



# SHARING IN THE CHARISM OF THE

## *Sisters of the Immaculate Heart of Mary*

### *of Wichita*

**June 2, 2016**

#### **I Take What is Set Before Me: The Understanding of Mary's "Fiat" in IHM Life and Practice**

Last week I had to pack up my classroom at Bishop Carroll as next year I will be teaching at Trinity in Hutchinson. As I boxed things up I was forced to face the reality that somewhere along the line I turned into a packrat. I've never been a packrat before. In fact I have always prided myself on how little I actually need. But now I can no longer hide the fact that I am a garbage collector - at least when it comes to my teaching. My perennial problem is the quick and simple thought that winds up determining all my actions: "I might use this someday." "It's a 20 year old article on the effects of communism on a small farming community of 17 people in eastern Europe that uses really big words and will bore every person under the age of 75 to death, but I just might need to use it someday in my high school religion class, because let's face it, you can't find things like this everyday even though we now have the internet." The good news is that I have exposed my inner packrat and am forcing myself to see reality - I will never use this stuff. I never have used it, nor am I ever even going to think about using it. So in the trash it goes. I'm not offering it to the teacher next door, not to the sisters, I'm not even putting it in the teacher workroom where some unsuspecting 1st year teacher who also suffers from "Packrat Fever" would be tempted to pick it up. I need the complete break and then let nature take its course. The time of the 20 year old articles is over!

It's not good for Sisters to be loaded down with a bunch of clutter, but why? Tonight we are going to explore the vow of poverty in the life of a religious and in particular IHM poverty. As with all things Catholic, it is Christocentric, that is, centered on Christ. But we can't forget about Mary. As IHMs we take Mary as our model and protectress and her fiat, "Be it done unto me according to thy word," is the defining point of her life and by extension should be of our lives as well. This availability to the Lord is the goal of poverty. Poverty empties

oneself in order to be filled. It's a discipline. St. Paul says, "Every athlete exercises discipline in every way. They do it to win a perishable crown, but we an imperishable one. Thus I do not run aimlessly; I do not fight as if I were shadowboxing. No, I drive my body and train it, for fear that, after having preached to others, I myself should be disqualified" (1 Cor 9:25-27) If athletes can give something up for a trophy made of plastic, how much more should we, who are in search of everlasting life.

The life of a religious is one of gift and communion. We live in union with Christ and give ourselves in service of the Church. Both accounts demand poverty. Being a bride of Christ means to live like Him and service implies giving to one who lacks, that is, who is poor. In order to better give to the poor, one must know poverty. It's much easier to see the need if you know it yourself, but there are many different ways to live poverty. As many ways, in fact, as there are religious communities and people for that matter, as we are all by virtue of our baptism called to be poor. Therefore IHM poverty is unique. We aren't Mother Teresa's Missionaries of Charity or mendicants like the Dominicans and Franciscans. We do not beg for our daily bread and we do receive a stipend for our teaching. We are poor, but not destitute. We have all we need, no more, no less.

The first point I want to make about poverty is the most obvious one as we have to start somewhere: Poverty means actually being poor, not having things. This is often referred to as factual poverty as opposed to a spiritual poverty, which is an important point that we will get to in a minute. Jesus was poor. He, along with Mary and St. Joseph, lived the lives of common laborers. He was born in a stable not a palace. But poverty does not mean destitution. Jesus had things, he didn't go hungry. The Holy Family had a home and the apostolic community that followed Jesus later had a supply of money. Judas was the one who held the community's coin purse. He was the treasurer you could say. So factual poverty is not destitution. In fact, destitution is not held up as a goal by the Church and she works to eradicate that type of poverty.

But this does not take away from the fact that actually being poor is the bedrock of our life of poverty. The institute possesses what it needs, but we live a simple life. Our constitutions call us to be content with little, while the community supplies what we need in order to fulfill our purposes, praying and teaching. Practically speaking this is done through what is called a common purse. We pool our resources, all of our resources, individually using only what we need. Our stipends, earnings, gifts, everything all goes into a common fund. When I, as an

individual need something, I can then rely upon the community to supply that need. For example, I have an aunt who always sticks several books of postage stamps in her yearly Christmas card to me. I in turn give those stamps to the community for all to use. And whenever I need a stamp, I just go to the stamp drawer and there are always stamps there. It's like we have a little stamp fairy that keeps us supplied! The common purse is an essential part to our charism and our life of communal and individual poverty. It helps to ensure that we actually do remain poor without falling into destitution.

Factual poverty helps form the heart, but it is only a good thing if undertaken with the correct intentions. Being poor is not a good in and of itself, just as ownership is not bad in and of itself. So factual poverty is only good if it serves some end and this leads us to the second point: spiritual poverty.

In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus said "Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Mt 5:3). This sets the tone for a Christian discussion on spiritual poverty. Like factual poverty, it unveils itself differently in almost everyone. God is pulling us to his Heart with unique cords, made individually for each of us, but there are many general things to be said about spiritual poverty. It begins with detachment. Poverty detaches our hearts so that it is free to be attached to God alone. This is easily seen with material examples: If I spend all my time on my cell phone or washing my car a thousand times so that it is perfect, I cannot be available for God. That possession takes up undue space in my heart.

But it's more than just material things that can take up that space. I can be attached to my likes and dislikes, to my emotions and my moods. I think a struggle for everyone is being attached to one's own will, my own way of doing things. Poverty means not having all the answers all the time and this takes great humility to admit. It is easy to spout my opinion on something, but having that self-mastery to stop and realize I don't know it all is very hard. Poverty is simple and humble enough to step back and wait for God's will. Therefore poverty is essential for obedience. But it's not a rolling over either. Poverty is not laziness. It puts forth every effort to discern what God's will is. Fr. Marie-Dominique Phillippe in his book on poverty in the life of St. Joseph wrote, "Poverty requires us to let God take first place and not to stop at our own judgments, whereas we are poor when we allow God to take precedence over our own opinions, desires, plans and aspirations" (Phillippe, 89) But then he

goes on to say that poverty does not demand that I not have opinions, plans, etc; just that I be willing to change them when God reveals his will to me. It's the Catholic both/and.

As IHMs we strive for this balance of spiritual poverty by living a motto coined by Mother Joanne: I take what is set before me. We try to place an image of this motto in a prominent location in each of our houses. Our Sisters strive to take what is set before them, by accepting humbly and gratefully whatever God wills or permits. Whether it be the food set before us, the students in our classrooms or even just accepting a rainy day, we know that God's hand is behind all and so even if He didn't explicitly will it, He can bring good from it. And He will bring good from it. When we apply this abandonment to the tougher situations in life, say the death of a loved one, or a situation where there is no seemingly easy way out, it takes looking at the Crucifix to remind us that we are not alone in this endeavor. Jesus takes the greatest evil, that of killing God, and turns it into the greatest good, that of the Resurrection. And we are a Resurrection people. Jesus is alive and with us always regardless of the pain. And He allows them for our betterment. These are the severe mercies of life.

It is here where we must speak on the role of gratitude in living a life of poverty. As Bishop Gerber used to say, a grateful heart silences a complaining voice. If we are going to take what is set before us, gratitude is the only acceptable response to all of God's actions in our lives. I think it's important when speaking about gratitude to point out that it is not a feeling. There are lots of things that I am grateful for that I don't feel grateful for. I'm grateful for the food I eat, even when the sister-cook burned it! Taking what is set before us means we rely upon God's providence to provide while at the same time recognizing that God often works through others, that we have to work for what we need, and that ownership is not an evil.

But detachment remains the key, especially when it comes to ownership. Ownership can very quickly fall into being owned. Every single one of us is made to be subservient. Our hearts naturally serve and this is good. It's how God made us. The disorder of the fall however distorts our vision, getting us to choose to serve something that is not meant to be served, mammon, as Jesus calls it in the Gospels. Detachment protects this. Fr. Thomas Dubay in his book entitled "Happy are you Poor" says, "If I am filled with myself, married to my own ideas and ways of doing things, convinced that somehow I am the hub of the universe, there is of course no room in me for being filled with God." (Dubay, 50). A disordered ownership says that I am owed what I have because I am

different, an exception to the rule. I deserve it because I am me, and eventually this leads to a mindset which believes most things revolve around oneself. Detachment is essential to not leading a life of miserable and destructive selfishness. Therefore poverty leads to happiness. The Church recognizes this in her very liturgical life. Lent is all about giving up something so we can prepare for and receive to the full, the joy of Easter.

Spiritual poverty, besides leading to happiness, also paves the way for other virtues, it is a discipline. Discipline comes from the same root as disciple, which means a student or learner. So we learn from poverty. It leads to maturity and a certain readiness which lets one fulfill his/her vocation. It's just like St. Paul's sports analogy. Next week Sr. Mary Elizabeth and I are playing in the Serra Club priest/religious golf tournament. I am so excited as I used to golf quite frequently. So this week I've been practicing in the back yard with clubs that I borrowed from my sister. And I am learning how "undisciplined" I am in golf. I still need a lot of practice and its to some of the sisters' disadvantage that they don't know the mean of fore while they are weeding the garden off to my right.

So discipline. Poverty is a discipline. A disordered ownership keeps our eyes focused on our possessions, but detachment allows us to open our eyes to the good, true and beautiful around us. Sheldon Vanauken, a good friend of C.S. Lewis, but also an atheist, chose to live a life of poverty *before* his conversion to Christianity precisely because he recognized this point. God's beauty around him was more beautiful because of poverty. His heart was free. While he was studying at Oxford with Lewis, he was in turn able to recognize Truth more readily because he and his wife Davy led a simple life. This ultimately led to their conversion to Christianity. This touches upon why poverty is also essential for a life of chastity. Poverty opens me to Christ who is the Good, True and Beautiful. If I'm filling my heart's capacity with things or inclinations, I will never be totally his. In the end, poverty enables us to live in complete commitment to Christ through the three evangelical counsels, a "triple expression of a single yes" as the Vatican says.

In his apostolic exhortation on religious life according to the changes of Vatican II, Blessed Paul VI reminds religious that Jesus came, not only to be poor, but to serve the poor and that we have a grave obligation to do the same. Poverty is not just for us or for our own virtue. It must overflow into service. We receive and accept God's gifts and then we must offer them back to the Lord in service. But once again, the types of service are

varied. There's a wide range of opportunities when it comes to serving the poor. Mother Teresa's community, the Missionaries of Charity serve the poorest of the poor, pulling dying people out of the streets. The Little Sisters of the Poor serve the elderly poor, helping people to truly die with dignity. Many Franciscan communities have soup kitchens, thrift stores and homeless shelters. These are all great and much needed ways to help the materially poor. But there is another, often overlooked, type of poverty: that of being morally or spiritually destitute. This is when one does not know Christ or what a moral happy life is supposed to look like. The spiritually poor are those who live their lives trapped in a downward spiral of misery and whose souls are endangered because they don't know the One who brings joy and heaven. This poverty is characterized by a lack of hope and a lack of knowledge.

We are immersed in a culture that is spiritually poor. On a daily basis we encounter students who are slaves to addiction, have turned from God for one reason or another or are raised in homes where there is constant compromise with the evil one. If the Church has a preferential option for the most poor and vulnerable, which Pope Francis is quick to remind us that she does, I think today's youth have to be on top of that list. They are definitely the most vulnerable in today's American society. We like to sit around and complain about "kids these days" but complaining about the situation is not going to help. Action needs to be taken as these children need help. Hence religious communities that teach. Our IHM Directory states, "In seeking to discern ways of responding to Christ's call to serve the poor, the Sisters realize that poverty is not merely, or even primarily, the absence of material goods, but even more gravely that of spiritual goods" (Directory, 54). We serve the poor through education, leading others to know Christ through prayer and a knowledge of their purpose in life. This satiates one's thirst for hope, which is the only thing that will lift them out of this spiritual destitution. The statistics that were shared a few nights ago about the decline of the number of teaching sisters in Kansas pains my heart most severely. I think it shows how overlooked the apostolate of religious education has become. I think we need to rejuvenate that.

Having said all of this, we as IHMs are also mindful of the materially poor, sharing with them part of our goods saved by personal sacrifice. When the poor come to our door we try to do all we can for them. I remember one time there was a man, probably in his early twenties, who came to the door needing money for a bus ticket. Somehow he got stranded in Wichita. I don't remember his whole story, but I do remember that he didn't just want a handout. He asked if there was anything he could do for us in exchange for the money. Is there

anything he could do? Of course! We always need help! My family affectionately calls this reality “Stewardship Corner” as we are a big recipient of their need to give. We had this man do some heavy lifting for us, moving bricks if I remember correctly. Well anyway it was my job to show him around and work with him. He worked hard and after a while I could tell he was getting winded so I went inside and got him a glass of water and a cookie. Now the only reason I remember this story is because of the look I got when he saw my gesture. He was astonished that I either saw his need or gave him something, I’m not sure which. Either way, I don’t think he cared much about the water and the cookie - even though it was one of those big chocolate chip ones from Panera! He kindly ate it and drank the water, but it was the act of kindness that touched him I think. It was like no one had done anything nice for him in a long time. To me it was nothing - just the right thing to do. But to him it changed his whole demeanor. We took a break and had a nice conversation about something I don’t remember. After our job was finished he, another sister, and I hopped in the car and drove to the bus station. He was so happy and thankful, not just for the ticket, but for having encountered us. I never saw him again, but he left that day looking a little bit lighter than when he first came to the door.

Poverty. We live in a world in which we are surrounded by it, but if I don’t see it, perhaps I’m the poor one, the one living in destitution. Poverty, true poverty, evangelical poverty, frees us to see the image of God in our neighbor. And this is the ultimate value of poverty I think. If I want to get to heaven, I must show mercy to my neighbor. But if I’m too tied up in my own world to see my neighbor and their inherent value, mercy will fall through my fingers like so many grains of sand.

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