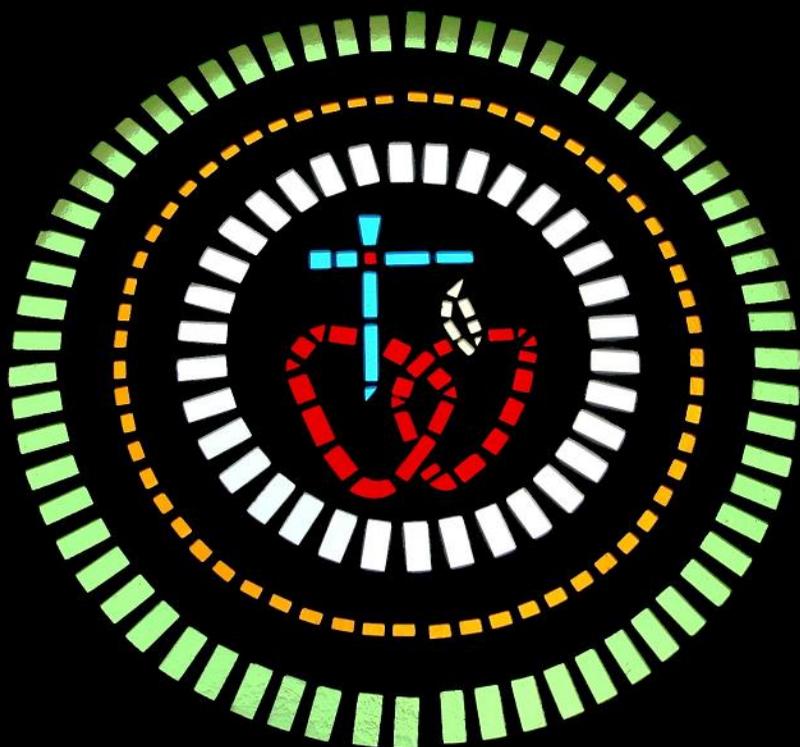


Cahiers of Spirituality - n° 25

Poverty, chastity and obedience today



Congregation of the Sacred Hearts

**POVERTY, CHASTITY AND
OBEDIENCE TODAY**

Cahiers of Spirituality - n° 25
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INTRODUCTION

We offer a new *Cahier* which is certainly exciting for us, as it touches on the heart of our religious life: the vow of chastity, poverty and obedience.

Patricia Villarroel ssc, Alberto Toutin ssc and Derek Lavery ssc offer us some new insights into this topic, drawing from their reflection and experience. They present us with different and complementary perspectives.

Jesuit José María Rodríguez Olaizola says: "What a pity that we do not find a more courageous way to talk about our vows! And what if one day, instead of talking about these vows of poverty, chastity and obedience, we were to talk about freedom, love and shared mission, which is the same thing?" We believe that the authors of the ensuing articles attempt to answer this question, which rests in the depths of many of us.

The Commission for Historical and Spiritual and Patrimony encourages you to read these texts. Let us go a little further and share our reflections in the community meeting or in conversations with our brothers and sisters. It will surely do us a lot of good.

RELIGIOUS VOWS, AN INSIGHT FOR THE YOUNG PEOPLE OF TODAY

Patricia Villarroel ssc
Superior General

Those of us who are entering the 21st century as adults realise that the cultural changes of recent decades challenge us, especially in our relationship with young people. If it is difficult today to be the parent of an adolescent or a young person, it is not easier to be their educator, their novice mistress or their brother in community. And I do not think that the young people of today are more difficult than those of the past, but rather that we are not prepared for the many differences that exist today between the different generational groups. We find it difficult to properly integrate the new into our community styles. Those of us who knew the old gramophones - even if it was at our grandparents' house - must coexist with those who were born with mobile phones in their hands and carry music in their pockets. Those of us who wrote letters with pencil and paper and had to wait many days for a reply, with those who communicate virtually and instantaneously, with friends all over the world. The young people who approach the Church, and those who enter religious life and our Congregation of the Sacred Hearts

today, are children of this time. With them in mind, I have tried to reflect on the religious vows in a way that can be understood and welcomed with their sensitivity.

TO BEGIN

Presenting today's young people with a lifestyle based on the religious vows of poverty, chastity and obedience requires us to address those questions that remain open and continue to make us uncomfortable. To name but a few, it seems to me that questioning the vow of poverty, when all basic needs are covered and studies, health and rest are assured, seems entirely legitimate. To question the vow of celibacy in the difficult moment the Church is going through, when there have been more and more denunciations of religious who have not lived it in truth, leaving victims of unacceptable abuses, is more than reasonable. To speak of a vow of obedience while showing a certain childishness of attitudes and personal opinions, at least, requires certain explanations. Consecrated life, and along with it the vows, has an important symbolic dimension which should exempt us from many clarifications. However, it seems that without them, the vows are frankly incomprehensible in today's world, especially for young people who demand coherence and who have the right to expect clarity and sincerity from adults. A re-reading of the vows appropriate to today's world is therefore necessary.

No one today disputes that consecrated life was not a proposition made by Jesus to his disciples, and that the texts on which it has always been based are not addressed specifically to consecrated persons. Neither the text of the rich young man, nor the story of Martha and Mary, nor any of the invitations to the apostles, were written or intended for religious life. They are testimonies, messages and facts of Jesus' life treasured by the early communities and recorded in the Gospels for all his disciples. Despite certain groups such as the communities of prophets, the Nazirites, or the Rekabites, in which we can recognise some characteristics of consecrated life today, it is not easy to find in Scripture testimonies of it as it developed in the history of the Church. Rather, we can say that consecrated life as we understand it today does not exist in the Bible, although we must say immediately that it does not exist without the Bible... since it is a particular way of living what is essential to Christian life: the following of Jesus....

The apostolic exhortation *Vita Consecrata*¹ emphasises several times the call to a *Christian form* of consecrated life, expressed in the living out of the religious vows. Let us recall, for example, the text which says: "...by professing the evangelical counsels, consecrated persons not only make Christ the centre of their lives, but are concerned to imitate in themselves, as far as possible, 'that form of life which the Son of God chose when he came into the world'" (VC, 16). This affirmation emphasises that religious

¹ VC: John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation *Vita Consecrata* (1996).

life is fundamentally consecrated life, and that, through the vows, it tries to imitate and make present the way of life that Jesus lived: poor, celibate and obedient.

It is not out of place to recall, then, that Christian life is born of a *people consecrated* by God's choice, ratified throughout its history, and that, furthermore, all the baptised have been *consecrated* at the baptismal font. If we speak of *consecrated life* in reference to religious life, we are not referring to a different, more complete, or more perfect consecration. The Second Vatican Council places "consecrated life in continuity with baptism and as a particular way of developing it" (Uríbarri, 22).² Emphasising consecration, we can say that more than three vows, or four, or five, there is a *vow of consecration*, which by religious profession commits the whole of life to be "*a living memory of Jesus' way of existing and acting...*" (VC, 22). What tradition has broken down into three vows over the centuries is nothing more than a way of breaking down the whole in terms of three very fundamental human dimensions, involving the ownership of goods, affectivity and sexuality, and the relationship with authority and power.

In religious profession one consecrates one's whole life; in pronouncing the vows one makes explicit a public commitment to order and manage with maturity and responsibility, the

² Gabino Uríbarri Bilbao sj, and others, *Raíz y viento*, Sal Terrae, 2015.

desire to have, the pursuit of pleasure and the lust for power; natural human impulses or tendencies which, if well regulated, are a potential for strength, joy, and fullness of life.

I. THE VOW OF POVERTY: SELFLESSNESS AND SOLIDARITY

In a world like ours, in which the dimensions of poverty and social inequality are enormous, while - paradoxically - material goods abound in an unsuspected way, it seems more important than ever to speak of evangelical poverty, of detachment and freedom from possessions, of a sense of justice and of a call to solidarity, all of which are necessarily implied in the vow of poverty. There is no need to bring concrete data to affirm that, despite the progress and technological and scientific advances of recent decades, there are still many who die of hunger, who have no access to health care, who cannot read... This is the context in which the vow of poverty can speak meaningfully, or simply say nothing at all.

A look in faith at this social situation necessarily leads us to recognise in each of these individuals, Jesus himself suffering all kinds of deprivation. The Gospel text of the final judgement is clear and definitive. Jesus identifies himself with each one of the naked, the prisoners, the hungry. (Mt 25, 31-46). And it is an imperative for all his followers to be concerned to clothe, to visit, and to feed them, how much more so for those who have consecrated themselves to live his way of life! It is true that we cannot

reduce poverty to material deprivation. There is poverty also in loneliness and abandonment, in the discriminated and the excluded, in the terminally ill... We cannot abstract from any of these realities if we want the religious vow of poverty to have any meaning for today's society.

Looking at Jesus Christ, "who, though he was rich, yet for our sakes became poor, so that by his poverty he might make us rich" (2 Cor 8:9), we discover the stripping away, the emptying out and the total oblation. The first witness to poverty that He gives us is the incarnation. It is in this offering, in this absolute detachment, that his availability and freedom arise, and his capacity to carry out to the end the mission entrusted to him by his Father. For this he was born in a manger far from his homeland and died on a cross as a criminal. That is why his friends were simple fishermen and humble women from a small village, and his way of life, an itinerant walk... Poverty has a great value when it is born of a free and coherent choice made from love. It is then that it enriches.

The need for material goods is indisputable. Certain possessions favour the growth and development of a dignified life. We need a house, food, medicine, education... But the desire to have sometimes becomes insatiable, compulsive, and if it is not properly managed and regulated according to principles and values, it turns into slavery and becomes a source of division, injustice and segregation. The desire to have must be evangelised to make

room for a poor heart purified of petty interests, ready to serve with an attitude of solidarity, and full of compassion for the suffering of others.

When proposing religious life for a young person today, we must not forget what Pope Francis said in his apostolic exhortation *Christus Vivit*,³ in speaking to young people: "So that young people can fulfil their purpose in life, there must be a time of generous commitment, whole-hearted dedication, sincere offering and sacrifices that are difficult but are ultimately fruitful." (CV, 108). The vow of poverty cannot be restricted to asking permission to use one thing or to have another. It is a commitment to live soberly, in community, in solidarity with others, making an option for the most disadvantaged, and advocating for social justice. "The language that young people understand is that of those who give their lives (...) And those who, for all their limitations and weaknesses, try to live their faith with integrity." (CV, 211).

Evangelical poverty is demanding. It is an attitude of the heart lived with inner freedom, expressed in a simple life always ready to share with confidence what one has, bearing witness to *the treasure found in the field* (Mt 13:44). It implies detachment from possessions and prominence, to walk alongside those who lack the resources and possibilities to reverse their situation. To

³ CV: Pope Francis, Post synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *Christus Vivit* (2019).

accompany those who struggle daily to escape from a poverty that they have not chosen and that confines them to living on the margins, on the peripheries, excluded from the wellbeing of social life.

II. CELIBACY FOR THE SAKE OF THE KINGDOM, A WAY OF LOVING

Any reflection on consecrated chastity today must begin by pointing out positively and clearly the value of human sexuality. Willed by God, created by him and a reflection of his Trinitarian being (Gen 1:27), sexuality is a basic human dimension which determines the whole of life. Human beings are sexual, and this is manifested in their way of thinking, feeling, communicating, and relating to others... "The capacities of human sexuality are not merely genital, but relational, communicative, cognitive, affective... since the aspects of sexuality embrace the whole human person. Through sexuality we enter the mystery of love" (Port, 26).⁴ It impels us to go out of ourselves in search of another to love. It is a force, an energy given to us by God himself when he created us, to enter into relationship with other people.

"Young people recognise that the body and sexuality are of crucial importance in their lives and in the growth of their identity. However, in a world that overemphasises

⁴ Cosme Puerto, O.P., PLIEGO, *New Life* 2336.

sexuality, it is difficult to maintain a good relationship with one's own body and to live affective relationships serenely" (CV, 81).

The social environment today has trivialised sexual behaviour in very extreme ways. The sexual is easily identified with the genital, and the sexual is often not considered to be linked to the affective, to commitment, to responsibility. We have gone from a taboo that was not talked about naturally between parents and children - which is why sexual education was frankly neglected - to very trivial conceptions that distort the meaning of sexuality, threatening the integral development of the individual.

In this context, religious celibacy has a very negative appreciation. Very few refer to consecrated chastity as love or recognise it as a path to human fulfilment and as a source of apostolic fruitfulness. It is seen rather as a difficult and painful renunciation, and in some cases as the castration of a fundamental dimension of the person. And I do not think that there is not some responsibility for this in the way celibacy has been lived, especially if it was once thought that consecrated chastity implied not loving and not having very deep relationships of friendship.

In the biblical mentality, which emphasises procreation as the way to realise the human vocation of being God's image, celibacy practically does not exist. The example of Jeremiah, whom God asks to remain celibate, makes him a sign of the cata-

strophes to come (cf. Jer 16,2). It is Jesus who introduces this way of life, which *is not for everyone but only for those to whom it has been granted, and which has its meaning in the proclamation of the Kingdom of God* (Mt 19,11). Jesus values marriage and the family, but he is celibate because his commitment to the Kingdom is above all else and relativises everything. His mission concentrates all his vital energies, including his sexual energies.

Christian celibacy is not the result of a personal effort of ascetic practices and painful renunciations. It is a spiritual charism, a free gift of the Spirit which enables the celibate to transform his or her sexual energies into a true potential for life in order to serve the Kingdom and to develop universal love. This does not mean, of course, that the sexual appetite is inhibited and that the difficulties inherent in the control of the impulse are lessened. Hence the importance of an adequate and solid formation to live a celibate sexuality. There is a need to recognise that the sexual impulse, though powerful, is manageable, and that calm, mature and conscious control of the impulse is not equivalent to harmful and neurotic repression. On the contrary, it forms free, self-possessed persons capable of gratuitous love.

Consecrated chastity is not simple sexual abstinence. That would be to restrict the sexual to the genital without considering all the aspects involved. Celibate sexuality is achieved through a dynamic process which encompasses the whole of life and which grows within the framework of human maturity, in

the identification with one's own gender, in the relationship with oneself and with others, in the expression of affection, ... The path of becoming celibate implies personal work, development, and growth. Ongoing formation is required to move forward, to embrace the cause of the Kingdom as an absolute, and a life of prayer and discernment is needed to recognise and strengthen the charism of celibacy, given by the Spirit, to love with the love of Jesus.

III. THE VOW OF OBEDIENCE: LISTENING AND DISCERNMENT

The biblical book of Genesis offers us a good reference to enter a reflection on obedience. Creation emerges from the voice of God, from the Word that He pronounces. *God said*, is repeated for each day, in the text of Creation ... *and so it was, it was so*, is repeated each time. God says and it is done, because the word that goes forth from his mouth does not return without accomplishing that for which it was sent (Is 55,11). Creation responds to his plan, to his creative will, and all is well, and all is good because God's voice has been heard (Gen 1). On the contrary, the disobedience of Adam and Eve consists in the fact that they listened to another's voice: the voice of the serpent (Gen 3,1-13). Thus, harmony was broken and the whole creation "was unable to attain its purpose" (Rom 8,20).

But God does not abandon his plan and promises redemption (Gen 3:15). And he is going to prepare a listening people for it. An obedient people who will put his will into practice. "Hear, O Israel" (Dt 6:1-13) is the beginning of the most important prayer of the chosen people; the one that is included in their creed and which they will have to repeat several times a day. In the language of the Bible, obedience has its counterpart in listening. "Ah, if only my people would listen to me, if only Israel would walk in my ways", says the psalm (Ps 81:14).

The history of God's people is a history of listening and rebellion, of covenant and disobedience. The prophets will be men who listen and therefore speak in the name of God. *And at the end of time, Mary, the new Eve, will know how to listen. "Let it be done to me according to your word"*, she replies to the angel (Lk 1:38). And then, the new Adam is born, the *obedient* one par excellence, who on entering this world says: *"Behold, I come, for it is written of me in the scroll of the book, to do your will, O God"* (Heb 10:7).

There are many biblical texts that enlighten us in the understanding of obedience. St. John presents Jesus with a clear awareness of his mission as one who is sent and who obeys the Father's plan. The Gospels show him in an attitude of constant listening. In prayer alone, in his attention to life, to people, to situations? This is why he is able to say: *"My food is to do the will of the Father who sent me, and to accomplish his work"* (Jn 4,34); or

again: "*I have come down from heaven not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me*" (Jn 6,38). His whole life is marked by listening to and fulfilling the will of God.

Religious obedience is not about following the orders or commands of others. It is intimately related to listening to God, to his plan, to the mission he has entrusted to us. And to obey God is to allow oneself to be led by the Spirit to do his will.

Etymologically, the word obedience means listening (the verb to obey comes from the Latin *ob-audire*), and in keeping with biblical thought, religious obedience is to listen to the voice of God. We can say that the religious vow is the promise to continually seek (listen), and to faithfully practice, God's will (put it into practice). The only one who deserves our radical obedience is God. Mediations, whether from superiors, the community, the rule, or any other, are the help we receive to recognise God's will in life. When we are aware of our fragility and the many forms of self-deception, we seek and are grateful for these supports. Often, we need to give up our own ideas, our own personal desires, to accept the decisions that have been made in community or in the discernment of authority. And silence and prayer are required because "only those who are willing to listen have the freedom to renounce their own partial or insufficient point of view" (CV, 284).

Our present culture identifies obedience with lack of autonomy, with submission and lack of maturity. And there may be some reason for this, when abuses of power have been committed, or when we have known very dominant authorities who restrict the freedom of others, or very immature people in their relationships with authority. The challenge today is to recover the essence of obedience, within the framework of the discernment of God's will. Obedience is not passive, it is an active search for what God wants from each one of us, to put it into practice. This dynamic involves the desire for power, a human drive that inhabits us, and which is important for the development of the personality. We need certain quotas of power to grow, and to exercise them in order to learn to make decisions and to take responsibility for our own lives. Personal gifts, abilities and talents are sources of power, which, when experienced in a balanced way, allow us to grow.

However, there are problems when we do not learn to manage our lust for power and control of others, turning them into objects of our needs or whims. That is why it is so important to control this impulse and learn to manage it in the service of the community, the mission, and the life we want to live. Today's young people are very sensitive to groups. They belong to groups, they meet in assemblies where they dialogue, discuss, and make decisions. They can understand religious obedience when it is focused on the joint mission of the community or Congregation, and when it arises from dialogue and discernment that seeks above all to obey God.

TO FINISH

In general, the laity appreciate these commitments of the religious. Young people, some more than others, are open to understand them. Young people's sensitivity is always ready to react to poverty, injustice, and human suffering. It may be a little more difficult for them to understand celibacy, because even chastity does not make much sense in the present youth environment. Is it true that we are indebted to formation on this matter? Obedience can be understood if it is between sisters and brothers who are all adults. But it is worth asking ourselves whether we have not caricatured the vows a little, emphasising the renunciations they imply instead of highlighting the life they offer.

Young religious must understand that it is up to them to renew religious life. In times of crisis, of difficulties, they are the hope for the future. What was said about the Church in the final document of the Synod of Bishops, and which the Pope quotes in his exhortation *Christus Vivit*, is also valid for consecrated life. "This dark moment, 'with the valuable help of young people, can truly be an opportunity for a reform of a historic nature', to open up to a new Pentecost" (CV,102).

Religious vows have a prophetic meaning. They announce a new way of living, which anticipates a different and better world. Young people want this new world, they value the generosity of

self-giving, the joy of daily work and the fullness of an austere, consistent, and self-sacrificing life. There are many testimonies of religious men and women who can teach them "that there is greater joy in giving than in receiving, and that love is not only shown in words, but also in actions" (CV, 197). It depends on this that the vows be understood as an alternative of a fully realized life, at the service of the Kingdom of God.

SEDUCED BY THE LORD

The inexhaustible source of the vow of poverty, chastity and obedience

Alberto Toutin ssc
Superior General

I. INTRODUCTION

I share with you these reflections on the vow of poverty, chastity and obedience which defines and structures consecrated life in the Church. The meaning and mission of religious life is to witness, through its members and the services they render, to the inexhaustible richness of Jesus, the fascination exercised by his person and his Gospel. This richness is incarnated in the diversity of charisms and forms of religious life in the Church, servant of humanity. Our religious family brings its own particular colouring to the vast range of colours that give a face to Jesus and his Spirit. The charism received and matured by our founders consecrates us to God's love for humanity, manifested in the hearts of Jesus and Mary. This is what we take places on the day of our religious profession in the Congregation. However, in these present times, I perceive such elements, which may seem clear in this presentation, as being not so inspiring for us, as brothers and sisters of the Congregation. I see this both in the

places where the Congregation is welcoming many vocations, as well as in those places where, for many years, there have been none. This is neither a question about numbers nor about survival. It is simply a question about life today, about what makes us live and die as religious consecrated to the Sacred Hearts.

To make us more sensitive to this vital question raised by the vow of poverty, chastity and obedience in the Congregation, I present what I have seen and heard in meetings with the brothers during the course of my visits:

When I meet with our young men in initial formation, I notice a diversity of motivations with which they wish to follow Jesus in our religious family today. In general, they bring questions and fresh perspectives to our Congregation, to our apostolates and choices. I also see in them a sensitivity, on the one hand, to the coherence between what is lived and transmitted in the houses of formation and what we live in the apostolic communities and, on the other hand, a sensitivity to the quality of our fraternal life. They find it incomprehensible that brothers do not speak to each other or to hear disrespectful comments being made by a brother about a brother.

Among the brothers who have been around the longest and who live in apostolic communities, it is rare that someone speaks to me about how religious profession sustains and inspires him in his life. Rather, what I see are difficulties in living some dimen-

sion of the vow: chastity can be a constant struggle whereas poverty seems to raise concerns in only a few. Very often brothers share with me their difficulties with the vow of obedience, on account of some conflict with the current or former superior, or because of a change in the mission which came as a surprise, or even because of a decision of a provincial chapter which, badly taken on board, remains like a wound which has not closed for years. And if ever the subject of the vows comes up more explicitly, what I hear more about is the renunciations and the privations they involve and, at best, what they were told about the vows during the novitiate, 10, 20 or 40 years ago. But, in general, I see neither a positive understanding of the content of the vows nor an enrichment of that understanding emerging from the changes or struggles that each brother has experienced in living them.

This poses a challenge which I would formulate as follows: drawing from our experience, paying attention to the present context and inspired by our SSCC spirituality, what, today, can we say that is both positive and inspiring about the vow of poverty, chastity and obedience?

In order to examine this question in greater depth and to find elements of an answer, I propose a twofold key to the reading of the vows:

1. The vocation to religious life is part of the baptismal vocation. Its specificity is its prophetic dimension, that is to say that it recalls and anticipates the new life received in baptism and leads us, from then on and forever, to participation in the life of God, in holiness. It is thus a matter of welcoming and unfolding the vocation to be, in Jesus, sons and daughters of God, his Father and our Father, and brothers and sisters to each other. This includes the whole of creation, which bears within itself the traces of its creator, who willed it to be good and entrusted it to the care of human beings. In other words, the religious vocation, through the vow of poverty, chastity and obedience, is called to make more transparent these essential elements of our filial and fraternal condition which characterise life in Christ and which we have received in baptism.
2. The vow of chastity, poverty and obedience is rooted in some fundamental anthropological dimensions: the experience of sexuality and affectivity in our relationship with others, our relationship to goods and freedom, from which, through choices and decisions, we orientate and assume the course of our existence. These dimensions receive new meaning, orientation and conditions for development after our encounter with Jesus and his Gospel. "I follow a man who took me by the centre of life, my deep inner root, the best of myself" (Esteban Gumucio). To be touched by Jesus, by his Gospel, is to allow these

human dimensions to be transformed by him. Religious life is thus called to "testify to the profound anthropological significance" (*Vita Consecrata*, 87) of the vow of chastity, poverty and obedience or a "profound Christian humanism".⁵

II. SOME MILESTONES IN THE HISTORY OF THE VOWS

Without claiming to be exhaustive, I would like to point out some milestones in the history of the vows in religious life. These are inspirational milestones which have survived to the present day and which call each one of us to continually re-appropriate them.

At the source of the vows is the newness and the good news that points to the presence of Jesus and the freshness of his call to "follow him". It is about an encounter with Him, always taking place through His witnesses. It is they, with their lives, who lead others to drink from the source of their transformation, Jesus. This translates into individual responses, into forms of eremitical, community or cenobitic life. The Gospels constitute the fundamental rule or orientation of the Christian life. Those who embrace

⁵ Francisco, Address of the Holy Father to the participants of the V Convention of the Italian Church. Cathedral of Santa Maria del Fiore, Florence, Tuesday, 10 November 2015. Cf. https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/november/documents/papa-francesco_20151110_firenze-convegno-chiesa-italiana.html

this way of life express it through a form of celibate life, poverty and community of goods - as in the first Christian communities. This is expressed, in some way, in a type of commitment-promise, resolution, or public vow made before others. Access to Jesus and his Gospel is always mediated through hearers and readers of His Word and through this experience they become "Fathers" (*Abbas*) or "Mothers" (*Ammas*) of the community.⁶ In these one could expect to find advice and a coherent testimony of life. Following Jesus and his Gospel leads to an encounter with his other disciples from whom one receives support and with whom one builds a new family: a family no longer based on blood ties, but on the recognition of oneself as sons and daughters of God, the Father of Jesus and our Father, and brothers and sisters in Jesus and with each other.

Nevertheless, from the beginning, religious life has been rooted in the Christian life understood as "living in Christ" through the acceptance of the Word of God, (Scripture) and lived among the faithful, with baptism and the Eucharist being the ways to configure to Christ: we die with him in order to rise with him.

Very soon those who wish to follow Jesus in his way of life run into the same difficulties of understanding and the same

⁶ *Deti e Fatti delle donne del deserto* (by Lisa Cremaschi), Qiqajon, Bose Community, 2018.

struggles that the disciples experienced and that the Gospels narrate. Discovering the beauty of the Gospel also involves taking on its demands. In order to be ready to listen to the Word of Jesus and to allow oneself to be transformed by it, it is necessary to wage a tough battle with oneself, with the impulses and shadows that inhabit the human being. Every authentic encounter with the other presupposes that we make room in ourselves to welcome and receive the other.

It is the same with the Lord Jesus who, in order to become our guest and interior master, requires that we arrange our inner dwelling place. This is expressed through asceticism and distancing ourselves from the values of the world ("*fuga mundi*"). This distancing responds to a lucid perception that the world from which we come and in which we live, we carry more or less consciously within us. To distance oneself from the world is to prepare oneself for a purification of the elements that remain in our heart and mark it. To move away physically, to live in the "desert" or "out of town" places is simply to signify a break. The most difficult thing is the battle that has to be waged with oneself, alone as a hermit, in the intimacy of a cell, within the four walls of the monastery. In this combat with the impulses, wounds and shadows, the "athletes" of Christ, guided by the Spirit and sustained by the mediation of the community and the spiritual fathers and mothers, are trained. Embracing the life of Jesus and allowing oneself to be conformed to his Word requires a "*conversatio morum*", a transformation, a conversion of our habits and our ways of thinking and living to make our lives more in

conformity with the Gospel. The non-naïve detachment from the world and the spiritual combat that accompanies it, aim at disposing the heart to self-denial and the consequent renunciation of the vices and habits that have become hardened in each one of us. These renunciations are understood as "ruptures" that follow the principle of John Cassian "to go out of the flesh while remaining in the body" ("*exire de carne in corpore commemorantem*").⁷ Basically, it is to make the body of each person and the community of brothers and sisters a dwelling place where God dwells and acts. Everything has as its "aim" to progressively gain purity of heart, which is what allows us to see God in all things, in our brothers and sisters and even in our obscurities. And its "end" is to belong more and more to the Kingdom of God which is already in our midst. A religious life thus expresses the fulfilment of the baptismal promises.

Later, the emergence of the mendicant orders - Franciscans, Dominicans - expressed a desire for a "more" Christian life and a "reform" of the Church as mediator and bearer of the Gospel of Jesus. Some of the values that will shape a new style of religious life are poverty, itinerancy and minority. These values would be incarnated though not without new struggles and asceticism by the mendicant orders. They remind all Christians and the Church of the values that are part of life in Christ. The radical nature of the Gospel is for everyone. A group of men and women then

⁷ Jean Cassien, *Institutions Cénobitiques*, Cerf (« Sources Chrétiennes », 109) Paris, 1965, Book VI, Chaps. 4, 6, 6-7.

decide to give it body and visibility in a way of life. This is what Francis expresses in the *Regula Bullata* (1223) as the core of the life of the Friars Minor: "The Rule of the Friars Minor is this, namely, to observe the Holy Gospel of Our Lord Jesus Christ, by living in obedience without anything of our own, and in chastity." (*Regula Secunda*, 1). However, along with this, a dual understanding of the Christian life gradually appeared, that of the 'simply' baptised and that of those who aspired to greater evangelical perfection as expressed in the vows. This led to a distancing of religious life both from the baptismal Christian life and the common vocation to holiness of the Church, the human race and creation.

Later on the Reformation and Counter-Reformation obliged religious men and women to a new purification of their fidelity to the Gospel and to rethink the action of grace in a humanity that is good, but inhabited by sin. It became a question of refining the discernment of spiritual motions in the human heart, of adapting the community means of formation. Seminaries were born at this time. From such places, the aim was to promote a new asceticism more oriented towards preparing candidates for religious life for the mission. There was also an overvaluation of the priestly role of religious life, especially in apostolic communities. The consequences of such a hypertrophy of the priestly function, especially in the exercise of power without the necessary balances and controls, we can see today in the abuses of conscience, power and sexual abuse in various parts of the world. Above all, this ministerial (apostolic) impulse obliged us to rethink the signif-

icance of religious life and to adapt its forms in order to contribute to the mission of the Church. All of this took place in an increasingly urban context wherein the challenge was how to be a sign of the radical nature of the Gospel and its transforming capacity in the heart of emerging cities.

Apostolic religious life - like ours - was thus confronted with a new challenge when it had to reposition itself in a Church in a Western-European world that was organised around new hegemonic values based on the triad of liberty, fraternity and equality. At the same time there was a renewed awareness of the need to proclaim the Gospel to the ends of the world. New values and the proclamation of the Gospel in "unknown lands" for religious meant having to adapt new lifestyles in their understanding and living of the vows. It was also necessary to open up to a different understanding of the Gospel, no longer understood as being proclaimed by its bearers, but also received by them in their encounter with new cultures. This involved for individuals and communities taking on the inevitable asceticisms and struggles so that the Gospel might be translated into a coherent lifestyle that bore witness to its transforming power.

The Second Vatican Council brought about an ecclesiological shift characterised by a renewed understanding of the Church as the pilgrim People of God journeying through history, the Body of Christ, composed of the baptised, bearers of a common dignity as daughters and sons of God and brothers and sisters in

Jesus. In this community, the Spirit gives rise to various charisms, gifts and ministries among the baptised for the building up of the Church and the service of the world. Religious life, as part of this pilgrim Body which is the Church, is rooted in baptismal life. The different charisms which animate religious life seek to animate forms of life in which the inexhaustible beauty and demands of the Gospel are expressed. At the same time, the diversity of charisms recalls and thus anticipates the "universal vocation to holiness" (LG 40; 42) to which the Church is called, as is the human race and the whole of creation. All this is lived out in the concreteness of particular churches and cultures. Therefore, in the logic of incarnation, religious life and living out of the vows offers a variety of ways to realise human existence in conformity with the Gospel. This entailed, on the one hand, overcoming that vision of religious life as a superior state of perfect life within the Church. Personal and institutional failures in religious life are helping to remind us of the illusory nature of that conception, without, however, renouncing its ambition. On the other hand, it involved the reinsertion of religious life in the journey of all the baptised faithful, stimulated by its witness of holiness and thus rediscovering "the spiritual taste of being a people" (EG 268-274).

Gospel memory

This brief survey of some of the milestones in the history of religious life seeks to make us aware of the essentially dialogical

dynamic which characterises it. A dialogue between men and women, sons and daughters of their time, marked by their encounter with Jesus and his Gospel. Their good news consists in having been found by Jesus who calls each one by name to follow him. To welcome this Good News and to make room in our lives for Jesus and his Gospel, which transforms us and makes us more transparent to him, means taking up struggles and entering into an asceticism that accompanies our whole life.

The vows of chastity, poverty and obedience remind us of this encounter with the person of Jesus, his fascination and his demands. They set us on the way to seek and follow Jesus, with all the baptised, and with those who wish to follow him in a common way of life in religious life. Evangelical radicalism, asceticism-rupture and conversion are all part of the Christian life of every baptised person. Religious vows are a response to the desire for "more" that dwells in the hearts of men and women who embrace this way of life. "For those who respond to this call, it is indeed a question of going further, of loving more and of serving better - better than what one was living until then, but no better than the others."⁸ Therein lies the ambition for perfection. This vow is a call to belong more and more to the Lord and to one another, in a religious family. Therefore the

⁸ Philippe Lécrivain, *Une manière de vivre. Les religieux aujourd'hui*. Lessius (La part-Dieu, 13); Brussels 2009, 52.

religious life as part of the People of God in his journey, reminds him the challenging beauty of the Gospel.

III. SOME SUGGESTIONS FOR A RE-SIGNIFICATION OF THE VOWS

In the following, I propose some reflections which can help us to re-signify the positive and inspiring content of the vows in general, and of the specific dimensions contained in poverty, chastity and obedience.

1. The vows in general

If I speak of the vows in the plural, it is only to highlight that they are rooted in the various dimensions of human existence. Of course, these dimensions form part of one and the same person who gives his or her life to the Lord in a religious family through the vows.

They touch on certain basic instincts of human existence. They have to do with our instincts of survival, possession, belonging, defence and protection. The vows are a way of evangelising them, that is to say, of assuming them, purifying them and orienting them to the service of the Gospel. To profess vows of poverty, chastity and obedience is not to deny our humanity, but

to allow the power of grace that configures us to Jesus to work at these basic levels of existence.

To see more clearly how the vows direct our instincts towards configuration to Christ, we can turn our gaze to his pedagogy. In his various encounters, Jesus does not mistreat the instinctive forces that his message touches and stirs, but recognises, welcomes and channels them. Thus, the ambition that existed among the disciples about who would be the greatest, or the most important, Jesus redirects towards paths of humanisation through service to others: "If anyone wants to be first, let him be last of all and servant of all" (Mk. 9:35). Or, in the encounter with the rich young man who genuinely aspires to the life of God, Jesus perceives an attachment to goods, which hinders this aspiration: "Jesus looked at him and loved him and said to him, 'You lack one thing; go, sell what you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me'" (Mk. 10:21). Jesus accepts him with all his humanity, with his shadows, his instinctive strengths and his genuine desires and offers him perspectives in which he can grow in freedom, especially in his relationship to goods. He invites him to set out on a journey with Jesus and on the journey, to enter into a new relationship with the poor and with goods, marked no longer by possession and attachment, but by gift and gratuitousness.

The vows are a way of responding to the way God wants to be Father to all humanity. To discover what that means, Jesus,

the Son, makes it known in his own actions. By following and imitating him, his disciples can enter into the relationship of intimacy he cultivates with his Father. We know from experience and from re-reading our personal history, that the relationship of each of us with our fathers has lights and shadows. There are joys and also wounds, forgetfulness and abandonment that all need to be accepted and healed. The vows, for their part, help us to enter into the feelings, attitudes and choices of the Son Jesus in his relationship with his Father who wants to be our Father too. Jesus has twinned himself with our humanity and has allowed God his Father to enter our humanity in this way, through his filial and fraternal roots.

The configuring power of making vows to Jesus allows those of us who profess them to open ourselves progressively to a relationship with God, our Father, as Jesus did, placing Abba and his will at the centre of our own life. This implies that the vows lead to a progressive decentring of oneself in order to focus more and more on the things of the Father: So do not worry and say, 'What are we to eat?' or 'What are we to drink?' or 'What are we to wear?' All these things the pagans seek. Your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. But seek first the kingdom (of God) and his righteousness, and all these things will be given you besides. (Mt. 6:31-33).

God's paternal care for his children is offered as a new existential security that takes over the instincts of survival and

protection. From this new security, living as a son and daughter takes on a new meaning and a new form of fulfilment: we give ourselves and place ourselves at the service of the God who wants to reign as Father over humanity.

The vows, moreover, also imply taking on the way Jesus "lives" his life. After announcing his death and resurrection, he offers the key for those who wish to follow him: from his perspective it is a matter of learning to live with the paradox of "losing" one's life "for my sake and for the sake of the Gospel" (Mk. 8,35) in order to "find it or to win it". This may be incomprehensible to a culture that tends to over-appreciate the value of authenticity, of being oneself, and which encourages each person to develop his or her potential to the full. The insistence on these values, however attractive it may be as a discourse, in practice often generates frustration, as it does not take into account the basic inequalities that exist between people, nor does it seek to create the conditions for everyone to fulfil themselves effectively with others and for everyone.

But Jesus, in the way he lives his life, offers important guidelines that structure the basic movement of the vows. In the first place, life takes on meaning when it is given away, even to the point of losing it and thereby regaining it, enriched. This is motivated by the decisive encounter with the person of Jesus, who constitutes a permanent reference point and an inner impulse.

The same Spirit of Jesus acts in his disciples and brings forth from within them the filial condition that calls out to God: Abba.

Like all genuine interpersonal relationships, this is done through the risk and adventure of freedom, where each one progressively opens up to mutual knowledge and trust, by making the other's desires one's own and seeking their good. It is about embracing a person, Jesus, and embracing with him, his transforming message, the Gospel. This is not something done once and for all. It is about the daily losing of one's life in the manner of Jesus, to find it as he did, dying to rise again, like the grain that falls to the ground and dies and bears fruit in abundance, like salt that disappears and gives flavour and enriches the earth.

Jesus also offers a paradoxical way of finding life: by denying oneself. This is only possible when one does not make oneself the centre of all one's efforts and projects, but instead makes more and more room for the other, for the neighbour and for Jesus, who becomes the centre of one's own life. One finds life by placing the other at the centre, to the point that, if one selflessly seeks the good of one's brother or sister, or makes one's own what Jesus seeks - the Kingdom - and those whom he loves with predilection - "the least of my brothers and sisters" the "lost" life becomes enriched by new relationships and grows in the life of others.

A lucid example of a living a full life according to the logic of Jesus's logic of losing one's life for his sake and for the sake of his Gospel can be found in the spiritual testament of the Cistercian prior of Thiberine in Algiers. Two years before his assassination (21 May 1996) and in full knowledge of the risks he and his brothers in the community were taking, he decided, in spite of everything, to remain in that country. He placed at the centre of this lucid and courageous decision his love for the country and its people and his love for the Lord Jesus and for his Father. Losing his life in this way did not diminish or frustrate him. That was the small victory of the violent. United to the surrender of Jesus and having the same feelings as he did, life opened up to a fullness that could only be received in the hope of the face-to-face encounter with God:

"This is what I shall be able to do, God willing: immerse my gaze in that of the Father to contemplate with him His children of Islam just as He sees them, all shining with the glory of Christ, the fruit of His Passion, filled with the Gift of the Spirit whose secret joy will always be to establish communion and restore the likeness, playing with the differences.

For this life lost, totally mine and totally theirs, I thank God, who seems to have willed it entirely for the sake of that JOY in everything and in spite of everything."⁹

⁹ Spiritual testimony of Fr. Christian de Chergé (written in Algeria 1 December, 1993 and 1 January 1994 Thiberine and opened on Pentecost Sunday, 26 May,

2. The vows in particular

To speak of the vows is to speak of a life given, given for Jesus and his Gospel. Bearing our name and our history, it is a response to the love that Jesus has for each one of us and which we discover always precedes and exceeds us. This is why the response to this love in religious life through a single profession is gathered in our Congregation in a single vow, which touches on the dimensions of our freedom with regards to goods, to others, to God and to his will, and which binds us to our religious family of brothers and sisters. This is what we express in our profession:

"I ... make the vow of chastity, poverty and obedience as a brother of the Congregation of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary in whose service I wish to live and die".
(Const. 17)

Each time we take part in a religious profession or renew our vows at the end of an annual retreat or an annual assembly, we once again become aware of the fact that following the logic of Jesus, our life is to be handed over, to be given away: we are to live and die in the service of a love that precedes and which

1996). Cf. <https://www.moinestibhirine.org/es/documents/le-testament/51-testament-spirituel-de-christian-de-cherge>
[Visited 19 February, 2022].

establishes us, making us into a visible body in the Church, of brothers and sisters.

Let us now take a closer look at each of the dimensions of self-giving in chastity, poverty and obedience.

2.1. Chastity in celibacy

What is implied in this vow touches on our instincts of survival and possession (relational). It also has to do with our sexuality, affectivity and our capacity to love.¹⁰ This implies taking charge of the work on oneself that involves recognising one's own sexual identity, with its history, its joys, shadows and sufferings (traumas and insecurities) and maturing in it. In fact, chastity is neither primarily nor directly identified with sexual abstinence, but above all with a purity of all the senses and of the heart. This is what Jesus warns when one looks at a woman with desire

¹⁰ The 2007 film *La vie en Rose*, by Olivier Dahan is about the singer Édith Piaf (1915-1963), whose life was tormented by a tragic love affair with Marcel Cerdan and by the death of her only son. At the end of the film, Edith Piaf appears by the sea and a journalist comes to interview her. He asks her: "Do you pray?" "Yes, because I believe in love". Later he asks: "If you had to give advice to a woman, what advice would you give her?" "Love". "And to a young woman?" "Love". "And to a child?" "Love".

(https://subslikescript.com/movie/La_Vie_En_Rose-450188 [Visited 19 February, 2022])

(wanting to possess, having no respect for limits), "he has already committed adultery with her in his heart" (Mt. 5:27).

In positive terms, chastity, in general, is closer to the beatitude pronounced in favour of the pure in heart (for they shall see God), in those in whom one finds a healthy and integrated living of sexuality and affectivity. In short, if we look at its etymology, "chastity (*castus*) is that which rejects incest (*in-castus*)".¹¹ Incest happens when distance is not kept and the otherness of the other (which is not only the difference), is not respected; on the contrary, incest is when the fusion, attachment, possession or instrumentalisation of the other as an object of consumption or narcissistic satisfaction is sought. Chastity is a way of respectfully loving the other. Incest is basically the destruction of the other.

From this point of view, there is the chastity of spouses and also the chastity of celibates. Those of us who profess the vow of chastity in celibacy have sexual abstinence as one of its concrete expressions. But it does not stop there, it goes much further. It is about maturing in the awareness and experience of a sexuality/affectivity that assumes our personal history with its lights, doubts and shadows, illuminating a serene experience of affectivity and sexuality, in an ongoing search for a dynamic balance.

¹¹ Enzo Bianchi, "la castità nelle relazioni umane" in *L'Osservatore Romano*, 9 February 2017, 1.5.

For this, it is essential to be formed and to allow ourselves to be formed in this area, to equip ourselves with personal tools and to favour community contexts that make possible a healthy experience of our affectivity and sexuality. In the times we live in, it seems to me especially important that we can create spaces in our life communities to grow together in our sexuality and affectivity with a sense of self-giving, assuming the renunciation of a life as a couple and having a family. All this, so that we might grow in our capacity to love, seeking and favouring the good of others, in the way of Jesus.

In this regard, we have community and individual formation programmes on affectivity and sexuality, both in the houses of initial formation and in ongoing formation sessions. However, it is difficult to speak confidently, serenely and without fear of being judged by others about living our sexuality and affectivity as celibates. We can give advice to others in a pastoral relationship (context), but when it comes to talking about our own experience of sexuality and affectivity, sharing in this area among ourselves is difficult. We do not know how to do it, we are shy, we do not dare or we do not find the conditions to confidently do so. How good it is for us when brothers open their hearts and confidently share their experience of chastity in celibacy, their struggles, their infidelities, the help that allowed them to return to the faithful love of the Lord and to the community of the brothers! How good it is for us to have friendships - outside and inside the community - with whom, in all sincerity and with hopeful realism, we grow together in our capacity to love and

support each other in moments of fragility! How sad it is to see brothers who do not love each other, whose relationships are marked by coldness, ill-digested wounds, fanned resentments. I believe that it would do our experience of celibate chastity a great deal of good if we helped each other to accept our sexual identity, including the sexual diversity that exists among us. It would change the way we look at each other and make us more empathetic towards the people we accompany in pastoral service. There is still some way to go, for the joys, doubts and struggles in this area will be with us until the end of our days... "...until 5 minutes after death..." as a venerable brother used to confess to me with humour.

All of the above has as our source and horizon the person of Jesus. As religious we can turn our gaze to him who decided to live his affectivity and sexuality as a celibate. His celibacy has to be seen in the context of the totality of the relationships that Jesus wove with the disciples, with the men, women and children who came to meet him. In the various encounters that punctuated the life of Jesus we see that his sexuality/affectivity and capacity to love made visible the love of the Father for all, especially for the little ones, the poor, the excluded. In this context his celibacy is eloquent, it speaks and attracts, it is present in all his relationships. In this wealth of relationships, in his encounters of "intimacy" in prayer with God, Jesus discovers in God the loving Father whose criteria and ways of loving become as necessary as food. His gestures are marked by a profound respect for the person before him. "What do you want

me to do for you?" (Lk. 18:41) Jesus says to a blind man who comes to meet him as he approaches Jericho. And in the righteousness of his gestures and words, those who meet him praise the greatness of God (cf. Mk 9:43). They see unmistakably that it is God himself who is loving them through Jesus.

Since the reason for chastity in celibacy is Jesus and his way of loving, it is essential to cultivate times of intimacy with him: in daily prayer and adoration, in the celebration of the Eucharist, in the study and contemplation of the Gospels - understanding all of this as a way to learn from him to love as he does. When we are present in such moment of intimacy with Jesus, we are reminded again and again that it is because of Him and His Gospel that we embrace this way of life. In such moments we allow him to purify our desires, sustain us in our struggles, and shape our intelligence, sensitivity, affectivity and sexuality so that we enter into his heart, "into the inner dynamism of Christ's love for his Father and for the world" (Constitutions 6).

Making room in our hearts, in our affectivity and sexuality for Jesus to love through our words and gestures involves the hard work of asceticism, of self-emptying. The figure of Francis of Assisi can inspire us in this respect. His way of loving that made him capable of twinning himself with the men and women of his time, with creation, even with death, "sister death", was to let his Lord and Beloved Jesus love through him, to the point of marking him with his own wounds. In order to make himself

ready for Jesus to love in and through him Francis' life was marked by a progressive self-emptying: his relationship with his father in Assisi, the leaving behind family securities, his time with the poor in Rome, sharing and enduring their conditions of life, and at the Portiuncula before his death, when he asked to be left naked on the bare earth to fight the last battle with the adversary, with no other certainty than his belief that the Lord does not abandon his children.¹² In this progressive stripping of himself throughout his life, Francis bore truth to the dynamic inscribed in the response to the vocation of the disciples of Jesus who "left everything and followed him" (Lk. 5:11). It is true that they left everything for Jesus, in order to receive everything from Him.

For us too, following the same dynamic of discipleship as that of Francis of Assisi - letting Jesus love through us - implies a process of leaving behind everything. We know from experience that this is not something that happens once and for all, it is a journey that is never quite finished, for we are continually giving up everything through life: family, home, brothers, sisters, mother, father, wife, sons, daughters, property, ideas or even our own intelligence, which could function as a false security. All this takes place so that we may grow free from the desire to

¹² Marco Bartoli, *la nudità di Francesco. Riflessione storiche sulla spogliazione del Povero di Assisi*. Edizione Biblioteca Francescana, Presenza di san Francesco, 66. Milan 2018. English Edition: Francis' Nudity: Historical Reflection on the Stripping of the Poor Man of Assisi (2021)

possess oneself, others, God. It is by increasingly stripping ourselves, that we come to belong to the Lord and to the community of his disciples. There is a risk to such a dynamic, as there is with any adventure that compromises our freedom. What is at stake is the leaving behind of sources of security (home, family, relationships), in order to be drawn into a new kind of foundational relationship with Jesus and his Gospel. But this adventure is not reckless. It involves a conscious risk: "for my sake and the Gospel" (Mk 10,29). We do all of this not to end up with an emasculated or humanly diminished life, marked merely by renunciation but rather to have a new form of fullness of life, "the hundredfold" that comes with enjoying new styles of human relationships broadened by faith - homes, brothers, sisters, mothers and children" and realistically "with persecutions". The latter, because there is no human experience of encounter with others and the Lord that is not accompanied by risks, conflicts, struggles, and a certain lack of understanding. Basically, it is to foretaste the eschatological promise of the definitive life in God in the overabundant set of relationships that arises from faith.

If we know from experience that celibate chastity has a dimension of asceticism, of self-emptying and renunciation, we also know the joys and deep joys that it allows us to experience: in the friendships that we cultivate inside and outside the community, in the relationships that can arise among us and with people in the pastoral ministry with whom, through shared faith, through the human depth of our encounters, we have bonds that are as strong or stronger than blood ties.

I wonder if the prophecy of religious life today does not lie, in part, in the capacity to build fraternal communities: wherein we call those who are not our "brothers", "sisters", "fathers" or "mothers", "brothers", "sisters", "fathers" or "mothers", on account of the bonds that arise from their religious profession.

There is an act of faith involved in welcoming the capacity of the gospel to generate these new relationships. A religious life thus appears to be of a rare timeliness because it resembles many of the "recomposed" families from which we come and which we encounter in pastoral service: where fathers and mothers of new families meet, the children of one spouse, those of the other and "ours" who come from both, single-parent families or families with two mothers or two fathers. The challenge then is to give religious life a human depth and create a space for growth where the relationships that emerge and are cultivated on a daily basis in our communities, are truly brotherhood, sisterhood, fatherhood and motherhood.

Let us allow the Lord to love more and more each day through our capacity to love. If we let Him, He can turn our poverty into riches for others, so that they may discover in our capacity to love the extent to which He, the Lord, loves them.

2.2 Poverty

This aspect of the vow to surrender one's life touches on the basic instinct to protect and has to do with the will to possess. This will to possess seeks to endow our fragile existence with securities on which it can rely: goods, places and basic relationships the stability of which allows us to become what we are. The difficulty begins when we identify ourselves with what we possess. I am what I possess: goods, ideas, image, people ("my young people") and relationships, "vocation", "ministry" and tasks, places, "my land", "my parish", etc.

At an instinctive level, the market prevails, all the time creating new "needs", for which a growing supply of objects is produced. This new existential security rests on the idea that I am what I consume. Objects, seemingly available to all, in reality, are only for those who have a high purchasing power. The consequences of this mode of functioning generate more and more frustration, because consumption, instead of being a source of satisfaction and happiness, produces anxiety and insecurity. Instead of being a factor of integration through consumption, it actually produces more and more exclusion, as many people do not even have access to basic goods and services. Above all, it is a voracious predator of natural resources and subjects vast sections of humanity to tenacious new forms of slavery.

A good starting point for an adequate pedagogy of initiation to the vow of poverty is to recognize that we too are children of this world, and that the market directs many of our "tastes", "inclinations" and "needs". Also, the sharing of our family and work history is very revealing as regards our sensitivity and relationship with goods. Some of us come from more or less affluent backgrounds, others from more modest or poorer backgrounds. Whatever the case, no one has a neutral relationship with goods. Even the way we "choose" to live poverty often does not take into account the history of poverty, imposed not chosen, from which many of our brothers and sisters come. If we do not start from this point, there will always be misunderstandings about what the vow of poverty means and implies, and obstacles to its evangelical living will arise.

We all need to evangelise our personal history in the light of the person of Jesus. We need to learn again and again from him, to live his poverty undertaken in freedom. His fruitfulness lies in the fact that for his whole life, his instinctive desire to possess and his relationship with goods were directed by the compass and the logic of self-giving. Because he has received everything from the Father, he was moved to give all and to give himself to others. Whoever discovers this logic and allows himself to be moved by Jesus' capacity to be present, to be whole and to give himself to others, glimpses in his gestures the ever-flowing love of his Father (cf. Jn 14:9).

In fact, in the Gospels we see Jesus as someone who is free, not only in his relationship to goods, but also in his relationships to people. Jesus shows himself as someone who is accessible, without barriers, available to all. A striking and appealing expression of this freedom is his table-fellowship. As one invited, a guest or host, Jesus welcomes all people, enjoys their company and whatever is put before him. For this reason, he is accused of being a glutton and a drinker, who sits at table with sinners.

They feel at ease with Jesus. He allows himself to be anointed by a woman with a costly perfume. He also accepts to be at the table of those he knows will judge his smallest gestures and words. In this context, Jesus unveils hidden thoughts, trick questions and malicious attitudes. His experience of poverty and the demand of his message is directed neither against the rich nor against the use of goods, but precisely against the desire for attachment to goods and the consequent tendency to make them a security upon which to build one's life. The most demanding words of Jesus in this regard aim at dismantling the even idolatrous attachment one can have to goods, taking the place that belongs to God alone: "You cannot serve two masters [...] You cannot serve God and mammon" (Mt. 6:24).

In positive terms, Jesus invites us to live the basic tasks of life such as eating and dressing, from the perspective of a provident God who cares for all his creatures, who provides them with the necessary food in due time and clothes them with

beauty, a God who knows in advance what we need, and for whom each of his creatures matters and counts. Against this background, the fundamental orientation of human existence is not to put oneself at the centre, but rather God and his reign: "Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well" (Mt. 6:33). This does not mean neglecting efforts to obtain what is necessary to subsist, or waiting, with arms folded, for everything we need simply to "fall from the sky". It is about establishing an existential priority, whereby we let God be God and allow his paternal and provident action be the horizon in which we inscribe the basic needs of existence without letting these become the compass and motive of our life. This priority entails a just relationship with God who cares for his creatures and for others, so that no one lacks the necessities of life. Nor is it an illusory matter of seeking to secure one's own life, as if we were masters of our own years, or of living attached to goods, but of making one's own life, however fragile it may be, and the goods we have, however modest, a gift of self to the poor, free of charge and with no expectation of return other than to participate in that secret joy that exists in giving rather than in receiving (cf. Acts 20:35). This is the joy that brings us into harmony with the feelings and character of the God of Jesus and of our God who loves and cares for his sons and daughters like a Father, who is generous as in the parable of the Merciful Father (cf. Lk. 15:11-32), to the point that all that is his is also his children's and he is capable of rejoicing and celebrating for his son who returns home. The son

who is missing or absent from the feast to celebrate his return prevents the father from being fully a father.

I wonder if the prophetic element of religious life today is to be found, in part, in seeking forms and styles of life that are expressed in the free, detached and sober use of goods and in a relationship of responsible care for the common home, our sister and mother earth. It is a matter of participating in the attitudes of the Father who cares for his creatures, who is not indifferent to those who live and to their conditions of existence, who counts even the hairs on our heads and who does not forget even five sparrows sold for two pennies (cf. Lk. 12:6). This is expressed concretely in the way we feed ourselves, in how we clothe ourselves, in the manner we restrain our consumption.

Above all, in a positive way, it is a question of looking together for concrete ways to care for others, to share goods, to care responsibly and concretely for creatures as God does. The vow of poverty can also be expressed through indignation and even public protest at the mistreatment of all the poor and the poor Earth. The vow of poverty can move us to join, at the level of our local communities, in concrete initiatives for sustainable development, fair trade, ethical investments, and dignified living conditions for all. In short, it is a matter of sharing with our lives the Good News that Jesus is for us and for the poor. It is therefore a beautiful and demanding way of loving, having the

freedom of the poor Jesus and trusting in the Provident love of God his Father for the poorest.

This is how Pope Francis speaks about a style of closeness to the poor that testifies to the closeness of God:

"An authentic option for the poor and the abandoned, while motivating us to liberate them from material poverty and to defend their rights, also involves inviting them to a friendship with the Lord that can elevate and dignify them. How sad it would be if they were to receive from us a body of teachings or a moral code, but not the great message of salvation, the missionary appeal that speaks to the heart and gives meaning to everything else in life. Nor can we be content with a social message. If we devote our lives to their service, to working for the justice and dignity that they deserve, we cannot conceal the fact that we do so because we see Christ in them and because we acknowledge the immense dignity that they have received from God, the Father who loves them with boundless love."¹³

The demanding beauty of this path of poverty can only be discovered by taking risks. It is a matter of leaving behind a certain security, the security offered by goods, and relying on a

¹³ Pope Francis, "*Querida Amazonía*" Post Synodal Apostolic Exhortation (2 February, 2020), n^o 63.

new security that is yet to be discovered, following Jesus, sharing what we are and what we have, especially with the poor who are always with us, and placing our lives each time in the hands of God the Father. This can be vertiginous, it can make us lose security. But it is not a reckless and thoughtless adventure. The vow of poverty is nothing less than participating in the freedom of Jesus who shares what he is and what he has because he knows that he is in the hands of God his Father, from whom he receives everything.

We can see this in the Gospel passage about the rich young man: if he is ready to give the money of his goods to the poor graciously and freely, at no cost, then this man is loving the way that God loves, which is precisely that of self-giving. When can also experience this when we have been evangelised by the poor who have welcomed us into their homes, have offered us their unconditional friendship, and have given us a taste of that joy that exists in giving rather than in receiving. The newness of Jesus' humanism can only be discovered in all its richness by risking our freedom in this adventure.

2.3 Obedience

This vow is rooted in the basic human instinct to self-defend and self-protect. Our life is marked from the beginning by a condition of fragility, dependence on the environment, dependence on others, needing protection. The environment in which

we live and the others around us are necessary even if at times hostile to ensure the unfolding of human life. Think about the enormous progress involved for the human species, and for each member of it, to be able to stand upright and communicate and interact with others. This would be impossible without the presence of a favourable environment and significant others who welcome and call each one by name. This is how the "I" comes into being, responding to a "you" who calls. The passage to a progressive autonomy passes through a leap of trust in the other, without losing the condition of fragility and dependence on others. Basic trust is what makes it possible to see reality in terms of offering help and opportunity to realise the unfinished human condition. If this trust is wounded or traumatised, reality is seen as hostile, as a threat that must be defended against.

We become what we are called to be with others, who protect us or from whom we must defend ourselves. This is the basic requirement for freedom and its capacity to guide one's existence by the choices and decisions one makes. The primordial condition is to belong to a group, to a tribe, to a herd, to a family, which protects and is a source of security. The older and stronger members of the group protect the weaker ones. There is a hierarchy of protection and defence.

A discovery of early modernity is the awareness in the individual (*Cogito, ergo sum*) of his or her singularity and of his or her unique and unrepeatable character. Consequently, the

idea has been forged that one gets ahead and manages to overcome the most adverse difficulties, through the decisions and choices each one makes, from the way each one assumes the imponderables of life. The subject "we" in whatever form can be assumed as an ally if it takes care of our individual interests and makes personal fulfilment possible. From this point of view, being authentic, being oneself, is valued more than joining others in a group. Thus, what comes from the individual is more credible and more easily accepted than what comes from the "we". If whatever "it" is comes from within and not from outside, then, as the Nike advertising promotes, "Just do it".

Social media and digital communication can give us the impression that we are part of diverse groups, of being a "we". The multiple messages that arrive on our smartphones can reassure us in the feeling of not being alone, but rather of being connected to many. But if these contacts have no more reality other than being part of the list of "friends" on Facebook or "followers" on Instagram, they may only be a numerical or algorithmic extension of the individual, of a self that looks in the mirror and is refracted in others who feel and think similarly to oneself, but without a true experience of the other as other than the self. This is what the philosopher Byung-Chul Han reveals as the underlying logic of much digital communication: "Digital communication consists of an echo chamber, in which one listens to oneself first and foremost. Likes, friends and followers do not

constitute a sounding board. They only reinforce the echo of oneself".¹⁴

Becoming what one is called to be is a risky enterprise, exposed to imponderables that depend neither exclusively on individual choices nor on the social environment in which one lives. This enterprise is also "threatened" by "enemies" or "demons" that inhabit the individual himself. The ideal of self-realisation, now that the self is more aware of its fallibility, has therefore been reinforced by the theme of self-care. It is about generating forms of protection and resilience through self-care.

When we look at Jesus, we see a man who is not centred on himself but on others, "a man for others"¹⁵ (Dietrich Bonhoeffer) who does not excessively take care of himself, but rather cares for and welcomes others who come to meet him. Jesus appears as a free man because he discovers himself increasingly in the hands of a God who loves him. For this very reason, Jesus pledges his freedom to God, placing his Father and the will of the Father at the centre of his choices and decisions. Even the initial obscurity about who his biological father might be is assumed and overcome by the theological gaze of allowing himself to be

¹⁴ Byung-Chul Han, *The Disappearance of Rituals, A Topology of the Present*. Ullstein Bucherverlage, Berlin 2019.

¹⁵ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Widerstand und Ergebung* in Dietrich Bonhoeffer *Werke*, Band 8, Kaiser Verlag, Gütersloh 1998, 559.

loved by God, whom he experiences in the depths of his being, as a loving Father. Thus the measure of Jesus' self-giving to humankind arises from the depth of the love that is received and given between Him and His Father: "As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you" (Jn 15:8).

On the cross, this certainty of the Father's love has to be purified anew through the darkness of faith. Out of the freedom that comes from being loved by the Father, Jesus, *in extremis*, confesses God as the one who finally hears his prayer and accepts his life, crying out to him the words of Psalm 22: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mk 15:34).

It is from this centre point - God as the Father - that Jesus, through constant listening, places his freedom at the service of the search for the Father's will through the people he meets, the events that mark his life, the decisions he makes. Just as Jesus perceives himself progressively and closely united to his Father, and gradually makes his own the Father's ways of being and loving (inclusive, self-giving) and of right relationships (contemplating how God the Father makes the sun rise on the good and the bad and rain fall on the just and the unjust), so too Jesus commits his freedom to a kind of relationship with others which reflects these criteria and ways of loving the Father. "Believe me: I am in the Father and the Father is in me. At least believe it on the evidence of the works themselves" (Jn. 14:11). Jesus' obedient love for his Father seeks, above all, to make trans-

parent God's first Love for the human being, about how God relates to humankind in Jesus and how people should place themselves before God: "Gospel radicalism is of the order of revelation rather than of service".¹⁶ From this point of view, the prophetic element of religious life, with the radical evangelical humanism contained in the vows, is above all of the order of witness. This is its major contribution to the mission of the Church.

In his obedient love, Jesus accepted the risk that the Father himself takes in loving men and women, even at the risk of not being loved or accepted. Jesus also accepted the mediations through which he recognises and accepts God's will: prayer - often alone - on the mountain or in a desert place; his contemplative gaze on what God is doing in people, especially when it inspires faith and acceptance of the sovereign action of God, reigning in the gestures and words of Jesus; through Peter in the confession of faith in Jesus as the Christ, the Son of the living God (cf. Mt. 16:17) or in the little ones to whom he has revealed the things of the Kingdom and hidden them from the wise and intelligent (cf. Mt. 11:25).

Jesus, who discovers himself as Son, invites us to enter into this filial relationship with God through his poetic view of

¹⁶ Bruno Maggioni, *Alle radici della sequela*, Ancora, Milan 2010, 30.

reality, a view expressed above all in his preaching in parables. Through them, listeners and readers can enter into the heart of Jesus and look at reality through his eyes, experiencing the possibilities that appear *hic et nunc* for welcoming God reigning in their midst.

Last but not least, another mediation in which Jesus discovers God's will are the conflicts and tensions he faces. In fact, Jesus becomes aware that his image of God clashes with the image of his adversaries: the Pharisees are annoyed because Jesus eats with Matthew, publicans and sinners: "Go therefore and learn what it means to say: 'I desire mercy and not sacrifice'" (Mt. 9:10-13; cf. Hos. 6:6).

Jesus expresses his obedient love centred on the Father and on service to others, in an appeal to all in which he shares the secret of his freedom and indicates the conditions for acquiring it:

Mk. 8:34 [After the first announcement of the Passion and the difficulties and resistance he encounters in the disciples and in particular in Peter, who struggle to understand it]: "Jesus turns to the crowd and to his disciples and said to them, 'If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me'".

"Come after me". This statement refers, on the one hand, to the dynamic process of following Jesus, wherever he be. On the other hand, this following, although a personal decision, is carried out with the other disciples. Jesus is seen through the community of those gathered in his name: "I am there in your midst" (Mt. 18:20). The disciples become familiar with Jesus and his ways as they walk alongside those who practice the will of

God their Father: "This is my brother and sister and mother" (Mk. 3:35).

"Deny yourself". This may be unbearable for a culture that promotes both being oneself and realising one's full potential. However, the point here is for the self not to become the centre of all our efforts and projects, but rather we make more and more room for Jesus so that he becomes the centre of our lives. Paul's conversion is a good illustration of this. Having been found by the Lord, whom he knows loved him and gave himself for him, it is no longer Paul who lives, but Christ who lives in him (cf. Gal. 2:19).

"Carry your cross". The school that Jesus proposes is that of seeking God's will by loving, even to the point of empathising or suffering with those whom the Lord asks us to love: those who feel unloved and even those who are enemies. This is to bear the cross. This is what Jesus glimpses in his loving obedience to the Father – that he "must" make his own the suffering of those he

loves. Consequently, Jesus shows the depth of the Father's love for all. In this way Jesus is radically free. This is what men and women have also witnessed to in a life of self-giving, freely given in obedience to the love of God the Father: Damien of Molokai, Maximilian Kolbe, Teresa of Calcutta, the martyrs of Thiberine, and also Mahatma Gandh and Etty Hilesun. In this way of loving, God, crossing confessional borders, is the merciful one because, through his witnesses, he loves by giving his life.¹⁷

2.4 The vows taken together

The vows of poverty, chastity and obedience have their foundation in the Christian life itself, which is not limited to the triad of the evangelical counsels and which is addressed to every disciple of Jesus. The Christian life and, rooted in it, religious life, arise from a foundational experience of having been touched by Jesus whereby his Spirit makes us sons and daughters in him, sharers in his death and resurrection and members of his pilgrim Body in the Church. Therefore, the vow of poverty, chastity and obedience involves a dynamic that configures us to Jesus and inserts us into his Church. The different elements of the vow of

¹⁷The Algerian writer Fadila Semaï, in her various lectures on the Monks of Tibhirine (martyred in 1996), states that the essence of a religion is manifested in the testimony of its members to give their lives for another person: "Whatever your religion, you can give your life for someone you love" Fadila Semaï, au-delà des contraires, La Croix (30 August, 2019).

poverty, obedience and chastity imply and illuminate each other.

Chastity in celibacy is a way of living the poverty of Jesus, for it consists in disposing oneself to love the Lord Jesus above all things, loving him concretely in those who are his brothers and sisters, our brothers and sisters, especially the least, the poor. This implies a stripping oneself of all forms of relational possession. We are not only called to love like Jesus, but to let Him love more deeply through our love. We are to love each other intensely, not by putting ourselves at the centre, but by stepping aside, so that it is Jesus who loves through us. By loving in this way, our celibate chastity is fruitful and makes our lives a "parable - of God's love for all – that speaks to the simple" (Esteban Gumucio). Such loving makes the Church, the disciple of Jesus, to paraphrase Madeleine Delbrêl, "more loving" and "more lovable", qualities that are essential for its existence.

Poverty is a way of entering into the obedience of Jesus. It consists in making our own Jesus' passion for his Father, for the Kingdom and for humanity. The axis of the Christian life is not self-realisation, but decentring and becoming unconcerned with oneself, having the other as a priority, and seeking to collaborate with the action that God is already unfolding in the other. This means that the Church does not fall into the temptation of self-reference, but becomes more and more available to others: a Church with open doors and having a mother's patient

love. Thus, from the obedience of Jesus, like His kenosis that made him servant, we enter into a way of stripping ourselves of self and thus making more and more room for others in our own life, in our affections, our use of time, our rest. Our *Rule of Life n. 75* takes up in an inspiring way the paschal and ecclesial dynamic contained in the vows:

"Rooted in the baptismal vocation, the religious vocation represents a type of Christian living which, through total self-surrender, shows forth the essentials of faith in Jesus Christ.

It implies a genuine conversion of all activity – intellectual, physical, emotional and spiritual. This ongoing effort unites us to the Lord's resurrection and constitutes one way of living Easter, a way which gives flesh to absolute faith in Jesus Christ as the centre of human life."

The vow of poverty then moves us to decide to walk with others, with those who embrace his Gospel and those who serve him, even without knowing it in the poor, and to listen to God's action through the mediations of the community, the brothers, the events and murmurings of our world, as well as the cries of the poor and of sister-mother earth.

Obedience as an expression of chastity in the celibacy of Jesus. In seeking the will of God his Father, Jesus finds himself more and more united to his Father and to those he loves. The vow of obedience also reminds us that we no longer belong to

ourselves, but to Jesus, to our brothers and sisters in the Congregation and to the people with whom we walk in the Church and in humanity¹⁸. In concrete terms, this means that we become all things to all people so that Christ, through his Spirit, can do his work. This means that the Church becomes more a listener than a preacher and a teacher because she is a listener to what the Spirit of the Lord is doing in the hearts of people. We remain ongoing disciples of the Gospel, because we do not yet fully accept and understand its beauty and demands. We are a church that is becoming more and more respectful of people, because its ministers, lay and religious, in particular, promote and accept legitimate controls in the exercise of their functions. Our obedience expresses itself in a living out of chastity in celibacy that respects the limits of the other and promotes his or her freedom, capacity for discernment and adult response to the Lord. Our obedience rejoices in the growth of others and shares in their suffering, even bearing their limits and forgiving their sins.

¹⁸ Lorenzo Arbeloa (Aibar, Spain 1936- 2022 Rio de Janeiro, Brazil), was a Spanish SSCC brother who lived 60 years in Brazil and who died on 6 February 2022 in Rio de Janeiro. In his spiritual testament, which was read after his death, he wrote: "On consecrating my life to the Sacred Hearts, I knew that my life no longer belonged to me and that my life would follow the search for God's will. On being sent on mission to Brazil, I was aware that perhaps I would never return to Spain, that from now on my home would be the mission, wherever it might be. I never forgot my homeland, but wherever I was, I felt at home, as I was well received by the brothers of the Congregation and by my friends."

IV. LIVING THE VOWS AND THE SPIRITUAL TASTE OF LIVING TOGETHER IN FRATERNITY

In this last part I would like to dwell on the relationship between living the vows and life in the community of brothers and sisters. Our religious profession commits us to this. In fact, as the Constitutions [Brothers] say so powerfully: "The Holy Spirit led each of us along diverse paths to enter the Congregation in order to follow Jesus there". (Const. 11.1).

Religious consecration is the free and public act of giving one's life in a religious family. It is accepted by the Superior "in the name of the Church and of the Congregation". There is a pact, a commitment made before God and with the community. Such a covenant, and the consequent form of common life it engenders, is a good for the Church as a whole. For the same reason, when a brother or sister decides to leave the Congregation or is asked to leave, it affects the whole body. This is why such a decision is not simply decided by oneself, without taking into account the membership of the body, the religious family.

It is a dispensation from a commitment to the body of the Congregation and, through it, to the body of the Church. This is also why the dispensation from vows requires the intervention of the Congregation and of the Church from which this indulgence or grace is requested. Often, however, when brothers enter into a crisis, membership of the community is perceived more as a

hindrance than as a support. Personal well-being and peace take precedence over belonging to the body of brothers and sisters. Few brothers rely on the sense of belonging to the community as a support when their individual commitment weakens or they enter into a crisis.

In the context of living the vows in community, I ask myself and invite you to do the same:

- How can we rediscover the beauty of living together in community?
- How do we make the community life that arises from our profession something desirable and not only, as is often the case, a burden to bear or the price to pay to finally be oneself or to carry out one's own project?
- How can we nourish the "we", those binding, rich bonds of solidarity that are created between brothers and sisters through religious profession?
- In moments of crisis or tiredness, how can we find in the community those things that supports us rather than obstacles that hinder us?
- How can we grow in the certainty that the decision to share our fraternity life with the lay people with whom we work brings with it an apostolic fruitfulness?

To answer these questions and to grow to spiritually savour the living of the vows in community, I propose two ways.

1. Sharpen the sense of the Mystery in which we live, move and have our being

This means paying special attention to the way in which the world of the spiritual, including God, manifests itself. Sensitivity to the Invisible always comes to us mediated through a body. There is no human experience, however sublime, that does not come through the senses. That said, it is necessary for the senses to grow in a certain familiarity with the Mystery in order to see, feel, taste and touch the Invisible.

Moreover, we need to pay renewed attention to the content of the mystery from a Christian perspective. Related to this is the need to develop an intelligence of the heart as the integrating centre of what we are, what we feel, what we value and what we believe. It is the heart that best understands, comprehends and integrates elements of reality. The Invisible that manifests itself in the sensible, through a body, is a vanishing point that transcends it. Ecclesiastes expresses this point in thoughtful words: "He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the human heart; yet no one can fathom what God has done from beginning to end" (Eccles. 3:11).

Indeed the same heart that perceives the mystery is also a mystery to the one to whom the heart belongs. "The heart has its reasons which reason knows nothing of" (Blaise Pascal). The human person is not always aware of what motivates him or her to act. A familiarity with Mystery includes being open to the Mystery that each person is and being open to those who are around us and who manifest themselves as such.

One expression of the Mystery is the experience of the SSCC religious vocation: Why has the Lord looked upon me and led me to follow him in this religious family? The answer to this question is not given once and for all. The answer is to be found in an ongoing dialogue with the Lord and the ultimate answer, we hope, will be found in the face-to-face encounter with the Risen Lord.

This is what we experience throughout our lives. These are vocations or calls of the Lord within a vocation; the religious vocation within the baptismal vocation, the vocation to a certain kind of service or way of life, within the community or in the Church. In all these vocations there is a "central core" that we need to return to and become familiar with, nourishing it in the different choices and responses we make throughout our existence in religious life. Pope Francis offers a clue as regards reaching that central spiritual core which is like an underground river in our lives and which irrigates the different choices we make: "I believe that each one of us must go to the root of the

choice that the Lord has made for us".¹⁹ Being familiar with this spiritual core, with the Mystery that calls and dwells in us, it becomes possible to go through the difficulties and tensions of religious life with greater strength and serenity.

The sacraments also contain a good pedagogy to sharpen our sense of the Mystery and to ensure that the intelligence of the heart matures. We can live our baptism in this perspective: we die with Christ in order to rise with him, and to live henceforth in Christ, closely united to him and to his members, symbolically expressed in immersion and emersion... Let us think of religious profession and its resemblance to the liturgy of baptism: Questions and answers with the dynamics of renunciation and adhesion, prostration/the covering with the mortuary cloth (immersion and emersion), litany of the Saints, public profession before witnesses, change of name, giving of habit and a candle, the embrace and welcome of the community.

The Eucharist nourishes us and unites us into one body. Even the community gathered in his name becomes a sacrament of the Lord. In his Body we become one in order to give ourselves as he did. In this self-giving lies the ultimate meaning of chastity in celibacy. Listening to the Word in prayer or to how it resonates in the life of each brother can sharpen our ear to

¹⁹ Antonio Spadaro, *Stralci del colloquio di Papa Francesco con i superiori generali tenutosi all'Aula Paolo VI*, 25 November 2016 en *Civiltà Cattolica* 4000 (2017), 324-334.

perceive that God continues to become word, encounter and flesh in us.

2. Rediscovering the beauty of asceticism

From a Christian perspective, asceticism does not have a value in itself, but is the result of a realistic awareness of the tensions, even contradictions, that exist in us. Paul expresses it, perhaps, in its most radical form: "For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing." (Rom. 7:18b-19) Asceticism consists of exercises and practices that aim to free us from the inveterate vices and distorted views that stiffen the human heart. Asceticism thus involves a life-long formation. Its ultimate goal is that we grow more and more each day in purity of this heart so that we may see God. Asceticism is a way of cultivating respect for the Mystery of God who comes to meet us, who takes on a face in Jesus, who dwells in us and whose sacrament is the other, my brother, my sister.

Asceticism allows us to wait for the other to manifest himself in all his mystery, and according to his times. This is what the fox tells the Little Prince - that if he wants to create bonds, he will have to be patient and each day come a little closer to the other:

"You must be very patient," replied the fox. "First you will sit down at a little distance from me--like that--in the grass. I shall look at you out of the corner of my eye, and you will say nothing. Words are the source of misunderstandings. But you will sit a little closer to me, every day ...²⁰".

Asceticism is to accept that the other remains unavailable to my times, my demands – stemming from my individualism - even my words - source of misunderstandings. On the contrary, it is to patiently accept that I must wait until the other, in his own time, manifests himself in his mystery. Relationships are not immediate in time, not even when the other is "connected" in a group chat or just a "click" away. It is a matter of learning to be present to the other and to look at them with respect, letting them be that other who is always beyond our impressions, however strong they may be, and beyond our judgements, however accurate they may be.²¹

²⁰ Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, *Le Petit-prince*, Paris 1943, 80. http://www.cmls.polytechnique.fr/perso/tringali/documents/st_exupery_le_petit_prince.pdf [Consulted 10 February, 2022].

²¹ It is interesting what film director Martin Scorsese says about the importance of learning to look fairly at things and life in its mystery, "to direct the mind to consider the great and overflowing mystery of just being here, of living and dying" (572), or grace: "is something that happens throughout life. It comes at unexpected moments" (570) or perceiving God "in the world of the intangible" (569). "...being touched by grace means". This entails a struggle

Asceticism has as its objective the commitment to build community as an expression of our being a congregational and ecclesial body, an image/symbol of the Trinitarian life and which has its symbolic and practical correlate in religious fraternity. Community life is not asceticism, although sometimes it is. Community is the space where we can discover its beauty. Community prepares us to welcome the other respectfully. Because of my profession I have chosen that other one to be my brother, my sister. Through asceticism I discover that the Lord speaks to me through my brother, my sister, even though the conflicts and tensions that may arise in daily life.

Asceticism is also a reference to the arduous and beautiful work that we need to do on ourselves, to discover and become familiar with the spiritual presence in each one of us, and to understand its meaning. The integration of the ascetical dimension in our relationships helps to change our gaze, purifying it in order

to decentre, to break through "my absorption in my work, my self-absorption, in order to be present for the people I love" (573). A patient training of the senses is needed just to be able to see the mystery, the intangible, grace as such. In this respect, he says that the street and making films have helped him, if not to look more accurately, at least in another way, to change his gaze: "Even this is a grace", he tells me. "Yes, I reply, to have been touched by grace means to see things in a certain way, in a different way". "Miracles happen, but at times, miracles are facts of life, but whoever perceives a miracle is able to decipher it well, to see it with the right eyes", he said. And so we need to train our eyes for years, sometimes for decades... (Antonio Spadaro, Interview with Martin Scorsese, in *La Civiltà Cattolica* 3996 (2016), 567-568.

to recognise the presence of God in my brother and sister. This presence is not reduced to the psyche, but goes beyond and surpasses it. Asceticism allows God to be God in the life of our brothers and sisters and thus allows God to be God in the life of each one of us.

Asceticism can also help us to face that tenacious tendency to withdraw into oneself, to isolate, or retreat into our narcissistic wounds. To overcome this tendency and to heal our wounds, let us count precisely on our brothers and sisters, whether they belong to the local community or not. It is not by distancing ourselves from our brothers that we solve the problems of fraternity, but by facing conflicts "with lucidity, courage, and the spirit of pardon" (Const. 45:3). All this, without losing a "sense of humour" about oneself so as not to take oneself too seriously, and to de-dramatize the conflicts that, at times, we have magnified within ourselves.

"Living a community life oriented toward the ideal that has been described involves trials, which constitute a death to the individualism, and selfishness that may be present in each member. In this way, the brothers are led to a fuller and more joyful life." (Const. 48).

To summarise these two dimensions in order to recover the spiritual taste of living community life and the vows, I make my own the words of Marko Rupnik and Maria Campatelli when

they speak of the religious vows, of the Mystery to which they point and whose beauty can radiate only when we embrace asceticism:

"You see, what our vows point to - in general everything that involves an ascetic effort, the object of the monk's promise - is a transfiguration of desire, of possession, of power and of the fundamental dynamisms through which each one builds his or her identity; all of this is best lived in the community, because it is the community that is the place in which the person emerges: poverty here does not mean owning nothing, but living *aktemosyne, sine proprio*, that is, renouncing property and thus using things with love and so becoming a reconciliation with others at the level of sharing; chastity means a new way of loving; obedience, a communion of the Holy Spirit' (2 Cor 13,13), in which hearts converge and so the Spirit can speak. The collaboration of the human being with the gift received is expressed precisely in the confluence of life, of goods, of will, in relational convergence. Community life, sharing, the use of goods, obedience - everything becomes the place where this life is realised as communion - where the presence of God is realised in us. Therefore, the presence of God's life in the religious is revealed in his non-possessive relations because that is the life he has received as a gift, that which the Holy Spirit has communicated to him. And it is revealed in the loving

use, for communion, of the things that he encounters, that surround him, of all creation."²²

V. JUST TO FOLLOW THE PATH - THE MOST ESSENTIAL VOW

I do not want to end this reflection with a conclusion. Rather, I would like us to continue this journey together, brothers and sisters of the Congregation. A journey made up of experiences, struggles, reflection, and, above all, a life given and welcomed each day as a response to the love of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary. It is what our founders called "the most essential vow" that will sustain our mission and characterise our fraternity.

"We need a name which reminds our brothers each day of their duties and obligations, which will help them never forget that they must sacrifice themselves out of zeal for the Lord; that they will fail in their most essential vow the moment they want to live only for themselves and not work for the salvation of their brothers."²³

²² Marko I. Rupnik-Maria Campatelli, *"Vedo un ramo di mandorlo". Riflessioni sulla vita religiosa*. Lipa edizione, Rome 2015, 242-243.

²³ Marie-Joseph Coudrin, *Memorandum on the title Zealots*, (6 December 1816).

It is not that this vow was added to the vows of chastity, poverty and obedience, but it aims to show the basic dynamic which animates religious profession and which involves the whole of life: Our life has no other meaning than that of giving it up, so that God accepts it as a sacrificial offering and associates it with his action of reparatory love in our world. Such a surrender is not made once and for all, but progressively. It is a question of responses within a continual dialogue with the hearts of Jesus and Mary. In dialogue with our brothers and sisters, we discover their constant calls and in them the depth of God's love that is revealed in their hearts.

The life given as a sacrifice of love is what the founders received as a gift for themselves and for the Church. In the most essential vow is found the strength that sustains in hardship and persecution and the serene joy of uniting ourselves to Jesus in his restorative love for men and women.

"It is under this title Zealots that we have joyfully borne more than twenty years of persecutions and trials. It has been our consolation, our happiness and, I would dare to say, our strength and support. Now that it is calm, why make us abandon a name that has been our consolation in the midst of the storm?"²⁴

²⁴ Marie-Joseph Coudrin, *Memorandum on the title Zealots* (6 December 1816).

May the witness of the founders and those who have drunk from the fountain that flows from the hearts of Jesus and Mary: Damien, Eustaquio, our martyred brothers in Spain and France, and so many other brothers and sisters with whom we have lived and journeyed, encourage us also to drink from that same fountain and to make of our lives, given day by day, the simplest and most eloquent expression of the most essential vow.

THE CENTRALITY OF RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

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Introduction

Globally, the times we are living in are somewhat unpredictable and revelatory. Unpredictable in the sense that we never know what is going to happen next. Just when we began to breathe sighs of relief in the belief that the end of Coronavirus was nigh, so in February 2022, Russia began its invasion of Ukraine, a conflict that some describe as a war, which, as I write, remains ongoing. These times are also revelatory because, as Pope Francis puts it, Coronavirus and indeed what is happening in Ukraine has exposed, at a global level, our false securities.²⁵

At the same time, I would say that the war in Ukraine and the times of lockdown imposed more than once on peoples have also generated some serious reflection about the direction and

²⁵ Extraordinary Moment of Prayer in Time of Epidemic (27 March 2020): *L'Osservatore Romano*, 29 March 2020, p. 10.

the future of the human family and about the growing gaps between the have and the have nots. There is also an increasing concern about the sustainability of the planet and its resources.

Moreover, whilst it is evidently true that the times of lockdown meant hardship and suffering for many people, such moments also saw a reduction in pollution, a heightened awareness of nature, a greater appreciation of those who work in the caring profession and an increase in occasions where people sought to keep watch on the most vulnerable in society. As Pope Francis noted, "In moments of crisis you get both good and bad".²⁶

As Christians it is our vocation, our duty, to be on the lookout for such positive signs of life as they are indications of God present and acting in the world, especially so in difficult and challenging situations. As vowed religious, discerning God's presence in the world and in the Church should be a primary concern for us. But in order to be able to see God present in the Church and the world we need to be able to see and experience God present and acting in our own lives. All of this requires a certain religious sensitivity which is both a given and also something to be fostered.

²⁶ Pope Francis, *Let Us Dream: the path to a better future*, Simon & Schuster, 2020, p. 2.

Not so long ago, I translated some work done by our brothers Alberto Toutin ssc and Nelson Rivera ssc. Both of them were reflecting on SSCC education and each highlighted the importance of educating children not just to pass exams but also to educate them in the faith, introducing them at an early age to creation, to silence, to prayer, to the bible. Nelson Rivera ssc makes the point that children come to discover and express themselves through art, music, painting, literature and sport.

I think this whole area of human and faith formation is necessary not just for children but for those, especially younger people, who enter into religious life. In what way were our candidates taught to pray or to practice silence when they were living at home? As they grew up, were they introduced to the spiritual life, to the many ways God can speak to us and relate to us through creation and people?

One of the central challenges presented by the outgoing General Government at the beginning of the General Chapter 2018 concerned the need of the Congregation "to sustain and strengthen the inner life".²⁷ Such an aspiration is not that far removed from the concern of Pope Francis that the Church consists of "Spirit-filled evangelisers who pray and work".²⁸ This challenge was taken up by the General Chapter resulting in

²⁷ Report of the General Government, 2012-2018; 5.1.1.

²⁸ *Evangelii Gaudium*, 259-262.

the first Chapter guiding document: "Our Inner Self is Being Renewed Day by Day".²⁹ The seriousness with which the Congregation took this challenge is evident in the various references to inner renewal that can be found spread through the various Chapter documents.³⁰

Emerging from the Chapter came a proposal to establish a Common Plan for Spiritual Animation.³¹ One of the goals subsequently presented in the 2020 Plan was to rekindle the centrality of the **experience of God** in the lives of the Founders so that we may experience something of the **enthusiasm/zeal** that they lived all their lives - the enthusiasm that was apparent in the disciples of Emmaus, "were not our hearts on fire?" (Lk 24:32), the zeal that underpinned the Founders' conviction that "the Lord has led us by the hand".³²

²⁹ 39th General Chapter, Rome, Congregation of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary, *Our Inner Self is being renewed day by day*, pp. 9-17.

³⁰ Ibid. *Promoting Brothers' and Sisters' Unity*, 2.2; *Sacred Hearts Spiritual and Historical Patrimony*, No 1.

³¹ Ibid. *Promoting Brothers' and Sisters' Unity*, 2.2.

³² Marie-Joseph Coudrin, « Memorandum on the title 'Zealots' addressed to the Sacred Congregation of Bishops and Regulars » (6 December 1816) in *Annales Congregationis Sacrorum Cordium* 35, Rome 1963, 221.

Religious Experience

"The primary reason for evangelising is the love of Jesus which we have received, the **experience** of salvation which urges us to ever greater love of him."³³

The reflection that follows seeks to offer some introductory comments on how we might understand "the experience of salvation" or religious experience. My sense is that religious experience is not something that is freely spoken about or encouraged in the Congregation and maybe even in the Church at large. One reason for this might simply be that we were never given the tools (forum, vocabulary) to enable us to share something about our religious experience.

A second reason could be that people who wanted to share their religious experience were regarded somewhat with suspicion, scepticism or even with a little fear. A third factor could be the mistaken belief that a religious experience was available primarily to the holy and the ascetic, to the good and the saintly. We understand better these days that this is not true. Everyone, faith or no faith, is made in such a way as to be capable of experiencing God, "each in his or her own way".³⁴ For us as religious, it is surely essential that underpinning our

³³ *Evangelii Gaudium*, 264. See also 1 John 4:9.

³⁴ *Lumen Gentium*, 11; *Gaudete et Exultate*, 10-11.

vowed life, our communion and ministry is some kind of personal experience or awareness of God.

When we consider the vocation, the unity and the mission of the Good Father and the Good Mother – we do well to reflect on the experience of salvation that brought them together, kept them together and enabled them to bear so much fruit. We know from their writings and the writings of the first community that each, in a particular way, had a personal experience of the love of God during a very difficult time in their lives: one was in hiding and the other was in prison. When providence brought them together they discovered in ongoing dialogue what they had in common: a **shared awareness** and **conviction** that people in France no longer experienced God's love and that God wanted them to try to repair the situation by founding a group of men and women who would live, contemplate and proclaim God's love each according to their different circumstances. "We no longer know what the love of the Good Lord means",³⁵ is how the Founder put it. For the Good Mother her experience of God in prison and her subsequent meeting with the Founder led her to make a vow "to be crucified in everything".³⁶ The Founders kept their religious experiences alive through ongoing dialogue,

³⁵ Marie-Joseph Coudrin, «Memorandum on the title 'Zealots' addressed to the Sacred Congregation of Bishops and Regulars» (6 December 1816) in *Annales Congregationis Sacrorum Cordium* 35, Rome 1963, 221.

³⁶ Henriette Aymer de la Chevalerie, «Billet au Bon Père» (s.l.) 3 February 1801) LEBM 16 in *Correspondance*, vol. 1, Rome 2008, 53-54.

grateful remembrance, and by placing themselves time and time again before the Crucifix or before the Blessed Sacrament.

It surely can be concluded that without such foundational experiences it would have been impossible for the Founders to become the spirit-filled, zealous, convinced and enduring visionaries and missionaries that they were or indeed to attract the many men and women who joined them in this work of God.

Thinking briefly about foundational experiences, one need only to consider the account of the disciples of Emmaus. We hear that they were walking away from Jerusalem, dejected, and their hopes crucified. On the road to Emmaus they had a profound communal and religious experience that resulted in them heading back to Jerusalem to share with the others what they had heard and seen. (Lk 24:32). Saint Paul is another example of one whose life was turned around. (Acts 9:1-19)

Think, too, of Mary. Mary in some way personally experienced God (Annunciation) and it was surely that experience, the grateful memory of it and prayer that gave her the courage to keep on going from crib to cross, hoping against hope.

Finally, there is Jesus. How else could he have endured a life that led him ultimately to the Cross other than having experienced in some way the closeness of God whether at his Baptism, or in the desert, or on the mountain, or in prayer.

That said, none of us are the two disciples walking to Emmaus, or Paul or Mary or Jesus. Pope Francis in his reflection on holiness helpfully observes that we ought not to grow discouraged when faced with examples of holiness that seem to be unattainable.³⁷ Each of us has to walk along the path that brings the best out of us. No one is excluded from the divine call to holiness and knowing God. All of us have been created capable of receiving, contemplating, living and proclaiming God's love. There is in our human DNA a religious sensitivity to the transcendent and to the divine presence in the world.

What now follows are a number of general and specific statements on religious experience:

Some general statements regarding religious experience

- ❖ The human person is always the starting point for any reflection on religious experience. Every human person, is the object of God's affection. To this end, every human person is made capable of both responding to and reaching out to God.

³⁷ *Gaudete et Exultate*, 11.

- ❖ The nature of God is to unconditionally and respectfully seek to communicate and be in relationship with each and every one of us. God is not reserved for the good and the great alone.
- ❖ There are no limits to when, where and how God can share divine love with the human family.
- ❖ A religious experience is when the Lord reveals himself or communicates himself and the other is or becomes aware of that. Such awareness can only be understood as **graced awareness**.
- ❖ Sometimes we can be aware at the time of God's presence and at other times we become aware of his presence as we reflect on what happened, e.g. The Road to Emmaus.
- ❖ The ways in which we can experience God are **endless**. For some God is experienced through family and friends or through music, poetry, film, the wonder, beauty and power of nature. Others may have felt God close as they witnessed a tender moment exchanged between two people, or a sunset or a sunrise, or perhaps the sound of a bird singing or a song playing. Others again feel God somehow present when they are close to the sea or in the middle of the countryside or climbing mountains. Perhaps it is in prayer or stillness or silence that God is experienced as a loving or calming presence.

- ❖ It is clear that we 'ought' not to limit religious experience to church, the sacred, prayer and the positive. The presence of God can also be experienced in times of crisis, sickness and in dying, in near death experiences, in humiliations, in sin.

Specific statements regarding the religious experience itself³⁸

- ❖ The experience of being consoled, of being recognised, or feeling held secure in the universe is what William James calls a religious experience. It is religious because it involves a recognition of our powerlessness and thus our dependence on a higher power. (Coronavirus has shown us how very delicate human life is and how it can be extinguished in a moment).
- ❖ Many people when they try to describe their experience speak of it as being very real, overwhelming, memorable, unifying, uplifting, insightful, convincing and undeniable, evoking sadness, gladness, remorse and resolve, a feeling of peace, a feeling of at-one-ness with everything ... "Let my right hand wither if I should forget" (Psalm 137:5).

³⁸ The following points are drawn from the work of William James, *Varieties of Religious Experiences: A Study in Human Nature*, (1902).

*Kimberly Rose Aguada recalls one of the most memorable parts of a pilgrimage to Kalaupapa, Molokai. "We hiked up a trail and at the top was a giant white cross. It overlooked the entire settlement and a beautiful valley. When I sat under the cross, I heard the wind blowing through the trees. It was almost as if God was speaking. I remember just sitting there and feeling at peace. I truly felt like He was there with me. It still gives me chills."*³⁹

- ❖ A religious experience can be judged "by the way it works on the whole". "By their fruits you shall know them, not by their roots". (Matthew 7:20) Usually such an experience brings about in the person some kind of energised good intention and resolve to change direction in one's life or to surrender to what is.

Four marks that qualify a religious experience as mystical

1. Ineffability: the difficulty in describing the experience to others; it can only be understood when experienced directly; others who have not had a similar experience struggle to understand the import of the experience.

³⁹ <https://chaminade.edu/6780/students-experience-spiritual-growth-through-kalaupapa-pilgrimage/>

2. Noetic quality. The experience brings with it insights, illuminations, revelations.
3. Transient. Such states cannot be sustained for long – perhaps 30 minutes, 1-2 hours before the state fades. The quality of the mystical state can only be reproduced in memory imperfectly. The experience and its significance, even if it dims, is never wholly forgotten and can reoccur.
4. Passivity. The mystic often feels as if they were grasped and held by a superior power. In other words, religious experience is a given and not something that can be ‘manufactured’. That said, there is nothing stopping us from creating the conditions that may cultivate or foster such an experience – time in prayer, meditation, practice of awareness.

"The devout Christian of the future will either be a ‘mystic’, one who has experienced ‘something’ or he will cease to be anything at all"⁴⁰

This often-quoted line by Karl Rahner, SJ is underpinned by his belief that God made us **so that God could love us** - which

⁴⁰ Karl Rahner, "Christian Living Formerly and Today", in *Theological Investigations VII*, trans. David Bourke (New York: Herder and Herder, 1971).

is not the way older generations were taught in their catechism classes. We were taught that the reason God made us was "to know Him, to love Him, and to serve Him in this world, and to be happy with Him for ever in heaven."⁴¹ The difference is very important as it casts our relationship with the divine in a completely different light.

Believing that we have been made in order to be loved sets us on a human journey in which we try to discover how God loves us in the unfolding of our ordinary, often mundane lives. The mystic then is the one who grows to see God in everything.

This is but a brief sketch regarding religious experience. I have no doubt that many, if not all of you, reading this will be able to recall more than one religious experience in your own lives. My hope is that this reflection may serve to help you to articulate your religious experiences and indeed to become more aware of them.

As SSCC religious and lay brothers and sisters, it is very important, if not essential, that our life, our ministry is underpinned by prayer and by our relationship with Jesus and at times a sense of God-being-with-us. it is true that God can be expe-

⁴¹ <https://www.sacred-texts.com/chr/balt/balt1.htm>

rienced in community and in ministry⁴² but "our communion in mission is most deeply rooted in our personal encounter with the Risen Lord."⁴³ It is clear that the Lord desires to encounter us in a personal way.

In this regard, Pope Francis has just released an Apostolic Letter on the need for the liturgical formation of the people of God.⁴⁴ For Francis, the liturgy is the place of encounter with the *living* Christ.⁴⁵ One of the cues he offers for our reflection is how important, essential even **amazement** is to the liturgical act.

We need to relearn to marvel and be astonished that we have been chosen to be the body of Christ in and for the world, led always by the head, who is Christ.

If you have the time, may I suggest that you take the next few minutes to reflect and think about your own religious experiences: they may be a sense of God loving you, or perhaps you saw or heard something or someone beautiful that lifted you up, or maybe you were aware of a very close escape and knew that God had saved you, or you were on the point of giving

⁴² Constitutions, 43.2.

⁴³ Constitutions, 50.

⁴⁴ *Desiderio Desideravi*, 29 June 2022.

⁴⁵ *Desiderio Desideravi*, 10.

up when at the last moment and from nowhere came an answer, an insight, a clarity or other form of help. Such moments are truly incarnational, "full of grace and truth" ⁴⁶ and deserving to be remembered and treasured forever in our hearts.

⁴⁶ John 1:14.