

# THE FOLLOWING OF CHRIST IN THE TEACHING OF VATICAN II

By PAUL MOLINARI

**I**T IS ONE of the outstanding merits of the second Vatican Council to have emphasized the christocentric and ecclesial value of the religious life by relating it closely to the doctrine on the Church, which is the mystical body of our Lord Jesus Christ. If we wish to appreciate what the Church has taught about the inner meaning of religious life, it is necessary first to penetrate more deeply into the mystery of our incorporation into Christ, which is the essence of the christian life. In other words, we need first of all to see more clearly what Christ intends to do in us as christians, and how we have to respond to his invitation.

We are members of the mystical body because Christ himself communicates his life to us, empowering us to move and feel in a supernatural way. It is impossible to perform a single salutary act without his grace. It is Christ himself who sustains us with a communication of his Spirit, the sole and eternal principle vivifying and unifying the whole body. The nature of this dependence is so profound and so intimate as to entail a truly ontological bond, uniting the members of the body to the Head. Those who are incorporated into Christ belong to Christ, are Christ's members. By the very fact that it is the same life which is given to the members, they are ontologically united amongst themselves. Because of the vivifying action given by Christ, each member has an influence on the others; all sustain one another and contribute to the well being, development and perfection of the entire body. This is why we need one another; we are destined to complement one another as members of the same body.

However, this body has a characteristic of its own. Each member, though vivified by the same principle, Christ's life, retains his own personality. Although the fingers of one's hand are vivified by the same principle, they are mere physical members of a physical body.

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The members of the mystical body, on the other hand, are truly made alive in the depths of their being by the life of Christ, yet they remain individual persons. This is possible because the communication of the supernatural life does not destroy the personality, does not suppress what is typical of each one of us as persons, but penetrates to the depths of our human existence and confers on it a new supernatural value. The life of Christ reaches down to the deepest roots of our own personality, transforming and ennobling it, animating it from within. This is why each one of us, while receiving Christ's life, is enabled to offer to Christ what belongs to each of us as individuals. Our membership in Christ signifies that we belong to Christ, that we live in Christ and that Christ lives in us. However, the fact that we retain our own personalities signifies that we are not mere recipients of the divine presence. We can, and must, freely and consciously activate our existence in Christ by contributing that which is proper to our unique person.

It follows, then, that each one of us fulfils his role in the mystical body insofar as he freely and consciously corresponds to the internal action of grace. A further consequence is that each one of us must participate in Christ's life in a way that corresponds to the dignity of the human person, freely accepting the gift which is being given, and consciously conforming the self to it. We are each of us given the power to contribute all that is our unique possession, so that Christ himself can live and bring to fulfilment in himself those human possibilities that he could not live out in his single and individual human nature.

For, in becoming man like ourselves, the divine Word subjected himself to the laws deriving from the metaphysical constitution of man. In taking to himself a single and individual human nature, the Word has taken on a human nature which is limited and can and must be completed by the existential perfection of other men. By the very fact that he is an individual human being, no one man can live all the concrete modes in which the specific perfection of human nature can exist; it is only in union with others, a union in which everyone complements the perfections of others, that maximum perfection can be obtained. Each one of us has some personal qualities that others do not have; and even Christ, as an individual man, could not live out all the possibilities of human perfection in his single and individual human nature.

This means, in the concrete, that Christ is the male descendant of a specific human mother, of a definite family and race; that he

possesses a definite biological heredity; that he has definite bodily qualities and characteristics, definite psychic, cognitive and affective dispositions, which are naturally reflected throughout his human life. These specific properties of Christ, though immune from the shadow of moral imperfection because he was not subject to original sin, were not suppressed or eliminated by the hypostatic union, but rather elevated and ennobled. The fact that he was an individual man means, moreover, that he was born and lived during a fixed period of human history, in a specific religious and cultural atmosphere, with his own country, people, and social class. It means that the possibility of immediate and direct social contacts between Christ when living on earth and other men, was restricted to those which he was able to have in the concrete situations and circumstances in which he lived, and with that limited number of persons who approached him.

But if the Word has assumed hypostatically an individual human nature which was limited, this is because he intended, by living on earth, by dying on the cross and rising on the third day, to redeem mankind and give to all the members of the human race his own life, so that he could live in them what he could not live in his own human nature. In fact, what is unique in the case of the God-Man is that, by making men sharers in his life, he lives not only in his own individual human nature, but also, through the communication of his divine life, in those persons who freely open themselves to his grace, and thus become members of his mystical body. Therefore, it is obviously the prerogative of Jesus Christ, living both in his own human nature and in the persons who constitute the Mystical Body, that he can live all the concrete modes in which, according to the designs of divine providence, human perfection exists.

In this way, Christ gathers into one the entire assembly of men vivified and united by him, to constitute the total Christ, Head and members, the Church. And in this sense, the human perfection of the total Christ, as well as the glory offered to God by humanity, is fuller and richer than the perfection of the individual man Jesus Christ, and of the glory that he offers to God. This is the real meaning of liturgy: that, in union with Christ, we offer to God a fuller glory; because it is not only the man Jesus Christ, but with him all the other members of the human race, offering their own persons so that Christ can live in them what he could not live in his own human nature; to this end he wishes to use our hearts, our minds, our tongues and our bodies to glorify God the Father.

This understanding of the mystery of the mystical body diminishes not at all our esteem for the sublime perfection of the humanity of Christ. On the contrary, it shows how God loves man, since he chose to submit himself to the law of human limitation, and thus to render men capable of becoming members of his own Body. In his submission is revealed not only the depth of his love, but also the sublime dignity of man and the essence of our vocation as christians. 'It is now no longer I that live, it is Christ who lives in me'. 'I fill up in my flesh what is lacking in the sufferings of Christ'.<sup>1</sup> To think in these terms is to begin to see what God has done for us and what our vocation is and the extent of our responsibility: Christ intends to be in our persons what he could not be in his own limited human nature. He asks us to lend him our own personalities; and we can freely accept or not, freely respond or not. Each one of us must offer Christ our person with our unique qualities. We are called to make positive use of all that he has given to us, by shaping it according to his ways: we have to 'put on' Jesus Christ<sup>2</sup>; we have to share his sentiments; we have to participate consciously in his life; and we should know that the more we conform our lives to his, the more we develop our own personality; and that, as soon as we depart from his life, our personality ceases to be fulfilled.

There are implications here concerning our ways of dealing with others; because when we become aware what it means to be members of his body, we become aware, too, of the fact that people are expecting something from us. The more we unite ourselves to Christ, the more others benefit from this union. They benefit first of all in a hidden way, because the communication of the divine life is something which, though real, is invisible. Similarly with regard to the external apostolate, it is Christ himself who wishes to make use of our persons to approach others. People have the right to find in us the living Christ, not the personality of someone who does not live in union with Christ. They must find in us a person who has really made an effort to conform himself to Christ. It is only when they meet Christ in us that they will open themselves to his grace. Christ intends to make use of all our human qualities, just as he lived with the whole of his own affectivity, his heart, his mind; he intends us to do the same, but for him. He wants us to meet others with the same warmth that he had himself.

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<sup>1</sup> Gal 2, 20; Col 1, 24.

<sup>2</sup> Cf Rom 13, 14; Gal 3, 27.

It is in this sense precisely that Christ wishes to prolong and extend his own life in us. He wants to make use of our heart, our minds, our bodies to communicate himself to others. He wants to live in us now his own life for mankind; he wants to continue his own salvific mission through us. For this reason all christians are called to sanctity, all are called to put on Jesus Christ, to make his attitudes their own. This is the point that the Church makes when she speaks of the vocation of all men to sanctity.

The Lord Jesus, the divine teacher and model of all perfection, taught holiness of life to each of his disciples irrespective of his position in life. 'You, therefore, are to be perfect, even as your heavenly Father is perfect' (Mt. 5, 48). The followers of Christ are called, not in the light of their personal accomplishments, but rather according to his own purpose and grace. They are justified in the Lord Jesus. Through baptism, in faith, we actually become sons of God, sharers in the divine nature; and it is by such participation that we are really made holy.<sup>1</sup>

God, we have said, gives us his divine life without suppressing our individual personality, and this for a dual purpose; first, because it is precisely as persons that we can freely accept this gift and freely respond to it; secondly, because it is in virtue of our personalities that each of us possesses innate qualities no one else has at his command, not even Christ in his own human nature. Accordingly, he wishes to extend his own life by utilizing in each of us these unique qualities. For this reason, all christians are called to holiness and no christian may put a limit on his sanctity; in fact, by force of their baptism, all christians are committed to lay down their lives, if need be, for the sake of Christ.

This same principle, according to which Christ submitted himself to the law of limitation, and now expects from us all that we possess as persons, also explains why there must be diversity in the manner in which we live our lives for Christ. For we also, as individuals, cannot live concomitantly all the richness, all the possibilities open to the human race. If Christ himself did not, we assuredly cannot. Here is the principle of diversity in the following of Christ.

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<sup>1</sup> *Lumen Gentium*, 40.

Christ is the Word incarnate and the Redeemer; and his incarnation was effected by his assuming a human nature; thus he sanctified human nature, and through it, all created things; but he effected redemption by dying on the cross. In the life of Christ, then, we can distinguish two principal aspects; incarnation and redemption. All christians, in the sharing of Christ's life, must live these two facets of it. But because of limitation, it is easily understood how some may be called by Christ, who desires to extend and prolong his own life in man, to emphasise one facet over the other. Herein lies the qualifying distinction between the laity and the religious. The laity are those who are called in their living to reflect predominantly – though not exclusively – the incarnational aspect of Christ's life. This vocation and responsibility of the laity, to sanctify the world and to live its human created values, is frequently re-iterated in the conciliar documents. The positive use of all the riches of human nature is the meaning of the lay vocation. We see it typified in marriage, where husband and wife are called to a mutual giving of self entailing the use of all the human faculties of love. By developing the entire human endowment, as well as all the faculties they have received, the laity must bring Christ into the world; they must imbue the world, the professions, every possible human activity, with the Spirit of Christ. This is their positive engagement in life. At the same time, since they are christians, they cannot dispense themselves from the cross. This is why the Church repeatedly insists that all christians, even the laity, must bear the sign of the suffering Christ, so as to witness to the redeeming Christ in their lives. However, the prevailing aspect of their living will be the positive duty of bringing to perfection the riches of human nature.

Others are called by Christ to live more predominantly, although not exclusively, the redeeming aspect: to follow him more closely, and therefore to abandon all things so as to share more intimately his redeeming sacrifice for the sake of others: that is, for the mystical body, which is the Church. These are the religious. By God's will, then, the orientation of the life of the religious is towards the sacrificial element present in Christ's life. Yet, as the Council states, this sacrifice is not to be conceived as an end in itself, but rather as an expression of that love of Christ which led him to lay down his life for the sake of mankind. Religious are to keep constantly before their minds that, though their lives are marked most specially with the sign of the cross, they should be inspired by a positive love, the love of our Lord himself; and that this love should lead them, in

union with him, to offer the whole of their lives for the sake of others. This is the keynote of the decree *Perfectae Caritatis*:

Theirs it is to follow Christ, virginal and poor (cf Mt 8, 20; Lk 9, 58), who, by his obedience even to the death on the cross (cf Phil 2, 8), redeemed and sanctified mankind. Their compelling motive is that love which the holy Spirit pours out in their hearts (cf Rom 5,5), so that they live more and more for Christ and for his Body which is the Church (cf Col 1, 24). And the more fervent their union with Christ in this gift of self which involves the whole of their living, the richer the Church's life and the more vital and fruitful her apostolate.<sup>1</sup>

### *The Vow of Virginité*

It is exactly for this reason that the essence of religious life, and the expression of this donation of self contained in the three vows, reaches down to the very roots of living; and that the vow of religious chastity is the essential and primary element of religious life. It is in their virginité that religious centre all their love on Christ our redeemer and, in the fullness of this love, pledge to follow him radically and totally in his salvific mission. Virginité is thus an offering of self made out of love for Christ; it entails a sacrifice of something vitally interwoven with life itself. This offering is made in union with the sacrifice which Christ himself made of his own life, not as an end in itself but for the sake of others. It follows also that religious will adopt that tenor of life which Christ chose for himself and 'share in the poverty of Christ who, though he was rich, for our sake became poor, so that by his poverty we might become rich (cf 2 Cor 8, 9; Mt 8, 20)'.<sup>2</sup> In function of the same gift of love, 'religious follow the example of Jesus Christ who came to do the will of his Father (cf Jn 4, 34; 5, 30; Heb 10, 7; Ps 39, 9), and "taking the form of a slave" (Phil 2, 7) learned obedience in the school of suffering (cf Heb 5, 8)'.<sup>3</sup> The theme, then, of the conciliar teaching on the religious life is this total donation of self and radical following of Christ the Redeemer.

<sup>1</sup> *Perfectae Caritatis*, 1.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, 13.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, 14.

Numerous scriptural texts indicate the kind of union which exists between Christ and those whom he has called to follow him. To follow Christ means to commit oneself to him, to surrender oneself to him, heart and spirit, and to cling to him. Religious life is the following of Christ in the total and effective donation of oneself to him. It is an answer to his call. Hence, the decree, before dealing with the vows, seeks to provide a unifying concept of religious life: that is, a life of donation to a person:

Members of all institutes must bear in mind that their profession of the evangelical counsels was made before all else in answer to God's call, in order to live for him alone, not only by being dead to sin (cf Rom 6, 11), but also by renouncing the world. They have, in fact, handed over the whole of their lives to his service; which is indeed a special kind of consecration and a more complete expression of it.<sup>1</sup>

In line with the biblical concept of the following of Christ, and the theological principles underlying the doctrine of the mystical body, the Church has explicitly pointed out to us wherein lies the essence of the religious life. Instead of describing religious life in juridical terms, the Church has deliberately stressed, by the use of several scriptural quotations, the idea that the religious life is a donation to a person, the adorable Person of our Lord, in order that he may continue in us his own life, his redeeming activity for mankind. The Council thereby offers us a much more positive and inspiring doctrine on religious life. It is a description, not a definition – a vivid description of a state of life which leads many people to follow Christ in answer to a call from him, to adopt the type of life Christ chose for himself. It is precisely because of a personal love that religious adopt the ways of Christ and share his manner of life.

It must be admitted that, at times, in religious life and training, the emphasis is more on the observance of rules than upon dedication to the person of our Lord. Unconsciously, even with the best of intentions, rules have been personified at the expense of the person of Christ; whereas it is in him that religious life is rooted and founded. As Christians, religious already participate in his divine life; but by a special invitation, they are asked to share in a pre-eminent way in his redemptive life, responding freely to his call to adopt his manner of life out of love. It is only when religious accept the doc-

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid*, 5.



trine given by the Church, which regards their lives in terms of personal donation to our Lord, that they will assume a manner of life that can be expressed in the rule in a vivifying rather than a legalistic way. Let us make a comparison. If we meet an acquaintance who has fallen in love with someone, we not only sense but see a definite change in his behaviour. This transformation is not caused by an external imposition of rule; it is the result of the personal donation to another, by means of which the other is led to adopt a manner of life befitting this total donation. Those in love do adopt some kind of rule, a new line of conduct: they behave in a manner quite different from before; and this is a telling expression of what they have in their hearts. In the same vein the Church insists that religious constitutions and rules must express the theology of religious life in biblical terms, so as to offer to religious and to those who aspire to religious life a vivid image of it as a consecration to the adorable Person of our Lord, such as can be aptly expressed in the rules and customs.

The primary emphasis, then, is always on the following of Christ, a participation from within; all christians are called upon to adopt the attitudes of Jesus Christ, but in the case of religious the invitation is to a more intimate participation in his redeeming sacrifice for mankind:

Their status as God's servants should be for them a spur and an incentive in the work of the virtues, particularly humility and obedience, fortitude and chastity, by which they share in Christ's self-despoilment (cf Phil 2, 7-8) and his life in the Spirit (cf Rom 8, 1-13).<sup>1</sup>

This self-despoilment is the expression of the total surrender, made out of love, by which a person offers in sacrifice to God all that he is, without retaining anything of himself.

This sacrifice made out of love has an ecclesial value. It is only when they open their hearts to the love of others that religious will be able to live among others with that intensity of love which is required of them. The more intensely they live this sacrifice for the sake of others, the more their hearts will be free to love all men, as the Council declares when dealing with consecrated virginity. The fact that religious sacrifice is something which is deeply connected with life does not mean that they have to sacrifice life and love. On

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<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

the contrary, if they are to live the vow of virginity according to its richest implications, and by the help of God's grace focus all their love on the person of Christ, they will share more abundantly in Christ's virginal love for men, and will thus be given the possibility of a new love for mankind that is distinguished by its universality, and at the same time by its intensity and ardour:

... they must leave all things for Christ (Mk 10, 28) and follow him (cf Mt 19, 21) as the one thing necessary (cf Lk 10, 42). They will listen to his words (cf Lk 10, 39) and be anxious about his business (cf 1 Cor 7, 32).<sup>1</sup>

By the use of these scriptural texts, the Council strives constantly to rivet the attention on the essential meaning and the implication of this total commitment for the sake of the kingdom of God. It is Christ himself who calls, and in response, religious should leave all things for his sake. Theirs should be the response of love to an invitation of love:

They will seek God above all things and him alone; and in them, contemplation, by means of which they cleave to him in mind and heart, will be wedded to the apostolic love which empowers them to share his redemptive work and spread God's kingdom.<sup>2</sup>

All of these terms are evangelical: 'to leave all things', 'to cleave to him', 'to follow him as the one thing necessary', 'to be anxious about his business'. Religious of their very nature are to be associated with the work of redemption. Religious life is a personal commitment, a total surrender, an adhesion to him, in force of which religious really share what is his, become solicitous of what is his, and therefore share his apostolic love. The Council speaks with purpose not of apostolic activity, but of apostolic love, which means much more than mere activity. Activity will be the portion of those who are called by Christ himself to follow him in institutes which are engaged in the active apostolate, and apostolic love will find its expression in apostolic activity; but the root of all activity must lie in apostolic love.

The Council, prior to speaking of anything else, even the vows, concentrates our attention on this personal surrender to Christ:

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

They will seek and love before all else the God who loved us first (cf 1 Jn 4, 10), and will strive in all circumstances to cherish a life hidden with Christ in God (cf Col 3, 3). This life and love is the source and stimulus of the love of one's neighbour for the world's salvation and the building up of the Church . . . they must be resolute and unwearied in fostering a prayerful spirit and in prayer itself . . . they will have the holy scriptures always at hand, so that by reading them and meditating upon them they may acquire the high privilege of knowing Christ Jesus (Phil 3, 8).<sup>1</sup>

The vows, as we shall see later on, are the expression of the way in which religious live and manifest their total adherence to him. Religious life is, in substance, a response of love to the one who has loved us first. This donation finds its primary expression in the vow of virginity, by which we surrender ourselves to him to be totally his, and which in turn will lead us to share his life. Therefore virginity in religious life has a primary function; it contains in germ the other vows. Poverty and obedience are a consequence of this total donation to Christ, because such a giving of self to him involves a sharing in his manner of life. He was poor, he was obedient to the death of the cross.

The primary function of religious chastity can be better understood by considering the analogy of the marriage vows. Marriage presupposes the donation of one person to another. When a young woman goes to the altar and says, 'I will', she gives herself; she commits herself to another person. And by this giving of self to her husband she will share his life. She will follow him wherever he might have to go; for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health. So it is with the vow of chastity: the religious says 'Yes' to Christ. It is obvious, then, that the religious must be poor and obedient, because Christ was poor and obedient. The texts used here by the Council are practically all taken from instances in the gospels in which there is a response to the invitation of Christ. Specifically, they refer to Martha, Mary, Peter, John, and others of the apostles. 'To cleave to him', 'to cling to him', 'to share his life', 'to follow him', – these words remind us in a graphic manner, and help us to understand, how people who have been face to face with our Lord, who have seen him and heard his invitation, actually

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<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

did follow him; they abandoned all things in order to be at his side, in order to share his apostolic mission. His invitation is an invitation to share his life; and the life of Christ cannot be separated from his salvific mission. The religious donation of self to Christ cannot be conceived primarily in terms of personal sanctification. It is a donation to Christ in order to share his life, to be united to him and thus to collaborate with him in his apostolic mission. It is true that personal holiness must follow from living this kind of life; but the Council stresses rather the union of religious with Christ and their association with him in his salvific work.

What is essential in this association with our Lord, and the participation in his apostolic mission, is the redeeming and sacrificial aspect of religious life. Though it does not seem to be exactly popular these days to use the terms sacrifice and holocaust in speaking of what is proper to religious life, the Council has deliberately repeated such phrases because they indicate the characteristic note of a love which finds its strength and its fulfillment in this donation of self; it is this self-giving which leads religious to share the love of the Lord who laid down his life for the sake of mankind. Expressions such as 'spécial consecration', 'offering', 'sacrifice' and 'self-despoilment' are indications enough of the essential quality of the love enshrined in consecrated virginity. These terms are in no way associated with gloom or pessimism. On the contrary, they should help to a deeper understanding of that richness of love which makes a person generous enough to lay down his life for others, and to reach that fulfillment of the personality which is truly christian. 'No one has a greater love than he who is ready to lay down his life for the sake of others'.<sup>1</sup> So the Church says of her religious:

The more fervent their union with Christ in this gift of self which involves the whole of their living, the richer the Church's life and the more vital and fruitful her apostolate.<sup>2</sup>

In other words, it is chastity for the sake of the kingdom of heaven, by which we freely and with joy offer our Lord that which is so precious, so valuable and so intimately connected with human life, which opens our hearts to a greater love. This sacrifice is meant to open and dilate the heart, not to desiccate or to harden it.

<sup>1</sup> Cf I Jn 3, 16; Jn 15, 13.

<sup>2</sup> *Perfectae Caritatis*, 1.

It is not love as such that religious are asked to sacrifice in their religious chastity, but simply one aspect of it: marital love, which of its nature denotes possession; for marriage demands the mutual self-giving which essentially involves the possession of another. Virginity, on the contrary, is the total surrender of self to Christ, which excludes every aspect of possessive love. This is why, as the Council says:

The chastity which religious profess for the sake of the kingdom of heaven (cf Mt 19, 12) . . . sets free a man's affections in an unique way (cf 1 Cor 7, 32-35), so that he may be the more set on fire with love for God and for all men.<sup>1</sup>

It is by the vow of virginity that we participate in Christ's apostolic love, and possess that freedom evocative of the spontaneity and warmth which typifies our Lord's dealing with men. His way of acting and dealing with people was to give himself totally to them; the gospels show him approaching people without any hesitation, and establishing with them a relationship of genuine fondness, more human in its warmth because of his own life of virginity. He himself shows how, by sacrificing one aspect of human life, we can gain another, more perfect. For this reason, the Council, when it declares that religious chastity frees the hearts of men, goes on to point out the need of fraternal love, by indicating the bond between chastity and community life.

The need for mutual love, and its authenticity on the spiritual plane and in religious life, has not always been rightly stressed; with the result that many generous souls have been deprived of a right and sometimes necessary assistance in their ascent to God, one which must certainly lead to a richer knowledge and a livelier love of the Lord. Because of our physical and psychic, our natural and supernatural constitution, we not only can, but must, cultivate Christ's own relationships with other men who are also called to live their belief in the communion of saints. In these relationships, a man can realize the plan of God and can love him who lives in all his creatures, but especially in the members of his Mystical Body. So the christian enriches himself through that knowledge and experience which make him more capable of knowing God himself more intimately and loving him more intensely; for the more extensive and compre-

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

hensive one's knowledge and experience, the greater one's capacity to know and love God.

Hence, even those who, at the divine call, consecrate themselves to those forms of religious life based on a more complete solitude, with its consequent sacrifice of opportunities for establishing those knowing and loving relationships with their fellow men, which normally depend on physical proximity and presence, do so with the conviction that the God-given capacity to know him and love him more closely in solitude and silence enriches their own lives and, through his love, the lives of their fellowmen.

This is not to say that social contacts will not involve perils and obstacles in man's ascent to God; in fact they frequently do. Every christian, and especially the religious, needs a vigilant prudence and discretion in order to regulate his relations with others in accordance with God's will. True love will always demand the self-control which is achieved only by mortification.

When the decree comes to deal with that common life and love which religious are to foster amongst themselves, the phrase 'fraternal love' is preferred to the more usual word 'friendship'. The current use of this word often fails to convey the warmth and the depth and the freedom from possessiveness intended in the Council's use of the phrase fraternal love. It connotes, rather, the relationship ideally existing between members of a family where the bond of love is much stronger than that of friendship. Religious should love others with that warmth and strength that exists among all the members of a family. We know that there can be degrees of understanding and love, even among the members of a family. Sometimes, one brother and a sister, or perhaps two brothers, can find a special rapport and sympathy with each other, possibly because of closeness of age or a similarity of temperament. Without excluding other members of the family from the warmth of their love, they accept the fact that they are closer and can help each other more than they can the other members of their family. Yet theirs is not a possessive love.

When we consider religious chastity in this positive way, in terms of a total donation of self to the person of our Lord, and therefore to all that is his, we come to realize how consecrated virginity is intrinsically connected with the apostolic mission. This is also, of course, the primary reason why the western Church insists on the celibacy of her priests; for it is indeed most fitting that those whose primary function is to offer the sacrifice of the cross on the altar, and to act on behalf of Christ, should participate in this sacrifice which

Christ the virgin offers to his Father. By so doing, as the Council says:

They more easily hold fast to him with undivided hearts. They devote themselves in him and through him more freely to the service of God and men. They more readily minister to his kingdom and to the work of heavenly regeneration, and thus become more able to exercise fatherhood in Christ.<sup>1</sup>

This intimate union with Christ in virginity reveals more and more the beauty of that human love which expresses itself in sacrifice for others. Religious chastity, seen in this perspective, gives us a truer vision of the riches of the apostolate. Instead of creating a barrier between religious and their fellow-men, it should foster in them a readiness to reach out to others, with the same attitudes that Christ himself had. In our contacts with others, the dominant emphasis should be the donation of self, not the possession of another. Whatever in the life of a religious has to do with self-satisfaction does not correspond to this ideal of the love of Christ. It is by responding freely and fully to the gracious calling of Christ, by joyfully living their sacrifice of virginity with all its radical consequences and implications, by loving Christ and all those who are called to be the members of his mystical body, that religious will re-enact, represent and perpetuate in the life of the Church the redeeming love of our Saviour.

It is in this sense, that through the ages and once again in the second Vatican Council, the Church has spoken of the religious life as being a special consecration to Christ, and a closer and more intimate following of his life and love. And this is also the reason why the Council speaks of the religious life, of consecrated virginity, as a precious gift of grace which effects the full flowering of baptism. In this sense, the vow is compared to physical martyrdom. So the Council says:

By martyrdom the disciple is transformed into the image of his Master, of him who freely accepted death for the world's salvation, and perfects that image even to the shedding of his blood. Though few are presented with this opportunity, nevertheless all must be prepared to confess Christ before men and to follow him along the way of the cross, amid the persecutions which will never be wanting to the Church. The

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<sup>1</sup> *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 16.

holiness of the Church is also fostered in a special way by the observance of the many counsels proposed in the Gospel by our Lord to his disciples. Outstanding among them is that precious gift of divine grace given by the Father to some (Mt 19, 11; 1 Cor 7, 7), so that by virginity or celibacy they can more easily devote their entire selves to God alone with undivided heart (1 Cor 7, 32-34). This perfect chastity, accepted on behalf of the kingdom of heaven, has always been held in particular honour by the Church as being a sign of charity and a stimulus to charity, and also a special source of spiritual fertility in the world.<sup>1</sup>

Here the Church offers us the answer to a problem which arises out of psychological fear: we are all called to martyrdom, or rather, we all have to be prepared to accept martyrdom. At the same time, only a few Christians are in fact called to martyrdom. They are the ones who have been given a special gift, a gift God is free to impart to whomsoever he desires. Similarly God can ask for the sacrifice of something comparable to martyrdom, something so intrinsically connected with life that its sacrifice presupposes and requires a special gift of grace, divinely given for the sake of the Church and for mankind as a whole. It is natural that we should instinctively seek to escape from the sacrifice of virginity as we would from that of martyrdom. Psychologically, it is exceedingly difficult to be ready to accept the implications of either gift. This is why virginity, like martyrdom, is to be held as something precious and to be preserved with reverential care. It is not primarily a question of renunciation, but rather of association with Christ, in order to love progressively more and more fully. This is the only road to that psychological and affective maturity which the Council teaches as being necessary for a fruitful life under the vow of virginity.<sup>2</sup> The grace of virginity, like every grace in the Church, entails a responsibility; it is given for the sake of the kingdom of heaven, as the Lord's parable of the talents teaches. The maturity which this virginity is designed to confer is that of the completed growth of Christ: that his mystical body might be proportioned to his mature manhood.

### *The Vow of Poverty*

The theology of the vow of poverty, as set out in the decree

<sup>1</sup> *Lumen Gentium*, 42.

<sup>2</sup> *Perfectae Caritatis*, 12.



*Perfectae Caritatis*, has its roots in sacred scripture; poverty is one of the fundamental teachings of the gospel. The essence of this teaching is that men should be aware of their total dependence on God; they are radically poor because all that they have comes from him. For this reason there is an intrinsic relationship between the spirit of poverty and actual poverty, and it is to this relationship that Christ refers in his beatitudes. Poor people, the actually poor, stretch out their hands and ask when they are in need. They know that they have to do it and they do it. Consequently, they develop that modesty and humility which is at times difficult for the christian to acquire: the acceptance and admission of their poverty, of their dependence on others. This was the significance of the mendicant friars; begging was one of their distinctive characteristics, which was meant to develop this sense of dependence. One who is rich, and very often many christians, not excluding religious, are in contact with the affluent, does not have the same sense of dependence. The rich know that because of their money they have practically everything at their disposal. They know that people want to lean upon them, want to cater to their desires. The more wealthy a man is, the more will he feel sure of himself; for he knows that he will always be surrounded by those who show him deference. Money can buy a great deal, even the heart of man. So our Lord points out the need for actual poverty; or rather he stresses the relationship that exists between actual poverty and the spiritual poverty that should typify the life of every creature. Religious life, which of its very nature is meant to establish a deeper bond between man and God, demands a growth in this attitude of loving union with God; for dependence can and must be a loving dependence.

Poverty, then, is first an expression of our submission to God, of our religious attitude towards God as human beings. We depend on him, we repudiate any rash confidence in ourselves, we rely entirely on his mercy; for we know that he takes care of us as a loving Father. Further, he bestows on us that supernatural life of which Christ is the fountain and origin. Our life of union with our Lord is based entirely on what is given to us. We would not be members of his mystical body but for his action and activity in us. As christians and members of his Body, we should feel increasingly this sense of dependence; we are members of the Church in as much as he constantly floods us with his own grace, his divine life. He gives me life; all that I am is his; I become a member of his body; therefore I am his. All that I have belongs to him, to the extent that it is

his will to make use of the personal qualities that he has given me.

This sense of belonging to Christ, which is a deep and constant awareness that we are deliberately offering ourselves to him in the depths of our being, enables us to focus our attention down from the concept of poverty in general to that actual poverty which is a definitive characteristic of the religious state. Religious poverty is a disposition of mind and heart by which we recognise that we belong wholly to Christ; and it is this disposition which enables us to understand that poverty is giving. The fullness of poverty means that the religious has reached the stage at which he does not possess anything at all; he has given all that he has, and yet he can go on giving, because Christ constantly offers him more; and he, in his poverty, constantly gives back to Christ. The religious is really poor when he gives all that is given to him for the sake of the kingdom of God and his glory. The practice of poverty is simply the logical consequence of this disposition. The religious makes use of the material goods which God gives him, and which are necessary for his apostolate, with a complete sense of detachment.

Poverty, then, is an integral part of that total donation of self to Christ: we are impelled by love to give in return everything we have received; we consider nothing as our own. Anything that was our own is now his. This applies particularly to personal gifts and qualities, much more than to exterior and material things, because nothing is so closely connected with myself than myself. So religious poverty becomes a readiness to be at his disposal by being available to and at the disposal of others. To be poor as Christ is poor is to be moved entirely by his Spirit: to have no anchor anywhere, to be ready to move, to go anywhere, to respond to any call. As a direct consequence of their following of Christ, his poor will have no home because they need to be at the disposal of others. To follow him means to lead the life of a vagrant, not for its own sake, but to be always at the disposal of others in view of Christ's salvific mission. Religious are called to be the living members of his body in whom he wishes to act, in whom he wishes to love, through whom he wishes to make himself felt. Just as religious chastity is a sacrifice of certain authentic human values which is made for the kingdom of God, so it is with poverty. Material poverty is voluntarily sought in order to follow him and to participate in his mission. Thus the element of sacrifice contained in this availability to others, in this readiness to give of all that we may have, is that which unites the

religious to our Lord and assures his participation in Christ's redeeming activity.

The decree, drawing on the Second Letter of St Paul to the Corinthians and the eighth chapter of St Matthew's Gospel, states that voluntary poverty

gives the religious a share in the poverty of Christ, who, though he was rich, for our sake became poor, so that by his poverty we might become rich (cf 2 Cor 8, 9; Mt 8, 20).<sup>1</sup>

Those who are members of his Mystical Body, because of their union with him, move about with him and are moved by his Spirit, and participate in this giving of self to others, so that others may become rich with Christ's own life. He chose for himself a special manner of life. He was not rich, nor did he have a home; religious, who imitate Christ more closely, must share in this actual poverty of our Redeemer. Religious poverty, then, cannot be confined or reduced simply to dependence or to a particular way of using material possessions. So the Council insists that religious, as persons more intimately united to Christ, should *live* as poor men. Here again is the intrinsic connection between the spirit of poverty and the actual poverty which is accepted in order to participate in Christ's mission. It is this participation which effectively regulates the quality and the extent of our material poverty. To achieve the ultimate in material poverty, to retire into the desert, or even into the inner city, and live in utter destitution, would have meaning only if this manner of living would achieve the salvific mission of Christ. This is the only safe criterion with regard to our material poverty. In virtue of this criterion the Council states that institutes have a right to possess property, in order to secure the energy and vitality of apostolic work for the spread of God's kingdom. It is in accordance with the same principle that the Council recommends so strongly the avoidance of any semblance of luxury, excessive wealth or the accumulation of property. Within this framework, religious institutes, and individuals, are directed to live like poor people; they will share with one another as poor people do, and they will be trained to work as the poor have to work, so that they earn their living the hard way. It would not be poverty, but infantilism, if religious dependence prevented any individual from being able to stand on his own feet and earn his own living.

<sup>1</sup> Cf *Perfectae Caritatis*, 13.

In practice, then, the Council is directing us to conform our lives more closely to the ideal of the poverty of the gospel: to live with that awareness demanded by our commitment to Christ; to seek, not a life of leisured regularity, but a life of hard work which brings us in fact closer to those who are poor; content that whatever we earn should not come to us as individuals, but to the community and for the extension of the work of the apostolate.

### *The Vow of Obedience*

The theology of religious obedience is set out clearly by the Council in the decree *Perfectae Caritatis*, section 14. Obedience is first considered from the point of view of the subject, or more correctly of the person who has committed himself to Christ in his manner of thinking, acting and loving. A double principle is unfolded here: the readiness of the religious to sacrifice himself, and secondly, his acceptance of a positive responsibility in contributing to the success of all that his institute is called upon to do in collaborating with Christ in his salvific mission. Obedience is then considered from the point of view of the superior, that is, of the one who has been given the task of holding God's place in the community. It is only possible to reach a balanced view of the complex problems of obedience by considering these two parts in their dynamic relationship to each other.

It is significant that the principles of theology of the religious life, as formulated in sections one, five and six of *Perfectae Caritatis*, and the treatment of the vows of virginity and poverty are brought together in the teaching of the decree on obedience; so that here we have a fully integrated view of the apostolic dimensions of the religious life. The explicit foundation of this teaching is contained in the classic pauline texts on the mission of Christ:

Have this mind among yourselves, which was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him a name which is above every name, that at the name of

Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth.<sup>1</sup>

In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death, and he was heard for his godly fear. Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered; and being made perfect he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him, being designated by God a high priest after the order of Melchisedech.<sup>2</sup>

But God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us . . . therefore as sin came into the world through one man and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all men sinned . . . then as one man's trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one man's act of righteousness leads to acquittal and a life for all men. For as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so by one man's obedience many will be made righteous.<sup>3</sup>

Our attention is therefore directed to the mission of Christ and to the way in which he fulfilled his mission. He willed to redeem mankind, that is to say, all men, men fallen because of the disobedience of Adam; and they were to be redeemed, saved, through the obedience of the last Adam, Christ; for though he was God, he made himself a man, and did not think he was losing anything thereby; and all this out of love for men. It is on the same principle that the mission of the Church is based. It is only by accepting in faith, and because of faith, what Christ has taught us both by way of teaching and example, that we in our turn can contribute to the salvific mission of the Church. This mission is the continuation of what he himself has done, and what we, as members of the mystical body sharing in his life, called to follow him and to share his manner of living, should do. The life of the Church can only increase, in so far as the members, totally united to Christ, really share in his redeeming sacrifice out of love for mankind, thus manifesting that total submission to God which once man denied God.

Today, there is much talk about *kenosis*, and rightly so; but unfortunately, for many the idea means nothing more than going out

<sup>1</sup> Phil 2, 5-9.

<sup>2</sup> Heb 5, 7-10.

<sup>3</sup> Rom 5, 8; 12, 18-19.

and meeting the poor. There is a lack of understanding of its real meaning and of its implication.

The *kenosis* or self-despoilment of Christ, which religious are called upon to share by their obedience, is that total readiness to sacrifice oneself, to abandon one's own will and one's own opinion, according to the pattern of Christ, who was ready to take the form of a servant in order to prove his submission to the Father, and thus to redeem sinners in the fulness of his love. He expects from us the same readiness to sacrifice ourselves; because it is through this sacrifice, made out of love, that redemption is brought about. This love is a disinterested love, the source of the creativeness which will lead us to offer to the Church all the talents that God has given us, so that we may share effectively in Christ's salvific mission, and become productive in our apostolate.

The humble submission to superiors in the spirit of faith and love for God's will, which the Council calls for from religious, is, at one and the same time, the responsible and mature collaboration which we must bring to the work of the apostolate. The religious is asked to bring his powers of intellect and will, his gifts of nature and of grace to bear upon the execution of the commands and the fulfilment of the tasks laid upon him, realizing that he is contributing to the building up of Christ's body according to the divine plan. In this way, religious obedience, far from lowering the dignity of the human person, leads it to maturity by extending to it the freedom of the children of God. This obedience, which demands a total surrender of self in the following of Christ, is diametrically opposed to passivity, idleness or immaturity. It fosters and stimulates responsibility; it involves a deep attachment to God's will and to his mission, one which clearly necessitates the detachment from self-will and self-love.

The chief defect in religious obedience, from which all the others flow, is a lack of responsibility. This often shows itself in a pusillanimity in giving. If we are timid, we will never give, we will never be poor and we will never love. True responsibility in obedience demands that we make our offering with a generosity that enables us to sacrifice our minds and our wills, if there is something in need of alteration in what we offer. Where this attitude prevails in religious obedience, the subject offers to his superiors much that is worthwhile, and much that will be accepted. Future sacrifices will be reduced to a minimum, because the religious will already have made the radical sacrifice at the very outset, the sacrifice which has opened

his heart and introduced into his life a completely new dimension: God's own mind which supplies for the defects of human thinking, his own heart which supplies for the defects of human loving. This is why, in the norms for implementing the decree, it is stated that subjects must contribute positively and earnestly to the renewal of the religious life, and to everything that is activated in their institute. The insistence on this conscious collaboration flows from the theological principle that those who have a vocation to a specific institute are made sharers of the grace of the founder of that institute, though not in the same way as the founder. If members of the institute faithfully respond to the graces of their vocation, and take the road mapped out by the founder, God's grace will be there to ensure a deeper insight into their vocation and all the implications of the founder's original inspiration. In their fidelity to their vocation, which has its origin in the action of the holy Spirit on the founder, the presence of the same Spirit will become visible in their attitudes as members of the institute, and in the way in which they contribute to the vigour of its life and activity.

In the light of these fundamental conceptions concerning religious obedience, the Council goes on to describe the function of religious superiors and the relationship which exists between them and those entrusted to their care:

As for superiors, who will be called upon to give an account of the souls committed to their charge (cf Heb 13, 17), they will show themselves docile to the will of God in fulfilling their duty, and will exercise their authority in the spirit of service for the brethren in a way that will express the love God has for them. In governing, they will treat those who are subject to them with due respect for the human person and as children of God, anxious to lead them to a submission that is freely made. In particular, they will grant them the liberty due to them with regard to the sacrament of penance and spiritual direction. They will so treat the brethren that they co-operate with positive and responsible obedience in undertaking tasks and acting on their own initiative. Therefore, superiors will listen willingly to the brethren and will seek their co-operation for the good of the institute and the Church, though without detriment to their right in authority to decide and to command what is to be done.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Perfectae Caritatis*, 14.

The superior is to love the brethren as God loves them: the emphasis is on the charity with which God loves each individual human being. Authority is given to some members of an institute in order that they may hold God's place. That is, they are to be living instruments in the hands of God, so that, in loving union with him, they may enable their subjects to experience and to understand God's loving care: not simply his authority, but primarily and principally his loving care. Wherever the Council documents speak of the superior-subject relationship (whether it is with regard to bishops and their priests, or pastors with the faithful) they emphasize and underline what is the essence of God's dealing with men; it is love. In the new law, the master-servant, creator-creature relationship, typical of the old covenant, is transformed by Christ's own teaching and example:

You call me Master and Lord, and you say well, for so I am. If, therefore, I, the Lord and Master, have washed your feet, you ought also to wash the feet of one another.<sup>1</sup>

In this context, authority can only be exercised 'in a spirit of service for the brethren'. God's love finds its expression in his concern and care, his attention and his providence for each individual human being. Each person has unique qualities given by God himself, who wants to make use of these qualities to obtain a free and loving response. God gives life, and fosters the growth of life. He provides all the means for this growth; he stimulates the spontaneous growth of the human person, drawing out of each one the best that he can give. He never destroys the qualities he has given to us; he wishes them to blossom forth so that they may bear fruit.<sup>2</sup> At times, of course, God prunes the tree, but only that it may bear fruit. This is the way in which God educates, gradually drawing the best out of the heart of man. This is the work of formation; God does not expect his children to be perfect from the beginning, he knows our poverty and understands our weaknesses. He knows that we are subject to temptation, that we may fall, and that we do fall, and yet he is patient. The reality of God's patience and love is perfectly manifested in the mystery of his Incarnation, in the emptying of himself. He allows himself to be consumed out of love, because it is only by so doing that he gives life. When we are feeble and frail, he comes with

<sup>1</sup> Jn 13, 13-14.

<sup>2</sup> Cf Lk 13, 6-9.



a gentle hand; when we fall, he rescues us with his mercy. He forgives and he forgets; and because he can forget he fosters our response of love.

We see an analogy of God's love in the love of christian parents for their children. In union with the God who gives life, they too give life. They labour for their children, when the children are not aware of it, even when they misunderstand. They continue to give themselves, to spend themselves as their children grow and develop. They do not force. Where there is force, the reaction will be loveless. They leave their children the necessary freedom which is needed for the development of personal responsibility, and therefore for the development of real love. They know how to accept the mistakes of their children, which are made because of inexperience or weakness. In fact, the mistakes serve only to increase the parents' love. This love, God's love, the true parents' love, is strong and demanding, but never harsh. It may necessitate the laying down of precepts at times, it can require the imposition of punishment, but of a sort that will be accepted consciously by the offender, who sees that he has failed and must make up for his transgression. Thus, even when it is manifested in strength, the inspiring force remains always the same, love. Punishment out of love is thus always endurable. A religious superior must be imbued with this same spirit, realizing that the divine grace will help him develop his own union with God along these lines. He finds God only when he responds to these demands of God. God has given him a task to accomplish on his behalf, he says: 'you are holding my place; be faithful to this vocation, look upon me. Derive your inspiration from me, from the way in which I deal with the individual.' The more a superior in his own interior life focusses his attention on God's loving care, the more he will be able to respond to God's invitation. Drawing strength from his own union with God, he will be able to associate himself with God's loving care for others. So the first task of the superior is to contemplate the way in which God himself deals with his children, caring for each one to the extent of sending his only begotten Son. It is in Christ, the revelation of the Father, that this loving attitude becomes patently visible. In contemplating Christ, we see how he draws out, educates men, how patient he is with them. His dealings with man is shown supremely in his education of Peter; or in his conversation with the two disciples on the road to Emmaus. Do we find a single instance in which Christ is harsh with his disciples? From time to time we feel that he gently reproaches them, always with great

amiability, almost with a smile. When they go wrong his gentleness is the only response, perhaps just a glance as we see in the case of Peter. Even after his conscious denial, our Lord did not utter a word of reproach. He turned, and looked upon Peter; and Peter understood, went out and wept bitterly, because he saw in Christ's eyes deep understanding, great mercy, deep love. He became *St Peter* at that moment. He had not been labelled by Christ.

How different the attitude of many religious superiors, who act like the guardian of the law, a policeman or an army officer. Very often this reveals a feeling of insecurity; but this in its turn asks for understanding and compassion. Superiors, too, have their weaknesses and shortcomings, and higher Superiors have to act with them with understanding and love. This principle applies on all levels. Christ's dealings with the Apostles was always intended to widen their spiritual understanding and to increase their love of God and man. In like manner, the concern of religious superiors must not be principally – let alone exclusively – for the material welfare of their subjects. Superiors should, on the contrary, be always concerned for their spiritual growth in Christ. They should be aware all the time that the subjects entrusted to their care are religious who have a divine vocation, a real desire to grow in Christ and a real longing for union with him. Of course, some religious may be young or not yet mature; there will be weaknesses and shortcomings. Yet a superior must be mindful of the fact that God himself is acting in their mind and heart just as he is working in the soul of the superior.

Christ shows his concern for his apostles by coming down to them, by being one of them, with them:

I no longer call you servants because the servant does not know what the Master does; I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you.<sup>1</sup>

Similarly a Superior has to be with the members of his community; he has to be one of them. He must not be afraid of doing so, for this was the Lord's way. He must not think that he will accomplish his task by placing himself on a level above the community and by having a categorical and assertive attitude. Whenever possible he should make a request rather than give an order, and even before making the request he must genuinely seek to discover whether what he requests is God's will. This is why the Council says here that each

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<sup>1</sup> Jn 15, 15.

superior must be docile to God's will, which presupposes and demands that the superior truly empty himself of preconceived ideas, and in humility try to discover what God plans for each individual. This can only be done by a prayerful study of the qualities that are in each religious. The superior should consider the personal vocation of each one of his community; he should try to focus upon the inspirations that God gives to each individual, and to be aware of the responsibility the superior has in making use of these gifts and graces, which are given to each one not only as individuals, but as members of a community which has a function in the Church. It is for the superior to help the individual to develop these gifts as God would have them developed. As the Council says:

A superior should listen willingly to his subjects and encourage them to make a personal contribution to the welfare of the community and the Church.<sup>1</sup>

The function, then, of a superior is that of a person in union with Christ who is to be the inspiring force of a community, the guide who stimulates and co-ordinates the individual efforts towards the goal which is common to the community, the whole institute and the Church itself. The superior is one who unites himself with God and opens his heart to the needs of the individual and of the Church; in listening to others he tries to see what God does in them. By his own humility and meekness he is enabled to perceive God's action in the souls of others.

This humility will assist the superior in making the ultimate decision which is his. The attitudes of service, of openness, of readiness to listen, are not meant to destroy authority. They are meant to foster the free submission to authority, loving submission which will be given by the subject with an open heart. The subjects will thus see and experience God's loving care for them; and they will respond with generosity and the spirit of sacrifice for the sake of the community and the Church.

In conveying a sense of responsibility for the community as a family, the superior must also convey a sense of absolute trust in each individual. It is unfortunate, but true, that many superiors, in dealing with their community, give the impression that they are more concerned with their own reputation before higher superiors than they are with the welfare of their own community, or the indivi-

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<sup>1</sup> *Perfectae Caritatis*, 14.

duals that compose it. They are anxious to be known as successful administrators, or they are determined that there should be no 'trouble' in *their* community. They therefore show a dislike of, or a coolness towards, those members of the community who have been labelled 'difficult'. These attitudes show a narrowness and a lack of a right intention on the part of the superior, which effectively prevents the members of the community from being truly open both towards the superior and the action of the holy Spirit. The community does not exist for the security and well-being of the superior; the superior on the contrary, must be ready for insecurity, uncertainty and suffering for the sake of his community. No member of his community should ever be labelled; it should be made quite clear that any faults or mistakes that have been committed in the past have no bearing on the present subject-superior relationship. It is only in this way that a real atmosphere of confidence can be created, without which the community cannot flourish.

The superior also has to manifest the availability of Christ by being completely and totally at the service of the community. His first duty is to be always available to them.

At the same time, this availability must not be confused with the tendency to think that nothing will be going right unless the superior is managing it personally. The norms for the implementation of the decree are insistent that the principle of subsidiarity should be operating at every level. The individuals who make up the community cannot be responsible unless they are given, each at his own level, fullness of responsibility.

The superior must also accept the fact that there will be members in his community who will be, in so many ways, much more competent than he is. The superior must be in the habit of understanding and relying on this competence. A sense of respect will increase amongst the community for the superior when they see him admitting his own limitations and being open to accepting suggestions. It is in this way that decisions will be based on a wider knowledge, and the bond that exists in the community will be strengthened because of the trust that is shown. Perhaps the chief requirement in a superior is that intuitiveness which flows from spiritual understanding. This is the wisdom of the Spirit, which is the fruit of humility. Love, humility, meekness and service: these were the qualities which Christ asked his apostles to learn from him. They are the strands from which the family bond of the religious community are to be woven; every religious must possess them, but especially superiors.