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The FURROW

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Bound to
be free!

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– *Vowed religious life*

Robyn Reynolds

Vowed religious life, with convictions, passions and concerns regarding its present and future shape, continues to be re-imagined in today's world. Now, in fact, is a critical time for Religious Congregations, a time calling for 'a world of a difference.

Christians hold as fundamental the coming of God's Kingdom. Religious life is a part of this story, a special way within the church and the world, of striving to proclaim and give witness to the Reign of God. The future of vowed religious life is inextricably linked to the coming of the Kingdom and has no meaning outside of this; attention to its life and growth is vital. I believe the living of our vows, where we are 'bound to be free', can further the Kingdom within and around us and so bring about a world of a difference.

I certainly believe in Religious life, and in its fundamental expression through the three religious vows. But I am uncomfortable with the thinking that clings to the notion that particular expressions (in this or that Congregation, for example, with this or that charism) must survive, at all costs. I view particular Religious Congregations as treasures in earthenware jars, to be held with gratitude, care and reverence, but held lightly. I am certainly not interested in survival for its own sake, and I agree with Miriam Ukeritis¹ who states 'It is not our task to survive as congregations. Our task is to do mission and be faithful' (p.13).

By staying faithful to the essential Gospel message and vision, the future *is* taken care of, whatever shape it may take. The gift of the Spirit has been given, 'the Spirit of truth, who is in you' (Jn 14:17); and from the God of the Covenant comes the abiding

1 Miriam Ukeritis csj 'Has the Window of Opportunity Closed?' in LCWR Occasional Papers, Summer 2007:13

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promise, 'I shall be with you' (Ex 3:12). Incidentally, those words were pronounced to Moses as he procrastinated and wondered about his suitability for mission or his ability to enter into an authentic covenantal relationship.

If those of us in religious life are preoccupied with a way of thinking and acting that focuses mainly on survival, on 'maintenance over mission', we may not only *divert* from the authentic Gospel way we are called to live, but could even become a counter-sign of God's Reign.

In discussions about religious life, some important and increasingly familiar themes keep emerging: (i) the call for an inclusive, cosmic spirituality; (ii) for practical and consistent engagement with the poor; (iii) for a commitment – at home and abroad – to eco-justice and the struggle towards world peace. We have become familiar with the discourse, the ideas. Regarding the implementation for change though, we paddle around the edges, testing the waters, or riding the waves; maybe, occasionally launching out into the deep? How easily and quickly we can find ourselves stuck again, or afraid, or complacent, staying safe on the flat, dry shore, where we can survive, and where it is easy to have more control.

Many religious congregations tend to resist change. A 'world of a difference' seriously considered, may not really be what we want, what we can manage. I am suggesting, however, that positive change is more than simply a desirable option; to respond authentically as vowed religious persons and Congregations today, the call to transformative growth is an absolute necessity. In Sandra Schneider's outstanding work, *Buying the Field: Catholic Religious Life in Mission to the World*, she has spoken of this different reality, stating that 'together the vows create and structure the alternate world, the concrete realisation in history of the Reign of God (p. 358).

Here I focus on three features of Christian discipleship - in its expression through vowed religious life: firstly, through the vow of poverty, an openness to the *uncomfortable* stance, that continuing struggle towards wholeness and freedom; secondly, through the vow of chastity, a re-imagined *authentic relating*, encountered and deepened especially with the most vulnerable; and thirdly, through the vow of obedience, a renewed *contemplative way of being*.

THE 'UNCOMFORTABLE STANCE'

Some thoughts then, regarding the first aspect, the 'uncomfortable stance', which I relate to the vow of poverty, to the following of Christ, who was poor, and who chose to live simply, detached from and yet committed to the world. Religious Life is doomed to

mediocrity or failure without a more radical living of simplicity, however 'uncomfortable'. Religious today, and always, are called to go where others would rather not. There is the urgent, almost desperate call to be counter-cultural in a world of ecological destruction, of consumerism, a world caught in a frightening downward spiral of greed, speed and need.

The uncomfortable stance, the vow of poverty: being the one in community who patiently witnesses to a simpler lifestyle, the one who courageously say 'no' to business deals, Government policies or even Church practices that can build up other than *God's Kingdom*.

Again, the 'uncomfortable stance' is being the one who quietly insists on listening once more to the individual, allowing one's opinions and ideas to be changed. Uncomfortable, yes. The precariousness of life today generates anxiety and religious can, unintentionally, even foster this, exercising increasing power and control. The 'uncomfortable stance' demands a robust Gospel living, ensuring and accepting a more vulnerable place, a little closer to the life styles of simple, poor persons, rather than the one which many inhabit, a place tending to be, even striving to be, a little more predictable, secure, manageable – and comfortable!

We *are* reluctant to face the uncomfortable. Many religious have meaningful ministries, however demanding; many are assured of health care, companionship, accommodation; many have the support of good families and relations; many have set goals and budgets for security and growth. All 'well and good', but not when such supports trap the religious in a mental and spiritual capsule that is unable or unwilling to move or inhabit a different more Spirit-centred space, more 'actively' contemplative; and manifestly poor, obedient and loving – and, generally, uncomfortable. *Foxes have holes, the birds of the air have nests...* This security is not the context for the Son of Man or for his followers.

Members of religious congregations in Australia, for example, professing to witness to the Gospel way, cannot fail to address the constant, urgent cry – and opportunity – to honest engagement with the land and with the indigenous peoples.

Aboriginal Australians, on ratio, continue to form far the highest numbers in almost every category of social deprivation, as is well documented; and yet the response of Religious Congregations to this most disadvantaged group remains, in varying degrees, as does the response of the Australian church and nation generally, intermittent, ignorant, sometimes reckless or dismissive, often times patronising, even mean-spirited, and frequently confused. There is need for change if we are to follow Christ who stood with and for the poor.

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Aboriginal Catholics often remind non-indigenous Australians of Pope John Paul's words in Alice Springs, 1986: 'The Church in Australia will not be fully the Church Jesus wants her to be until you have made your contribution to her life, and until that contribution has been joyfully received by others.'² There is need to walk in solidarity, more humbly and respectfully, with indigenous people in their continuing struggle for justice and reconciliation.

Religious Congregations world wide will have stories to share from their early histories, accounts of a small group of young women or men perhaps, setting sail for distant lands. There was no consideration of ensuring a comfortable life style, of needing to maintain or increase numbers, buildings, 'works'. The *raison d'être*, clear as a bell, was the call to mission.

Currently, many congregations find themselves with just small numbers, being 'all there is'. If only the response, as in those early times, could be a simpler, bolder one, rather than the timid response that can become so lukewarm, pessimistic and even bitter. A negative way of thinking and being can creep up, and like a cancer, overtake and spread, locking persons and groups in negativity, in a profound weariness and uncertainty, a lifeless conformity, with doors closed rather than open to the Spirit.

Today's 'distant lands' need not be measured in kilometres. The 'distant lands' may be the homes and bodies of broken women, distant lands in the dazed eyes of disillusioned youth, in the wounded hearts of the marginalised. The 'distant lands' may in fact be the land itself, our soul mate, from which we have grown so apart. The call to mission, to 'distant lands' is as close as the polluted stream beyond our back fence; as visible as the lonely neighbour across the road, (in the next room?), as audible as the indigenous voice, waiting to be heard.

For religious women and men who do live their vowed poverty with a truly Gospel response, perhaps what appears uncomfortable, is in fact the means of liberation and transformation.

THE VOW OF CELIBACY

Moving to the vow of consecrated celibacy also calls for further examination in light of the context of today's global world. The vow of chastity is perhaps best looked at in relational terms. Even without trying, religious women and men find themselves today in a world that enables and invites new relationships and new ways of relating. Today's context is an international, intercultural, interfaith one and religious have moved fairly easily into accepting

2 John Paul II 'Address to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders' in *The Pope in Australia: Collected Homilies and Talks*, St Paul Publications, Homebush, NSW 1986: 172

and talking about new insights and images relating to Trinitarian theology, spiritualities of relationship, and with the many and varied ways of discovering, celebrating and calling forth communion, knowing the value of networking, and of establishing links.

However, despite this growing understanding of connectedness, religious may still often find themselves and their communities, in a remote place; monasteries, convents and apartments can shield and isolate persons from others; electronic communication can close us off from one another and we can find ourselves minimizing contact with other people. How independent and self-sufficient many of us have become! So many of our wants are being met through social media, through the Web, through Facebook, through our phones (those trusted, non-threatening, non-invasive companions), The globalised world is within us: 'I google – or 'I am googled' – therefore I am'!

Descartes gave us *cogito ergo sum*, 'I think therefore I am'. No need of relating here, to establish identity! The well known African proverb, on the other hand, has a deeper wisdom: 'I am because we are'. *This* is relating. Incidentally, such a proverb, profound as it is, if found in an Australia Aboriginal language, would, I suspect, understand the pronoun 'we' to include the whole of creation, all living creatures, land, sea and sky, to all the wonders of our planet and universe: 'I am because *we* are'; and in my understanding, I expand the 'We' to the sacred mystery of the Trinity: 'I am because *We* are'. Our vow of chastity enfolds us in this embrace.

David Couturier³ suggests we need not so much to grapple with an identity crisis, as with a keen awareness and acceptance of the cultural context to which we belong. But such attentiveness does impact on our self-understanding. The challenge is to make wise, sometimes tough choices, to create new, different spaces for responsible participation and co-operation. I believe that God delights in our recipe for the Divine Will. This world of a difference is up to us, ours to imagine, and to shape. And with Carmelite Sister, Constance Fitzgerald OCD, who expounds in her remarkable paper 'From Impasse to prophetic Hope', we trust in a God 'who is coming anew and calling us forward' (42).

Nonetheless, we tend to despair over the rapidly increasing rich-poor divide among peoples of the world. We cry out for world and for the poverty and brokenness of the earth community. As vowed religious, how do our lives witness to the most vulnerable, those caught in systemic injustice, in addictive behaviours, those marginalized in our world, or to the countless number of ordinary – extraordinary women and men holding down jobs, supporting

3 David Couturier ofm 'Religious Life at a Crossroad' in *Human Development*: Volume 36, Issue 12, 2008:3

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families under enormous stress and unfair pressure? Do these ones have a place on the Agendas of our community meetings, our Congregational gatherings? And do we confront systems, as well as care for individuals? Do we even, especially together, advocate for change and work in generous-spirited co-operation with positive moves already happening around us, the sometimes ground-breaking work of local or global organisations for example, in protecting and promoting life?

As religious, and as Congregations, perhaps some of us have lost our bearings a little. In this fast moving, individualistic, pressurized and consumer driven world, there is profound and urgent need for moral and spiritual wisdom and leadership. Through our vow of chastity we are drawn into profound and loving relationship, especially with the vulnerable human persons we ourselves are, with the very poor among us, and with our weary, crumbling, violent – and precious world. Above all, through authentic consecrated celibacy, we are drawn ever more intimately, into Divine Love: The bloody, naked, spent and abandoned Jesus on Calvary was the God of Love and the pierced Heart became Hope for the world.

Religious are called to discern who they are being called to accompany, to serve, and to be served by. When the heart is open, the Spirit breathes! It is often through genuine encounters with others of diverse social, religious and cultural backgrounds, that possibilities for a very different world, more attuned to the way of God, may be revealed.

Miriam Ukeritis discusses some ministry relationships which she describes as a form of ‘parochial assimilation’. Catholic lay people have often been disregarded and devalued. Again, women and men religious need to be in respectful relationship with those who are marginalized (by Church and society), to receive from them and learn from them. A better way of relating, of living out the vow of chastity, in company with Jesus, for others, can bring forth the very Reign of God.

THE VOW OF OBEDIENCE

Turning finally to the vow of obedience, I suggest it is the contemplative spirit that brings meaning and scope for Christian discipleship – and certainly for Religious Life. Attention to a contemplative way of being, to a constant and sincere response to the sacred encounter between ourselves and God, between ourselves and the person of Jesus, is paramount; it fosters the obedient spirit which enables transformation .

Through the ages, and in recent times, especially since Vatican II, Religious congregations have striven to name once again the contemplative call. Revised constitutions and updated chapter

documents, papers distributed for discussion, seminars offered, all remind us of this dimension. We like to speak of the mystics in our various traditions, or tentatively perhaps recognize the mystic within our very selves, just as, maybe rather carelessly, we sometimes use the word 'prophet' or 'prophetic' in relation to our religious lives and congregations.

The vow of obedience is primarily a vow about our relationship with God. It is about a love that proclaims the Kingdom of God, a love that fosters justice, a relationship, like that of Jesus with his Father, that stays attentive, trusting, obedient ... and faithful even unto death. Our vow of *chastity* also, is about a relationship of love, with God and with others; the vow of *poverty* too is grounded in a loving relationship with Jesus, and with the Christ of the poor. The vows are inter-connected of course, and not mutually exclusive.

It is through efforts to live out a contemplative way of being, that we discover in very real terms, what is the nature of our vow of obedience. Its prerequisite is contemplation, which requires patience, listening, and discerning. Then can follow true obedience. The contemplative way of being requires a quiet heart and responsive spirit, just as the vow of obedience, to be free and holy, requires a deeply contemplative way of being. Vowed religious life is shaped, for better or worse, by our way of engaging with the Spirit of God. Unless there is something real happening here, all else is 'as a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal' 1 Cor 13:1.

I see our vow of obedience, as lived out in this contemplative relationship as not closed or inward looking (however intimate it may be), but existing within the sacred context of the Spirit's work for the world, for the whole of creation. As individual religious and as members of religious communities and congregations with a contemplative way of being, we are caught up into the vast, inclusive Dream of God, the Dance of God, the Spirit's mysterious, transforming action in our world. Religious are called to nourish and better promote this inclusive dimension of the contemplative way, those in monastic and contemplative as well as apostolic orders. The world will certainly not be different if we neglect this. For a Gospel-shaped 'world of a difference', the contemplative way of being is absolutely fundamental.

Religious in the church and world of today are being 'invited and challenged' to a different way of living, different from the norm, from a materialistic, individualistic, hedonistic, often inhumane and isolating world. The call to a different way of living through vowed religious life, through a reimagined '*uncomfortable*', *relational and contemplative way*, that the pilgrim journey invites. But I feel it is so much more than simply 'an invitation'. It is as though God, with heart near breaking, is pleading with and in us.

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Our world is pleading, our poor are pleading, demanding that we hear their lament.

Mary, prophet of the Magnificat, comes to mind and woman of Cana: 'They have no wine!' Her words still reach us, 'Do whatever he tells you!' May this be so. Religious perhaps need to sharpen anew the understanding and living of the vow of poverty in today's globalized world, exercising a willingness to do whatever is required, however uncomfortable. And there may be need to renew and embrace again the vow of chastity, to deepen a way of relating that springs, as it did with Mary, from a single-minded union with her Son to an abiding compassionate heart for the needy. And with the vow of obedience comes the call for a radical contemplative spirit in order to hear and respond to the abiding Word of God. It will be with Divine grace, and in tune with the Spirit, that the lament of the poor especially, may be heard; and that the lament of the earth and the entire planet may be turned into a new song. Bound to be free, religious women and men in today's world, are invited to hear and share this Christ song which could truly make a world of a difference.

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