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**Gift of Self**  
**Monday of the Thirty-Fourth Week of the Year**  
**The Very Rev. Thomas A. Baima, S.T.D.**  
**Theology House Chapel**  
**Mundelein Seminary**  
**November 26, 2012**

Jesus said:

"I tell you truly,  
this poor widow put in more than all the rest;  
for those others have all made offerings from their surplus wealth,  
but she, from her poverty, has offered her whole livelihood."

In seminary, I hear a lot of talk about the *donatio sui*, the total gift of self. I think that this is what Jesus is talking about in the text which the Church has appointed for our reflection today. Your generation of seminarians is attracted to the radical dimension of the Gospel. In the conversations we have in the Prist Center in the Institute for Lay Formation, we struggle with helping the candidates understand lay ecclesial ministry as a vocation and not just a church job. Linda Couri, the director, will frequently ask them to reflect on what they are "giving up" for their vocation. Her insight is that behind every vocation there is a sacrifice which fuels the gift of self.

Father Barron has spoken a number of times about Msgr. Reynold Hillenbrand, the second rector of Mundelein Seminary, who was a pioneer in the area of lay vocation. The first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was a time when Christianity was under seige from Marxism and Comunism. Indeed, one of the movements Msgr. Hillenbrand led was specialized Catholic Action, which sought to empower the laity to live their baptism and impact the world.

Lay ministry today still struggles with that issue of how to live the baptismal vocation and impact the world. During the same period as Msgr. Hillenbrand, another great leader of the lay apostolate was Catherine de Hueck Doherty who founded the Friendship House movement. Catherine wrote about the radical demand of Jesus' Gospel, not on priests and religious but on the emerging lay apostolate. One of her insights, which is pertinent for us today is that we cannot adequately understand the vocation to priesthood and the religious life without first understanding the relationship of sacrifice to vocation.

For Catherine, baptism was the most radical of all the sacraments. It was radical because it asked you to conform yourself to Christ and there is nothing more radical than that. Conforming yourself to Christ, Catherine taught, is nothing other than replacing your will with his - the Will of God.<sup>1</sup> It's just what John the Theologian writes when he tells us: "These are the ones who follow the Lamb wherever he goes."

Catherine's point is the same one that Linda Couri uses to challenge the lay ministry candidates: what are you giving up for your vocation? Catherine, who was among the most self-aware persons you could ever meet, wrote:

. . . where your treasure is, there will be your heart also" That is something I can understand well. It's no problem for me to give away everything I have. That kind of poverty doesn't bother me. In fact, I don't even regret the things I give away. I'm only too happy to get rid of them.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Catherine de Hueck Doherty, *The Gospel of a Poor Woman* (Denville, NJ: Dimension Books, 1981), 64.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

But she goes on, in her deep self-awareness, to ask:

Is that completely true? As a Catholic, as a believer, as a baptized person, is there in my heart something I don't want to give away? You know this sounds like I'm proud.

Maybe I am. Or arrogant? But there is another word that describes what I feel: self-satisfaction. You know that word very well.<sup>3</sup>

Catherine describes how she had gotten good at voluntary poverty, but still had attachments. At a certain point in her life, she began to feel the Lord was asking her to detach from the apostolate she had spend years building. In that moment she realized it had become a possession. She was voluntarily poor, but was not free of attachments. "They have tied me with a thousand cords. Little cords mostly, but I can't move. They justify so much!"<sup>4</sup> The apostolate had become her attachment, her wealth that she was not ready to part with.

Then, she met a blind man who taught her, in her words, a luminous explanation of the Gospel on poverty. He said "Catherine, it's wonderful to be blind. Yes! Because you live in an entirely different world. I don't mean the world of touch or hearing. No, you live in a world of God because your eyes are wide open to all he said and all he wants us to do."<sup>5</sup>

The luminous explanation of the Gospel is this: the baptismal vocation will equip us to live in that world of God. That's the radical form of Christianity. Living with eyes wide open to all God said and all he wants us to do. But we cannot get to the root if there is something in our hearts that we refuse to give away. I like the word Catherine uses in place of pride or arrogance,

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<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., 63

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., 62-63.

“self-satisfaction.” Self-satisfaction is each little cord that ties us to something we are not willing to give away. But *the little is large when it stands in the way of the great*. Self-satisfaction so well describes the deception we play on ourselves, being so proud, for example, of our priestly vocation or our religious vocation or our marital vocation that we excuse ourselves from the radical demands of our baptismal vocation.

The gospel of the widow’s mite is the heart of the baptismal vocation, and the foundation upon which any other ecclesial vocation is built. What is your mite, which you don’t want to give away? What is it that, if you did give it away, would free you to more fully embrace the will of God?