

CONSECRATED LIFE: Love for Poverty, Need for Management and the “Temptation of Power”

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I come before you, dear brothers, with the desire of sharing a simple reflection drawn from our own daily life-experience as religious. We are well-informed - to some extent at least - about the life of our Congregations and Institutes of Apostolic Life.

I have been asked to do this service, and I do it willingly. However, I am aware that what I wish and am able to offer is far from being an academic presentation, since that is outside my scope. My sole intention is to offer some avenues for our reflection and dialogue.

All of us and our religious confreres have made the vow of poverty by professing the evangelical counsels. And I have no doubt that, generally speaking, we live a simple and moderate life in our individual capacity. Most times the problems we face are not on the personal but on the institutional level. And this is the framework within which I intend to develop the following points:

1. The Pope’s invitation to *love and live poverty*
2. The Church Fathers and their call to a *radical outlook* in the use of goods
3. The much-needed *responsible management* of economic goods.
4. The hidden *temptation of power*

1. LOVE FOR POVERTY, a witness to the newness of Christ

It was on the occasion of the celebration of the International Symposium on the “Management of Ecclesiastical Goods of the Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, for the Service of Humanity and the Mission of the Church” (March 8, 2014) that Pope Francis addressed a clear and emphatic call to religious men and women, reminding them that consecrated persons have always been “a prophetic voice and living witness to the newness which is Christ, and that they have to conform themselves to the One who made himself poor so that we might become rich by his poverty.” The Pope went on to say that “*this loving poverty* is *solidarity, sharing* and *charity* and is expressed in *moderation*, in the *quest for justice* and in *contentment with a simple life*.”

I have personally put some words in dark type to highlight not only the keywords but also the *attitudes* that must accompany our life. For us, to live poverty cannot be solely a matter of thrift or control of oneself or others. This has little to do with the essence of *personal freedom with regard to economic goods* and with *our donating and sharing them*. Basic personal and institutional attitudes such as solidarity, sharing, charity, moderation, justice and contentment with a simple life must really find a place in our documents, our personal and institutional ‘examination of conscience’, our ‘accountability to others’, etc.

To keep these things in our mind and heart makes us more free with respect to “the material idols which blur the authentic meaning of life” (says the Pope in this same message). And along with this, he adds another forceful call. A call to ensure that our poverty is not theoretical but in consonance and communion with the poorest of this world. A theoretical poverty is of no use; what is needed is a poverty that we learn by touching the flesh of the poor Christ in the humble, in the poor, in the sick, in children.” The Pope invites us to continue to be for the Church and for the world “the outposts of care for all of the poor and for all material, moral and spiritual poverty, and examples in overcoming every form of egoism through the logic of the Gospel which teaches us to trust in the Providence of God.”

2. THE CHURCH FATHERS

I am not bringing them into this topic for a show of erudition, but because we can never afford to ignore their voice and their conscience.

We are well aware that the thinking of the Church Fathers conveys to us with absolute firmness the clear awareness they had of what we now call the ‘social dimension of the Faith’. Being direct witnesses of the apostolic tradition and authorized interpreters of Sacred Scripture, the Church Fathers enable us to acquire a particular sensitivity and radical outlook also in matters concerning the use of wealth, equality among the followers of Jesus, and the sharing of goods.

Therefore, only for the purpose of reminding ourselves of their words, I have put together some of their texts, among many others, that I consider to be weighty statements.

Drawing on the power of the Gospel and on the radical approach and freedom with which Jesus sets before us his stand concerning goods, the Fathers call our attention to the following:

St. Jerome

(Letter CXXX to DEMETRIADES, no. 14 (M.L. 22, 1118), p. 428)

“If you wish to be perfect, sell not a part of your goods but everything. And, after you have sold them, what should you do next? Give it to the poor. Not to the rich or to relatives; nor should you use it to satisfy your greed but to meet the needs of others... Some use their fortune to build churches and cover the walls with marble sculptures; they erect huge columns whose capitals they decorate with precious ornaments; they adorn the doors with silver and ivory, and make their altars shine with gold and precious stones. I neither reprove nor encourage these things. Each one must act according to his own judgment. It is better to do such things than greedily amass riches. But, there are other ways proposed to you: to clothe Christ in the poor, to visit the sick, to feed the hungry, to welcome the homeless into your house and especially those of your own faith, to help the monasteries of virgins, and to take care of the servants of God and those who are poor in spirit.”

St. Augustine

(Epistle 130, Nos. 3, 12 and 13 (M. L. 33, 495 and 498), p. 443)

"Oh, if we loved God the right way, we would absolutely not love money! So, let money be for you something useful for your pilgrimage and not something to satisfy your greed; make use of it for your needs and not to take pleasure in it... Use money in the way a traveller at an inn uses a table, a glass, a pot, a bed. You have to leave them behind, you cannot have them always with you."

(Expositions on the Psalms, Psalm 147, no. 12 v. 13 (M. L., 37, 1922), p. 468)

"Consider the things that are necessary and you will see how few they are. See that not only what suffices you is little but not even God asks much of you. He asks what he gave you; keep from it what you need. All the other goods that are superfluous for you are needed by others. The surplus goods of the rich are necessary for the poor. When you possess what is superfluous you are possessing what belongs to others."

St. John Chrysostom

(Homily LXXVII, 2-6: Ruiz Bueno, II, 539 ff.; on St. Matthew, p. 265-266)

"Is what you have yours by any chance? You have been entrusted with the goods of the poor, even if you have acquired them through inheritance from your father or have earned them legitimately from your work. Why, by chance, could not God take them away from you? If he has not done so, it is because he wants you to be generous towards the needy... You should not think it is effectively yours because God has told you how to give from what is yours. He lent it to you that with it you might give him glory. Do not think, then, that it is yours when you give him his due."

(To the people of Antioch, Homily II, 5-8 (M. G., 49, 39 et seq.), p. 217-218)

"For our part let us not try to decorate our houses, if we have not first decorated our soul. Isn't it shameful to cover the walls with marble without any reason or motive and to let Christ walk naked through the streets? Of what use is the house to you, O man? Are you going to take it away from this world? No, you will not take the house when you leave this world; what you will inevitably take with you is your soul.... So, let us build houses to live in them, not for show. Whatever goes beyond your need is superfluous and useless. Try putting on shoes that are larger than your feet; no, you will not endure them, because they will prevent you from walking. In the same way, a house that is bigger than necessary will prevent you from going to heaven."

3. THE NEED FOR A RESPONSIBLE MANAGEMENT OF ASSETS

As a result of Pope Francis's concern regarding poverty in the Church and the use of economic goods, a document was prepared after the afore-mentioned Symposium by the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life. It bore the

title: "Circular letter of the CIVCSVA. Guidelines for managing the assets of the Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life ", and was dated August 2, 2014.

I am sure that, in one way or another, all of you are acquainted with it. I am not going to quote from it to offer you a presentation or an annotated reading of the document but to highlight some aspects that can illuminate what we are called to be and to do.

* The letter reminds us that we must not overlook *the evangelical aspect of the economy*.

* And, in the presentation, quoting from Pope Benedict XVI (*Caritas in Veritate*, 34), it reminds us that each founding charism belongs fully by right to the "the logic of gift" which "does not exclude justice, nor does it merely sit alongside it as a second element added from without": in addition to being gift, we give our true contribution to economic, social and political development which, "if it is to be authentically human, needs to make room for the *principle of gratuitousness* as an expression of fraternity."

* The invitation we receive is to respond with *renewed boldness*, with *evangelical prophecy* and to continue to be a *prophetic sign of God's Love*.

* By referring already in the first point of asset management to the *Charism, mission, works and projects* of the various Congregations and Institutes, **the document asks us to define** the works and activities that are to be carried forward, those that are to be eliminated, stopped or modified, and the new frontiers where we need to be. It calls for planning and speaks of budgets and balance-sheets not only in apostolic works but also in religious communities. It asks for monitoring systems to be put in place in works that are running at a loss, attention to be paid to (spiritual, relational and economic) sustainability, and for the welfare mentality to be cast aside.

* The document issues **a vigorous call for transparency and vigilance** to guarantee a proper functioning. It repeatedly makes a demand for full transparency, respect for civil and canonical legislation, and further emphasizes the practice of vigilance and controls in order to provide a real service to communion and transparency, and to safeguard those who discharge the delicate tasks of administration.

* It asks **economers to give an account from time to time** to the Major Superiors and their Councils, to document the transactions and the contracts, and to archive everything.

* Another chapter focuses on collaboration: the collaboration of the local Ordinary and of the local Church, the relationship and collaboration with other Institutes, and the relationship with collaborators and advisors. It suggests the following:

→ Dialogue is important with the local Ordinary when it is a matter of closing houses or works as well as alienating property.

→ Similarly, communication must be had between Superiors when decisions need to be taken about staying in a particular territory so as to ensure that the city or the diocese does not "remain devoid of a religious presence".

→ It must be recognized that the complexity of economic and financial issues today often requires us to depend on the collaboration of lay experts or other institutions, with whom there should be clear agreements about conditions, contracts, the value of the advice etc.

* Finally, the document considers **training** for the economic dimension to be a matter of vital development to ensure that the missionary options of Congregations or Institutes are innovative and prophetic.

- It asks that the training of economists be not neglected.
- It proposes that care be taken of this dimension right from initial formation.
- The Major Superiors must be aware that not everything in economic management and not all that is done correspond to evangelical principles or are in tune with the Social Teaching of the Church.
- Economists must be helped to live their task as a service and not domination.
- And the laity cannot forget that the missionary and charismatic dimension of the Institute for which they work is directed towards the development of the Mission.

Some considerations... drawn from life:

Thus far, we have seen the main lines of the document. Now, the question is: what is there to say in the light of this document? What is there to discuss?

Allow me to put forward some simple considerations which, whether you agree with them or not, arise from the way we all live our lives in one way or another.

→ 1. I think that, in general, it could be said that, individually speaking, men and women religious live in a simple and moderate manner. Certainly, not always and not everyone. But, that is the trend.

→ 2. It is more difficult for us to give this same witness when we consider our buildings that sometimes go back decades and even centuries, and when we try furthermore to modernize them to meet today's needs and challenges, for example, in the area of education, risk prevention, and so on.

→ 3. It is very difficult for us to give expression to a renewed boldness, an evangelical prophecy. The "logic of gift" we spoke of gets diluted many a time in what we believe to be a sacred duty to preserve the heritage received, the legacy of the life and work of those who have gone before us...

→ 4. Even sharing, which we accept in many areas, is hemmed in by a very thin, impenetrable wall when it is a question of economy, monies and properties.

→ 5. We get tired of speaking about closing down, relocating, reframing or restructuring our own works... as our evangelical enlightenment and discernment collides head-on with the heart and the feelings and the life as it is lived in this house or the other...

→ 6. The call for transparency, monitoring, working with budgets and balance-sheets seems obvious to us, but, considering the reality in the whole world and not only in Europe, it seems, in a certain sense, that we are constantly starting anew.

→ 7. Not infrequently we come across grave mistakes, improper sales, fraud in the signing of agreements or contracts, not out of bad will and never, generally speaking, out of a desire to harm one's Institute or Congregation, but because economic management is not our strong point and because today it has become more delicate, difficult and dangerous than ever before.

→ 8. Sometimes pride, the craving to stand out, the desire to be the one who finally manages to resolve endless legal problems, and the lack of humility in failing to consult others lead to mistakes and serious damage with harmful consequences, whether economic or legal.

→ 9. We ask economists to report regularly. It is not a surprise – we know it from our own experience – to find provincial or local superiors who are actually “prisoners of their economists” as these are the ones calling the shots.

→ 10. On the subject of the need for technical or expert advice, not infrequently does it happen that we are incorrectly advised or held hostage to the hidden interests of some people. How important it is to have reliable persons of proven trust and loyalty - which is something quite different from having this or that friend... - because when we lose the freedom to choose our consultants, we fall into a web of dependence on people.

→ 11. I encourage you to see to the training of your economists. Allow me to say, however, that it is not possible to train ourselves in everything or to have trained persons for everything. Therefore, in my opinion, it is more important to train people who are capable of Animation and Government, and they will know how to surround themselves with those who can enlighten and advise them when the time comes to take decisions.

→ 12. Speaking of transparency, we know well enough that it is one of the most obscure areas in the lives of our confreres, despite the profession they have made. It is not surprising that the accounts and balance-sheets – be they big or small – that are delivered by lay people who manage the finances of an institution are much more transparent than the wearisome statements that are sometimes presented by our confreres.

→ 13. And finally, as a separate point in this commentary on the document I shall speak about service, and not power, to be manifest in these undertakings.

4. THE HIDDEN TEMPTATION OF POWER

Let me add, dear brothers, a last point for our dialogue. I will be brief in describing it, though I think that it is much more alive and present than we imagine (and dare to speak about).

I personally am concerned about it because increasingly I am beginning to see it more clearly in our religious life as a reality which, almost without our realizing it, can kill us in what concerns our condition as religious. Of what use is it to speak about *loving poverty* and about our life as a donation and free self-gift if this temptation runs the danger of becoming - I do not know whether to a small or large extent - the blood coursing through our veins?

→ It is becoming increasingly common to find religious men and women leaving aside the most essential aspects of their charism (think, for example, of young people in the case of us Salesians) to involve themselves in the management and administration of projects, ventures, etc.

→ It is becoming increasingly common to find young religious who, as soon as they have completed their years and stages of initial formation, immediately ask about the post they will hold or the office they will occupy.

→ Still more worrying is the clericalism of the Church and of our Congregations and Institutes where to be a priest is an honour and a status that has been achieved, which translates into authority, power, and includes access to financial resources that are to be handled, that can be used to help one's family, and so on.

→ Still more worrying too is the rigidity of religious men and women who are ready to have *lay dependents* (such persons are easily accepted) but are not ready to really share the mission of the Institute or Congregation with lay people in a relationship of equality – in connection with the mission – and still less ready to depend as religious on laypeople.

→ This situation becomes even more serious and difficult in situations where our confreres not only wield authority but also make payments. Lay people understand very well that the one who pays is - if not the boss – the one who certainly holds power and can tell them one day that their job is terminated. In this way, their temptation to dominate is satisfied, and the need to be submissive becomes a mode of survival for the others.

→ Not only is there not a decrease but an increase in many parts of the world of cases of religious men and women seeking to take control of institutions, to be the principal or the director of a school, to be the administrator (in order not to relinquish control over money on the pretext that lay people cannot be trusted), or parish-priests who have a deep-rooted conviction of being the owners of the parish...

→ *And all these situations are further aggravated when they are disguised with a message which says that such things need to be done out of a sense of responsibility, for the good of the institution, as a guarantee for the future, as a way of ensuring that everything does not collapse, etc.*

In my opinion, what is not spoken of and not even listed by the CIC among the other things that ‘violate any of the commandments of the Divine Law’, is that these are certainly situations in dire need of *authentic evangelization and conversion*.

In the dialogue that we shall have my desire is that we confront these things with our own life-experience and that of our Institutes and Congregations.