

## The Joy of the Gospel in the Vowed Life

by Keith Clark, Capuchin

### Introduction

The *attitudes* of poverty, chastity and obedience have existed in the human race long before they became vows which Christian religious profess, even long before Christianity. Those *attitudes* have been part of what developed the human race as fully human. *An attitude is a decision one has made about the way life, or some part of life, is or ought to be.*

Here's a story I got from my youngest brother, which to me characterizes the role attitudes play in our lives.

A young married couple had a nice home in the suburbs. Each Monday morning as they had breakfast in their kitchen, the wife would look out the window into the next door neighbor's backyard, where the wife next door was hanging out her laundry. The wife in the first house would always look out her window and say about her next door neighbor, "She's such a lovely person. But she just doesn't get her whites really white; they're always sort of gray."

One Monday morning, as the couple ate their breakfast, the wife looked out the window and said, "Oh my! She got her whites really white this week!" Her husband said, "No, dear, I got up early and washed our window."

That's an attitude. Attitudes are the windows through which we view our world. They are decisions which are already within us prior to our observing anything outside of us.

In the life-space of all human beings, and every man and woman individually, there are only three elements: things, people, and events. Attitudes are the windows through which we view these three elements. We've made decisions about the way things, people, or events are, or ought to be.

The attitude of poverty is a decision that one has made about the *wise selection and use of things*. It's the window through which we look at things.

The attitude of chaste love is a decision *respectfully to distance oneself from other people*, so that something always remains true about the relationships among people: the other person never becomes *mine* in the sense of my possession. It's a way of loving people. The attitude of chaste love is the window through which we look at other people.

The attitude of obedience is a decision *to listen intently to the events of life*, seeking to understand their deepest possible meaning. The attitude of obedience is the window through which we look at the events of our world.

These attitudes developed in human society gradually and long before they were as succinctly described as I have described them above. They are human and *humanizing* attitudes in human life. In fact, for life to be truly human, these three attitudes must be found within individual human beings and in human society.

Today we can find numerous instances of societies where these attitudes are missing or diminished. We can look globally at societies like Isis, where apparently decisions have been made that things are to be selected and used for destruction, that other people don't count at all and receive no respect, that the meaning of all events is determined by what is advantageous to Isis. That is not a human nor humanizing society.

If we prefer to look closer to home, we can perhaps see the same distortions of human life. In our society, things are selected and used quite unwisely, so that some people have immensely more than they need and others have virtually nothing. People are regarded as property in ways which range from prostitution and sex-trafficking to exploiting employees with less than living wages. And events of our times are looked at, not for their deepest meaning, but for how they can be advantageous to us.

These are the attitudes radiating from the *religious value radiation center*.

Besides the religious value radiation center found in every society, there are also the practical and the technological value radiation centers which make up human culture and society.

No society can stand without the underpinning of the three basic values: the religious, the practical, and the technological. The practical dimension asks, "Does it work?" The technological dimension asks, "How can it work better?" And the religious dimension asks, "Is there more to it than whether or not it works, and whether or not you can make it better; what's the deepest meaning?" It's as though there were three legs of a stool on which a society is built. If one of those legs were to disappear, the society would fall.

Perhaps a university can serve as an example of these three value radiation centers. A university teaches what is known (practical), it researches what is yet unknown (technological) and it has ethics and philosophy departments asking what is the meaning of things (religious).

Over time, society leans more heavily on one of those legs than on the others. The shift in societal emphases is very gradual. Perhaps in the time of the industrial revolution, society leaned very heavily on the practical dimension of life. One might think that today our society

leans heavily on the technological leg. Or perhaps people would say that it's the practical leg which bears the weight of our society. Even when there is not much weight put on one of the legs, it must not be allowed to disappear entirely. With the passage of time, more weight may be shifted to a different leg.

The religious leg of that stool is itself comprised of three legs: the *attitudes* of poverty, chaste love and obedience. These are like the legs of a three-legged stool upon which the religious dimension of society sits. The world is in need of the witness of a life consecrated by the pursuit and development of these three attitudes. The world needs the instruction provided by attitudes of poverty, chaste love and obedience.

As religious we cannot force the world's attention on the religious attitude of society, which we support by the profession of vows. Nor do we need to force the world to look at us. *But we have to be there.* Just in case someone does glance our way; just in case someone asks, as the whore, Dolcinea, asked of Don Quixote, "Why do you do the things you do; why do you do those things? . . . and what do you want of me?" To some we might seem as foolish as they thought Don Quixote was, but that we live our lives of poverty, chaste love and obedience is not only a good thing for us; it's essential to the continuance of our society.

In this article I would like to look at things, people and events through each of the three windows of poverty, chastity and obedience. I will also direct attention to what Pope Francis has written in his letter, "The Joy of the Gospel," to help us to clean our windows so that our view is not distorted.

My point in raising the issues in this article is that we might appreciate more fully how important it is, not only for ourselves, but for our whole society, that we live the three vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. God has called us, not only for ourselves, but for the world. We're prophets. "Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you, before you were born I dedicated you, a prophet to the nations I appointed you." "Say not, 'I am too young (or too old).' To whomever I send you, you shall go; whatever I command you, you shall speak. Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you.'" (Jeremiah 1:5,7)

### *Poverty: A Love Affair with Things*

When we look out our window at the *things* in our life-space with the attitude of poverty, we are looking at things with the attitude of the *wise selection and use of things*. This *religious* attitude toward things asks, "What is the deepest possible meaning of things?" Things obviously have also a practical meaning: we wear clothes; that's practical. Things also have a technological meaning: they keep updating my computer and cell phone on a regular basis. But the religious attitude directs our attention to the *wise selection and use of things*.

Way back in 1881, Pope Leo XIII began the modern concept of Catholic social thought by looking at the deepest meaning of things. He wrote that the whole of creation is given by God gratuitously for the good of the whole of humankind. It is not a grab bag for each to help oneself to as much as one can get, in such a way that the strong receive more than they need while the weak receive less than they need for a decent life. Nonetheless, Leo XIII championed the right to the private ownership of property, cautioning, however, that that ownership is that of stewards who exercise their ownership for the benefit of themselves *and of others*.

That's possibly the deepest possible meaning of things: they are gifts of God given to all.

Allow me, please, to insert here a Franciscan view of things as gifts of God. Francis realized that he came from God, that God was his father. That became ever more clear after he repudiated his earthly father, Peter Bernardone. Francis looked at all other people and things as also coming from the hand of a loving father. Therefore, all people and all things were his brothers and sisters. What appears so often as Francis' austerity in his clinging to his beloved bride, Lady Poverty, was actually his love for all the things which were his brothers and sisters. He cherished them; he didn't want to possess them.

Perhaps our attitude of poverty, our window through which we look at the things in our life-space, is our great love for all things because they have been given for our use by a loving God. We desire to cherish things, rather than to possess them. By our vow of poverty we surrender all ownership of things. Now and then I still find a book with the inscription on the frontal piece, "Ad usum . . ." and then a name. "For the use of . . .," not "The possession of . . ." That may have been an expression of the *practice* of the vow of poverty, but maybe without the *attitude* of cherishing the book; the practice of poverty may have missed the *meaning of the attitude of poverty*. It may have been an expression of what I can't have as my own, but it perhaps didn't give due reverence to the thing itself as a gift from God.

I am currently driving a 1999 Saturn car. It has over 207,000 miles on it. Every year the treasurer of the province asks for the reading of the odometers of the cars used by the friars. And depending on the number of miles on a car's odometer, he may or may not budget for its replacement during the course of the coming year. For years, the treasurer has budgeted for the replacement of my car. And every year that money isn't used. My keeping my old car is obviously not a matter that I *can't have* a new one. The province is poised to give me a new one. But I love my car! I cherish it. I want to give it the opportunity to serve as long as it can. When this one dies, I'll be grateful for its replacement. But I'm not ready to end its life of service yet. (OK, I also like the fact that it is a standard transmission, and the province won't buy any more cars like that, because so few friars can drive standard transmission. And I like the fact that in the summertime on long trips it gets more than forty miles per gallon.) My point: some might think I'm "practicing poverty" by having such an old car. And I am. But I think of that practice of poverty quite a bit differently than most people who think about it. It's not a matter of austerity; it's a matter of love. I love the thing!

But it is possible to try to love too many things and to have them for my use. The accumulation of things, or even money, can vitiate the attitude of poverty because things can begin to dominate me. I no longer have things; things have me. When things have me, the more things I want. Here's another story.

Twin boys were conspicuous for the way they looked so much like each other, and equally conspicuous for how unlike each other they were in their attitudes. One was always happy and optimistic; the other was always down in the dumps and very pessimistic. The parents brought the two boys to a psychiatrist. The doctor put the boys in separate small rooms. The optimist was put into a room filled with horse shit. The pessimist was put into a room filled with every imaginable toy. After an hour, the doctor and the parents opened the door of the pessimist's room full of toys. The boy was sitting in the middle of the room crying. He looked up at the doctor and his parents and said, "The toy I really wanted isn't here." Next they opened the door of the optimist's room full of horse shit. The boy was flinging horse shit all around and saying, "There's got to be a horse in here somewhere."

That story says something to me about the accumulation of too many things. I can't love them all, and eventually I don't love any of them, because I'm always looking for what I don't yet have.

Sometimes we can profitably let things go because we love them, rather than hold on to them. Perhaps I can give someone else a chance to love some of the things I have, thus insuring that they will be loved more than if kept them. If I have too many things, I probably neglect to love some of them. Better I should send those things to someone else to love.

A very poor person might cherish a dollar. The very wealthy people think nothing of a dollar. They've got too much to love it all. That might be a good norm for the practice of religious poverty: do I have too much to cherish it all? I might have it, but can I love it?

Living poverty gives us credibility. It tells people that we're not in it for what we can get out of it. Socrates said that people believed him because he was poor. Mahatma Gandhi was believable because he was poor. Once again, living the attitude of poverty in regard to things makes us prophets.

In his gospel, Saint Luke wrote that Jesus instructed his disciples: The harvest is abundant but the laborers are few; so ask the master of the harvest to send out laborers for his harvest. Go on your way; behold I am sending you like lambs among wolves. Carry no money bag, no sack, no sandals; and greet no one along the way.

For most of my life I thought that the harvest was like a wheat field, and I had to be careful because there were wolves in the field. But now I wonder if the wolves are the harvest. Perhaps the harvest is so abundant because there is so much "wolfing" going on. And Jesus is

sending us out as natural prey to those we are supposed to harvest. So how do we keep from being preyed upon? We don't have anything the wolves might want.

I customarily go through my closet almost every year to look for clothes which I haven't worn in a year. If I find things that I love, but which I have neglected because I no longer use them, I give them away. Sometimes I give them to Vincent dePaul, so they can sell them to someone who will love to have them. Sometimes I give them to a friend who would love them. But there is one item of clothing which I haven't been able to part with. In 1984 I spent Christmas in Florence, Italy with another Capuchin from our province who was studying there. I never thought of buying him a Christmas gift, but he thought of getting me one. He bought me a deep maroon-colored heavy cable-knit sweater, hand-made by a woman in Florence. There's no commercial label in it. It has sentimental value for me because of how I came by it. Years have gone by in which I didn't wear it. But I keep it. I do wear it occasionally, but seldom. But who else is going to love it as much as I do? So I keep it.

This is all about how the attitude of poverty (the wise selection and use of *things*) as lived and pursued by individual religious. Pope Francis, like many of his predecessors, has extended the application of this attitude of poverty to the whole of human society. We'll look more deeply at what he has written about the selection and use of things when we look at the vow of obedience. There we will see that vowed religious are meant to be a beacon, first to our Catholic and Christian communities, to our church, and then for the whole world, guiding all people in their selection and use of things. We're prophets. Pope Francis wrote, "Religious should be men and women who are able to wake up the world."

**Scripture:**

Matthew 5:42

Luke 6:30-36

Luke 10:1-12

**Joy of the Gospel**

2. Consumerism

4.2

7. Pleasure vs. joy

53 - 56.

59 - 60.

78 - 81

*Chastity: A Way of Loving*

The vow which we call chastity really needs to be understood as *the attitude of chaste love formed into a life-style*. Why do I say that? All human love, in order to be truly human and humanizing, must be chaste. That is it must be characterized by a *respectful distancing* from others. In other words, true human love is *intimacy*, which psychologically is *the simultaneous fusing and*

*counterpointing of personalities*. Love, intimacy, means that as people bond with each other no one is dominated by or subjugated to the other. Anything less than that might be genital or romantic involvement, but it is not love; it is not intimacy.

The words “love” and “intimacy” are used today in ways which are often inaccurate. “Love” or “intimacy” are words often used to mean genital or romantic responses or pursuits. I could hardly say in the general public that I spent an intimate evening with my dear friend Jan. It would be true; I’ve spent many intimate evenings with Jan. But if I said that, the general public would hear that we engaged in romantic or genital behavior. And that would not be true. We love each other; we have an intimate relationship. We have bonded in such a way that our personalities remain counterpointed because of our respectful distancing from each other, even though we come together in intimacy.

Perhaps a bit of review of the nature of human sexuality will make more clear what I am saying. I have biological *urges* which push me toward bonding with other people; my biological urges want *genital activity*. I have psychological *drives* which push me toward bonding with other people, because I find them attractive; my psychological drives want *romantic activity*. And I have a personal and spiritual *need* to bond with other people. That personal and spiritual need wants *intimacy* with another person. Intimacy is the goal and meaning of everybody’s sexuality. All romantic and genital behavior which does not stem from or culminate in meeting the human need for intimacy will inevitably disappoint, because the meaning of sex is found in intimacy: the simultaneous fusing and counterpointing of personalities. This is achieved by *respectful distancing from the other* even as our personalities fuse.

All authentic human love is characterized by this chaste love. The religious attitude of chaste love asks us to look at the deepest possible meaning of persons.

Within the Christian community, when two people commit themselves to this chaste love in matrimony, it is regarded as a sacrament, because it points to something we can’t see, namely how fully Christ has taken us to himself for life no matter what. The religious vow of celibate chaste love is not a sacrament, because it points to something we *can* see. It points to the meaning of all sexuality. Celibate chaste love is a way of loving people, not because of biological urges to do so, not because of psychological drives to do so, but because we love people respectfully for themselves. The life-style of celibate chaste love points to the meaning of sexuality, something which *can* be seen in successful marriages.

It may seem a bit ironic that a commitment to a life-style of celibate chaste love – a love which does not stem from nor lead to genital or romantic pursuits – points to the meaning of all sexuality. The vow of chastity, of celibate chaste love, makes visible the deepest possible meaning of all human love.

In matters of human love, there is a tendency to think that if it isn’t permanent, it isn’t real. I don’t think of it that way. I believe the test of the celibate way of loving is this: they and I are

better off for our having been together, but neither of us is worse off because of our parting, no matter how emotionally wrenching our parting may be.

I learned a lot about loving during my time as a member of the novitiate team in Huntington, Indiana. I had just spent a year and a half at Fordham University in the Bronx, New York. And then I was assigned to Huntington, Indiana! I thought I had been exiled to the edge of the world! The people talked funny. They *warshed* their *deeshes*. And they got their INSurance before they went to DETroit. Shortly before I was leaving, one of the people said, "Oh, we did a good job on you, Keith Clark. When you came here you were so uptight." I was about to object, but I realized that it was true. The Hoosiers had changed me. I think they taught me how to love.

On the night before I was to leave, a lot of our friends gathered at the friary for a Mass and a party. I presided at the Mass. At the end of Mass I had planned to give a short talk. I began, "Thank you for allowing me into your lives." That's as far as I could get. I choked up. They had let me know them, and I had let them know me. An intimate bond had been formed among us. We were all better off for our having been together, but we were no worse for our parting. Parting was painful; but we could do it, because we had maintained a respectful distancing even in our bonding.

I think one of the blessings of memory is the ability to recall those who have been our friends during our lives. I am no longer in touch with most of those who have been my friends. But my life has been enriched by each one of them over the years. I made a retreat once in a wilderness cabin in northern Wisconsin. For some reason, one day I decided to think about and write about my friends, as one after another came to my mind. At the end of the day, I stopped writing and I told myself, "If you can judge a man by his friends, then I must be quite a man!"

If Pope Francis wrote directly about a vowed celibate life in his letter, I missed it. But throughout we can see the spirit of love for the world, shown in ways which are respectful of all people, not dominating or subjugating them. In his description of the relationship of the pope to the bishops, he writes, "Nor do I believe that the papal magisterium should be expected to offer a definitive or complete word on every question which affects the Church and the world. It is not advisable for the Pope to take the place of local Bishops in the discernment of every issue which arises in their territory. In this sense, I am conscious of the need to promote a sound 'decentralization.'" (16) A self-centered, self-preserving church he dismisses as not authentically true to the Gospel. (27)

Vowed celibate chaste love bears witness in the Church and in our world to this human and humanizing attitude toward people .

### **Scripture**

Matthew 22:37-39



John 4:7-10  
John 13:34-35  
John 15:12-13

### **Joy of the Gospel**

6. God's love never fails  
16. A sound decentralization = respectful distancing  
27. Not self-preservation  
53.2  
62.  
66 - 67.  
87-88.  
91-92.  
100-101.

The entirety of Chapter Four, the reiteration of much of Catholic social thought, applied to the Gospel mandate to love one another. Note particularly  
178 - 188  
226 - 229

### *Obedience: Listening Intently to Reality*

In our life-space, there are not only people and things. There are also events. Obedience means listening intently to the events of our life-space.

In some convoluted way which I've never quite understood, the English word "obedience" comes from the Latin words, "ob" and "audire" meaning "to listen to." I understand better that the Greek word for "obedience" is "hypokue," made up of the word "okue," which means "to listen," with the prefix "hyp-" which means "super." (You know, as in "hyper.") So the Greek word for obedience means to "hyper-listen," or "to listen intently." The human and humanizing attitude of obedience asks us to look at the deepest possible meaning of events.

The implication is that we not only listen, but we hear. So religious obedience is a listening intently to reality with a readiness to respond.

The founders of the older religious orders understood "obedience" in that sense. Saint Benedict, for instance, required of the abbot who had to make a decision for his monastery that he consult all the monks, including the newest novice. Not only the abbot, but all the monks, had to "listen intently" to the matter at hand, and had to listen to what God might be telling them through that listening. It was a process of each member of the community bringing his or her piece of the truth and joining that piece to those pieces brought by all the other members of the community.

In more recent times, the notion of religious obedience took on the character of doing unquestioningly whatever the superior said, as though the superior's piece of the truth was sufficient information on which to act. And in even more recent times, the notion of doing what the superior said was challenged and many thought that whatever they felt was best was "listening intently" to their reality, even though they might be listening only to their piece of the truth.

Having departing from the original understanding of obedience, it has come to mean the two extremes of doing whatever the superior says, or doing whatever I think is best.

I was personnel director for our province for six years. Occasionally, but only occasionally, I heard friars tell me, "After much prayer and having consulted my spiritual director, I now know that God wants me to do this or that." I was always tempted to reply, "Well, I was talking to God just this morning, and God knew we would be meeting today, but God never mentioned to me that he wanted you to do this or that." But I didn't say that; I just thought it.

In religious communities, "listening intently" to reality most often requires a communal listening. Each of us is sensitive to certain aspects of reality, but few if any of us are sensitive to all aspects of reality. Sister Artist might be sensitive to the beauty of things; and Sister Economica might be sensitive to the cost of things; and Sister Maintenance might be sensitive to the practicality of things. Brother Progressive might be sensitive to new possibilities; and Brother Traditional might be sensitive to the history of the institute. But if all listen together, they might arrive at a consensus. And again, they might not. The leader of the community is charged with making the final decision about what the community will do, and in the absence of consensus, all need to follow what the leader has determined after listening to the others.

Sometimes the leader may seem to be a not very good listener! Well, that too is part of the reality to which we all must listen, not only in religious life and in the church, but in every corporate headquarters in the world.

Pope Francis invites us to look beyond our immediate life-space to the whole world in which we live, and to listen intently to the reality we find there, and to have a ready willingness to respond to what we find there. Actually, the whole body of Catholic social teaching is a matter of obedience: listening intently at the deepest meaning of the events of our lives together as human beings, with a willingness to respond.

It is not surprising that vowed women religious have been at the forefront of the church's involvement in political and economic movements designed to further the efforts for justice and peace in our world. It is part of the attitude of listening intently to reality. The "nuns on the bus" might not even think of their efforts as part of the human and humanizing attitude of obedience, but it is.

Because there are those who say that religion should be kept out of politics, I want to digress a bit to comment on that claim.

Aristotle defined politics as the art of the possible. It's the formation of strategies to accomplish some goal. The body politic, through its elected officials in the case of the United States, must plan on how to accomplish the goals of the society. But determining what those goals should be is the purview of the religious radiation center of a society, looking for the deepest possible meaning of events, not only at their practical or technological meaning. To say that religion has no role to play in determining what the goals of a society should be is to claim that the stool needs only two of its three legs to stand on.

Pope Francis is surprisingly blunt when he says that "trickle-down economics" hasn't worked. It might have been a great *theory* back in Ronald Reagan's time, but over the course of the last thirty years, the trickle has not been down; it's been up! With each passing decade, fewer and fewer people control greater and greater percentages of the world's wealth. The pope is very blunt in asking us to listen to *reality*, not to theory.

It's not only *theories* which can obscure our ability to listen to reality; it's also slogans or labels. Neither theories nor slogans nor labels help us listen to reality. Obedience means we think critically without thinking we know it all. But it does call us to think.

Let me share with you my own difficulty with slogans in the very important matter of abortions. I think we're not listening very well to reality on that topic.

Pope Saint John Paul II, in *Evangelium vitae*, wrote that those who vote for abortion laws bear a serious responsibility. [Some countries have abortion laws which require couples who are pregnant more than once to have an abortion or to pay an enormous fine. The United States has no such abortion laws.]

The pope also wrote that "*no less serious responsibility* lies with those . . . who should have ensured – but did not – effective family and social policies in support of families . . . with particular financial and educational needs," which would lead fewer women to seek abortion. (*Evangelium Vitae*, No. 59)

When a group labels itself "pro-choice," many people hear "pro-abortion." Democratic Vice-President Joe Biden has said publicly, "I'd *do* anything to reduce the number of abortions short of putting women and doctors in jail." He belongs to a group which labels itself "pro-choice," but he is definitely not "pro-abortion." And when a group labels itself "pro-life," that doesn't necessarily mean its members will *do* the things which would prevent abortions. It can all become merely a matter of rhetoric in political discourse. We need to look beyond the rhetoric to see who is *doing* something to reduce the number of abortions.

It seems to me (I'm thinking critically here, but I don't think I know it all) that when Congress voted against raising the federal minimum wage, which would have brought 27 million Americans from below to above the poverty line, they "should have ensured – but did not – effective family and social policies in support of families . . . with particular financial and educational needs," which would lead fewer women to seek abortion.

But the Republican party garners a large share of the Catholic vote, and the Democratic party loses a large share of the Catholic vote, simply on the basis of the slogans or labels "pro-life" or "pro-choice." I think few people are listening intently to reality; many are listening only to theories, slogans and labels. In my opinion, that is downright *disobedient* – it's not listening to reality.

For us religious, obedience means a whole lot more than doing what a superior might tell us to do. It means that we are a value radiation center for our culture, calling people to listen to reality. *It means thinking critically without thinking we know it all.* If we think we know it all, we've stop listening, we're no longer obedient. Instead we bring our piece of the truth to decision makers in our communities, in our church, in our country and in our world. Being obedient has very little to do with being compliant. At times, it might mean we're a pain in somebody's butt!

**Scripture:**

John 8:29

John 15:10

**Joy of the Gospel**

51. Signs of the times

61-62.

64.

68.

70-75. Francis listening to reality of the world

82-86.

Virtually all of Chapter Four is Pope Francis' being obedient – listening intently to events of our world in order to discover their deepest possible meaning with a readiness to respond.