

SPIRIT OF THE VOWS

Fr. Barre — no vows, no cloister.

Fr. Barre went against the general trend of the time when he counselled the first Sisters to choose the apostolic life against the monastic life. He was very firm in his rejection of any form of vows: "The Sisters do not make vows of obedience, poverty and chastity and must never do so, so that what was originally intended for the good of others may not degenerate into preoccupation with personal perfection by enclosing themselves in a cloister or a monastery." (SA 4)

"They will live in community without making vows or being cloistered, under the direction of the superior whom they will obey out of pure and holy love, and with the resolve to remain united in spirit, heart and work with all the subjects of these Charitable Schools, where no one will be received or admitted without these holy dispositions." (SR 1:5)

During his time, the requirement of the Church was such that, in order to pronounce even simple vows, an institute had to have its existence officially recognised by Rome or by a bishop as well as by the king. This official approval was given only if the group could claim to have sufficient financial security (in the form of endowments, real estate, capital) to ensure that it would not be a burden on the State or on the communes. It was precisely to this security that Fr. Barre was opposed. (pp.246-247, Out of Darkness Colour Breaks)

The First Community of Sisters

The first community of Charitable Mistresses was not a religious community like the cloistered Orders, but a lay community united in their common mission. They lived a simple life-style in community, without any security, with just enough to live on. Their priority was mission, and community was for mission. They rejected material security in the form of endowments in order to be free to reach out, wherever they were, to young girls and women trapped in poverty and rejection, and give them human and religious formation. (p.247, ODCB)

Fr. Barre's insistence on 'no vows, no cloister' was for freedom of mission to reach out to the poor in their environment: "To seek out in their own surroundings, older girls who are at risk or who are already in trouble, in order to avert the fall of the former and help the latter by their zealous and charitable efforts to extricate themselves from sinful situations and avoid future occasions of sin." (MI 4b)

With firmness and freedom of thought, Fr. Barre presented an apostolic spirituality to the Charitable Mistresses who were called to follow Jesus Christ in His apostolic life which would involve a deep spirit of availability and abandonment to Divine Providence. The

known form of religious life at the time was uniquely monastic and not compatible with apostolic service of the poor in their own surroundings. Women who took solemn vows and lived in enclosed Convents were restricted in their services to others and tended to be more preoccupied with their spiritual progress than with fostering the spiritual growth of others.

Due to the influence of Jansenism, people lived in great fear of eternal damnation. Hence people tended to focus on personal sanctification. Fr. Barre reacted strongly against this self-centred spirituality. He sought to remove all apprehension from the Sisters and encouraged them to concentrate on the salvation of others. (P.55, ODCB)

The Spirit of the Institute at its foundation

The spirit of the Institute at its foundation: three words encapsule what Fr. Barre demanded of his first spiritual daughters — abandonment, availability, disinterestedness.

In the spirit of Fr. Barre, the first Sisters understood availability as total obedience to the Father. For the pure love of God, after the example of Jesus Christ, the Sisters would neglect nothing that could contribute to their neighbour's salvation.

Fr. Barre encouraged a spirit of disinterestedness by challenging the Sisters to be more preoccupied about the salvation of others than about their own perfection: "When Jesus Christ sees that for love of Him we are taken up with the service of our neighbour, with his or her good and sanctification, He Himself undertakes to see to our salvation and our spiritual progress...It would be an error to think that in working for others, out of love, we should ourselves be lost; or that in enriching others, we ourselves should be impoverished." (PM 11, 12)

Fr. Barre was intent on making them totally dependent on the wise, loving and all-powerful Providence of God so that they would rely upon it continually, uniquely and always for their maintenance and upkeep. He was firmly convinced that since their services for God and their neighbour were given freely and out of pure love, they would receive a recompense which would be beyond human power to give. (FS 2)

The Spirit of our Vows today

In the same spirit as our first Sisters we are challenged to keep ourselves informed about local and global issues and the ways in which they affect the lives of people today. While the historical and geographical contexts in which we live differ greatly from that of our origins, we

reach out to people with the same spirit that has continued to give life to the Institute down through the centuries. Impelled by the Spirit, we are ready to go where we are needed, often courageously taking risks and trusting in God's provident care for us. We give ourselves simply and generously to the sharing of the Good News, recognizing the dignity of each individual and working for their human and spiritual growth. (#3, p.5, Orientations for Formation)

Chastity: In a spirit of 'love one another as I have loved you', we seek to enter into genuine relationships, both human and divine, in every aspect of our life and ministry. Out of love the Word became flesh so that people alienated from themselves and from one another might be reconciled by the discovery of the true meaning of love and of their unique identity as children of God. This love makes us strong and courageous, instills fire and enthusiasm and enables us to act with courage and freedom so that God may be present in the human heart. (#14, p.11, Orientations). The spirit of consecrated celibacy calls us to commit ourselves to authentic love which, when freely chosen in answer to God's call, sets us free to love universally with warmth and compassion.

Poverty: In a spirit of 'selling all', we seek to be alongside those whose basic needs and rights are being neglected or violated. We support and encourage those being humiliated in this way, to recognise their dignity and get access to justice. Living in simplicity frees us to understand the situations in which people live and to become sensitive to their aspirations and sufferings. It makes us question our lifestyle, our choices, where and how we live, the way we share what we have and who we are. It frees us to go towards those in greatest need (#15, p.11, Orientations). The spirit of poverty frees us to be alongside others, while encouraging initiative and responsibility. We make an option for the collective possession of goods and pooling of resources, as a way of contributing to the common good in a world of consumerism and poverty. We remember that all we have are God's gifts to us.

Obedience: In a spirit of 'not my will but yours be done', we seek to live in an attitude of listening to the movement of the Spirit of God in the world of today. We listen to events, to what others say, to developments in the Institute and to whatever may be stirring within us. We make the Word of God our constant companion and try to embody it in our life and ministry. Listening deeply, which implies detachment from our own agendas, gives us a sense of purpose and direction. Discernment then becomes a way of life so that we are constantly alert to the action of God in the realities in which we find ourselves (#16, p.11, Orientations). The spirit of Obedience calls for deep listening, participation, involvement, consultation, dialogue, co-responsibility and subsidiarity. We listen to the people to Whom we are sent and those with whom we collaborate, believing that together we can enter more fully into God's desires for all.

References:

The texts of Fr. Nicolas Barre

Infant Jesus Sisters' Book of the Institute

Orientations for Formation

Themes from the writings of Nicolas Barre.

Out of Darkness Colour Breaks, unpublished manuscript by Maureen KC Chew, IJS.