

Extracts from “Poverty, Celibacy, and Obedience – a radical option for life” by Diarmuid O’Murchu.

Published by “The Crossroad Publishing Company”, 370 Lexington Avenue, New York, NY 10017

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“Religious life belongs to God and to people. It arises from those deep spiritual yearnings of the human heart as people strive to articulate, explicate, and negotiate their key values. The values themselves do not change from one age to the next; in a sense they are permanent and enduring. How we enculturate those values, how we translate them into personal, interpersonal, social, and political action is a human dynamic from within which people invent “liminal movements” to assist them in grounding and living out their God-given value orientation. A great deal of this process happens subconsciously; we are not consciously aware of what we are doing, because other forces –divine, cosmic, and planetary- are all involved in this process.”

“The major crisis facing the vowed life today is that it has largely lost touch with its capacity to serve in a liminal capacity. It has been heavily domesticated and excessively institutionalised, not merely in religious (ecclesiastical) terms but also because it has over identified with the conventional behaviours of secular life. Religious tend to work and minister in institutions and systems sponsored by state or church, sometimes by both. Such involvement seriously hinders the ability to act in a liminal and prophetic way. The liminality is not threatened. The people will ensure that there will always be liminal places and liminal people to shake up our staid institutions. Sadly, religious life no longer seems capable of responding to this need, and therefore we detect the liminal witness surfacing in a whole range of alternative movements within and outside religious contexts. Many of the contemporary ecological and feminist movements serve the liminal calling in a truly authentic way. They name, bravely and subversively, the sins of oppression in this age and go beyond that to proffer alternative ways of living, for now and for the future. Liminality is alive and thriving, but for the greater part outside and not within the monastic and religious life we know today.”

“For contemporary religious the call of our time may be to place our resources (personal and congregational) more explicitly at the service of those movements that operate at the liminal cutting-edge in today’s world. In many of our aging orders and congregations we ourselves may not feel able to assume the liminal work, but hopefully we can contribute to its unfolding through solidarity in prayer, thought, or supportive action.”

“Consecrated celibacy in all the religious traditions is based on a spurious understanding of human sexuality, one I suggest that is fundamentally violent to both God and its people. Sexuality is portrayed as belonging to the unruly passions and instincts which distract from the things of God. Sexuality is about pleasure and joy,

which strangely we find unable to attribute to God and to God's creativity in the world."

"Since the unfolding spiritual vision was very much the product of men and male thought patterns, it is not surprising that the female body and female sexuality became the primary and greatest casualty of this violent spirituality. Ironically, women, despite all their deficiencies, were deemed to be capable of strong sexual allurements, and their sexuality, more so than that of men, was deemed to be particularly unruly. The consequences are all too obvious even in the contemporary world. And the final aspect of this strange quagmire is the body of the earth itself that, too, was to be shunned and spurned. Those called to the vowed celibate life were to flee the world, abandon it, and hate it as much as possible. The world, the flesh, and the devil all belonged to the one despicable package. Only a radical denial of all three, especially in the sexual realm, could guarantee entrance into life eternal."

"It is from this depth that we begin to reclaim our real story as a psychosexual species, endowed with the erotic propensity to relate in love and justice, not merely with other humans, but with all those creatures who populate our world, and with the earth itself as the cosmic womb of erotic possibility."

"As creative people, called to discipleship with a co-creative God, we need to grapple further with the renaming of this vow. One suggested formula, a "vow for participation," has much to commend it. But my personal preference in the context of the present work is that of a vow for mutual sustainability. In contemporary usage, "sustainability" encapsulates several important concepts that challenge the violence we are seeking to outgrow. Closely related to the word "sustenance", it reminds us that everything in life is gift given for nourishment and therefore not intended to be usurped or destroyed destructively. To sustain something in being requires renewed effort and devoted love, not the competitive or antagonistic behaviours that seek to undermine and exploit another. As used in ecological discourse over the past twenty years, "sustainability" highlights the complementary relationship of growth and the environment (see Burrows, Mayne, and Newbury 1991). A strategy which seeks the maximum output does not necessarily realize the optimum potential. Everything in creation belongs to a context and needs to be used in a caring and responsible way within the evolving nature of the context in which it is given. In the old understanding of the vow of poverty ownership of goods belonged to the community rather than to the individual. This often led to widespread abuse and a great deal of irresponsible evasiveness. The notion of sustainability requires each and all of us to reclaim a real ownership of the goods entrusted to our care. The word "ownership" has a paradoxical ring to it. It oscillates between the possessiveness that all too quickly becomes a ferocious consumerist greed and our human temporality which time and again reminds us that we really own nothing. However, as we strive to adopt a non-violent way of living, especially in our relation to the goods of creation, a spirituality of nonpossessive owning becomes quite an engaging vision."

"Our often felt human alienation or sense of being people in exile is much more about our estranged relationship from creation rather than from God. Our inherited tradition of being masters, or even stewards acting on behalf of an absent landlord, has left us bewildered and confused in our relationship to the world around us. We suffer from a debilitating sense of cosmic homelessness. Reclaiming the vow for

mutual sustainability is very much about coming home to ourselves as planetary-cosmic creatures who owe everything we are and everything we have to the creation out of which we have evolved. The earth is not an object given for our sustenance, or even for our delectation and delight. No, it is the primordial womb, which under God begets everything that exists, including ourselves. Our vocation to mutual sustainability is about learning afresh what it means to be at home where we really belong and to be at home creatively with all those others with whom we share the earth as home.”

“The gross abuse of the planet’s resources arises primarily from a debilitating ignorance about the meaning of creation and our human role within it. Apart entirely from spiritual considerations, our patriarchal dominance of the earth, along with the economics and politics that foster that dominance, is doomed to ultimate catastrophe. We are engulfed in a dark and frightening ignorance. Unless wise people are forthcoming, the future looks perilous indeed. Unearthing that wisdom and translating it into an engaging narrative for our time is a primary challenge for those committed to the vow for mutual sustainability.”

“The dualism of the sacred and the secular violently undermines our potential to work for justice. The injustices that underpin so much barbarity and suffering in the world are essentially political and socio-economic in nature and can be confronted only from within a socio-political context. Church prohibitions on religious inhibit many from more direct involvement in those political processes that could begin to confront the sinful injustices in the contexts where they really belong and through modes of engagement that would highlight the need for equity and equality in the world. We also need to outgrow the restrictive religious connotations of justice-ministry. Justice is not just a notion that belongs to church or formal religion’ it is a critical dimension of what makes relationships – at every level – sustainable or destructive. Today we use terms like “eco-justice” (Hessel 1996) or “geo-justice” (Conlon 1990) to describe the essential connection between the personal and the ecological, the spiritual and the earthly, aspects of our call to be justice-makers.”

“All the major religions are notoriously naïve and ignorant about the systemic/institutional nature of sin and suffering in the world. The root cause of much injustice is not the unjust deeds done by individual people, but oppressive social and institutional forces that compel people into acting immorally and even oppressively of each other. In many parts of our world, governments themselves are the most corrupt and corrupting of influences. And the mainstream religions are not without their internalised oppressions, often fostering the values and strategies of war, sexism, exclusion, and patriarchal domination.”

“From the liminal perspective of the vow for mutual sustainability, anthropocentrism is the most deadly sin of our age. It is the arrogance and self-inflation whereby humans set themselves up as masters of creation and proceed to lord it over other species, over nature, and, inadvertently, over God too. It is the compulsive masculine urge that seeks to divide and conquer everything it encounters, vividly and barbarously expressed in the oft-quoted words of Francis Bacon: “We must keep torturing nature ‘til she reveals her last secrets to us”.”

“It’s a muddled and confusing landscape made all the more convoluted by the superficial theology of the religious life that has prevailed ever since the Council of Trent, when the vowed life effectively became an adjunct of the clericalized church. Not until we reclaim our liminal identity in a more explicit and vociferous way will we religious be able to engage with the major questions of meaning that our world invites us to address in this age – and in every age.”

“The liminal vocation, with its call to mutual collaboration, is about a global shift in consciousness. It is the new way of seeing and perceiving that will beget new action. Let’s direct our energy to where it really matters; let’s direct our resources to where they’ll make a real difference. Let’s reclaim the liminal horizon that points us to exciting possibilities filled with the hope and promise of a new tomorrow.”

“The liminal witness, therefore, centers on relationships more than on anything else. The vowed life is about plumbing the depths of our interconnectedness as a cosmic, planetary, and personal species. Our primary vocation is global and universal and should never be subjugated to the norms or laws of any one political or religious system. Our accountability is to the entire people of the earth, and this too has cosmic and planetary dimensions. Confining the vowed life to religious enclaves is an act of blasphemy. It flies in the face of our relational (Trinitarian) God who missions us to the creative fringes where our call is to keep pushing and transforming the boundaries that undermine authentic relationships. No realm of life is beyond our concern. We do not have to be experts in everything or, indeed, in anything. The wisdom we witness to is a wisdom of the heart, and while it does require the human tasks of learning, reflecting, and sharing, ultimately it belongs to the unlimited giftedness of the wise and wonderful God who calls us into being in the first place. For many religious today, this may seem a daunting and impossible undertaking. Breaking through the domestication of the vowed life over several centuries – indeed five millennia if we include the experience of the other major religions – will not be an easy task. Perhaps we can each begin by trying to break through the sacred vs., secular dualism in which many of us are spiritually and humanly trapped. Can we reclaim in all its fullness the invitation to be an incarnational people called to follow the global Christ of the Basileia? And we can strive to break out of the narrow confines of that spirituality that focused on individual salvation and allow our hearts to be touched by the God of unconditional love who unceasingly sends us to our brothers and sisters at the heart of creation? The whole world is held in the embrace of the God of unconditional love. We, too, as co-creators with that creative God must hold our world – totally and lovingly. Only a vision as large and as deep as this can help to heal the scars of our violent destructibility. Only in working for right relationships, characterized by love, justice, peace, and liberation, can we undermine the violence of separation and division which, even today, is far too prevalent across our suffering earth.”

Extracts from “Proclaim Jubilee – a spirituality for the twenty-first century” by Maria Harris
Published by Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, Kentucky.
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“The demand is liberation; the emphasis is connectedness; the corrective is suffering; the power is imagination; and the vocation is tikkun olam - the repair of the world.”

“The liberation sought by the poor is not only religious but political and economic.”

“The Rio Earth Summit of the early nineties, a gathering of persons from around the world concerned with environmental issues, and countless environmental experts who are speaking today assure us that the global ecosystem includes all of us, and if no one goes, we all go.”

“One hundred and fifty years later, biblical scholar George Tinker points to similar attitudes in describing how Native Americans read the Bible today and, in a reflection closely related to Jubilee’s teaching on fallow land, comments that his people’s spiritual insights also begin with their relation to creation and the earth.”

“The spiritual presupposition of this counsel is that humans stand in a relation of reciprocity with the world and that like them, all of the world is instinct with spirit and presence, the numinous and the sacred. As such, it must be treated with reverence and respect.”

“We are mysteriously connected to the universe, we are mirrored in it, just as the entire evolution of the universe is mirrored in us.”

“The debts that should draw our attention, however (especially if we are in the 20 percent of the world’s peoples who hold 83 percent of its wealth while the poorest 20 percent receive 1.4 percent of its total income), are those stemming from loans made available years ago to so-called developing nations in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, where the compound interest on the loans is now so great that the poorer nations are unable to get out from under the resulting burden. While it may be relatively easy to forgive a brother-in-law, many still find it difficult to grant the forgiveness demanded by global sin and global debt; we may even find it difficult to accept the teaching that affluent nations owe it to poorer nations to forgive them their debts, and if they do not, they cannot be forgiven either.”

“Or as poet-farmer Wendell Berry has written, when God made us, God did not make us body and soul, with the soul slipped into the body like a letter slipped into an envelope. Instead, God made us from an inseparable mix of “dust and breath.” Our holiness comes from keeping these two sources together; the divine breath coursing within us mingles with the prosaic but sacred dust we share with all the other earth creatures, dust that originated as particles of a massive star. Dust and breath make us “members of the holy community of creation”, and the dustier and breathier we are, the better. In addition to this composite makeup that describes our persons, another factor shapes this form of spirituality: the conviction that spirituality necessarily includes works that serve justice. It is not justice imagined as a blindfolded figure trying to balance a set of scales arbitrarily, however. Instead, it is a fiery, prophetic, unrelenting justice, urged on us by a God of justice who demands not only that we preach it but that we do it, Justice is not only a constituent dimension of the gospel, it is a constituent dimension of religious education and spirituality. It is also a constituent dimension of Jubilee.”

Extracts from “The fire in these ashes – a spirituality of Contemporary religious life” by Joan Chittister, O.S.B.

Published by “Sheed & Ward”, Kansas City.

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“Given the interconnectedness of systems, the globalism of human life, the universalism of experience and the economics of national politics, doing “good works” may be exactly what ministers to humanity least. Without knowing it, for instance, we ourselves can become unwitting supporters of an oppressive system. We may nurse in hospitals that refuse care to the destitute, we may teach in schools that discriminate against women employees, we may invest in companies that make plutonium trigger-fingers, we may farm huge tracts of land with fertilizers that destroy that land for generations to come, we may pray prayers that enslave half the human race simply by rendering them invisible. To do anything these days without knowing who profits from it and why may undermine the very ministry to which we are most committed. No doubt about it, the intellectual life has always been important to religious commitment. Now however, intellectual development marks the merit of religious life, as never before in history, if for no other reason than the scope of the issues in which we’re immersed. Acid rain in the West destroys forests in the East; war in the Middle East causes depression in the West; the politics of food in the West starves children in Africa; the movements of plants from Detroit to Cambodia leaves the labour force of both regions out of work and out of hope.

To say that we can possibly minister to the poor in such a world and never read a single article on the national debt; to think that we can possibly be moral parts of a global community and never study a thing about the Third World debt; to imagine that we can save the planet and never learn a thing about ecology; to infer that we work to promote the women’s issue but never go to a women’s conference, read a feminist theologian or spend a minute tracing the history of ideas about women’ to say we care about the homeless dying and never say a thing about the evil of homelessness or the lack of medical care for the indigent, smacks of pallid conviction at best. Simply to do kind things is not enough anymore, Professional education that fits us for particular skills but neglects to prepare a person for dealing with the great questions of human life is not enough anymore. The world needs thinkers who take thinking as a spiritual discipline. Anything else may well be denial practiced in the name of religion.”

**Extracts from “The Religious Life Review”, Vol. 35 March-April 1996.
From “The Prophetic Dimension of Religious Life” by Joan Chittister, O.S.B.
Published by Dominican Publications.**

“Religious life when it is its most religious self has always been a burning torch in a cold place, a voice of truth in a confusion of opinions, a shaft of light on a darkened road. Religious life is of its essence prophetic. But performance punishes. Success breeds complacency. Prophecy becomes easily institutionalised by achievement. Once scaled, mountains are often harder to descend than they were to climb. But it is the prophetic element, the fresh voice, the searing presence, the power of religious life to make invisible pain visible and God’s will plain that is most needed today. Whatever the difficulty, that is surely the task, the challenge and the charism of the present age without which, though religious life may continue to exist, sincere but sluggish, religious life has no viable, vibrant future.

*Since Vatican II, we have the freedom, the direction
and the mandate to be religious again.*

The problem is that, serene and safe, institutionalisation reins us in. Prophecy, on the other hand, requires freedom of spirit and steel of soul. Prophecy and piety are not synonyms. We have learned how to ‘practice’ religion. The task of religious life for the next century is how to authenticate it. The temptation, of course, is to cling to what we are because we have done it so effectively. The need, however, is to become what we first were – a vision of possibility for the hopeless, a passion for life for the oppressed, a commitment to justice for the visually blind, the socially lame, the marginalized voiceless. The need is to become more than social service agencies and become again strong, organized heralds of the reign of God who speak with one voice for those disenfranchised in the kingdom. In a society where profit rules, proficiency reigns and beneficence is the virtue of choice, the world has need of a call to reckless demonstrations of community and a relentless commitment to gospel values. At a time when exploitation of the poor, violence against the powerless, and a suppression of women – as much by the church as by the state – has become the hallmark of the social order, religious life cannot sink to the level of the professional and expect to survive. If religious life has a problem it is that we have become more skilled than scandalous.

*Francis of Assisi was a scandal; Teresa of Avila was a scandal; Mary Ward was a scandal; **Mother McAuley was a scandal**; Benedicta Riep was a scandal; Charles de Foucauld was a scandal; Vincent de Paul was a scandal. We, on the other hand, have become the most proper of the proper. We scandalise few, least of all the mighty.”*

