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CIRCULAR LETTER OF FATHER GENERAL



OUR RESOURCES AT THE SERVICE OF THE MISSION

Where your treasure is, there also will your heart be
(Lk 12, 34; Mt 6, 2)

INTRODUCTION: THE WITNESSES

I write to you all who have chosen to say yes to the invitation of the Lord to follow him “in the footsteps of the poor apostles” and in the Company of Mary, conscious of the heritage of St. Louis de Montfort, of blessed Marie Louise of Jesus and of Father Gabriel Deshayes.

I began to draft this present letter at the Grotto of Lourdes. In this blessed place of Mary, I participated in the 60th Montfortian Pilgrimage of the French Province, on the 150th anniversary of the apparitions of the Immaculate Virgin to Bernadette Soubirous. I finished it little by little in other contexts, allowing myself to be challenged by concrete situations in life.

For a long-time, I've wanted to share with you my reflections on the relationship between material and personal goods, which the Lord has placed in our hands, and the Mission to which we have been called. While meeting confreres in the different entities and sharing life with them, even if for a brief amount of time, I have found shining examples of fidelity to the heritage which our Founders have left us, but, unfortunately, I have also found pathways that go precisely in another direction.

How can I explain all of that?

I have gone back to one of the *symbolic* biblical figures, that of John the Baptist. In order to proclaim the Lord and his reign he settled in the desert: “he wore clothing made of camel's hair and had a leather belt around his waist. His food was locusts and wild honey” (Mt 4, 3). John the Baptist is the link between the First and the Second Testament, and he traces the one path which enables us to join our personal reality to that of Jesus. In order to lay aside the old person and to be clothed as a new person, it is necessary to make a very precise choice: to change radically our relationship with goods, both material and personal. If we have not yet made this radical step, and if we do not renew it daily, we risk living in continuous compromises which render our mission ineffective and barren.

Let us look at Father de Montfort: leaving his town, giving to the first poor person he meets his new suit and the money that he has in his pocket. It is not the gesture that counts, but the radical choice which was born in his heart, destined later to mature and to accompany him throughout his life. The fruitfulness of his mission sprung from this choice.

Let us observe blessed Marie Louise of Jesus: she left the security of Poitiers, the city of her birth, to risk the adventure of wisdom at La Rochelle and later on at St. Laurent without any other resource but Divine Providence. She made a radical choice of giving everything for Jesus wisdom and for the poor. She did not only give what she had, but she gave who she was: “if I were material I would give myself to clothe the poor...”

I also want to offer the experience of one of my predecessors, Father Gabriel Deshayes, a person whom I discovered only last year, while visiting his birthplace. When he realized that there was no longer any money in the cash box, he began some large undertakings, strong in his only richness: Christ, whom he carried in his heart. His only security was poverty. A real poverty! Before leaving Auray, where he had been parish priest for 15 years, he greeted his faithful parishioners with these words: “my dear parishioners, when I was assigned to the parish of Auray, I came among you without anything but my walking stick in my breviary... and now that the time has come for me to leave you, I am going in the same way that I arrived, with my walking stick and my breviary.” It is also said that the only *treasurer* that he wanted to keep was his shepherd’s knapsack and his wooden clogs, in order not to forget the poverty and the simplicity of his origins. It was thanks to his poverty that he was able to give much. Every Sunday he distributed to the poor food, clothing, and medicine – all the fruit of the extra income of the week. Because he gave everything that he had to live on, Providence never abandoned him. He found in Providence the treasures of generosity, solidarity and creativity for an extraordinary number of initiatives in favour of the most deprived (little spinning workshops for prisoners and disinherited people, work for the unemployed, schools for children and for deaf mutes). His social action transformed the city of Auray, and restored dignity to the poor. The phenomenon of begging was no longer seen.

1. FOLLOWING JESUS, MEEK AND HUMBLE OF HEART (Mt 11, 29)

Jesus made the fundamental choice of *announcing good news to the poor* with his life (cf. Lk 4, 18; MR 2). Such a decision brought him to empty himself of everything (cf. Phil 2, 7) in order to be completely free and available. This option remained at the heart of the life and teaching of Jesus and is contained in the first beatitude: *Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of God* (Mt 5, 3). The first among the poor who are blessed is Jesus himself: he chooses poverty of material goods, of knowing, of desire and of power, in order to be completely available to the mission which the Father entrusted to him. And he invites all of his disciples to follow him on this path.

Jesus openly proclaimed: *my food is to do the will of the one who sent me and to finish his work* (Jn 4, 34). This will directed all of his decisions, illuminated all of his actions, and guided his feelings. He constantly came back to this choice, as we see above all in the Gospel of John, renouncing everything that could prevent him from remaining one with the Father and finding here the strength and freedom to travel to the end the road that would bring him to cross. Jesus was conscious that this pathway realized the loving will of the Father for humanity.

We are in the *Year of St. Paul*, and I invite everyone to encounter this extraordinary apostle of the Lord in order to understand the real poverty to which we are called to proclaim the Lord: *when I came to you, brothers, proclaiming the mystery of God, I did not come with sublimity of words or of wisdom. For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified. I came to you in weakness and fear and much trembling* (1 Cor 2, 1-3).

True poverty for Paul is to renounce everything, but in order to make a new and unique choice, the choice of a treasure, the choice of Christ: *I even consider everything as a loss because of the supreme good of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have accepted the loss of all things and I consider them so much rubbish, that I may gain Christ* (Phil 3, 8).

It is a total renunciation, which, as Jesus himself clearly says, becomes a renunciation of oneself: *if anyone wishes to come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me* (Lk 9, 23). To “deny oneself” is an expression which we often use, and therefore it can be emptied of its profound significance: we are called to renounce our “I” (our ego) in order to construct a life which enables us to encounter God in the deepest part of ourselves. We are invited to follow Christ in fullness and to conform ourselves to Him. He is the *pearl of great price*, the *hidden treasure* for which we must sell everything in order to possess him. True poverty, then, is not material poverty, which only remains an expressive sign and a clear indication, but it is the free choice to unite ourselves to Him through the vow of poverty, and to enter into his ways of freedom, of joy and of love, forever. *Leaving everything, they followed him* (Lk 5, 11).

In order to follow Jesus with you, I have also taken up the ongoing reading of the Gospel, because, if we really want to be disciples of the Lord, we can only carry it out through contemplation, seeking day after day to make our own his sentiments, his interior freedom, his complete openness to the will of the Father, his very own choice: *Seek first the Kingdom of God and his justice, and these other things will be given you besides* (Mt 6, 33, Letter 7).

I would now like to offer you the aspects of poverty which I have felt resonating in me throughout this process of meditation and contemplation.

Poverty “in material goods.” Looking at today’s world, we unfortunately discover millions of people who live in real material poverty. We cannot play with the term *poverty*. We ought to recognize in truth that we have sufficient goods which give security for the future. What does this mean, then, to live as disciples of the Poor Jesus? *Go, sell... and then come follow me* (Mt 19, 21). Jesus asks of us a disengagement, a self-emptying, a detachment, a profound change in our relation to material goods, illuminated every day by the Word which liberates.

Poverty “in knowing.” Jesus did not bury his abilities, his knowledge and his talents, but neither was he motivated to show off and to be esteemed by people. With an attitude of humility and poverty, he placed his entire self at the service of proclaiming the Kingdom. He used in the best possible way the gifts of the Father in order to transmit the wisdom of God, to form and accompany his disciples, to denounce courageously and fearlessly hypocrisy, inconsistency, falsehood.

Poverty “in affectivity.” With what clarity, firmness and freedom did Jesus claim a distance from his family! He was told “Your mother and your brothers are standing outside and they wish to see you.” He said to them in reply, “My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and act on it.” (Lk 8, 20-21). It is an affirmation hard to accept, but it is an interior journey to make each day. A heart that is free is not a heart that is empty, hard or barren, but it is a heart that frees itself from a purely human fruitfulness for a fruitfulness that comes from above, the fruit of listening to the Word and putting it into practice. Let us return to the experience of Jesus with Mary, Martha and Lazarus, his friends from Bethany! Father de Montfort asks for *Liberos* in no. 7 of the Prayer for Missionaries, in order to live in the freedom of the Lord who makes possible profound relationships with each person.

Poverty “of will.” *The one who sent me is with me. He has not left me alone, because I always do what is pleasing to him* (Jn 8, 29). Filial obedience, which was not always easy or clear to undertake – as in the Garden of Olives (cf. Mt 26, 39), brought Jesus to a total freedom and availability. We are *liberos* in order to live in the love and the will of the Lord, to be men according to his heart (cf. PM 8). In every instance of life, in every concrete situation, we should never remain chained to an idea, a decision, a project, but rather we should have that interior poverty which keeps us always open to discerning the will of God.

Poverty” in power.” *If anyone wishes to be first, he shall be the last of all and the servant of all* (Mk 9, 35). The present culture of *performance* places in us the subtle temptation to want to be the first, the best, to dominate others, to command, to manipulate the weaker ones. *You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and the great ones make their authority over them felt. But it shall not be so among you* (Mt 20, 25-26). Jesus gave us an example of this in the gesture of washing the feet of his disciples, in the offering of his life in ransom for humanity (cf. Mk 10, 45). We ought to struggle every day against the temptation of power in order to have a heart that is free, humble and generous.

Poverty “in one’s own reality.” Jesus invites us to live the truth in ourselves. *The truth will make you free* (Jn 8, 32). It is an invitation to recognize our reality of grace and sin, of gifts and limits. Only in recognizing our sins will we be forgiven and begin again every day the pathway toward the goal, while also searching for someone to

accompany us and to help us to shed light within ourselves. *Whoever lives the truth comes to the light, so that his works may be clearly seen as done in God* (Jn 3, 21). This itinerary, traced out in our personal poverty, is not to do works for God but to do them in God, and this keeps us always in a place of humility and listening.

Poverty “of heart.” *Learn from me for I am meek and humble of heart* (Mt 11. 20). Living from the heart allows for living with intensity, with passion, in a real listening to others. But how many traps make a slave of our heart every day! Hostility, envy, jealousy block the growth of life and make it dry and barren. The fruitfulness of the heart grows in the measure in which we are able to root out everything that prevents us from loving.

2. OUR DAILY LIFE: OPPORTUNITIES AND TRAPS

To follow Jesus who is poor, meek and humble of heart is not a choice made once and for all many years ago, but it is a decision to renew and to revive, as I said above, with profound contemplation and a familiarity with the Word and with the Jesus of the Gospels.

It is in daily life, in the sentiments and the attitudes of every day that we manifest the choice at the depths of our life.

Consecrated Life today is living in the midst of a phase which we can call a *recession*. Vocations are lacking in the north of the world while they are numerous in the south of the world, although there it is still searching for a force and a history which guarantees an appropriation and interiorizing of a received heritage. In these times, then, we are all called to look reality in the face, as it is, without ideology and justifications. We are urged to search for concrete roads which free us from the immobility and tiredness into which we can fall, otherwise we risk staying tied to the shore and not consenting to the invitation of the Master to put out into the deep (cf. Lk 5,4).

While visiting the communities of our Congregation, spread out in so many countries in the world, I noticed that daily life is the reality that allows us to verify if we are able to “Start Afresh from Christ” (cf. the Instruction of CIVSAVA, 2002). For a real effectiveness and liveliness in personal, community and apostolic life, we are constantly invited to compare ourselves with the poor Christ of the Gospel, the cornerstone of life, of community and of mission.

I am convinced that our poverty passes through an ongoing examination – both personal and communal – with regard to things and money, to the style of daily life, to attitudes and sentiments toward others. It is here that ongoing formation takes place, which becomes an ongoing conversion to the Lord’s attitudes and way of acting.

I see this desire to dwell with frankness and charity on some aspects of daily life both as an opportunity to live our discipleship of Jesus the Poor One, and also as a trap which blocks our pathway as consecrated persons and evangelizers *in the footsteps on the poor Apostles*. I am led by the desire that each and every one together might keep alive the valuable heritage of Father de Montfort: a life of poverty and love of the poor. I do not pretend to be exhaustive, but I simply recall the most recurrent aspects of our daily life which we often do not know how to evaluate in the light of the Poor Jesus of the Gospel.

ON THE PERSONAL LEVEL

Personal financial accounts. We encounter this practice often today, which is a clear sign of a loss of a sense of belonging to the community, leading to confreres deciding by themselves how to use money. We waste such an opportunity when we do not undertake a communal discernment on the evangelical use of goods which the Lord has entrusted into our hands! We become the *masters* of the little or large amount of money that we possess, and we no longer take care to report it. Thus, we no longer live our discipleship of the Poor Jesus.

“Pocket money.” I have found this practice in some entities. Originally, such a small sum was for little expenses, for unforeseen needs, for charity. But today, often, *pocket money* is equal to, if not more than, the wages of a simple local worker. Considering that every confrere receives what is necessary for living from the community, what sense does this practice have? How is this money acquired? Perhaps the Lord wants to offer us the chance to re-evaluate these practices and see if they are really according to the spirit of the first Christian communities. It is good to be aware that often part of this money which is in our hands does not come from *rich pockets* but from *poor* ones like that of the widow in the Gospel (cf. Mk 12, 42-44). Simple people, who often sustain us through renunciations and sacrifices, perhaps would be in crisis if they knew how their donations sometimes come to be used.

After a certain number of years of priesthood, “I have the right to study.” This is a statement that I've heard several times during my visits to the entities of the Congregation. Now, a specific preparation for the mission is a gift which is to be used so that our ministry might have a certain quality. But when studies become a *personal right*, then this is a trap which leads to holding on to a *title*, to take for ourselves the time and money necessary often in order to satisfy *personal tastes*. In the end, it removes us from service to others to which Jesus calls us by his example.

Vacations. To have time and space to regenerate the energies of body and spirit, for a harmonious interior equilibrium and to restore us with renewed enthusiasm for

ourselves, for the community and for the mission is certainly an opportunity. But vacations become a trap when we do not consider sufficiently the kind of travel and the destination, or we do not take account of the cost of the stay or even when the obligations of our mission toward others are ignored. “The poor never go on vacation...”

Mobile phones, computers, the means of communication and transport. The achievements of science and technology offer extraordinary opportunities for interpersonal communication. In a pastoral context, they are wonderful instruments to strengthen the service of proclamation, of personal accompaniment, in order to multiply in different places and in real time a presence of witnessing, of solidarity, of illumination at the school of the Gospel. But when they make us slaves, then such instruments can become dangerous: we lose their true significance, we use them in every moment and we become *dependent* on them. It is necessary never to lose the perspective that these instruments have their value in reference to the mission. Thus we will be helped to keep ourselves free (*liberi*) from these means every time they invade valuable space and time dedicated to the service of the Reign.

AT THE COMMUNITY LEVEL

Financial reports. There is in the tradition of religious life a custom which has been tested over time that every community at different levels present a report to the person in charge. It is a dimension of fraternity and of poverty. Unfortunately this does not happen in all of our entities, even when some requests are made asking for subsidies from the General Administration or other entities and persons! It is a trap which prevents individuals and the community from a necessary and objective evaluation of goods, consistent with the decision to follow Jesus the Poor One. It is urgently necessary to recover some means of this tradition and good common life which help us to be mature and responsible. We should teach young religious the principles of bookkeeping, the management and the cost of goods, the correct use of time, of resources and of money, as well as making them sensitive to the problems of work. It is good to remind ourselves often that we are not *owners* but “wise and faithful stewards” of the gifts which the Lord places in our hands, often through good and simple people, for the good of all, especially the poorest.

Salaries and pensions. Social organization has made great strides in some countries and is growing little by little in others. This offers the possibility of taking advantage of social benefits, like a pension or a stipend which is the fruit of our labour. But it is not rare to find confreres who consider these things as *personal affairs*; so salaries and pensions become private property to be managed according to one’s own criteria. It is another sign that we have lost the sense of belonging to a community and of co-

responsibility for the good of all, within and outside of the religious community. Even in human families, parents save some of their income to help their children in difficulty!

The witness of life to form the new generations. We know from experience that the mission of formation is not easy. Nevertheless, it remains a fundamental duty that is accomplished mainly through the living witness of the formators as well as the communities in mission. Sometimes there are discrepancies in life-styles: between expatriate missionaries, who receive economic aid from elsewhere, and confreres native to the place; between formators and young people in formation as if they belong to different categories; in the young people in formation themselves, who demand everything, moving far away from a simple life-style close to the condition of the people! It is important from the beginning of the path of formation that the young candidates be accompanied in their attitudes toward moderation in food and in clothing, and in knowing how to contribute to daily life with their own manual labour.

A sense of belonging and co-responsibility. It is important to develop in every confrere and in every young person in formation a sense of belonging and co-responsibility that expresses itself in a personal and communal commitment to sustain the Congregation in all its entities. Day after day, it is necessary to overcome the trap of feeling like *dependants* or *wage earners*, for that would be a denial of the foundations of our choice of entering into a family, into a community, and living as a responsible and active part of it. From this choice flow the efforts of everyone and of every entity to reach a certain financial auto-sufficiency which is the fruit of solidarity and creativity in meeting needs for life and for the mission.

Regulating financial aspects in the statutes of the entity. In light of the constitutions of the Congregation, it is important to clarify how to look at the use of goods. It is also necessary to be attentive not to acquire debts without the necessary authorization in order not to put the Congregation at risk of having to assume the responsibility to safeguard the good name of the entity with respect to creditors. At the same time it is wise to discern in community the commitments toward social projects to avoid going beyond the allowable financial capacity and the limits of prudence and of religious suitability.

AT THE LEVEL OF FREEDOM AND AVAILABILITY FOR MISSION

The family. Each one of us feels obligated to thank God for his own family, from whom he has received the gift of faith and has been accompanied in growth. Montfort is just as strong as Jesus (cf. Lk 14, 25-27) when he calls for missionaries “free from everything, detached from father, mother, brothers, sisters, relatives according to the flesh” (cf. PM 7). We know well that this does not mean a rejection and even less a disregard of our families,

but it is a clear and strong invitation to make a firm and courageous choice which allows us to be true disciples of Jesus and missionaries of his Gospel and to follow after him in freedom. In different cultures the sense of family takes different accents, but the message and the example of Jesus in relation to his mother and his relatives (cf. Mk 3, 31-34) are clear for all, and, if lived consistently, leads us to receive the “hundredfold” (cf. Mk 10, 28-31). It is important therefore to evaluate when necessary the behaviour of each of us regarding the connections we often maintain with the family and the financial aid which we may set aside for them. On the other hand, it is beautiful to experience the unconditional support of our own human family in view of our complete missionary freedom.

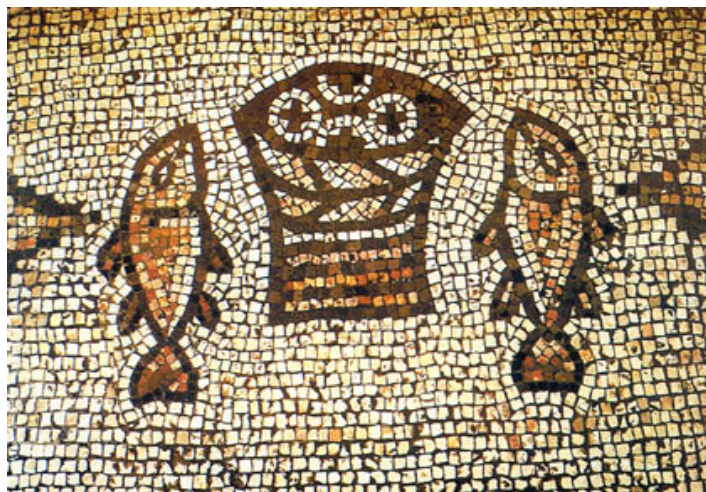
Becoming a priest and religious seen as an ascent on the social ladder. Religious consecration, apostolic life and work in a community, and the priesthood are all gifts which commit us to live closely in solidarity and in free service to our brothers and sisters in mission. But it can sometimes happen that the material goods that we receive in community, the financial ease which is at our disposal, rather than being a source of communion with brothers and sisters, can become a motive for separation. We place ourselves or we feel that we are higher. We do not get our hands dirty; we are no longer capable of humble work because it is incompatible with our new *dignity* ... This is also a trap which makes us lose sight of Jesus, the truly Consecrated One, the one Priest who made himself everything for everyone, and who chose fisherman and simple people as his collaborators.

Personal witness in mission. In the light of the Word of God, we are all invited to verify daily the truth that is in us and to know how to choose the path of ongoing conversion which will allow us to be credible witnesses with our lives, because “contemporary people listen more readily to witnesses than to teachers, or if they listen to teachers they do so because they are witnesses” (Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 41). The real mission is always realized by witnesses, martyrs, confessors, saints. The trap into which we may often fall, when we lose sight of the radicalism of life, is the ideology and justification by which we may be able to offer good advice and clear directions for others, without a coherent life on our part! The Acts of the Apostles says that Jesus began “first by doing and then by teaching” (cf. Acts 1, 1; LEW 153; SR 2; MR 62).

Construction and projects for the community and for the mission. Missionary solidarity, still alive in the Christian community and in the Congregation, often gives us the opportunity to receive help, and sometimes considerable help, to use for our brothers and sisters in need or for the needs of the community. This is a great occasion for community discernment on projects and on their concrete realization, so that every work might be for the good of all in a simple style and according to our choice of poverty. It is

important to keep an accurate accounting also for these solidarity projects in order to render a just account of how we have invested the goods which have been entrusted to us. Often we are prone to the trap of making personal choices and connecting construction projects or other projects to a particular person, losing sight of the attitude to which Jesus invites us: to be “useless servants” (Lk 17, 10).

Availability for the mission in countries which are poorer than my own. Our missionary identity calls for an openness and availability for those places where there is the most need “to announce the Good News to the poor” (cf. Lk 4, 18). How beautiful it is to read the missionary history of our Congregation and become aware of so many choices made in favour of countries and situations which were most difficult! A real missionary spirit guided our predecessors, and it is such a spirit that we would like passed on to the new generations of Montfortian communities, But sometimes a gnawing enters into the heart of some confreres called to a mission outside of their own country: it does not make us available for places that are too poor because they require too many renunciations ... It seems to be almost an offense against our dignity and then gives the impression of being sent *into exile*.



3. SHARING GOODS FOR THE SERVICE OF THE MISSION

Giving now a fuller look at the life of the Congregation, at the service of the proclamation of Jesus, the poor man and the friend of the poor, I would like to invite us personally and communally to read and meditate on *Hymn 20* of our Holy Founder, entitled “Treasures of Poverty”. Let us be pervaded by the evangelical spirit of poverty which was able to transform the life of our Founder into a beacon which should illuminate our path of discipleship. I only cite the first two verses of the hymn, but I truly invite each one of us to meditate on it and to contemplate it as Montfort could transform into a song what he lived in his depths:

*Here is the precious pearl
Here is the treasure so hidden,
And the quality so generous
That I have sought for so long,
But it is not easy to take hold of;
Whoever wishes to possess it
Must, to do so, give away and sell
All he has, without any haggling.*

*It is called voluntary poverty,
Or poverty of spirit,
Or the great saving counsel,
Given to us by Jesus Christ;
It makes a wise man put aside
His goods and any desire for possessions,
So to follow in His footsteps,
Like a true Christian.*

Reflecting on the Orientations given to us by the last General Chapter, let us keep in the background the spirit of the *Hymn* of Father de Montfort and the witness of his life.

Among the challenges that the capitular text presents to us about the sharing of goods, we read the following:

- 1 No. 35. *Creating solidarity calls for trust between entities in need and entities with sufficient resources. Trust is present where there is transparency and accountability.*
- 2 No. 37. *The goal is to achieve transparency and accountability: transparency leads to accountability, accountability to trust, trust to solidarity.*

Transparency and responsibility, solidarity regarding our mission in the midst of the poor and with the poor of the earth – this is the road to travel to be faithful and carry out the challenges which the Congregation has taken up.

Transparency and responsibility

The good administration of goods, expressed in correct accounting, is one important means which allows for an *examination of poverty* in our personal and communal life and is a means to do the pruning evangelically necessary for always being *liberos* as Montfort wanted.

It is in following Jesus the poor man that consecrated persons and their communities risk all of their credibility and prophetic witness in the world today. Because of this, it is necessary to form every religious in responsibility and not in dependency, by treating the aspects that reveal our true life choice.

Called like Jesus to *a simple and poor life-style*, close to the reality of the people of one's own country, we will avoid presenting consecrated life as a promotion. It necessary to have clarity in discerning the vocational motivations of candidates, in order to avoid serious difficulties in entering into the charismatic identity of the Congregation, with the resulting waste of energies to sustain an appearance that is not integrated. The number of vocations is not always a sign of the evangelical witness of our lives.

Called to *live by our own work*, a move toward a certain auto-sufficiency is urgent and necessary in the young entities, stemming from their own missionary work and close to the life-style of the local people. Consecrated life is always born among the poor and it is placed at the service of the poor. It is necessary to create already in the formative period a culture of manual labour and simplicity of life as an expression of an evangelical way. The point of reference always remains a return to the essence of the Gospel and to the person of Jesus.

Called to *give a transparent account of what we have and what we receive*: without the truth we cannot progress and we do not enter into the spirit of the first Christian communities and of the age-old traditions handed down to us by generations of consecrated persons. And, as St. Peter says, “You have lied not to human beings, but to God” (cf. Acts 5, 4).

Solidarity

“They had everything in common” (Acts 4, 32). The communion of goods within our religious Congregation is a prophetic necessity within the present globalized world which moves ever more toward individualism and personal profit.

At the same time solidarity is going to be realized in such a way that even the entities in developing countries can little by little grow toward a certain auto-sufficiency,

so that it gives each one dignity, interior strength and responsibility to live by the fruit of his own labour.

But it is important for everyone to work for the common good, truly feeling responsible for one another. Our path of consecrated life should bring us to create a real fraternity. We have to thank the confreres and those responsible for the entities who have for years been carrying out initiatives to make solidarity real in the Congregation.

Unfortunately, this has produced an attitude of dependency in some cases. A change of mentality and the task of forming and informing become urgent and necessary. The global economic crisis these days, which has repercussions within our community, is without a doubt a great opportunity to forge together new roads of solidarity and at the same time to look once again at our life in the light of the commitment which we have undertaken to follow Jesus the poor one.

And it is important never to forget that the sharing of goods and solidarity are always for the charismatic mission of the Company. Sometimes it is noted that a preoccupation with material goods is not in strict connection with the quality of formation for mission and with a solidarity with our brothers and sisters who are the littlest, the poor, who bring us back to the fundamentals of the Gospel and to our foundational origins.

Friends of the poor

By his example, Jesus does not teach us to do some things for the poor, but rather to live with Him, a poor man and a friend who remains with the poor. Already in the Old Testament we know a God who listens to the cry of the poor, defends their cause, consoles their afflictions and strongly reveals that material poverty is to be combated.

But the form of a deeper poverty, that of the *anawim*, personified in Jesus himself, has all its value in the eyes of God. The Gospel is not only proclaimed to the poor, but it is proclaimed by a Master who “though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God something to be grasped. Rather, he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave” (Phil 2, 6-7).

We are invited to harmonize these two paths: a love for the poor and a choice of a poor life for ourselves, following the poverty preached and practiced by Christ, and imitating him in his sincere and real love for the poor. “Whatever you did for one of these least brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me” (Mt 25, 40).

Before considering the poor as a social problem, we ought to see them as persons to love, to listen to and also to help. “When he disembarked and saw the vast crowd, his heart was moved with pity for them, for they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things” (Mk 6, 34). Before multiplying the loaves Jesus

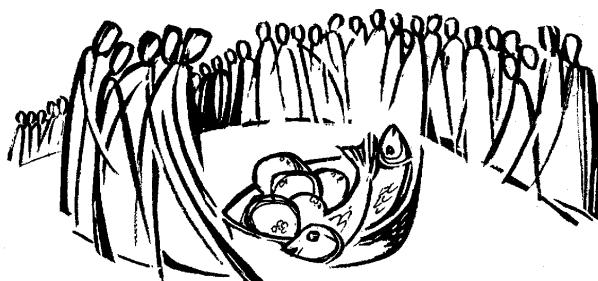
established a profound communion with the people, spoke with them, and proclaimed the saving word. Then he involved his disciples: “Give them some food yourselves.” (Mk 6, 37). Before opening ourselves to the needs of the poor, we ought to listen to them as our brothers and sisters, love them, and enter into relationship with them. We should then not only run and act, but stop, listen, respect, and seek.

Our young people in the process of formation live a closeness to the poor as an essential element of their growth. We do not forget, then, that for all our life we are and we always remain disciples following Jesus, meek and humble of heart (cf. Mt 11, 29).

The source of everything is always listening to the Word, otherwise love becomes cold or becomes an ideology which distances or objectifies the poor. The Word reinvigorates in us daily a heart open to the poor, and it also nourishes community life and our celebration of the Eucharist.

For years we have been saying: “The poor evangelize us.” Let us really place ourselves at their school! By keeping them in sight every day, they help us dismantle our false securities, built not on rock but on sand. Nearness to the poor *with our heart* reveals to us our weaknesses and our fragility, places us in a position to experience the richness of their humanity, of their words, of their friendship and their gratitude. They will shake us from our tranquillity. Let us remember the words of Pope Benedict XVI: “The program of the Christian – the program of the Good Samaritan, the program of Jesus – is ‘a heart which sees.’ This heart sees where there is a need for love and acts accordingly” (*Deus Caritas Est*, 31).

It is not out of place to invite us to open our eyes and hearts also to *the poor in our houses*, that is, to our confreres who live in our communities with discomfort, with sickness, with anxiety ... As good Samaritans let us take care of them and help them to welcome the gestures of our fraternal and cordial solidarity.



CONCLUSION

In the history of consecrated life, an incorrect use of goods has always engendered decadence in religious life. Then a radical reform was necessary which brought back a deep sense of the vow of poverty, as a way of following after Christ and being conformed to Christ himself, who “became poor although he was rich, so that by his poverty you might become rich” (2 Cor 8, 9). It seems to be a paradox: Christ has not enriched us with his richness but with his poverty, that is, with his love that led him to give himself totally to us.

We can then verify the quality of our consecrated life by the quality of the management of material and spiritual goods which the Lord has given us. This verification can be an excellent means of reflection and sharing in our community assemblies and meetings, without falling into the trap of beautiful affirmations, but rather dealing with concrete daily life.

Poverty as liberation, purity of heart as a pathway toward God, professional honesty in the use of goods and their correct administration: this is the way to avoid falling into the presumption of having *privileges*. These privileges, rather than making us witnesses, are obstacles to spreading the love of God among people.

We must also give particular attention to our connection with creation through a moderate life-style, the conscious use of water and energy, and a critique of consumerism. In order to do this it is necessary for us to cultivate the prophetic spirit of biblical figures and of the missionaries for which Montfort dreamed and entreated God.

Our Founder invites us to take Mary as the sure way. The inspiration which comes from the Blessed Virgin should fill us with the same poverty of spirit which springs from the song of the *Magnificat*. Mary’s participation in the mission of salvation brings us close to the suffering of people, just as she followed the road to Calvary and stood at the foot of the cross of her Son.

From the 12th to the 14th of September 2008, I participated in a *Day of Montfortian Marian Spirituality* in Loreto. There were more than 250 people there who live the Montfortian Consecration, and we placed ourselves together “with Mary at the school of Crucified Wisdom.” The enthusiasm of so many simple people, often living in difficult situations, but who have made a life choice beginning with the Consecration proposed by Montfort, and who make themselves freely available to the path of God, led me to exclaim spontaneously: “The lay people are evangelizing us.”

Let us re-appropriate the Montfortian Consecration, living it as a process of poverty – self-emptying – liberation, which restores to us the spirit of true missionaries of the Gospel:

*I ... an unfaithful sinner,
renew and ratify today through you
the vows of my Baptism:
I renounce forever Satan,
his empty promises and his evil designs,
and I give myself completely to Jesus Christ, Incarnate Wisdom,
to follow him all the days of my life
carrying my cross
and to be more faithful to him than I have been till now.
In the presence of the Angels and Saints
I choose you this day, Mary, as my Mother and Queen.
I entrust and consecrate myself to you as your slave, body and soul,
with all that I possess, both spiritual and material,
and even the value of my good actions
past, present and future.
I give you the full right
to dispose of me and all that belongs to me,
without any reservations,
in whatever way you please,
for the greater glory of God
in time and throughout eternity.*

Rome 7 October 2008
Feast of Our Lady of the Rosary


S. M. M.

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