

THE VOWS

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ACCORDING TO THE *Directives on formation in religious institutes* religious life is rooted in a personal call, a call to which the religious responds by making God the affective centre of his or her life. Religious life is different from the ordinary ways of Christian discipleship, because the religious sets aside divine gifts of spouse, possession, and independence in order more radically to manifest the importance of God and the coming of God's kingdom. Poverty, chastity, and obedience, the document states, are 'the main support of the religious life, since they express in a significant and complete way the evangelical radicalism which characterizes it' [12].¹

During ten years of work in religious formation I have watched a good number of our young people leave the community. Their reasons varied. Many mentioned a need for a relationship with someone who would always be there. Others expressed the need to be away from strong social structures such as family and religious community in order to appropriate their own freedom and adult maturity. A few, very few, said that they just wanted to get a good job, make money and live well. They left because they could not find the love they felt they needed in chastity, the freedom they wanted in obedience, or (though rarely) the life-style they wanted in poverty. Nonetheless, most left with a very positive attitude toward the Society and many have written in the years since their departure to 'keep in touch' and to express gratitude for their years as Jesuits. I often think that religious formation programmes are providing a legion of well trained lay apostles for the Church, even while they form permanent members for their own communities.

On the other hand, many stayed; and I have watched with wonder their development through the long years of formation: through the graces of the Spiritual Exercises renewed in rich and challenging ways across a lifetime, through the excitement of apostolic service, through the disappointments and fears for the future when others, particularly close friends, left the Society, and through discouragement with the Society itself, our humanness and sinfulness which at times becomes all too evident. Not all who stay will be excellent Jesuits, just as not all who have left will make excellent lay apostles. Some lapse into a cynical contentment with mediocrity, at best giving

lip service to the ideals of religious life and of the Society. Others remain chronically bitter at the Society for not being the perfect family or for not bringing about complete justice on earth, or for any number of our all too obvious shortcomings. But the vast majority of those who stay are neither mediocre nor bitter. These men seem to have been able to maintain their idealism in a spirit of humble realism about the human condition. They have been able to find affective vitality in apostolic service and in community; they have been able to give themselves freely to a process of decision-making which is flawed and fallible without feeling either diminished or beaten down; and they can live the poverty of the Society without excessive consumerism on the one hand and without being overburdened by the Society's collective failings in the area of poverty on the other hand. These men have successfully negotiated the important realization that the ideals of the Society of Jesus and of religious life exist in no utopian state but *only* in the limited persons, actions and structures of Jesuits who have great desires yet who have great weaknesses and sinfulness.

Religious life is the unrelenting quest to promote a kingdom which is coming but whose shape we can never fully imagine. The *Directives* say that religious life is radical, and it is, but it is not the radicalism of a single extreme. The radicalism of religious life can be found in the tension of trying to embody, in real persons and in real structures, gospel values which will achieve their fullest expression only after we are dead. To live this tension requires tremendous emotional and spiritual maturity; and it places the religious at the heart of the mystery of the Incarnation.

Ever since Vatican II there has been a tension in religious life between a separation from the world and an insertion into the world. The tension has always been there, particularly for apostolic religious, but it has become more explicit in recent statements about the meaning of religious life and the vows.² This tension is a major thread which runs through the *Directives*' treatment of religious life and the theology of the vows. It generally appears in the form of a balance between the vertical and the horizontal, the vows as pointing to God alone and the vows as defining a relationship to the world around us. For example, the *Directives* say that religious give 'a public witness of separation with regard to "the spirit of the world" (1 Cor 2, 12) and to the behaviour which it involves, and at the same time of a presence to the world in keeping with the "wisdom of God" (1 Cor 2, 7)' [10]. Elsewhere the *Directives* note that religious life is a 'sign of

the future age', as well as a way of 'service to the Kingdom of God' [7]. Religious life is a state whose 'whole existence becomes a continuous worship of God in love' [7] but which 'helps a religious to cooperate in the construction of human society' [12].

The radicalism of religious life and of the vows is precisely in living this tension, in being a presence in the world which builds up the world while simultaneously pointing to the transcendent reality of a kingdom which can never be fully realized until the end of time. This tension is the dangerous rock upon which many young vocations flounder. In the past it was easier. Religious life enhanced separation from the world, and even for specifically apostolic communities the interaction with others was shaped and limited by a culture which shouted separation. Religious life was radically different and obviously so. Like Antony, the 'founder' of religious life, we could always go farther into the desert, farther away from the city. Now, like Antony in his later life, we are being called back to the city, not to embrace it but to live in it, to transform it, all the while being a sign of the coming of a kingdom which is not of this world. Young people, who demand instant and clear solutions, do not find this balance an easy one to negotiate.

Each vow gives particular shape to the tension between a renunciation of the world for the sake of the kingdom and a relationship to the world with the hope of transforming it and preparing it for the kingdom. Chastity is 'a sign of the future world' by which the 'human heart . . . burns with a love for God' [13]. At the same time chastity brings about 'the possibility of a true dedication to and openness toward others' [13]; chastity 'begets life for the church' [13]. Poverty is embraced in 'imitation of Christ' with the 'intent of centering one's life on the poor Jesus, who is contemplated, loved, and followed' [14]. At the same time poverty relates us to others, particularly the poor. Like most of the world, religious share 'a life of labour' with due respect for 'creation and the material objects placed at their disposal' [14]. Furthermore, in a world torn by inequities between the wealthy few and the poor masses, religious have 'a particular sensibility for the poor and for the poverty that exists in the world today' [14]. Finally, obedience is 'an imitation of Christ' in his perfect offering of himself to the Father. Yet it is also 'a participation in his mission' [15]. Religious obedience is not simply a renunciation, a passive oblation of self. Obedience is also given in order to participate more effectively in the ongoing work of salvation.

We have nearly two thousand years of spiritual literature which develop the themes of celibacy and consecrated virginity. Our

chastity was to be like that of the angels, since we were pointing to a kingdom not of this world, one in which men and women do not marry. Now that we live our celibacy in the world, the issue of sexuality has emerged with more nuance and the *Directives* encourage directors of formation to provide a comprehensive education on sexual development. There is no question of the importance of this kind of education, and we need screening programmes which will ensure that candidates for religious life have a healthy understanding of their own sexualities before they are allowed to enter the novitiate. We also need to understand the continuous unfolding of our sexualities as we grow older.

However, I do not think that sexuality is at the heart of our growth in chastity as much as affectivity is. We know that chastity makes sense only if we view it as a gift to God and a special way of relating to God. Nurturing this relationship is vital to a successful religious vocation. What needs further reflection and articulation is how chastity helps us to love others. The *Directives* assure us that it does and that chastity does develop the full potential of the human personality [13], but we need to reflect more on what this means concretely. What kind of human relations are possible and desirable for a celibate? Obviously, we need people in our lives. We come from families; we belong to communities; and we have friends. Do we relate equally, therefore, to all people? Do friendships, which should certainly be celibate and chaste, have any moral claim on us and on our time? Furthermore, how do we make these friends? Certainly there will be people in our lives with whom we experience a natural affinity and compatibility and these may become lifelong friends. However, are we also able to give ourselves to those, particularly in our communities, with whom we do not find this immediate affinity? Do we believe that we can find affective vitality in these relationships and that we build the kingdom through them?

The *Directives* warn of 'a self-centredness that is content with one's fidelity to purity' [13]. The celibate life-style, even in community, can protect the religious from the level of sacrifice demanded in marriage and family. This would be a disaster for the religious, but it is very easy for religious to develop a comfortable independence which isolates them from personal care for other human beings. Celibates can pick and choose their relationships more easily than others, and they can change them more easily, too. Love demands a dying to self, and celibates need to find themselves in situations, both communal and apostolic, which call on them to love until the end.

One of the surest signs of healthy affective development in a religious is the capacity to give affective and faithful care to one's aging brothers or sisters in the community.

The radicalness of celibacy is in loving, deeply and with commitment, yet without possession. A disciplined aloofness, which hides affections behind work, will not generate 'more abundant fruitfulness' [13] nor will it makes us 'faithful and constant in love' [15]. Neither can we surrender to the immediacy of our feelings. Affective renunciation is as important in celibate loving as it is in marriage. The tension for the religious is to strike a balance between an affective renunciation which points to God alone and the necessary friendships through which our humanity expands and our vocation is supported and gives support. Young Jesuits who seem most successful in this regard are those who have good friendships both inside and outside of the Society, who are able to relate warmly with many different kinds of people, and who know how to turn loneliness into solitude.

Obviously poverty aims at an imitation of Christ whose material poverty was eclipsed by his spiritual poverty. But how does poverty help us to relate to the world, particularly to the poor of the world? This is perhaps one of the most difficult vows for young religious to understand. It is not that they do not want to be poor. Most do, particularly in the beginning, and their desires speak prophetically to all of us. However, there are more subtle issues which emerge. How does one reconcile an expensive education and formation with a preferential option with the poor? How does one reconcile dependence on the community with salaries and personal budgets? How does one reconcile the obvious need to change the unjust and sinful structures which perpetuate poverty and injustice with the beatitudes? To the young religious sheltering the homeless is a more satisfying response to the poor than studying economics, and political action for social change seems more real than the beatitudes.

Religious poverty is not an absolute, and the young religious must learn to negotiate successfully three different tensions. The first is the tension between the requirements for apostolic effectiveness and the desire for true simplicity. Religious formation is expensive, and the costs truly escalate for communities whose commitments require men and women with professional training and advanced degrees. The extremes are obvious. Everything can be justified under the rubric of apostolic effectiveness, and the desire for simplicity can vanish. On the other hand, living in total austerity and forfeiting all resources for apostolic development would nullify the mission of many apostolic communities. We must live in the balance.

A second tension is between financial independence and total dependence on the community. More and more religious work in the world and consequently they manage their own finances or budgets. It is healthy to learn to use money wisely and to take responsibility for our decisions in the use of resources. On the other hand this can perpetuate an individualism which is already rampant in western culture, as well as leading to a life which is simply not poor by anyone's standards. The reverse is a total relinquishing of responsibility to the community. Dependence on the community for our resources is part of the vow of poverty, but simply asking for as much as we can get is both a personal diminishment and a parody of the vow.

The final tension is between political action for the poor and the beatitudes. Insertion among the poor and an immediate awareness of their problems leads quickly enough to the desire to do something about it. Religious, and the whole Church, should be involved in the quest for economic and political justice. The *Directives* do not dispute this movement; they support it. On the other hand, they remind religious that their poverty is more than simple political action. The vow of poverty has a religious dimension, manifested in the spirit of the beatitudes, which elevates poverty, freely chosen, to a way of entering into the mystery of a fuller union with Christ [14]. Ultimately, our poverty symbolizes the meaning of being human: creatures gratuitously loved and gifted by the Creator.

Through obedience religious offer themselves to the mission of the Father in imitation of the Son. While the practice of obedience varies greatly among religious communities, there often comes a moment in our lives when we are called upon to surrender our own desires, sometimes even what we think best, in order to undertake a certain task. Whatever we may think or feel about the task, we recognize that to refuse would be to violate the bond we have with our community and the promise we have made to God. If the grace of obedience is operant in our lives we undertake the task with hope in the good judgement of our community and with faith in God that God's kingdom will be served. In these moments, which are probably rather rare, it is easy to see how the vow points us to God and throws us into a radical dependence on God, because only God could give meaning and fruitfulness to this kind of surrender. Traditionally, religious obedience meant that we viewed the commands of the superior as if they were manifestations for us of the will of God.

The *Directives* retain this vertical image, but they also supply an horizontal one. Obedience not only relates us to God through the

mediation of our community and its legitimate superiors, it also relates us to others in dialogue, and most intimately it relates us to the centre of ourselves, to our own autonomy. The *Directives* note that 'a superior who promotes dialogue educates to a responsible and active obedience' [15], and they encourage formation directors to 'leave room for responsible initiatives and decisions' [15].

We live in an age where personal development and accepting one's freedom and responsibilities are considered God-given rights and responsibilities. The young religious in obedience must be able to see how his or her obedience is a collaboration in mission and how his or her contribution is valued. In the beginning stages every incident can be construed as a question of personal autonomy and integrity. Only after years of growth can the mature religious freely give consent to another, whether it be a person or the group, and not fear loss of self. Dialogue and discernment are directions for the practice of obedience which have not been fully developed in the theology of the vows.

Dialogue is not easy. In some ways it demands more renunciation than blind obedience for it often involves more than just the religious and the superior. Dialogue presupposes discernment, which means that the young religious must go beyond the lack of freedom which is habitually present in us all in order to offer an opinion based more on commitment to the mission of the community than on personal needs. I have not found this to be an easy task, either in young religious or in myself. The tension in religious obedience is to yield independence, since God is all, without losing personal integrity, since we remain responsible for promoting the coming of the kingdom here and now.

It is harder to be a religious now than it was thirty or forty years ago. The strong Catholic culture which once supported and applauded religious life exists no more, and the clear symbols of identification, linked more to a life of separation from the world, have largely disappeared. In the past religious habit, enclosure, and a separated life-style clearly marked religious in the eyes of the public and therefore in the eyes of the entering novices. Religious life was distinctive and that distinctiveness was clear to the public. What was not clear was what went on behind the cloister walls. If the external markings of religious life were clearly visible, the interior life was every bit a mystery. Today the situation is reversed. The individual lives of religious are exposed to the same public scrutiny as anyone else's. We are seen in our strengths and weaknesses, and our sins often make the newspapers. Yet, while our private lives have become

more public, our corporate lives as religious institutes have become more hidden.

Since what we wear and where we live no longer define us in the public eye as religious, the burden falls on our community life, our poverty and our service, all of which should be marked by a spirit of prayer. These are the areas in which we experience our vows in the day-to-day, and they are also areas which, for most of us, are becoming more and more visible to the world around us. The quality of our lives together is not just a matter of mutual support; it is a question of witness within a world which wonders if even a man and woman who love each other can live together successfully. Our capacity as celibates to show a fidelity to God alone and a fidelity to the people in our lives, especially in our communities, will be a measure of the distinctiveness of religious life. Another measure will be simplicity and openhandedness of our use of material goods. The level of poverty will vary from community to community and often within communities. However, some degree of simplicity is necessary for credibility, and involvement with the truly poor and marginalized (even if it is only part-time such as in time-tithing) is essential. But most of all, people will notice if we are generous. Religious obedience will remain opaque to most people, who assume that religious have to follow orders just as most of them have to follow orders in one way or another. However, a service rendered joyfully and selflessly will be noticed. The world knows the meaning of job and career and the world will take note of a service which is generous and which is marked by an availability to work where the need is greatest. Of course, our love, our poverty and our service must be marked by prayer. Our prayerfulness is not simply a matter of our personal relationship with God. Our prayerfulness, our faith, our experience of God are vital supports to our brothers and sisters in community and they are also what the world expects from us more than anything else.

The focus of the vows has shifted from the static to the journey. Our religious identity rests less on the externals of separation and more on our imperfect attempts to love celibately, to live simply and generously, and to serve with freedom and joy. The tension between the loftiness of our ideals and the 'humanness' of our response is all too evident, and this is especially hard on the young religious, who seek more immediate satisfaction for their needs for love and meaning. The challenge for directors of formation and for those in formation is to remain in the tension of always becoming something

which is not yet here, but this requires a great deal of patience which is not a hallmark of the present generation. However, it is precisely in the daily attempt to incarnate lofty ideals in fragile human containers that we find the radicalness of the vows. For the Trinity's solution to the human dilemma was not the elimination of evil, nor of the human condition, but the Incarnation. Through the vows we place ourselves directly on the path of Christ who revealed his divinity through his humanity, and in so doing we also place ourselves at the very core of what it means to be human.

NOTES

¹ I have used the text as it was published in *Origins* (22 March 1990, Vol 19: No 42). Throughout the article references to the text are noted with paragraph numbers in brackets.

² For a fuller treatment of this point, see Sandra Schneiders's *New wine, new wineskins* (Paulist, 1986), pages 25-27. The entire chapter entitled 'Toward a theological theory of religious life', is a thoughtful presentation of some of the paradigm shifts which have taken place in religious life in recent years.