

2010-102

Living in Paradox

**The Elie Wiesel Foundation for Humanity
Prize in Ethics Essay Contest
January 8, 2010**

“You want to be a nun?” said my sophomore roommate, frowning in shock. “Aren’t nuns like... child abusers?” I winced, feeling sick to think that religion could be reduced to this, the antithesis of ethics. So often, before I can explain my intention to become a sister and how such a life relates to an ethical presence in the world, I have to explain what vowed religious life is not about: I am not going to copy medieval manuscripts by candlelight, or skip across the hills of Austria as in *The Sound of Music*; I will neither isolate myself in a cloister nor descend upon schoolchildren with a ruler. I hope to become a sister, not because of any repression, naïveté, fundamentalism, or perversion, but because I believe the vows – can demonstrate the progression from ethical ideals to ethical reality, from institutional concepts to personal integrity. The process of discernment takes place in no stained glass vacuum; it is instead a process of self-searching engaged with the question of what vows are thought to be, what they really are, and the concepts they signify in the modern world.

I love the ideal of church, a community living in humility and integrity, but I know that reality reveals a lack of self-searching in the Catholic Church - a fault which can lead to a sense of triumphalism and a tendency for dangerous blind spots in the ethical viewfinder of religion. In this essay, I seek to rethink some of the thought patterns which underlie notions of religious ethics, grounding the discussion in the framework of Catholic religious orders because they elucidate particularly well the various forces which an individual encounters when trying to self-identify within a religion or religious group: Loyalty to the community and to the concepts it has built and valued through tradition, but also the search for personal relevance to the ethical needs of the modern world. Beginning with a brief description of the recent social history of religious orders, I hope to communicate the context in which re-evaluation of religious identity is timely and necessary. I then provide an alternate methodology of religious thought, replacing the

paradigm of tightfisted and reactionary defense for one of radically generous paradox. Finally, I redefine the oft misunderstood vows of Catholic religious life – poverty, chastity and obedience – as paradoxical examples of the way religious institutions can contribute ethically to modern society.

Catholic Religious Life: A Context of Re-Evaluation

The past forty years, shaped both by cultural trends like the women’s liberation movement and long overdue exposés of ecclesiastical hypocrisy in the news, have radically shifted society’s perceptions of what it means to be a sister. Older Catholics who remember the first half of the 20th century often describe the way religious priests, friars and nuns were at one time assumed to be inherently more “holy” than the rest of the populace, with clear-cut spiritual and social roles. Vows were thought to be a surefire way to humility and piety as sisters worked their entire lives in Catholic institutions like schools and hospitals, their interiority and separateness indexing a special closeness to God and immunity from wrongdoing. Church reforms during the 1960s rejected the hierarchical arrogance of this approach and redefined vowed religious life as one of many ways to lead a wholesome life, stripping away any perception of special status.¹ Social obliviousness, often parodied as either childishness (as in the sitcom “The Flying Nun”) or close-minded stubbornness (as in Mother Superior, Whoopi Goldberg’s nemesis in *Sister Act*) became an irresponsibility rather than a virtue.

Between the 1960s and 1980s, many female religious orders left their institutional work to venture into other worthwhile ministries like food pantries, inner-city social work, immigrant support, and environmental advocacy. Over 75,000 sisters currently work among the poor in

¹ The watershed 21st Ecumenical Council of the Catholic Church (1962-1965) asserted the value and agency of the laity in the Church. The document *Lumen Gentium* (Dogmatic Constitution on the Church) imagined a church of all “the people of God,” elevating non-clerical and non-vowed people to spiritual equality with those working in the church; *Perfectae Caritatis* (Decree on the Up-To-Date Renewal of Religious Life) encouraged religious orders to reconsider their organization, work, and clothing for modern social relevance.

America, though they are often unrecognizable since most orders gave up the habit in favor of regular clothing.² And whereas ministry was a professional opportunity in the first half of the 20th century, enabling girls to become professional nurses and even university administrators in an era where most women had little agency beyond the house,³ today such work no longer depends on gender or religious affiliation; it is well and good to teach or to feed the poor, but one doesn't need to become a "religious" to do it. Finally, reports of clerical abuse of children have set many people in the Catholic community reeling in anger and horror, wondering what a religious profession means if not at least mere decency.⁴ The total number of sexual abusers in the priesthood is less than 2%, comparable to the rate among married men, but it has shaken people's faith in the tradition of celibacy.⁵ Those opposing it have argued there is something unhealthy about the life of religious profession, and that it leads to the horrific emotional, physical and sexual abuse revealed in the news. Does the institution of Catholic friars, brothers, nuns and sisters, living something known as "religious life" – tend not only towards being outdated but also unethical?

The complexity of this context – a mix of stereotypes, contemporary social trends and serious ethical failings – requires a discernment process that is free from reductionism of any kind. I chose to become Catholic as an adult, and began to consider life as a sister, knowing that religion in society has been neither solely commendable nor solely depraved, guaranteeing no automatic altruism and providing only the occasion for ethical action. A religion fully aware of both its capacity for good and capacity for evil should engender a sense of engaged responsibility

² John Fialka, *Sisters: Catholic Nuns, and the Making of America* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2003), 26.

³ Joan Chittister, *The Way We Were: A Story of Conversion and Renewal* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2005), 19.

⁴ For example, the physical and sexual abuses detailed in the John Jay Report (U.S. 2004), Ryan Commission (Ireland 2009) and Murphy Report (Ireland 2009).

⁵ Philip Jenkins, *Pedophiles and Priests: Anatomy of a Contemporary Crisis* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 81.

in those that belong to it: we maintain no unexamined givens, allow ourselves no exemptions, and refuse to settle for an identity of ethical contradiction. When a Muslim neighbor on the bus sees my cross necklace and reminds me of the crusades; when a Jewish friend tells me how St. Louis IX of France ordered all the copies of the Talmud to be burned; when an older Catholic estranged from the church tells me how harshly some nuns used to yell in elementary school, the only appropriate response is a deeply sincere and personal apology, and also an internal resolve to realize a more discerning and equitable church. I cannot undo history that took place before I was born, but I can give my life to ethical reflection and action. By what criterion, by what litmus test, does one adopt and improve the ideals of a religious institution?

Redefining the Paradigms

When it comes to determining the positive efficacy of religion in the world, I reserve the highest respect not for proclaimed truth or self-confident logic, but for paradox - that oblique, elliptic wisdom which delights in impossibility. Paradox cuts through the confusion of ideals that somehow went wrong, hinting at the indescribable mystery which must have first caught the religious sentiment of humanity long ago. What happens when an irresistible force meets an immovable object? Is it possible to know that I know nothing at all? Why do people lack happiness when pursuing it for themselves, but achieve it when working towards somebody else's? I find that even after truth, which too often only *is* because somebody contrived that it *must* be, has circled into dull and meaningless oblivion, paradox still spirals lithe and acute. After logic has gone stale and hard, desiccated through opinion's manipulations of "if" and "then," paradox still stretches supple and uncontainable. Paradox never grows tiresome, impossible to conform and impossible to reduce. It was this love for perplexity that led me to

Catholicism, where faith is the opposite of certitude, and later to consider religious life - where the less you have, the more you can give in generosity.

Early in my discernment, I puzzled over the story of Maximilian Kolbe – a Franciscan friar who, caught victim in the consuming atrocity of Auschwitz, demonstrated radical love where mere decency did not exist. The camp demanded fear in July 1941: a long line of haggard prisoners, Polish Jews and those caught helping them, stood against a fence; the Nazi commander SS Karl Fritzsch, brain behind the Zyklon B gas chambers, paced as he chose ten men, ten random examples, to suffer death by starvation and thirst.⁶ One of the condemned, Franciszek Gajowniczek, cried out lamenting his family; it was inevitable – an excruciating, protracted death in torture chamber 13. But, but then, after a moment, unexpectedly like a door opening along a hallway that had none, an eleventh prisoner stepped out of rank. SS Fritzsch turned in rage: *What does this Polish pig want?* But the prisoner, gaunt in his striped uniform like the rest, gestured towards Gajowniczek and answered: *I am a Catholic priest from Poland; I would like to take his place, because he has a wife and children.*

I do not understand how love can answer hate, or how generosity can emerge from the most desperate situations. I fear that if I stood in that line, paralyzed by the fence at my back and the evil before me, I would have been unable to think past the inevitability of Nazi will. The world had no space for reprieve, no escape from depravity. But Father Maximilian Kolbe drew on an untamable freedom: the paradox of those last who are first, those meek who inherit the earth, those fools find their lives in losing them. And in the pressure of Auschwitz, he exercised it not through abstract resolution, but from the praxis of everyday habit. A life of voluntary poverty, chastity and obedience is a life practiced in anomaly, steeped in paradox.

⁶ Frossard, *Forget Not Love: The Passion of Maximilian Kolbe* (Fort Collins: Ignatius Press, 1991), 4.

The Vow of Poverty

The paradox of voluntary poverty lies in capacity, not lack. Poverty refuses to be limited by the zero-sum ideology of economics, that guarded logic which assumes you must have something in order to give it and which worries, tightfisted, that any output is loss. The mystics, the whirling dervishes, the Mother Teresas of the world all testify to the sui generis nature of love: *When I am poor, send me someone in need; when I am cold, send me someone to warm; when I have no time, give me someone I can help a little while; when I am disheartened, give me someone to cheer.* Whereas deprivation is perverse, parsing prosperity to some and suffering to others, poverty is magnanimous - manifesting solidarity where before there was only disparity.

Poverty makes the individual a conduit for justice, since love for the poor is a motive for working, so as to be able to give to those in need. John Chrysostom wrote that “not to enable the poor to share in our goods is to steal from them and deprive them of life. The goods we possess are not ours, but theirs”.⁷ Thus voluntary poverty does not patronize or give charity, but rather pays the debt of justice. Poverty, as a capacity to give freely, does not stint. Instead, it holds all things loosely, with open hands, so that they can be given and justice be done.⁸ John Fialka, in his book *Sisters: Nuns and the Making of America* recounts the role of a sister in a Civil War battle:

On December 29, 1861, Sister Lucy Dosh, a twenty-two-year-old Daughter of Charity, collapsed and died, infected by typhus and bone weary from working long hours at a makeshift field hospital set up in a factory in Paducah, Kentucky. That made her patients, Union and Confederate wounded lying side by side on bloody pallets, reflect on their situation: They had more in common than their pain. In the quiet of the evenings Sister Lucy had often sung to them... It would lift them up and take them home, if only for a few moments. They all looked forward to it. Now, quite suddenly, her song had ended. They declared a truce and formed an honor guard to carry her body across the

⁷ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed., 2445.

⁸ Virginia Herbers, ASCJ, “The Vows” (lecture, Queen of Apostles Spirituality Center, Imperial, MO, November, 8, 2008).

river. The cadence was set by muffled drums, and the guns fell silent as she accompanied her casket in a Navy boat up the Ohio River.⁹

Religious poverty can be significant, dispelling fallacies of false dichotomy and providing people with another way to think. Sister Lucy's brand of sacrifice is fortunately rarely necessary, but there is always the opportunity to be more selfless and always the opportunity to lay down one's political, philosophical and religious arms.

As a religious mindset, poverty can demonstrate how to move from ascetic mental safeguarding towards generous intellectual dialogue. Just as material poverty frees the sister from needing to accumulate or hoard for herself, ideological poverty – perhaps better known as humility – needs nothing to prove. This disposition is particularly necessary in public discourse on politics and religion, where communication seems increasingly shrill, reactionary and polarized: conservatives versus liberals, traditionalists versus progressives, some 'true' members of the religion versus the others also claiming to be the 'true' adherents. I am often discouraged by divisions in the Catholic Church, but I believe a spirit of voluntary poverty can work around the oppositional stances. The pope, controversial for his power and decisions in every century of the church, has many titles, but the one most necessary for today's world is one of humility: the "Servant of the Servants of God". I look forward to a reality in which the church, both institutionally and individually in its members, sees itself from this perspective of ideological poverty. Religious ethics require a justice dedicated not to staking out one's own righteousness but to willing the good of the other.

The Vow of Chastity

The paradox of voluntary chastity lies in extroverted love, not introverted abstention. Chastity, oft misperceived as coldly adverse to intimacy, in fact promotes the wholesomeness of

⁹ Fialka, 6.

relationships and the integrity of promises. The nature of the promise then determines chastity's relation to sexuality and emotional investment. While in marriage chastity upholds the focused fidelity of one physical bond, in religious life it upholds the collective care of many social bonds. Religious chastity promises to care attentively but universally, without being preferential.¹⁰

If love is patient and kind in all cases, if love always protects and always perseveres, then it is not be limited to favored relationships. Too often, people sift love – measured in time, attentiveness, and patience - through a hierarchy of importance, allotting it first to personal concerns, then to familial and friendship needs, and then to the pressures of coworkers, acquaintances and, last of all, strangers. Chastity rejects the conservatism of this hierarchy, not taking exclusive relationships or private preferences. But neither does it take license to avoid the nitty-gritty love by which spouses put up with one another's annoyances or by which a parent drives a child to yet another dental appointment. Rather, the vow turns that responsible and concrete care to the periphery of society where there is other ethical loving to be done: homeless people needing food, orphans needing mothering, immigrants needing assistance, disadvantaged students needing encouragement and advocacy. According to *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, "chastity represents an eminently personal task; it also involves a cultural effort, for there is 'an interdependence between personal betterment and the improvement of society'" (2344). Society never quite accounts for everybody and those gaps must be filled by an impartial and ready care.

Chastity also recognizes that a tense, over-busy life is helpful to nobody. I remember, as a child, puzzling over balloons and their paradoxical expansion. I thought that the more air I blew and the more firm the rubber grew, then the stronger and more permanent the balloon should be. But the fullest balloons – too taut to absorb the slightest pressure – were quickest to pop on the

¹⁰ Ibid.

grass, while the smaller balloons could withstand a great deal of squashing and throwing and bouncing. Lives too are strongest when supple. In “Wherever You Go, There You Are,” John Kabat-Zinn wrote that “voluntary simplicity means going fewer places in one day rather than more, seeing less so I can see more, doing less so I can do more” (69). Strained, brittle service is no help at all, but pliant chastity can afford to be pure, attentive, and significant.

Finally, as a spiritual mindset, chastity demonstrates that, despite the human tendency to take care of oneself first with little regard for ethics, one doesn’t actually need to have it all. The opposite of chastity is not sexuality per se, but a false sense of entitlement. When the media reports on scandals, they often misidentify the tragedy and represent un-chastity as a sexual affair instead an unwillingness to make choices one way or another. In May 2009, the news broadcasted pictures of Fr. Alberto Cutie, a television host in Miami, involved in an affair with a woman on the beach. Many people blamed the Catholic Church for the requirement of celibacy in the priesthood and in religious orders, citing celibacy as “an impossible standard” although many continent priests, sisters, and single people would disagree on that point.¹¹ But Cutie could have chosen to leave the priesthood and marry - plenty of priests and nuns have done so with approval from the Catholic Church, dispensing with their vows in good graces. Ethical problems arise when people begin to see all their preferences as necessary, unwilling to cede anything for the sake of those they represent: Father Cutie’s decision to keep both his romance and his TV fame as a Catholic priest; President Clinton’s decision that intimacy with Monica Lewinsky was somehow essential despite his highly sensitive political office; Bernard Madoff’s decision that it was not enough to make money through legal investing. The word ‘chastity’ connotes Victorian priggishness for many today, but the need for it will never go away as long as people feel entitled to more.

¹¹ Maggie Rodriguez, “Interview with Fr. Cutie” (interview on *The Early Show*, CBS, 7 May 2009).

The Vow of Obedience

The paradox of voluntary obedience lies in self-respect, not self-erasure. The notion of obedience is often feared, perceived as a hindrance to clear thought and a threat to personal agency. But obedience, originating from the Latin *oboedire* for “to listen,” requires acute attentiveness and honest self-knowledge; anything less is not obedience but rather a timid intellectual laziness.¹² People who can truly listen, both to the inner voice of their consciousness and the outer voices of other people, are those most secure in themselves. Conversely, the people most paranoid about defending the sense of self are generally those with the weakest grasp on it. An obedient person can walk calmly into the realm of authoritative influence, trusting in his or her ability to recognize those suggestions which resonate with the genuine ethical self as well as those that do not.

Obedience requires a secure but not over-confident self, one that is comfortable letting go of comforts to listen ever more closely for hints of growth. Active listening sheds the accretions of passive existence: self-illusions that have become convenient, ideas that have become rigid, viewpoints that have become fixated, independence that has become standoffish. Receiving advice is not comfortable, jostling and shaking you, as it does, from the very constructions you think you need most. In “You Are Not a Single You,” the Sufi poet Rumi wrote:

You're still early in Spring.
July hasn't yet happened in you.
 This world is a tree,
and we are green, half-ripe fruit on it.
We hold tight to the limbs, because we know
we're not ready to be taken into the palace.
When we mature and sweeten,
 we'll feel ashamed
at having clung so clingingly.
 To hold fast

¹² Oxford English Dictionary, “Obey,” <http://dictionary.oed.com.libproxy.wustl.edu>.

is a sure sign of unripeness.¹³

To grow in obedience is to mature in freedom. Stripped of all props and yet finding yourself uncompromised, perhaps strengthened, you take a step forward.

Religion and Reconciliation

Why did Maximilian Kolbe step forward?¹⁴ I can only explain it through paradox – that somehow poverty trained him in the capacity for generosity, that chastity made him attentive and supple enough to love a stranger more than life, and that obedience helped him hear the way to be loyal to all that he held to be important - three vows which seem to restrict life and yet offered life. I puzzle over this, never able to connect the dots as clearly as I would like, but I do not worry over it because paradox is at the heart of all knowledge. Chemists wonder why hot water sometimes freezes faster than cool water. Physicists wonder why adding extra capacity to a network reduces efficiency. Cosmologists wonder why the night sky, with infinite stars in the universe, looks black. Every worthwhile pursuit is driven by perplexity, and it is for this reason that I trust questions more than answers, confusion more than clarity, and paradox before any other wisdom. I possess no certainty that I am meant to live the vows as a Catholic sister and I doubt I ever will; but it is a call to which I am willing to listen and try to obey more genuinely.



Fig.1. Maximilian Kolbe

Are the particular vows necessary for an ethical presence in society? Of course not. The ethical modes of being and acting, which I have attempted to communicate through the discussion of Catholic religious life, go by other names in other conversations. But wherever religion is lived ethically, it serves as an opportunity for true dialogue in which people can listen

¹³ Jalal Al-Din Rumi, *The Illuminated Rumi*, trans. Coleman Barks (New York: Broadway Books, 1997), 24.

¹⁴ Figure 1. S. Massimiliano Kolbe: *Vita dei Santi* (<http://users.libero.it/luigi.scrosoppi/santi/kolbeing.htm>, 25 Oct. 2009).

as well as talk, and give as well as defend. It is a process of redefinition, acknowledging failings as well as pointing to a more ethical future. When I became Roman Catholic, I found what it means to be part of a community and to take responsibility for something beyond my own individual existence. Religion makes me sometimes delight and sometimes agonize, often hope and often worry - but it always and inevitably makes me think. Religion is a mirror for humanity, the occasion to search ourselves, honestly face the reflection without excuses, and imagine a better reality. As Pierre Teilhard de Chardin said nearly a century ago, "The future belongs to those who give the rising generation reason to hope."

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