesus Christ? We might consider that Albert did not even include the vows of chastity and poverty in his letter of the Rule, but this was a very common practice for eastern monastics because these vows were widely presumed and there was no need to specifically mention them. There remained, however many other questions and options within Albert's grasp. The selection (not necessarily election) of a prior was not a basic or self-evident choice. His choice of choosing a prior first and before all other requisites is meaningful.

Why did Albert 'First' require the hermits to have a prior? Was it because he thought them to be a disorganized band that needed unity and structure? Was he a hierarchist who demanded formal structure? Did he value obedience above all other virtues? Scholars can delve into the history, life and other works of Albert to come up with some plausible guesses, but I am no scholar and I am looking for something that is much more meaningful than 'plausible.' What meaning and significance can we find in our Order and Way of Life today from the basic fact that this is the 'First' thing that the Rule requires? Of all the demands and provisions that the Rule gives, the appointment of a Prior holds primary place.

If we are in service to the Master, then is the Prior the one who now stands in this same place, as a living reminder of our commitment to Christ and obedience to Him? Is our obedience to Christ the primary cornerstone of living in allegiance to Him? What does it mean that obedience itself holds such a primary place and, are we living a community of humble obedience? or are we living a community of congenial independents, of decision makers living under a more or less present threat of being forced by obedience to act against our private will? Do we give obedience and what proper obedience means as friar and prior, sufficient attention and thought?

Specific answers may not be ready-at-hand, and that in itself is a very meaningful point. By claiming 'First' to require that we have a prior to whom we promise obedience, Albert is telling the brothers of Mt. Carmel that this issue is, for him, first above all others and should be central to our discernment and practice in living this Way of Life.

CHAPTER 4: THE COUNSELS OF PERFECTION

Recognize the Prior of your home, promising obedience.



St. Albert directs the brothers and sisters of the Order to elect a prior from within their midst. His intention is simple and quite basic, and has nothing to do with democracy and governance, as some today are hasty to point toward. They would describe the Rule itself as a radical document of democratic ideals, written six centuries prior to the revolutions that swept the Americas and Europe. They would also like to reduce this move by the Patriarch to an ordinary act of practical management. The loose band of brothers gathered around the Spring on Mount Carmel needed to be brought together and organized under a single leadership in order to facilitate the living of a common life and create a structure for order. These are the ways of thinking in the democratic age of the 21st Century; it is the way of thinking of a corporate mind that concentrates on management structures and methods. But St. Albert did not come from either this time or our age of thinking. His question was not first about how to organize a management structure that encouraged unity and cooperation among the brothers, nor was his second question about how to select a leader that would guarantee an equality of voice for all. Rather, we are already in the fourth chapter of his Rule and his first and second questions have already been answered: To live a life in allegiance to Christ according to this particular way which has been presented. These are his concerns, and the purpose for the Rule and the end toward which everything he has written points, including this provision to elect a prior. Everything in the Rule is meant to lead one in living this life of allegiance.

Much of what is behind this directive comes from long-standing traditions of the Christian faith and very common practices of the 12th century, which are beyond the scope of our discussion and my meaning here. What is worth noting and is very relevant to anyone living today, is that Albert is not reflecting a political or sociological ideology of the time, but is gathering the Order around a reflection of Christ and that first generation of disciples who followed him, who walked in the physical footsteps of Jesus, swearing and following in obedience

to the Master, who as we will discover more throughout the Rule, has himself sworn and committed his life to bringing the salvation of others, to reconciling them with the Love of the Father, to healing, to teaching, to sacrificing and showing the perfect Love of God. The prior is the one who has been called to stand in the very feet of Christ as shepherd and caretaker of God's children.

Within the Order, each house elects a prior from among its members. This is something that, except for a few rare conditions, is simply not possible, nor practical for those living outside the Order. Would we expect for families to elect a single prior to whom everyone else, including the spouse, pledges obedience? Would we ask a group of priests sharing a rectory to swear obedience to one among them when they live under the Bishop? Should a group of college roommates give their life in obedience to someone whom they may have just met? Or should a newly wed couple elect one or the other to be prior?

Here, we are reminded of a natural order to things. God has already elected parents as the prior of the household, as He elected Christ, by his birth and nature as the Son of God, to be that first prior and head of His church. And here also is something interesting that I should draw your attention to, and which was not a grammatical error: the parents, father and mother, are the prior of the household. Through marriage they are singular and brought together as one, and it is only as one, in unison and communion, that they have been elected and act properly as the prior. It is not one, even if by consent--as if our own word could undermine God's order of things--who takes the place of Christ and prior, demanding obedience of the other. But mother and father together (except in the sad cases when one has died or the marriage has been separated by divorce) step into the role of the prior.

We are also reminded then that it is in Christ that husband and wife are united; it is the body of Christ and in His communion that they have been brought together; and it is by acting like and in Christ that husband and wife become one. The life in allegiance to Christ and position as prior strengthens their bond and union in marriage, along with all of the aspects of love that mother and father share.

In other places outside of the Order, it may in fact be very difficult, impossible and even harmful to recognize a prior. If you are living alone, or in a house of roommates with others who do not share your desire for this Way of Life, you do not have a prior and should not try to *fill* the role of prior. In this case, Christ alone is your prior, as was long the tradition of the desert hermits--our obedience must always be given to someone other than to ourselves, and all of the other benefits that our soul garners from humble reverence, reliance upon and our relationship with the prior come from these relationships to another person. To put it into other words, our

spirit needs someone that is above us in authority and to whom we are held responsible and accountable. We need the benefits of this humble relationship and the virtue of dependance that comes from relying on another. It is not just any other person whom we can rely on for these things, but we must take care and be observant in who this other is--that is the task and attention that is needed in recognizing the prior whom God has elected before us.

For those who may become zealous and may be already making connections between a prior over a house in the Order and a boss at work, I should also caution here against placing a boss or supervisor as a prior. While there are benefits to maintaining a certain obedience to all who have been given authority over us, (these will be addressed in much more detail later) making a promise of obedience is only meant for, and protects us when everyone involved has professed a similar promise and lives according to a similar Way of Life. To promise obedience, or to simply at try to live according to such a promise while working for a boss who is quick to take advantage and abuse others, or for a middle manager who may joyfully steal credit for his subordinates' work, is not the intention or desire for such holy obedience. These superiors should never be mistaken as priors, because they do not stand in the place of Christ, however this does not mean that they may not stand in the place of some of the traits and responsibilities of a prior. The difference being that in the Order, the Prior stands alone in responsibility for all aspects of the brothers' and sisters' lives, while outside of the Order, these many things may be separated. Our boss may be like a prior over our job and career; our teachers a prior over our learning; our priest, spiritual director and confessor over matters of the spirit, coaches may act as priors over their team and so on and so forth.

There is one final point that is worth mentioning here. I have written that we are to recognize the prior and not elect because if there is a prior of our house, they have already been elected by our Father and our task is merely to recognize who this prior is, and most certainly, each of us has someone who God has properly stood before us to be this tangible and living Christ, for a few it may be Christ himself. What we glean will be different, but by looking and being attentive, we can see those in our life who have been set before us, to whom we can be safely and appropriately obedient to; who will lead in the day-to-day things of following Christ; who will teach us to pray; help us to heal when he are sick; treat our wounds; push us a little further in our struggles; help us in service to others; and bring us into a greater and more perfect love of Christ.

Recognize the prior, and those who at times may be filling the place of a prior, promising to them obedience of a life that is in allegiance to Christ.