



THE POOR HAVE GOOD NEWS PROCLAIMED TO THEM

(Lk 7, 22)

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June 2013 Circular 309

Summery

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*Having called the Twelve,
He sent them out to proclaim the kingdom
of God
and to perform healing.
And He said to them,
"Take nothing for your journey,
neither a staff, nor a bag,
nor bread, nor money;
and do not even have two tunics apiece.
Departing, they began going
throughout the villages,
preaching the gospel
and healing everywhere.*

Luke 9, 2-3; 6

INTRODUCTION

“The poor are sacred to us.” With these words, John Mary de la Mennais invited his Brothers to open their schools to children of poor families. To substantiate this, the Rule of Life specifies that the Brother “belongs to a Congregation that the Founders have established to provide Christian instruction and education, especially to children of the working class” (Rule of 1891), and as such he “knows that one of the most effective ways to fight dire poverty is to fulfill its specific mission” (D 50).

The 2012 General Chapter underscores the urgency of serving the poor: “The poor are among us, close to us (in our communities, schools, educational centers...) The new poverties of young people (moral, emotional, spiritual, material...) challenge

us, especially in this time of crisis. We must dare to risk this evangelical commitment which urges us to recreate and to renew the way in which we live the mission by announcing Good News to the poor.”

Proclaiming the Good News to the poor, such is our mission. In the context of a new evangelisation to which the Chapter challenged us, we cannot pretend to embrace a vocation – that of brotherhood – which claims to testify to God’s presence at the heart of humanity without asking ourselves anew how we welcome the Kingdom in our midst. This is why I wish, by way of this circular, to invite all Brothers to reassess the ways in which they are faithful to their vow of evangelical poverty in keeping with the spirit of our Congregation.

“Love and practise in all things religious poverty which opens to you the treasures of heaven.” Such was the advice John Mary de la Mennais gave to the Brothers at the onset of the Congregation. At that time, the Brothers made only the vow of obedience which included the other two, namely, the vow of consecrated chastity and the vow of evangelical poverty, hence Father de la Mennais’ speaking of “religious poverty”. His advice to his Brothers regarding religious poverty recurs constantly in his letters to them. His demands for effective poverty were unequivocal, whether in daily living which he insisted be frugal or in the management of community goods. With an open mind, however, John Mary de la Mennais, while advocating a well-balanced life, asked his Brothers to practise simple lifestyles in keeping with the standards kept by families at the time. Moreover, he asked them to live a real community of goods: nothing belonged to them personally. Brothers had to make do with what was placed at their disposal in daily living or in their ministry. There was absolutely no room for luxury. Saint Paul’s quota-

tion in a paragraph of the Rule of 1825 makes clear the meaning of this radical poverty: “If we have food and covering, with these we shall be content.” This quotation should be understood in the light of the following verses in the first letter to Timothy whence it is taken: “But those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a snare and many foolish and harmful desires which plunge men into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all sorts of evil, and some by longing for it have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pains.” 1 Tm 6, 9-10.

After having spent some time on the meaning of consecrated chastity in 2010, I now would wish to devote some time to the meaning of evangelical poverty. It seems to me, in fact, that there is plenty to rediscover if we grasp more clearly the demands of “poverty” for our vocation. Meditating on the beauty of this vow and committing ourselves to its radical demands will lead us to lovingly and joyfully living our vocation to the brotherhood. Yet again, our vocation can claim to be prophetic only to the extent that our humble poverty is in the very likeness of the poverty of Jesus.

This brief survey will show us how the Gospel urges those who wish to be disciples of Jesus to give up everything in order to “drink the Cup” which Jesus drank. We will then attempt to understand what being poor of heart means, and thus share in the mystery of the evangelical beatitude of the poor. In the third part, we shall look more closely at what our vow of poverty commits us to at the personal and at the community levels. Lastly, we shall see how the poverty to which we are called is meaningful for the mission and a source of unrivalled graces. We shall then be reminded that we are called to proclaim the Good News to the poor who are the children in our schools. Finally, we shall

be in a better position to understand that being a Brother is truly “good news”.



*"Sell your possessions
and give to charity;
make yourselves money belts
which do not wear out,
an unfailing treasure in heaven,
where no thief comes near
nor moth destroys.
For where your treasure is,
there your heart will be also."*

Luke 12, 33-34.

I

BEING POOR IN THE LIKENESS OF CHRIST

“The Brother, in all humility, commits himself to follow Christ more closely in his poverty” (D 42). Who can read this sentence without trembling? Are we really walking in the footsteps of Jesus? Are we truly in the likeness of Jesus in our poverty? We may so wish to be, but we also know only too well how difficult it is to achieve. Before the Lord, we bow, asking forgiveness for clinging to the goods of this world while he, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God something to be grasped but emptied himself even to death on the cross (Cf. Ph 2, 6-7).

1. *Making a Radical Choice*

We have committed ourselves to follow Christ in his poverty. The choice we made was conscious and free and comple-

mented the vows of consecrated chastity and of obedience for the Kingdom. We thus responded to a personal call from the Lord. Sent by Christ among young people to proclaim to them the Good News of salvation, we have been called to be in his likeness, to follow him in his poverty and obedience, to total self-giving. *"Henceforth, the Brother belongs to God in a new way"* (D 24).

Of course, all the baptized are called to be like Christ. All are called to holiness. This is not a matter of comparing various vocations as degrees on a scale of perfection. According to Jesus, whoever wishes to be great must be a servant, and the first will be last. But some are called – it is a vocation – to offer him their entire existence, to "lose" their existence in an act that involves the whole of life once and for all. This is where lies the radicalism of the religious profession to which, unfortunately, one can respond half-heartedly, taking back what was once given.

"The consecrated life, through the prompting of the Holy Spirit, 'constitutes a closer imitation and an abiding re-enactment in the Church' (LG 44) of the way of life which Jesus, the supreme Consecrated One and missionary of the Father for the sake of his Kingdom, embraced and proposed to his disciples" (VC 22) wrote John Paul II. And, so as to show the road to follow in order to be in the likeness of Christ, he adds: *"The depth of his poverty is revealed in the perfect offering of all that is his to the Father."*

Can we say that such is the radical project of our life? Have we really not taken anything back from what we had generously given up on the day of our commitment in the religious life? Does our life's project demonstrate that, in the offering of our lives and of everything that belongs to us, we want to be fully and joyfully to God and God alone, without reserve? Can we

really claim this without feeling in the secret recesses of our conscience that much remains to be done? Let's not be afraid to admit it. Everyone, starting with myself, has to ask God forgiveness for not having done what we promised to do. Let's acknowledge it in order to change and resume our journey with courage and confidence in the power of the Holy Spirit, with the help of Mary and of our Brothers, and with the precious assistance of the prayers of our Founders.

2. Never Taking Back What Was Given Up

"Can you drink the cup that I drink?" (Mk 10, 38)¹ Jesus loves the disciples James and John to whom he asks the question. They left everything when he asked them to follow him. So why are they making this crazy request: *"Grant that in your glory we may sit one at your right and the other at your left?"* (Mk 10, 37) What audacity! We are surprised: it is not a question here, it seems, of a surge of the heart to do the will of God. What they want is to get the best possible places, and to do so without delay lest the places be taken by others! We are amazed, even shocked, at this inconsiderate demand from beloved disciples of the Lord. We are tempted to say: "I never would have dared make such a request. Really, it's crazy!" And yet, are we certain never to have made such a request? What are we really looking for with Jesus?

Let's not be surprised if we discover that we, in fact, have the same desires as James and John. Let us mention a few points

¹ I here seek inspiration from a reflection by a Beninese Dominican, Father Roger Hounbédji, professor of Holy Scripture at the Catholic University of Abidjan and at the Centre Dominicain de Théologie et de Développement of Yamoussoukro (Ivory Coast) in his book: *La radicalité de la vie religieuse en contexte africain*, éditions Paulines, 2010.

that we should consider carefully. There are different ways in which to emulate the daring – or the impertinence – of our two disciples. Upon entering the religious family, we can indeed look more or less consciously to obtaining some benefits, such as social recognition that provides power over others and makes us accede to a more favoured "class". At the beginning of our religious life, we probably had a strong desire to follow Jesus wherever he would send us. But gradually, the possibility of "making a career for oneself" may have dawned upon us. If we were not careful, this idea gained ground. The desire to "climb the ladder" became stronger, without our becoming aware that we were slowly taking back what we had generously given up. We may then have requested our superiors to pursue our studies, to get degrees, not primarily to be available for the ministry entrusted to us, but to be at par with others, not to lag behind and find ourselves ranking below others – in our eyes and the eyes of others! Of course, the expression of these shady desires is different from one culture to another. But it is present everywhere.

On that front, Father de la Mennais warned the Brothers: *"Another form of pride is the vanity of knowledge, this excessive desire to learn, not to work more successfully to the glory of God, but to glorify ourselves in the knowledge itself."* (VIII S, 2514). The temptation of taking advantage of a situation at the expense of others is present in a Brother's life as in any other human existence. If Father de la Mennais wanted the Brothers "to be thoroughly prepared for what they were teaching" (Retreat 1833), he watched even more closely over their progress in the knowledge of God and made sure that no one "claimed to be a great mind", as he wrote to Father Mazelier in 1825.

In another area, can there be, in the same community, Brothers who seek to amass wealth at the expense of others?

We hope not! But are we sure? We know that excesses do exist. You can have a vow of poverty and do exactly the opposite of what you promised. Are there no hidden areas to which no one else has access, not even the superior? These may be small things at first, but the door gradually opens to more important things. In some countries, for example, Brothers personally receive their salaries paid by the State. Many, in keeping with the Rule of Life, give it in full to the superior of the community. Some keep it in whole or in part. Can one do this with a clear conscience? I shall return to this later, but this is a very important aspect of the practice of real poverty.

There are many other areas of our lives that we could look into. Suffice it to draw everyone's attention to the issue of personal "property". Whether in everyday life or where our ministry is concerned, nothing is our own, nothing belongs to us. We must be detached from everything. Otherwise, we react like owners, unlike Jesus did. We do not then have the religious spirit required by Father de la Mennais of his Brothers. Of course, we have to personally use the telephone, computers and other "tools" that have become almost indispensable. Nonetheless, we must be able to do without all of this, without being perturbed as if our personal property were being vandalised. Without our realising it, the spirit of the world can always restrict our inner freedom and turn us into slaves. We then soon adopt the arrogant ways of the two disciples John and James, our brothers. However, if we allow the Spirit to guide us, Jesus can still transform us as he so wonderfully did James and John.

3. *Drinking the Cup that Jesus Drinks*

"The call to follow the Lord requires of the disciple an attitude distinguishing itself from all conformism: far from being a

*'follower', the disciple is rather called upon to give an answer that makes him a determined, free and committed Christian and religious. This is the condition for a mature life of faith that can withstand rough weather, turbulence and the trials of life."*² Such a religious willingly drinks the bitter cup with Jesus and takes up his cross. Carried with love and faith, the cross is a light burden; carried without love, it is heavy and the heart sours. Drinking the cup that Jesus drinks means, first of all, loving him and being aware that he loves us. We cannot, without this, be like him in his poverty. Nothing is possible without a strong and authentic love, without a deep commitment to the Lord. Jesus must be the precious pearl which we have found and compared to which all other wealth is dull. A Brother should seek to develop an "adult faith that can withstand turbulence". Only the love of Jesus, which makes prayer grow strong and which strengthens the gift of self to the little ones, those icons of Jesus, can obtain a Brother this adult faith. A Brother who so loves exudes the "aroma of Christ", but also – in the words used by Pope Francis talking to priests on Holy Thursday – gives off the "smell of sheep" at whose service his life is offered. Given to Jesus, offered to the little ones, he is a friend and a brother to all.

a. Taking up the Cross with Jesus

We again come across James and John. As the Samaritan village refuses to welcome Jesus, they lose their temper: *"Lord, do you want us to call down fire from heaven to consume them?"* (Lk 9, 54) As for Jesus, he invites them to patience and forgiveness. When our interests are stunted, we may be tempted to defend ourselves and accuse others. This is the easiest way, which seems normal. Yet if we are not careful, this attitude

² Father Roger Houngrééji, *La radicalité de la vie religieuse en contexte africain*, p. 60

keeps us from poverty of heart. We no longer know when looking for our interests must come to an end. Ultimately, we are driven into a trap that shuts us in. We are afraid of losing what we have, even if it is very little. We do not live the evangelical beatitude of the poor.

The Lord invites us instead to "resolutely take the road to Jerusalem". There, we can drink with him the bitter cup of the cross, and we will resist the temptation to power and wealth. We will not seek to use the Lord's name to defend our rights. We will not use our religious status to put ourselves above others and to pursue our interests. Let us listen to what Benedict XVI said on Ash Wednesday a few days after announcing his resignation in a great gesture of humility: *"What is at the heart of the three temptations of Jesus? It is the proposal to exploit God, to use him to one's own ends, one's own glory and one's own success. So, in essence, to take God's place, by eliminating him from one's existence and pretending he is superfluous. Everyone should then ask: what place does God hold in my life? Is he the Lord or am I?"* This is a question we should ask ourselves in truth: Is Jesus the Lord of my life, the one Master worth living for? Or, am I myself, the lord of my own life?

b. Never settle down comfortably

The Son of Man had nowhere to lay down his head. Can his disciples actually expect to settle down comfortably? True poverty cannot claim abode anywhere in particular. When we have found a place that suits us and where we find consolation in our ministry because we are well known and have acquired habits, it certainly is not easy to move away. And yet, this is also part of our vocation as Brothers: remaining available to move, change place, leave the country even, if we are asked to do so. Brothers forever ready to heed the call of obedience are a blessing in-

deed! Basically, true poverty leads us to obedience. Jesus was poor because his nourishment was to do the will of his Father. *“We need Brothers imbued with a spirit of sacrifice... Whether they are placed here or elsewhere matters little... God alone is their motto!”* (S VII 2296-97) Very many Brothers can make these words their own since they have lived them and have thus witnessed to the fact that the Kingdom does belong to the poor. The cup may at times be very bitter but ultimately it brings a freedom and a joy that nothing can match; it provides the necessary strength for the loving and selfless gift of self. We need such Brothers today. They are the wealth of our Institute and of the Church. They are not looking to be applauded. They are willing to go wherever obedience sends them. Their only wish in everything is to allow the sweet light of Christ to shine through the gift of their life to the “little ones” of this world.



Questions worth considering

What place does the vow of poverty hold in my life?

Does a revision of life help me identify the “riches” that hold me back in my following of Christ?

What invitations does the Lord extend to me through such a revision of life?

“It should be noticed that when we feel attachment or repulsion toward effective poverty and that we are not indifferent to poverty or wealth, it is most beneficial, in order to extinguish this inordinate attachment, to ask in prayer (in spite of natural reluctance) that the Lord deign to call us to effective poverty, and that we wish to have it, ask for it and beseech to obtain it, as long as it is for his service and the praise of his divine Goodness.” (N° 157, Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius).

*Mgr Jorge Mario Bergoglio comments:
“If we make our motto ‘Father, not my will but your Will be done’, a number of things will be revealed to us that are hidden in the depths of our heart. It is the only way to true discernment... when we accept to understand which way our heart truly inclines...”*

Jorge Mario Bergoglio
Amour, Service et Humilité, Magnificat, p. 86

II

BEING POOR OF HEART

Poverty is primarily an attitude of the heart. It is the result of a personal conversion. In the Gospel, many examples of this fundamental attitude in a disciple of Jesus are offered. That of Zacchaeus is particularly eloquent. The reversal of his heart occurred when Jesus gazed upon him and Jesus' word invited him to open his door to him. It was then that, along with the kingdom of God, Christ entered his home. Everything else counted as nothing next to the treasure that he had acquired in the person of the Lord. Thanks to his generous yes, a torrent of graces flooded his withered heart from which sprang wonderful fruits.

When we read these words: *“The Brother, in all humility, commits himself to follow Christ more closely in his poverty”* (D 42), our joy matches the closeness of our relationship with

Christ. If our heart has withdrawn from his loving presence, the words of the Rule of Life have no doubt become meaningless. They sadden us in the same way the words of Jesus have saddened the rich young man of the Gospel. But if our friendship with him has deepened over the years, our following him in his poverty has become sweeter and more radiant.

1. *Being Humble*

We have all been moved by the humility of Pope Benedict XVI when he decided to retire. Such humility is made even more manifest now that he has withdrawn in prayer and silence, and the media have moved away. Such witnessing speaks to hearts of goodwill. All, great and small, can detect the Spirit of God at work. Benedict XVI mirrors Mary when she says “*Do whatever he tells you*” and then withdraws. His gaze conveys the nearness of a brother. Poverty makes us brothers. If it is lived and welcomed in the depth of our heart, poverty “*puts us in an attitude of absolute parity*”.³ With Jesus, we feel close to him when we really wish him to “*make us what we are*”.

However, it is easier to speak about humility than it is to live by it. How easily we are upset when a word offends us. Contraries and contradictions displease us. We dislike being held in low esteem. In spite of what we might say, we give great importance to our reputation. Do we really wish to know if we are humble? Let us consider, for instance, what regard we have for the “*humble people*” of this world. What importance do we give to the poor we come across on the streets of our cities or on the roads of our countryside? How do we welcome them, what are

³ Arnaldo Pigna, *Repartir de Jésus Christ, la spiritualité des vœux*, Éditions des Béatitudes, 2001, p. 66

our feelings about them? If they are our brothers and sisters, we should be able to love them like the Poor of Assisi who, retracing his steps, kissed the hands of the leper who had come to meet him. Pope Francis addressed the poor of Rome as follows: *"Know that you are in my heart and that I am at your disposal."* The reaction which our friends the poor give rise to in us may be indicative of the profound attitude of our heart which is all too inclined to appearances. Let us admit it: it is difficult to fight against the temptation to put ourselves above others, to claim the best place and to do everything not to lose face.

Let us return to our everyday living. Is it easy to be humble in a community? Father de la Mennais asked himself that very question: *"But who, in a community, are the truly humble men?"* He replied: *"They are those who always and at all times, in smaller as well as in important matters, willingly give up their own will ... those who wish to be most dependent... those who are never upset when they are criticised or when they are reprimanded ... "* (S VIII p. 2512).⁴ A nice idea! We are tempted to think that it is unrealistic. We have a hard time, indeed, to recognize ourselves in such a description. But nothing is impossible to God!

2. Being Detached

- A Fundamental Attitude

Poverty of the heart urges us to detachment, to a peaceful and joyful inner disposition which makes us available to do God's will. *"Since the temporary possession of worldly goods*

⁴ Some of John Mary de la Mennais' quotations in this circular are taken from the presentation on the Mennaisian charism by Brother Miguel-Angel Merino during the month long international session.

comes from God, the Brother, in submission to his superiors and in co-operation with his confreres, learns how to use material goods without attaching himself to them.” (D 43b)

We must be watchful not to attach ourselves to whatever deters us from our life’s fundamental choice. This is not a self-centred attitude; it is rather a rejection of anything that thwarts self-giving. True love of Jesus precludes self-interest. We are here to serve, not to be served. Our hearts forego temporal goods which seem worthless compared with *“the superior knowledge of Christ Jesus our Lord”* (Ph 3, 8).

- The Gift of Peace

The generous self-giving of our first years must grow deeper roots and become an internal attitude of self-surrender in the hands of God, as a result of which our heart savours peace and is undeterred. It stands firm, distancing itself from feelings and emotions which, if left to themselves, engender storms and contradictions.

Self-surrender gradually leads a Brother to thorough detachment of all that can hold him back. He then comes to the realisation that, through the grace of the Spirit, no material possession can rival with the beauty and the goodness of the Brother’s vocation in the midst of children and of young people.

- Surrendering to Providence

It has already been said that self-surrender expresses itself in a life of obedience. Obedience and poverty are an expression of the *“spiritual childhood”* to which we are called. Through obedience, through inner detachment, worries concerning the future (five, ten years hence) are dispelled. We journey through life with the assurance that, always and everywhere, we are carried in the Father’s loving arms: *“Providence of my God!”*

Our personal future and that of the Congregation do not worry us. We know that we abide in the mercy of God who leads us through paths of light. We fear nothing. For those who seek God, who love and strive to do his holy Will, "all is grace!" Abandoning our own ideas and projects, we give up our certainties for greater openness to God who is *"always new and always unpredictable"*.⁵ For, *"often enough, our lack of hope is a sign of concealed riches and of our remoteness from evangelical poverty"*.⁶ On the other hand, love giving rise to detachment engenders inner freedom.⁷ May we testify to this! The future will then open to us in a new light. We must ask Mary to obtain this grace for us. Her affirmation within us will bring about the obedience of the heart which never resists and hopes always.

- An Inner Freedom

From the moment we try to possess, lord it over and control, we run the risk of losing the precious freedom the fruits of which are respect for others, lending a fraternal ear to our neighbour and paying attention to the little ones. We then fall into the temptation of claiming for our own goods and ideas that become our masters. In the words of John of the Cross, things by themselves do not alienate the soul; it is *"the wish and the appetite for these things"* ⁸ that enslave her rather than open for her the vast spaces of the coming Kingdom. *"As a pilgrim in the world, the Brother lives inwardly free from temporal goods, in cheerful availability to others and readiness to share."*

⁵ Arnaldo Pigna, p. 68

⁶ Mgr Jorge Mario Bergoglio, *Amour, Service et Humilité*, édition Magnificat, p. 15

⁷ See the text of Madeleine Delbr el page 45

⁸ La Mont e du Carmel, quoted by Arnaldo Pigna, p. 70

Religious poverty involves this interior disposition; it is more than a merely social or economic condition.” (D43)

- In the Father’s Heart

Life is a school that invites us gradually to total self-surrender into the hands of God. Our sick or aging Brothers know very well that to be guided by God, in health and in disease, is a long apprenticeship. Our infirmities teach us self-giving when we feel our strength diminish. We then slowly slip into the shadows, away from the spotlights of the world or of our communities where we once gained recognition. Gradually, the Lord invites us to enter into the secret of a heart-to-heart with him. This is where we find, if we accept it as a blessing, that we are loved and long-awaited for. The arms of the Father hold with love and fondness those who allow themselves to be so embraced. Brothers accompanying or visiting our older Brothers benefit from this quiet influence. Our sick Brothers are our evangelizers: they show us how to be poor.

3. *Needing Others*

The spirit of poverty manifests itself at the heart of our daily relationships. Those who are poor easily acknowledge the help that they receive from others and they marvel at it. They know that they cannot stand on their own, that they cannot live alone and abandoned by all. The others are not competitors against whom they have to defend their position. It is not a question of dominating or possessing them so that they may serve our interests.

- Giving

Let us again gaze upon Jesus. As he is looking for ways to comfort the hungry crowd, he looks to his apostles and asks

them to feed the people themselves. He eventually receives the help of a young boy with five loaves of bread and two fishes. Far from despising these gifts, at first sight almost laughable, Jesus blesses and multiplies them. Jesus needs the help of this young man. He is the poor who begs and takes with gratitude what someone else offers him. This gift then grows up into everlasting life, because in so doing, he invites the other to give everything that he has. Zacchaeus had the same experience. He was rich but became poor, welcoming Jesus like a poor, sharing his home with him.

- Giving thanks

Do we wish to know whether we are poor of heart? Let us see if we can solicit the loving assistance of our Brothers instead of considering them as rivals who would undermine the image of the good man which we so wish to project. The poor need the friendship and the help of his Brothers. Let us see whether we are grateful to our Brothers for the gift of their presence and of their services. We love giving thanks to God for the benefits he grants us. We should also be thankful to our Brothers. Whoever cannot give thanks is self-centered, over-concerned with the image he projects, jealous, miserly, envious and judgmental of others.

- Marvelling at

The poor of heart captures the beauty that surrounds him, the beauty of goodness and of forgiveness and of the light that radiates from the eyes of a child. True poverty provokes wonder at the world and people. Instead of displaying frustration and concern, true poverty rejoices at endeavours that bring about peace and that blossom in silence. The poor of heart is like the

gardener who enjoys the sight of his garden that finally hatches in myriads of colours.

- Sharing

The intensity of the brotherly love that reigns in a community is a clear sign that people try to live poverty. Father de la Mennais knew this: *"What makes me most happy is to know that love reigns among us. This intimate and truly fraternal union will be your strength and happiness. Hold fast to it as to a treasure"* (to Brother Hervé, 1843). He knew that this charity was a sign of real poverty, a genuine sharing of what one is and of what one has. He invited his Brothers to discover that, in a community, everyone needs everybody else and that the "sharing of gifts" is our true wealth.

4. Making Do with the Basics

- God alone suffices

Can one be poor in spirit and of heart if one lives in the midst of riches? Jesus' reply is clear: *"It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God."* (Mk 10, 25) Upon hearing these words, says the evangelist, the disciples *"were even more astonished"*. In the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus, Jesus is severe and insists on the Rich Man's inability to listen: *"...neither will they be persuaded if someone should rise from the dead"* (Lk 16, 30). Dear God, keep us from riches that blind us. How easy it is to say and proclaim vigorously that we are poor of heart. Are we truly poor of heart when three square meals a day land on our table at the snap of our fingers? We may very well look like the rich young man. His clean living covers up a laden heart. He appears as a just man, but his interests are elsewhere! In fact, he is not happy

in his heart. He belongs to his riches. These may be small, but they are no less crippling. The bird whose leg is attached to a thread cannot fly. Such are the comforts from which we can no longer free ourselves.

- Turning Down Extras

It goes without saying that the head of a family should manage his possessions in such a way that his children should not go wanting. Such should be the case for a community. The superior and his bursar should make sure that each Brother has a decent living which enables him to carry his ministry with the youth. However, it is up to each Brother to discern between what is necessary and what is not. True apostolic spirit relies on God alone. Without denying the importance of the tools that teaching, education and animation in our schools require, we must always bear in mind that these means are the servants of the educator and of the apostle, not their master.

- Hearing calls for help

Poverty of the heart invites us to make do with the basics since what we are looking for before all else is to love and serve young people generously and unselfishly, with a heart that is open to all who knock on the door seeking to have someone's ear. Whoever can make do with the basics hears the calls of those who need accompaniment and encouragement. He will patiently and joyfully welcome those who need time to be listened to as if they were the only people in the world. The poor of heart knows that the Kingdom yearns to grow in the recesses of the heart of each and everyone. His own heart is free from useless concerns. He is sensitive to the secret longings and stealthy clues of young people. He gives generously of his time and of his joie de vivre to the young people who need to be lis-

tened to and encouraged since he is used to listening in the depth of his own heart, in silence and prayer, to the Word that saves.



Questions worth considering

Has my apostolic mission anything to do with the vow of poverty?

Can I tell of a personal occurrence that has made me realise that the vow of poverty can still, today, challenge young people and adults in my midst?

And Mary said:

"My soul exalts the Lord, and my spirit has rejoiced in God my Saviour.

For He has had regard for the humble state of His bonds slave; for behold, from this time on all generations will count me blessed.

For the Mighty One has done great things for me; and holy is His name.

And His mercy is upon generation after generation toward those who fear Him.

He has done mighty deeds with His arm; He has scattered those who were proud in the thoughts of their heart. He has brought down rulers from their thrones, and has exalted those who were humble. He has filled the hungry with good things and sent away the rich empty-handed.

He has given help to Israel His servant, in remembrance of His mercy, as He spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and his descendants forever."

Lk 1, 46-55



III

TAKING THE VOW OF POVERTY

Evangelical poverty is a fundamental attitude of the Christian. It is a demand of our baptismal consecration. It is the basic attitude of the creatures that we are, chosen by God to become his children. All good things come from him. We owe him everything that we are. We have received everything from him: life, body and soul, intelligence and heart, growth and being. Everything has been given to us; we have deserved nothing. Therein lie our radical poverty and our treasure. We are loved beyond all comparison by our heavenly Father who carries us in his arms like beloved children.

This is why a Brother chooses to be poor to the extent of foregoing the free and independent use and disposition of *“temporal goods having monetary value”*. (C 16) He has re-

nounced, by vow, to use the goods which he could have owned. Everything placed at his disposal and everything that he earns through his work belongs to the community. Nothing belongs to him personally.

1. *The Brother and the Vow of Poverty*

Basically, evangelical poverty is an act of faith in the unconditional Love of God who looks after each one of us. Faith in this Love implies refusing to place our trust solely in material goods, “*pretending to be saved by them*”.⁹ Jesus affirms this: “*Do not worry about your life, as to what you will eat; nor for your body, as to what you will put on... But seek His kingdom, and these things will be added to you*” (Lk 12, 22; 31). Trust in Providence presupposes faith. If it is weak, abandoning oneself to Providence will make it grow stronger.

Every Christian must at one time or other become aware of the truthfulness of this word of Jesus: “*Your Father knows that you need these things.*” (Lk 12, 30) The Brother, through his vow of poverty, stakes his life on this conviction: the Lord knows what our needs are and he will provide. He will take care of each of us in the same way he gives beauty to a flower. Such is the context in which we can understand the radical choice of the vow of poverty. Whoever chooses to make the vow of poverty, in the Church and in a given Congregation, makes it because he feels called by a Love that fills his heart. He could start a family or prepare himself for a very promising professional future, but he foregoes all of that to answer an inner call from the Spirit. We all have heard of the choice that Pope Francis had to make in his youth: foregoing the love of a girl to answer God’s call to

⁹ Arnaldo Pigna., p. 81

be unreservedly his. The poverty to which we have committed ourselves is a free and voluntary response to a personal call from God. This is inconceivable to one who does not love God and does not believe in him.

a. The Vow of Poverty

What is this poverty which we have freely decided to embrace and which Vatican Council II tells us that it must be “*defended, nourished, developed, cared for delicately and, in the end, loved*”?¹⁰ Canon Law replies as follows: “*The evangelical counsel of poverty in imitation of Christ who for our sake was made poor when he was rich, entails a life which is poor in reality and in spirit, sober and industrious, and a stranger to earthly riches. It also involves dependence and limitation in the use and the disposition of goods, in accordance with each institute's own law.*” (Canon Law, 600) The vow of poverty implies a life that is effectively poor; poverty in spirit reveals itself through actions. The poor religious works for his livelihood; he does not live at the expense of others. He does not seek to grow rich; such are not his wishes. Certain goods are placed at his disposal and he uses them in dependence with his community and in keeping with the Rule of his Institute.

Evangelical poverty, “*even before being a service on behalf of the poor, is a value in itself, since it recalls the first of the Beatitudes in the imitation of the poor Christ. Its primary meaning, in fact, is to attest that God is the true wealth of the human heart. Precisely for this reason evangelical poverty forcefully challenges the idolatry of money...*” This is why “*today more than in other ages, the call of evangelical poverty is being felt also*

¹⁰ Arnaldo Pigna, p. 85

among those who are aware of the scarcity of the planet's resources and who invoke respect for and the conservation of creation," (VC 90) The post-synodal exhortation on consecrated life further stresses the demand for *"a renewed and vigorous evangelical witness to self-denial and restraint"* in the form of a simple and hospitable fraternal life. It also points out that a community witness of poverty will *"naturally"* be accompanied by *"a preferential love for the poor"* and *"by sharing the conditions of life of the most neglected"*. We cannot be poor in the likeness of Jesus without living with and for the poor whom he showed preference for. This is not a political or ideological option, but a demand of genuine love.

This is the spirit in which we can read the Rule of life, the proper law of our Institute. Therein lies the call to be in the likeness of Jesus. Before being a code of law which we must observe – we have committed ourselves by vow – the articles of the Constitutions concerning the vow of poverty express our firm will to follow Christ. One should reread chapters 4 of the Constitutions and of the Directory. Here, the full text of two articles from the Constitutions will suffice. They are sufficiently precise so as not to require comment. The following pages, however, will broach some points in particular.

*C 22. All salaries, stipends, pensions, gifts, insurance benefits or other income received by the Brothers belong to the Congregation and must be promptly and faithfully surrendered according to the norms of the region or province.*¹¹

¹¹ These articles are taken from the Rule of Life printed in 2013, including the modifications adopted by the 2012 General Chapter, the dispositions of which concerning the Districts are "ad experimentum" until the next Gen-

C 23. *Brothers may not dispose of money without accounting for it. For major expenditures, they request permission from the local superior and they consult him when recourse to higher authorities is necessary. They submit reports of current expenditures according to norms established by provincial or regional authorities. Permissions do not dispense one from prior personal discernment, nor do they eliminate responsibility in their use.*

b. The Brother's Life of Poverty

The two articles just quoted show clearly that living the vow of poverty implies a personal commitment and concerns concrete ways in which to live our brotherhood and our mission.

- Province or Vice-Province Directories

In the first place, let us underscore the importance of the setting up and of the constant adaptation of Directories of Provinces or of Vice-Provinces. Articles 22 and 23 of the Constitutions allude to them when they mention the “norms of the region” or the “established norms”. The Rule of Life cannot, in fact, spell out all considerations concerning the life of poverty on a daily basis, although this needs to be done. It is up to Province or Vice-Province Directories or “Practical Guides” to define the specific manners in which to live together a simple and fraternal life that can be prophetic. Several Provinces and Vice-Provinces have had such directories for a number of years, Others have yet

eral Chapter, according to the ruling by the CIVCSVA (Congregation for the Institutes of Consecrated Life and for the Societies of Apostolic Life). We have chosen in this circular to speak about Vice-Provinces. Districts will gradually see the light of day until the next General Chapter.

to write them. The definition of such practical guidelines is a matter for provincial or vice-provincial Chapters. Superiors have to see to it that the way to live poverty on a daily basis is precisely defined: how to give an account of one's expenses, what authorisations to solicit, etc. It is a simple matter of concrete fidelity to our life's commitments. Our vow of poverty must be loved and defended. The relationship of dependence with regards to the superior, practised with true inner freedom, is necessary for poverty to be lived in a Christ-like manner. The Directory or the Practical Guide is but a means to that end, but it is a necessary means.

- Personal Discernment

Nevertheless, if the way to live poverty depends in part on the "rules" decided by a Chapter, it is first and foremost the fruit of personal choices. Over and above the handing over of all that he receives in the way of salary or indemnity for his work – which is clearly demanded by the Rule and should be demanded of everyone – each Brother should ask himself what he really needs and what he can reasonably do without. So many appeals come our way that it is necessary to exercise true personal discernment; otherwise, we get into the habit of acquiring things and imperceptibly develop a "rich" mentality. We all too easily seek provisional trimmings, while the generous thrust of the heart that impelled us into the brotherhood, wanes.

Each of us must be watchful not to give in to the lures of society and thus distance himself from his initial radical choice. One is not poor of heart if one asks the superior to buy such and such a thing without having discerned beforehand, in prayer, whether this request corresponds to a true spirit of poverty and zeal for the mission.

- Poverty through obedience

It is possible that some Brothers may feel called to commit themselves more specifically at the service of the poor in one form or another. This inner desire is very commendable; it may even be an authentic call of the Spirit. It must then be subjected to discernment by the community and the superiors. Let us keep in mind that the first discernment criterion for us Brothers is obedience. A close reading of the Rule of Life and listening to Father de la Mennais will remind us that our practice of poverty is primarily exercised through obedience, the true measure of our detachment.

We must not oppose obedience and poverty. Refusing obedience in the name of poverty is taking the wrong track and deceiving ourselves. Obedience assures us that we are poor like Christ. Going where we are sent, calmly, with no regrets, without dreaming of other things, guarantees our imitation of the poverty of Christ whose pleasure it is to do the will of his Father and not his.

Whoever is truly poor of heart and loves the poverty of Christ can detach himself from everything that has been placed at his disposal. He can always give more, doing not what he wants but what God wants. Never does he claim having given enough. His heart holds but one treasure. He wishes for nothing else. This attitude alone is truly prophetic and needs the Spirit's input to prevail. *"Poverty is an extremely delicate virtue. If we are not careful and do not cultivate it diligently, we may end up losing sight of it and imperceptibly losing its spirit."*¹² Gradually, however, if we make the necessary efforts, diligently and without telling anyone what to do, true inner freedom will be ours.

¹² Arnaldo Pigna, p. 88

2. Community Poverty

"The Brothers meditate on the example of Christ and his apostles and that of the early Christians where 'no one claimed for his own use anything that he had, as everything they owned was held in common'. The community of goods is an essential element of religious poverty." (D 46) Entering a community after giving up personal belongings in order to share one's life and fate with Brothers we have not chosen, and living with them from the fruit of our labour unaware of what the future holds for us, relies normally on an unshakable trust in God-Providence and builds relationships so strong that they should never be broken. *"Poverty is a requirement for living in community and is a particularly effective way of building the community."*¹³ For whoever is faithful to his vows without cheating or lying, the community becomes the way to holiness and the means of fidelity to the call received. On the other hand, for those who are amassing their own personal possessions, the link is broken.

Community poverty enables us to live together for the mission, not for self-enrichment. It helps us serve without fear of riches that dull the spirit or of destitution that segregates. Our Rule of Life gives much importance to this simple life whose basic concern is not our own survival but the service of young people and of children. Together we must live the Gospel of the Beatitudes so as to be authentic witnesses. This requires clear-sightedness and generosity so as not to keep anything for oneself and always seek to divest ourselves of anything that might weaken our apostolic spirit. *"The Brothers live like persons of modest means,"* (C 26) says our Rule of Life. And it specifies: *"especially in their housing, food, clothing, means of transporta-*

¹³ Arnaldo Pigna, p. 91

tion, travel and entertainment." Had it been written more recently, it would certainly have alluded to the modern means of communication referred to above. The Rule adds: *"The pooling of goods should not lead to affluence."* (C 26) Yet again, *"Religious poverty and Christian charity are inseparable. Conscious of their solidarity with the poor, the Brothers treat them generously and strive especially to eliminate the causes of destitution."* (C 27)

Unfortunately, we always run the risk of moving in the direction of a "comfortable" life, of those who have "extras" at their disposal and who are "respectable" in the eyes of society. Of course, we have not chosen to be miserable – Jesus was not miserable –, but we must not find ourselves on the side of those whose security is fully guaranteed. We would then no longer be poor. We may be tempted to befriend the rich in money and power. Such a situation is always more comfortable but it keeps us away from the poor, and cultivates a mindset contrary to the spirit that should prevail in our communities. Father de la Mennais insisted that the Brothers be very attentive to this. We always have to remind ourselves that if we have a vow of poverty it is to *"participate more closely in the poverty of Christ who chose to live in poverty among the poor,"* to be with him on the side of the poor, and to detach our heart from what we have and from what we are (cf. C 15).

But let's face it: we have over time acquired goods as a by-product of our mission. Without realising it, gradually, we may consider as normal what in the eyes of others might appear to be signs of wealth. Of course, we have closed houses, some because they were too big, others because they were not conducive to community living. We have tried to be closer to the people *"of modest means"* with more or less success. These efforts

are commendable and have allowed the Brothers to break away from what could stifle their apostolic zeal and discourage the most generous. However, discernment is always necessary. *“Brothers help one another in the practice of personal and communal poverty and all, especially superiors, challenge whatever could, even unwittingly, offer a counter-witness in matters of poverty.”* (D 49c)

Our residences should be simple and inviting. We should love to live there with simplicity, as brothers united around Christ. The best room has to be the one that is reserved for common prayer, for listening to the Lord of our lives, for the celebration of the Eucharist. This is where Brothers draw their unity and their zeal for the mission from. The other rooms should be simple and clean, without inclining to excessive comfort. Upon entering a Brothers’ community, one should see that what gladdens the heart is the simplicity of life and the joy of welcoming guests as if they were Christ himself. It should be obvious that those who live there are peacefully and joyfully at the service of those who hunger and thirst for truth and peace. While taking care of safeguarding community life and the requirements of prayer, work and silence, the Brothers' house will be open in such a way that all feel right at home. This will testify to the living witness of poverty.

Such are the criteria that should also be used to decide on such issues as cars, computers and multimedia material. As much as we should welcome, without hesitation, everything that fosters our mission with children and young people, we should also ensure that we do not confuse the ends with the means. A saint like Francis of Assisi can help us discover the inexhaustible and prophetic resources that a heart given to "lady poverty" may have at its disposal to preach the Gospel of the Beatitudes

to the world. It is pleasing to see how the commitment of a community at the service of children and youth from low income families can lead to significant choices in their lifestyle. Some communities, for example, chose not to have a car or TV set simply because they felt they did not need any. These communities do not wish to be quoted as examples. They simply live what seem to them the requirements of authentic witnessing. All communities need to ask themselves how they are perceived and integrated into their environment. In other words, what is the intensity of the love that binds them to those whom they serve? How are the beneficiaries of their action made to see that Jesus is the sole Master loved and listened to in those communities?

3. A Spirit of Sharing and of Solidarity

“The Brothers willingly submit to the universal law of work and thus contribute to the resources of their communities and to the commitments of the Congregation.” (C25) Whoever takes the vow of poverty commits himself to manual and intellectual work in keeping with the requests of his Superiors. He does not work for himself. Through his work, he contributes to the welfare of the community and to the service of the mission entrusted to him. In the words of Pope Paul VI, *“Earning your own living and that of your brothers or sisters, helping the poor by your work—these are duties incumbent upon you.”* (ET 20) What we received as a community, thanks to the contribution of each Brother, in keeping with the mission entrusted to him, are not riches that we would “amass in our barns”. Rather, it is the outcome of brotherly sharing in view of the Kingdom. Through the vow of poverty, we claim that we can make do with little, fruit of our labour. As such, we should probably reconsider the im-

portance of the numerous services carried out by the work of our hands. The Brothers who are so dedicated are our models. Their work is certainly worthwhile for the economic contribution that it makes, but more so for the example of the humble and precious service that they provide to their confreres and to the common work of education.

We should assess the way in which we apply the universal law of work in our community living. Meeting our needs and the needs of the mission, in a spirit of solidarity with the entire congregation, should be the goal of all communities. Each community must ensure the careful management of the assets at its disposal so as to help the poorest communities, including the houses of formation. It does not seek to enrich itself. It satisfies its own needs and gives the surplus to the Province or the Vice-Province in order to share the fruits of its labour. The Directory of a Province or of a Vice Province is an invaluable guide to this solidarity and its fair implementation.

4. Poverty in an International Congregation

Let us pursue this reflection calling to mind a few risks, even if they have already been mentioned. The sharing of goods within an international Congregation like ours can, in fact, if we are not careful, divert us from the original purpose of our religious Profession.

Given the reality of our Congregation and its implementation of solidarity – even if it can always be improved – one can say that in most cases, if not all, Brothers have what they need to live and carry out their mission. We may add that basic welfare is provided everywhere. Brothers can benefit from what "people of modest means" sometimes get only scantily, if at all. Wherever we are, we are not abandoned. No Brother can be

found on the street through job loss. If he is sick, we will ensure that he has access to health care. We are mindful that our older and sick brothers have the best possible living conditions. There are no doubt differences between countries where we are, but nowhere is brotherly care missing. This is certainly "the hundredfold" offered by God to those who have given up everything for him and whose first concern, if not their unique concern, is "the kingdom of God and his righteousness."

Yet, when we have the basics, we may allow ourselves to drift into some kind of irresponsible reaction as regards the economic reality of the community or of the Institute, and remain insensitive to the economic reality of the people around us. Either through lack of information or through negligence, we take refuge in indifference and our life wastes away. "*Meeting needs kills the spiritual quest of man.*"¹⁴ It is our duty to always strive to keep abreast of these realities as well as develop a grateful heart and a readiness to serve. "*The security that is offered by the Institute must become a constant and provocative reminder that we are called to the generosity of service.*"¹⁵

Pope Francis shows us the example. As Archbishop of Buenos Aires, he had refused to live in his episcopal palace in order to live in a simple apartment near the Cathedral, accessible to all. He shows us how to be both close to Christ and friend of the poor and of the lowly. May I insist: We do not live in community to be locked up in our security. The only security of which we must avail ourselves is the assurance of God's Providence. Otherwise, our way of life contradicts our speech. On the one hand, we preach trust in Providence, but on the other, we surround

¹⁴ Laurent Boisvert, *La Pauvreté religieuse*, cerf, 1990, p. 66

¹⁵ Arnaldo Pigna, p. 94

ourselves with a mountain of precautions so as not to go without the basic needs and, at times, the superfluous.

"Being poor means, first of all, not belonging to oneself but belonging to an Other, and placing at his full disposal all our capacities and capabilities: material, physical, moral, intellectual and spiritual, in order to work with him at the construction of a more human world ..." ¹⁶ If we are poor the way Jesus is, we cannot not hear him when he says: "...you did it to me!" (cf. Mt 25, 31-45). A true spirituality of the poor will save us from withdrawing into our selfish interests.



Questions worth considering

By what personal choices or gestures have I discreetly shown the Lord my wish to follow him in his poverty?

What decisions, as a community, should we take after having read these pages?

¹⁶ Arnaldo Pigna, p. 97

"Being poor is not interesting: all the poor are of this opinion.

What is interesting is to possess the Kingdom of Heaven, but only the poor have it.

Also, do not think that our joy lies in spending our days emptying our hands, our heads, our hearts.

Our joy is spending our days digging up a place in our hands, our minds, our hearts, for the Kingdom of Heaven which passes.

Do not say: "I lost everything." Say rather: "I have won everything."

Do not say: "Everything is being taken from me."

Instead say: "I receive everything."

Get under way without a road map to discover him, knowing he is on the way and not at the end.

Do not try to find him in original recipes but let yourself be found by him in the poverty of ordinary life."

*Madeleine Delbrêl
La joie de croire, Seuil, p. 48*

IV

PROCLAIMING THE GOOD NEWS TO THE POOR

"A Jewish parable from the Middle Ages wonders what God was doing while Emperor Titus was invading the Temple, profaning the Holy of Holies, and deporting the people. Which activity was so urgent, so decisive in his eyes that it passed before the defence of his people and his presence in the Temple? Was there somewhere a manifestation even more valuable to safeguard, a place where his name was even more threatened? Was there an issue more crucial for the Covenant? The parable replies: God was busy teaching the alphabet to children."¹⁷

¹⁷ Marguerite Léna, *L'enjeu spirituel de l'éducation*, *Christus* n° 164, octobre 1994, p. 462-463

Wonderful parable that shows how our charism makes us witnesses of God's preference for children in whose likeness we should be if we wish to enter the Kingdom of God. "*Children hold the secrets of the kingdom.*"¹⁸ The poor to whom the Lord sends us are our students. Let us have a high esteem for our charism and let us do everything we can to make it a sign of God's mercy towards children and young people.

Brothers who, because of age, disability or simply obedience are no longer in contact with children and young people will understand that we need to talk about this charism of the Congregation with whom we are at one. This charism is the source of our fundamental unity. It gives meaning to the life of all the Brothers. All wish the charism long life and we are grateful to all of them.

1. *The Vow of Poverty and the Educational Relationship*

*"In a society where everything tends to be free, consecrated persons, through their freely chosen poverty, take on a simple and essential lifestyle, promoting a correct relationship with things and trusting in Divine Providence. Freedom from things makes them unreservedly ready for an educational service to the young that becomes a sign of the availability of God's love in a world where materialism and having seem to prevail over being."*¹⁹ In the context of the Congregation for Catholic education, the Church underscores the beauty of such a vocation. Obedience, but also poverty, prompts a Brother to be a fully dedicated educator to his mission, with simplicity and humility.

¹⁸ Marguerite Léna, *Le Passage du Témoin, éduquer, enseigner, évangéliser*, Parole et Silence, 1999, p. 17

¹⁹ Congregation for Catholic Education : *Consecrated persons and their Mission in Schools, Reflections and Orientations*, Rome, 2002, n° 26

It is this radical dedication to his mission that allows him to welcome his students as Jesus would. Let us be happy to walk in the footsteps of those men whose humble devotion Mgr Laveille praised: *“That ‘Humble Brother’ (‘Petit Frère’) from the countryside, detached and dead to himself, readily humble, voluntarily poor, whose whole life is dedicated to a thankless and obscure task, exists in the magnificent reality of his commitment. Four qualities are needed to produce such a marvel: the vow of obedience, daily meditation, spiritual direction every two months and the annual retreat.”*²⁰

The Brother lives this fundamental attitude in daily contact with his class or with the children’s parents, in his management of a number of classes, of a school or of an educational Mennaisian center. Children and young people are able to recognize the strength and beauty of such a vocation. One day, in one of our schools, over a thousand students have wonderfully demonstrated this fact. While the Director presented each teacher to a few visiting Superiors, one in particular received a thunderous hand of applause: it was a Brother. The students knew that the whole of his life was at their service. They could count on his daily availability. This brother did not make speeches, but every minute of every day was given to his students who, in their own way, had wanted to testify to this.

A Brother’s gift of self is a daily celebration of the beauty of the presence of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ made flesh. The Brother’s mission, lived in the footsteps of Jesus made poor, blossoms and bears fruit when it vibrates to a true “spirituality of education”. Let us see briefly some of its main features:

²⁰ Mgr Laveille, *Jean-Marie de la Mennais*, Tome 1, p. 366. Quoted by Brother Miguel-Angel Merino in his work on the Charism.

a. Attention to the Students' Soul

"What a joy, what a privilege to have been called to look after the welfare of the souls that Jesus Christ has redeemed with his own blood," wrote Father de la Mennais to Brother Émeric in 1844. Taking care of the souls of children is to believe that each person is loved by God, an incredible mystery of a life opened to the infinity of love. The Brother must attend to it most respectfully. He must be the humble servant of each of these souls who are waiting to receive from his mouth and his example, the Word of Life. It is in this sense that the last General Chapter recommended that each Brother *"contemplate Christ in the poor, primarily in children and young people."* (No. 22) Contemplating Christ in children is opening oneself to the mystery that dwells within them. *"The real history of the world is the history of souls. It is God who grows up in the souls."*²¹

The Brother whose heart is detached from the goods of this world and who, thanks to the heavenly Father, with Jesus, can gaze in the recesses of the heart of his students to attend to the beauty that the Spirit promotes therein, does not primarily look to good results, even if he works dutifully. He knows that he is at the service of a love relationship between God and a person.

The spirit of poverty opens us to the Holy Spirit who teaches our heart and our mind, and through us, seeks to touch the souls of those to whom we are sent. The Spirit of the Lord is risen, indeed. He is *"the Holy Spirit, the Educator"*, as he is called by the book of Wisdom (Wis 1, 5). It is under the action of the Spirit that Peter, along with John, one day, said to the infirm from birth begging in the Temple: *"I do not possess silver and gold,*

²¹ Pierre Lyonnet, *Écrits spirituels*, quoted by Marguerite Léna, p. 17

but what I do have I give to you: In the name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene--walk!" (Acts 3, 6)

A Brother does not come to his students with his own power, with gold and silver, or any other wealth. He comes to them with his religious being, having given everything to God, aware of his limitations but trusting in Providence. He is a poor man who meets the poor, the "little ones". He has but one word to offer them, a word that is not his, but that of Another, a word that works what it says: *"You will work wonders in the spiritual order... these infirm children to whom you will give back their spiritual health... who are they if not the blind restored to light, the crippled who by your care will begin to walk straight and steadily...!"*²² said John Mary de la Mennais to his Brothers.

If *"we dare not go to the very bottom of our desire for the salvation of those who are entrusted to us,"*²³ is it not because our heart is still divided? We must work at detaching ourselves from ourselves and from our riches so that, with Peter, we can say to children and young people whom we are called upon to serve, "Rise up and walk!"

b. Putting on Humility

If you have no humility, *"you are but simple schoolteachers like so many others everywhere,"*²⁴ John Mary de la Mennais told his Brothers. It is this humility that will help us respect young people and children, to welcome them as they are, even if they do not meet our evaluation standards. They are unique persons, free human beings who can progress but who can also

²² S VII, 2237

²³ Marguerite Léna, p. 24

²⁴ S VI 2331

regress. They are also fragile beings who crave our affection and who need a compassionate ear and a caring look.

Being poor and humble before our students encourages us to keep a low profile as regards our knowledge and skills and, like John the Baptist showing Jesus to his disciples, invite them to follow him. Upon entering the classroom, at the start of a course or before a conference, we could remember John the Baptist with the words ²⁵: *"They must grow and I must decrease."* (cf. Jn 3: 30). *"Make every effort to run a good class, not for self-glory but for the greater glory of God."* (John Mary de la Mennais to Brother in Mérédic in 1844).

The student, loved by Christ, is the neighbour whom we are called to love. A real relationship based on this belief inspires patience rather than irritation, forgiveness instead of threats. The advice addressed to Brothers by our founder is along those lines: *"Do not expect them to be perfect ..."* (to Brother Lucien, 1847) *"You have every reason to treat your students with gentleness; try to win their affection..."* (to Brother Emeric, 1847). Besides, *"... the gentle means are always the most effective"* (to Brother Lucien, 1832) *"With children, be kind, patient and gentle ... You will more easily correct the defects of these poor children if you win their affection than if you wish to be feared"* (to Brother Liguori-Marie, 1845). Patience and kindness are the tools the Master uses to instil self-confidence in his students.

The Master, poor and humble, is not one who likes to hear the sound of his own voice. He is more concerned with helping students become their own masters and reach out to others in a true spirit of cooperation. The Brother who loves his students

²⁵ This is what Jean-Daniel Nordmann proposes in his book, *Refonder l'école catholique*, Ad Solem, 2004

knows, above all else, how to create a fraternal atmosphere among his students, encouraging the brightest to support the weakest, helping each one to discover his own talents so as to place them at the service of all.

2. *Schools for the Poor*

The last General Chapter recommends to all communities of the Institute to live a *“real communion with the poor”*, especially in adopting a simple lifestyle and in reaching out *“in immediate and concrete ways to the poor in their midst”*. It also invites schools and educational centres to promote a real *“culture of justice and of solidarity”* with close attention being given to all kinds of poverties, be they moral, intellectual, physical, social, etc. It then calls upon Provinces and Vice-Provinces to create and sustain endeavours directly dedicated to the education of the poor in our societies. (Cf N° 23 and 24)

The Congregation for Catholic Education expresses the same expectations in the fore-quoted document. The text broaches the question of *“non-formal education”* which is *“the education of those who have been unable to have access to normal schooling.”* Let us read this number *in toto*:

“Another equally important field of evangelisation and humanization is non-formal education, that is, of those who have been unable to have access to normal schooling. Consecrated persons feel that they should be present and promote innovative projects in such contexts. In these situations poorer young people should be given the chance of a suitable formation that considers their moral, spiritual and religious development and is able to promote socialization and overcome discrimination. This is no novelty, inasmuch as working classes have always been within the sphere of various religious families. It is a case of confirming

*today with suitable means and plans an attention that has never been lacking.”*²⁶

This insistence was already that of Vatican Council II which reminded the Church that she must offer her “educational service” in the first place to “those who are poor in the goods of this world or who are deprived of the assistance and affection of a family or who are strangers to the gift of Faith.”²⁷

This was always the concern of John Mary de la Mennais. The Brothers accepted to live the life of the poor to be closer to the poor and serve “the children of the working class”. *“In being all things to all men, the Brothers of Christian Instruction have, for the past sixty years, established Christian schools in the least parishes of Brittany; and under the guidance of the parish priests, they do their very best to instruct and evangelise the most humble and the most destitute portion of the flock of Jesus Christ.”* (Rule of 1879, p. 10)

Setting up establishments in favour of the poor presupposes that we ourselves are poor. A Brother who is truly detached from himself and from all that can dull his zeal is inclined to be all things to all men joyfully. Today, in the Congregation, several Brothers, starting with the youngest ones, are ready to leave everything, even their country, to educate and evangelise poor children. Much audacity and great trust in Providence are needed to dare new foundations in favour of the less fortunate. The financial crisis in the Western world that affects the poorest countries makes our economy more fragile. Let us acknowledge, however, that a large number of families throughout the world

²⁶ *Consecrated persons and their mission in schools*, n° 40

²⁷ *Gravissimum educationis*, n° 9

suffer even more dramatically from the repercussions of this crisis.

We must not overcautiously withdraw into ourselves; on the contrary, we must give of ourselves even more so that the Kingdom may be proclaimed to the poor. Let us share the conviction of John Mary de la Mennais that *“the poor are sacred to us”*. Let us not abandon them. Let us rush to their rescue. Let us proclaim the Good News to them. Let us go to them like missionaries entrusted with establishing the Kingdom of God in their souls. We must not forget, either, to stimulate the generosity of young Brothers as from their initial training, for the service of the poor is not reserved to the most generous and the most daring. Everyone must feel responsible for this missionary commitment and be willing to participate in this endeavour.



Questions worth considering

After reading the above, can we sketch, in a few sentences, the image of the Brother that the vow of poverty portrays?

What are some features of that figure that we should make ours today so that, through our Charism, the Good News be truly proclaimed to the poor?

HUMILITY

Humility is not the mere absence of pride or of the stuffy attitude of those who, convinced to the contrary, shout to the company at large that they are nothing and not worth anything. Christian humility has nothing to do with contempt for humans.

Humility is a relative to the vessel of clay, knowing itself weak and brittle, but also aware of the treasure it contains. There is nothing sad or anxious in humility, which, to the contrary, is peaceful, happy and above all, marked by an unfailing sense of humour. It has nothing to do either with weakness, because the Christian knows that he can, at any time and under any circumstance, rely on divine Providence and the power of the Spirit.

"When I am weak, then I am strong! (2 Co 12: 10).

Christian humility, therefore, deviates strongly from the humiliation of the slave or from false modesty; it relies, instead, on filial confidence. Aware of not having reached the goal; proud to know that it is capable of much more.

*Jean-Daniel Nordmann
Refonder l'école catholique, Ad Solem, p. 110*

CONCLUSION

The title of this circular pointed to the proclamation of the Good News in the context of the New Evangelisation. It invited us to a double questioning. The first one could read as follows: Are we sufficiently poor to receive the Good News? We are well aware that we receive Jesus only to the extent that we have made ours the spirit of poverty. It is difficult for a rich man to welcome the Kingdom of God. This is the meaning of our three vows, and more specifically, of the vow of evangelical poverty that we reviewed in these pages. When challenged by our vow of poverty, we have rediscovered that we are called upon to be totally receptive to God. We have sold everything so that we may lose ourselves fully in him. We know that we will never be truly happy in our life as a Brother if we refuse to go through

with this radicalism. Our refusal to be generously poor like Jesus dulls our life in the Spirit, puts us to sleep, and blunts our liking for our vocation.

The second review which we were invited to concerns our mission: Do we proclaim the Good News to the poor? This question is fundamental. That is why we are Brothers. We made the vows of obedience, of chastity and of poverty to educate and evangelize the youth, especially where the needs are the greatest. We need to reassess how we carry out our mission of Christian education to the "children of the people," and commit ourselves with renewed vigour with all our Brothers, the Laypeople of the Mennaisian Family and the youth of our schools themselves who must also learn to serve the poorest among them. This is what the General Chapter of 2012 wished that we should hear.

Faced with these calls, we recognize our weakness. The task may appear quite vast and somehow above our strength. Let us therefore rekindle our faith in God alone since only God can perform this conversion in us. He calls us to be before him as his children, and to keep alive the flame that he deposited within our hearts. We are invited to a firm and joyful inner decision – that of total self-giving and of a genuine desire to do what God wills. The Holy Spirit, "the Educator", will then fashion our heart, will strip it from what holds it back and will lead us, in hope, where the poor expect that we will proclaim the Good News to them.

Ultimately, if we want to be poor and if we wish to announce the Good News to the poor, we must have had the experience of Love, the only wealth that deserves selling everything in order to acquire it. We conclude with the only thing we would

probably have to remember: *"If charity is born of God, from above, if He has loved us first, we must know, therefore, that we only learn to love by giving love, by making room, in silence, for life, listening intensely for the gift of God and living in the praise of God."*²⁸ Day after day, walking in the presence of Jesus and lovingly listening to Him, we will learn to love true poverty of the heart.

For this, prayer is essential. We can say that only those who pray can expect really to attain poverty of the heart. *"The work of prayer supersedes all good works, because without it, nothing much can be accomplished. Without frequent prayer, we cannot find the path that leads to God, know the Truth, crucify the flesh with its passions and desires, be illuminated by the light of Christ and unite with him in salvation."*²⁹

Finally, it is by turning to Mary that we learn the poverty that opens itself fully to love, and that we will be educators open to all types of poverty with love. *"The ecclesial motherhood of Mary is there to help us She teaches us how to love one and all, making us capable to love each as if he were unique and to love all as if they were one... We will then be able to awaken young people to the distress of the world without distressing them, and attune their heart to joy in God without their having to look elsewhere for wretched substitutes."*³⁰

To pray Mary every day like a child is to be assured of becoming "poor of heart." As we become poor, the Gospel will

²⁸ Bruno Forte, in Michelina Tenace, *Servir la Sagesse, La part-Dieu*, 2009, p. 134

²⁹ Récits d'un pèlerin russe, p. 27-28, quoted in *Servir la Sagesse*, p. 135

³⁰ Marguerite Léna, *Le Passage du Témoin*, p. 46

transform our innermost being. Transformed by the Gospel, we will become its joyful witnesses.

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Rome, June 3, 2013.