

THE APOSTOLIC RELIGIOUS WOMAN AND HER SPIRITUALITY

By PAUL MOLINARI

THE SPIRITUALITY of the apostolic religious woman, like that of her male counterpart, derives from her consecration for mission. It consists essentially in her relationship with the Lord and with those to whom he sends her that she may participate in the prolongation of his mission in the world. Obviously, therefore, hers is not the spirituality of the hermitage or of the cloister. It supposes the freedom necessary to carry out her mission. In spite of this fact, however, we know that, historically, the conditions of life proper to apostolic religious have usually been denied to religious women. Instead, their lives have often been circumscribed by adverse socio-historical conditions.

Fortunately, the situation is changing. The Church herself, conscious of what has happened in the past, has urged us all to go back to the spirit of our founders and to discover anew the charisms of our respective families. In every case, the original source of inspiration was the holy Spirit. Although several of these foundresses became aware of the similarity of their own spiritual experiences, insights and projects to those of Ignatius of Loyola, and frequently sought assistance among his sons, it would be false to think that they all drew their inspiration from him.

The genuine ignatian spirituality certainly favours an open and adaptable conception of the activity and style of life for apostolic religious women. If, nevertheless, many restrictions developed in women's congregations, this was, in general, due to external circumstances and in particular to the social position of women in the past. Today it is more and more widely recognized in principle and often even in practice that the reason, or the excuse, for this anomaly of the messenger sent into the world but forbidden to go there, no longer exists.

Though further improvements remain possible and desirable, apostolic religious women of our times enjoy a freedom for the

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Kingdom which too many of their spiritual ancestors, saints among them, never possessed. Such unprecedented opportunities and the incredible speed of social change present a situation so complex that it is sometimes difficult for today's religious women to realize how illimitable their present possibilities are. Two features of the new situation seem to me especially worth mentioning.

First, the communication of the christian vision is necessarily conditioned by the possibilities for communication in general, and by the *Zeitgeist* which affects ourselves and our contemporaries. What is the promise of ours? Rabbi Tanenbaum has some interesting comments to make on that subject:

The ideals and values of judaism and christianity with regard to God, man, nature, society, and history are open to the possibility of application and translation into actual human experience more than at any time in historic memory. This moment in history . . . can in truth therefore be more accurately described as 'pre-judeo-christian' rather than 'post-judeo-christian'.¹

Quite simply, the availability of the human family for evangelization is at a high-point.

Secondly, the heart of the christian vision, the fact of an infinitely loving God – a God who regards his children with paternal tenderness and who has proved that tenderness by the gift of his Son – has a natural appeal to the sharpest sensitivities of modern men. The human race is tending more and more, in spite of so many aberrations, to reflect the tenderness of God. We detest war; we try to eliminate violence, to abolish capital punishment, to alleviate every form of human suffering. The popular idol is not the soldier or the emperor, or the savant. It is the humanitarian, the person who shows his love and concern for other persons, like Dag Hammarskjöld or Mother Teresa.

In addition to the facility in communication and the potentially sympathetic *Zeitgeist*, sisters enter the apostolate of today with some important advantages specific to themselves. By and large they are certainly better educated than any other large group of religious women in history, and although they are still, at times, limited in their activities, they enjoy, in general, more freedom of action.

Why then the depressing statistics? Why, in spite of so much good

¹ Tanenbaum, Rabbi Marc H.: Commencement Address, St. Louis University, June 5, 1971.

will, such high-level ability, such hard work, do so many sisters feel they are accomplishing so little of real importance? With the temerity of an outsider who is lovingly concerned and trustingly confident, I submit that two factors in this situation, distinct but inter-related, are of major importance.

The first factor

The first of these derives, essentially, from a theological trend which is based on a misinterpretation of chapter v of *Lumen Gentium*. The trend itself represents a reaction which is understandable, in psychological terms, against the impression which once prevailed in some quarters that religious were a caste set apart, and that christian sanctity was practically accessible only to them. But the reaction has gone so far as to ignore one of the fundamental elements of life in any living organic entity such as the Church. I refer to the variety of modalities in which the one life is shared and lived out by its members, a variety which is willed by the Giver of life and is intended to enhance the vitality of the entire organism. This is the principle that St Paul explains so vividly where he speaks about the unity of the Church as the mystical body of Christ and the diversity of functions and roles which are mutually complementary. This diversity has as its origin the pluriform action of the Spirit, which distributes his gifts to individuals according to his will in view of the whole body.²

In effect, this means that each of us, while accepting the limitations intrinsic to human nature, and understanding that no one can live at the same time all the possible modalities for human existence, must humbly discern what orientation and therefore function the holy Spirit assigns to him for the sake of the whole body. One who accepts this call as a response to God will find his own fulfilment by rendering to the whole body the living contribution that he alone can give.

This is why the Council emphasizes so strongly the truth that all christians are called to sanctity. At the same time, however, it specifies accurately that this union with Christ, which is sanctity, must be lived out by each christian 'according to the measure of the giving of Christ':³ that is, according to the specific call of each one. It is because of the critical importance of this point that one of the earlier drafts of the Constitution on the Church, which stated that

² Cf I Cor 12.

³ Eph 4, 7.

'all christians are called to one *and the same* holiness', was deliberately corrected by the Council. The adjective *same* was deleted as a modifier for 'holiness', and was replaced by the phrase, 'according to the gifts and the duties which are proper to each one'.⁴ The sad fact is that among many educated catholic groups this fundamental teaching of the Council is misunderstood even to this day. The situation is not difficult to understand when we consider that, in some of the translations most widely used, the text has never been modified in accordance with this important amendment made by the Council before final approval of the dogmatic constitution. The consequence is widespread confusion. Many people fail to realize that 'christian life' does not exist in the abstract, but only in the concrete existential order of the life where each person has his own modality to live out, so that he may give to Christ and others what he alone can give. This is certainly one of the elements of the so-called identity crisis which unfortunately afflicts so many generous sisters. They can no longer perceive the essence of that form of life which, grounded on a specific call of God, leads to a radical living out of the gospel in consecrated virginity for the sake of the Kingdom: a life in which one hands over one's entire self to the Person of Jesus Christ and in him to others, sharing his life and mission.

The second factor

The second source of the crisis is a logical consequence of the first, even though in the psychological order the sequence may be reversed. In any case, the second is the more serious because of its effect in the existential order. I have the impression, rightly or wrongly, that many religious, though they have relatively great external freedom, are not always free within themselves, because the essential vision that should lead them to this inner freedom has been blurred. In fact, like other human beings, religious can attain inner freedom only through self-transcendence. Ordinary human beings like ourselves, as Lonergan points out, can seriously and perseveringly transcend themselves only

when they fall in love. Then their whole being becomes being-in-love. Such being-in-love has its antecedents, its causes, its conditions, its occasions. But once it has occurred and as long as it lasts, it takes over. It becomes the first principle. From it flow one's desires and fears,

⁴ *Lumen Gentium*, 41.

one's joys and sorrows, one's discernment of values, one's vision of possibilities, one's decisions and deeds.⁵

Once a religious vocation was widely understood as a falling in love. Most of the religious I know entered because they did believe themselves to be in love. Today many religious believe that Vatican II has made that concept untenable: the emphasis on the universal call to holiness has finally laid to rest the old-fashioned 'romantic' notion of a personal call to special intimacy with the Lord. This attitude is connected in their minds with a rejection of the application of the bridal imagery in scripture to the relationship between the Lord and the individual christian as distinct from the Church itself. It is true that the primary reference in these passages is to the Church; but one must not forget that we, as persons, are the Church, and that God, who is a person, has a personal relationship with each one of us. Like any personal relationship it has, in every case, modalities which are unique, even within the fundamental patterns determined by the form of life that God has chosen for us.

Only where there is this clear sense of relationship to define identity in religious life, is it possible to fall in love with the Lord, and thus to attain the inner freedom and vitality essential for effective mission.

Father Lonergan's remark was made in the context of the jesuit renewal, not in a retreat for school-girls. His observation points to the very centre of our being, the meaning of our life and apostolate. It defines, explains and sustains us. There is no equally good reason for us to discuss anything else. Nor is his approach simply poetic. It is grounded on the reality of the religious life in which the initiative rests always with God. The 'falling in love', therefore, can only occur as a response to a divine action by which God touches the hearts of men and women and produces in them a profound nostalgia, a compelling need and an ardent desire for him.

In fact, as I have repeatedly tried to express this very concept, by touching the heart in this way, God invites. If one responds by looking for him, this search soon develops into an attitude of loving attention, and by living in this attitude, an interior disposition of entire dependence on the Beloved is developed. A gift and a treasure is then communicated – one which is multiplied in every attempt

⁵ Lonergan, Bernard: 'The Response of the Jesuit, as Priest and Apostle, in the Modern World', in *Studies in the Spirituality of the Jesuits*, vol. II, no. 3 (September, 1970), pp 94-95.

to share it with everyone who is willing to be loved. To respond to this invitation of Christ means to follow the movement of a love which allows him to continue his intimate action, through which he establishes a very deep bond. There is then a new and affective knowledge of the other, the knowledge of the heart, which confers a special sensitivity: the ability to perceive the slightest desires, thoughts and intentions of the Beloved, to be aware of him in every circumstance of life, and, especially, in every human person. Furthermore, it compels the one who is in love to lose himself in the Beloved, and thus to think, to act, to behave as he does: and this, not as the result of a voluntaristic effort, but as the natural outcome of that deep bond of affection which urges those who are in love to share the life of the Beloved.⁶

This is what Father Lonergan describes in the wider context of the different modalities of human affection and the responses given to various calls:

Being-in-love is of different kinds. There is the love of intimacy, of husband and wife, of parents and children. There is the love of one's fellow man with its fruit in the achievement of human welfare. There is the love of God with one's whole heart and whole soul, with all one's mind and all one's strength (Mk 12, 30). It is God's love flooding our hearts through the holy Spirit given to us (Rom 5, 5). It is grounded on the conviction of Saint Paul that '... there is nothing in death or life, in the realm of spirits or of superhuman powers, in the world as it is or the world as it shall be, in the forces of the universe – nothing in all creation that can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord' (Rom 8, 38–39).⁷

Is this not what so many people, whose hearts have been touched by the Lord, have experienced? Is it not what the Song of Songs expresses so vividly? Is it not what John of the Cross has beautifully depicted in his *Spiritual Canticle* and *The Living Flame*?

Is this not what St Ignatius, much more concisely, but not less forcefully, expressed in his *Spiritual Exercises*? In the Contemplation for Obtaining Love, he states very clearly: 'Love consists in a reciprocal interchange, the lover handing over and sharing with the beloved his possessions, his gifts and capacities and vice-versa'.⁸ These words are taken from the passage which is regarded as expressing the epitome of ignatian spirituality. They help us to

⁶ Cf Molinari, Paul: 'The Following of Christ in the Teaching of Vatican II', in *Supplement to the Way*, 4 (1967), p 102.

⁷ Lonergan, *op. cit.*, p 95.

⁸ Exx 231.

understand why, from the experience of being loved by God, not only in spite of our sins, but rather because of our misery, through the colloquy with Christ crucified, Ignatius accompanies the retreatant, as, helping him to listen to Christ's call, he leads him to become aware of the loving invitation of the Lord and Master: an invitation which, once perceived, will result in a falling-in-love. The retreatant will then feel the need of making a complete oblation of self so as to go out of himself, in order to be united with the Lord, so as to be where the master is, so as to share all that is his.

The better to imitate Christ our Lord, and to become actually more like him, I desire and choose rather poverty with Christ poor than riches; contempt with Christ contemned, than honours; and I desire to be esteemed as useless and foolish for Christ's sake, who was first held to be such, than to be accounted wise and prudent in this world.⁹

It is in this total oblation of self, expressed in their profession, that apostolic religious women centre all their love on Christ our redeemer; and, in the fulness of this love, pledge to follow him radically and totally in his salvific mission. When this deeply personal encounter has taken place, which can occur only on God's initiative, there is a constantly increasing need for deeper communion.

The fulfilment that is being in love with God is not the product of our knowledge and choice. It is God's gift. Like all being in love, as distinct from particular acts of loving, it is a first principle. So, far from resulting from our knowledge and choice, it dismantles and abolishes the horizon in which our knowing and choosing went on, and it sets up a new horizon in which the love of God transcends our values, and the eyes of that love transform our knowing. Though not yet the product of our knowing and choosing, it is not unconscious. On the contrary, it is the harvest of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, kindness, goodness, fidelity, gentleness, and self-control (Gal 5, 22).¹⁰

This 'being-in-love' creates, for the apostolic religious woman, a constantly increasing need to come closer to the One who has called her to follow him and to be his in the love of his people. Her intense desire to know him more intimately is not a mere craving for theoretical knowledge, but a yearning for deep and loving communion; she desires the knowledge of the heart, the kind that Paul calls 'the surpassing knowledge of Jesus Christ', and this quite regardless of the degree of any merely human learning. It is a gift

⁹ Exx 167.

¹⁰ Lonergan, *loc. cit.*

that only God can give; which is why Paul prays to the Father for his beloved Christians at Ephesus:

Out of his infinite glory, may he give you the power through his Spirit for your hidden self to grow strong, so that Christ may live in your hearts through faith, and then, planted in love and built on love, you will with all the saints have strength to grasp the breadth and length, the height and the depth; until, knowing the love of Christ, which is beyond all knowledge, you are filled with the utter fullness of God.¹¹

Ignatius, following the same path and guided by similar spiritual insights, urges those who have been touched by God to beg humbly and ardently for 'a deeply felt interior knowledge of Jesus Christ who for my love has become man, so that I may the more love him and follow him'.¹² Ignatius is conscious that just as God is the one who has taken the initiative in calling, so he alone is the one who can bring about what he intends to accomplish by his choice. Ignatius knows that the call which makes one fall in love is, by its nature, a progressive, dynamic and constantly renewed action of God. Men and women need to be aware of it, so that, on their part, they can follow God's movement, collaborating with him in humble and insistent prayer, like a poor beggar, that they may receive what God himself makes them long to receive.

This simple prayer which Ignatius wishes the retreatant to repeat over and over again, to the point of its becoming like the weaving thread of every contemplation of the mysteries of our Lord's life, is of paramount importance in the spirituality of a woman who has been called to share his life and mission: that is, of an apostolic religious.

The love of God and the genius of woman

It is this very attitude, and the deep inter-personal relationship which it engenders, that brings about a gradual transformation within the woman who has fallen in love. As with any powerful affection, there is the constant seeking of the Beloved, so that in frequent contact, profoundly silent, the union grows. With it develops the desire to share his life. The response given to God's call, and the affective bond nourished in contemplation, unite her ever more to himself. This love for his person increases her familiarity with all that is his. She is more and more impressed with the

¹¹ Eph 3, 16-19.

¹² Exx 104.

smallest details of his life, his thought, his mode of being, his sensitive awareness of every human person. Really to love Christ is to love his form of life, to accept his view of things, to grow in comprehension of his way of loving. She comes to understand the criteria of his mission, to be pulled gradually out of herself to become the Other, who is Christ. She tries to pour out on him, and on all the human-kind beloved of God, the riches of her woman's heart. In Father Lonergan's words:

Being in love with God, as experienced, is being in love in an unrestricted fashion. All love is self-surrender, but being in love with God is being in love without limits or qualifications or conditions or reservations. It is with one's whole heart and whole soul and all one's mind and all one's strength. Just as a total openness to all questioning is our capacity for self-transcendence, so too an unrestricted being in love is the proper fulfilment of that capacity.

Because that love is the proper fulfilment of our capacity, fulfilment brings a deep-set joy that can remain despite humiliation, privation, pain, betrayal, desertion. Again, that fulfilment bears fruit in acts of love for one's neighbour, a love that strives mightily to bring about the kingdom of God on this earth.¹³

The religious woman who understands this will see that she must withhold nothing, but allow her whole self to be unmasked, to live in the joy of this light, to accept the exacting obligations to other persons which result from travelling a new road, to say 'yes' to the adventure of this love and to the risks which result from its growing stronger at every turn, to the work of being possessed by this love and abandoning herself to it, led to a sharing constantly more profound in his life, his ways, his views, yet ever restless with the need of sharing with others what he has shared with her. She is then introduced to a life of involvement with him for the service of others such as she has never dared to hope for.¹⁴

In fact this complete abandonment of herself to God enables him to flood her mind and heart, her whole being, enables God to take over, to make her totally his, possessed by the God who actually lives in her heart. Her way of thinking and loving is no longer her own; it is God's. 'It is no longer I but Christ who lives in me'.¹⁵ She cannot look at any man or woman or child with the eyes of

¹³ Lonergan, *op. cit.*, p 95.

¹⁴ Cf Molinari, P.: 'Teaching How to Respond to God in Faith', in *Faith and religious life, Donum Dei* (The Canadian Religious Conference, Ottawa, 1971), pp 37-54.

¹⁵ Gal, 2, 20.

human prejudice, but only with the penetration of Christ's universal love, which is yet always personal and particular.

This 'madness for the pagans and scandal for the Jews'¹⁶ is not accepted with merely passive serenity. It becomes the source of a new and indescribable joy, the joy that Christ himself has foretold would belong to his followers, if they really lived in union with him and shared his ways: the ways that he, in his wisdom and love, elected when he became man for love of man, the ways which typify his life and mission and must be shared by those who are called to live a prolongation of them.

'Happy are you when people hate you, drive you, abuse you, denounce your name as criminal, on account of the Son of Man. Rejoice when that day comes and dance for joy!'¹⁷ Why all this? Because of deep unitive love: 'It is enough for the disciple that he should be like his teacher'.¹⁸

This is the unitive love that Ignatius envisages (and with him all the other saintly men and women who have lived in this light) as the obvious outcome of the process of growing in love which is typical of an apostle of Christ. The well-known, and yet not always well-understood, third degree of humility is precisely the experience of this intimate union with the Saviour which, on account of the intensity of her affective relationship with him, makes the really apostolic religious woman desire to imitate Christ our Lord at any cost.¹⁹ Our Lord accepted self-despoilment, poverty and sufferings simply because he was and is divinely in love with men: the mystery of the cross is a mystery only to those who do not know what love is. In fact, it is the visible manifestation of the intensity of God's love for men, of his apostolic love. 'He loved them until the end'.²⁰ His mission, because it is entirely a mission of love, led him to lay down his life for us. His contemplative love and his sacrificial action constitute but one glorious reality, and so it is for those whom he calls to be especially his for the continuation of his life and mission on earth. This form of consecrated life requires a harmonious fusion of contemplation and action, with a genuine compenetration of these two elements which are meant to make up the one reality of apostolic religious life.

The true 'being in love with God', the form of affective bond with Christ of which we speak, does not lead the apostolic woman religious to a losing of herself in a type of abstract contemplation

¹⁶ 1 Cor 1, 23.

¹⁸ Mt 10, 25.

¹⁷ Lk 6, 22-23; cf Mt 10, 17-20.

¹⁹ Exx 167.

²⁰ Jn 13, 1.

which pulls her away from the world and detaches her from people. On the contrary, it is a unitive love and a contemplation which by its own nature leads ever more deeply into the mystery of the mission of Christ, who came among men, lived in their midst, and, while remaining constantly united to the Father, spent himself for them precisely in order to do what was pleasing to the Father. This is the life apostolic religious are called to prolong. Apostolic religious life, therefore, is not only a matter of living in a relationship of love with him or simply of following his example. It is a life in which, because of Christ's living presence and his constant action in her and her response to it, she becomes more and more aware not only of her belonging to him but even of her being plunged in Christ, of his being in her and of her being in him, and therefore of living and acting in and with him.

When she sees all this in its reality, which means in a deep spiritual vision of faith existentially experienced, she can readily understand the content of the ignatian Contemplation for Obtaining Love. By inviting her to contemplate God's goodness in giving her all things so lavishly, God's loving labour in all the things with which he provides her,²¹ and most especially in her own self, Ignatius introduces her to an interior understanding of what it really means to be a contemplative in action, and therefore to the very heart of apostolic religious life. It is because God is in love with her that he contemplates her with tender affection and, by virtue of this affection, he acts and labours for her. While he performs this 'labour', the conscious bond of affection that unites him to her is not interrupted by his action. On the contrary it is, so to speak, strengthened, because love is proved by deeds.²² So it should be for her, in response to his love and in union with him who is actively present in her. Knowing that she is the subject of his love, and experiencing the joy of this knowledge, she will certainly fall in love with him. She will live by that affective bond which not only brings about a new and more intimate kind of knowledge of God, but urges her to act lovingly for him and, with him, for all who are his.

The compulsion to share

Being united with him in heart, and therefore with a kind of conscious awareness of his nearness, she will experience a movement towards others and all created things. Having been caught up in Christ's love so that every person with whom she comes in contact

²¹ Exx 236.

²² Exx 230.

may feel his presence in her, she in her turn will discover in every human person the active and loving presence of the Lord. In fact it is only when, on account of a deep affective union with him, she sees with Christ's eyes, that it is really possible for her to find God in all things – not only in the beauty and splendour of creation, which obviously speaks of the Omnipotent; not only in the eyes of a child, which speak of the purity, simplicity and loving concern of the Father in heaven; not only in the affection of a brother and sister, in the intimacy of a husband and wife – which all speak of the goodness of the Source of all love; but also in those human events which do not seem to have an explanation, and most especially in the 'distressing disguise' (Mother Teresa's phrase for describing the presence of the Lord in the human being who has been made repulsive by the neglect of his fellows).

To the extent that the apostolic religious is one with Christ and in him with the Father, she will see the needs of men as God alone sees them. She will have an inner understanding of the realities of human life, with insights that no human means nor efforts can provide.

And yet she will never despise these efforts. She will see the world of nature in all its beauty and the world of men in all its fascinating complexity, in the context of a universe held together by the glowing reality of the cosmic Christ, who also finds in us 'his homeliest home and his endless dwelling'.²³ She will revere everything made by his Father, and treasure every human person redeemed by him to whom her whole being belongs. She will rejoice with every step of human progress and do all she can to promote and encourage it.

Such a spirituality, authentically lived, ought to lead to an intense awareness of the meaning of human personality and a genuine sympathy with every man and woman and child she encounters. In practice, of course, her awareness of persons, and even her awareness of the Lord himself, is limited not only by her always incomplete spiritual development but also by her simple human incapacity to perceive more than a very minute fraction of present reality at any one time. But given these inevitable consequences of the human condition, it is still possible for her to become more and more aware of such human persons as she can encounter, and to see them in the context of their relationships, most especially their relationship with him who, as he wishes to be all-in-all to her, wishes also to be all-in-all to the other. It is essential for her not to see anyone

²³ *Julian of Norwich*, Longer Version, Ch. 67.

merely in relation to herself, in terms of whether they do or do not like and appreciate her, in terms of whether contact with them is likely to prove professionally helpful to her etc. In other words, she cannot forget that every person is always an end in himself, the object of Christ's love, and, as such, deserving of whatever reverent love it is possible for her to give.

In the real life which she daily lives, however, complexities abound. So often she must make difficult choices. Shall she give this hour to A or to B? Should her congregation serve those who are materially, mentally or spiritually poor? Or should they try to prepare leaders who will ultimately serve all these others and so multiply their mission? Or, in these days of much volunteering, whom should she ask personally to serve? None of these questions can be answered in the abstract. They are all matters for spiritual discernment. But the quality of the discernment will always depend on the totality of individual and corporate commitment to the Lord, and on the awareness of the absolute sense in which he identifies himself to her or to them in the person of the other.

Historically, the saints who loved the Lord most ardently were those who gave themselves to men most generously and with an insight into their real needs that others lacked, even in the case of those who were better equipped from the point of view of human information, psychological or social preparation. This is due to the fact that they shared Christ's vision and understanding of men, and, above all, his efficacious love for them. In many cases their strongest apostolic drive was towards the Lord in the persons of the most abjectly poor, the most repulsively ill, or even the most morally reprehensible.

The tendency one sometimes meets, to set the personal love for the Lord and the joy in that love, designated verticalism, over against the loving service of his people, designated horizontalism, has no basis in theology, in the lives of the saints, or in the existential realities of our time. A piety without any social dimension is simply an illusion, and social concern which does not recognize the Lord as the source of all love is not in itself christian, though it may well reflect unconsciously the influence of the centuries of christian impact on our whole culture.

The massive efforts of the modern world to help those who are in any special way unfortunate, inadequate as it certainly is in terms of the christian imperative, surely deserves the support of the apostolic woman religious, even though in some of those who strive

most heroically to relieve or prevent human suffering, the christian influence does not operate at the conscious level. What is difficult to understand is that this concern should ever fail to operate in those who believe they love the Lord whose words are so clear: 'When I was hungry . . . Whatsoever you do . . .'²⁴

The religious, and, because of women's special power to love, particularly the sister, should surely be the epitome of mercy and kindness and preoccupation with the other. There has never been a self-centred saint, a cold, indifferent saint, a lover of the Lord who was not, at the same time and in the same motion, a lover of men.

And yet this tenderness, so normal in any woman, and so especially appropriate in the apostolic religious woman, can be threatened by factors far less important in themselves. It used to be threatened by a too inhuman understanding of chastity, which made many feel obliged to treat everyone with a formality and coldness which were widely resented. Yet in congregations which have outgrown this particular aberration, it is sometimes still threatened. Professionalism, if it becomes a sister's strongest motivation, can effectively chill her love of God and man alike, in favour of the love of her own achievements. The misplaced energy that once went into the effort to develop a perfect 'religious' walk, tone of voice etc., can be even more perilously misplaced if the supreme goal of a sister's life is to be a great writer, or a brilliant administrator, or a surpassingly skilful teacher. True professionalism is, of course, preoccupied with the persons to be served, and is simply an expression of charity and justice. It is a wholly proper expression of a life given to the Lord for the service of his people, when the emphasis is on the Lord and the people and not on the fulfilment, in the sense of narcissistic satisfaction, of the religious professional.

If the apostolic woman belongs wholly to the Lord, 'the joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted' will be the joys and the hopes and the griefs of his follower. Nothing genuinely human will fail to raise an echo in her heart. And this echo will not resound in vain.

It will be God, by granting a share in his own vision of the world, of its needs, of its anxieties, who will enable the apostolic religious woman, moved with pity and compassion, to go forth and spend herself for others in union with the Good Samaritan who is Christ.

²⁴ Mt 25, 35-40.