

Vows In The New Millennium

Mary Aquin O'Neill, RSM, Ph.D.

Prepared at the invitation of the Sisters of Mercy, Omaha Regional Community
September, 1999

Introduction

Thank you for inviting me to your weekend of reflection on the vows. I must say the assignment you gave me was very challenging. The questions and concerns sent beforehand go right to the heart of our current dilemma with the vows.

No one person can answer the queries raised by you. Rather, what I will offer is a framework within which we might think together about the questions that are of such moment. In the first session, we will wrestle with the interconnections and disconnects among our belief, understanding and practice of the vows. The second session will concentrate on an analysis of what has transpired with respect to the vows of religion. The third session will move toward an articulation of what the Sisters of Mercy are called to do at the cusp of the new millennium. After the panel presentation, I will give a fourth session reflecting on what has been said by you during our time, as I am able to catch and hold your insights, concerns, hopes, and imaginings. Nothing ambitious about this program!

Essentials of A Theology of the Vows

For my purposes here, the classical definition of theology will serve. Theology, St. Anselm wrote, is “faith seeking understanding.” It necessary to be clear that “understanding” comes not only from the mind but also from the body. That is, understanding has both a theoretical and a practical dimension. Thus a theology of religious vows will entail statements of belief and ways of understanding what those statements of belief mean. The ways of understanding encompass not only what we say when we try to explain to ourselves and others what we believe, but also those practices by means of which we put into action what we believe.

For example, it is not enough to say “I believe in God.” One must have some understanding of what it means to say “believe” and “God,” for believers may be called upon at any time to explain to someone else for the sake of that God. Finally, belief and understanding require that believers show forth in their deeds what they understand by what they believe.

Let me give a more specific example from another religious tradition: Orthodox Judaism. If you ask why orthodox Jews all live near their synagogue, you will find out that they must be able to walk to the synagogue on the Sabbath. If you press further, you will find that their understanding of the law (which shapes what they believe about God’s will for them) is that they must not work on the Sabbath, and driving an automobile constitutes work. Work is forbidden, they believe, by God’s law as revealed in the Torah.

You would get the same result if you were to start from the other end. Ask what orthodox Jews believe about work and you’ll be told that it is a good thing to do on every

day except on the Sabbath, when it is forbidden. Ask why they don't drive on the Sabbath and learn that driving is considered work. Inquire why they live near the synagogue and they'll tell you it that, in order to observe the Sabbath by communal worship, they must be able to walk to the synagogue.

Belief, then, when shared by a community, will inevitably have a visibility in practice.

In a former era of Mercy religious life, our lives were hemmed round with practices that reminded us daily of the vows we had taken. For instance, in preparation for these talks, I took up the copy of the Constitutions I received in the novitiate and found it inscribed (in pencil) "ad usum" Sister Mary Aquin. "To the use of." In the latest Constitutions, I have written my name, though still in pencil. I guess some things linger!

I do not intend this as an exercise in nostalgia. I am simply pointing out that there were embodied ways of keeping before our eyes the vows we took and the meaning that the community attached to them. Or should I say the meaning that the spiritual writers (almost all male) attached to them? I'll come back to that later.

That is the purpose of the exercise sheet that accompanies this talk. To use it, jot down statements of belief or understanding and any concrete practices that embody for you, your community, or the Sisters of Mercy at large the four vows of the Sisters of Mercy.

This exercise should give you an angle on the oft-repeated questions about **visibility**, a concern that dominated the materials sent to me ahead of time. Though most often phrased in the direction of others (how can others see that we have taken vows?), it also applies to ourselves: in what concrete ways do we keep before our eyes the meaning of our vows?

We know that the life of apostolic women religious has undergone a profound shift in the years since Vatican II. Authors like Sandra Schneiders, Joan Chittister, Pat Wittberg and our own Doris Gottemoeller have written often and well about some of the dimensions of that shift. They have analyzed the effects of the conciliar teaching about the universal call to holiness on our self-understanding. They have shown the dramatic impact of feminism on our ideals and on our rhetoric. They have identified forces challenging our tradition of the common life and undermining our witness of community. I don't know of anyone, however, who has gotten at the particular disconnect among belief, understanding and practice revealed in the exercise you just went through. That makes this approach unique and perhaps somewhat difficult.

Let me give some examples. I wager we believe that by our vows of poverty, chastity, obedience and service we give ourselves to God in a public and distinct way. In other words, these vows are symbolic of a self-donation in answer to a call. The vocation or call is to a distinct way of life whose visibility in the church represents a public ministry, a participation in Christ's own salvific work. The difficulty comes, it seems to me, when we try to explain to ourselves or to others the way we live out our vows. That is, what distinguishes our relationship to material possessions from that of our contemporaries who are not vowed? What distinguishes our exercise of freedom from

that of those not vowed? With respect to these two vows in particular, we could once say that we could have nothing to our use not designated to us by a superior, that we could undertake no life-project without the permission of a superior.

Our self-donation was made visible in our commitment not to acquire possessions, create a family of the flesh, nor decide other large life issues on our own. Practices such as asking permission to receive a gift, take something from the common store, or dispose of used items drove home this understanding of poverty; yearly mission assignments, a horarium that shaped the days, and a host of other directives from superiors kept us very aware of our vow of obedience. The visitation book reminded us of the vow to serve the poor, and ignorant, even in time that would otherwise have been “free.” The habit, clothing prayers, restrictions on who could visit and when, all the ways in which particular friendship was discouraged—these practices kept before our mind’s eye the vow of chastity. Most of these practices could be witnessed by others. To some they were edifying, to some they were absurd. But everyone who came into any kind of prolonged contact with us knew that the vows we took shaped our lives.

The exercise in which one tries to link belief, understanding and practice shows that, in many ways, we have gone from a highly visible practice to a much more invisible one; from a communal practice to an individual one; and perhaps from an intelligible practice to an unintelligible one. At any rate, it may put us in a better position to see the contours of our struggle to find a coherent way to present the vows to new members and to interested parties outside the community.

The Evolution of the Vows of Religion

I am now going to give a brief overview of the evolution of the vows of religion and then of the presentation of the vows according to various rules of the Sisters of Mercy. You might keep your worksheets in front of you and note where you find yourself resonating with practices, understandings or statements of belief.

Religious Life for Women

If one has read *Sisters in Arms*, by Joanne McNamara (all 644 pages of it!), one knows that the history of religious life for women, and with it the history of the vows we have under consideration, is fascinating and challenging. McNamara observes that among the earliest Christian victories in the Roman world was the extension of the “right of three children.” This gave to women who consecrated themselves as virgins or chaste widows free control over their own fortunes, a right given to other women only after they had borne three children. By religious consecration, women could escape the demands of family and use the means at their disposal to create a life devoted to matters of the spirit and to a wider community of need.

From my (admittedly feminist) reading of the history, there is no doubt that, in the first flush of religious life for women, chastity represented freedom—a freedom hitherto unknown to women. McNamara writes, “Virgins, whose refusal to marry put them immediately outside the law, gained freedom to preach and minister to their communities,

to lead the apostolic life.”¹ Many influences were brought to bear over the centuries to tame this heady freedom, not the least being the imagery of brides of Christ and the interpretations of the virginity of Mary. But we must not lose sight of the fire that was ignited by chastity at the beginning of our history.

Poverty was embraced by women as a way of clearing encumbrances to the spiritual life and of leveling the social differences represented in the community. Throughout McNamara’s tome, references show the “common table” to be at the heart of poverty for women. Ironically, by offering hospitality at that table, women also drew benefices of great importance and set in motion struggles with bishops and kings over lands and holdings.

Obedience allowed for a coordination of efforts so that the community of women could support themselves, care for those entrusted to them, and ensure a future for their monastery or congregation. As the unifying vow, it has also enabled communities of women to counter the high-handed exercise of episcopal authority over women religious.

One of the most salutary lessons of *Sisters in Arms* is that the vows of religion, while constant throughout the history of women’s religious life, did not have the same meanings attached to them at every stage of that life. Nor were they lived out in the same way. There has been a marvelous malleability to the vows, a malleability hidden from us by an understanding shaped only by Canon law and spiritual books written in the last century.

¹ Jo Ann Kay McNamara, *Sisters in Arms, Catholic Nuns Through Two Millennia*. (Harvard University Press, 1996), p. 23.

Sisters of Mercy

By the time Mother McAuley founded the Sisters of Mercy, religious life for women was solidly under the control of ecclesiastical authorities. The meaning of the vows had solidified as well. If Catherine was to develop a rule, the understanding and practice of the vows had to be pretty standard for the time. As we know, she worked from the Presentation Rule, making adaptations as she saw fit. One of the most interesting adaptations is the ordering of the chapters of the rule. Catherine does not open her rule with the three vows of religion. She leads, instead, with the object of the institute and the works of mercy that were to characterize that institute. Whereas material on the vows appears in the third, fourth and fifth chapters of the Presentation rule, the vows do not appear in Catherine's original table of contents until chapters 16, 17, and 18.²

Moreover, Catherine made significant changes to the chapters on the vows in the Presentation Rule, changes that provide a window into her own attitude toward the practice and meaning of the vows of religion. So, for instance, she does not consider that poverty forbids "decorations of any kind" in a sister's cell. She omits the long paragraph in the chapter on chastity that admonishes sisters to avoid profane books and never look a man in the eye or in any other way show themselves familiar with men.³ And, as Mary Sullivan notes, she "makes a number of thoughtful changes in chapter 19, 'Of the Vow of

²Mary Sullivan, RSM, *Catherine McAuley and the Tradition of Mercy*. (University of Notre Dame Press, 1995), p. 292.

³*Ibid.*, p. 313.

Obedience,' some of them involving greater modesty about the role of the mother superior and greater deference toward the good judgment of the sisters.'⁴

It seems to me that Mother McAuley does not often give admonitions concerning the vows in her letters and instructions. Union and charity, the care of sick sisters, the sacrifices sisters are making to establish new foundations, worries about money and about conflicts with ecclesiastical superiors, the needs of the poor—all these fill her pages. I say this because it is beginning to dawn on me that Catherine's spirituality was not primarily shaped by the vows of religion—at least not as traditionally understood. If I am wrong, please correct me during the discussion period.

All the effort to have the original rule accepted, and then to get the rule for the newly amalgamated Institute of the Sisters of Mercy approved by Rome, resulted in revisions that reshaped the rule in significant ways. Mary Sullivan's research into the 19th century revisions is an invaluable contribution to our history. From the amalgamation up to the development of our current rule, novices were instructed in an understanding of the vows little different from that of any other apostolic community of women founded in the 19th century. Yet I think some of Catherine's spirit lived on in the received wisdom from sisters who have lived the life. I hope this will be confirmed when you tell your stories this afternoon.

For the sake of brevity and clarity, let me outline what I think the essentials of that dominant teaching were. I will draw on the *Constitutions* of 1955 as typical:

Poverty: By the vow of poverty a sister renounces the right of lawfully disposing of any object estimable at a price, without the permission of her lawful superior. This means that a sister may neither give nor receive, purchase nor throw away, appropriate to

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 265.

herself nor designate for another anything that has a dollar value. In essence, one gives up the right to possess anything except by permission of the superior. Pious customs such as the one I mentioned earlier (*ad usum*) will remind the sister that even those things she has to her use do not belong to her and can be taken away at the will of the superior.

The theological warrant for such an abdication of possession was taken right from the Presentation Rule. Sisters were to keep in mind how “tenderly [Jesus] cherished holy poverty,” being born in a stable and laid in a manger; suffering from cold, hunger and thirst; not having a place to lay His head; dying naked on the Cross.⁵ By living out this understanding of the vow of poverty, then, the Sisters would conform themselves to “their Heavenly Spouse.” One way of rephrasing that is to say that, by the vow of poverty, sisters shared the lot of the one to whom they had joined their lives.

Chastity: Even the old rule is not as clear about chastity as it is about poverty and obedience. What it says is that by the vow of chastity the sisters oblige themselves to observe celibacy and to abstain from every internal or external act which is contrary to chastity. That which was to be safeguarded, according to the rule, was “the purity of their hearts.” Modesty, mortification of the senses, humility, frequent and devout prayer, and the sacraments of penance and eucharist were recommended as necessary means to this life of chastity.

I think I am on safe ground when I say that what was understood as renounced by this vow was not only sexual activity but also sexual pleasure. According to some spiritual writers, sexual activity *because* of sexual pleasure. What I mean is that the

⁵ Sisters of Mercy of the Union, *Constitutions*. (Sisters of Mercy General Motherhouse, 1955), p. 37.

understanding of chastity was connected to a perception of sexual pleasure as defiled and defiling. Stay clear of sexual pleasure and you remain pure of heart.

The theological warrant for chastity is the same in the original rule and in the later *Constitutions*: it is “the most angelic virtue, consecrated in the person of Jesus Christ and recommended in the Evangelical Law”; it is a “heavenly gift.”⁶ The motivation for living a life of chastity, then, is that it makes one like the angels.

Obedience: By the vow of obedience the Sisters assume the obligation of obeying the commands of their lawful superiors in all those things which refer, directly or indirectly, to the observance of the vows and of the *Constitutions*. The effort here is a renunciation of one’s own will, as the *Constitutions* say.⁷

Surprisingly, there is almost no theological warrant for obedience, in the original rule nor in the 1955 *Constitutions*. The original rule refers to the “sweet yoke of obedience” and that is transformed into the “sweet yoke of Jesus Christ” in the later rule-- both references I suppose to Jesus’ lines about a yoke and burden that are light and sweet.⁸

Service: I can find no evidence of a vow of service in the original rule, nor do I know when the words “and the service of the poor, sick and ignorant” were added to the vow formula. Perhaps someone here can help us with that. At any rate, even though the words appear in the vow formula of the 1955 *Constitutions*, there is no chapter of explanation devoted to it. This would mean, I think, that instruction on the vows in most novitiates would concentrate on poverty, chastity and obedience without necessarily linking them to the vow to “serve the poor, sick and ignorant.” I see our current

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

awareness of this fourth vow and our determination to connect it with our living out of poverty, chastity and obedience, as one of the most important developments arising from these years of experimentation and change since Vatican II. The proposals being floated to have an alternate form of religious life that would be based solely on this fourth vow are of great importance as well.

Current *Constitutions*

The decade long effort to write a new rule for the Sisters of Mercy brought us up against the shifting sands of our belief, understanding and practice. A study of the current *Constitutions* reveals continuities with the past as well as new insights derived, I think, from our experience of living out the vows in a different way.

The new rule continues Catherine’s pattern of opening with the object of the Institute and the works of mercy. Between these opening paragraphs and the consideration of the vows come important paragraphs which link the mission of the Sisters of Mercy to the reception of God’s Word and to the reception of the sacraments. Prayer—liturgical, communal and personal— and the living bonds of union and charity among the sisters make of us one body living out the mission of the Sisters of Mercy. This theological goldmine precedes and is in some ways independent of the consideration of the vows.

The paragraphs on the vows in general make the following points: they are made publicly, they are made within the Institute of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas, and the vows professed are chastity, poverty, obedience and the service of the poor, sick and ignorant.⁹ By this religious profession sisters choose “a life-long direction that unites us

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

⁹ Sisters of Mercy of the Americas, *Constitutions*. (Institute of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas,

to God and to one another as disciples of Jesus.” Religious profession also intensifies “our baptismal covenant in ways that foster growth in freedom and love.”¹⁰ Here we have two important statements of belief. Do we any longer believe them to be true? And if we do, can we interpret and articulate that belief so that there is some common understanding of the following: How does religious profession unite us to God and to one another as disciples of Jesus? How does religious profession intensify our baptismal covenant in ways that foster growth in freedom and love? What are the practices that embody such statements of belief? Theologically, it is impossible to speak about baptism without speaking of dying and rising. We once spoke easily of “dying to the world,” but do so no longer. To what, then, do we die when we profess the vows of religion?

Perhaps the paragraphs on the individual vows will give some indication.

Chastity: By our practice of chastity we make our unique response to the love of Jesus and commit ourselves by vow to a life of celibate chastity for the sake of God’s reign. Accepting God as our first and all-encompassing love, we give ourselves in love to our companions in community, to those in need and to family and friends...God illumines the mystery of celibate love in contemplation, in friendship and in our life of service.¹¹

It is significant, I think, that chastity is the first vow mentioned. The ordering of the vows has been changed from former rules. Any thoughts on why this should be?

Whatever reason for putting chastity first, two things are clear. (1) These *Constitutions* assert that chastity is above all about love. (2) The earlier theological

1992), paragraph 20.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, paragraph 21.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, paragraphs 22 and 23.

warrant, namely that chastity makes us like the angels, has been replaced by a new one: “for the sake of God’s reign.” What is not clear at all is what we mean by “our practice of chastity” or “celibate love.” Do we still assume that the real meaning of each consists in the renunciation of sexual activity and sexual pleasure? If so, what is the connection between renouncing sexual activity and advancing God’s reign? For that matter, what constitutes, for women, sexual activity? A woman can derive pleasure from non-genital activities such as holding a baby to her breast. Is this sexual? Certainly it has to do with her sexually differentiated body. There is no gainsaying the fact that contemporary women recognize significant differences between the sexual experiences of women and those of men. [The sexual experiences of women are more generalized, not tied to specific organs.] In many ways, our understandings of chastity have been shaped by the men who wrote on it in spiritual books and in Canon Law. We have yet, I think, to develop an understanding of chastity that honors woman’s way of being human. I believe that there are resources in our experience for figuring out what we can now affirm about the vow of chastity, but to access them we must begin to talk honestly to one another about what life has taught us. We must tell each other our stories.

Poverty: The paragraphs on poverty reveal some interesting shifts in understanding. No longer is the focus on renouncing the individual right to dispose of objects with dollar value except by permission of a superior. Rather, here, the spotlight falls on surrendering the independent use and disposal of material goods. Moreover, stewardship of the resources of the earth is connected to this vow, as is the promise to support one another by our labors and to strive for unity by sharing what we have with one another. Finally, the external sign of the practice of poverty is identified as a life of

simplicity that balances concern over our own future with compassion for the poor and needy. The theological warrants for poverty are two-fold: to follow Jesus who became poor for our sake and to value the resources of the earth as gifts of God.¹²

Again, it is doubtful that we have a common understanding of what it means to say that Jesus became poor for our sake or what practices follow from valuing the resources of the earth as gifts of God. This is work yet to be done if we are to make our living out of the vow of poverty intelligible for ourselves and for others.

Obedience: The new rule presents obedience as the vow by which sisters commit to obey those who exercise legitimate authority according to the *Constitutions*. Legitimate authority can formally call this commitment into play by invoking the vow either in writing or in the presence of two witnesses.

The practice of the vow will lead to a spirit of obedience by means of which sisters are impelled to search together for God's will in fidelity to the mission. For this obedience to be responsible, individual sisters must inform their minds and prepare their hearts for dialogue, share insights and respect freedom of conscience. Listening to one another is essential to a constant conversion to God's will. Given the courage to live this way, sisters are able to embrace the cross in whatever shape it presents itself in their lives.¹³

The theological warrant for obedience is union with the obedient Christ whose call and mission led to his death and to the redemption of the world.

Clearly, the new rule retains an understanding of the vow of obedience as the commitment to obey legitimate authority. But it yokes to this understanding admonitions

¹² Ibid., paragraphs 24, 25, 26.

¹³ Ibid., paragraphs 27 and 28.

about the communal search for God's will and a personal program of preparedness that—to my mind—introduce a tension into the exercise of this vow that did not exist in the rule heretofore. What does one do if there is a conflict between the exercise of legitimate authority and the communal discernment of God's will? What is the obligation of the one in authority to be guided by this communal search? How does a community respect freedom of conscience when the exercise of that freedom puts it on a collision course with legitimate authority in the Church? In the cases of Jeannine Gramick and Sister of Rochester, we see these questions played out in the public press. I suspect that a discussion of these cases would disclose among us very different attitudes and conclusions.

All of this leads to a quite different perception of the obedience that led Christ to his death and to the redemption of the world. It also changes our perception of the cross we are to embrace. That is, the practice of obedience by modern women religious cannot be understood as a renunciation of our own wills and a resignation of them to the superiors.

Service: Though there is only one paragraph devoted to the vow of service, it is significant in being now counted among the vows. By this vow, sisters commit ourselves to the exercise of the spiritual and corporal works of mercy. The theological warrant is that these works were revealed through the life of Christ and are made possible by his love, his mercy, his word.

It important to note that the text says “the spiritual and corporal works” not “the spiritual or corporal works.” I take that as a challenge to the growing dichotomy among us between those who meet the corporal needs of the poor, sick and ignorant and those

who minister to their minds, hearts and spirits. If we are to exercise the works of mercy according to the example of Christ, the corporal and the spiritual belong together. Each Sister of Mercy needs to develop an ease with both.

In this overview of the evolution of the vows of religion, I have shown the malleability of the vows in various periods of history. In particular, this post-conciliar period, when women religious could and did revise our own rules, reveals shifts in belief, understanding and practice with which we have yet to come to terms. In the next talk, I will present ideas on what we are being called to do as we enter the new millennium. For now, I look forward to a lively exchange about what has been presented thus far. Thank you.

Mary Aquin O'Neill, RSM, Ph.D.
Prepared at the invitation of the Sisters of Mercy,
Omaha Regional Community
Copyright September, 1999
All Rights Reserved
Mount Saint Agnes Theological Center for Women
www.mountsaintagnes.org

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Flinders, Carol Lee, *At the Root of this Longing, Reconciling a Spiritual Hunger and a Feminist Thirst*. HarperSanFrancisco, 1998.
- McNamara, Jo Ann Kay, *Sisters in Arms, Catholic Nuns Through Two Millennia*. Harvard University Press, 1996,
- Pohier, Jacques, *God in Fragments*. Crossroads, 1986.
- Rolheiser, Ronald, *The Holy Longing, The Search for a Christian Spirituality*. Doubleday, 1999.
- Sisters of Mercy of the Union, *Constitutions*. Sisters of Mercy General Motherhouse, 1955.
- Sisters of Mercy of the Americas, *Constitutions*. Institute of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas, 1992.
- Sullivan, RSM, Mary, *Catherine McAuley and the Tradition of Mercy*. University of Notre Dame Press, 1995.
- Wittberg, Patricia, *Pathways to Re-Creating Religious Communities*. Paulist Press, 1996.