



RENUNCIATION OF OWNERSHIP

Although it is a common perception, the *renunciation of ownership* should not be confused with a vow of poverty; the *renunciation of ownership* is not the commitment to live a life of simplicity, to go hungry, to wear a lower quality of clothing, to live without money in savings or to use broken-down, second-hand things. The *renunciation of ownership* does not require one to live on the edge of financial security; it is not the voluntary decision to go without meeting one's daily needs; it is not to be homeless, to have access to lower education or less access to basic health care. The *renunciation of ownership* is not a condition of life that for some is involuntary, brought on by the environment of a surrounding neighborhood, sudden and unplanned unemployment, serious medical conditions, or debilitating family situations. Rather, the *renunciation of ownership*, like the other vows, is a disposition of the heart: to renounce pressing an exclusive claim of use, of authority, or of belonging over any thing. These are the things that poverty brings. Some may be helpful to the spiritual life, but most are deprivations that place undue burdens on one's well being and on those we love. By renouncing the ownership of things, however, we do not deprive ourselves of wants and needs, but transform and shape ourselves so that we want and need fewer things; we become content with less and detached from a need for finer things (as fasting frees one from cravings and the driving impulses of foods); we don't simply become more satisfied with less, but have our eyes trained toward the love of others, detach from worldly desires and treasure the truly valuable things in heaven.

If, as we have already said, *obedience* is the first disposition that is necessary and begins a life in allegiance to Christ, and *chastity* is the very end, the reward of this life and the goal for which we hope, then the *renunciation of ownership* is the day-to-day work that conducts us along this journey; it is the way by which we grow in love, and which transforms the soul; it is the path by which we travel and which helps us to love better and more in the image as God loves us. Another way to think of these three vows and dispositions is to think of the Holy Trinity itself: the Father gives us the model of *chastity*, the Spirit a model of *obedience*, and the Son a model of *renunciation*.

What more could Christ renounce than his very seat in heaven, that from such divine heights he emptied himself to take on flesh. In becoming man, he saw fit to not even claim ownership of his divine nature; and on this earth he claimed no property as his own. He had no home as we hear in the Gospel: "The Son of Man does not even have a place to lay his head." He gave his

love, his power to heal, his wisdom, his compassion and even the moments when he had retreated in prayer, he gave to the disciples when they had sought him out. Christ gave to this world all that could have been his. There is nothing in him that he reserved for his own and claimed ownership over. In the Garden of Gethsemane he prayed: “Father, be it not my will that is done, but your Will.” And before his death, “My life is my own to give and I give it freely.” In Christ we see the greatest depths of the *renunciation of ownership* and how far it goes beyond the ownership of material goods and things. The *renunciation of ownership* is the activity of love, of giving rather than keeping, that draws our awareness outward to the other so that it is in this renunciation that we truly mimic the life of Christ.

When I was living in the Order (during my novitiate year), I was not only living in a house with several brothers, but our house itself was part of a larger compound with the National Shrine of Our Lady of Mt. Carmel. Instead of a couple of trash cans, we shared a large dumpster. As you might expect, people from all around the area would drive by and dump their trash in our dumpster. One night, I was walking outside when I saw a middle-aged man pull up in a relatively new sedan, he popped open the trunk, pulled out a couple of bags, tossed them into the dumpster and then drove off. For a moment, I thought about yelling at him—I had been close enough I likely could have even run over and stopped him before he had left. Here he was, using our dumpster to get out of paying his weekly trash collection fee...and then what I was thinking actually hit me: *He was using our dumpster.*

On another evening, I walked into the kitchen for a drink of water and the commotion of a dozen people outside our back door caught my attention. The novitiate house was on an open property of more than 100 acres. Behind the house was a long, narrow lake that was about the size of a football field, only half as wide. A handful of Boy Scouts and Cub Scouts had gathered on the other side, preparing for a future camping trip by practicing setting up and tearing down their tents. A couple of my brothers, including our novice master, were grumbling about how the scouts had just showed up in our yard without asking or even letting us know what they were doing. “It’s just something you have to get used to” they said with derision, “people just show up like its a public park.” Families and individuals will come and fish for hours just a stone’s throw from our back deck, in the winter they’ll bring their sleds right up to the deck and no one gives any attention to the several signs posting “Private Property” and “No Fishing.”

The renunciation of ownership means that it was not *private property*, nor was it *our* dumpster. We have been given the responsibility of care and stewardship over things. If someone wanted to drive four-wheelers, leaving tracks and making muddy trails, or throw a large party leaving beer bottles and trash lying everywhere, or illegally throw hazardous waste into the dumpster, then it

would certainly be our place to say something and prevent misuse. Scouts setting up tents because they need a large and open area, families spending an afternoon together, a man practicing his golf swing, or teenagers tossing around the frisbee were doing nothing harmful. But it was through us, by generous gifts to the Order, that God was providing such a place for people to go and spend time together—a far better thing to do than playing video games or texting on the couch. God provides, not us. The *renunciation of ownership* is nothing more than recognizing and trying to live out that fundamental truth: all things exist for God's Kingdom and all things belong to the Creator of the Foundations of the World. And at the end of this path, we may even come to realize and see that it is not even my life that I have been given, but a life that I may give.

The *renunciation of ownership* teaches us humility by placing the needs of others ahead of our own. If we no longer claim ownership of things, then it is harder to grow prideful and believe that we deserve them more than others. It teaches us patience. It is hard to grow angry over things that we do not see as “our own,” or rather, it is far too easy to be hurt and upset over things that we have laid claimed to. If someone criticizes our job, our opinions, or even our clothing, it can truly hurt deeply and more quickly motivates one to anger. Yet we also know that these things are not who we are—I am not the sum of either my wardrobe or my latest joke which no one laughed at. By renouncing ownership, we acknowledge this and are less hurt. If I no longer take possession of *my* job, or of *my* time writing, then I become more patient with interruptions and more attentive to other things that may need my attention. We learn patience too because there will be times when we want, or think that we need something, and it is not available to us—and so also we progress in the detachment from things and become less dependent on them. We grow in solidarity as we see things less often as *mine*, we are forced to work in cooperation with others more often and we gain, at times, the first hand experience and understanding of what it is like to have to go without. The *renunciation of ownership* increases our compassion, contentment and our faith; that we have more compassion for those who are in need, we are more content with fewer things and that we live more and more by the faith that God will always provide and less according to our individual need to accumulate and provide for ourselves.

The *renunciation of ownership* focuses us away from the attainment and accumulation of things, it points us toward the higher things of God, to those treasures which are truly most meaningful and most valuable. It is through this daily work of *renunciation* which is love itself and a reflection of the life of Christ, that we are most abundantly transformed and grow in our ability to love others, to lower our dependence and our need for things and so set their needs above our own.

The first step in *renouncing ownership* is the renunciation of physical things, of material goods and things. Here it should be said that the only way to truly renounce the ownership of all

property and things is to join an Order itself; that within the Order there are the constructs, the supports and the unity that make true renunciation possible and even appropriate. The common ownership of all things and renunciation of personal ownership stands in opposition to the way of the world and many necessities of living in daily life; it is one of the clearest signs that distinguishes consecrated life. This reality, however, does not mean that we cannot, and should not adopt this disposition, that we take a goal of owning as little as is necessary and not needlessly burdensome to life and so pull our hearts away from the pitfalls and distractions of a consumer driven and materialistic society.

One may consider renting movies, rather than always buying them. Even if it may cost a little more to rent a movie a few times, you will gain more by not having so much clutter and by being free from owning so many things and give more attention to what you truly desire, rather than what happens to be laying around close at hand. The same can also be said for many larger tools or things that we may use only a few times each year, consider the possibility of renting, or whenever possible, joining with a group of friends, or neighbors to purchase one and then share. Have as few vehicles as your household truly needs. In large cities with good public transportation, it may be possible to not even own a vehicle, but wherever you may live, it may not be necessary that every person in the household owns their own vehicle. Similarly, every individual in a family may not need to own a computer, but there may be a family computer. When it comes to knick-knacks and collectibles, be attentive to what you buy and what real purpose things serve. For children, it may be helpful to set a limit on the number of toys that they have, so that as they acquire new toys, they may have to give up some of their older ones (this will likely change with their age). In all things, bear in mind that the goal is to own as little as is necessary, to be satisfied with possessing less and not make life unduly burdensome. Meet the needs of your position in life and your appropriate responsibilities to others. What is difficult to give up in the beginning becomes easier and as you continue down this path, you will find yourself wanting, and even needing, to own less and less.

The other aspect in the *renunciation of ownership* is the recognition of communal ownership. For families, there are things that are rightfully and necessarily owned by parents, but there also should be a disposition in teaching the children too, that everything which can be, practically speaking, owned in common, should be owned by the family. We can then extend the circle outward to things that are shared with friends and the neighborhood, always bearing in mind our position as good stewards and using common sense. The *renunciation of ownership* can also extend into the workplace, knowing our attitudes and dispositions toward things: this is no longer *my* stapler, *my* desk, *my* computer, etc. and encouraging others to also see common ownership and a common mission.

As we have said, this is the first step in the *renunciation of ownership*. You will find that as you go along this road, mimicking the life of Christ in this simple way, you will find yourself following in other ways; that by first renouncing the ownership of material things you will no longer claim ownership over more valuable and unseen things, of your time, your job, your thoughts and opinions, and even over your very salvation. One does not own one's salvation, but receives, as in all things, from the generous Love of the Father. If one can begin to recognize the gift, then temptations of the fear of losing it, of judgment and even scrupulousness lose their power and affectivity.

Renunciation of ownership is a daily action, beginning with physical and material things, that we do not claim the exclusive ownership of things, and then extending into other things. We may begin to see that our job is not even our own; my time does not belong to me; nor even my thoughts and my opinions. Like the others, this vow is a disposition that we do not begin by living perfectly, but by adopting the disposition which grows and becomes more perfect and more complete the further that we advance in prayer and in our ability to love. At the end, we find that not even our salvation is our own; that it is an object to be attained or that I am even responsible for my own salvation. that as Christ stood before Pilot saying, "You would not have it, except that it has been given to you by my father," and gave himself over to death. All that we have has first been given to us, not for our good in keeping and reserving personal ownership, but for the good that we may in turn give because it is in this giving that we come into greater and greater love; we become more like Christ and ever closer to that beautiful image of the One who Loved us.

Lastly, we recognize that a spirit of *renunciation* directs one's thoughts and gaze toward relationship. Grammatically speaking, to truly renounce ownership does not mean that one stops using the articles of *my* husband, *my* car, *my* home, or *my* idea. Rather, that article no longer carries a tone of exclusivity, just as the vow of chastity professed by religious calls them away from exclusive love and relationships and not love all together. *My* husband does not describe ownership, but one's relationship to him, carrying certain obligations, responsibilities, rights and benefits, and describing how people relate to one another; *my* car describes that one is responsible for it's care, that it has been placed into one's hands for using to the good of God's kingdom and that it is the car that one drives; *my* idea does not mean that one owns the idea and deserves credit, or financial compensation for anyone else to use it, but that it came from me, there is an element of my creativity within it and it is, in some way, an expression of me. The *renunciation of ownership* transforms one's view of things from exclusiveness to relationship.