



**HORIZON**

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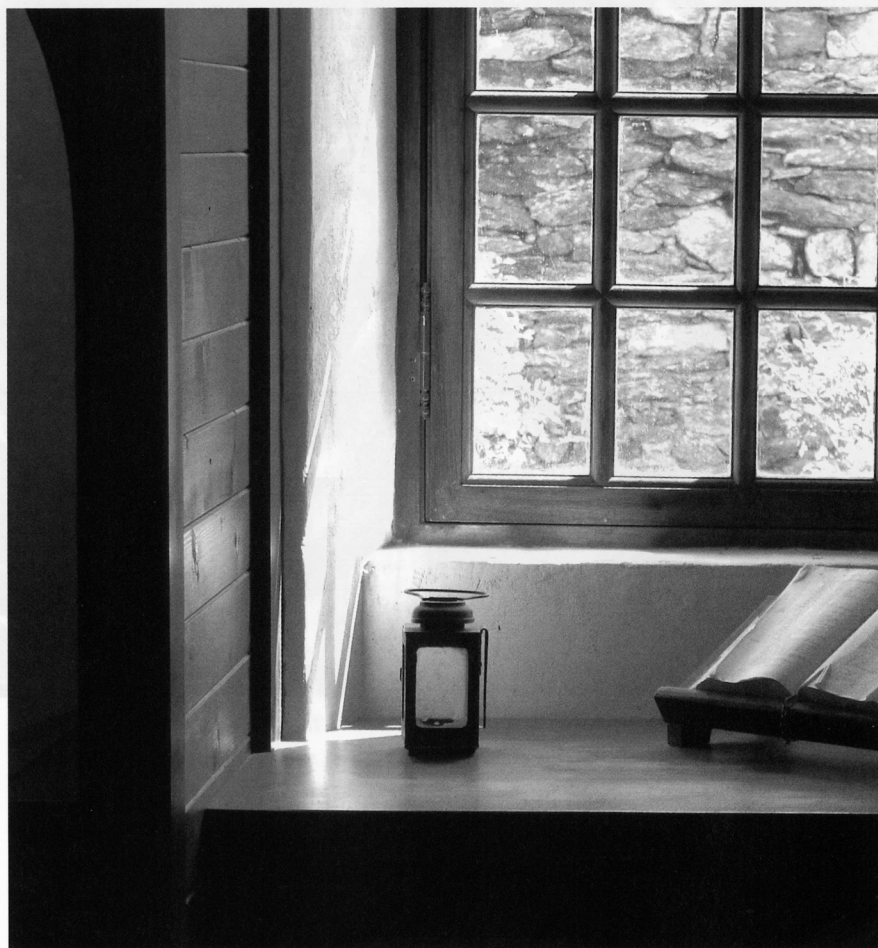
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Evangelical poverty is at the heart of religious life. It always deserves fresh re-examination.

## Poverty: new thoughts on an old vow

*Discerners don't get far in considering religious life without thinking hard about poverty, chastity, and obedience. With that in mind, HORIZON begins a series of reflections on the evangelical counsels. We invite readers to give their feedback to keep the conversation going. Write us at [nrvc@nrvc.net](mailto:nrvn@nrvc.net), or respond on HORIZON's Facebook or Twitter page.*

### A WITNESS TO PRESERVING GOD'S CREATION

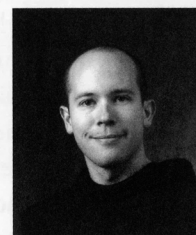
BY SISTER ELISE GARCÍA, O.P.

**I**MUST SHARE AT THE OUTSET THAT I never took a vow of poverty. Dominicans such as myself take only one vow: that of obedience. Voluntary poverty and chastity are implied, lived as part of our common life, but they are not explicit in the traditional vow that we in the Order of Preachers have taken over the centuries. Nonetheless, voluntary poverty in the form of mendicancy was actually one of the distinguishing characteristics of the new form of religious life that St.



Sister Elise García, O.P., is on the General Council of the Adrian Dominican Sisters. She co-founded and co-directed Santuario Sisterfarm, an ecology center in Texas.

The center was dedicated to cultivating diversity—biodiversity and cultural diversity—as a way of promoting peace among diverse people and between people and Earth.



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Sister Tracy Kemme, S.C. a Sister of Charity of Cincinnati and regular columnist for the *Global Sisters Report*, lives at Visitation House, a community of discernment and hospitality, and ministers at a largely Hispanic Cincinnati parish and at the Archdiocesan Catholic Social Office.





Two girls stand in front of debris in Tacloban City left by a 2013 Super Typhoon in the Philippines. Worldwide, poor people are harder hit by natural disasters and environmental damage. Their homes are less structurally sound, they have fewer resources for rebuilding their lives, and they tend to live in areas damaged by pollution.

Dominic and his contemporary, St. Francis, created at the start of the 13th century.

Relying as it did on the uncertainty of almsgiving, mendicant poverty signified abandonment to God's

providence. For Dominic, the humble act of begging daily for food also meant entering into a relationship of mutuality with those to whom he preached. As his biographer M.H. Vicaire, O.P. wrote, mendicancy replaced a "vertical scheme" of preaching with a "horizontal scheme." Sharing the Word of God in evangelical humility with

those who shared their daily bread was a means of creating "a loving union with his brethren, with all other men and women, and with God."

Although in time the practice of mendicancy gave way to other forms of living voluntary poverty, the basic tenet underlying it—that we preach with our lives as much as with our words—remains key today. So, too, does the idea of preaching from a "horizontal scheme"—or from within a "discipleship of equals," to draw on the feminist insights of theologian Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza.

Seen in this context, voluntary poverty calls on religious to impose limits on consumption and to renounce privilege, which expresses itself in oppressive ways across lines of race, class, gender, income, sexual orientation, and geography. Lived to its fullest, Dominicans and other religious have an opportunity today to turn this vow into a powerful witness for social transformation by publicly rejecting ways of living that ravage God's Earth and dehumanize God's people.

The ever-accelerating consumption that undergirds our global economic system relies on the exploitation of people and planet—and is fast outpacing our planet's natural capacity to replenish itself. The Global Footprint Network in 2016 calculated that we reached "Earth Overshoot Day" on August 8, 2016. That was the date when humanity's demand on nature for the year exceeded "nature's budget"—what Earth could generate in a year. Each year the date of our overshoot moves up, with devastating impact: "collapsing fisheries, diminishing forest cover, depletion of fresh water systems, and the build up of carbon dioxide emissions," according to Global Footprint Network.

"Overshoot also contributes to resource conflicts and wars, mass migrations, famine, disease, and other human tragedies—and tends to have a disproportionate impact on the poor, who cannot buy their way out of the problem by getting resources from somewhere else."

If consumption is the driver of this global economic system, fossil fuels power it. The massive amount of carbon released into the atmosphere through this process

is changing its chemistry and threatening to alter our global climate catastrophically. Recognizing the existential threat that climate change poses to life on Earth, in December 2015, 195 nations signed the historic COP21 Paris Climate Agreement. The agreement imposes curbs on fossil fuel use to cap global warming at no more than 2 degrees Celsius, with a goal of limiting the increase to 1.5 degrees—a safer target. It also provides for funding from wealthier nations to assist poorer ones in making this massive economic transition.

As of today, the plans to implement the agreement do not match those urgent goals. The signatory nations must make much greater commitments to reduce their fossil fuel use if they are to reach that target—and to provide the promised investments.

## Vow of poverty invites action, witness

Time is fast running out. It takes 100 years for carbon dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>) to dissipate from the atmosphere. That means the effects of climate change we are experiencing today are the result of accumulated CO<sub>2</sub> spewed during the industrial growth of the last century. The impact of any action we take now to curb carbon emissions—or to continue business as usual—will be felt decades from now. It will be a shameful legacy of unimaginable global hardship and anguish if we don't quit our carbon habit and shift to sustainable ways of living—swiftly.

According to Carbon Brief, we have five years remaining at current emission rates for the world to use up the “carbon budget” that would keep future temperature increases to no more than 1.5 degrees Celsius. That's the level most scientists now believe we should not cross if we are to avoid the risk of runaway global warming. In short, we have between now and 2021 to step off the catastrophic trajectory we are on and begin to walk on a new path towards a clean renewable-energy future.

This small window of time puts a laser-like focus today on our ancient vow of poverty: How might we give it public witness to help the world make this critical economic shift?

In the U.S., with avowed climate deniers in power, and renewed oil and gas exploration getting the green light, it is difficult to press for change at the national level. But the global economic and energy transition that needs to take place will be realized in villages, towns, and cities across the world—and that kind of local focus could be a very fruitful way to move forward.

Here in the United States where we bear an historic responsibility as the world's top carbon polluter, com-

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munities of women and men religious could make the individual and communal sacrifices necessary to help lead these local efforts. Our motherhouses, convents and monasteries could set bold targets for reducing our

The vow of poverty, with its call to limit consumption and renounce privilege, is a powerful religious commitment that can help us give witness to the global economic shift our world must undertake.

carbon footprints within the next five years—by 2021. We could make the means for achieving those reductions—such as solar panels or wind turbines—highly visible and reach out to work with our neighbors and public and civic leaders to help leverage similar changes in our local areas, with a focus on addressing the needs of

people in low-income neighborhoods and in areas suffering the deleterious effects of environmental injustice.

We could go a step further, joining hands with those of other faith traditions around the world who are similarly concerned about the integrity of God's creation and the impact of ecological degradation on the poor, and are playing leadership roles in driving change. In the face of melting glaciers and other environmental challenges, for example, Buddhist monks and nuns in the Khoryug network of monasteries and centers in the Himalayas have installed solar panels, rain catchment systems, and taken other steps "in order to save the Himalayas and Tibet from the threats of deforestation, climate change, and pollution." The effort to lead environmental change in their region flows from a belief "that this positive change in our societies must begin with ourselves first."

The vow of poverty, with its call to limit consumption and renounce privilege, is a powerful religious commitment that can help us give witness to the global economic shift our world must undertake with urgency. In *Laudato Si: On Care for our Common Home*, Pope Francis observed: "We are faced not with two separate crises,

one environmental and the other social, but rather with one complex crisis which is both social and environmental. Strategies for a solution demand an integrated approach to combating poverty, restoring dignity to the excluded, and at the same time protecting nature." (139).

At its root, this complex crisis is a spiritual crisis. We blaspheme against the Creator when we desecrate God's creation and act in ways that dehumanize our brothers and sisters. Beginning with ourselves, we can be the change we wish to see in the world, living the vow of poverty today—as if all life depends on it.

PHOTO COURTESY OF ADRIAN DOMINICAN SISTERS



The author's community, the Adrian Dominicans, have a 10-acre permaculture site (sustainable and self-sufficient agriculture) as part of their ecological commitment. At the site transplanting rhubarb are permaculture specialist Elaine Johnson (right) and a student volunteer.