

## Comments about the Religious Life Today

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Transcript of a recording made by and edited by Father Louis Merton  
for Special General Chapter Sisters of Loretto, 1967

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Yesterday Sr Luke<sup>1</sup> and I were talking about the religious life, its problems, and so on, and thought it would be a good idea to make a tape, throwing together some of the ideas we were talking about, hoping it will be useful for your General Chapter. I warn you that this is particularly haphazard, and is being thrown together from all directions in the hope that the Holy Spirit who is present with you will help you to find something that you might not otherwise have found; help you above all to live your vocation. People have entrusted themselves to you that you may help them live more fully, that they may find a more abundant life. We all know this, but we also know that this can become very ambiguous, and it is not enough to go around talking about life and how we have a better life, a higher life, etc. We really have to live and it is more important to have one convent with five people in it who are alive than to have a whole country of convents in which people are half dead, or live a kind of living death, which sometimes can happen in religion. But then it has to be expected that life and death go together and there are moments when we all have this struggle in us as St Paul said. Life is a struggle between life and death in which, though we die eventually, at the end life must win. And life wins if during our life we have truly lived, or if at least at the end when faced with the ultimate decision, we can come back to life in the Spirit in such a way that death is overcome and that Christ rises in us.

1. Sr Mary Luke Tobin, SL.

There are several things I can do on this tape. One will be to take over the very excellent ideas in Sr Jane Marie's<sup>2</sup> prospectus or outline, or spiritual manifesto, so to speak, which is really excellent – the best I have seen and I'm probably going to talk about it to the monks here. It really dots the I's and crosses the T's and hits the nail on the head. It is really a very Christian document, an excellent piece of theology on the religious life. So that anything I say about it is simply to meditate aloud, using some of the ideas suggested by it to me in the hope that they may stimulate some discussion and some further seeking on your part. For example, let us take the first few words here.

'The congregation of the Sisters of Loretto, a dedicated community of faith and service, exists to praise the Lord and to minister to his people.' The word 'dedicated'. What is 'dedicated'? What does it mean to be dedicated? That is one of these words full of ambiguities that we have to explore and understand better.

We say dedicated. Rome says dedicated and The Sacred Congregation says dedicated, and we don't all quite mean the same thing. What are the various possibilities in this word dedicated? Is the dedicated life a trap? That is the big question. Is the dedicated life cold storage? Is a dedicated woman one who has been placed in cold storage, who has been placed out of circulation, who has been removed from life, who has been frozen? That is what the dedicated life has meant and does mean to certain people, and that is the purpose of the religious community to keep people dedicated. They mean by this: to keep people in an ice box, to keep them out of contact with life. Now this goes back to medieval theology, to an overemphasis on the negative aspect of sacrifice. A sacrifice is the act in which the victim is dedicated to God by being destroyed or being removed from the temporal sphere. This, incidentally, is not to be scoffed at. There have been reasons for this, for this kind of understanding of the sacred as apart from the temporal. I don't want to investigate it now, but I am sure that in the middle ages where you had a completely unified society, unified in one faith, it was possible to maintain this kind of understanding of the sacred as apart from the secular. In fact this helped to contribute a great deal to the secular. Whether there was myth in a cathedral[,] (the center of medieval cities built by the people by their own common effort and by their own spontaneous, dedicated work) you had something which at the same time was sacred and temporal, and the temporal society was sacred because of this particular kind of setup. But obviously this is far from being the kind of setup we have today and consequently today to

2. Sr Jane Marie Richardson, SL.

speak of the sacred as being apart from the temporal is fatal. Because it removes the sacred totally from the temporal, shuts out the temporal and makes the union of the two impossible to conceive.

A dedicated life—dedication as a trap? What does this mean to say dedication is a trap? Dedication is a trap if everyone in the dedicated life becomes completely controlled and completely predictable; if the dedicated woman is a totally predictable woman whose acts for the rest of her life are predetermined, from whose life spontaneity has been amputated by a brutal operation, from whose life spontaneous love has been a priori excluded in the sense that [it] is no longer possible within the framework of a certain number of predictable actions, or when her life is dedicated it means that the number of unforeseen possibilities has been cut down to a minimum. There are only five or six things left which are possible to us in which *we* can express love and these things are defined not by us but by somebody else; to be for somebody else, to be for the institution according to the ideas of somebody else. If this is what the dedicated life is, and if it is nothing but this, then it is a trap, and the sacrifice one makes in entering it is the sacrifice of all possibility of real, spontaneous love. That is the sacrifice of all possibility of growth and it is also really the sacrifice of all possible conversion.

My idea of dedication implies that one has *one* initial conversion at the beginning of religious life and then no other, except the conversions that are pre-determined, predictable and set up according to the pattern of the annual retreat—the retreat master comes and defines for you your annual conversion which is simply a return to the original conversion. So there is only one conversion which is renewed by an act of will under the lash when somebody whips you into doing it at a specified time according to canon law.

Now Sr Jane Marie really excludes this by saying that 'our lives as dedicated Christian women are meaningful to the extent that we cooperate through unceasing conversion and self-donation in the life-giving mission of Jesus Christ'. If the dedicated life is a life of unceasing conversion, then it is not a trap. It is a freedom and the freedom we seek in religious life is a freedom for seeking conversion, a self-donation, a renewed self-donation, the renewal of your gift, and this renewal of our gift is not simply a renewal of consent to being in a trap. It is new—it is not simply the reaffirmation, the reiteration of the old act of giving which you made in 1921, or something like that. It is a new act of self-donation here and now in 1967[. A]nd Christ said he will make all things new and perhaps now I have to give myself in a totally new way which I could not possibly have anticipated at the

time of my profession; in a way which no one around here could have anticipated.

But there are traps. Let us look at dedication from another point of view. Let us face the fact, setting aside all that can be said and should be said about the value of secular life in our times, let us face the aspects of secular life which make it a trap. Secular life is a trap, and in this I'm not simply giving my own ideas—I'm repeating what secular critics themselves have said in complaints about secular life. They found it to be a trap in which everything is highly systematized, highly organized, in which people are brought under control, in which a man lets himself be pre-defined in advance by society and is paid for his capacity and astuteness to accept this condition of being defined and to function in that condition in a sort of free-wheeling way in which there are certain forms of freedom, certain forms of latitude, but deadening in many cases because they are simply ways of making money; ways of being an operator, ways of being a wheeler-dealer, so to speak. And the freedom which we are defending in the USA is the freedom to be an operator, the freedom to make money in a certain context in which everything is rather rigidly defined and in which a lot of people are defined out of existence by poverty.

Complaints about the world as a rat-race, as a kind of tyranny in which society maintains its hold over the individual by reducing him to a situation in which he is rewarded for being a non-person, or for simply finding a way to affirm[ing] his personality in prescribed ways which are completely acceptable to society and which involves the acceptance of one's definition by one's society. And in the dialogue between the individual and other people he immediately finds himself systematically non-approved when he is spontaneous, when he is really himself and systematically affirmed and approved when he is untrue to himself, so that he quickly learns to live by the role which society gives him, and thus to be untrue to himself.

Now let us remember that there is a whole dialectical relationship between the individual and society and the individual *has* to be open to others; he has to be responsible and responsive to society; he has to accept the institution as just not a necessary evil, but as a real good in his life. All this we are remembering, but at the same time, we also remember the fact that society tends to make things easy for itself by enforcing certain roles upon individuals and making them accept these roles and punishing them for not accepting these roles, and for demanding as a sacrifice of the personality that the person be untrue to himself in order to be true to society. Consequently, whether in secular or religious society, we are constantly finding ourselves in positions

where people are rewarded for betraying themselves and betraying those whom they love, and this is praised as an act of sacrifice and homage to the supremacy of the organization.

Now get back to the idea of dedication. True dedication is the escape from that kind of trap and false dedication is a confirmation of that kind of trap. The dedicated life is not mere anarchy; it cannot be mere anarchy; it cannot be a mere life without any institution whatever. But the reason why people are called by the Holy Spirit to the dedicated Christian life is in order to free them from the tyranny of being defined constantly and everywhere by others and from being constantly tempted and enticed to betray their fidelity to themselves and their fidelity to those whom they really love, in order to affirm the supremacy of an institution which becomes actually more and more meaningless in their lives because its aims are further and further away from what they can honestly identify with. So that in the end the height of religious perfection is extolled as a total surrender of one's fidelity and truth to oneself and to other religions whom one may love, etc., in order to simply immolate one's ideals, one's thoughts, etc., and affirm that the institution has all the rights of God himself—that the institution, so to speak, has the right to destroy us if it wants to, in order to affirm itself.

Dedication in this sense becomes a sort of Aztec human sacrifice in which the religious is simply laid out on a stone altar and his heart is removed with a stone knife. That is not what we are here for; not what we are in the religious life for. Consequently, as long as this concept of dedication remains alive in religious life, the religious life has had it; it is through. Any community that maintains this false concept of dedication is finished. So, therefore, a lot of communities are finished because the ability of a community to survive and be a meaningful life in the Church today is correlative to its ability to overcome the false idea of wrong dedication as a trap in which the individual must, when the chips are down, sacrifice her integrity, her honesty, her truth, her deepest desires, etc., not for good reasons, but for some trivial reasons, purely and simply because the community demands it of her. The community that demands this kind of Aztec immolation of its members is no longer a community.

Let us remember how in our society today, secular and religious, there is more and more a tendency for an organization to trap an individual and to define him to himself. This puts him in a position from which he tries to escape. Remember what some of the big escapes are: not only the escape of a nervous breakdown and completely going out of one's mind, but just the escape of psychosomatic sickness, hypo-

chondria, addiction to medicines, drugs, etc.; think of the numbers of religious there must be who subsist on tranquilizers, who have to have tranquilizers in order to keep going; think of the priests and religious who drink too much; think of the people who are attached to all kinds of useless and hopeless escapes; think of some of the emotional friendships which are actually escapes from the tyrannic situation – and there again we have to be rather careful to distinguish the real friendships from those which are substitutes and which perhaps the trap-situation has made impossible; the number of emotional and homosexual attachments that sometimes arise in religious life can be an indication of what is happening to people (and they are not bad people); there is nothing the matter with them except they get trapped and this is their reaction to being in a trap. It is perhaps a cry for help.

Perhaps we should be grateful that these things are given as indications of a situation which *has to be dealt with*. But, of course, what happens is that the individual is blamed and these manifestations of a life force which is being arbitrarily denied are exploited, heartlessly sometimes as a way of invalidating the honesty of the individual. A person who has once been caught in some compromising relationship of some sort is thereafter discredited forever, and this is held against her for life. Anything she does, anything she says thereafter is simply a manifestation of this perverse disposition within her, and what this perverse disposition really is, is a despairing effort to escape a trap. A person for whom chastity has simply become a trap, instead of being able to develop greater love, or growth in love through consecrated chastity, may be, in a sense, despairingly reaching for some kind of confirmation in the emotions, the heart, the flesh; a confirmation of some inner integrity which has been denied. Of course, this is despairing, frustrating, hopeless, useless, fruitless; but there is a reason for it because the instincts are being more denied by the chastity which is supposed to help them sublimate themselves and be spiritually fulfilled.

The purpose of the dedicated life should be (ideally) to make unnecessary all these escapes and all these substitutes for reality and all these little wrong ways of 'turning on', uselessly trying to seek illumination, help, consolation, etc. And incidentally, to what extent are tranquilizers the results of the individual having been forced back into herself? She is seeking that support from a pill which is not forthcoming from a valid relationship with anybody else. Think of the kind of vicious circle which we can get into with that! And yet let us also at the same time recognize the fact that for a lot of people tranquilizers are necessary in a situation which is *de facto* unlivable for them and they need them, although they are prescribed, etc. But at the same time think of

the temptation there is; these things are so easy to get; the temptation simply to fall back on them, and the temptation to run.

You would be surprised at the number of people in religion who take tranquilizers. We have to just honestly face the fact of our religious destitution to a great extent and the fact that even this marvelous contemplative life should solve all problems and in fact doesn't; and contemplatives need to take sleeping pills!

Another way in which people run away from a trap situation is by their simply going on strike and becoming unable, simply unable to do certain things that are required by the trap. It is frightening sometimes to think of the number of religious who really could be so fruitful and so productive in many spheres and who are simply bogged down and become incapable of doing anything except a sort of third-rate job on something. A job to which they cannot quite give themselves, a job on which they have to be defensive, self-protective and wary all the time, living at a very low level and simply fulfilling minimum obligations and this with an enormous expenditure of exhausting effort just to keep going on this fruitless kind of level. And sometimes these people, when they suddenly find themselves by surprise in a quite different situation can completely open up and find it easy to be productive and original, fruitful, etc. But as soon as they get back in the rut, they can't give out anything much, and yet in giving out what little they give, they have to expend an enormous amount of effort. Then [in earlier times] the old, bad theology tried to explain that all this was highly meritorious and this was a real sacrifice of a dedicated life, this was a real crucifixion, etc. All of this as a consecration of religious sterility and fruitlessness.

Once again we have to guarantee that in the religious life we do not confuse this sterility, this fruitlessness, with dedication. The religious life is not cold storage; it is not an icebox. Obviously, there has to be some attention given to the needs of the body, modern needs of the body. Here I would say it is not so much a matter of just better food and more sleep, and things like that. These are of good quality everywhere; even at Gethsemani now the food is pretty liberal. What we really need is to provide more athletics, more sports, more getting the body into the sun, more tennis, something like that. These are things the modern person needs, a certain freedom of expression that comes from letting the body go in legitimate things. Swimming is tremendously beneficial. Religious should engage in other sports if they have time, and there should be time. They should find things they can do. It would be wonderful if nuns could ski and go off into the mountains

and ski once in a while. These things are tremendously fruitful today, provided one goes at it in the right way.

We have to admit the fact that psychiatry has become more and more an instrument of social control. This is something I think we should be aware of and study more carefully. There have, for example, been many articles written on the tyranny of psychological testing in secular and business life and there is much more to all this than I would be able to start talking about at the moment[. B]ut it is certainly true that there are a lot of people who feel themselves caught in a trap in society, who feel unconsciously or otherwise that there are deep possibilities in themselves which are being denied, completely amputated, and who react against this by getting mentally ill, by becoming unable to concentrate on their work, or unable to do a really good job, able only to carry on doing a mediocre job, but with tremendous effort, wasting a lot of time and energy, having headaches and going around feeling utterly sorry for themselves: all this is a symptom, as a protest—a really valid protest in many cases—against an unlivable situation. So then what happens? The organization, the institution has to defend itself by condemning these people, not by saying they are morally evil, possessed by the devil, that they are witches—although sometimes they act very much like witches—but by classifying them as neurotic, schizophrenic, schizoid, psychopathic, all that.

Psychiatrists themselves, who have a certain amount of wisdom, recognize the meaninglessness of these classifications and see how they are used as a handy method of controlling and discrediting religious. In some communities in which there are a whole lot of people who are simply misfits, who can't function properly anymore and who are a great nuisance to superiors, their way of handling these people is simply to categorize them as nuts, and to punish them for being nuts, so that when they do get a chance to come up with something meaningful, they are slapped down as being idiots, up to their old tricks. Of course, there are some that nothing can be done with—they are sick, utterly sick; they've had it, and they will drag on for the rest of their lives until they die, being more or less useless.

Now what they are in the eyes of God is another matter; whose fault it is, is another matter. How can anyone say whether the organization is entitled to point to them and to comfort itself on the basis of the sickness of these people? To declare that they are wrong and the organization is therefore right? To announce that this is what happens to people who don't knuckle down and follow the system.



Etc? But once again these aberrations which come from the protest of life against a dedicated trap are turned against the individual and become a further reason to prove that the rightness of the system, to prove the wrongness of non-conformity, to prove that everybody who disagrees with the system is a nut, and to prove it by an appeal to psychotherapy, putting the person in the care of a psychiatrist who is docile to the system (perhaps) and perpetuates this illusion.

Well, this machinery is nevertheless necessary; obviously some people would crack up completely if they didn't have this amount of care.

So what you have then is this religious organization, a dedicated trap in which all these people with good potentialities which have been completely blocked off and for whom there is no hope, live half-lives, vegetating as half-sick people, giving about one-quarter of what they could give, unhappy, unable to live fully, and completely aware of the fact that they are deceived, that they came to religion for something and didn't find it, through whose fault nobody knows, and they are reduced to the acceptance of defeat. The only consolation they have is for others to tell them, 'yes, you are defeated, but at least it is meritorious if you can accept it and don't bother us; live with it, leave us alone. We will give you all the tranquilizers you want. Just don't rock the boat, please!'

Now this kind of situation again is something that is bound to happen, but we could find other ways of dealing with it than simply by categorizing these people as neurotic and putting them on the shelf, and telling them it's their cross.

Maybe all these types of classification are pretty unreal and maybe all this psychotherapy thing is an evasion. Now I'm not agreeing with the right-wing kooks who are so scared of psychiatry. But let us admit the fact that psychiatry can be abused as a method of social control, as a method of absorbing misfits in a way acceptable to society so that they still continue to give a little, and fit in a little, although they are not fully living; a way of putting people into categories of insufficiency and then justifying it on certain religious and psychological grounds.

Actually, the dedicated life ought to be able to do better than that. There should be some way of finding out what real possibilities in these people are not being fulfilled and *if* there is some clue, some hint to a real possibility that is capable of fulfillment, let us make room for it. Now religious orders should be able to be flexible enough to open up to possible legitimate human possibilities which we didn't expect. If these neurotic people could have possibilities they could use, and if in using these possibilities they could be less neurotic and more fruitful, then for heaven's sake, let us cultivate and use them.

Now the question of how that is possible is another matter. I'm not a professional in this field; I don't know anything about it. But there must be a way, and surely the Holy Spirit, if we are faithful to the basic call and meaning of our dedicated life, will show us a way, a way of healing. There is in the Church a charismatic power of healing and this charismatic power of healing should be nowhere more obvious and more active than in the religious life, and yet where is it less obvious and less active sometimes? Sometimes—not always—but sometimes. Where is it more frustrated sometimes? The religious life should be the place where new possibilities should always be respected and able to open up. Religious life can't help being a trap for some people, but there should be built into it a means of getting individuals out of the trap and yet letting them remain in religious life. In a certain sense it would be all right if there were a provisional and valid form of ascetic discipline to deliberately lead people into a trap, provided we knew how to get them out again. This is very true in Zen-Buddhism. The Zen method of meditation, properly understood, is not just a system like the Ignatian system in which you learn several steps and just go through them. But, led by the spiritual master the disciple who can't possibly know quite what is going on is completely led into a trap; he is led almost to a point of a nervous breakdown. He is led almost to a point of collapse where he flips and this near-flip in Zen is a very, very fruitful thing because it simply brings the person to realize the total insufficiency of all systems, the Zen system included, of all organizations, all disciplines, and forces him, if he is any good, to make a breakthrough beyond all disciplines, all organizations, all systems, after which he is able to function in the organization, in the system, etc. with perfect freedom. So, therefore, we really have a dialectical proposition which is nothing new; it has been going on since the time of St Benedict, in China. And of course, it has become ostracized in China, too. The communists want answers, too, now! But the living Zen principle is something we can learn from.

It is not the question of simply breaking down all the barriers, making religious life completely permissive, letting people do whatever they want. That would be absolutely foolish; there has to be discipline, there has to be some compulsion, there has to be a certain amount of force exercised to stop somebody doing something that is utterly foolish; provided we know it is foolish and we don't think it is foolish just because it happens to go against our prejudices.

When a person is brought under pressure, life does become to some extent unbearable, but in a totally different way and for the sake of liberation driving the person to liberate himself. He is placed in a

situation which he recognizes to be unbearable and he sees that the unbearableness of it comes from the fact that there is no institutional way out, that the answers of the institution are not sufficient for him personally in this situation and that the answers of an ascetic discipline don't work, prayer doesn't work, meditation doesn't work; none of these things work; they all break down, and he has to go it alone. He has to make a breakthrough by himself with nothing, without help, without recognition, without anything; and then he gets recognition from his Zen master who says, 'Yes, he did in fact break through'. But he is not by any means reaching a point where he measures up to the master's definition of him; the master's preconceived definition of what he is supposed to be. The Zen master stands back, verifying that this disciple has validly defined himself.

That is what the religious life should provide. It should provide trained and compassionate people living in a community where other people who are trapped by the falsity of a lying system, an inadequate system, may come and be led through discipline to a point of great hazard and difficulty, where they are forced to define themselves, and sweat blood doing it, and to die and rise again while doing it. To be concerned in their self-definition by the sympathy and understanding of others; thereafter to join with these others in freedom, but in accepting social organization and discipline, but with total freedom and flexibility, not as an end in itself, not as an ultimate definition of their lives. And in this freedom to go on with the others to a creative, totally creative, self-definition of their own future, and of their community in its future; which means leaving everything wide open.

Applying this to you: it seems to me what you should be thinking is not how to close the future with definitions which you will henceforth live out, but how to keep the future completely open so that you will be able to liberate yourself and one another in an open community with the help of the Holy Spirit and with the help of your love for one another. And your love for one another should take a form, not simply of framing a definition and keeping each other in mind with the definition, but an undefined life, opened to the Spirit and moving freely with the Spirit, helping one another to stay open to the Spirit, reproving one another when you see one closing up against the Spirit (if you know what that is, and don't be too quick to assume that you know).

But I do think that the document here which Sr Jane Marie has drawn up should give some pretty good guidelines for this, especially with the idea of unceasing conversion and self-donation which is really what I have been expatiating on in the last few minutes of this particular tape.

One of the things that the hippie movement is trying to say to this country is that in an entirely square and organized life such as we have, where unsuspected possibilities are clamped down and sat on, only certain things are permitted to come out; in this kind of life people are afraid to let out what is hidden in them, and the hippies are saying one should not be afraid. One of the things about LSD, one of the things they are saying by using LSD (and one of the arguments against it) is that it takes you up out of yourself and makes you flip. The person who is under the influence of LSD is temporarily crazy and yet exalted, and of course, the danger is that even under LSD the person may be totally vulnerable to what is inside himself. He may be overwhelmed and destroyed by it. But by and large, what they are saying is that it is a logical outcome of the whole movement which began with psychoanalysis and which has become channeled in socially acceptable forms by psychological therapeutic engineering and manipulation of people to keep them under social control. So now you have a rebellion against all that, in which by means of drugs one lets out something that is beyond all social control and one rebels against social control by releasing power hidden in the depth of oneself through the mechanical application of drugs.

Now this is of course a symptom and this should be relevant to the religious life because religious life, of all places, used to be the traditional place where people 'turned on' without drugs—let's face the fact that rituals and sacraments and liturgical methods perhaps did take the place of drugs and helped people handle these deep compulsions which could come out in these ways. Perhaps the structure of the religious life as we have it now is not only not able to do that any more, but prevents it. I don't know. I certainly found that in my first days in Gethsemani the liturgy and the life here certainly helped one 'turn on' in the real sense. It certainly gave the key to profound, deep things in oneself that one couldn't have access to in life outside, or I never was able to have access to them in that way. Whether the life here is now doing that, I don't know; perhaps it is. But anyway, that is what the religious life is for. Not for people to have experiences but for a profound liberation and release of the deeper things in the spirit of man; things which are beyond consciousness and which can become conscious without destroying a person, without upsetting a person, so that religious life should be a place in which ecstasy is common but not ecstasy as a pathological sort of way in which a person is out of his senses. It should be an ecstatic life in the spirit (if you take the word 'ecstatic' in the way I mean it), a place where one transcends frequently one's ordinary level, in which life has a great fullness, a jubilation, an

inebriation of love and joy and fullness and creativity, etc. This is what the hippies are shouting about, claiming that it is utterly impossible in our square society in which instead of this, what we have in American suburban society instead of LSD is the martini, by which people get stoned every night, and instead of getting in a state of creativity they live in a state of being sandbagged, a sort of mixture of joy and stupor which is a common thing. What makes this way safer or better than LSD?

Now this isn't what the religious life is about by any means, but there should be a dimension of ecstasy in religious life. But we are afraid of this and there is a great deal of hesitation because there is the danger of false, crazy, emotionalism, stupid pseudo-mysticism in religious life and we know that is another form of sickness. It's a cry for help on the part of certain people, and we have to be very careful not to give the impression that this is what we are preaching, but religious life should enable people to handle the onslaught, the seeming invasion from within themselves of profound unconscious feeling, emotions, impulses, lights, etc. that society does not normally account for and cannot normally account for. And whether we can handle that kind of thing today (I think we should be able to; we are able to some extent), but we should keep that in mind. Our lives should favor this ecstatic sense; that is what it means to belong to Christ, to be liberated from the mere square existence of rational consciousness of what is socially acceptable and to be able to, as St Paul says somewhere, 'to exceed', to go beyond oneself toward God and at the same time to be sober for one's neighbor, for one's sisters and those who are around one. To live a dialectic of excess and sobriety, of an interior spiritual excess of joy and love and an external modesty of consideration of others. We don't burst out and manifest these things and speak of them in ways that annoy other people. If we can learn to live in that kind of alteration between the deep joy of the Spirit in Christ and the love and compassion for others, which out of consideration for them is open to them without imposing any of our own excess except in so far as they want it. But we are afraid of what is not socially acceptable; what is not previously defined by society strikes us more and more as something that invades us from the outside and something that we ought to fear. Hence the anxiety. It is hard to explain that among religious there is so much anxiety in which they feel themselves threatened by something within themselves, and yet, what is threatening them is perhaps the best thing in them, something that is very vital and profound that they have been denying conscientiously in obedience to the demand of a previous definition imposed on them by the organization. Now if they

can learn to be free from that previous command and open up to this power in themselves which they have hereto denied, their life might be much more joyful and much more creative. And all it will call for will be to take the risks of sometimes being so happy they take a flip; but they should learn to control this and there should be people around to help them handle it. That is what the religious life is for. So that is why St Teresa would play the guitar and dance. She had certainly a great deal of this and so there should be sometime a little bit of that kind of excess and joy in the convent and in convent life and in dealing with other people.

Religious should not be under the compulsion of pressure at every moment. Religious should be people who know how to get free from the obsessions with doing things and getting things done. There is an enormous overemphasis on activity and on doing things and getting things done and accomplishing something and expressing oneself by action. Activity is good and I am not saying that the substitute for activity is to sit with folded hands and closed eyes and hope for the prayer of quiet to come, or something like that, although there is nothing wrong with that at certain times. But we are obsessed with the idea that we have to get things done or that we have to be in a state of perpetual motion, constantly doing things and constantly operating, constantly getting something started, etc. We could profitably learn to get out of, and to look at things in a much more relaxed and less pressurized way. You can do much more if you are not obsessed with what you are doing, not dominated by the sort of fear that all these essential things will not get done somehow. Maybe they are not so essential; maybe a lot of these things need not be done, etc.

Religious should have a little more freedom from the compulsion of being active and this is in the interest of activity itself. In other words, they should give the best of themselves to what really should be done. And in order to give the best of oneself, one has to have a certain amount of time just to let things be and just to simply relax and not to be constantly pushing at any specific project, to let things be quiet and let ideas come. People have a need for a certain amount of quiet and relaxation of a sort. The fact that many Americans feel so guilty about this is bound to have an effect in our religious life and in our religious people. Some people can't stand solitude, can't stand silence, can't stand being by themselves, can't stand being inactive.

Really it is very important for religious to have the freedom and flexibility and the openness that comes from not being constantly under pressure and I think it is very important for all of us. One of the things that get[s] us under this pressure is the excessive concern about

our institutional survival. This should not concern us that much. We get in a vicious circle. We have got to keep these institutions going; have to keep the thing up; keep it surviving; keep attracting postulants and then you have to convert the rest of the world and you have to do hundreds and hundreds of things you would be free from if you weren't concerned about this structure.

There is a kind of pharisaism in reverse that is backfiring against the religious life. There are those who suddenly discover that everything is 'wrong' with religious life, with religious institutions, and therefore make a great fuss about leaving the institution, etc., as if the idea is that as soon as you find anything corrupt at all, anything that has anything wrong with it, you have a moral obligation to run away from it as fast as you can. I think this is something which is quite absurd and which we really need to pay attention to. Of course perhaps part of it is due to a sort of religious pharisaism which we have always had to contend with. What is happening now is simply a turning inside out of the old religious viewpoint of the perfect religious life as opposed to the corrupt world. Now we are getting this thing turned around and it is being used against religious life. In the old days one found the world corrupt and he fled to the cloister. Now you find the cloister corrupt and you flee with great protestations of purity and innocence to the world. This is just the same thing in reverse.

If we criticize the religious life and the religious institutions, as I criticize them, that critical stand has to be validated by something. I agree that I as a religious identify with this life that has these imperfections and elements of corruption in it. They are my imperfections and my corruptions and I should say that the things I don't like about Gethsemani are in some and perhaps in large measure my fault. I have contributed to the things about Gethsemani that are wrong, the things that are false about it. Perhaps one reason why they bother me, why they irritate me, is that I recognize them as my own failings. It would certainly be far-fetched and very dishonest if I ran away from Gethsemani merely because it was manifesting a lot of things I did not like about myself. I can't really identify with some things that are not my fault, but I must accept these just as much as Gethsemani must accept me. I can visualize how another person at Gethsemani would look at me and say, 'How is it that this character is allowed to go on doing the things he does?' In the religious life we have to accept this, accept the fact that we are a scandal to one another to some extent, that our life is not what it should be and that it really never will be what it should be, and that we are all under judgment together. One

of the basic things about the religious life is this facing our common failings and judgment.

Part of the good will of a religious is the willingness to take upon himself or herself the failures and faults that are inevitable in one another and in the community, and to shoulder the burden together under the judgment of God, asking the mercy of Christ for all of us.

There is the pharisaism of the young who come in starry-eyed and ga-ga about the religious life for a year or two, then all of a sudden they begin to find some of the older religious are human beings with human failings and limitations. They raise their hands in horror at this and say, 'What am I doing in this institution with these miserable old people?' This is a very unchristian reaction. If we have entered a religious order, a convent, cloister, or monastery, we have decided implicitly that we accept the mercy of God and the order, and we have to deal with this sort of people. We are going to tolerate them and they are going to tolerate us and we don't make exorbitant demands for the impossible upon the members—demand that they be perfect, demand that they be reformed, demand that they be unworldly, without spot or wrinkle.

A great number of people who have their own failings, suddenly find a few failings in the Church and then decide this is a good excuse for leaving. Now this is not a Christian attitude. The Church is corrupt in many ways, but we have to stay with it and work with it among ourselves and all try to get a little bit better as we go along. I think this has to be clearly stated today; otherwise there will be a great deal of confusion. As soon as anybody offers any honest criticism, it must be clear that this does not provide a justification for rejecting the Church, the religious life, simply taking off into the world just because there are faults to be found. If we are what we are, then we must work at repentance and renewal. It is part of the common work of repentance and renewal, and a common work of repentance and renewal cannot be carried out in honesty if as soon as anything is found to repent of everybody repents of their whole vocation and simply departs.

Obviously the institution has to continue and we have to bear in mind that it needs a future of some sort; we are responsible to some extent to the future. But we should not look at this with obsession and compulsion, with the idea that we have to keep this thing going as a big success, etc., and get lots of postulants, preserve the image, make money, and be a big deal. But we should entrust the future [to] God with greater confidence, greater hope and have a more relaxed attitude toward the future and also toward the present so that we also



can be open to influences of grace in the present which we would not otherwise recognize if we were too upset about maintaining the institut[ion] in the future.

One of the things that makes Camus so much of an influence with young people today, especially university students, is that he is one of the few thinkers they can actually trust. He inspires this trust by a quality which I think is important today for us to consider as religious—his fidelity to man, his refusal to sell man off in favor of a theory, or an idea or a system. His fidelity to concrete human values and his refusal to sacrifice these values for abstract, historical concepts, abstract historical ideals. Camus' position face-to-face with communism was that of a man who said, 'You shall not torture and kill in the name of history because you have a historical theory or idea which you think is the right one. That does not entitle you to sacrifice human beings; their right; their right to life; their right to happiness in favor of a hypothetical historical situation.'

This also was his attack upon Christianity because he accused Christians of being unfaithful to man in the name of *dogma*. He said Christians would always prefer an abstract dogma to concrete human values. This also separates him from the existentialists. Camus is not an existentialist; that is to say, he does not place exclusive emphasis upon the freedom of the individual will and on the person creating his own life out of his own freedom completely arbitrarily. For Camus, there was more to it than this simple, rather arbitrary fidelity to oneself which is so common in existentialism and which we run up against so much today. Instead of this completely arbitrary dedication to one's own freedom, Camus had an objective vision of human values which he did not amplify greatly, but he did have this basis of human value, and human fidelity and human relationship in which there were objective grounds of certain fidelity which he would claim before all else.

This, for example, he would say is the theme of the novel, *The Plague*. Camus sums up in a few sentences the idea that one does not have truth and explanations of the plague in terms of the theology of good and evil, but rather that one must heal what one can heal, even though one does not yet know or see what it is all about. One accepts the limitations of a concrete type here and now. When people are dying, you heal them if you can. When people are sick you do what you can to help them get well. If you don't know what it's all about, you keep on healing them if you can while waiting to find out about it later, if you find out about it at all. In other words, we do not manufacture an answer in advance that says what it is all about. And then we either heal or don't heal in accordance with whether the person you confront

fits in with your ulcer or not. If he is a good man (Marxism) you heal him; if he is a bad man you shoot him. And so it is a kind of realistic, very acceptable humanism which accepts the obvious path which is proposed by human needs here and now, and Camus is willing to respect this everywhere. He finds it in some Christians and he doesn't find it in enough Christians.

There is another statement made which is typical of his kind of prudence, modesty, skepticism if you like. He said that he 'understood that one does not demand anything of life, but one accepts life without argument. That is better than wanting violently to be faithful to oneself when above all one, like myself, does not know himself very well.' I think this is a good point because this is a lot more realistic view than many young people take today. There is a great deal of talk about fidelity to oneself based on existentialism.

Camus has reservations about the existentialist approach. The existentialist approach tends to demand a great deal out of life and to be aggressively faithful to oneself, aggressively true to oneself without knowing who one is—this is one of the great characteristics of some of the young people today. This insistence upon being true to themselves in a way that is obviously not true to themselves. It is very ambiguous because it consists really in an evasion, a setting themselves up against somebody they imagine to be opposed to them, and negating this other person as an affirmation of themselves, a sort of futile, desperate continuation of the adolescent refusal to submit to his parents while remaining completely dominated by them, a neurotic revolt against people when one is really not in revolt at all.

There is a great ambiguity about being true to oneself and this is why at the end one is reduced to desperation if one takes this too seriously in young people. They are always talking about being true to themselves and you go along with them, but what is it? Later it becomes quite clear what it is they are being true to, and one suddenly finds all this talk about being true to oneself, being autonomous, can in many cases mask a rather abject dependence. They are constantly coming to you for approbation of their progress in being true to themselves and you say, yes, go on, be true to yourself; but you can't get rid of them. They won't stop hanging around your neck. You do run into it very much. An enormous amount of time is wasted in useless discussion about all these beautiful ideas of spontaneity and self-affirmation of which one eventually becomes very tired because actually they don't really mean what they claim to mean.

Another thing about Camus is that he does distinguish an order which is imposed by life itself, by nature and by the universe. He does

not make a big thing out of this; he does not develop a whole cosmos system, but there are certain objective duties and values which are imposed by life itself and by the universe. He holds this objective order rather than an arbitrary, subjective order imposed by man in his individual freedom. With Camus it is all right in so far that it does have some objective basis, but when it is purely subjective and arbitrary it takes no account of anything except its own caprice, its own fantasy and it sacrifices everything, including the lives and happiness of everyone to its own self-affirmation. The point that Camus makes is this fidelity to man in the context of a rather respected, prudent, classical, realistic humanism which refuses to affirm more than it really knows and refuses to base itself on things it has not really experienced, but does pay great respect to what it actually has experienced, to the human values it has encountered in concrete human beings and in loyalty to those concrete human beings.

As religious we have to think in these terms much more – of fidelity to one another, fidelity not just to the rule, to the system, the religious ideal, but to our common vocation and common task, the common value we have discovered living together, studying together, working together for a certain end. This precludes excessive demands on life, excessive demands on other people, excessive insistence that they live up to standards of our own, etc., accepting people as they are, accepting institutions with their inevitable failings, but also with the duty to criticize, to change and adapt. Basically, however, I think one of the best means is a lot less talk about fidelity and a lot more real fidelity based on the actual facts of human and religious existence; fidelity based on the commitments we have made to one another by living together, working together, making vows together, undertaking certain tasks, etc., and we need, if possible, a deeper understanding of the fact that fidelity to oneself is not just a sort of magic phrase that excuses every infidelity to everything else. Somehow one feels that this idea of fidelity to oneself is just simply a glorification of caprice in which people excuse themselves from every possible kind of commitment and can be very faithful to other people. Now obviously this *is* found everywhere, but all of a sudden someone begins being true to himself and very untrue to someone else.

So, therefore, we can conclude with the thought that a real fidelity is of great importance and even if we do not come up with very perfect ideals, if we end up with much more fidelity to one another and to the grace God manifests to us through one another, we will really be doing something worthwhile.