

OWITF Reflections

Reflection Letter 16,
January 2018

VOW FOR MUTUAL SUSTAINABILITY

The previous reflection letter introduced the idea of religious life as a counter-cultural expression of certain values which society tends to forget. In the next few reflection letters, we will consider the vows as radiating values which call for a rediscovery of what all of us are invited to live, but which religious are especially called to espouse in a radical way. We begin with the vow of poverty or what Diarmuid O Murchu names as a vow for mutual sustainability.

Many religious have struggled with the vow of poverty in its traditional expression since most religious are not materially poor, and often are sheltered from the uncertainty that comes from economic deprivation.

O Murchu moves from a vow *of* to a vow *for*, thus emphasizing the key objective of each of the vows rather than simply a classification of what the elements of the vows are calling us to give up. So, with poverty, he sees that the objective of this vow is for mutual sustainability.

The vow for mutual sustainability views everything as gift. The whole of creation is blessed, and we can view all things as good. God saw everything as good, we read in Genesis (Gen. 1:31), and we view the world with the eyes of wonder and awe. What does this mean for the way we live, especially when we also view the world through the eyes of the poor?

In the first place, it calls us to live a non-cluttered lifestyle. Was it Einstein who said, “Out of clutter, find simplicity”? The Proposition invites us to create community houses that are simple and beautiful. Victoria Moran, the author of *Lit from Within: Tending Your Soul for Lifelong Beauty*, said: “When you’re clear about your purpose and your priorities, you can painlessly discard whatever does not support these, whether it’s clutter in your cabinets or commitments on your calendar.” So, religious are called to let go of what is unnecessary, and avoid the obsession with the latest gadgets or the most popular brands. It also means that we de-clutter from time to time so that our houses are not dumps for all sorts of junk!

More positively, religious are called to be open to God in the day-to-day reality of our world, seeing God’s presence in the whole of God’s creation. As we view the universe as the gift of the Creator, we learn to respect and care for the earth as our home. In *Laudato Sí* we read:



This sister [Earth] now cries out to us because of the harm we have inflicted on her by our irresponsible use and abuse of the goods with which God has endowed her. We have come to see ourselves as her lords and masters, entitled to plunder her at will. The violence present in our hearts, wounded by sin, is also reflected in the symptoms of sickness evident in the soil, in the water, in the air and in all forms of life. This is why the earth herself, burdened and laid waste, is among the most abandoned and maltreated of our poor; she “groans in travail” (Rom 8:22).



So, with the vow for mutual sustainability, we come to a respect for the earth. So, rather than seeing the earth belonging to us, we see that we belong to the earth and have a duty to ensure its sustainability (Marlee Matlin).

Another element of the vow for mutual sustainability means living with daily uncertainty. Those who are economically poor know what this means in a very real way. We, as religious, do not. However, living with uncertainty means that we are open to the unexpected, the unforeseen, and have a mind that refuses to sink into the ruts of routine. It may indeed also mean that we do not place too much emphasis on financial security, and are willing to give of our substance to those who have less. Maybe we need to risk finding ourselves with ‘not enough’ in our compassionate outreach to those who have been made poor.

In this vow for mutual sustainability, we move from the dependency of the child to the autonomy of the adult. Whereas before, the religious depended on the superior to supply all his or her needs, now we are being called to manage the day-to-day challenges of life in a mature way.

So, some of the implications in living out the vow for mutual sustainability are as follows:

- Moving from exclusive ownership to non-possessive ownership
- Ensuring responsible budgeting
- Simple living in solidarity with people made poor
- Accepting everything as gift
- Taking responsibility for the life of the community
- Cultivating respect for the environment

Through Pope Francis’ prophetic words in *Laudato Si*, we are called even more insistently to see the truth that, “The earth is essentially a shared inheritance, whose fruits are meant to benefit everyone. Everything is related, and we human beings are united as brothers and sisters on a wonderful pilgrimage, woven together by the love of God has for each of his creatures and which also unites us in fond affection with brother sun, sister moon, brother river and mother earth.”

The question for each of us now is: **How am I called to live every day of my life in a way that ensures mutual sustainability for all?**