

## STATIO FEBRUARY 2012

### POVERTY – THE ROOT VOW

Meditating on *Conversion* as theme for our General Chapter I came across booklets by Aylward Shorter, M. Afr., on the vows in the African context. I quote from the last Chapter of the booklet: *Religious Poverty in Africa*, 2005

#### **The Root of Consecrated Life**

The consecrated life is the radical following of Jesus. “Radical” means literally “from the root”, and living the consecrated life means getting to the root of discipleship, going to the heart of what it means to be like Christ. The divine nature of Christ is humble love, and his appearance among us as a fellow human being was a *kenosis* or self-emptying, an impoverishment so that we might all be enriched. The radical following of Jesus Christ is equally a *kenosis*. The religious enters into this divine self-emptying, this impoverishment. By definition, religious are those who try to “be poor in the sight of God”, so as to win riches in heaven for themselves and for others.

This spiritual impoverishment is linked to a measure of material impoverishment, worldly riches become less important. As Jesus taught, there is no future in hoarding material wealth. We cannot take it with us when we die. It remains behind. Worse still, while we have wealth, it may be an obstacle to spiritual enrichment. Self-deprivation is the starting-point for the religious, just as it was for Jesus himself. Giving up possessions, giving up relationships, joining the ranks of the material poor, are ways of entering into God’s humble love and becoming a member of Jesus’ family. But the self-deprivation in the consecrated life is more radical than for the life of the ordinary Christian. It involves giving up normal married life, foregoing a marriage partner, a family and children of one’s own. Consecrated celibacy constitutes a self-deprivation, a *kenosis* that goes to the root of one’s very personality. It is the most profound form of self-dedication possible.

There is another facet of *kenosis* in the vow of religious obedience. This is the surrender of a person’s will, the voluntary deprivation of one’s own judgment, in order to enter into the will of a superior and so make the common project of one’s community one’s own personal project. The vow of obedience flies in the face of all the contemporary values of self-assertion and affirmation of personality. It is another very striking form of self-deprivation, imitating the *kenosis* of Jesus that led him to be obedient, even to death on a cross.

Poverty can be said to be the “root vow” because it underlies the other two vows. Both celibacy and obedience are eminent forms of poverty practiced by Jesus and imitated by his “radical followers”. Poverty is also the root vow because it lies at the heart of the consecrated life itself. It is at the centre of religious commitment.

#### **Being, rather than Having.**

The riches of a person vowed to the consecrated life should be spiritual. The religious who opens up to the transforming influence of God’s grace, and who is not self-centred and full of worldly concerns, experiences a personal development, a growth into the likeness of Jesus Christ. She develops something like the kindness and compassion of Christ. She shares, however minimally, in the wisdom of Jesus. This is what it means “to make your own the mind of Christ”, the precondition for the *kenosis* of self-emptying, described by St. Paul in Phil 2:5-11. We have to be empty so that Christ can live in our hearts through faith and “his power, working in us, can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine” Eph 3:20.

If, because of their self-emptying, religious are able to be more, rather than to have more, it is because they are called to live for others. Their being more is for others’ sake. Just as Jesus was the “man for others”, so the religious is a person for others. Not only do religious empty themselves in order to be filled with the Spirit and the grace of Jesus Christ, they empty themselves to be filled with fraternal love, overflowing to others. Religious poverty is directly related to the humble love that is God himself. That love is an outpouring for others.

The spirit of religious poverty implies that one does not accumulate knowledge, experience, skills for one’s own satisfaction or profit. This would obviously contradict religious poverty. They cultivate their gifts in order to serve God’s people in humility.

Being more is related to prayer and to being a person of prayer, being united with God. Religious pray for the needs of the poor and the marginalized, the people among whom they work and witness. Prayer makes religious more generous and sharpens the discernment necessary for identifying the needs of the poor. Prayer is a necessary expression of humble love and a condition of being poor in God’s sight.

### **Travelling light – a Strategy for Religious Poverty**

Travelling light means not being hindered by many possessions and things. Religious do not possess immovable property that could make them immovable or distract them from the pursuit of holiness and the humble service of others. They travel light as they do not possess many clothes, some books only, some tools. Travelling light is a guarantee of freedom as treasured by the nomads in African deserts. It enables religious to be truly at home in God's creation. They are the meek and gentle who truly inherit the earth. The whole earth belongs to them. They themselves belong to the Spirit who himself fills the whole earth and who blows where he wills. He enables the religious to find God in all things and situations and places as Paul says: "I accommodated myself to people in all kinds of different situations, so that by all possible means I might bring some to salvation. All this I do for the sake of the Gospel, that I may share its benefits with others" 1 Cor 9:22-23.

Travelling light is an attribute of speed. The African nomad moves quickly, because he is not impeded. He has no loads to carry, no heavy garments to obstruct his movement. In the same way, religious can also move quickly from both a physical and a spiritual point of view, because they are not impeded by possessions. Not only can they accept successive appointments without difficulty, but they can deepen their attachment to God and to neighbor, because they are detached from material possessions.

### **Shared Poverty and Religious Community**

In the African experience shared poverty makes for solidarity and social cohesion. This is especially evident in traditional village life, in rituals of initiation. Religious poverty is also a shared poverty, a poverty that is lived in community and that is experienced equally by all its members. It is clear that this shared poverty helps to strengthen community life in various ways.

We have just seen that "travelling light" helps to ensure mobility. Paradoxically, religious poverty also contributes to community stability. Benedictine monks do not take a vow of poverty, but poverty is implied in their vow of stability and conversion of life. They are to "persevere in the monastery until death". Their common way of life enables them to do this.

What those vowed to religious poverty share in common is basically a common spiritual patrimony. This they have acquired by "emptying themselves", by becoming a *tabula rasa* on which can be inscribed the charism of the traditions of their congregation. Like the African initiates in rituals of social maturity, religious too adopt a common spirit, a shared family likeness, and they can only do this in the measure that they are able to relativize their own personal riches of mind and soul, as well as to abandon the material attachments that might compete for their allegiance of spirit.

Shared poverty also enables religious to appreciate the spiritual riches of other community members. One has time to give them, time to learn from them and time simply to be with them. Shared poverty gives scope to the development of such immaterial riches, in conversation, in dialogue, in faith sharing and in shared prayer. Because of shared poverty, religious are enriched by each other. Their riches are shared, and this is the kind of sharing that makes each of them "rich in the sight of God".

### **Reflections.**

- Which aspect of poverty in this text is especially important for me, which is new?
- Do I want to take part in the *kenosis* of Christ? In which way?
- Can I travel light or do possessions hinder me?
- Where do I have to start my conversion in living my vow of poverty?