

RELIGIOUS POVERTY A PROPHETIC CHALLENGE TO FIRST WORLD ECONOMICS

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I. INTRODUCTION

Thank you for inviting me to speak to you at this convention of financial officers of Religious Institutes. I am sorry I cannot give this talk in French which would be easier for you but I was afraid you might have more difficulty understanding my French than my English! However, I will try to take questions in French from those who are not comfortable in English and I know your translators will make the talk itself comprehensible to the non-English speakers here. Your officers plan to make a copy of the talk available after the lecture so that you can listen without trying to take notes or follow a script.

I want to begin by saying that I am completely incompetent to speak to you about matters financial. Except for a couple university courses in economics about forty years ago I have no knowledge of the professional world in which you operate so competently. But Diane here in Montreal and Jeanine in Ottawa assured me that you have plenty of resources for that aspect of your work. Your interest in having me here was to help you to reflect on the biblical, theological, and spiritual dimensions of your ministry as stewards of the material resources of the Religious Institutes you serve.

So, here I am. But in the interests of truth in advertising, I will first say that I am not only not going to talk to you about how to acquire, preserve, manage or account for money or real property, but I am not even going to try to work out how the biblical and theological material I will present can and/or should influence the day to day processes of your ministry. That is something you are better equipped to do than I. I want to talk to you about the strange context, namely, Religious Life, in which you carry on your work. And it *is* strange from the point of view of postmodern, first-world culture. I am going to discuss how the vow of poverty which Religious make on the day of Profession, and the economic system which that vow made by all the members of a Congregation generates, make the handling of material goods – individually and corporately – a highly original way to live in a first world context and why that highly original project has the

potential to offer prophetic witness in our endangered world. It is in the strange context of an economic system based on freely chosen, religiously motivated, lifelong poverty, rather than on the nearly universal commitment of our society and culture to the amassing and maintaining of personal or corporate wealth, that you are working to keep Congregations functional, their members cared for, their ministries adequately funded, and, strangest of all, their goods and services flowing outward in ministry to the poor, the oppressed, and the magistrateship rather than inward for self-maintenance. My hope is that a deeper biblical/theological/spiritual understanding of Religious poverty, the foundation of the economic system which Religious create and live within, will help you, both Religious and lay colleagues in congregational financial ministries, to contextualize your ministry of stewardship within the Gospel project of the Reign of God.

II. Framing the Question

Let me begin by framing this discussion of the meaning of Gospel or evangelical poverty, the poverty Religious vow, in terms of a hypothesis and three presuppositions.

The *hypothesis* is that, on the one hand, Religious Life is profoundly *Christian*, i.e., Religious share in the identity and mission of all the baptized with whom they relate as equals, and, on the other hand, Religious Life is a *distinctive lifeform* in the Church, i.e., a state of life that can be recognized and identified by its specific contribution to the life and mission of the Church. By way of anticipation, I will suggest that Religious Life is an alternate lifeform in the Church. Religious, by the vows they profess and live, create an alternate "world" in the midst of this world, the *saeculum*. Religious do not simply attempt to live differently in this world, which all Christians must do, but to create a different world -- one which is distinct and original in any context but can even appear strange, weird, or downright insane in our postmodern, first world context. This alternate world intends to offer a prophetic witness in, to, and sometimes against the world and even the institutional Church.

Three *presuppositions* frame this hypothesis that Religious Life is a prophetic lifeform in the Church. The first concerns the *meaning of the term "world,"* a concept that must be carefully parsed today lest

Christians continue policies of human domination and exploitation of the natural world on the one hand or rejection of creation in the name of religion on the other.¹ Perhaps our best New Testament source for a nuanced theology of world is the Gospel of John which uses the term more frequently than does the rest of the New Testament combined.² Four meanings of the Greek term *kosmos* (world) can be distinguished in the Fourth Gospel. First, world can mean the **whole of creation** which John's Gospel, echoing the first chapter of Genesis, declares came into existence through the Word of God (cf. Jn. 1:9-11), the creator God who declared creation "very good" (cf. Gen.1:31). Second, the world can be seen as the **theater of human history**. Jesus spoke of his own coming into the world as light to save all (cf. Jn. 12:46) and prayed at the last supper not that God take his disciples out of the world, i.e., out of human history, but that God preserve them from evil as they lived and acted in the world (cf. Jn. 17:15). Third, the world is the **human race** in its entirety. God, the Gospel says, "so loved the world" as to give the only Son that "all" who believe in him might not perish but might have eternal life (cf. Jn. 3:16). All three of these meanings of "world": i.e., creation, the theater of human history, the human race, are essentially positive. The world created by God, especially the human race in its journey through and creation of history, is the handiwork of God, redeemed in Christ, and destined to glory. Whatever we may have thought or taught in the past, Religious Life cannot be a blanket rejection or abandonment of the world. And, of course, Vatican II in *Gaudium et Spes*, the dogmatic constitution on the "Church in the Modern World", made precisely this point as it rejected the world renunciation the Church had espoused for centuries in favor of solidarity with the human race and its legitimate projects.

¹The pre-eminent exponent of the "universe story," an attempt to situate humans within the larger cosmic context, is probably Thomas Berry. His influence among first world Religious, especially women, has been enormous. At times Religious have over-reacted by calling for a virtual moratorium on the specifically Christian story while we immerse ourselves in the "world" we have so long ignored or rejected. The over-reaction needs to be recognized but the necessity of attending to the issue is not thereby abrogated.

²The term *kosmos* occurs 78 times in the Gospel of John and 24 times in the Johannine epistles (92 times in total) in contrast to 14 times in the Synoptic Gospels and 47 times in the Pauline literature.

But the fourth meaning of “world” in the Gospel of John, used much more frequently than the preceding three, is distinctly negative. Jesus refers to a world that is **a synonym for evil**, that is in the grip of Satan (cf. Jn. 13:27), whom Jesus also calls “the Devil,” “the Evil One,” or the “Prince of this World.”³ Jesus claims that he is not of this evil world nor are his disciples (cf. Jn. 17:16). The minions of the Evil One will persecute and even kill them but they are to have confidence because Jesus has overcome the world (Jn. 16:33). Against Jesus the Prince of this World is powerless (cf. Jn. 14:30) and will finally be judged (cf. Jn. 16:11). But until the consummation, the struggle against the evil world and its Ruler continues.

This evil world, then, is not a place nor a group of people; it is a construction of reality, a way of ordering reality, according to principles or coordinates that are the polar opposite of the central values of the Gospel. These opposing reality constructions, the Reign of God on the one hand and the Kingdom of Satan on the other, are realized by the moral choices of human beings under the influence either of the Spirit of God or of the Devil and they come to expression not only in the personal behavior of individuals but in the political, economic, social, cultural, and religious institutions of society. The Gospel project of self-transcendence toward God in Christ for the sake of the world is directly opposed to the self-enclosed and divisive dynamics of oppression and domination inspired by Satan. All Christians at their Baptism are called to renounce “Satan and all his works,” that is, to disaffiliate from the reality construction of the Evil One. But some Christians, namely, Religious, incarnate this renunciation of the evil world in a particular way which we will shortly discuss as the creation of the alternate world generated by the profession of the vows.

My second presupposition is that *the foundation of the Christian challenge to Satan’s evil reality construction, i.e., the negative “world,” is the Resurrection of Jesus* in which the victory of God over Satan is

³I cannot enter here into the question of the nature of the devil whom John calls Satan. The Fourth Gospel assumes, indeed affirms, the existence of this evil power and clearly regards “him” as a personal agent. This captures the important point that moral evil is not simply “what happens” as nature and history take their course but that personal volition in opposition to God’s salvific will is at work in the world. Jesus is said to overcome both “the Prince of this World” and “the world.” Thus, there is a meaning of “world” which is synonymous with the embodiment or symbolic expression of the principle of evil at work in human history.

realized in the person of the crucified and risen One. His paschal mystery is the principle of the Christian enterprise. It establishes definitively that eternal life comes through death, not the death which is a natural biological process and therefore not an evil, but the death which results from the refusal to integrate one's life into the reality construction of Satan. Jesus did not die a natural death. He was unjustly executed, i.e., murdered, because he subverted the oppressive political, economic, social, and religious systems of his society by preaching good news to the poor, opening his table fellowship to all, and especially to those that the religious and political authorities declared unacceptable. The followers of Jesus will risk and accept death in their effort to realize in this world the Reign of God which Jesus announced, the discipleship of equals in which all are welcome, cared for, and in which all flourish. Until the will of God is realized on earth as it is in heaven, until all creation, and especially human beings, can experience the infinite *shalom* of God, the struggle between the Prince of this World and the true Prince of Peace will be waged in and by the followers of Jesus in collaboration with all people of good will. Different members of the glorified Jesus will participate in this struggle in different ways. Our first question, then, will be what is the distinctive way Religious participate in this enterprise and what are its implications for the way they relate to material goods?

This brings us to the third presupposition, namely, that *Religious participate in the struggle for the Reign of God by creating, living in, and ministering from an alternate world*. Again, "world" as I am using it here is not the natural universe, a geographical place, or a group of people. "World" is a reality construction. When we say something like "My world fell apart when my mother died" or "I don't know what planet he is coming from," we use a material or spatial metaphor to reference a complex construction of reality within which we coordinate our thinking, feeling, choosing, and acting. Specifically, the imaginative construction of reality, "the world", is primarily a certain way of understanding, organizing, and operating within and upon the basic coordinates of all human life: material goods, power, and sexuality. Material goods which we relate to in terms of possession, power which we exercise through freedom, and sexuality which we

construct and express through relationship are the raw material which humans shape into "world," either the Reign of God or the Kingdom of Satan, as they work out their destinies, personal and corporate, in history.

The distinctiveness of Religious Life as a lifeform arises from the public, lifelong commitment of the members, as individuals and as communities, to a characteristic approach to material goods, power, and sexuality which creates a particular concrete realization of the Reign of God, on a 24 hour a day, 7 days a week basis. In other words, by profession Religious create a "world." This alternate world is the "strange context" I evoked at the beginning of these reflections. Because of the overlapping and intertwining of the Reign of God and the Kingdom of Satan in all human experience, Religious, in order to undertake a pattern of life in which there are to be no exceptions to the dynamics of Gospel life and no compromise with the dynamics of the evil world, actually construct an alternative to life in this world, in the *saeculum*. In pre-conciliar days Religious even "left the world" geographically, set up closed off, physical places – convents and monasteries -- in which to live this alternate reality. Ministerial Religious do it differently today, but the basic project, to create an "alternate world", is the same. This project is a utopian project, the attempt to incarnate a socio-religious ideal, which is particularly challenged in the postmodern context by the suspicion of all unitary projects and metanarratives.⁴ In other words, constructing a "lifeform" is a highly suspect project from the standpoint of contemporary sensibilities. Religious Life as a state of life does not "make sense" to our contemporaries as it once did. Hence, we -- Religious ourselves and those who partner with us in the creation and functioning of this alternate world -- have more need than in the past to know what we are doing and why.

Prior to the renewal of Religious Life inaugurated by Vatican II Religious often tried to handle the ambiguous environment in which the Reign of God and the Kingdom of Satan are intimately intertwined by

⁴We cannot go into a discussion of postmodernism, which increasingly is the context of first world Religious Life and is making inroads, through globalization, into other cultural situations, but the fragmentation which is characteristic of this world view poses special problems for any theory of Religious Life as a unitary project. A good introduction to the characteristics of postmodernity is Paul Lakeland, *Postmodernity: Christian Identity in a Fragmented Age* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997).

physical separation from the people and processes that surrounded their convents and monasteries. But in the aftermath of the Council this “total institution” model of Religious Life had to be and was deconstructed⁵ in favor of the full involvement in the human enterprise that the Council recognized as the vocation of the Church and therefore of Religious.⁶ Today, unprotected by the isolation of their lifeform from the mainstream of society and culture, Religious have had to recognize the full gravity, scope, and difficulty of constructing and living this ideal or utopian lifeform. Its strangeness has become apparent to Religious themselves in a way it was not before. This project is no longer protected by physical and social isolation nor legitimated by a sociology of knowledge that involved a blanket rejection, if not condemnation, of everything outside Religious Life as “worldly.” Consequently, Religious are challenged to re-articulate the nature of their venture, and to commit themselves explicitly to pursuing it in the very midst of this ambiguous situation, within human history, in cultures and social settings which are structured to a large extent by the satanic dynamics of sexual exploitation, political domination, and economic oppression locked in mortal struggle with initiatives, religious and non-religious, which promote right relationships among all God’s creatures.

Religious construct their alternate world by the profession of vows. Profession is the solemn and public act by which individuals integrate their personal life into the reality construction that began in the charismatic vision of a founder or foundress, like Mother McAuley, or Francis of Assisi, or Teresa of Avila, or Madeleine Sophie Barat, or Mary Ward, or Marguerite Bourgeoys, and has been lived into reality by generations of Religious within a particular community, for example, the Mercy Sisters, Franciscans, Carmelites, or the Religious of the Sacred Heart, the Loretto Sisters, the Congrégation de Notre Dame. By their personal and corporate living of the vows Religious create the distinctive and characteristic lifeform,

⁵The sociological category of “total institution” was proposed by Erving Goffman, “The Characteristics of Total Institutions,” *A Sociological Reader on Complex Organizations*, edit by Amitai Etzioni and Edward Lehman (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1980): 319-339.

⁶See *Gaudium et Spes* [The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World], 1 and 3.

the alternate world, by which they participate, with Christians called to other states of life, in the Church's mission of witnessing to and realizing the Reign of God in this world.

Therefore, to understand what Religious are undertaking we have to rescue the understanding of Profession and the vows that Religious make from the almost exclusively juridical framework in which they have been immured, especially since the 1917 revision of the Code of Canon Law.⁷ Profession, for at least the century before Vatican II, was seen as the assumption by vow of narrowly defined supererogatory obligations like asking permissions for every item used, having no discretionary use of even minuscule amounts of money, never riding alone in a car with a man, or responding instantly to the sound of a bell. In reality, Profession is not about obligations or practices. It is a global commitment. Like marriage which inaugurates a shared lifeform of monogamous self-donation to one's spouse and primary commitment to one's offspring, profession is an orientation of one's whole person, life, and history toward the realization, by particular means, of the Reign of God in this world. It is a specification of baptismal commitment, the commitment by which all Christians renounce Satan and all his works and choose to live as disciples of Jesus. The specification of that commitment which Religious make is courageously open-ended, not merely a restriction on specific behaviors in arcane arenas of a medieval lifestyle.

The vows, whichever ones are made in particular congregations,⁸ are Gospel-based global metaphors for the stance Religious take toward the fundamental coordinates of human existence, namely, material goods, sexuality, and power. It is through these metaphors that we imagine and construct the living parable of Religious Life as alternate world. Like Jesus' parables the vows not only describe but

⁷The juridical, indeed legalistic, understanding of the vows that was adumbrated in the *Catechism of the Vows* (for example, Pierre Cotel, *A Catechism of the Vows for the Use of Religious* [Westminster, MD: Newman Press, 1962, c. 1926]) was somewhat offset by the treatment of the "virtue of the vows" which tried to express the ideal embraced by the one making profession but, in fact, most Religious who went through formation prior to the Council equated the vows with the assumption of carefully specified legal obligations that exceeded those of other Christians.

⁸The distinction between Profession as a global life-orientation and the vows as specific expressions of this orientation is clear from the fact that one can undertake Religious Life in different Congregations and orders by profession of a variety of different vows. Some groups, e.g., male Dominicans, make one vow. Others, e.g., Jesuits, make numerous vows. In most Congregations the members make three vows and sometimes a fourth pertaining to

narratively generate a different world, not just a different way of living in this world.⁹ The world of Jesus' parables, the Reign of God he presents, is a world of endless forgiveness, of abundant refreshment at the wedding feast of eternal life where the last will be first and the marginalized included, of equality and dignity for all. In what follows, I will very briefly and inadequately explore how Religious, through the vow of poverty, try to tell this story into reality, to generate this alternate world and offer it, in and through the Church, as a real possibility, a future full of hope, to the world in which they live. Time will not permit dealing with the vows of prophetic obedience and consecrated celibacy which are also integral to the construction of this alternate world¹⁰ but I hope the consideration of this one vow, namely, evangelical poverty, which is most directly concerned with material goods, will help spark your imaginations as you think about and talk about your facilitation of this project through your financial ministries.

III. Evangelical Poverty: The Economy of the Reign of God

Poverty is the focus of a great deal of ambiguity and sometimes even guilt among Religious. We Religious often feel uneasy, even hypocritical, as we enjoy adequate material well-being in a world of widespread want and even destitution. The ambiguity and ambivalence many Religious experience around the vow of poverty is expressed in many ways that often become evident to people in leadership and probably to those in financial service to the congregation. Some Religious budget so tightly that their life and ministry is characterized by the very over-concern with money that the vow should eliminate while others find ways, legitimate and otherwise, to circumvent what they experience as overly restrictive financial or accounting requirements. The lack of a contemporary theology of evangelical poverty deeply rooted in scripture and in touch with the very different approaches to money that have developed in most

a specific ministry. Profession, in other words, is the act by which one becomes a Religious. The vows are ways of unfolding the potentialities of the act.

⁹The vast amount of work on the parables in recent biblical scholarship was launched by the pioneering work of scholars like Amos N. Wilder, *Early Christian Rhetoric: The Language of the Gospel* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1999). A particularly enlightening treatment is that of Sallie McFague, *Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982), esp. chapter one on metaphorical language and chapter two on parables. See also John R. Donahue, *The Gospel in Parable: Metaphor, Narrative, and Theology in the Synoptic Gospels* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988).

¹⁰I have dealt with the vow of consecrated celibacy extensively in *Selling All: Commitment, Consecrated Celibacy, and Community in Catholic Religious Life* [Religious Life in a New Millennium, vol. 2] (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 2001), pp. 117-274.

Congregations over the past thirty to forty years is certainly partly to blame for this situation. Policies about ownership and regulations for handling bank accounts and credit cards and cars and apartments and insurance and so on, much less efforts of leaders to call individuals to accountability when problems arise, are no substitute for a well articulated and deeply internalized spirituality of poverty. In what follows I want to sketch a framework for such a biblically based theology and spirituality of evangelical poverty.

Poverty is, first and fundamentally, about material goods, the resources without which we cannot live at all, much less live well. Thus, we naturally tend to think about poverty in quantitative terms. How much property or economic leverage should we, individually and corporately, have? By what standard should we measure our possessions? I suggest that our focus should be less on the quantity of goods with which we deal, something that necessarily varies enormously from situation to situation, and *more on the economic system* within which and according to which we deal with material goods. And the *standard for freely chosen evangelical poverty*, which is very different from unchosen deprivation, should be derived not from a comparison of our standard of living with that of any economic class, whether in the first world or other parts of the world, but from the Gospel. The Gospel says much about material goods, about our attitudes and behaviors in relation to them, and about the kind of world such attitudes and behaviors generate. But it does not say anything about actively seeking deprivation much less destitution or about comparing standards of living. This might suggest where we need to concentrate our attention.

Let me detour, for a moment, through the thought of an American culture critic, Lewis Hyde, whose oft-republished book, *The Gift*, is a profound reflection relevant to our topic.¹¹ Hyde, probing beneath our surface typology of economies as barter economies, industrial economies, technological economies, service economies, and so on, proposes that there are essentially two types of economies, i.e., two ways of organizing the use of material goods within a society, namely, commodity economies and gift economies.

¹¹Lewis Hyde, *The Gift: Imagination and the Erotic Life of Property* (New York: Random House, 1983). First published in 1979.

In a **commodity economy** goods are seen as objects of ownership and the primary economic activity in such a system is acquisition.¹² The object of economic behavior is to take as much as possible of the available goods out of circulation into private ownership. The very practice of what is called “business” in first world countries and is even the object of graduate school programs in “business” has nothing to do with securing what people need to live. It is about moving money around in such a way that the “movers” become more and more wealthy regardless of their needs or the effect of their acquisition on others in the society. In a commodity economy social status and power accrue to the person who owns more and, since material goods are intrinsically limited, what one person has another cannot have. In such a zero-sum economy the desire for more than one actually needs, saving against a possible future need (the proverbial “rainy day”), conspicuous display of one’s possessions, competition for goods that are always perceived as scarce simply because they are intrinsically limited even if there is more than one could possibly use, are considered natural behavior required for survival. In other words, greed, covetousness, hoarding, conspicuous consumption, conflict, even the defense of one’s goods at the expense of another’s life if necessary are virtues in a commodity economy.

By contrast, in a **gift economy**, which characterized many primal societies and still characterizes some tribal communities, material goods are regarded first of all as that which we have received -- received from God, nature, family, community -- and therefore as that which we, in turn, can give to others. The primary economic activity in a gift economy is not taking goods out of circulation into private ownership but keeping goods in circulation, contributing to the well-being of the community through one’s work, the use of one’s talents, the sharing of one’s material possessions. Ownership in a gift economy is relative to the needs of others and no one can own what all need such as land, water, food, and air. The highest status in

¹²American free market capitalism is probably the most striking example in modern times of this aspect of the commodity economy. For a very sobering description of how rampant acquisitiveness and naked greed on the part of less than 1% of the population sentences most of the population to increasing poverty, see Charles R. Morris, “Economic Injustice for Most: From the New Deal to the Raw Deal,” *Commonweal* 131, no. 14 (August 13, 2004): 12, 14, 16-17. Of course, what he had to say a few years ago is even more relevant since the implosion of the world economy in 2008.

a gift economy accrues to the person who contributes the most. Real poverty consists not in having nothing but in having nothing to give. Scarcity may be, at times, a community concern but it is not a personal disgrace. Greed and hoarding, even refusing to share what one actually needs, especially when other members of the community are in want, is dishonorable and ignoble. Conspicuous consumption is vulgar. Irresponsibility or refusal to work are disgraceful. The virtues that are admired in a gift economy are generosity, sharing, good work, responsibility, simplicity, compassion for the less fortunate.

Needless to say, these economies are not morally equal. From the Christian standpoint one, the commodity economy, is clearly marked with the signature trait of the Evil One, namely, divisiveness;¹³ the other, the gift economy, provides a fertile substrate for the Gospel values of right relationships in a community of shared life. Against this background, let us return to our consideration of the evangelical poverty Religious vow and by which they construct, economically, and live daily in the alternate world of the Reign of God thereby offering prophetic witness in the Church and to the world.

In the Gospel story of the Rich Man (Mk. 10:17-22 and parallels) who asks Jesus what he must do to inherit eternal life Jesus says that he, like all good Jews, is called to obey the commandments. But when the man persists Jesus tells him that he lacks one thing. He should dispossess himself completely and join the itinerant band of disciples following the homeless Jesus. Notice that Jesus does not say he should become destitute and die of starvation, exposure, or disease. Nor is Jesus proposing to the man an ascetical ideal of renunciation in the service of contemplation. Jesus invites the man to join a community of itinerant disciples who are individually without possessions and who live simply, sharing a common purse and accepting the generosity of others even as they freely serve others through the preaching of the Gospel in word and deed.

¹³Although capitalist economies are not necessarily evil, and Pope Benedict's last encyclical recognizes the legitimacy of the market economy as Thomas Aquinas recognized the legitimacy of private property, the so-called "free market" or *laissez-faire* economy is as likely to take the common good into account as the camel Jesus talked about in the Gospel is to get through the eye of the needle.

Shortly before Religious make a vow of poverty they cede the administration of anything they own (quaintly referred to as “patrimony”), and renounce ownership of everything they will ever acquire, as Religious, by work or gift.¹⁴ Even if their patrimony is still legally owned by them, Religious renounce all the rights of ownership, the “use and usufruct” (i.e., proceeds) of the property, as well as independent control of anything they will acquire in the future. In other words, the Religious becomes functionally and practically “possessionless,” totally economically interdependent within the community.

If the vow is lived seriously by all the members of the community they are creating and living in a radically gift economy. All things used by any of the members are held in common, i.e, everyone puts everything into the common fund, and all receive from it according to need. They have accepted the condition the rich man in the Gospel refused because, as the biblical text says, “he had many possessions” (Mk. 10:22). It was not difficulty or hardship before which the man faltered. After all, he had kept all the commandments “since his youth.” What he could not embrace was being without personal, individual possessions. Jesus’ band of itinerant disciples lived, in the concrete, a community of gift, of shared simplicity, in which private ownership had no place. For moderns to undertake this kind of economic life is to create an alternate economic world in the context of the globalization of market capitalism in which private property, in principle and practice, is the ultimate value. Most people today, even believing Christians, find it difficult to process the notion of a voluntary and total possessionlessness that is as radical as the Religious vow of poverty demands.

¹⁴See Canon 668 (see *New Commentary on the Code of Canon Law*, edited by J. P. Beal, J. A. Coriden, T. J. Green (New York, NY/Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 2000) for the English translation of the canon and commentary on it. The ways different orders and Congregations handle the question of patrimony, earnings, gifts, etc. vary enormously and most renewing Congregations probably need to devote serious corporate attention to how previously clear policies and shared understandings have evolved over the last forty years. Especially in what were previously called “Congregations of simple vows” (the 1983 Code of Canon Law no longer distinguishes simple from solemn vows but the particular law of some Orders may specify the practice of poverty in the way that solemn vows did in the past) there is currently considerable lack of clarity and even abuse due, probably in most cases, more to ignorance than malice.

Another Gospel story, the parable of the Eleventh Hour Laborers (Mt. 20:1-16), illustrates a second economic feature of the alternate world that Religious create. The vineyard owner, clearly a God-figure, employs a series of workers beginning with a shift hired early in the morning and ending with a group hired an hour before closing time. He agrees to pay each what is just and at the end of the day he pays all an equal wage making sure that the earliest shift sees what the 5:00 p.m. workers received. The early morning workers indignantly object. Should not people who work longer and harder be paid more than people who work less? Should not earnings be proportionate to labor?

The vineyard owner, however, claims to be operating according to a different economic system. No one, neither the first hired nor the last, earned anything; all is gift! Divine generosity, not personal effort, is the source of what each received. The vineyard owner asks, "Are you envious because I am generous?" All we have we receive freely from God's largess. Without our very being, our strength and talents, and God's "employment" of us we could do nothing. Our system of acquiring through earning is a provisional human arrangement in a commodity economy. It does not express our truest relationship to material goods which are always God's gift to us and ours to each other.

But even more significant is the vineyard owner's pay scale. He specified that the first shift would receive "a day's wage," in other words, what a person needs to live. To the later workers he promises a "just wage" which turns out to be the same as the "day's wage" promised to the earliest shift. The need met by "a day's wage" varies enormously among individuals and is very much conditioned by culture.¹⁵ A day's wage in the Bay Area of California where I live, or in Toronto or Montréal, would support a family in rural Africa for weeks if not months. But the parable suggests that, in any context, those who can work more do not need more than the necessary resources for life and mission, i.e., a day's wage. And those unable to work as

¹⁵The Greek actually says the owner agreed to a "denarius" which is a day's wage rather than a specific sum. This opens a literary path to reflection on the diversity of value in diverse cultural contexts. It is not the absolute sum but the needs of people in a given context which should determine what a person should receive. For a first world professional to try to live on the resources that sustain well a farmer in a third world country is the kind of fruitless "imitation" poverty that creates such unease in contemporary Religious Congregations without helping to clarify policy or improve practice.

much do not necessarily need less to live; indeed, if they cannot work because of sickness, handicap, lack of jobs, or responsibilities for children or others, they may need a good deal more¹⁶ than a healthy single person with good insurance.¹⁷ All should contribute what they can to the common enterprise and receive what they need. The vineyard owner does not want anyone standing around idle. He sends the eleventh hour workers into the field, even though at 5:00 p.m. there is not much of the work day left. But the point is clear. The right to life, and therefore the resources needed to sustain it, does not arise from what or how much we do. Rather, good work for the common good is the overflow of life sustained at the appropriate level. This disconnecting of work from the right to life-sustaining resources is a fundamental subversion of our human illusion that we “support ourselves” by our work and its logical conclusion that those less able to work deserve to suffer want. Jesus says that all *should* contribute as they are able but all *must* receive what is necessary for life.

This is precisely the approach to work in the shared enterprise of ministry that characterizes a Religious community which takes seriously its economic common life. Each Religious is to work as much and as well as she or he is able. Religious, therefore, do not “retire” from ministry at a certain age to live in leisure on the savings they have amassed from their earnings and investments. No matter how much they ostensibly “earned” during their ministerial years, they have not gotten rich by working and saving. Religious do not personally earn anything. They act, and receive compensation, as agents of their Congregation. But when, because of age or infirmity, they can no longer bear the “burden of the day’s heat” they continue to minister in whatever ways they can and to receive “the day’s wage” within the community just as they did in

¹⁶Augustine, in his Rule which was written c. 400, handles the question of need vs. want in ch. 3, par. 5: “Melius est enim minus egere, quam plus habere.” (“It is better to need less than to have more.”) The *Rule of St. Augustine* in modern translation is available on line at <http://www.geocities.com/athens/1534/ruleaug.html>.

¹⁷This is by no means a new idea. Augustine, whose Rule has supplied the basis of numerous ancient, medieval, and modern rules and constitutions including those of both monastic and ministerial Congregations, wrote, (ch. 1, par. 3) “Call nothing your own, but let everything be yours in common. Food and clothing shall be distributed to each of you...not equally to all...but rather according to each one’s need. For so you read in the Acts of the Apostles that *they had all things in common and distribution was made to each one according to each one’s need* (4:32,35).”

the prime of their work lives. In other words, in an economy of gift, especially the radical version of such an economy that involves complete possessionlessness and total economic interdependence, all things are placed and held in common; all work as much and as well as they are able; all are sustained and cared for according to need. There is no economically based social class, no status, power, or influence flowing from superior wealth, no dependence and shame attached to poverty, no destitution as long as there are any resources to be shared. The gift economy is the material basis for the radically egalitarian community of disciples that Jesus founded, i.e., for the Reign of God.

IV. The Ramifications of Religious Poverty: Mystical, Communitarian, Ministerial

Evangelical poverty has ramifications for the relation of Religious, individually and corporately, to God and to one another. I will simply indicate, without stopping to develop them at length, what some of those spiritual and communitarian ramifications are, because I want to spend a bit more time on the implications of poverty for mission and ministry which is where money acquired, transferred, accounted for, becomes central.

As the long history of the spirituality of poverty makes plain, evangelical poverty grounds a relationship with God, a mystical spirituality of total receptivity, which has often been gently mocked if not lampooned in the media as a charming, if childish, naïveté. Religious, because they are not “in business” but in ministry, have always had to depend on God, on divine providence, for their well-being. The foundation and survival of most of our Congregations is, financially, somewhat miraculous as Congregations have founded and staffed institutions, educated their newer members, cared for their elderly, and supported their active members in conditions of scarcity, financial insecurity, and outright want. But, difficult as such conditions have been, Religious have trusted that God, whose work they were doing and to whom they had given their lives, would finally provide whatever was necessary even if that was not what we might have wanted. That spirituality of receptivity, total dependence on God, faith in providence was not seen by Religious as a counsel of despair but as a condition for growth in faith, hope, love, generosity,

prayer, commitment. In other words, poverty was an important ingredient in the growth in union with Christ that Religious Life is all about.

Poverty, the free renunciation of all ownership, has also been extremely important in creating and maintaining the kind of community life that people espouse by entering Religious Life. Because no one, regardless of the background from which they came, what they owned prior to entrance, family pedigree, or influential connections, had any more or any less than other members of the community, Religious communities were able to realize in a striking manner that basic equality among disciples which Jesus instituted in his original community. Mutuality in friendship, reciprocal free service of one another unto death, sharing of life springing from sharing of material supports of life have always been the ideal of Religious community life modeled on the ideal community described in Acts 4. Like the first disciples, the members of the community were to be "of one heart and one soul" with no one claiming anything as her or his own.

It would take another paper to develop these two points, the mystical and communitarian dimensions of evangelical poverty. But suffice it to say, here, that both of these dimensions are under considerable pressure today. Excessive anxiety about income and debts, an anxiety which can and sometimes does lead to contention, mutual recriminations, lack of trust of each other, and even panic about survival as well as stinginess of leadership toward members, compulsiveness of members, undercover efforts to provide for one's own security as corporate solvency seems threatened, fear of ministerial risk, selfishness, and so on are not just social or psychological problems. They manifest a lack of rootedness in a spirituality, a mysticism, of evangelical poverty which inspired most congregations at their origins and needs to be reclaimed and reinvigorated today.

And the massive changes in how money and other goods are handled in most renewing Congregations has introduced, at least in some Congregations, a serious subversion of the reality of common life as a basis for the unique kind of community that Religious Life is meant to be. The disparities in disposable resources, clothing, housing, recreation, educational opportunities, vacations, and so on are

problematic for those on the top of the *de facto* financial pyramid as well as those at the bottom. More rigorous enforcement of accountability cannot really substitute for a spirituality of community based in the Gospel ideal of possessionlessness that Religious freely undertook by profession. But once again, theology has often not kept up with behavioral and procedural changes in Congregations and interior renewal in regard to evangelical poverty is not likely without the kind of theology which can ground a personal and corporate spirituality of poverty.

But, important as the mystical and communitarian dimensions of evangelical poverty are, I want to spend our final few moments on the ramifications of poverty in the sphere of ministry. (And as I talk about these ramifications I am aware that the Canadian reality is somewhat different from that of the United States because some of your ministries are state supported and because you have health care insurance and often retirement benefits. However, I am sure many of your ministries are not supported by the secular order and that you also have increasingly fewer earner in relation to retirees. I have to talk out of the context with which I am familiar and let you make the appropriate adjustments to what I say.)

Poverty not only fosters the right relation of community members with God and with one another, but it also enables the community and its members to minister freely and generously, not as paid service providers in a consumer economy but as sisters and brothers to fellow humans beings in need. Religious Congregations have traditionally chosen ministries to those members of society who are under-served precisely because they cannot pay or pay well for the services they often desperately need. The history of most Congregations, and especially Congregations of women, bears eloquent testimony to this, especially in times of famine, epidemic, and war. Religious, today as in the past, can afford -- or make themselves afford -- to serve the needy because they are not trying to get rich by their work. Thus, those they serve do not feel exploited on the one hand or diminished and patronized on the other by Religious who serve them, not for gain, but out of divine compassion. The needy in body, mind, and spirit are not beggars to our bounty but brothers and sisters, first of Jesus, and then of those who serve them in Jesus' name.

The salaries of Religious whose ministries pay well, the proceeds of prudent investments, the gifts of generous partner-donors, can help support ministries which are not self-supporting. But, as we all know, few Congregations, especially of women, are able to make ends meet on the basis of the recompense of fewer and fewer earners supporting more and more non-earners. It becomes increasingly difficult to maintain a genuinely ministerial focus in conditions of scarcity. It is easy for a Congregation to get so caught up in the dynamics of a commodity economy that it loses sight of the real, indeed radical, difference between ministry and gainful employment, a difference that remains crucial even when the two coincide externally.

A more subtle subversion of the ministerial focus of Religious can come from the ecclesiastical structure itself. Religious can be coopted into ecclesiastical agendas that are foreign to their Congregation's charismatic identity, becoming unwittingly a cheap ecclesiastical job corps rather than ministerial agents sent by and in service of the charismatic identity and mission of the self-determining Congregation. They can even become co-dependent enablers in the massive denial dynamic of the hierarchy by filling empty slots in the clerical structure without proportionate -- or indeed any -- influence within or on that structure because, at least, such positions are minimally remunerative. When money rather than mission drives our ministerial choices something is seriously amiss.

In his recent book, *Double-Crossed: Uncovering the Catholic Church's Betrayal of American Nuns*,¹⁸ Kenneth Briggs notes the remarkable fact that despite all the stresses and strains, especially in regard to human and financial resources, that Religious orders have experienced in the post-conciliar years, they have, by and large, retained a puzzling corporate élan, a ministerial commitment difficult to understand in view of declining material and personnel resources, a confidence in the future that belies the predictions of sociologists and economists alike that the demise of Religious Life is certain and imminent. I think there is some foundation for believing that one reason Religious Congregations -- stressed as they undoubtedly

¹⁸Doubleday, 2006.

are -- have not succumbed to the manipulations of the “invisible hand” of the first world market economy, the economy of the empire, is that even though we are of necessity very much involved in it, it is not really the economy we believe in or are committed to or want to promote. The fuel of the economy of the Prince of this World is greed. The economy of the Reign of God runs on a different kind of fuel. Living as we do in a society and culture that is distinctly inhospitable to doves of any kind, we certainly have to be wise as serpents, and the enormous competence of the people in this room is part of that wisdom. But we also have to remind ourselves, our leaders and members, our lay colleagues, our benefactors, and the people to whom we minister, that Religious have chosen to construct and to live in and to minister out of an alternative world. It is hard to imagine anything more counter-cultural today than religiously-motivated, freely-chosen, personal and corporate Gospel poverty undertaken for the Reign of God.

V. Conclusion

The authentic living of an economy of gift in the midst of a commodity economy can offer a prophetic witness that challenges the very foundational convictions of modern capitalism as Jesus challenged the Rich Man and the wage-earners in his audience. It says very effectively, and in a way that simply imitating the poor or practicing what I call “conspicuous deprivation” cannot say, namely, that material wealth is not the primary value in life, that all ownership is provisional and conditional, that all people have a right to what they need, that greed and hoarding and conspicuous consumption are not virtues but vices, and that violence against persons in defense of property, whether shooting an intruder or attacking an oil rich country, is never justified. If the poverty Religious vow were lived seriously and consistently by every member of a Congregation, no matter when or where that Congregation found itself now or in the future, its spirituality, its community life, its ministry, and its witness would effectively challenge the world construction of the Evil One with the Gospel’s vision of the Reign of God, the economic, social, and political order in which the poor are truly blessed and raised up while the rich are sent empty away.