Poverty: New thoughts on an old vow

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Evangelical poverty is at the heart of religious life. It always deserves fresh reexamination.

Discerners don't get far in considering religious life without thinking hard about poverty, chastity, and obedience. With that in mind, HORIZON begins a series of reflections on the evangelical counsels. We invite readers to give their feedback to keep the conversation going. Write us at nrvc@nrvc.net, or respond on HORIZON's Facebook or Twitter page.

A witness to preserving God's creation

By Sister Elise García, O.P.

Sister Elise García, O.P. is on the General Council of the Adrian Dominican Sisters. She co-founded and co-directed Santuario Sisterfarm, an ecology center in Texas. The center was dedicated to cultivating diversity—biodiversity and cultural diversity—as a way of promoting peace among diverse people and between people and Earth.

I MUST SHARE AT THE OUTSET THAT I never took a vow of poverty. Dominicans such as myself take only one vow: that of obedience. Voluntary poverty and chastity are implied, lived as part of our common life, but they are not explicit in the traditional vow that we in the Order of Preachers have taken over the centuries. Nonetheless, voluntary poverty in the form of mendicancy was actually one of the distinguishing characteristics of the new form of religious life that St. Dominic and his contemporary, St. Francis, created at the start of the 13th century.

Relying as it did on the uncertainty of almsgiving, mendicant poverty signified abandonment to God's providence. For Dominic, the humble act of begging daily for food also meant entering into a relationship of mutuality with those to whom he preached. As his biographer M.H. Vicaire, O.P. wrote, mendicancy replaced a "vertical scheme" of preaching with a "horizontal scheme." Sharing the Word of God in evangelical humility with those who shared their daily bread was a means of creating "a loving union with his brethren, with all other men and women, and with God."

Although in time the practice of mendicancy gave way to other forms of living voluntary poverty, the basic tenet underlying it—that we preach with our lives as much as with our words—remains key today. So, too, does the idea of preaching from a "horizontal scheme"—or from within a "discipleship of equals," to draw on the feminist insights of theologian Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza.

Seen in this context, voluntary poverty calls on religious to impose limits on consumption and to renounce privilege, which expresses itself in oppressive ways across lines of race, class, gender, income, sexual orientation, and geography. Lived to its fullest, Dominicans and other religious have an opportunity today to turn this vow into a powerful witness for social transformation by publicly rejecting ways of living that ravage God's Earth and dehumanize God's people.

The ever-accelerating consumption that undergirds our global economic system relies on the exploitation of people and planet—and is fast outpacing our planet's natural capacity to replenish itself. The Global Footprint Network in 2016 calculated that we reached "Earth Overshoot Day" on August 8, 2016. That was the date when humanity's demand on nature for the year exceeded "nature's budget"—what Earth could generate in a year. Each year the date of our overshoot moves up, with devastating impact: "collapsing fisheries, diminishing forest cover, depletion of fresh water systems, and the build up of carbon dioxide emissions," according to Global Footprint Network.

"Overshoot also contributes to resource conflicts and wars, mass migrations, famine, disease, and other human tragedies—and tends to have a disproportionate impact on the poor, who cannot buy their way out of the problem by getting

resources from somewhere else."

If consumption is the driver of this global economic system, fossil fuels power it. The massive amount of carbon released into the atmosphere through this process is changing its chemistry and threatening to alter our global climate catastrophically. Recognizing the existential threat that climate change poses to life on Earth, in December 2015, 195 nations signed the historic COP21 Paris Climate Agreement. The agreement imposes curbs on fossil fuel use to cap global warming at no more than 2 degrees Celsius, with a goal of limiting the increase to 1.5 degrees—a safer target. It also provides for funding from wealthier nations to assist poorer ones in making this massive economic transition.

As of today, the plans to implement the agreement do not match those urgent goals. The signatory nations must make much greater commitments to reduce their fossil fuel use if they are to reach that target—and to provide the promised investments.

Vow of poverty invites action, witness

Time is fast running out. It takes 100 years for carbon dioxide (CO_2) to dissipate from the atmosphere. That means the effects of climate change we are experiencing today are the result of accumulated CO_2 spewed during the industrial growth of the last century. The impact of any action we take now to curb carbon emissions—or to continue business as usual—will be felt decades from now. It will be a shameful legacy of unimaginable global hardship and anguish if we don't quit our carbon habit and shift to sustainable ways of living—swiftly.

According to Carbon Brief, we have five years remaining at current emission rates for the world to use up the "carbon budget" that would keep future temperature increases to no more than 1.5 degrees Celsius. That's the level most scientists now believe we should not cross if we are to avoid the risk of runaway global warming. In short, we have between now and 2021 to step off the catastrophic trajectory we are on and begin to walk on a new path towards a clean renewable-energy future. This small window of time puts a laser-like focus today on our ancient vow of poverty: How might we give it public witness to help the world make this critical economic shift?

In the U.S., with avowed climate deniers in power, and renewed oil and gas exploration getting the green light, it is difficult to press for change at the national level. But the global economic and energy transition that needs to take place will be realized in villages, towns, and cities across the world—and that kind of local focus could be a very fruitful way to move forward.

Here in the United States where we bear an historic responsibility as the world's top carbon polluter, communities of women and men religious could make the individual and communal sacrifices necessary to help lead these local efforts. Our motherhouses, convents and monasteries could set bold targets for reducing our carbon footprints within the next five years—by 2021. We could make the means for achieving those reductions—such as solar panels or wind turbines—highly visible and reach out to work with our neighbors and public and civic leaders to help leverage similar changes in our local areas, with a focus on addressing the needs of people in low-income neighborhoods and in areas suffering the deleterious effects of environmental injustice.

We could go a step further, joining hands with those of other faith traditions around the world who are similarly concerned about the integrity of God's creation and the impact of ecological degradation on the poor, and are playing leadership roles in driving change. In the face of melting glaciers and other environmental challenges, for example, Buddhist monks and nuns in the Khoryug network of monasteries and centers in the Himalayas have installed solar panels, rain catchment systems, and taken other steps "in order to save the Himalayas and Tibet from the threats of deforestation, climate change, and pollution." The effort to lead environmental change in their region flows from a belief "that this positive change in our societies must begin with ourselves first."

The vow of poverty, with its call to limit consumption and renounce privilege, is a powerful religious commitment that can help us give witness to the global economic shift our world must undertake with urgency. In *Laudato Si: On Care for our Common Home*, Pope Francis observed: "We are faced not with two separate crises, one environmental and the other social, but rather with one complex crisis which is both social and environmental. Strategies for a solution demand an integrated approach to combating poverty, restoring dignity to the excluded, and at the same time protecting nature." (139).

At its root, this complex crisis is a spiritual crisis. We blaspheme against the Creator when we desecrate God's creation and act in ways that dehumanize our brothers and sisters.

Beginning with ourselves, we can be the change we wish to see in the world, living the vow of poverty today—as if all life depends on it. Tweet this

The vow about power and relationship

By Father Daniel P. Horan, O.F.M.

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Gratitude *(2016).*

MOST PEOPLE THINK that, among the three evangelical counsels, the vow of obedience is about power and the need to surrender it in response to a religious vocation. Likewise, many believe that the vow of chastity is primarily about relationship and, again, the need to surrender the possibility of marriage for the sake of giving oneself for the Kingdom.

To some degree, both assumptions are grounded in truth. Obedience is about a letting go of the need to be in complete control in order to listen to the Holy Spirit at work in and through one's religious community. Chastity is about the embrace of another kind of relationship, one that allows for attention to the many over the individual.

But what then are we to make of the vow of poverty? What is that about?

Simply put, whereas obedience and chastity appear at first to be about power and relationship, respectively, I believe the vow of poverty is in fact about both power and relationship. This is not some clever notion that I invented or an insight for which I can take credit. Instead, the meaning of evangelical poverty can be discovered in the life and tradition of one of its best-known adherents and the one who also happens to be the founder of my religious order: St. Francis of Assisi.

Among many caricatures, including love of animals and the establishment of the first Christmas crèche, Francis of Assisi (d. 1226) is often remembered for his singular love of poverty. This is undoubtedly true, but not for the reasons most people might at first think. Francis did not love poverty as an end in itself. He appreciated the scriptural witness that confirms material or abject poverty is always an evil, something to be avoided and protested. The God who "hears the cry of the poor" (Psalm 34) or is concerned about the poor enslaved in Egypt (Exodus 3:15-17) would not demand a voluntary embrace of abjection. That kind of poverty—what we usually mean when we use the term—should never be confused with evangelical poverty, which is what women and men in religious communities are called to embrace.

Francis's embrace of evangelical poverty was overtly modeled after the example of Jesus Christ whose self-emptying (*kenosis*) in the Incarnation (Philippians 2:5-11) and example of itinerancy throughout his earthly ministry provides us with a pattern of life that does not allow possessions to get in the way of relationship with others. Both material possessions and a sense of possessiveness (such as our ego, our need to be right, our judgmentalism, and so on) can easily get in the way of authentic encounters with others. Francis came to see this in his own 13th-century time by the way society was increasingly stratified with ever-growing divisions between the "haves" (*maiores*) and the "have-nots" (*minores*); the latter were often overlooked and treated as disposable.

His embrace of evangelical poverty was a means to a greater end: relationship. He desired to walk in the footprints of Christ and realized that maintaining the status quo lead to complicity with the social—and, at times, ecclesial—power structures of the day. These structures often perpetuated systemic injustices and discrimination that marginalized the materially poor, the lepers, those of other religious traditions, and anybody else who did not "fit in." By voluntarily divesting himself of material possessions and a sense of intellectual and egotistical possessiveness, he freed himself to be open to encountering anyone he met. As the historian Jacques Dalarun observed in his book, *Francis of Assisi and Power*, Francis "chose to establish in a rule of religious life the condition shared by the most powerless classes in the society of his time.... With Francis there is less of a merely visible break with the world; at the heart of his life there is instead more intransigence toward any compromise with the world and its powers."

What began with Francis more than 800 years ago lives on today in the women and men inspired by his and St. Clare's examples of evangelical poverty. I have found this outlook on poverty both liberating and challenging, life-giving and difficult. What has been liberating and life-giving is the notion that the vows we profess as consecrated religious are not ends in themselves or anachronisms that serve no purpose other than to perpetuate an outdated way of being in the world. Instead, they are powerful means toward a much greater end. Evangelical poverty understood as following in the footprints of Jesus Christ according to the example of Francis and Clare of Assisi puts relationship with all our sisters and brothers first and relegates to a place of disdain the social norms that otherwise govern so much of how we act toward one another.

The challenge of poverty

Whereas many of our cultures push the materially poor to the margins of our societies—physically in terms of homelessness, and conceptually in terms of how little most people think about them—evangelical poverty calls us to seek those overlooked and forgotten, the voiceless and abandoned. If we do not cling to our possessions, we have little reason to fear them being taken away from us. If we aren't concerned about our pride, ego, or our appearance before others, then we are free to associate with all kinds of people in the manner of Jesus and Francis. This simple yet challenging shift in outlook is just one of the many freeing aspects of the vow of poverty.

But it is especially difficult to embrace evangelical poverty in a world in which so many of us—myself included—find ourselves privileged by so many factors. In my case, I am a white, male, cleric, who holds the highest academic degrees, and experiences financially stability as a religious. This means that my socio-cultural context is one that is inevitably shaped by numerous unearned privileges. Working to become and then remain aware of these realities—particularly how many of the same cultural factors simultaneously benefit me and disadvantage others—is an ongoing challenge. While there are many things my fellow religious sisters and brothers and I can divest ourselves of (such as ownership of property, attachment to

material possessions, and the like), there are also immaterial things, like judgments, prejudices, and preconceptions that highlight the need for consistent conversion. Oftentimes the material possessions are the easiest things for us to dispose of and the immaterial things onto which we cling can take a lifetime of growing into evangelical poverty for us to let go.

Not an end in itself

This last point is especially important for those accompanying women and men considering religious life. At times the attraction to apostolic ministry or monastic enclosure is partnered with an understandable desire for an increased simplicity of lifestyle that follows from a candidate's presumption about the meaning of poverty. Many viewing poverty as simply an end in itself will miss the opportunity for spiritual growth and conversion, which is the primary aim of evangelical poverty, particularly when it frees us to be in authentic relationship with all we meet. Likewise, approaching religious life with a black-and-white or singular vision of poverty does not reflect a wholistic Gospel life. Instead it reiterates many of the same assumptions and either-or thinking of worldly logic and power.

Francis of Assisi is remembered for having referred to himself as God's new fool in the world (*novellus pazzus in mundo*). While this seems like a deprecating statement, it is actually a statement of affirming Gospel living, including the embrace of evangelical poverty. St. Paul writes in the first chapter of his First Letter to the Corinthians about how there are two kinds of logic or wisdom: that of God and that of the world. The wisdom of God appears like foolishness and is a stumbling block or scandal to those who operate with the wisdom of the world. In this spirit, Francis embraced the Christian call to seem foolish in a world whose logic discriminates against, rejects, and despises the poor, the ill, and the stranger.

The vow of poverty is for me an invitation for women and men religious to risk appearing foolish in the world, to become "fools for Christ." It is about operating according to a different logic and wisdom, which prioritizes relationship over and against the temptation of earthly power. It is a rejection of a materialistic culture in which everything and everyone has a price. The vow of poverty says that relationship is the ultimate value and the greatest treasure we should seek.

A poverty of communion

By Sister Tracy Kemme, S.C.

Sister Tracy Kemme, S.C. a Sister of Charity of Cincinnati and regular columnist for the Global Sisters Report, lives at Visitation House, a community of discernment and hospitality, and ministers at a largely Hispanic Cincinnati parish and at the Archdiocesan Catholic Social Office.

Before I became a sister, my time as an international volunteer with Rostro de Cristo exposed me short-term to what life could be like living a vow of poverty. During my two years of service, I lived with other young adults in an impoverished neighborhood on the coast of Ecuador. We spent hours getting to know our neighbors, people the world might denote as "the poor." We sat in their small cane houses and talked with them for hours, sweating under the heat of the day but refreshed by the wisdom they exude. They taught us how to make *seco de pollo,* and their kids beat us at soccer in the dusty streets. We worshipped each Sunday together in a simple chapel, where stray dogs wandered down the aisles and true faith was palpable.

Along with our time visiting neighbors and our ministries at various non-profits, a focus of our year was cultivating intentional community in our home. We prayed and ate together each day. We shared a roof, a refrigerator, a washing machine, a bathroom, and a meager house budget as well as all house responsibilities. The transition from an individualistic, success-driven college career to a simple, communal lifestyle in South America was jolting. I felt a total loss of control and a new kind of vulnerability. The first year was the most challenging of my life to date.

And yet, the experience was powerful and transformative, and it left me wanting more. Living in community with each other and in close relationship with our neighbors propelled me into a depth of living I had never known. I discovered that my life was not my own; it belonged in a quite final way to God and God's people. And although it was demanding, it was freeing. The possibility of living a similarly radical and meaningful life drew me to the Sisters of Charity. I made first vows in June of 2015.

Of the three vows I professed, the vow of poverty remains the most elusive to me. Although forced to in the exercise of writing this article, I struggle to put words around it or know if I am living it well. However, during my period of vow preparation, many sisters reminded me that the vows are lifelong journeys. As I wrestle with the vow of poverty today, the word that surfaces in my heart is "relationship." The vow of poverty has everything to do with community. We read in 2 Corinthians that Jesus "became poor" so that "through his poverty [we] might become rich." When Jesus "became poor," he became human, which placed him in intimate relationship with us. He surrendered to vulnerability, and he bound himself inextricably to the vulnerable. In order for the vow of poverty to be powerful and prophetic in a world of need, we must live it in community—within our congregations and with all who suffer.

The vows are evangelical counsels, and as such they have always allowed women religious to say something important to the world. It's awesome how God calls the "right" people for each generation of religious life and imprints in their DNA a desire for what is most needed in their time and place. When I gather with other newer members, we recognize that

perhaps what is needed most from us right now is our witness to interdependence. People coming to religious life now have often had the experience of financial independence, a career, and life on their own. There are a myriad of ministry opportunities for single and married people. We don't come to religious life for an only slightly altered experience of a life we could have lived otherwise. I sense that new generations of religious are and will be called to live the vow of poverty, in community, with even more intensity. For the great majority of us, that means, nonnegotiably, living in intentional community under one roof.

A different way to be in the world

Living in intentional community, under one roof, enhances the experience of the vow of poverty and unleashes its prophetic tension. Sandra Schneiders has written that the vow of poverty urges us to create a gift economy in which the goal is not accumulation of goods but rather the common good. As a young sister, I love the concept that we try to create a whole different way of being in the world based on completely different values. How countercultural that we hold everything in common and use our resources to work for a better world! People coming to religious life long for this alternative "economy" as a stance of resistance to the status quo. And we want to live this way not only in a congregational sense, but in our homes. On a strictly practical level, living together under one roof means holding everything in common even through the ins and outs of daily life. It means one refrigerator and one washing machine. It means a combined food budget and a shared gas and electric bill. It is an important proclamation to a world that, as we all know, is increasingly selfish and divided. Choosing to do life together says no to that and yes to simplicity and communion.

Living in community also reduces our carbon footprint. At this moment, perhaps the most urgent cry of our vow of poverty is to be prophetically responsible to Earth and all of creation. The environmental crisis is the test of our era. As Pope Francis says in *Laudato Si,* "What kind of world do we want to leave to those who come after us, to children who are now growing up?" (160). Women religious are poised to play a role in a comprehensive response to the critical issues facing us. If our vow of poverty binds us to those most hurting in society, we owe everything to our bruised Earth and to the vulnerable populations most affected by Creation's destruction. In many ways, religious communities are being left behind by other organizations in the fight to save the planet. Together, if we choose it as central to our vow, we could and should be leaders in it.

Living in community also creates depth and challenge on the spiritual level of the vow of poverty. Intentional community means a surrender of power. Even in little things, like what's for dinner or what kind of Christmas tree we're going to get, we are reminded daily that "it's not all about me." We learn to compromise, to collaborate, to take others into consideration. We die to ourselves. Living in intentional community pries open the space of vulnerability elicited from our vow. We find ourselves having to take off our masks and reveal both our dark and light to our community mates. We come to morning prayer or dinner whether we feel like it or not that particular day. We come face to face with our wounds. Different ways of thinking and being stretch us to be better than we could be on our own. It is sometimes uncomfortable and unsettling. Newer members of religious communities hunger to live out this challenging yet freeing facet of the vow of poverty.

The vow of poverty calls us as well to radical hospitality. If we believe that nothing is truly ours, everything we have is for sharing, especially our homes. The vow of poverty seems to be calling newer members to create local communities ready to welcome collaborators, discerners, volunteers, neighbors, and those in need of shelter. In one sense, the gift of hospitality allows us to share the richness of our vows in intimate ways and grow our networks and future. In another sense, our hospitality will keep us in touch with the poverty of the world. We vow to be ready to let the chaos and brokenness of our neighborhoods enter our places of living and disrupt us, knowing that Jesus, too, dwells with us. We vow to repurpose property, if it makes sense, to house the disenfranchised. We vow to put ourselves in places that will keep us in relationship with those who suffer. And that will inform our life work of service and justice.

The vow of poverty we need now is one of communion. Community with one another in the context of community with "the poor" and all of creation will form us more fully into the religious God needs for this time. It has been said so often before: we know we will never truly be economically poor, and that is never our aim to begin with. But I also must be careful to not use that as an excuse to get too comfortable. We vow poverty because we don't want anyone to be poor. We must risk our whole lives to move together toward that dream, and the vow of poverty can help us. Perhaps it is precisely the ambiguity of the vow of poverty that keeps us seeking, striving and growing. When lived in community, the creative tension of the vow of poverty brings unique prophetic possibility and an urgent transformative message to a world in longing.