

more the necessary political negotiations between dioceses or between the bishops and the religious orders had not taken place. In the event the Congress was not a major occasion for decision-making about pastoral strategies appropriate for England and Wales as a whole but the initiation of a *process* which was to start with personal spiritual renewal and the tilling of the soil at the grass-roots. Only time will tell whether the delegates will remain faithful to this work in the face of considerable apathy, frustration and hostility at the parish level. If they are, and if the bishops continue to give them the support which they need, then truly English Catholicism will have come-of-age.

## Religious Celibacy and Sexual Justice \*

Roger Ruston O P

It is a foolish thing to make promises about what you intend to do in a year's time; but at the chapter meeting last year I promised the Provincial that I would give a talk on celibacy this year, hoping to provoke some discussion on a topic that is too rarely discussed. I have had plenty of time to regret it. But I have kept to my original proposal because the reasons I had for making it have not gone away.

The first reason was a sense of irritation at the way some of the brethren speak about the problems of celibacy entirely by way of anecdotes: how Father A was nearly seduced in the parlour, how troublesome women plagued the life of Father B, about Father C and his "cousin", about the real reason for Brother D leaving the Order. When I thought about it, I realised that there are two things about this kind of talk that I find unsatisfactory:

- 1 its privatisation of the vows: that celibacy is mostly a matter of an individual keeping his vow of chastity, like a precious object to be kept intact under threats, especially threats from certain women; and that the available collective wisdom on the matter consists in anecdotal knowledge of how to do this.

- 2 the failure to take seriously the lives of the women whose attentions cause so much difficulty when it gets out of hand and — it must be added — so much satisfaction when it is under proper ministerial control. It is a failure to look very deeply into what

\* Paper given at the Provincial Chapter of the English Dominicans, April 1982.

happens and ask why it happens in such predictable ways and what this tells us about the injured relationships between men and women, which we celibates have to live out as much as anyone else. Men and women in the life of the Church get caught up in processes of interaction which few people understand and which cause humiliation and frustration on all sides. The stereotypes of women get strengthened: they are bossy/neurotic/strident/after power/after my virginity/ unhappily married/better off married/ incapable of independent thought, etc. etc, . . . And there is always the suspicion that the woman who frequents a male religious establishment and professes to be interested in theology or the spiritual life or prayer or whatever else, is *really* interested in the male attention she needs, or a man to look after, or a risk-free flirtation . . . I am not, by the way, saying that other people suffer these stereotyped views but that I have got it right. I have been through all these opinions myself, and from time to time they come back very strongly when things are going wrong. And conversely, it is obvious to me that some of my brethren handle these things a good deal more successfully than I do and that, on the whole, their view of women is fair and compassionate. However, no one can doubt that there is something wrong, and that we do not very often talk about it. And that is what I want to do:

The second source of dissatisfaction for me is the absence of any shared wisdom about celibacy in the Province. Nothing was passed on to me when I was a novice or student; and I had nothing to pass on when I was novice-master: except my own half-baked attempts to make sense of my own experiences, with some help from the gospels and St Thomas. But there was no shared, living theology. Perhaps everyone always assumes that everyone else understands what it is about already, and that there is no need to explain. The similarity here to the old-fashioned embarrassment about communicating the facts of life is probably not accidental.

Of course, I have picked up ideas about it in a haphazard way, as everyone does. But all the explanations or ideologies have been unsatisfactory. As a rough and ready classification, I have divided these explanations into two sorts: the *ideal* and the *functional*. Of ideal explanations I again distinguish two sorts the *negative* and the *positive*. Negative ideal explanations talk of celibacy in terms of renunciation for the sake of following Christ, something meaningless in worldly or natural terms. It is giving up something good in itself as an act of faith and a sign of the passing away of this world to make way for the Kingdom of God. We do it simply because we are called to do it. Positive ideal theories on the other hand talk not so much of the renunciation involved as of the positive values to be realised: the return to the possibility of shame-

free male/female friendship, as it was before the Fall; the freedom to love and take bodily life seriously without having to make decisions about whether to marry, or sleep with, someone (freedom from “the tyranny of genitality”, as Simon Tugwell O P called it in his useful paper on this subject in the *Furrow*, June 1977). In general, positive theories see celibacy as giving the freedom to live a more human life, at least for some people who have the gift of being able to live without marriage.

Functional explanations tend to be more sober, more pragmatic and without high theology: there is only one good reason for remaining celibate – it enables me to do my job of preaching the gospel, being a priest, or a brother in the community or however it is I see my calling. In itself, it has no value. I myself have always tended to take the functional explanation, largely out of distrust for idealistic theories.

I do not mention these explanations of celibacy only to pour scorn upon them. They all have value, but I find them all inadequate. My complaint is not that they are wrong, but that they do not seem to lead to a *practical wisdom*. I suppose it was a practical wisdom that the anecdotal approach was, in its own way, trying to provide. I have already been asked – after reading a version of this paper to a women’s theology seminar – what I mean by a practical wisdom in this context. I cannot be precise about it yet. I am hoping that the rest of the paper will explain what I mean by it. The term suggested itself as a result of my preparing a class on Aristotle’s *Ethics* at the same time as writing this paper.

The negative ideal type of explanation of celibacy – renunciation of a natural good as an act of faith and sign of this world’s passing away – fails at the point of responding to the demands of justice. I believe that the necessity of doing justice is a very important element in all male/female encounters. “Giving it all up for the Lord” is an explanation that may keep me going up to a point – until I enter the confusion of listening to the voice of the Lord in the needs and claims of other people, with other vocations; especially women caught up in the toil of child-rearing, desertion, failure of marriage, failure to find their real value in the male Church, which likes to think it knows all about women’s value.

The positive ideal type of explanation is more helpful in this respect, since it does have something to say about celibacy being for the sake of a more satisfactory human community: giving the hope of regenerated human relationships, not depending on sexual domination, nor on the privatised, commercialised marriage patterns which impose themselves upon people almost universally. However, positive explanations may still suffer from the limitations of idealism. These are chiefly two:

- 1 the tendency to identify celibacy with personal virginity, which is always and everywhere the same thing;
- 2 the consequent belief that, morally speaking, you either keep it or you don't – that there is a single scale of success or failure.

This makes celibacy a non-historical, given state of life that is lived faithfully or unfaithfully at different times and in different places, but is essentially the same identical thing in the 3rd century, the 13th and the 20th, for men, women, monks, nuns, Dominicans, Jesuits etc. etc.

The result of this idealism is that it is powerless to cope with the historical issue between men and women. There is a female/male agenda, as it were, which is under continual historical revision. My intuition is that only a non-idealist conception of celibacy would be able to cope with this. Conversely, I believe that religious celibacy is a vital factor in healing the injury of male/female relations in the Church and the world at large: that it is one of the great gifts which the Church has for the world.

The curious thing is that, when it comes to poverty and obedience, we Dominicans have successfully managed to abandon idealism and to adopt historically different, socially appropriate forms. We know that poverty must take different forms at different historical epochs and we know that it does not amount to the same unique practice in all orders of the Church. Benedictine poverty is not the same as Dominican poverty and Dominican poverty in the 13th century is not the same as Dominican poverty in the 20th. And it should not be, if we are to do our work well. Different objectives in the life of the Church and different social/religious conditions demand different expressions of the renunciation of possessions to follow Christ. There is not some single, unitary practice called religious poverty, which different religious live up to either well or badly, according to the state of their religious fervour.

It is the same with obedience. We only have to look at the way Dominican obedience differs from that of the Jesuits: a different spirit, a different organisation. Fraternal, perhaps, rather than military, and with a far greater degree of democratic participation; but none the less demanding for all that. And we only have to look at the way our practice of obedience has altered over the past twenty years under pressure from different ideas of co-operation brought into the Order by people formed in a very different post-war society. Idealists will tend to see all change as decline from perfection, but truly, those of us who have joined the religious life during the past twenty years know that something far more hopeful and valuable has been going on: something which has enabled *us* to come, to remain, to be Dominicans, even though in a way which would

have been scarcely acceptable to our brethren of a generation or two ago.

But what have we done with celibacy? I think we have failed to re-think it in the same way. We are left with anecdotes and a threadbare idealism – and a lot of embarrassed silence. I think our practice has in fact changed a great deal. The virtual disappearance of the strict enclosure in most of our houses is a sign of this. But we do not care much to talk about it and there is certainly very little shared understanding to pass on, as I discovered when I was novice-master.

What I shall now do is to put forward a number of propositions: materials for a non-idealist understanding of celibacy. I shall use as a starting point St Thomas's rather sparse account of the religious life in *Summa Theologiae*, IIa IIae, QQ 183, 184 and 186. I have always found it the most useful because it concentrates on essentials, is based on the gospel texts, is free of inflated theology and can be rescued from the matter/spirit dualism which often infects this subject. On the other hand it does seem to suffer somewhat from a religious individualism, i.e. the religious state is primarily for the sanctification of the individual. But I think it can be rescued from that too, since the core of St Thomas's theology of the religious life is that its purpose is to remove impediments to charity, which cannot possibly be understood in purely individualistic terms, as if it were simply a moral virtue.

The essential thing for St Thomas is that the religious vows are a commitment, made with "some solemnity" – i.e. publicly, in a Church ceremony – to take on a state of "perfection". In this life, perfection can only mean removing all obstacles in the way of charity, by which the goal of human life, God himself, is to be reached. It does not mean moral perfection. It means following Jesus – a dynamic thing. Now "states" in the thinking of St Thomas have to do with types of freedom and servitude. The really free person is free from sin and in servitude to justice. This freedom from sin and servitude to justice comes about through charity. Charity and Justice converge in the service of Christ: justice expands to include mercy and everything else which comprises the righteousness of God's Kingdom. So the religious makes herself/himself free to serve charity/justice by removing certain impediments to love which commonly get in the way and make this service more difficult. Of course, this charity – love of God, and one's neighbour as oneself – is imposed upon all Christians through the fact of their baptism. It is a matter of precept, not of counsel only. So everyone has to remove *sin*. Sin is simply a block. But the *impediments*, which the religious life removes, are basically good things, like possessions, marriage, individual ambitions. The desire for these things is re-

nounced, so that the desire can be for God only. I think St Thomas sees these things as being impediments which chiefly get between the individual and God himself, in a rather “vertical” manner. Hence the flavour of religious individualism which runs through the account. Nevertheless, the material is there for a wider view. It is in the central truth that the vows of religion are *instruments of charity*, making a person free for justice, and are not ends in themselves, or a kind of moral perfection. With a wider understanding of justice and a less vertical understanding of charity, we can build on this idea.

We can recognise that there has always been a Christian ambivalence towards human institutions, especially marriage and property, so closely connected, which are both God-given and good and yet man-made, cast in historical forms with a various admixture of injustice. At any given time injustice has a hand in their shaping so that they may present real obstacles to love. We have to admit that the capacity to love suffers social, organisational injury, which the individual alone cannot get over just by being “more loving”. Any investigation of the meaning of justice and charity in the scriptures will show that charity is not to be thought of as an individual escape route from an otherwise unjust society. What is promised in the gospels – and in St Paul – is a thorough reconstruction of the human world in which justice and love will converge and both become really possible at last. I think the vows of religion must have something to do with realising this possibility.

The vows of religion then are instruments of charity. Of course, not everyone who makes themselves *free* for charity (or justice) in this way actually *does* charity (or justice). There are bad religious who use these instruments for their own selfish ends. This can be particularly true of celibacy, long before anyone loses his virginity in the technical sense. Conversely, the vast majority of Christians who do not take vows of religion are not prohibited from doing justice, and may do it as well as – or better than – anyone in vows. St Thomas likens the difference to that between the two brothers in the gospel parable, sent by their father to work in the vineyard: the one said “Yes, I will” and didn’t, and the other said “No, I won’t” and did. And what the one did and the other didn’t was not keep poverty, chastity and obedience, but do justice and love God and his neighbour. But here we come up against one of the great unsolved ambiguities of the religious life in the history of the Church. No one who looks at the historical evidence can doubt that, for most of the time, it has been thought of as *better* – as a way of life more faithful to the commitment of baptism. This is clearly St Thomas’s understanding. He believes that the religious state is more open to the love of God, since



those natural impediments have been removed. This evaluation is simply rejected by most lay and religious men and women whom I have spoken to on this matter. They see no reason why the justice of the Kingdom cannot be done precisely through taking on those things that St Thomas talks of as impediments to charity.

Let us look at what he says about celibacy – or perpetual continence, as he calls it. It is an instrument of charity like poverty and obedience. He gives two reasons why the married state can be an impediment to charity:

1 The intensity of the pleasure involved in sex withdraws the soul's attention from God. He quotes Augustine: "I think that nothing brings a man's mind down from the heights as much as the seduction of women and that bodily contact indispensable to marriage". I do not think this is a good argument. It is dualistic, male-centred and betrays an idealist concept of contemplation: and no doubt some of my married friends would say that it is just plain wrong. But then St Thomas wasn't speaking from experience, although Augustine was. However it was experience viewed in retrospect, after his Neo-Platonist conversion.

2 The second reason is a more functional one – and a better one, though not without pitfalls for the interpreter. It is the complaint which St Paul makes about marriage in I Corinthians 7: "I want you to be free from troubles. The unmarried man (or woman) is anxious about the affairs of the Lord, but the married man (or woman) is anxious about worldly affairs – how to please his wife (or her husband). Their interests are divided". Now this passage can only be understood properly as part of St Paul's general advice to the Corinthians not to change the way of life they were leading when they were converted, because the end of the world and the second coming of Christ were expected soon. It would be a time of great distress for everyone, and it were better if the Christians were at peace so that they could be single-minded about meeting the Day: "I think that in the present distress it is well for a person to remain as he is. Are you bound to a wife? Do not seek to be free. Are you free from a wife? Do not seek marriage. If you marry, you do not sin . . . Yet those who marry will have worldly troubles, and I would spare you that. I mean, brethren, the appointed time has grown very short; from now on let those who have wives live as though they had none . . . For the form of this world is passing away. I want you to be free from troubles. . . ." So it is in this spirit that the verses used by St Thomas are to be read. The married man is liable to limit his vision to the affairs of the moment – starting a new life with a new person, starting a new family and home. And similarly with the woman. In these verses St Paul is not posing a clear alternative between pleasing one's wife or husband

and pleasing the Lord, as if the one interfered with the other at all times. It is only because he believed the time to be short and full of impending distress that he could talk in this way. It is not a general principle of Christian spirituality. If this were the case, there would be introduced into Paul's thinking a partitioning of love between Christ and other Christians which finds no support elsewhere in his writings. It is rather a judgment which is very much bound to a unique historical situation. The primary purpose of Christians at that time was to live in peace with everyone, so as to be in a proper state to meet the final appearance of the Risen Lord: i.e. not to be absorbed by lesser events and plans for the future. So my conclusion is that this scriptural reference of St Thomas is not all that informative about the best reasons for taking on celibacy and it does not give us any sound reason for regarding it as a "better" state, simply speaking.

I want now to return to the central idea of the vows of religion as instruments of charity, without any attempt to work out why they should – or should not – be regarded as superior to any other such instruments, such as marrying and bringing up children. So my first proposition is:

1 *Religious celibacy is an instrument for doing justice in the matter of relations between the sexes –*

in a world in which there is a good deal of routine, institutionalised injustice done to women. This is a prescriptive statement: all instruments can be used for good or bad purposes, and taking on celibacy is not a just or loving act in itself. It can be used to confirm injustice in a male-centred Church. I am saying what it *ought* to be, rather than what it always *is*.

Taking on celibacy is not just a matter of renouncing some natural created good – sex and marriage. That way of looking at it betrays an innocence towards relations between the sexes to which we have no right. What we are doing through celibacy is putting ourselves in a different position with regard to an inherited, historically changing set of relations between men and women: a set of relations which is not all bad, to be sure, but which is certainly characterised by a good deal of routine denial of women's gifts, aspirations and indeed, vocations in the Church. Women's vocations are systematically stereotyped and limited, largely by male needs. They are bearers of children, makers of homes, givers of much needed attention, purveyors of drinks and sympathy – and devotion – providers of dependable ignorance, willing students who never graduate to be teachers, disciples who never become preachers of the gospel, followers who never become leaders. And all this is the necessary environment for male enterprise, male excellence – or, in the Church, male vocations, which are



consistently valued more highly in relation to the central activities of the Church itself. Women are on the whole valued in relation to male vocations.

I would have thought that celibacy – contracting out of marriage for the sake of the justice of the Kingdom – is nothing if it does not in some way attempt to put this right. And I refer here to both male and female celibacy, the difference between which I shall presently come to. Not taking an idealist approach towards justice any more than I do towards celibacy, I do not think it is advisable to describe some state of justice between the sexes towards which we ought to be aiming, except in the most general terms. Our starting point is the shared personal experience of damage done to lives, both female and male, by the injury which perpetuates the state of injustice. (I am using “injustice” in the broad, theological sense of “not right”, not like it is in the Kingdom of God, not what God intended in the beginning, not satisfying people’s deepest God-given needs. Jesus’s teaching on divorce is understood to be a correction of injustice in this sense.) Our starting point ought to be the religious life we now find ourselves living and to question it: to see whether it depends upon or causes, bad male/female relations, instead of healing them. We need to take the risk of reversing things which we normally take for granted, i.e. to find out what it means to listen to women instead of always speaking to them, to learn wisdom instead of always giving it, to treat the female vocations as equal in importance to the life of the Church as our own – and I am not talking here about motherhood, teaching or nursing rather than preaching, organising and counselling.

In any case, we have to de-centre male vocations and to question the usual assumption that women will never have anything very important to say, or at least, nothing original. Ask yourselves how many sermons you have preached to predominantly female congregations; how many retreats you have given to nuns; how many women you have counselled. Then ask yourselves how many women’s sermons you have heard; how many nuns you have had a retreat from; how often you have been counselled by a woman on religious matters.

2 My second proposition is that *male religious celibacy and female religious celibacy are not the same thing*.

I mean this as a descriptive statement: it is an observation as to what is actually the case, rather than what ought to be.

One reason for this state of affairs is the inequality of power in the Church. Celibacy enables men to do more things, go more places, meet more people than women. Celibacy is another form of masculine freedom for men, but is usually another form of fem-

inine restriction for women.

Secondly, male celibacy is usually in fact, and always by association, tied to the priesthood. And the priesthood is the centre of power in the Church – not just social or legal power, but *religious* power. It is the power of being the origin of what is really needed – of speaking and acting in God’s name wherever you go. It is sacramental power. Women are not considered to have the same kind of originative power because they can’t be priests and they can’t be priests because they don’t have the power – because they are women . . .

With this masculine power of priestly celibacy goes quite a lot of sexual power. On the whole it is diffuse – not something consciously wielded by male religious. But it is there, and it is often imposed upon them by women whether they like it or not. It is a function of the unequal male/female power, value and freedom in the Church which, in this as in many other respects, mirrors the state of the world as a whole. Male religious have a lot more sexual power than female religious. It is institutional rather than personal. As a woman friend of mine put it, women in a sense cease to be women if they don’t have children. Men don’t. On the contrary, their sexual power is in some ways heightened.

Thirdly, women in religion remain dependent on male offices, while men – in the form of priests, givers of the sacrament, confessors, counsellors, acceptors of female vows in the name of God – have always had a necessary, institutional entry into female communities. The converse is not true in any way at all. Male religious community is thought to be complete in itself and in no need of female offices, unless (when the brothers get too old and too few) it is the woman who comes in twice a week to do the cooking and the cleaning and the mending. The centrality and the self-sufficient nature of male community in the Church is assumed without question, just as the lack of it is assumed in women’s community. Men are always needed by women’s community; women are not needed by men’s community. I think this is the single most important difference between male and female religious. It is always what strikes women as the most significant. Whereas independent, self-sufficient male community is the norm, the prospect of a female religious community entirely outside male jurisdiction and entirely without need of male ministry is absurd and terrifying to the male Church. (A parish priest in Oxford did not like the idea of the local convent having two of its sisters commissioned to distribute communion to its own sick: “Soon there won’t be anything left for us to do”, he said.) All female enterprise in the work and ministry of the Church has very quickly been brought under male jurisdiction and surveillance. Can you imagine it happening the other way

round? Why not?

It is the pretended self-sufficiency of male community, rather than of the individual male religious, that is most disturbing to women. It echoes the medieval belief – which can be found in St Thomas – that women are less of a help to men than other men, except in the matter of procreation. Women are, strictly speaking, thought to be superfluous in anything to do with religion.

For these reasons, then, male celibacy is not the same thing as female celibacy and is understood not to be by male and female celibates and those who know them.

3 My third proposition is that *The Answer to the unsatisfactory state of male/female relations in the Church does not lie in simply trying to give to women everything that men have already got, but in trying to realize a better kind of complementarity between them, and that this is essential to the enterprise of the religious life.*

This is a dangerous thing to say. In itself it could mean many things, most of them highly suspect to feminists. But I do have something more definite to say about it on a theological level.

I take up the point – often used in the theology of the religious life – that it has to do with the renewal of the image of God in human life through imitation of Christ, the true Image. It is in some sense a restoration of our fallen state. But I do not understand this in an individualised sense. When, in the first chapter of Genesis, it says, “God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them”, it is not being said that, in virtue of some individual attribute possessed by all human beings, each one is made in God’s image. All that is said is that man (*adam* – the collective) is created in the image of God and that being male *and* female belongs to this creation. Along with theologians such as Karl Barth (*Church Dogmatics* III, 1, p 185 and 2, p 324), I believe that the close juxtaposition of the two statements and the deliberate, three-fold repetition of *bara* – create – indicates that the two-fold sexual existence belongs in some sense to the image. It would be difficult not to infer some intended connection. This does not imply that there is a sexual division in God, nor does it imply that the two-fold sexual existence is what comprises the image of God in man to the exclusion of anything else. Still less can we derive any doctrine of sexual equality from the statements. (Any notion of equality must find its roots in the perception of harm done to actual lives through unequal treatment in various respects. It can only arise from the negation of actually-existing injustice, as a product of the search for justice.) But I do believe we can conclude that male and female belong to the image in a way which must not be ignored or transcen-

ded by appealing to some common human essence which all individuals are supposed to possess. We are not told anything about intellectual, creative or governing abilities, nor anything about the capacity for moral choice: nothing at all, in fact, about those attributes which men have always been supposed to possess in a more complete fashion than women.

Indeed, the biblical doctrine that mankind exists only as man and woman together in the image of God is very different from the philosophical doctrine, inherited by the medieval theologians from the Greeks, that the male alone is the perfect human being, self-sufficient in most respects, and that the female is some kind of imperfect version of human nature, existing for the essentially male project of procreation. In my opinion, the attempt to distil an essence of man – “reason” for instance – is a disaster of thought. Such an essence is always much more of an historically conditioned thing than anyone suspects at the time. Moreover the supposed “specific human function” is always the possession of some class of human beings compared with which other classes seem to be less human – and less close to God – because they have less of it, whether it be reason, creativity, governing ability or something else.

So I do not think that the renewal of the image of God through following Christ in the religious life can be reduced to mere individual renewal or sanctification. It is a collective issue. I believe in fact that male/female interaction and living together cannot be dispensed with if the image is to be renewed. The main consequence this has for my argument about the religious life is that the assumption of self-sufficiency by male celibate life must be denied. If this assumption is denied, then so are the others which issue from it: for instance, the assumption that the relationship between male religious and women – and I mean both nuns and lay women – is essentially a superfluous one: i.e. that men originate anything of real value and meaning, that women are spiritually and intellectually always dependent, always receivers of what men have to give, always having their *female needs* satisfied through *male vocations*: that what happens all the time is the giving and receiving of male superfluity, stimulated, inspired, supported and above all appreciated by women but never equalled or replaced by them. There is in fact a systematic – largely unthinking – denial of the seriousness of women’s vocations in the Church, because it is always men who decide what vocations shall or shall not find the opportunity for expression. It is men who define the limits of what women shall be deemed fit to do and what women are fit to give. It has been said to me by a woman – highly motivated to preach the gospel, but finding no encouragement or opportunity to do so – that

women's vocation is generally discovered through the experience of limits: that they frequently experience a calling to a role that does not exist for them. The self-sufficient male institution has no need of them except in a supporting role, or a client role. It is not surprising then that some women will use whatever power is left to them and will destroy an oppressive male virginity if they can. Male celibacy creates its own destroyers.

At present, I think that only the rise of women's theology and women's ministries in the Church gives us a chance of putting this right. But even then, women's theology and ministry is not going to provide any general solution that will become acceptable to male theologians and ministers at an intellectual level as soon as they perceive the sense of it. Ways of thinking don't change without people's relationships changing at the same time. They will never perceive the sense of it while they maintain the same kind of relationship with women – in which men speak and minister and women are only spoken to and ministered to. One by one men will have to respond to women's initiatives out of a recognition that they – the men – need it. Then perhaps men's needs on the one hand and women's vocations on the other, will both get the recognition they deserve. I mean men's need to receive from women: not just sympathy and inspiration and a ready audience, but truth and the word of God too. (Let me just point out that those classes of men in the Gospel who were most impervious to the words of Jesus were those who were convinced of their self-sufficiency and who thought that the others – the needy – had nothing to contribute to the Kingdom of God.) But only women can decide how these things can be done by them and how a better complementarity with men can be achieved. If we tried to describe it now, I am afraid we would fall back on stereotypes and idealism of the kind I am trying to get away from.

4 My fourth proposition is, *Contemplation is not to be carried on in the religious life without being grounded in some way in male/female interaction, and that, this being necessary for contemplation, it is also necessary for preaching.*

If female vocations and male needs are recognised for what they really are, there will be a lot of pseudo-innocence lost on both sides. Pseudo-innocence is a self-protective denial of the power which one really has at one's disposal. A lot of male celibate pseudo-innocence comes from the illusion of male collective self-sufficiency. We don't really want to know what effects this has on women. We fear it. We run from it. We don't want to take responsibility for it when it seems to get out of control. On the other hand, a lot of female pseudo-innocence comes from women's acceptance of dependence and incompetence. They will not take their real power seriously

– mainly because they get no encouragement to do so. The illusion is maintained that their main power is a sexual one and that, as a consequence, they are a danger to male vocations.

On the other hand, we have to recognise that a proper, equal interaction between male and female in the Church, which is based on a recognition of male needs as well as vocations and of female vocations as well as needs, is bound to have a sexual dimension. I am unable to accept that ancient strand of Christian thinking on celibacy – reported by Simon Tugwell in the article I mentioned earlier – which envisages the sexuality of the saints vanishing altogether and women becoming like men. (It is always that way round – why not men becoming like women?) That seems to me to be a simple recipe for pseudo-innocence in sexual matters which could be very destructive. When you come to think of it, it is only those happy few who can cut themselves off from the material toils of this historical existence – especially anything to do with children – who can afford such innocence. It is a dream, which has little to do with real contemplation.

Sexual interaction – by which I do not necessarily mean genital interaction – means trouble for celibates. But it means much more trouble if they pretend that it is something they have to put behind them, or ought to grow out of. I am convinced that the inevitable contradictions and difficulties we encounter in living out our vocations can only be lived through and survived by a continual effort of *understanding* – that is, rather than a continual effort of will-power. My object is survival as a Dominican – but more than mere survival: if my only aim were to survive, I could not contemplate or preach the gospel. In my opinion it is much worse for a Dominican to abandon his powers of understanding than to abandon his virginity.

We may indeed make the wrong moves with people we encounter, for the best intentions – or less than the best – but if we do not understand more of reality as a result, then nothing significant has happened. I don't count failure to live up to an ideal as anything significant. I am not talking about learning from my mistakes so as to avoid taking risks next time round. I am talking about a far more serious process of learning, which comes from facing the various imperatives of life, some of them apparently contradictory. For instance, the needs of others in general are always tending to turn into the needs of individuals in particular and so to contradict our general availability. The Christian command to be compassionate always risks our getting caught up in absorbing attachments to particular people. What if we do?

The root of contemplation is not learning from our mistakes, so as better to realise the ideal. It is the unrelenting attempt to



realise justice and charity and compassion amid the contradictions of life: things which can never be idealised beforehand.

I take it that contemplation is not the devout gazing upon eternal truths and their implications for our way of life, but rather a continual search for justice and charity through the understanding. (The contemplative life consists in the love of God, as St Thomas says, but he adds that it is essentially an activity of the intellect.) It requires a continuous effort of understanding in the midst of failure and guilt. I think that the contrary to idealism is not the rather smug Dominican common-sense that we often take refuge in from the extravagant ideas of other religious spiritualities, but instead, this strenuous, never-ending effort of imaginative understanding in the face of contradiction and weakness: in the face of the weakness of individual and community life, which can only continue through the day-to-day practice of justice and love.

Everyone knows that practically nothing is *secured* by taking a vow of celibacy. It is the point of entry into a maze. But the deviations, the back-tracking and failures – which are mostly failures of *justice* rather than of will-power – do not mean the end of faith. If not, they become merely lapses from an ideal set before us perfectly clearly on the day of our profession. Then all we get is various degrees of failure, much guilt and no understanding. We get repressed sexuality, self-absorption, taking refuge in the safety of the self-sufficient male community. Or we get a kind of emotional promiscuity based on pseudo-innocence. Or we get those painful and dramatic decisions to cut the losses, go straight and get married – so many of which I have witnessed since I joined the Order twenty years ago. For people who are called to be contemplatives and preachers, that solves nothing.

Therefore I believe that the life of contemplation – which is what celibacy is supposed to make us free for – can only be lived by facing the conflicts that will result from trying to live our male/female relations in a better way. That is not the whole business of contemplation, of course, but I believe it is an unavoidable part of it. And this applies to both heterosexuals and homosexuals in their own way. There can be no standard model which applies to everyone.

It will not be contemplation in the sense of mere intellectual understanding, but the practical wisdom that I began by asking for but have not, of course, provided in this talk. It will be understanding that comes through facing conflict and gradually learning what it means to do justice between women and men.