

## **CHASTITY, POVERTY, OBEDIENCE:**

Ways of Love and Signs of Faithful and Total Love

*19 gennaio 2002*

Each of us here has a personal and precious story of religious life. Our stories are rich and unique. I would like to link "story" and "religious life" as we consider "Chastity, Poverty, Obedience: Ways of Love and Signs of Faithful and Total Love." Once upon a time religious life was defined in terms of vows: poverty, chastity and obedience or some unique blend of these vows. But the story begins differently today. In fact, recently I read a report of a national survey by women religious and the words vow, vows, chastity, poverty, obedience were not present. In a discussion with a committee of Sisters associated with the report, I told them my observation: "Vows are not mentioned in your survey of religious life." I added, "I am not saying this is negative. It is an observation." However, considering that religious life begins with a vowed commitment, it seems very important to keep before ourselves such an omission. The traditional vocabulary of the fifth historical phase of religious life is changing and already shows itself altered. So let us begin our story of religious life in a different way: "Once upon eternity I know God fell in love with me."

When Vatican Council II ushered in a dominant focus on the Incarnation, Jesus Christ, God's Love Incarnate, a profound transition took place in Catholic life and in religious life. The summons to religious is to live a radical following of Jesus, a gospel way of life, a life expressive of gospel community, a life inspired by the evangelical counsels. This invitation called for a transition that speaks of a positive spiritual depth in personal living. The emphasis is on relationship with Jesus Christ: "radical following of Jesus," "gospel way," "evangelical counsels." Note the necessity of experiential familiarity with Jesus of the gospels and the scriptures.

It seems clear, then, that only if a person is keenly aware of a divine proposal can he/she freely choose to live such a relational and personal response as this religious life. The nature of the proposal? God's love, so captivating, so magnetizing, that the person is drawn with inner conviction of heart to an awareness of God's tremendous personal love for him or her. This proposal is not a matter of words; the proposal is silent, yet persistent and definite. The person only discerningly discovers that he or she is falling in love with God in a new way. The charm and influence of divine love is so real and personal as if the person heard spoken and summoning words, such as: "I love you more than you can imagine. Will you come with me and let our lives become uniquely one? I give all to you. I desire you, all of you, yourself, your gifts, your time -- the everything you are and have or ever can be or can ever possess. I yearn for you to find fullness of joy in me." God's passionate love for a particular person and God's choice of that person is the foundation of living a religious life of relationship with Jesus. This is the religious life of our day.

It is clear in marriage that the commitment is about loving someone with whom one has fallen in love and about living life together in love: "John, do you take Mary to be your wife? In health and sickness? In poverty and riches? In good days and difficult ones?" "Mary, do you take John to be your husband? To love him until death parts you?" The chastity, poverty and surrender in marriage is clearly a proclamation of love without limits and measurements that hopefully will unfold during a lifetime.

What, then, about the way of chastity, poverty and obedience in consecrated religious life? In this "way", too, there is a mysterious falling in love because one is being grasped by Love Divine in the depths of one's being. A man or woman experiences a proposal from a personal God who is in love with him or her. Religious life begins when someone, having progressively grown in love, discerningly accepts God's delicate love proposal: "Will you be mine for now and eternity?"

Will you be my presence, the face of my Son, Jesus, in the world of my people today -- until I bring you home to myself someday? Will you walk the way of my Son, Jesus, for my sake and for others that they may know my incarnate love for them?"

Where is the respondee to find nourishment for this way of living? Vatican Council II articulates a striking shift from Constitutions/Rules to the gospel as the "supreme law" of every congregation (PC #2). Jesus is the focus. And when one loves, the loved one's name becomes a theme song. The mind is filled with thoughts of the loved one through-out the day and night. One looks for the person everywhere. The screen of the imagination is filled with the face and features of the person. The deepest desire is to be in the loved one's presence. What the beloved loves becomes significant to the one who loves. People loved by the beloved become precious. Values, thoughts and dreams are shared.

And where can we find human examples of persons so captivated by Jesus Christ? Vatican Council II's second norm for life in the following of Jesus focuses our attention on founding persons. We are admonished to drink from the original spirit of our founders and foundresses. We shall do this as we consider chastity, poverty and obedience as ways of love and signs of faithful and total love. Founders and foundresses of congregations are persons who respond eloquently to the summons to follow in the way of Jesus. These persons wholeheartedly embrace the counsels of Jesus. Founders and foundresses dramatically evidence being grasped by God/Jesus in a profound, life-altering way. As words spoken by a human lover capture the beloved and quicken him or her to new depths of living and action, so it is for these founding men and women who experience God's words spoken in the gospel or God's words whispered through the needs of the world, through the needs of God's beloved people. The voice of the Lover penetrates the heart of the sensitive beloved of God. God's personal love becomes so real that it captures, energizes and ultimately transforms the beloved of God into a special likeness of Jesus.

On October 4th a Sister in our generalate community said at breakfast, "You know, Francis of Assisi really seems as close to being a second Jesus as anyone might be." Yes, this man knew in a profound way that he was uniquely loved by his Father in heaven. Thus he was drawn into the mystery of life with and in Jesus. The magnanimous love of the Father captured the mind, heart and imagination of this Man of Assisi. And we know how Francis discerned what God desired of him.

One who loves desires to hear words spoken by the beloved. Words like "I love you." have been spoken countless times throughout human history. But when the lover hears these words from the beloved, the words are new and welcomed into the heart as deepest truth. The words begin to form the hearer so that his or her life begins to shape itself around this loved one. This is true for a person who is drawn to marriage and it is equally true of someone like Francis of Assisi, who is drawn by the precious words of Jesus to live the gospel.

A married person gives up home and all that is familiar to walk with another because of words that capture the heart. So it is for Francis and for many others throughout history. And what is the effect of Francis' openness to the words of Jesus? Francis belongs to the whole world, just as Jesus does. A Mother Teresa of Calcutta takes to the streets as she follows Jesus' way of love. God's love is again made visible in our world and God's love enfleshed touches the people of our world. An intellectual Edith Stein becomes a sensitive mother to children orphaned by the hysteria of their mothers who realize they will soon die in the gas-chambers. This woman, not a foundress, gifted with a passion for philosophy, sings with little children as she celebrates with them the joy of God's presence -- and unknown to them, the coming encounter with God who loves them. These chosen persons experience being loved so deeply by God that they do an "illogical" thing in view of values of the world: they give their lives in following Jesus. They commit themselves to Love. Give their lives to God! AND to others! Falling in love leads to a dramatic commitment of life, even through suffering, until death yields to union and vision with the

Beloved. And what sustains such persons? A self-transcending, overflowing and transformative love! A personal relationship with Jesus blossoms into a way of chaste love, a poverty of love and a sensitive surrender to God's will discerned in the present moment.

Following becomes a spontaneous, human and creative response of love to Love. In the soil of personal freedom and God's grace, mustard seeds of chastity, poverty and obedience take root, grow and thrive. One sees Jesus' way unfolding through these persons: pure love embraces the Father and others in daily living; loving frees from clinging to or grasping things, money, houses, ambitions, prestige, power; love creates openness to be where and with whom the Father wills. Radical surrender expresses itself in a life form like that of Jesus of the gospel.

What more inspiring and challenging figures can we find than founding figures? Without established structures to direct their lives, they were drawn by sensitive discernment to dramatic realization of God's love that ultimately expressed and stabilized itself in vows. In persons like Francis of Assisi, Mother Teresa of Calcutta, Ignatius of Loyola, Jeanne Jugan, your founder or foundress and mine, we discover persons moved to startling responses of love because they first fell deeply in love with God/Jesus and God's people.

When Vatican Council II sent us to look for our roots, to breathe in the spirit of our founders/foundresses, the mandate put us in touch with religious life at its best! In these persons we see religious life as a close following of Jesus and a vibrant living in the spirit of the gospel. This is the oxygen for religious life: experience of a personal God whose love draws to a radical following in the way of Incarnate Love, Jesus. Radical is formed from "radix," the root. Founding persons, drawn into the following of Jesus, give not the fruits of their lives to God or to nourish others, not the trunk of the tree for a boat, but the root of themselves so that all is God's in the gift of following.

The life of the evangelical counsels parades before us in an exemplary manner in those to whom God gives a founding gift. The life of Jesus advises these persons in their daily decisions and living. The counsels of Jesus are spontaneously, humanly, creatively lived as responses of love. Living arises from personal freedom strengthened by grace. The fruit we see is a radical following of Jesus and transformation into his likeness because the core of the person is given in love. Jesus' way really becomes their way of life -- loving the Father and others by laying down their lives, living a prodigal giving which is foreign to clinging and grasping, participating in mission among diverse people according to the Father's prompting and human needs.

Ignatius of Loyola, Francis of Assisi and countless others fall passionately in love with Jesus because of the power of the gospel. Ignatius meditates the gospel, contemplates his Jesus. He discerns his way in daily living through familiarity with Jesus and lives his counsels. Ignatius uses a name which connotes being always in the presence of Jesus: The Company of Jesus. Francis of Assisi absorbs the counsels from opening the scripture three times. His life's course is set. Francis weeps because "LOVE is not loved." His chaste love and gift of self arise naturally from the gospel dispositions of his heart. No one needs to detail for him how to live chaste love. His commitment to exclusive-inclusive love of Jesus/God and others is the natural fruit of Francis' encounter with Jesus. And Jeanne Jugan, foundress of the Little Sisters of the Poor, loves God so passionately that her love embraces an abandoned, elderly and blind woman in the streets -- and Jeanne Jugan's bed belongs to the stranger. Chaste love finds expression in action. Jesus lives again.

Who counsels a Francis of Assisi or Jeanne Jugan to be poor? They accept all as gift given by the Father. The natural effect is that they share with freedom and joy what they have received. Also, they seek, as Jesus, the face of the Father and they surrender to do things according to God's plan: "My food is to do the will of the one who sent me and to complete his work" (Jn. 4:14). They are open and ready to respond. Founding persons are, to use an image of Hildegard von Bingen, like a "feather on the breath of God".

Love makes these persons inventive in living a chastity of passionate love of Jesus and the Father and a warm compassion for people, a poverty that appreciates beauty but need not possess it, and obedience of following the Father's will with an eagerness of one who finds the greatest pleasure in what they are doing. Founding persons mirror to us Jesus: chaste Lover, detached Lover, listening Lover. These persons live the reality of "vows" naturally from the influence of the gospel counsels before ever "making vows". Thus, even if the vows were unknown, these persons would freely invent them by living them. This is a reality to be celebrated and reflected upon, for all religious are called to live the counsels from "within", not the vows from "without".

The contemporary emphasis on personal interior motivation, integration and necessary personal accompaniment in initial formation address the desire for renewal of religious life today. Contemporary on-going formation invites vowed persons to examination and reflection relative to the quality of their personal response in following Jesus. Freedom of choice and love are at the heart of the call to interior renewal. Mature religious life is possible only when consecrated persons freely and repeatedly choose to live from deep interior motivation of love. This is how founding persons lived and live. Their intention was not to enter a formed way of life, but to follow a unique star of God's will for them. A dream of God fires their imaginations, captures the arena of their minds, quickens their hearts and energizes them beyond natural explanation. It appears that even when their commitment crystalizes in following the evangelical counsels through vows, these persons do not yield to living comfortable vows. They vow to live the passionate and compassionate love of Jesus, to exercise Jesus' freedom from anything that would hinder expressing the Father's love for others, and are consumed by the desire to carry out the Father's saving will for humankind. Jesus lived "for" the Father, "for" others. Such was his love and freedom of choice that his life was a consuming and totally giving way of life. This is the Jesus and the way that we proclaim to follow.

However, there is a contrast if religious life is lived without the discernment that comes from the initial and personal love proposal of God. Religious life, then, suffers from a dangerous virus: institutionalization. Living is linked to "outer complicity" and "morality". Laws, limits, minimums and comfortable self-fulfillment are the tainted fruits. Directories and dependence upon outer voices take up where the heart falters. Gone is the passion of love that drives one in the following of Jesus and living of his counsels. Measured commitment gives security ("I'm a good religious."), wilts generosity ("I'm living what's expected in our life."), stultifies growth ("I live a religious life as good as the other religious I know.") and produces replicas rather than the "works of art" of God's design (Eph. 2:10). Institutionalized living of the vows, rather than living of the counsels as vows, is the result.

Community influence, too, can pose a subtle threat to intense living of the counsels. Religious can live as if they made "community" vows, rather than personal vows. It is possible to become comfortable in living the "vows" and thereby to lull one another into living that lacks motivation in living the counsels responsibly and generously. Quality personal prayer and discernment in daily life call each consecrated religious to a unique following of Jesus and to a special presencing of God's love to others in community and in mission. There is no homogenous way of living vibrant religious life. God holds the secret for each individual's fashioning.

A contemporary tension also exists between religious life as a radical following of Jesus in living the gospel counsels as personal relationship with Jesus and with personal responsibility, versus living a less demanding and more comfortable way at this transitional period in history. But living and revealing Jesus is at issue. The counsels invite

-- to a chaste, life-giving relationship of love of God/Jesus, of others without exclusion, and of all of creation with reverence

-- to a poverty of love that shares what one has and a detachment, freedom and simplicity in using the gifts that one has

-- to an obedient, discerning, dialogic willingness to lay down one's life in love for others that they may know the Father's love for them.

Maturing relationship with Jesus that is a progressive identification and deeper union with Jesus through prayer, contemplation and in life, is essential for the interior motivation that makes real following of Jesus possible for a life-time. The relevant question in consecrated life is "How am I LIVING the LIFE of Jesus?" The answer influences religious life, all people, the Church and the world.

"Potissimum Institutioni " (Directives on Formation in Religious Institutes) #12 states: "The counsels are, as it were, the main support of the religious life, since they express in a significant way the evangelical radicalism which characterizes . . . (religious life)." The lived gospel counsels are visible signs of the reign of God in this world -- beacons of God's incredible love made visible in human flesh today. Radical discipleship in the following of Jesus calls to mission, just as Jesus was sent on mission by his Father. The mission of Jesus involved living quality relationships in terms of life-giving, redeeming love that love might reign on earth. Our challenge is to re-image this discipleship by living our religious lives in today's world. With the gospel as guide, we are called to respond as Jesus in a world that is marked with the same darkness of prejudice, injustice, violence (and goodness) as in Jesus' times.

Witness of discipleship depends upon relatedness to Jesus, "The Consecrated One", whose example fashions us and whose voice forms us when the gospel takes root in our hearts. In the humble accounts of the life of Jesus, we hear, see, and experience the counsels. Jesus witnesses an uncompromising, non-exclusive love, lived with tranquility. His pure love, his preference for people over any earthly value or thing, and his adherence to the divine perspective of the Father bring love's reign in the world.

The counsels are linked to Jesus' mission. Jesus LIVED his counsels IN MISSION. The whole of Jesus' life counsels us. We see a man of fearless action flowing from the primary value of love. The counsels give life to his mission, and Jesus' mission supports and fosters the lived counsels. Our share in the mission of Jesus is also of critical importance to living the evangelical counsels. We note that founders and foundresses were drawn into the mission of Jesus and, seemingly, naturally lived gospel counsels as consequence. Mission is purifying, presses one back to Jesus, to the gospel. Living the counsels sustains mission. When united with Jesus of the gospel, we live most radically OUR share in HIS MISSION. The counsels lived as vows give life to mission and sharing the demanding mission of Jesus insures living the counsels as vows.

Jesus counsels us through action and word. He concretizes the compassionate love of the Father, the Father's longing to bring all of us home. Jesus shows us the result of union with the One he loves. It is this intensely alive Jesus who lives risen life in us. As religious look upon and share time and life with this Jesus, acquaintance deepens and love matures. Increasingly, religious seek to find his face everywhere and in everyone. They are transformed in his spirit as they live his way of life.

Jesus is the model for mission and for living the gospel counsels. Jesus accepts the culture surrounding him and attempts to inculturate Love Incarnate with the values found in that environment. Jesus' words and actions are human, warm, compassionate, and genuinely loving. He seems fearless in relationships. Is this not a risk? He loves freely, but he knows to Whom he belongs. So deep is his rootedness in the Father that his outreach in love corresponds in length and intensity. It is the same with the saints and saintly founders/foundresses. There is no rigid self-preservation of disengagement in Jesus ministry. Jesus is captivated by goodness and beauty reflected in each human face and in all of creation. Jesus' exclusive love for the Father frees him for the all inclusive chaste love which we see in the gospels. Jesus misses no one: the sinner, the fearful, the hesitant, the off-the-path person, the friend, the disciple, the child, the widow, the excluded, man, woman, whomever. And how did Jesus relate? He loved one-to-one, on the way,

and brought oneness to those who responded.

For a relevant image of an integrated religious life animated by the counsels and holding fire in witness, we may focus on Mother Teresa of Calcutta. The world knew Jesus in and through her. She did what Jesus did. No one was excluded from her love. And what was the outcome? The same as for Jesus! Her body in death was claimed by the government! This little wrinkled woman had a state funeral! Every country sent the "best person" it had to represent its country. She wanted to bring Jesus to the world. And she succeeded magnificently in death, just as Jesus did. Never before in history has such a simple religious had a state funeral. Why? It does not make rational sense! Yet she really changed the world simply by living intensely her religious life. She lived the counsels on mission with Jesus. She LOVED! She was transformed. She made Jesus visible in our world.

The foundress of my own congregation, Aldegonda Wolbring, was just twenty-two years old and a teacher in a parish school when our congregation was founded. An account of our history says that the difference between an ordinary christian and a saint is that the saint sees something and does something about it. The same can be said of Jesus. He simply did something about the things he saw. Aldegonda Wolbring followed the counsels of Jesus and did the same. She took home the poorest child of her class and gave her food, clothing and shelter. But that was not enough! There were other children in equal poverty. She rented a house and took more poor children. Within two months it was necessary to buy a larger home, and fortunately another woman came to assist Aldegona Wolbring.

If I study this woman's life, it reads like Jesus' life. She taught little children, gave a home to the poor, was expelled from Germany in the Kulturkampf of 1874. As a refugee, she struggled with life in a new country, the United States, and a new language. Yet her extent letters ring with joy. When there was no teacher for a school, she volunteered so the children might be educated. She was the only sister in the school. In the local parish she cared for several elderly women and an old man who seemingly had an alcohol problem. At the end of her life, she again cared for orphans. Whatever she did seemed to bring her deepest happiness because she knew for Whom she did it. She seemed to have no fear in the face of others' needs. Her relationship with Jesus was so secure that the words she spoke in the face of need were "Forward!" and "Here I am, Lord!". She lived the mission of Jesus and presented Jesus to others.

My foundress had no struggle with poverty because she had a mission, a love-goal outside herself. She dedicated her inheritance to care for the poor. She never was the superior general. She found God's will in obedience to mission. She had readiness to go wherever and to do whatever for whomever. Her God-given desire to be a missionary was unfulfilled until expulsion from Germany made her missionary.

Our foundress never fell in love with chastity, poverty and obedience, but she lived all three vows uniquely and with abandon. Why? Because she fell in love with a Jesus who is Caring or Compassionate Love. She followed his counsels. She became his shadow in our world because God's love animated and energized her. She lived the counsels as she shared the mission of Jesus. These lived counsels of her pre-profession days became her vows on her profession day. We noted earlier that religious are called to return to their roots. This is a marvelous way to inspire vitality in religious life because founding persons are so clearly "uncaught captives" of God's love (Francois Mauriac). They teach us that it is not because we are placed in a cage with a locked door that we live our lives. The test of love is the open door that allows one to freely remain in God's love or to fly away like a bird. The person who is committed in faithful and total love remains, and progressively and uniquely takes on the likeness of Jesus in his/her own life. Then the power and beauty of God's love reaches others through the consecrated person.

Of course, there is risk in religious life and in universal love because religious must own human vulnerability and the capacity to lose self in another or others. The risk is that we may not be

faithful. Therefore understanding human growth is immensely helpful and freeing in our lives. Fear of relating to others, whether men or women, if not owned and addressed, leaves us at risk in mission. A healthy sense of self, psychologically, sexually and spiritually, is extremely important for living a life of the counsels. Growth in chaste love means growing through social contacts, positive experiences of community relationships, openness to deal with affective issues, awareness that growth is on-going. We see clearly our need to be rooted in prayer and formative study of the gospels so that relationship with Jesus continues to foster growth in love.

A story that conveys to me what happens to a religious who is prayerfully present to God/Jesus over a life-time is "The Great Stone Face" by Nathaniel Hawthorne. Ernest, the main character, daily contemplates a peaceful and kindly face carved on a distant stone mountain. Each evening he ponders again the captivating face in the distance. His mother taught Ernest to look to the face on the mountain when Ernest was a small boy. Ernest progressively experiences a longing to meet the man whose image he sees on the mountain. He seeks to find the person of his dreams among the people of his village.

Sometimes the village people anticipate that the man of the mountain is coming. They believe a rich man who comes to the village will be the man of the mountain. But Ernest sees that the rich man is possessive and miserly to the poor and covets his money. Ernest turns away disappointedly: "This is not he." The people are sure that a famous visiting politician will be the very likeness of the face on the mountain. But Ernest sees that the politician loves power and is arrogant and aloof from the people. Ernest sighs, "It is not he." At last a poet who authored exquisite poetry is expected to visit the village. The people are certain that his face will be a perfect likeness to the face of the mountain. Ernest reads the poetry, and so pure are the ideals expressed that Ernest prepares himself to meet at last the one who bears the likeness of the mountain face. But one glance at the poet and Ernest questions how the man before him could ever be the one who wrote the sensitive poetry that he had read. Indeed the poet's face does not bear a likeness to the great stone face. Sadly, Ernest asks the poet about his poetry. The poet admits that he had a great gift for poetry, but he confesses that he lived a sordid life and admits that he does not embody the ideals of his poetry. Disappointed, Ernest still clings to his daily practice of being in the presence of the beautiful face each morning and each evening. And he continues to seek its likeness in each person of the village. He clings with faith to the day when he will behold the gentle, loving face that he has contemplated for so many years.

But finally the search of the people of the village comes to an end. They note that Ernest himself has the likeness of the face on the mountain. Without Ernest realizing it, he has taken on the likeness of the face he has contemplated so faithfully. He has become transformed without his knowing it.

This is also what I believe happens to the religious who perseveringly seeks God/Jesus and lives in gospel following. Faith and trust yield gradual transformation into the likeness of Jesus through the assimilation of the lived counsels of the gospel. Hearing and pondering the words of the Beloved in scripture causes the person to be loved into love, consecrated chastity. Lines from the psalms speak the heart's message:

". . . You are my God,

My happiness lies in your alone . . ."

"O Lord, it is you who are my portion and cup;

it is you yourself who are my prize. . ."

"I bless you, Lord, for you give me counsel,

Even at night you direct my heart;

I keep you, Lord, ever in my sight,

since you are at my right hand, I shall stand firm." (Ps. 16:2, 5, 7-8)

The frail initial love of the person grows mysteriously into a deeper and more conscious awareness of being loved by God who loves the individual into likeness to Jesus.

Joy characterizes the religious who is loved into this God-focused chastity that embraces others with the love of Jesus. To love others with warmth, tenderness and freedom is also loving Jesus. And this chastity and joy is known by those who, as Rea McDonnell, SSND writes, are "able to be happy with God as enough", "happy to be so single-heartedly devoted to the One devoted to" him or her ("A Fresh Look at the Vows" -- article from TransFormation, 1999. Published by the Religious Formation Conference, Silver Spring, MD, USA). A recent master teacher of this love is Mother Teresa of Calcutta. Her passionate love for Jesus flowered in relationships with others until the world felt the embrace of her consecrated chastity.

The purity of heart of this woman touched the world through her freedom and joy. I often reflect on her relationship with Pope John Paul II. She and he naturally held hands at times. TV cameras captured their relatedness, but both of them had been loved into a love that made them safe against censure. Their abiding in God's love gave a sense of security to the world in general. God's love was shining through.

Both of these persons took quality time to be alone with the Beloved, just as lovers do. Pope John Paul II lives the words he once spoke: "Every . . . religious must bear witness to the primacy of God and must dedicate a sufficiently long period of time every day to stand before the Lord, to tell God of her (or his) love, and above all to let herself (or himself) be loved by God." In the words of the Song of Songs, one needs time to rest in the shade of the apple tree, special beyond all other trees: "In his longed-for shade, I am seated" (2:3). Simply being in God's presence or in the presence of Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament deepens the capacity to receive God's love and expands one's capacity to love. Thus a consecrated person is drawn increasingly into the family of the Beloved. Love of others and unity with and among others are definite signs and fruits of maturing consecrated chastity.

Living poverty, as counsel and vow, is also about love and consequently about sharing with others what one has and is. Jesus counsels poverty in so many subtle ways in the gospels. Remember the poor widow of last Sunday's gospel with her last two coins (Mk. 12:41-44), Dives who lacked sensitivity to the beggar Lazarus (Lk. 16:19-31), Matthew's "Last Judgement" with its ". . . in so far as you did this to one of . . . these . . . , you did it to me" (25:40). In countless ways Jesus related to others of humble circumstances and manifested reverence for all of creation. The counsels to poverty in word and story in the gospels touch social justice in a world where peoples' appetites seem always to want more. The counsels of Jesus contradict the power of having, while others are left in actual want. Gospel poverty promotes just relationships among people, fosters care for one another that does not exploit others for money or personal gain. Money is viewed as creature to further the reign of God's love in the world. Living the counsel of poverty with global awareness makes a religious pause discerningly to distinguish between need, desire and the cries of brothers and sisters of the world. Gospel poverty is a poverty of love that learns from a loving God how to be a gracious in giving to others. It includes trusting God to teach us the meaning of generosity.

Another social aspect of religious poverty, as Rea McDonnell, SSND says, is "a relinquishing of our grasp on our rights to pursue justice for the voiceless." This happens only if we identify with the poor and live the role of the prophet who carries out a God-given mission. And from where does this strength come? "The prophet is so close to the mind and heart of God that she or he dares to speak in God's name. The intimacy of God flows from our contemplation of the justice of God" (Rea McDonnell, SSND)."

The best of obedience is also rooted in love. It is not a servile attention to one who dominates, but rather the expression of someone who walks lovingly and listeningly in the presence of God. Jesus is one who seeks the face of the Father in daily life and finds strength, creativity and joy to



live in love the mission for which he came. A loving obedience also characterizes a consecrated person who is willing to grow by sifting through what happens in life and in our world as he or she faces God/Jesus. Such seeking for God's will means sensitively following God's lead in daily life and engaging in dialogue in the context of living obedience. Only in this discerning, responsive and contributing manner can a consecrated religious live Jesus' obedience in daily life. Such a religious, in the words of Rea McDonnell, SSND, is "so close to the heart and mind of God that . . . (he or she) dare(s) to enflesh God's love and wisdom . . ."

A final reflection on the gospel counsels/vows in terms of love centers on two small words: "of" and "for". Diarmuid O'Murchu, MSC, suggests that "of" has a limiting effect when used after the word "vow": vow of chastity, vow of poverty, vow of obedience. "Of" connotes possession: for example, a box of candy. The mind and imagination picture a capacity and then fullness. Thus, using "vow of" is an expression that implies "boundaries for personal, communal, and moral behavior within which the person is expected to live and whose transgression incurs censures . . ." (Poverty, Celibacy and Obedience: Radical Option for Life, p. 29). The author suggests that a more dynamic and growthful living of the counsels as vows is stimulated when the word "for" replaces "of": vow for chastity, vow for poverty, vow for obedience. Using the word "for" "denotes movement, action, growth, change, and possibility, but not necessarily an eventual outcome." Thus a sense of complacency or fulfillment is stretched to prayerful and active pursuit of Jesus in gospel following. Trust is stimulated that God "who began the good work" in us "will bring it to completion" at the end (Phil. 1:6). Vow "for" chastity, poverty or obedience also "has echoes of freedom, creativity, initiative, possibility, exploration, search, and the expansion of horizons." All of these are important aspects of living a life of the evangelical counsels and a quality consecrated life of vows. A change from "of" to "for" emphasizes that vows are about "fundamental values rather than fundamental laws" (p. 30). Or most importantly, "for" challenges one to live the gospel counsels unto the fullness of Jesus as the real meaning of vows rather than being content with limited living of a prescriptive vow or living the vows in a time-honored fashion. Growth is of the essence of the vows of chastity, poverty and obedience if they are to be ways of love and signs of faithful and total love. It is because of love that the religious commits himself or herself to follow Christ and vows to this following -- and this, only after discerning that Divine Love graces and calls to this gospel way of life.

Helpful reflection may also be stimulated by using both "of" and "for" with the word "vow": a vow of chastity "for", a vow of poverty "for", a vow of obedience "for". When "for" follows the word "vow", I imagine arms open to embrace the One from whom I learn to live my gift of self in love. I envision growth and desire that extends throughout the person's life. A consecrated life of living these counsels and vows in the following of Jesus, with all the challenge that is involved, demands a vibrant daily and maturing spirituality. It is because the one who follows Jesus trusts that God leads the way, he or she keeps his or her eye on the Prize and follows in love. Transformation into Christ Jesus is God's surprise for the consecrated person who lovingly perseveres in living, desiring and struggling for a life-time.

When one considers the impact of a single founder, foundress or saint who lived the evangelical counsels of chastity, poverty, obedience as ways of love and became signs of God's faithful and total love, we may wonder how our world might be if all of us who are vowed to the following of Jesus Christ lived more discerningly the vocation that is ours. Focus the name of your founder or foundress and ponder his or her effect in history. St. Francis of Assisi, Blessed Jeanne Jugan, St. Ignatius of Loyola, Mother Teresa of Calcutta have touched the world for all times. As Jesus Christ Risen is alive and transforming us by his presence today, so these women and men of God continue to bring life and change to our world by carrying on the mission of Jesus among us.

What a precious gift and profound calling is a vocation to the consecrated life. It is a life rooted in God's immense love for an individual. It is a summons to live a response of love in the follow-

ing of Jesus for the whole life of one's life

We are challenged to renewal in new ways today as we reflect on the call to live the gospel counsels in the following of Jesus. We have great desire to embrace the challenge of living this commitment with interior motivation and greater love. And we ask, "How can on-going and initial formation lead us to a more radical and interior living of the following of Jesus Christ in a life of the counsels?" Thus, we live in a very graced time in the history of religious life. We place our trust in God's faithful and total love for us: "I have called you by name . . . you are mine . . . you are precious in my eyes . . . I love you . . . I am with you" (Is. 43:1-4).

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