



CHAPTER VII

TRELLISES:

FRESH FRAMEWORKS FOR COMMITMENT

THE VOWS IN CHANGING CULTURAL CONTEXTS

Although the evangelical counsels are of abiding value, the terminology used to express their meaning has passed over the hill of **MEANINGFULNESS**. Fresh frameworks for Christ-commitment in community need to be fashioned, fresh expressions need to flower forth.

Inspired by new theological and biblical understandings, the Sisters For Christian Community adopted a fresh expression for the three traditional vows as **SERVING, LOVING, and LISTENING**. Other groups have undoubtedly considered other options. The SFCC interpretations of the vows are highly Gospel-based and embrace, for that reason, the same essential commitment to God and to the total Christian Community as before, but with significant differences. Any up-dated representation of the basic meaning of the consecrated life within a sisterhood, requires not only a willingness to sacrifice the convenience and nostalgic value of familiar terms, but also a strong conviction that old values do, indeed, require ever-changing contemporary frames.

The science of linguistics demonstrates that words turn forward different faces of their essential meaning within changing cultural contexts. For example, in past centuries the Western world experienced the major problems of **MATERIALISM, LIBERTINISM, and ANARCHISM**. At opposite poles from these problems were **POVERTY, CHASTITY, and OBEDIENCE**. But today, although our social problems may be almost identical, those six terms have an archaic ring. Addressing very similar epicentral issues, the social analysts today might more likely speak of **CONSUMERISM, PROMISCUITY, EGOCENTRISM, or NARCISSISM**. Again, these terms are in polar opposition to **POVERTY, CHASTITY, and OBEDIENCE**.

NEW EXPRESSION POSSIBILITIES

Instead of continuing to employ the older vow terms, the Sisters For Christian Community considered a contemporary vernacularization of these words. They affirmed the synoptic accuracy of **CONSERVATION, CELIBACY, and COLLEGIALLY** as one possible set of substitutes which might express their commitment more succinctly. In the following juxtaposition one may see at-a-glance the possible fit:

CONSUMERISM: an abuse of property

CONSERVATION: a responsible use of property

PROMISCUITY: a use and abuse of persons

CELIBACY: a responsible loving and respect for persons

EGOCENTRISM: an indifference toward or a rejection of authority and common good concerns

COLLEGIALLY: a concerned and responsible sharing of authority in community

It might be useful, too, to consider the rationale that prompted the Sisters For Christian Community to use **SERVING, LOVING, and LISTENING** instead of the above. They see **CONSERVATION, CELIBACY, and COLLEGIALLY** as logical and meaningful terms, but ones that are less expressive, for them, of relational and communal values.

Exploration of the appropriateness of the term **CONSERVING** or **SERVING** for the older expression **POVERTY** shows at the outset that a certain obfuscation obtains when the ideal of world conservation and traditional **POVERTY** are examined as parallel concepts. The word poverty has a negative meaning in contemporary society which seems to belie any commonality with the **SPIRIT OF POVERTY** in the Sermon on the Mount. Readers of the daily press or of such a recent best seller as James Gollin's *Worldly Goods*, are quite knowledgeable about the considerable corporate wealth of many religious congregations. Horton and Leslie's 1978 edition of the *Sociology of Social Problems*, (p. 252), lists value conflict over materialism in the churches as a major theory for membership decline, and asserts that several different estimates place the wealth of American churches between eighty and one hundred fifty billion dollars, with the Catholic Church holding about half of the total. Gollin documents the fact that the billions held by the Catholic Church are mostly frozen into massive buildings, —churches, seminaries, and motherhouses with no as-is resale value. Nevertheless, the impression of great wealth in the Church persists through the lifestyles in some bishops' mansions, rectories and convents where it is general knowledge that the accommodations are of at least middle class status. Religious poverty is simply not the same reality as visible, measurable, and painful poverty in the sociological sense. In America poverty means dogfood dinners for the aged, despair, disease, mental disorders, unstable marriages, alcoholism, slum housing, chronic hunger, malnutrition, illiteracy, illegitimacy, ignorance, victimization by criminals, inadequate medical care, shortened life expectancy, low self-esteem and the stunting of human potentialities. Poverty is escape-proof; the poor are locked into a cycle. In consequence, the vow of **POVERTY** of religious seems to involve a misnomer and thereby exposes religious men and women, as well as the Church as institution, to accusations of phoneyess that could be precluded by a simple word change.

To translate the **VOW OF POVERTY**, a negation, a void, a cultural enigma in the minds of many, as **COMMITMENT TO CONSERVATION**, or **COMMITMENT TO SERVING** the poor, the old, the ill, and the uneducated, could bring an ancient evangelical value into 20th Century context and renewed relevance. Placed side-by-side, world conservation and religious poverty can be seen to share these similarities:

WORLD CONSERVATION MEANS...

RELIGIOUS POVERTY HAS MEANT...

That the world's abundant or limited resources belong to all humankind



That the congregation's abundant or limited resources belong to all members

That persons are **STEWARDS** of the world's natural resources and are accountable to the world community and their posterity for the responsible and appropriate use thereof



That religious are **STEWARDS** of the congregation's goods and resources and are accountable to God, the superiors, and one another for their appropriate use

That humankind has a moral responsibility to preserve, protect, conserve, and justly share the world's goods



That religious have a moral responsibility to preserve, protect, conserve, and justly share the congregation's goods

That wanton destruction, extravagant use, inordinate hoarding, or monopolistic control of the world's resources is antithetical to the common good of the world community and therefore a moral evil



That wanton destruction, extravagant use, inordinate hoarding, or monopolistic control of the community resources is antithetical to the common good of the congregation, a moral evil and a breach of the vow of poverty

Although this generation might more readily identify with poverty in the term of **CONSERVATION**, the Sisters For Christian Community, nevertheless, preferred the term **SERVING** as more Gospel-based. Not just the term, but the meaning of the vow itself has differed widely throughout the centuries as the following historical-scope diagrams will illustrate briefly. Only by scanning the following brief-outs can the rationale of new communities such as the SFCC become clear, and the appropriateness of newer models of **POVERTY** be seen in context.

POVERTY IN THE SYNOPTIC GOSPELS

- Jesus nowhere proposed an **ECONOMIC** pattern for His followers nor does He propose holding of property in common
- The **VOW OF POVERTY** has its gospel-base in the Sermon on the Mount where Jesus makes no reference to an economic system leading to perfection, but to a spiritual quality: **BLESSED ARE THE POOR IN SPIRIT** . .
- Jesus' specific recommendation to the rich young man (Mt 19:21; Mk 10:21; Lk 18:22) to "Go, give what you have to the poor and you will have treasure in Heaven: then come follow Me . ." was seemingly never required of the Apostles. On the contrary, Jesus promised them a hundred-fold . .
- Even to the rich-young man, Jesus did not say "Pool it; share it with all of us," rather, He asked the young man to denude himself of anything preoccupying him and preventing him from sharing himself with others . .
- Jesus did not ask for the renunciation of things, but for the renunciation of certain other-injuring attitudes: **PRIDE, ARROGANCE, SELF-AGGRANDIZEMENT, ELITISM, SEXISM, RACISM** and all forms of dominance and superiority . .
- Jesus said: **BLESSED ARE THE POOR IN SPIRIT** and not the poor in purse . .
- BE LAST OF ALL . . . SERVANT OF ALL** (Mk 9:27)
- I AM AMONG YOU AS ONE WHO SERVES** (Lk 22:27)
- Jesus' call to **POVERTY** was wholly revolutionary. He instituted, really, a new pattern of **INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIP**, not an economic pattern. He invited all to:

- Mutual service
- Mutual love and concern
- Mutual friendship and equality
- The **RENUNCIATION OF ALL ELITISM**
- The eschewing of all forms of superordination and subordination
- The necessary **CONFRONTATION** of all forms of domination

POVERTY IN THE FIRST ECCLESIAL COMMUNITY

- The first ecclesial community practiced **DISTRIBUTIVE JUSTICE** and not the counsel from the Sermon on the Mount to be "poor in spirit" (Acts 2:44-45)
- The **ECONOMIC SYSTEM** of the first ecclesial community required the following:
 1. The sharing of wealth
 2. The holding of things in common
 3. Distribution to those in need in the "believing community"
 4. Taking from those who have and giving to those who have not
 5. Economic responsibility of Christians for Christians
- This **ECONOMIC SYSTEM** was not based of the admonition of Jesus to the rich young man to **GIVE ALL TO THE POOR**, but was a pooling of the wealth of early Christians
- This **ECONOMIC SYSTEM** involving pooling or sharing did away with two classes: the very rich and the very poor. It created a **MIDDLE CLASS** that necessitated a living together, —a communal group
- An **ECONOMIC SYSTEM** which requires life in common for its members also must require a high degree of organization and administration plus a population of persons willing to be dependent upon the group for subsistence and survival . .
- As Christianity spread, such a vast economic system became untenable, impractical, and was discontinued in the Church without explanation or guilt because it in no way represented the teachings of Jesus, and never seemed intended as a universal pattern for Christians . .

- The early Christians expected the imminent return of Christ and the end of the world. When this view changed, they went about their own economic ways and the pooling of all ceased.
- The first Christians knew that Jesus called for all to be **POOR IN SPIRIT**. Such asks for a renunciation of **ELITISM** and **DOMINANCE**, not for a renunciation of wealth or material well-being . .

POVERTY AMONG THE EARLY HERMITS

- 1st Century A.D. in Egypt and Palestine
- They “sold all” as the rich young man was counseled to do, and entered the desert
- They worked at self-chosen means of livelihood
- They made and sold mats, baskets, etc.
- Money received for their work obtained supplies
- They formed large-scale communities around the leadership of Pacomius and others
- As the communities grew, large-scale industries likewise grew
- Thus began the evolution of the **COMMON LIFE**

POVERTY AMONG THE EARLY BENEDICTINES

- 4th Century A.D. in Europe
- Patterned themselves according to agricultural communities in their area
- Based poverty on the counsels of Basil, Cassian, Augustine and Acts 4:34-35
- Devised an economic system based on farming and manual labor
- Each monk worked but was dependent on his brothers for support
- Poverty became understood as **DEPENDENCE**:
 - personal abandonment to the care of the group
 - the receiving of all one’s needs from the community
 - a spirit of non-ownership
 - a sparing and careful use of things
- This poverty implied a loving trust of God and one’s brothers or sisters
- A monk was a man who could not own, possess, or monopolize
- However, his monastery could own, possess, and monopolize. These did amass wealth, property, and power
- The latter, **POWER**, seems to some specifically antithetical to the counsel of Christ to **BE POOR IN SPIRIT**

POVERTY AMONG THE EARLY CISTERCIANS

- Born in the Middle Ages in reaction to Benedictine’s loss of the spirit of frugality
- Born as a reaction to the monastery’s amassment of wealth and power over Medieval Europe
- Returned to the letter of Benedictine rule
- Bound themselves to be hard-working manual laborers and farmers
- Chose the least healthy land on which to work in contrast to the Benedictine’s monopoly of the best land in all of Europe
- Did penance for the loss of the poverty ideal of Benedictines
- Fell one and a half centuries later and began amassing wealth
- Cistercian holdings expanded so broadly almost the whole of Europe was Cistercian
- Citeaux became a great political force in the Church and lay society until the French Revolution
- So much of Europe was dependent upon the monasteries, closure of abbeys in France and England destroyed the major relief system for the poor, —a

paternalism which kept the masses immature and facing starvation without the monasteries

POVERTY AMONG THE CARTHUSIANS

- Began in Europe in the Middle Ages
- Blended the hermitage and the monastery
- Reached a peak of contemplation in the Charter House
- Saw poverty as uniformity and dependence
- Never reformed because they never strayed or relaxed, nor did they ever grow beyond five hundred members at a time

POVERTY AMONG THE MENDICANT ORDERS

- Franciscanism* began in the Middle Ages as a reaction to the scandalous richness of abbots, monasteries, churches, and clergy
- It showed concern over the sham of monastic poverty
- It was also a reaction against the formal content and minute details of monastic rules and constitutions
- It based its poverty on "the foxes have holes . . ."
- It ruled that a Franciscan could own nothing
- Poverty was seen as a following of Christ, a freedom from the burden of material possessions, and a sparing use of things
- Bonaventure later changed "naked poverty" to "sparing use"
- This change caused such internal controversy that Pope John XXII stripped Franciscans of all property but later returned it saying that Jesus and the Apostles had a true right to own property
- Dominicans* began in the Middle Ages
- They also aspired to austerity and mendicancy
- They accepted Thomas Aquinas' definition of poverty as interior detachment
- Their ideal was to live with no other security than God
- It was based on ". . . go forth with one pair of shoes . . ." and "Behold the lilies of the fields . . ."

POVERTY AMONG APOSTOLIC CONGREGATIONS

- The economic systems of early apostolic groups such as those of St. Theresa and St. Ignatius embraced a poverty that meant:
 - living on alms
 - supporting the group through works
 - receiving grants from kings, nobles, bishops, wealthy patrons
 - receiving beneficiaries for ministries
 - accepting government subsidies
- To these 19th and 20th Century apostolic groups added:
 - incomes from hospitals, parishes, private schools, bazaars, fund-raising, silver teas, salaries of individual members working outside the congregations' corporate works, interest on doweries and investments
 - Social Security and Medicare (A United States option)
 - National Retirement Pensions (As in Canada)
 - Welfare checks where needed (See *America*, Feb. 16, 1974)
- In some congregations, as among the Jesuits today, poverty is not uniform but takes into account:
 - circumstances of members
 - temperament, talents, and work preparation
 - country, climate, and mission environment
 - health and personal character

- one's productive capacity
- one's maturation or "holy indifference"
- one's need for "liberty of heart"

POVERTY IN URBAN AND RURAL FRATERNITIES

- 20th Century *Urban Fraternities* specifically in Europe
- Little Brothers of the Poor, Little Sisters of the Poor following the spirituality of Charles de Foucauld
- Members live by the labor of their hands
- They identify with lower class workers
- Only one in ten may be a nurse or teacher to help support the others
- They accept the same social security systems as other workers
- 20th Century *Rural Fraternities* of contemplatives: Brothers of Our Lady of the Poor
- They consider factory work incompatible with contemplation
- In Europe they work as game keepers or herdsman
- They consider old abbeys too rich for the common man
- Contemplation of God is the first priority
- This requires a minimum of well-being which overwork or malnutrition would harm
- Material poverty is seen as just one facet of a **SPIRIT OF POVERTY**

POVERTY IN THE EMERGING NEW COMMUNITIES (Using the SFCC as a case example)

- Places exclusive emphasis on the **SPIRIT OF POVERTY** from the Sermon on the Mount
- Expresses **POVERTY** as **SERVING**, as availability to others; it is concerned with the quality of Christ-like relationships facilitated by material resources and not by the quantity held by each member
- Expresses **POVERTY** as personal responsibility for self and others which includes the community determination to avoid incorporation and the ownership of motherhouses, convents, retreat centers, corporate works, retirement facilities
- Makes each sister personally responsible for her own education, work position, and the payment of her own taxes, insurance, medical, living, travel, study, recreational, retirement, and burial expenses
- Sees **POVERTY** as the renunciation of all forms of **ELITISM**; privileged status in the Church, titles, honors, exemptions, etc.

Obviously the poverty ideals of the Sisters For Christian Community and similar new sisterhoods has little in common with poverty in the first ecclesial communities, the desert hermits, the monastic or mendicant orders, the contemplative and apostolic groups, or the urban and rural fraternities.

Understandably, the above sketch-out of the various meanings and practices associated with religious poverty throughout twenty centuries is incomplete and leaves the beauty, mystery, and faith elements hardly addressed. But it may accomplish our specific purpose of demonstrating the wide spectrum of meanings characterizing different groups and different eras of history. Such a perspective makes it more evident that to replace the term **POVERTY** with a more contemporary expression would be fully in keeping with the on-going changes explored above. One observation seems to stand out after reviewing the spectrum of interpretations of **POVERTY** just finished: **POVERTY** in religious orders, congregations and communities of the past seem more associated with the economic system of the early Christians described in Acts, than with the spiritual attitude in the counsel of **POVERTY OF SPIRIT** from Christ's Sermon on the Mount. Focus on the latter aspect appears to be the trend of sisterhoods today.

THE POVERTY CONCEPT OF THE SISTERS FOR CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY REPRESENTS A MOVEMENT . . .

FROM TRADITIONAL PRACTICES TOWARD A WHOLLY NEW EXPRESSION



- | | |
|---|---|
| <p>— FROM canonical POVERTY asking:
-detachment from things</p> <p style="margin-left: 20px;">-an openness to superiors for permissions for use of things</p> <p style="margin-left: 20px;">-an absence of personal ownership, acquisitiveness, or sense of proprietorship</p> <p style="margin-left: 20px;">-a pooling or sharing of wealth requiring a communal living together</p> | <p>— TOWARD a biblical POVERTY asking:
-detachment from conventional values not consonant with simplicity</p> <p style="margin-left: 20px;">-an openness to the Holy Spirit's charisms and directioning</p> <p style="margin-left: 20px;">-an absence of dogmatism, close-mindedness, authoritarian dominance, sexism, elitism, status seeking, the valuation of affluence and power over others whether spiritual or material</p> <p style="margin-left: 20px;">-a communal love and mutual concern but without a shared economic system that requires communal living</p> |
| <p>— FROM a concept of POVERTY based on the Acts of the Apostles and Christ's specific challenge to the rich young man</p> | <p>— TOWARD a concept of POVERTY based on the synoptic gospels: Christ's Sermon on the Mount: "Blessed are the poor in spirit"</p> |
| <p>— FROM poverty of purse, a renunciation of personal material goods</p> | <p>— TOWARD poverty of spirit, a renunciation of personal egotism and elitism (Heb 2:17) "He emptied Himself" . . . not His purse</p> |
| <p>— FROM corporate, congregational ownership and possible wealth administered by bureaucratic officers on behalf of others</p> | <p>— TOWARD membership in a pilgrim community without buildings and wealth, where each member is responsible for her own stewardship</p> |
| <p>— FROM abandoning one's personal possessions</p> | <p>— TOWARD sharing one's personal possessions</p> |
| <p>— FROM poverty of dependence a canonical formulation</p> | <p>— TOWARD poverty of responsibility, a personal commitment to sharing and conservation</p> |
| <p>— FROM having all one needs if one asks</p> | <p>— TOWARD having all one needs if one works</p> |
| <p>— FROM typical middle class comfort in the convents of the congregation or the parish</p> | <p>— TOWARD self-selection of one's living level consonant with the demands of one's charisms or work role</p> |
| <p>— FROM apostolic labor in the corporate works of one's congregation</p> | <p>— TOWARD ministries that penetrate the total social system, that carry Christ to the market place, legislative halls and beyond</p> |

FROM TRADITIONAL PRACTICES OF POVERTY TOWARD A WHOLLY NEW EXPRESSION



- | | |
|--|--|
| <p>— FROM a POVERTY associated with</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -permissions -dependency -renunciation -but possible affluence of | <p>— TOWARD a POVERTY associated with</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -personal responsibility -co-responsibility -moderation -conservation |
|--|--|

the congregation as corporation

—**FROM** a **POVERTY** seen as giving up **THINGS**:

- material goods
- money use
- ownership rights

—**FROM** a **MATERIAL POVERTY** that gives up:

- superfluities
- excesses
- the personal disposition of material objects

—**FROM** rank and prestige being associated with the role or office one holds

—**FROM** a poverty that extricates one from the work-a-day-world of industrialization and automation, from the strife of competition for employment and promotion, from job insecurity, taxes, insurance, pension plans, etc.

—**FROM** a **POVERTY** that is a **WITHDRAWAL**

- a detachment from persons
- a retreat from the realism of 20th Century economic issues
- a cause of retardation in responsibility maturation

—**FROM** a negative Aristotelian **POVERTY** that sees matter as evil as a risk and a danger

-simplicity

—**TOWARD** a **POVERTY** seen as giving up **ATTITUDES**:

- class distinctions
- sexism
- racism
- elitist privileges
(Mk 9:35; Lk 22:27; "...be least of all and servant of all...")

—**TOWARD** a **SPIRITUAL POVERTY** that gives up:

- past symbols of consecration: titles, holy habits, veils, etc.
- structures of convenience and security: convent, chapel, infirmary, assured employment, retirement center, a motherhouse graveyard, canonical approval, high status in the Church bureaucracy

—**TOWARD** accepting (1 Cor 3:8) "The one who plants and the one who waters are equals, and each will receive (her) proper wage according to (her) work."

—**TOWARD** a **POVERTY** that immerses one in the work-a-day world of ordinary persons, there to bear witness to the gospel through natural virtues, there to be leaven in the dough of every-dayness without elitist identification

—**TOWARD** a **POVERTY** that is an **INVOLVEMENT**

- a loving availability
- a growth in stewardship responsibility
- an assumption of personal economic choices and their consequences
- an adult response to "bearing one another's burdens" whether economic, psychological, physical, spiritual

—**TOWARD** a positive Christian **POVERTY OF SPIRIT** that sees matter as good and its ownership as an opportunity for sharing and caring . .

CELIBACY AS A VOW TERM FOR CHASTITY

Even as world sisters' numbers swelled to almost one million in the mid-Sixties, sisters languished with other world women in a sexual subjugation or gender powerlessness. No convent-dwelling Joan of Arc emerged to mobilize the ideological forces inherent in Christ's teachings or to stem the persistence of **SEXISM** within the Church as well as world society. The silent witness power of celibacy was diminished because it was seen as simultaneously under the domination of **SEXISM** in a male-managed Church. Through the past centuries, and even these recent years, women's protest against **SEXISM** was neither born within nor encouraged by the Church. Sisters have not been in the vanguard of the liberation movement for either themselves or for other women. Sisters can be credited with being highly articulate on behalf of **CHASTITY** in their teaching roles, but were relatively voiceless regarding the heresy of **SEXISM** with its person-deforming violence in relationship to women.

The women's liberation movement, therefore, is a potentially powerful ecumenical thrust toward more authentic Christianity and the development of a theology of women. In the context of this world-pervasive movement, likely to accelerate in consequence of the June 1982 defeat of the Equal Rights Amendment to the United States Constitution, it is highly appropriate, —the time is over-ripe—, to change the vow term from **CHASTITY** to **CELIBACY**. Speaking anthropologically, in a world where women have been treated as male property by law and by practice, **CHASTITY** appears to be a chauvenistic, male-made norm to protect one male's jealously-guarded property from another male —even by enlisting the female's cooperation through her fear of moral transgression. Voluntary **CELIBACY**, in contrast, bespeaks a woman's affirmation of personhood, a recognition of her integral human dignity and equality, a rejection of any person being a **THING**, an **OBJECT**, or the **PROPERTY** of another. The voluntarily celibate woman recognizes herself as a **WHOLE PERSON**, one capable of self-support and self-determination. Over and above the value of consecrated **CELIBACY** as an eschatological witness, world women, including world sisters, can use **CELIBACY** as a witness to their freedom.

That **CELIBACY** is a term better suited than **CHASTITY** to these times, may be seen in clearer focus if the terms are placed in juxtaposition:

CHASTITY	CELIBACY
—implies constraint	→ —implies freedom
—is a mandate to be "decent" in sex for marital love and procreation	→ —is a decision to be free of genital sex, of marital love and procreation
—implies exclusiveness in mate choice	→ —implies exclusion of a mate choice
—is an aspect of the functional theory of sex that sees women as an OBJECT for pleasure, for procreation, for the perpetuation of the human species, or for a live-in servant	→ —is a recognition of a person as a SUBJECT with goals transcending procreation, with love transcending sex, and sex transcending genitality

The concept of **CELIBACY** has seemed more intransigent to change in cultural meaning than the vows of **POVERTY** and **OBEDIENCE**. Nevertheless, a significant evolution in the understanding of **CELIBACY** among sisters has been taking place. The changes, most briefly sketched out, have been in these directions:

FROM	TOWARD
←	→
— FROM seeing CELIBACY as a negation: -a renunciation of marriage -a renunciation of genital sex -a sacrifice of the joy of parenting children	— TOWARD seeing CELIBACY as an affirmation: -a personal union with Jesus -a vocation to LOVE with His freedom -a being one's self for others
— FROM sexuality being limitedly conceived of as a physical union of spouses for the expression	— TOWARD mature sexuality being broadly conceived of as an expression of physical

of their love and for procreation

and emotional affection between persons that is:

-intimate and deeply trusting

-enduring or genuinely committed

-sustaining, emotionally

-healing, comforting, supporting

-perfecting (fostering, each other's growth physically, intellectually, socially, emotionally, spiritually)

—**FROM** a celibacy that avoided friendships, love, and expressions of human affection because they were considered a danger to chastity and almost inseparable from genital activity and procreation

—**TOWARD** a celibacy involving a deep esteem for friendships, love, and sexuality as among God's greatest gifts, as expressions of a mature person able to enter fully into relationships that are:

-unifying

-restoring

-renewing

-affirming

Because **CELIBACY** is not an end in itself but a means whereby a Christ-committed person may be freed to love more expansively, the Sisters For Christian Community choose to express this second evangelical counsel as simply **LOVING**.

OBEDIENCE TRANSLATED AS LISTENING

In a natural community where all responsible adults are exercising their rights and obligations to author ideas and actions for the common good, all members **LISTEN** to one another in assembly in order to achieve consensus and act upon it in concert. In the truly authentic Christian Community, members not only listen lovingly to one another, but all strive to be sensitive to the Holy Spirit's direction through one another. Unless all listen to all with great openness, the community cannot be fully responsive to the Spirit. Because of the primacy of **LISTENING** in both achieving and perfecting community, the Sisters For Christian Community prefer to use the word **LISTENING** as a highly appropriate substitute for the same concept translated as **OBEDIENCE**. The SFCC rationale for this change follows.

In the Old Testament obedience meant **TO LISTEN, TO HEAR, and TO BE OPEN-MINDED**. The Western Church translated as **OBEDIENCE** the Hebrew word **SHEMA**, which means "to hear." Although **SHEMA** was used to express ordinary relationships, it was used in the Old Testament to refer specifically to relations between God and persons, or God and Israel as in Deuteronomy 6: 1-6 beginning "Hear, O Israel . . .". Old Testament disobedience was equivalent to disbelief or the failure or inability to **HEAR** the words which God addressed to the People. (See F.W. Young, *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, p. 580)

Likewise, **OBEDIENCE** in the New Testament is not a submission to the law but a **LISTENING TO THE SPIRIT**. Christ's **LISTENING** to the Father and the Holy Spirit not infrequently led Him to be in conflict with the law and in confrontation with the authorities in Israel. **OBEDIENCE** transcends submission, and even demands resistance to some laws, and apparent rejection of some authorities because of a higher authority. In Acts 10:17-29, Peter disobeys the Old Testament and visits the Gentiles because he **LISTENS** interiorly. In Acts 5:28,30, the Apostles preach Christ regardless of cease and desist orders from the lawful Jewish authorities.

At the Council of Jerusalem, as recorded in Acts (15:2-16), obedience was not a passive submission to any one authority even though Peter, the first pope, and James, the bishop of Jerusalem, were present. Rather, all **LISTENED** to one

another, to the authority of the assembly, to the pooled charisms and best judgments of all present until they could collectively respond with the words: **THE HOLY SPIRIT AND WE HAVE DECIDED . . .** Clearly, then, the **OBEDIENCE** in the Primitive Church was not a simple submission to the thoughts, views, and judgments of any one or few leaders or office holders, but a **LISTENING** to the Holy Spirit through the charisms of all.

As with the Old Testament word **SHEMA** meaning "to hear" but translated by Western culture as "obedience," the New Testament had two terms translated as "obedience":

1. **HYPAKOEE**, in which the root word is **AKAUO**: (verb **HYPAKAUO**) meaning "to hear" and
2. **HYPOTAGE** (verb **HYPOTASSO**) with the nuance of submission

Careful scholarship has shown that it was the first expression that was used in reference to Christ's obedience. Christ **LISTENED** to God and responded in love, not submission. Therefore, the major posture of those imitating Jesus is **LISTENING** rather than passive submission. In 1 Cor. 16:16, Paul does use the second term above when advising a group of Christians to "be subject" to certain men because of their charismatic gifts, but almost immediately, in verse eighteen, he qualifies his earlier statement by saying: "Give recognition to such men."

The current Canon Law interpretation of **OBEDIENCE** as subjection of one's will to the **SUPERIOR'S** will, is a departure from its biblical meaning as **LISTENING**. As with the concept of **POVERTY**, an historical overview of the meaning of **OBEDIENCE** through twenty centuries, shows variations in its meaning depending upon historical contexts:

OBEDIENCE IN THE PRIMITIVE CHURCH was

—a **LISTENING** to the Holy Spirit speaking through community **CONSENSUS**



—OBEDIENCE AMONG THE FIRST ANCHORITES was

- a **LISTENING** of young cenobites to the counsels and charisms of older and more experienced men whose years of prayer and self-denial on the desert evoked respect
- a **STUDENT-TEACHER RELATIONSHIP** or submission to a charismatic leader that slowly developed into the structured relationship of paternalism, of **FATHER-SON**



—OBEDIENCE IN MONASTIC ORDERS was

- a **SUBMISSION** to and **DEPENDENCY** on the father abbot that became specified by vow
- a di-polar relationship of **SUPERIOR-INFERIOR** resulting from
 - the need to efficiently administer a large population of young and uneducated monks
 - an underdeveloped and suppressed theology of the Holy Spirit



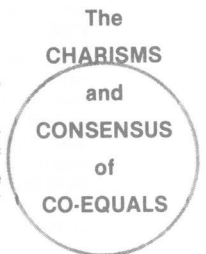
—OBEDIENCE IN APOSTOLIC CONGREGATIONS was a

-relationship of **RULER-SUBJECT** modeled on civil and secular governments that emphasized submission to **SUPERIORS** and **EXTERNAL LAW**



—OBEDIENCE IN THE NEW COLLEGIAL COMMUNITIES is

- a return, full-circle, to the model of the primitive Church
- a **LISTENING TO THE HOLY SPIRIT** speaking through community **CONSENSUS**
- a return to the Pauline Theology on the role of the Holy Spirit in community, a **REALIZATION** of the meaning of Paul saying that the Holy Spirit speaks where (it) will, to the least as well as to the greatest, to persons of every rank for the upbuilding of the Church



-an affirmation of Vatican II's **GAUDIUM ET SPES** that it is "through the gifts of the Holy Spirit that man (woman) comes by faith to the contemplation and appreciation of the divine plan, and that this ability to comprehend and realize the divine plan is the gift of the Holy Spirit to **ALL PERSONS.**"

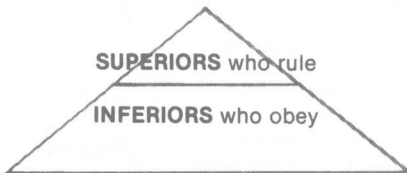
A CONFLICT IN TIME SEQUENCES

Although law ordinarily **FOLLOWS** practice and reflects ideational change and societal consensus, the **NEW CANON LAW** of the 1980's seems destined by the circumstances of history to be out-dated at its inception in areas relating to the consecrated life. Sisters seriously concerned over the continued authoritarian model of obedience purportedly retained in the **NEW CANON LAW**, need to consider the following circumstances most probably accounting for it:

- the New Canon Law Commission operated in a quite patriarchal culture milieu
- the members of the commission were males lacking sisterhood renewal experience and familiarity with their updated constitutions
- healthy trends of change expressed in the emerging new communities were, in all likelihood, almost completely unknown to the commission
- so the commission did, in all likelihood, what time-pressured persons tend to do, they made assumptions and acted on them
- the commission, it appears, assumed that world sisterhoods were ever-declining dramatically but were otherwise involved with "business as usual"
- the commission, it appears, felt safe, then, in more-or-less simply repeating the norms of Vatican II's Document on the Appropriate Renewal of Religious Life without taking into account the fact that during the two decades following Vatican II there had been significant ideational and practice alterations in the new and renewing sisterhoods, and that many world sisters are on the move, journeying . . .



—**FROM** accepting unquestioningly the Constantian and bureaucratic model of Church and congregations as hierarchical organizations with ranked levels:



—**FROM** accepting unquestioningly an out-dated Canon 528 (1981 draft) which reads:
The evangelical counsel of obedience, undertaken in the spirit of faith and love in following the Christ who was himself obedient unto death, obliges a person to **SUBMIT** his or her own will to legitimate **SUPERIORS** acting in place of God.

—**TOWARD** envisioning the Church and the consecrated life as Christian Community, a unity of co-equals-in-Christ Jesus who live out His affirmation: **I WILL NOT CALL YOU SERVANTS BUT FRIENDS**



—**TOWARD** envisioning an up-dated Canon 528 which reads:

The evangelical counsel of obedience, a counsel to **LISTEN** to the charisms of the Holy Spirit in the good judgment of community members in assembly, —through which means God directs People —, challenges us

to pool our charisms and best judgments in loving unity.

—**FROM** accepting unquestioningly an out-dated Canon 544 (1981 draft) which reads:

SUPERIORS should exercise the power they received from God through the ministry of the Church in a spirit of service. Therefore, in fulfilling their role in accordance with the will of God, they should **RULE THEIR SUBJECTS** as **CHILDREN** of God with reverence for them as persons, promoting voluntary obedience, and they should listen freely to them and foster their cooperation **FOR THE GOOD OF THE INSTITUTE** and of the Church, without, however abdicating their authority of deciding and prescribing what ought to be done. (Emphasis mine)

—**FROM** canonical obedience defined as submission to institutional authority, rules, and constitutions

—**FROM** compliance with superiors' directions for the congregation

—**FROM** subjecting one's will to another's

—**FROM** self-effacement in relinquishing one's right and responsibility to make decisions for one's self or the community

—**FROM** obedience to a person above us

—**FROM** obedience to external law that fixates persons at the 4th level of moral maturation

—**FROM** being part of a political or organizational unity, —a legal body governed by contracts and constitutions based on secular models of organization: monarchical, bureaucratic, or democratic

—**TOWARD** envisioning an up-dated Canon 544 which reads:

MEMBERS of Christian Community recognize their God-ordained **RIGHT** and **RESPONSIBILITY**, by reason of human adulthood and consecration to Christ in Baptism, to exercise their unique authority in authoring ideas and actions for the **COMMON GOOD OF CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY**.

—all **LISTENING** to all
—all in **MUTUAL RESPECT**
—all in **MUTUAL COOPERATION**

—**TOWARD** biblical obedience defined as **LISTENING** to the Holy Spirit speaking through **CONSENSUS**

—**TOWARD** cooperation with co-equals for the community

—**TOWARD** freely willing the will of God together

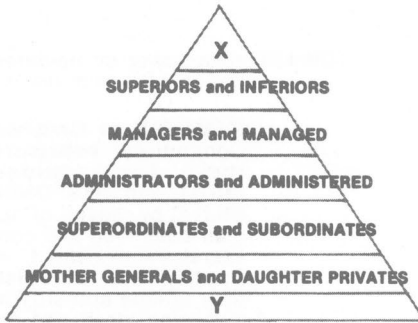
—**TOWARD** self-development in responsible decision-making for one's self and the community

—**TOWARD** obedience to the Spirit within us

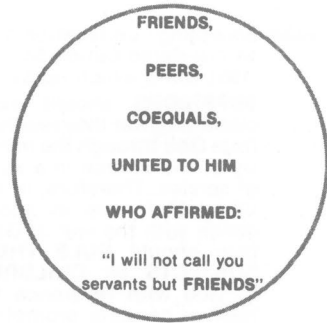
—**TOWARD** respect for internalized ideals and community consensus that moves persons toward the 5th and 6th levels of moral maturation

—**TOWARD** being part of a **SPIRITUAL UNITY**, a loving communion of co-equals-in-Christ, a unity *sui generis* making consensual decisions in assembly for the common good

—FROM being a congregation or order divided into:



—TOWARD being a community united as:



CONCLUSIONS AND SUMMARY

In the preceding pages we have seen the enormous implications flowing from the interpretation of **POVERTY, CHASTITY, AND OBEDIENCE** as **SERVING, LOVING, and LISTENING**. Universally, anthropologists find that what a people **THINK** determines what they **DO**. Thinking finds expression in action, in organizational patterns or social structures. If one interprets **POVERTY** as the **ABSENCE OF ELITISM** and the presence of loving service and equalitarian availability, one cannot remain in an organizational structure that divides persons into **SUPERIORS and INFERIORS, ADMINISTRATORS and ADMINISTERED, SERVICE PROFESSIONALS and CLIENTS**. If one interprets **OBEDIENCE** as **LISTENING** to the **HOLY SPIRIT** through group consensus, one cannot remain in an authoritarian, oligarchic, or even democratic organization where administrators direct congregational activities for the common good, or decisions are made on a majority vote basis. Not only do the concepts **SERVING, LOVING, and LISTENING** alter the organizational structure of a group, but communication patterns and the quality of interpersonal relations as well. The multiple **FROM-TOWARD CONTINUUMS** in this chapter have demonstrated that revolutionary changes have occurred in the consecrated life even if not yet reflected in Canon Law. Sisters of the world are on the move, —journeying . . .

FROM

TOWARD

—FROM expressing the vows as **POVERTY, CHASTITY, and OBEDIENCE**

—TOWARD viewing the evangelical counsels in alternate terms such as **SERVING, LOVING and LISTENING**

—FROM seeing the vows as a renunciation of personal **RESPONSIBILITY**:

—TOWARD seeing the evangelical counsels as commitments, as personal **RESPONSIBILITY** for:

-a **RENUNCIATION** of **OWNERSHIP** though the vow of poverty

-**SHARING** material goods with others and serving their needs

-a **RENUNCIATION** OF **AFFECTIONAL RELATIONS** through the vow of chastity

-**LOVING** others more expansively

-a **RENUNCIATION** of independence and personal decision-making through the vow of obedience

-**LISTENING** to the direction of the Holy Spirit through the charisms and best judgments of one's self and the community

—FROM being bound by vows

—TOWARD being freed by vows