

FIRST VOWS CEREMONY 2015

Homily by Fr Tom Layden SJ, Irish Jesuit Provincial

Each time I come to a vows ceremony I am drawn to a document I found very helpful when I was preparing for my own first vows. It is Decree 2 of General Congregation 32 and it asks the question, 'What is it to be a Jesuit?' And the answer? It is to know that one is a sinner, yet called to be a companion of Jesus as Ignatius was: Ignatius who begged the Blessed Virgin to 'place him with her Son', and who then saw the Father himself ask Jesus, carrying his cross, to 'take this pilgrim into his company'.

René de los Reyes SJ and Steven Edmunds SJ are making their first vows to-day and they know themselves to be sinners, weak and fallible, but deeply loved by God. They have heard the reassuring words of today's first reading speaking of the primacy of God's love for us.

They know, as Ignatius did, that God loves them warts and all. They have heard a call to be a companion of Jesus, not just to be a servant, but to be a close personal friend. This call, experienced in their lives, has become explicit in the *Spiritual Exercises* and confirmed in the experiments of the novitiate. Today, René and Steve, having heard and reflected on that call, that invitation, have asked to be placed with the Father, and with Jesus who takes these two pilgrims into His company.

We, their brothers in the Company, are deeply happy that René and Steve desire to share and participate in our companionship. As they make today's public and sacred offering of themselves, we stand with them in solidarity and support. As they read out their vows, each of us Jesuits is reminded of our own vow day when we made this same commitment.

Today's ceremony calls us to the roots of our own personal vocation and of the communal vocation of our Order. We are moved to make this offering because of our trust in God's grace. The Lord has given us the desire to offer ourselves in this way. This decision comes from God. The one who has given us the desire will also give us the grace, the help to live it out in creativity and fidelity, in compassion and with imagination.

When we Jesuits commit ourselves to the evangelical counsels of poverty, chastity and obedience we do it so that we might be totally united to Christ. We want to share in His freedom so as to be at the service of all who need us.

I recall that the Superior of the community I was sent to after I had made my vows sent us all a sheet in which he spoke of the vows as roads to freedom.

How do the vows set us free?

Poverty: We are made free by our vow of poverty to share the life of the poor and to use whatever resources we may have, not for our own security and comfort but for service. We are helped to become free by putting our total reliance on the Lord Jesus and on our community to give us the support we need to live this way of life.

There is an invitation to rely more on God's providence than on human resources; to safeguard the freedom of the apostle (the one sent) by detachment from avarice and the

bondage it infers. At the end of the day, the vow of poverty is a call to follow in the footsteps of Jesus Christ who preached good news to the poor by being poor himself.

Chastity: We are made free by our vow of chastity to be persons for others in friendship and communion with all, but especially with those who share our mission of service. Here is a call to grow in love, a personal love for the person of Jesus Christ; a call to an ever more inward knowledge of Him. And we daily ask that we may better love and follow Him.

We desire to meet Jesus, to encounter and experience him as St. Ignatius did.

Jesus, Son of God, sent to serve, sent to set free, put to death and risen from the dead. This love is the deepest well-spring of our action and of our life.

Obedience: Our vow of obedience frees us to respond to the call of Christ made known to us by Him, when the Spirit was placed over the Church. Free to follow the lead of our Superiors, especially Father General.

Above all we live obedience by allowing ourselves to be drawn into an ever deeper spirit of humility. We are one group in the Church and we have a particular charism and way of proceeding. But we can't do everything. Nor should we try. And in the projects in which we are involved we realise that we must be willing to work with others: with Christians, persons of other religious faiths and all men and women of goodwill. When required we should be willing to play a subordinate, supportive, anonymous role. We should be willing to learn from those we seek to serve.

It is inevitable on an occasion like today that we focus intentionally on what is explicitly Jesuit and we celebrate it and rejoice in it. Concerning this, two extremes are to be avoided. The first is the danger of speaking as if ours is the only vocation in the Church. That would be as ridiculous as it is untrue. We rejoice in all the other ways of seeing the Lord: in diocesan priesthood, monastic life, in the charisms of other religious orders, in the vocation of marriage, the single vocation, and the lay vocation.

The second extreme might be one that we are more tempted to nowadays: to be silent about our way of life, to be hiding it, to almost let ourselves be embarrassed about speaking positively of it. Truth and justice demand that we acknowledge the gift we have received ultimately from the Holy Spirit and especially through the Spirit's action in the life and ministry of Ignatius Loyola and the First Companions.

Today as we witness these vows, we promise our support to René and Steve in the years to come. We ask that God will bring to completion the work that God has begun in them. For us Jesuits, that support will come in and through community life, the supportive relationship with superiors, formation directors and spiritual directors, and through friendships.

We know that René and Steve will also receive support from their families and from friends outside the family, married couples, peers and work colleagues. I know that you are both going to study philosophy in the University of Toronto and you will be living in Cardoner House. I know that Frs. Gilles Mongeau and Joe Schner at the community will give you fraternal support.

Today's Eucharist gives us the opportunity to say a word of thanks to all those who have helped you over the past two years here in Harboure: Paul and Gregory, Brendan and

Kevin, and the Jesuit community in Manresa House. Also to all the people with whom you have worked on your experiments: those who organised them, offered you support when you arrived, helped you to reflect on what you were learning, maybe sometimes challenged you to go deeper.

In a special way, a work of thanks to your families from whose love you have come. We thank them for standing with you in solidarity today and offering you their best wishes for your future lives as Jesuits.

Thanks too to your friends who are here with you – and for you – today, and who desire to be with you into the future.

In the spirit of today's gospel the prayers of all of us for you is that your lives as Jesuits will bear witness to God's love and will be fruitful in service. The gospel reminds us that God chooses us, not that we choose God. May each of us be richly blessed as we seek to live out the calling we have received from the Lord.