APOSTOLIC POVERTY AND CHURCH LAW: DISCERNING THE ESSENTIAL

By JEAN BEYER

IT MAY FAIRLY be claimed that the renewal chapters of many religious Institutes, authorized to legislate experimentally in the name of the Church, reflect not so much a desire of 'doing away with poverty', but rather a search for its meaning: why and how it has been held, in the spiritual tradition, as essential to the following of Christ crucified and risen, and what precisely are the new ways in which it can and ought to be expressed and lived in our pluralistic society.

Canon law and renunciation

It must be confessed that there are certain senses in which Canon Law has been positively deleterious to the development of religious life, especially in apostolic Institutes of women. Amongst its less fortunate effects must be counted an exaggerated standardization, which often eliminated whatever was original in these Institutes, and tended to iron out the specific differences between them. Secondly, until the other day, women religious have never counted amongst their number able theologians, much less canonists; and the priests who have assisted them have been concerned mostly with the superficial application of the law to congregations of women. There has been little attempt to trace the directives of the Code back to their essential roots – those essential aspects of monastic tradition through which an authentic and meaningful poverty was actually lived. In other words, there has been too much preoccupation with the literal application of the law, and little or none with religious life itself.

However, if we cannot expect the Code, either in its present or future form, to speak the last word on religious poverty, there is still much to be learned from why the legislators adopted the positions they did.

Let us begin with the novitiate. According to the letter of the law, the novice can relinquish nothing: he could still continue to administer his property and dispose of his income. The Code imposes the absolute minimum: since it would be highly undesirable for novices to be engaged in money-making, it is left to the individual Institute to decide what should be done.

Nothing could be clearer: the law cannot be taken as a spiritual guide. The minimum imposed by the Church is simply a dictate of prudence. The novice may give nothing away because there is no certainty that he will persevere; and it is this same consideration which has influenced the Church in several of its canonical requirements.

There is a further factor which has put a premium on practical prudence in church legislation: the turbulent history of religious congregations over the last two centuries. The French Revolution inaugurated a situation of total insecurity. As one political upheaval in Europe followed another, religious Institutes stood in constant peril of being disbanded, exiled and left without support; whilst potentially insecure foundations were made by exiled religious in England, and later in U.S.A. In such circumstances, it was inevitable that the Church in her legislation should reflect the general uncertainty as to the exact meaning of religious poverty. In our own day as well, situations have arisen in which the Church has preferred that solemn vows should not be made at all. Up to 1954, in France, Belgium and Holland, even the carmelites had only simple vows, which allowed them to retain their personal property. In the long run, it is possible that experiences of this sort have contributed to a deeper understanding of the meaning of personal poverty in religious life. But their immediate result, in terms of legislation, has been a limiting caution and not spiritual insight.

When the time comes for the novice's first commitment to the religious life, the Code insists that there is still no question of his renouncing his worldly possessions. But until quite recently he did make a will – an act which had its roots in monastic tradition. The monastic profession meant total renunciation of the world in the pejorative sense of the word; it was the equivalent of a funeral-rite, a penetration into the paschal mystery, the death and burial with Christ in order to share his resurrection. To make his will helped the novice to understand that by his profession he 'died' and 'was buried'. Once again, however, the symbol, and the devotion embedded in it, was at odds with the fact and with the law. Since the

novice had not, in the normal case, attained his legal majority, his will was invalid in law, even if he did possess property.

It was only in recent times that this practice of making a will was deferred until it should be valid in civil law. In this adjustment of the Code to civil statutes, it was also laid down that whilst the young religious must dispose of his income, he must still retain possession of his capital. Here also the over-riding consideration is practical prudence. He retains possession of his capital simply to guard against the unexpected – political upheavals, for example. At the same time, he must surrender the administration of his property and any income, so as to be free from any financial pre-occupation; and someone has to be found (usually the Procurator of his congregation) to act as administrator.[1]

A religious who owns capital is the proprietor of it. Charity – and only charity – may persuade him to modify his will in favour, for instance, of needy relatives or of his congregation. However, his will cannot be changed without the permission of the superior General, and to guard against the natural pressures put upon him by financially harassed superiors, the will may not be altered in favour of the congregation. Certainly, without being actually ordered to do so, religious have been persuaded to alter their will to boost the finances of the congregation in difficult times. But such persuasion, while understandable, hardly accords with the principle of complete liberty on the part of the subject.

The act by which a religious wholly renounces his right of ownership is canonical only, since modern civil law does not allow a measure which would accumulate property in the hands of the Church. Solemn vows and their consequences have therefore no significance in civil law. Consequently, if a religious is released from solemn vows to return to secular life, his entire property is restored to him. Again, in the days when civil and canon law made a single system, the professed religious could neither inherit nor receive financial aid of any sort. Civilly, he was dead. In modern secular law, only the state itself is entitled to deprive a citizen of his civil rights, as a penal measure.

What, then, often appears as exaggerated caution in the Church's

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[1] Formerly, this arrangement saddled the administration of religious Institutes with a heavy burden, since the property of each religious had to be administered separately. Later on, permission was given to lump them all together to make a single capital – which, in these days of increasing defections, causes considerable administrative difficulties.

legislation, or a pre-occupation with minutiae, is seen to be more reasonable in its context, which is that of an age marked by revolution, anti-clericalism and world wars. Recent years have seen the development of a more profound ideal of poverty, inspired mainly by René Voillaume and the Little Brothers and Sisters. This ideal finds clear expression in the Council: the religious vowed to poverty needs to be really poor – to possess nothing. In an early draft of the decree *Perfectae Caritatis*, it was proposed that the solemn vows of poverty should be allowed even in congregations of simple vows; whilst in the definitive text of the decree, authorization is given to general chapters of such congregations to sanction complete renunciation of all possessions by the individual religious. The chapter is to determine whether this renunciation should be obligatory or optional, and when it should be made.[1]

The concession to Institutes of simple vows of the power to sanction a complete renunciation of property is not the significant step that some have taken it to be. It is certainly reasonable to allow such renunciation to those religious who desire it and at the same time give evidence of stable character.[2] But we are still in the realm of legal formalities, and the meaning of the measure in terms of the lived experience of the counsels is by no means clear. So long as the religious remains a religious, he becomes no more 'insecure' than he was already. Real insecurity would result only if he should decide to leave his Institute, in which case he would no longer be under a vow of poverty.[3]

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[1] 'Religious congregations may, by their constitutions, permit their members to renounce their inheritances, whether they have them in fact or merely in expectation'. *Perfectae Caritatis*, 13 (Cf *Supplement to the Way*, no 2, May, 1966, p. 48).

[2] In the opinion of the present writer, it would be unwise to propose this renunciation as a norm of perfection, nor should it be allowed before the age of 45. Increasing defections from religious life place a heavy burden on the finances of religious communities, since there is a duty in charity to assist former members who for a number of reasons (age, lack of professional training, failure to qualify for pensions or social insurance) may be unable to support themselves. Many congregations have had to dispense considerable sums on this object alone.

[3] A last point which needs to be mentioned in this brief outline concerns the dowry of enclosed nuns. The purpose of this was to provide the nun with a capital enabling her to live, fairly frugally, on the income. However, the effect of the practice was to debar from the cloister anyone who could not raise the required sum. Convent life thus became the preserve of the well-to-do. Nevertheless, the dowry was never of much importance. For one thing, it was generally mismanaged (no wonder, since cloistered nuns are not bankers), and furthermore, the amounts in question have been made nugatory by successive devaluations. Now that religious earn their living by work, the custom of the dowry has become obsolete and in the reform of the Code it will be the first thing to go. The dowry,

Poverty of dependence

Another feature of church law is its view of common life in terms of uniformity and complete dependence. Here we need to remember that the Code signalizes an emphatic reaction against an abuse which severely weakened religious life in past times: the *peculium*. By this term is meant a substantial sum of money in the permanent possession of the religious, who is free to dispose of it without any recourse to the Superior's permission. It is a fact of life that most religious, men and women, fervent novices and observant 'young professed' alike, experience at one time or another the desire to have money at their disposal, 'without any strings attached'. However, the legal corrective of this desire for possessions, or rather the over-literal interpretation of it, has had the most unfortunate results. By and large, religious have all they require to meet their needs. As long as they ask permission, they live well – at a comfortable middle-class level. Indeed, novices often discover, on entering religious life, that they are better off in many ways than they were at home. Poverty in this all too common situation has thus been equiparated with asking permission for 'little things'. It is often seen, particularly by intelligent religious women, as the dependence of a small child on capricious parents who are, by turns, indulgent and parsimonious. It was the rigid and irresponsible attitudes of superiors in the past – the tendency to treat the community like infants in demanding that religious ask permission for every little thing, which sparked off the problem of the 'personal budget'.

Nothing is more natural than the desire of the consecrated woman today to enjoy a responsible freedom in the apostolate. It is true that this lies at the root of much current dissatisfaction regarding poverty of dependence. And in some cases, exasperation with the restrictions imposed by traditional religious life has prompted religious congregations to seek a way out of their difficulties by becoming secular Institutes: a project usually founded on a profound ignorance of what a secular Institute is. But behind a restlessness which it is easy to deplore there is a history from which the Church does not emerge altogether with credit. Once this is understood, the general lines along which the future must develop become clear.

Apostolic Institutes of religious women have undoubtedly failed

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then, is no solution to the economic problems of enclosed religious. Work, on the other hand, could be. But the type of work needs to be selected with some care. It is not always easy in an industrialized society to find a task which is both remunerative and suitable. To work in a factory is in no way conducive to authentic contemplative life.

in the past to offer their members sufficient personal responsibility. The blame for this is not to be laid indiscriminately at the door of superiors, since severe limits were set to a truly personal apostolate in these congregations. One looked to sisters primarily to discharge particular tasks; what they themselves might have had to say was always of secondary interest. Routine engenders frustration, which often finds release in petty and even eccentric attachments to tiny details and meaningless privileges. But it is noticeable that such attitudes are less evident among sisters who find real satisfaction in their work; the strongest advocates of the 'personal budget' are not to be found among religious who are social workers or teachers in outside schools. These, even if they enjoy the use of a car and receive an allowance for petrol, often evince no desire for a *peculium* and are unaffected by the mania for personal spending.

To make a judgment on poverty of dependence, the first qualification is to have lived such poverty. The most competent judge of the matter would be the religious for whom dependence has been part and parcel of life from the day he entered to the day when, in his last illness, the superior fails to call in a competent specialist. To be constantly dependent on others, to receive all you ask, but never to ask for as much as you would like, is an arduous and life-long death to self. In looking elsewhere for the meaning of poverty, there is a danger of reversing the priorities. Certain young religious may well make a point of 'living poor'; but a striking feature of their particular brand of poverty is that it makes them less dependent, more free to do as they wish. To decide whether the group that lives poor is in fact poorer demands the realism that can recognize a facade for what it is. Admittedly, in religious life as we have known it in the past, many things could have been done more simply, but to under-rate good administration would be disastrous. There are times when the apostolate is better served by a building that will last a century, than one which will fall apart in ten years. The criterion is apostolic service.

Of course, poverty has always meant more than dependence. (How many professional people live for the whole of their lives in one room?) Nevertheless, the fundamental difference between the poverty of religious and that of others lies in the inability of the religious freely to dispose of money or property.

This consideration must be borne in mind when we try to assess certain recent experiments designed to remedy the lack of responsibility in religious life. These are of two main types. First, there is

the case in which the religious lives on a budget submitted to the superior. The arguments in favour of such a system of religious living are obvious enough: the gain in terms of personal maturity, the need to know, at first hand, the simple economics of living, the exercise of a poverty that is truly personal. Yet the arguments offered are not always conclusive; and the objection should be faced in all honesty that the system is gravely exposed to human weakness. Unless there is a strong sense of mutual responsibility, love and humility, the result would be a return to the old *peculium*. More serious, however, is the further step already taken by many congregations, of allowing religious a free hand with their professional earnings. A sister draws a salary, and, since she receives it in her own name, she begins by taking from it the amount she needs to live on, and then hands over the surplus to the congregation. At this point the last traces of a common, fraternal poverty begin to disappear. The religious becomes in effect a proprietor who is also a charitable benefactor of the community. It must be frankly admitted that few, if any, of the founders of existing religious congregations would have countenanced such a practice; it would have seemed to them fundamentally irreconcilable with religious life.[1]

Common life

An expression which frequently recurs in connection with poverty is 'common life'. It is likely that neither the meaning nor the practical implications of the term is always clear. In the context of the active apostolic vocation, and as understood, for example, by the jesuits from the time of St Ignatius himself, it has three distinct meanings. Sometimes it bears the deeply apostolic sense of living according to the material standards of one's environment. In other words, 'common' has the sense of ordinary. But it would be untrue to say that for Ignatius the notion of 'ordinary' takes precedence over the second meaning, namely community life. For although jesuits do not – and never did – live in monasteries, they do normally live together. Thirdly, common life has the sense of fraternal life, and is the basis of the bond of charity, the unity of doctrine and outlook that makes for a common spirit in the members of an order or congregation.

[1] One thing is certain: the problem will not be solved by placing the poverty of religious on the same footing as that of secular Institutes. In the latter, individuals dispose of their own money and property, manage their finances, engage in business. In all this they give their characteristic witness of detachment, moderation and poverty of spirit, which is quite different from that of religious Institutes. Cf *infra*, pp 45–6.

An early witness to the difficulties of common life is the Acts of the Apostles. The Jerusalem community clearly had no vocation to religious poverty, though it has bequeathed us some scriptural texts which illustrate what a religious community should be: a brotherhood, united in heart and soul and having all things in common. For the religious, this experiment which failed at the time but has since been lived successfully by countless communities will be seen primarily as an example with a special appeal. But he will also find matter for sober reflection in the fact that it *failed.* With such thoughts in mind, future chapters should take a fresh look at some of the decisions reached by the chapters of renewal to see where they are really leading. For us, the problem is not one of hereditary possessions. The challenge today comes from the salaries we receive for our professional work, and the pensions guaranteed us on our retirement. (They amount in most cases to far more than we would ever have inherited.) The vow of poverty must retain its meaning even in a socialized society.

The most searching questions about community life today come from religious women, who are perhaps more sensitive than men both to the burden and the enrichment of living together. Again, in this sphere as in many others, renewal asks of women a more radical adaptation of practice and outlook than is the case with men, who have been freer to evolve gradually over the years. Sometimes one detects behind their questions an approach to community life which, however understandable in view of past structures, calls today for considerable modification. A common instance is a certain way of referring to the 'trials' or 'demands' of community life. In some Institutes, the living of common life is openly, and with approval, spoken of as penitential. It is true, of course, that the sacrifices demanded by living with others contribute richly to the value of religious life. But the view that community life should be a sort of obstacle-course has been responsible in the past for some absurd customs and sad deviations. The time has surely come for religious Institutes to rid themselves of any remaining vestiges of an unfortunate, if once common, attitude.

Another tendency needs to be approached with much more caution and reserve than has been the case in the past: the allegation that, for women especially, an organized and well-developed community life is an indispensable support for the apostolate of the individual. Perhaps the first point to be made here is this: more important than the distinction between men and women is the dis-

tinction between different Institutes and different forms of apostolate. There are Institutes of men where the community emphasis is quite as marked as in many women's communities; each Institute has its own character. Furthermore, in the world today a wider diversity obtains among religious women than was once possible. The narrow compass of traditional 'feminine works', such as teaching, the care of the sick, upkeep of sacristies and episcopal residences, is giving way to an expanding range of opportunities. Today the same convent-building may be the home of a social worker, a health visitor, a teacher and the sister in charge of the catering. In such a situation, ideas of community life formed in another age are out of place. A friendly and indeed intimate relationship between members of the community when they are together is highly desirable. But this must not be an obstacle to the apostolate. It should never assume a sacrosanct character. The community must never leave the laity with the impression of a cosy inward-looking group, only too happy to turn its back on the world outside.

Legislating for poverty

There is no true poverty where charity is at a discount. This is a truism, but one which needs to be underlined; for charity can be made to suffer in the name of religious poverty in a number of ways. Certainly, religious Institutes have always shown themselves responsive to the demands of charitable work, nor is there any doubt that the spirit of charity has generally been demonstrated both by individual religious and by institutions. Nevertheless, while the personal lives of religious exhibit remarkable generosity, a streak of avarice is all too evident in the institutions themselves. It is not unknown for an injured or dangerously sick patient to be kept waiting at the hospital door until someone is found to pay the fee. Charity may reign supreme in an institution while the institution itself remains closed to certain social classes. In short, the individual has often been more charitable than the institution.

There is another, more subtle way, in which religious Institutes may pursue an unbalanced idea of poverty at the expense of charity. It may happen when a form of poverty is adopted which deprives the community of the means of performing its proper apostolate in a fitting manner. Students need books, teachers need diplomas, scientists need laboratories. The lack of such means can cause both tension within a community and failure to meet the needs of other people.

A great deal of current writing about the witness of poverty, often seen in terms of real economic deprivation, or at least of some resemblance to the conditions in which the poor actually live, testifies to a one-sided pre-occupation with the social aspect of poverty. It exhibits little concern for such matters as health or the actual social situation of many religious communities. More seriously still, one sees little awareness of the real needs of the apostolate. Yet the vow of poverty is not taken for its own sake. It is taken within a religious Institute committed to a particular mission, to which everything else needs to be directed.

It is essential, then, that poverty be considered in its full religious context. It then becomes evident that 'witness to poverty' is not so simple a matter as might be supposed. First, it must be emphasized that christian witness is addressed primarily to believers themselves. There can be no forcing the gospel message on those who have not received the grace of conversion, and it is at least questionable whether the more strident forms of 'witness to poverty' are likely to favour this conversion. On the contrary, they may well obscure the most appealing element in christianity, charity. Hence, the desire to be outwardly poor, to set an example of material poverty and to belong by right to the world of the under-privileged, is at best an ambiguous witness if it is coloured by other attitudes less easy to reconcile with the gospel. The christian who is genuinely poor is all things to all men. However ardent his zeal for social justice, his methods will never be those of class warfare.

Hence, to arrive at a sound judgment on the matter of religious poverty requires a prudence enlightened by faith and a thoroughly balanced approach. And if priests and bishops have sometimes pronounced on poverty in terms which take no account of the all-important spiritual attitude, it must be remembered that priests and bishops who take no vow of poverty are not the best judges.

If general chapters are to improve on the over-cautious, over-standardized legislation on poverty – and this is certainly what the Church has been asking of them since the Council – they will need to strive for that understanding of it which is at once liberating, apostolic and specifically designed to match the needs and nature of the individual Institute. There is no reality that we can label 'religious life as such'. What exists is a wide variety of distinct religious Institutes. And the personal and collective poverty appropriate to a particular Institute can be seen only in terms of its charism and apostolic work. The questions to be asked are: What

are the works of this particular Institute? What opportunities for charity and service are open to it? Given its character and circumstances, how can it foster the quality of detachment while remaining sufficiently well-endowed to give help to those in need? By what means can it be made apparent in the very atmosphere of a given religious Institute that its members do not work for themselves, that all they have is for others?

Secondly, it cannot be over-emphasized that poverty is subservient to the love and service of God and man. True poverty is thus a sign of the charity which it also promotes. And its expression in practice must, of course, harmonize both with the will of the Institute's founder and its authentic apostolic expansion.

Thirdly, we need a correct understanding of religious witness, a question bedevilled today by much confused thinking. My own view is that the term 'witness of poverty' is obfuscating. Rather we should confine ourselves to talking about the witness of consecrated life. There is a one-sidedness in the way we proclaim our poverty; and it is worth asking why modern religious do not adopt the same approach towards their 'witness of chastity' – a witness surely just as vital in the Church today. Yet in the last analysis what really counts is the complete witness, the unique blend of many elements that gives religious life its distinctive character. The over-drawing of certain features produces not a portrait but a caricature. An analogous distortion has occurred in a number of religious Institutes. There are clear external signs of poverty (or should we say well-meaning attempts at self-deprivation); but what of the apostolic face of the Institute? Charity, in particular, comes off badly in the resulting imbalance.

No disparagement is intended here of such communities as the Little Brothers and Sisters, whose generosity is beyond question. Their apostolate, however, is confined to the poorest levels of society, and the work they do is the unskilled work of the sub-proletariat. This special vocation is not therefore the model for all religious Institutes. It is on this point that the thinking of certain religious is dangerously confused, and were such thinking to prevail, many Institutes of major apostolic importance would fail in their purpose.

The corrective to facile over-simplification lies, then, in seeing the place of poverty as part of an organic whole. This may become clearer if we consider the essential complexity of religious witness as exemplified by a particular Order. If the benedictines were to adopt forms of poverty inconsistent with their tradition of hospi-

tality, the solemnity of monastic liturgy, the tranquil rhythm of conventual life or the indefinable graciousness radiated by the truly contemplative community, then they would no longer be benedictines. For the sake of the Church, we should have to try to win them back to the poise and balance so characteristic of St Benedict himself.

The experiments now going on, and the many changes that are modifying the shape of religious life, should be scrutinized in the light of these considerations. The importance of experimentation is beyond question. This is one way – perhaps the only way – of bringing religious of all ages up against the realities that underlie our problems. Nevertheless, there is no guarantee that experiments will produce good fruits, nor are they a substitute for thought or decision. Two observations may be relevant here.

First, reflection must follow experiment, reflection which might in some cases reveal that a more profound or genuine religious poverty has not been achieved after all, or that a style of life has crept in which is not consistent with the basic nature of religious life, or of the spirit of the Institute. Secondly, at the end of the process of experimentation, a solution must be adopted and, once adopted, adhered to. But it is essential that the solution be the fruit of responsible and serious thought. Nothing is less satisfactory from every point of view than the attitude which takes former practice as the norm, and from this standpoint proceeds to 'make concessions'. Indeed, it is because concessions stand in constant need of revision that such an attitude so often results in endless changes and adjustments that would not have been necessary had the problems been thought through in the first place.

Tradition and evolution: monastic and apostolic poverty

The right sort of adjustment and experiment does not depend simply on a knowledge of the law, with its defects and strengths. It must be emphasized that the dubious quality of much recent adaptation is due in large part to a failure to discern the effects of traditional religious life on the present. As is indicated elsewhere in this issue, the rule of St Benedict contains the profoundest lessons in the living of religious poverty. Yet how many chapter delegates have read his rule? Benedict was proclaimed patron of Europe as much for the cultural as for the spiritual influence of his order. Using the simplest means – the normative life of prayer combined with work, lived out in fraternal community, he educated the euro-

pean christians. In our cultural as well as our spiritual roots, we are all of us benedictines.

A knowledge of the chequered history of monasticism in the west is also helpful for our understanding of religious poverty and its problems today. When the benedictines lost something of their spirit of frugality and began to amass wealth, power-politics took control. The cistercian reaction was to return to the letter of the rule. They bound themselves to hard manual labour, choosing the least healthy districts to work in. There they did penance, tamed the land and made it bear fruit for mankind. None of this was spelt out in a rule; it was lived. The cistercians, in their turn, fell a prey to the amassing of wealth. A century and a half after its foundation, Citeaux had lost its austerity, and with it its fervour. The necessary balance between the poverty which is lived and the poverty which consists in giving away to others had disappeared. Cistercian holdings expanded so far that one could almost say that the whole of Europe was cistercian. Citeaux had become a political force, and would remain a social force right up to the french revolution, when the closing of the abbeys destroyed the major source of poor relief. The result was the same terrible crisis in France as the dissolution of the monasteries caused in the England of the tudors. A large segment of the population, no longer supported by the monasteries, and in default of any system of state assistance, were brought to starvation level. So the cultural and social situation of christendom was eroded – initiated by the loss of monastic equilibrium, in its turn dependent on an authentic poverty of spirit.

No consideration, however brief, of monastic poverty would be complete without mentioning the carthusians. The Charterhouse represents the peak of the contemplative life, in which the hermitage and the monastery are blended. The carthusian priest has his own house, to help him to achieve greater solitude, while the brother looks after the farm and all the main domestic work; he has entered the Charterhouse for the same solitude, but finds it at a different level, and with more community life. To try to unify these two classes of carthusians would ruin both vocations. Carthusian life is most unostentatious, and its poverty consists in uniformity and dependence. No one can have anything he has not asked for, since he is enclosed in his cell, in his house. Everything is focussed on prayer, and the brothers are always caught up in this labour (for it is nothing less) for an ever deeper union with God. They are at the service of the twenty or thirty hermits who constitute the choir of

the Charterhouse. A person judging the carthusians by contemporary social criteria might say: 'I don't understand them, they are loafers'. Useful work is not in fact a carthusian's task.

The whole structure of their life is to focus on union with God. The severity of the order is proverbial. As the *Imitation* puts it, 'Carthusians were never reformed because they were never relaxed'. It is not surprising that there are only five hundred of them.

Our own times have seen new expressions of the contemplative life. We have already referred to the Little Brothers and Sisters of Jesus. Another instructive example is the Brothers of our Lady of the Poor, founded in the Landes in France, and now flourishing in Germany, Chile and Ruanda. Their first desire was for solitude. This they found in the Landes. And there too, they found paying work, as herdsmen or game-keepers for the big landowners. Their work was simple. When, in other places, they had to look for part-time factory work, they discovered that this was incompatible with contemplative life. (The trappists have had the same experience.) Nervous stability is absolutely necessary for contemplative life. Different forms of prayer would have to be found if they were to re-integrate contemplation and the sub-proletariat of modern society. For fifteen years they have been endeavouring to establish a contemplative life closer to the poor, that would allow them to share in it as equal partners: a monasticism where poor men can be accepted. Some abbeys are culturally too rich, too high-class and genteel, for the poor to enter. With these brothers the form is so simple, the manner of life so close to the poor man's own, that the most indigent of any country will not feel out of his element when he sees their huts and style of living. What is hardest to accept is something different, namely, the silence, the solitude, the whole venture of prayer.

These new monastic foundations are fruitful and exemplary because they are seeking a poverty that can meet a social problem – not to do social work, but to allow everyone of every class full entry into true contemplative life. In the old days this was offered to lay brothers; but they formed a second division, after the choir-monks. In the new form there is only one rank, anyone is eligible and everyone lives the same sort of life.

I believe a more truly poor embodiment of monasticism has at last been found, especially by the Brothers of the Landes, which is socially better adapted to the countries of the Third World. The Church's monasteries are now open to everyone, no matter how

socially under privileged, so that all can be offered a place that suits them for monastic living.

We may now ask what inspiration monastic life, old and new, can offer to the members of modern apostolic Institutes, and what conclusions we ought to draw. The first, surely, is that God comes first. Poverty is to be found not in prayer but in what constitutes the basis of prayer: that is to say, in the choice which is the root of prayer and action, which is the foundation of the whole of life, where God is truly first. In the gift to God, a minimum of well-being is necessary if one is to carry on this life of prayer and praise and worship. Experience shows that contemplative prayer is not possible where the material social minimum is lacking. Many will not get sufficient nourishment, or will work too hard and be too tired to pray; and others will fail to find true integration between work and prayer and live unbalanced lives. Notice that the witness is a global one; the aspect of poverty is secondary, and material poverty is only there to buttress poverty of spirit. It is never paraded, never sought for its own sake; but contact with these Institutes soon enables one to sense that poverty of spirit is the psychological foundation for a material poverty. Where material poverty is at a discount, the spirit also deteriorates. Material poverty has always been one measure of spiritual fervour in monastic life.

Monastic experience is thus of capital importance in helping us to define one problem of poverty for apostolic Institutes. There is hardly need to stress the disasters that have occurred in the uneasy marriage of the monastic with the apostolic, or the aberrations resulting from too violent a reaction against mediaeval expressions of poverty in modern apostolic life. What is necessary is to take a closer look at the fundamental lines of apostolic poverty as drawn by Ignatius Loyola, the founder of the first apostolic Institute, understood in its strictest sense.

Ignatian poverty is not uniform. It depends primarily on 'indifference': that is, spiritual poise and balance, the liberty of heart necessary for discerning and fulfilling the divine will. This attitude of complete dependence in relation to God controls ignatian poverty. It is only when the religious is 'formed' that he can be expected to have this settled attitude. The goal of jesuit formation is the apostle who is wholly consecrated, dedicated to God and man. He is then put at the disposal of Christ in his Church – directly or indirectly, in the person of the vicar of Christ or the superior of the Institute, in order to be 'sent'. It is in these precise terms that Ignatius defines

the poverty of the society of Jesus. When the religious is sent on his mission, it is for the one who sends (the holy Father or his intermediary, the superior) to decide how he should go and how he should live whilst performing his apostolic task: 'whether he should travel in the manner of a poor man (note the phrase), asking alms and begging his bread for the love of God our Lord, or whether he should live in a different way. What seems better to the holy Father will make for greater devotion and security in the Lord ... The Superior will decide what is best to be done, always taking into account the greater good of our neighbour, and the greater service of God our Lord'.[1]

It is clear from this that apostolic poverty can never be uniform: it must take into account personal characteristics, health and productive capacity. Secondly, its dimensions are determined by the mission – a mission which depends from what is to be given, and the means employed for and in the giving. Such a criterion of poverty is at once extremely flexible and difficult of application. It supposes a complete openness with the superior, from whom each one is charged to accept, along with his mission, the kind of poverty by which he is to live. This is why the society of Jesus has always put such a premium on experimentation in various forms of apostolic living for its young religious, particularly its novices.[2] They must be prepared to accept, as mature religious, any form of poverty which the exigencies of their apostolate may impose: they must be prepared to live like the real poor, or at a rather higher standard, depending on the nature of their apostolic mission and environment. It goes without saying that this attitude towards poverty demands a very high degree of discernment and of personal honesty since one can always invoke apostolic reasons for seeking a greater measure of material comfort.

This poverty is also a poverty of edification – one might almost say 'of witness', except that it is shaped not by witness but by action. We can see how one traditional monastic element is fundamental to this kind of poverty: nothing belongs to us, everything is a gift. But on to this monastic stock is grafted a different growth: the ability constantly to adapt to the apostolic task and situation. And, since the jesuit is often sent to work on his own, it is he himself who must make the judgments and the decisions. His is not a statutory

[1] *Societatis Jesu Constitutiones*, VII, 1, 609–11.

[2] Cf Molinari, Paul, S.J.: 'Formative Activity in the Novitiate', in *Supplement to The Way*, 8 (November, 1969), pp 208–20.

regimented poverty: it is one that must be discovered as he lives and works.

For Ignatius, then, common life is never a call to uniformity; it is never standardized. It is simply the ordinary way of living in the particular environment in which one is working. In ignatian terms, the phrase 'common life' means a life adapted to the milieu of apostolic activity. The milieu itself provides the norm, especially if it is a poor one. Supposing, however, that the environment is comfortable and 'middle-class'. In such a situation, the life of a man vowed to Christ's apostolate will itself preach poverty without giving offence, without ostentation. His manner of life will be such that everyone can reach him without being put off. And Ignatius makes the further point that the apostle ought to be free from financial involvements in order that he might give himself completely to his work.

This idea of apostolic poverty and common life, it may be objected, is altogether too *simpliste* in terms of the economic structures of modern society. It may be possible for an individual priest, or even for a small group, dedicated to the ministry of the word and of the sacraments, to direction and spiritual counselling, to give freely what they have freely received and to ask for nothing. But what of the large establishments still run by religious women: the hospitals, the schools, the clinics and the hostels? It is true that the form of poverty we have been describing, because of its evangelical nature, has up to now been largely closed to religious women in the Church. But it is becoming more and more possible in our day for the latter to engage in a more directly pastoral apostolate – and hence to live this new dimension of apostolic poverty.

We have said that apostolic poverty must be extremely flexible: that it will take into account differences of temperament, talent, health, and the preparation which apostolic works demand. It will be sensitive to different environments, countries and climates. In other words, it puts a premium on formation. This the Church has recently recognized in the Instruction *Renovationis Causam*, where such emphasis is given to formation by experimentation carefully chosen to suit the personality and aptitudes of the young religious. We have here the introduction of the element of personal vocation in the choice of apostolate. Ignatius, like many other founders after him, saw that the choice of apostolic work was not so much a question of organization but of the discernment of a charism: a man is to declare his attraction to a particular work not because he likes

the idea, but because he feels himself spiritually drawn to it, out of that perfect poise which Ignatius calls indifference. In a religious order in which the formed personnel, thanks to their prayer and their discernment of the apostolic needs of time and place, feel themselves drawn towards certain apostolic choices rooted in their desire to be apostles with Jesus Christ and forming a brotherhood in him, standardization of common life would be, to say the least of it, superfluous.

It is only by striving after this apostolic ideal that we will begin to understand and to live apostolic poverty. The time is certainly ripe to make the attempt in apostolic Institutes of religious women. At bottom, the renewal that is being called for is the spiritual preparation of the younger religious who will have the discernment, the courage and the trust gradually to leave go of the old and to embark upon new forms of apostolate which are more directly pastoral, more consonant with apostolic poverty in true brotherhood.

Conclusion

The necessary renewal and adaptation in our time of religious poverty, particularly in apostolic Institutes of religious women, is not a problem which can be solved simply by the Institutes themselves. The answer to it lies with the whole Church; but the existing situation cannot be reversed overnight. It is first necessary to get rid of an imbalance which has bedevilled the apostolate of religious women for many years: the disparity between the increasingly common university degrees in secular subjects and a theological training often limited to a catechism course. Many sisters will need a formation more or less resembling that of priests, if they are to pronounce on moral or theological questions or give counsel on prayer and the spiritual life. The lop-sided interchange between religious and ecclesiastical authorities will be a thing of the past only when we have sisters with doctorates in theology and canon law. In short, the ideal of the adult apostolate calls for something more than new attitudes. It will become a reality only through the long and laborious task of acquiring the professional expertise needed for a more direct and specifically religious apostolate.

Ultimately, poverty must be seen as integral to the faith of religious: as the foundation we need in a shifting world in which the apostle more than all others is ready for change. Given this basic view of life, questions of detail, the problems of law, will slip into place. Without it, a balanced and integrated apostolic religious life

is impossible. But the difficulties which arise from divergent mentalities, from the make-up of our communities and the nature of the milieu in which we live, will not be resolved in a day. Nor will they ever be resolved by human effort alone, since our aim is to be true to the Spirit's gift.

A note on the poverty of secular Institutes

Like every other form of evangelical poverty, the poverty of the secular Institute is essentially on a spiritual plane; but its overtones and nuances are different. The spiritual poverty of the secular Institute is characterized above all by its apparent ineffectualness. It requires very deep spiritual poverty if you are never to see the effect of your presence, and agree to go on living even in a hostile environment without ever letting it be known that you are dedicated to God. It is true that many religious would just as soon not wear religious dress, but it has sometimes been worn with too much show, as though it were a banner of holiness. To enter the ordinary society of men and women, to stay where God has put you, and bear christian witness there chiefly by practising the natural human virtues, without ever allowing yourself any direct proclamation of the gospel, to be indeed the leaven in the dough in what appears to be an apostolic vacuum, which you chose and now are keeping up through a whole lifetime: all this certainly calls for utter poverty of spirit. In this sort of consecrated life lived completely in the world, what is hard is to practise poverty of spirit not only at the personal level but also in the very form of your apostolate: having constantly to deal with social and economic factors which seem to bear witness against you; following a mode of life like anyone else's in your external situation, and even concentrating on money-making (and not only by earning a salary in order to live, but perhaps by running a business or even managing an industrial concern).

It was my good fortune to know a widow who ran a large industry for at least twenty years, dealing with business-people for buying and selling and signing contracts, without these people ever suspecting she was a woman totally dedicated to God. She was held in high esteem by her employees. Her impact will be realized only when she is no longer around. She is eighty now, and has relinquished her business in a most christian fashion. People will say of her: 'She was ahead of her time in social reforms'. In her factory she created a family spirit. She set up a religious group among the women, to be apostles among the other employees; but she could never

have been taken for the 'superior in charge'.

In one and the same secular Institute poverty can take as many social forms as there are members. Two examples I know are of a government minister who receives his full salary and expense allowance; and, belonging to the same Institute, of a working woman who has just enough to live on and whose first care, out of loyalty to evangelical poverty, must be to put away enough for old age, so as not to be a burden on her family. She must save, and might grow miserly; but he has more than enough and could enjoy himself. In fact they share the same spirituality. This confirms what was said about apostolic Institutes. Different forms of material poverty can flow from one and the same spirit, in the service of the same ideal and in the same vocation. Each individual has a personal responsibility and must, in consultation with authorities who know the details of his or her life, draw up a personal budget, that will cover such things as social and family expenses, charity, even posthumous charity, since a person earning a fair amount cannot abdicate this duty. And if you should have a business, then you have a capital investment which has to grow, and you must administer your capital.

Here is a quite different notion of poverty. One might ask, Is such a person outwardly poor? He is not, if you think of poverty as indigence, or as external witness. But even where there ought to be external signs of poverty, it will never in fact be a witness unless it testifies to a deep, evangelical life, firmly anchored in God, a filial relationship with and in Jesus Christ, a love open to all and at the disposition of all.