10.
The Vows “from below”

Each of us finds a way to reclaim religious life in our own minds and imaginations, since the reasons why we entered religious life are probably not the exact same reasons for which we have stayed. For me, the process of reclaiming can be summed up in terms of two discoveries. The first is that religious life, as a particular expression or pattern of Christian existence, originates “from below.” And the second is that religious life makes a sacrament of human solidarity.

The terms “from above” and “from below” are best known from their usage in Christology as a way of distinguishing methodological starting points. “From above” generally means that one’s understanding of Jesus starts with the doctrinal statements of fourth and fifth-century councils, and that one interprets the gospel portrayals of Jesus in light of them. “From below,” on the other hand, describes an approach to the study of Jesus that begins with the human, historical dimensions of the life and ministry of Jesus embedded within the gospels. There is probably something artificial about the terms in view of the fact that our understanding of God and ourselves always begins from within history, that is, from within our social and cultural experience. Besides, scholarly attentiveness to the human and historical features of the gospel story can illumine and support the Church’s belief in Jesus as God’s Son; historical research hardly needs to be opposed to faith.

Nevertheless, the methodological distinction of “from above” and “from below” can be useful in developing a contemporary theology of religious life. For not only has the scriptural recovery of the human, historical Jesus had its impact
on the way we think about the nature and mission of religious life, but religious life itself has human, historical origins and deep this-worldly commitments. By proposing that we look at the vows “from below,” therefore, I mean that religious life has emerged from experiment and practice; it did not (and does not) exist in some ideal state, waiting to be discovered by Christian visionaries. Religious life, with its characteristic stress upon poverty, chastity, and obedience, originated from within the human world.

Nevertheless, the foundational narratives of religious communities can tend to mythologize their origins and confer on them a normative status that both obscures the humanness and contingency of the beginnings and distracts us from the equally important histories of later believers, whose lives give equal testimony to the ongoing action of God among his people. Religious life then starts to assume a “from above” character. To some degree Luke mythologized the beginnings of the Church in his foundational narrative of the Church itself in Acts. What prevents Acts from turning into pure myth-making, however, is the seasoned faith of the reader who knows enough not to lose sight of the abiding presence of the Spirit within history, no matter how fantastic some of the deeds Luke reports. While I do not deny the constructive role of myth in the life of social, political, or religious institutions, when divorced from critical reason and from faith, myth can turn authoritarian and steal our spontaneity.

The fact that Christian religious life has analogues within the major religious traditions of the world underscores its anthropological base—a base that indicates strong odds for its long-term survival. Religious life, in other words, belongs to the spiritual patrimony of the human race. It serves as a mirror in
which humanity can discover a reflection of its deepest religious and moral struggles, its desires, aspirations, sinfulness, thirst for healing, and so on. The many modalities of religious life testify further to its essentially historical character as well as to the adaptive potential of the human spirit in its search for wisdom and transcendence.

Christian religious life traditionally based itself on a particular reading of the gospels—albeit a somewhat circular reading—which focused on Jesus as the exemplar of the three vows. But the way Jesus himself lived was not scripted in advance, as if Jesus had been destined to be the archetypal religious. Jesus’ life assumed the form or pattern we perceive in the gospels because he walked with his people. For the most part his ministry was shaped by the particular pressures of his times; his message and consequent death were intimately tied up with the historical situation of Galilean peasants. Jesus’ life exemplified what had been so obvious from the Hebrew Bible, namely, that God loves the poor preferentially.

Christians have known from the moment the Church was born that they had a particular responsibility toward the poor, but it took us a long time to understand why helping the poor could not proceed without thinking about the social and economic structures that privilege some while excluding the vast majority of others. Apparently God has taken the side of the poor because he so hates injustice: the good things of the world were intended for all, not just for a select few. As Exodus 3:7-8 says in such memorable fashion, God heard the cries of the poor and witnessed their affliction; therefore he “came down” in order to take them to freedom. The redemption of the human race is conceptually inseparable from the biblical insistence upon doing justice.

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The vows as particular ways of responding to the world are what happens when people make a deliberate choice to live prophetically and walk with the poor, not simply for two or three years or for certain hours of the day or week, but continually. In other words, it is the story of Jesus that gives meaning to the vows, not the other way round. Apart from his life, death, and resurrection, poverty, chastity, and obedience might exist as valid transcendental religious forms, but they become dissociated from the historical experience of suffering communities. They remain valid but, from an evangelical perspective, incomplete.

**Religious life as a way of identifying with the poor**

My second discovery was that religious life, at least in its ideal state, ought to be a living embodiment of human solidarity—the solidarity indelibly impressed upon Christian imaginations by the Incarnation itself. This second and complementary idea is simple, although coming to see it took me a number of years. Our fervent hope for a world totally remade—the new heavens and the new earth of the seer who gave us Revelation—ought to be manifest in the way religious communities function from day to day. The sustaining power of this vision of a reconciled, unified world should be evident in a community’s zeal and dedication, if the Eucharist is the liturgical expression of Christian solidarity and if communities regularly center their religious lives in this mystery. Solidarity is what assures the quality and depth of a community’s prayer, its evangelical witness, and its apostolic projects. The Eucharist logically fosters a tangible, effective awareness of the pressing concerns of the whole human family, for global consciousness belongs to the core of Christian religious experience. The divine
eye that holds each of us individually simultaneously beholds the entire human family.

Each of the vows can be rethought in terms of how they express and promote solidarity. The intentionality of the vows, that is, how the vows orient us and shape the kind of person we choose to be, displays itself on three levels.

On the first and most elementary level, a religious is someone who wants to imitate Jesus and who wants the imitation of Jesus to be the central business of his or her life. Then, understanding why Jesus’ life assumed the concrete features exhibited in the gospel story, we are drawn, on a second level, into wanting to associate with the sort of people with whom Jesus mainly associated—those whose wholeness and salvation were the principal object of his ministry because their needs were so obvious. Furthermore, not only are we drawn to associate with such people, but we also begin to identify with them and view the world through their eyes. In short, we are capable of a self-emptying that can be every bit as radical (and occasionally as dramatic) as that of the one who, though rich, became poor for our sake (2 Cor 8:9).

In the rhetoric of the Exercises we name the intense desire to share the lot of the crucified ones wherever they may be as a grace of the Third Week. For us the gospel text “Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me” (Matt 5:11) translates into “because of the company you keep.” We are not likely to be insulted, persecuted, and unjustly charged merely on account of our doctrinal or even our ethical positions. Instead this Beatitude would more likely apply to us when, like Jesus, we associate with people outside respectable social, economic and moral boundaries. Later the evangelist has Jesus answer the
followers of John the Baptist, “Go back and report to John what you hear and see: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor” (Matt 11:4-5). The major beneficiaries of Jesus’ healing and preaching are not those who live in palaces and dress in fine clothes. If we were to bracket Jesus’ dedication to the poor from the gospels, then the overall narrative structure would collapse. To grasp the range and force of this social identification, one needs to understand as thoroughly as possible the social and historical contours of the gospel narratives. The grace of the Second Week truly mandates a lifetime of scriptural study.

The third level of intentionality within the vows centers on the mystery of God. When I think of Jesus’ being poor, I do not attribute the poverty of his life to the socio-economic situation of his family in Nazareth. His was very likely a family of slender means, but his walking with the poor had to be the result of a choice that came to expression at the Jordan, with the personal history and its attendant mystery that Jesus brought with him when he left Nazareth to hear John preach. Anyone born into destitution (although Jesus was not) could not be blamed for resisting their fate and working mightily to escape it, but Jesus was not teaching the peasants of Galilee a means of religious escape by concentrating on the afterlife any more than he was encouraging them to initiate a tax-revolt or violent political protest. Prophets resist poverty through their teaching and their actions—words and deeds through which we hear the divine “No!” to human misery. With feet planted in the experience of the people, prophets advocate for the kingdom of God, challenging the rest of us to opt for a world ever more just. Jesus accompanied the poor because God had called him to do so. His poverty, in other words, reflected a “preferential
option.” So in the end, that option reflects his calling—his desiring—to accompany the people at the bottom or at the margins of society. And that option is founded, I believe, upon the premise that the life of God and the life of God’s people are, from the point of view of religious experience, inseparable. Examine a person’s experience of God—a person raised on the Judeo-Christian narratives and the Psalms—and we shall find the experiential threads that hold God and his people together.

The preferential option for the poor may in fact be the most adequate idiom to explain what the vow of poverty means. When they pronounce this vow, it might make a great deal of sense for religious to speak it in the presence of those who are actually poor, those who represent the disenfranchised, people trapped at the bottom or at the margins of society, the homeless, refugees, migrant workers, the unskilled, and so on. I would argue further that the promises of chastity and obedience flow from this option. A commitment to the least ones among God’s people—a commitment with both practical and ideological aspects—gives rise to a desire, a calling, or an attraction to live for them with all of one’s affective energy, and to listen to their voices so humbly and so totally that in effect one pledges them his or her “obedience,” which is to say his or her life.

Every community—religious, civil, or familial—requires a minimal level of obedience from its members if the community is to remain cohesive and flourish. But from a religious viewpoint, this practical or functional aspect of obedience may be the least interesting (and the most annoying). All of us have to learn how to live within systems and institutions in ways that are mature, not juvenile, and that keep us focused on the wider or greater good of the family, the local community, the nation, and so forth. In this sense, obedience is a natural virtue. The
mystery underneath religious or vowed obedience, it seems to me, is not that superiors represent Christ or that they render the divine will concrete in our regard—unless one wants to generalize the point and argue that anyone occupying a legitimate position of authority could be imagined as placed there by God.

Paul argues this way in Romans 13:1-7, and the same idea reappears in Ephesians 6:5-8 and 1 Peter 2:11-25. Such an argument, however, is loaded with serious dangers. At the very least the pious practice of imagining that Christ himself is speaking in the person of those in authority betrays a fundamentalism about the interior life. It violates the cardinal theological principle than no one can directly represent Jesus, and it may be spiritually regressive. At its worst, the practice undermines the life of faith by naively fusing divine and human authority. The author of Revelation furnishes us with a very different view of how Christians should regard and respond to the culture of Roman imperialism. The imperial culture, after all, held considerable responsibility for the social and economic hardship of Jesus’ people. In the end, Roman arrogance and power cost Jesus his life, and the author of Revelation quite possibly believed that it had cost Jerusalem her temple. Imagining ourselves responding to and obeying the voice of Jesus makes better sense, it seems to me, after we have come to a decision, not before it.

What, therefore, is the underlying mystery in the matter of obedience? Just as there is an elementary poverty that defines the human condition—all of us are existentially poor—so also there is an elementary relation of obedience to God that defines who we are and limits what we can do. We learn our place in the created scheme through the things that we suffer, to echo a
phrase from Hebrews. Existential obedience names the lifelong process by which human beings attain wisdom, humility, and equanimity. In this basic or existential sense, poverty and obedience are spiritual complements. They represent the constraints imposed upon human existence by virtue of creation and, to be honest, cannot properly be the objects of a vow, any more than a person could make a vow to grow up.

The obedience of religious, however, moves in a different direction, taking its cue once again from the gospel story. One patiently listens for God, but the direction to which we turn is the human world as it is described, for example, in the well-known paragraph that opens Vatican II’s Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World. We pay attention to God by listening carefully to the needs and aspirations of God’s people, especially those undergoing daily crucifixion. The poor do not become a substitute God for us, even though in Jesus God became poor. Nevertheless, their presence in history and our world today rivet our attention as nothing else does. While we clearly do not promise to do whatever they tell us, we do profess that their lives have placed a permanent call upon us, challenging us to keep real and credible the message of the Gospel as good news for the poor. Like the vow of poverty, religious obedience rests upon an option and its practice is a manifestation of true solidarity.

In a world where millions of human beings are desperately trying to climb out of poverty and achieve a decent standard of living, the renunciation of material goods hardly seems sensible. Although the aging process has a way of teaching us not to cling to possessions, complete dispossession is not a very compelling ascetical ideal, either. Our lives may become considerably simpler as we grow older, and it is undoubtedly
true that in a consumer-oriented society the vow of poverty runs against the cultural grain. Nevertheless, we cannot very well encourage poor people to improve their lives while saying at the same time that material goods do not matter to us. Detachment may be an ascetical ideal, but for most people it sounds like a religious luxury, not a virtue for ordinary living. One thing we do know, however, is that it would make no evangelical sense to promise to live celibately if we were then to compensate ourselves with physical comforts and more possessions than we honestly need. Religious grasp intuitively the logical connection between poverty and celibacy. And the reason is that poverty and chastity are about commitment and fidelity to the people of God—a sign to those who struggle that we are with them and a counter-sign to those with more resources than they need of the needle’s eye that awaits them.

There is a solitariness to every human life which has to be acknowledged; any effort to deny or escape it only frustrates the Spirit’s way of teaching us wisdom. Celibacy is a public acknowledgement of the human condition as a state of incompleteness. In the end, we believe and hope, we shall find the completeness we long for in communion with the mystery of God and with one another in God. But once again, one does not have to pronounce a vow of celibacy in order to enact this incompleteness; married people also have to come to terms with the limits of one person’s union with another. Jesus, it is worth remembering, was not celebrated for leading a rigorous way of life in the manner of John the Baptist.

Whenever celibacy is conceived as a form of abstinence, we probably need to be reminded that Jesus himself was not remembered for regular fasting (Mark 2:18) and saw no value in going hungry. After all, he did feed people (Mark 6:30-44 and
8:1-13), and joined them at table (Mark 1:31, 2:15), and was most sensitive to their need to eat (Mark 2:23-26, 5:43). Not only were some of his apostles married, but their wives accompanied them on mission, as Paul informs us (1 Cor 9:5). Celibacy is not a matter of rejecting sexual union—something that God created and called good—but of wanting to live for the kingdom of God. And this translates into a public declaration of wanting to be men and women for others.

There are Christians who feel drawn to a solitary way of life; they may or may not pronounce vows. If they do, then their solitude will contour the intentionality of the vows for them. But I do not believe that Jesus deliberately chose celibacy the way religious do. His being single was the consequence of a prior call to “marry” his people. That is, Jesus’ being single was an accident of his ministry. It might well have been a central aspect of his life if he had been part of a monastic community readying itself for the coming of Israel’s messiah, but he does not appear to have emerged from a desert recess the way John the Baptist did.

I do not think a convincing argument can be made that celibacy creates the inner space for a more concentrated attentiveness to the mystery of God. That single people have more disposable time than do married people with children goes without saying, and that this extra time is often devoted to prayer and good works is likewise true. But raising a family is a good work of the most basic sort, and busy parents do learn how to pray between the cracks, as it were, of the many demands on their time and energy. They will pray differently, of course, as they get older, just as religious do; and they may have more time for reading and meditation once their children move on. But the mystery of God would be very strange if it was
more accessible to solitary people and celibates than to married couples and parents. The value of celibacy, then, lies in its power to connect us with the overall following of Jesus, where following him is viewed as solidarity with the people in desperate need of divine attention.

Religious vows undoubtedly affect the piety and spiritual development of religious themselves, but they can only be understood fully within a theology of the Church. Not only do religious live among and for the people of God, but what happens among the people of God, as I have proposed here, forces us to re-think the meaning of the vows for our time. The classical formula of poverty, chastity, and obedience might not have to be crafted anew in order for Christian religious life to maintain its relevance to the Church and contemporary society, but like all religious formulas the horizon that gives it meaning needs constantly to be retrieved. Two of the major signs of our times—at least for religious life—have been the great strides made in our understanding of the human, historical Jesus and our theological recovery of the cross and resurrection as a revelation of divine solidarity with all victims. Redemption takes place in time, in history, and so the more we understand the one human history of which we are all a part, the better shall we be able to explain ourselves when we claim that God accompanies his people, or as the author of 1 Peter puts it, when we are asked to account for the hope that we have (1 Peter 3:15).

We are forced to rethink the vows, I suspect, because we are no longer praying the way we once did. As we appropriate historical research into the gospels and Christian origins, our grasp of Jesus as God’s incarnate Word is going to purify and develop. Yet as our understanding of Jesus changes, so too must
our experience and understanding of God. Finally, if the way people find God changes—and there indications that such change has been taking place as the process of globalization continues—then it should come as no surprise that vowed religious, precisely because religious life is a laboratory of the Spirit, will be among the first to feel the effect.

[2003]