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I. THE VOW OF POVERTY AS A MEANS TO OVERCOME POVERTY

1.1 Intolerable Situations of Poverty

The experience of many Spiritans brings them into numerous situations around the world where they see millions of people living in insufferable situations. Beside the rich residential areas of big towns immense shanty towns spread out. Everywhere it is the same situation: the people crammed into them lack the necessities of life. The level of unemployment is high and violence is a daily reality. From time to time the suburbs explode and urban guerrillas terrorise the inhabitants. But poverty is not only an urban phenomenon for it is found also in the rural areas. Because they are far from the centres there is no access to basic amenities. Even finding drinkable water becomes difficult. Children do not go to school and in many countries lack of educational opportunity is a serious problem.

Health matters are becoming a major issue; figures speak for themselves. In 2005 there were 15 million AIDS orphans; in 2007, 2.5 million people were infected by the virus. Each day 3,000 children die from malaria. Some recent statistics show that 9 million people are infected by a more resistant strain of tuberculosis which is difficult to cure. The majority of victims are from poor countries, prompting Kofi Annan to remark: "the greatest danger to health in developing countries is poverty".

War situations and economic crises force thousands of people to leave their region of origin or their own country, in the process losing most of their belongings and often their own lives.

Globalisation has no doubt liberalised the markets, but the gap between rich and poor widens every day. Today the hike in the price of basic foodstuffs like cereals and sugar leaves the most vulnerable behind. The dignity of the human person is totally disregarded. Who can accept such a situation? Poverty suffered is a revolting evil which cannot be ignored.

1.2 In the light of the Gospel and our Founders

When Jesus of Nazareth began his ministry, he was able to observe his contemporaries. The parables of the rich man and Lazarus (Lk. 16:19-25) and of the Last Judgement (Mt. 25:31-46), reflect a society riddled with inequalities. Jesus not only announces a Kingdom where there is a place for all and no distinction based on wealth, but he comes close to the lepers rejected from their villages and to the blind whom he presses to keep quiet. He understood that the battle against poverty begins necessarily by being close to people so as to understand their suffering. The parable of the Good Samaritan (Lk. 10:29-37) reflects his own attitude of compassion and care in the face of distressing situations, not worrying about or being limited by social or racial differences. His enemies drew attention to his scandalous behaviour: here is a man of God full of wisdom who does not respect the Law on the pretext of being on the side of outcasts. From the beginning of his ministry Jesus chose to be in solidarity with the weakest members of society (Lk. 4:16-21).

The prophetic life of Jesus has influenced thousands of men and women of all times, of all culture and of all religions, people like Mahatma Ghandi and Mother Teresa of Calcutta. The little-known story of **Father Jacques Laval** could

be usefully meditated upon. He was a man who had all that was needed to succeed in life. As a doctor he was of a privileged class, but he decided to devote his life completely to the service of the poor. As a diocesan priest he generously shared what he received. Arriving on the island of Mauritius, he chose to live as a poor man and devote himself exclusively to the most impoverished inhabitants; he lived close to them, welcoming them into his house and visiting them in theirs. This approach attracted bitter criticisms and obstruction from the authorities. But in this way he had opened a way to the hearts of many people who were able to recover some of their lost dignity.

Daniel Brottier on his part, did not remain inactive when faced with the distressing conditions of abandoned children reduced to begging for a living. Not only did he receive them, but through the Auteuil Organisation, he offered the necessary means for training, educating and finding a place in society for them. He realised it was not enough to give them a roof over their heads and three meals a day. They needed also to have the skills necessary to assure their future, help them find their dignity again and, more than that, open them up to the God of love. Such is the final goal of Spiritan presence among the poor; it is similar to the paralysed man at the Temple door – healed by Peter and John he recovers his dignity as a fit man and is thus able to join the believing community from which he had been excluded (Ac. 3:7-8).

The battle against poverty begins, in effect, with the humble step of coming close to the poor in order to break down the wide gap created by inequalities. This was the step taken by Fr. Angelo van Kempen in Brazil – he chose to live among

the poor as one of them². It is a necessary step towards understanding and analysing with those most affected the structures which have created the situations which oppress them.

1.3 The Struggle against Poverty

In many situations we feel that we can do nothing. But lack of means should not be an excuse for doing nothing or not trying to do something.

Need for Closeness

How to engage in the struggle against poverty? From the beginning our Founders, inspired by the Gospel, understood that the important thing was not to weigh in with heavy resources, but to accept a certain vulnerability and to actually live with those most deprived. Sometimes this closeness took the form of the duty of hospitality or of sharing financial resources. Did Fr. Libermann not say that we must be among them as “*servants to their masters*”³? Without this need for closeness, to be poor among the poor becomes an empty slogan, as useless as it is harmful.

Need for Consistency

Concretely, we need to ask ourselves where our commitments are... Our chapter texts have plenty to say about our desire to be committed to peoples in need. In reality our choices for missionary activity speak for themselves and indicate our priorities. But the fact that certain circumscrip-

² Cf. the moving and outstanding account given by Fr. Antonio Gruyters “Contemplation and Action” given at the General Chapter of Torre d’Aguilha, reprinted in ‘Spiritan Life’ No.15 pp.129-132.

³ ND. IX p.330.

tions cannot find confreres for difficult situations, questions our real availability and desire to combat poverty.

Need for Adaptation

Situations evolve rapidly. When a war or tensions break out inside a country or natural disasters occur, we see thousands of people taking to the roads carrying with them only what they can. Our Spiritan history is not lacking examples of where confreres, often endangering their own lives, have been there when most needed to come to the spiritual and material aid of refugees or displaced peoples⁴. We need to recognise the courage shown by these confreres. New situations are appearing today because of the distress caused by the AIDS epidemic. Adapting to an attitude in favour of such issues of JPIC, calls on our reserves of energy. In his own way, Libermann recommended this, noting that each one *“must study the needs, discover society’s wounds, and seize every opportunity offered in one’s position to bring a remedy and healing for such needs and wounds”*⁵.

Spiritual Needs

Concern for the most deprived is not the monopoly of Spiritans. Thousands of other organisations pursue the same ends and often with extraordinary efficiency. If we had been only a Non-Governmental Organisation, we would no doubt have achieved great things, but would we have in fact realised our aim? It is not necessary to be a Spiritan or even a Christian to give a glass of water to someone in need. But we do this *“in the name”* of Christ himself (Mk. 10:37). It is this spiritual aspect which helps us recognise Christ in the most deprived (Mt. 25:31-46).

⁴ Examples are numerous, for example in Nigeria, Angola, Croatia, Congo-Brazzaville, Congo-Kinshasa, Sierra Leone, Pakistan etc...

⁵ ND XI p.536.

Need for Competence

We are aware however, that in so many cases, good will is not enough. So as to avoid mistakes due to harmful paternalistic attitudes, it is urgent that we acquire appropriate qualifications. No-one can improvise when it comes to being a teacher, a headmaster, a doctor, a nurse, a social worker or a carer for street-children. Real credibility comes from proper training. Our work among the poor brings us into contact with other groups which undertake lobbying of international organisations. To get involved in this requires preparation and a lot of experience. It must be accepted that the parameters of the Spiritan vocation cannot be reduced to parish administration. In some situations a brother would be better suited than a priest – the spiritual motivation for mission is the same but the way of carrying it out is different.

Family Needs

In the same spirit, another questions sometimes crops up: what can we do, or must we do, when confreres' parents need help or ask us for support? For many confreres family concerns are a constant worry and a responsibility they have to face up to. This is not a new problem. It needs to be stated that some confreres manage as best they can without saying anything about how they resolve such dilemmas. The time is right to look again at SRL 40.1: "Our charity too is expressed in the interest that we take in our own families and in our attentiveness to them. Each circumscription 'of origin' decides upon the manner of hospitality to them and the help it will offer them should the need arise". Nothing can be properly set up unless there is a discussion within each circumscription and an attitude of complete transparency on the part of all Spiritans.

1.4 Where are we?

The General Chapter of Torre d’Aguilha reminded us of the concern of our founders for the poor and most abandoned; it is “an important criterion for our lifestyle and discerning the works we take on” (TA 1.1.4). This statement needs to be understood in the light of the milieu in which we find ourselves. In effect, Spiritans are living in such diverse situations that they must learn how to adapt their response to the implications of their vow of poverty.

1.4.1 On a Personal Level

Availability involves more than just a vague sense of charity. Most of us have to change our social and cultural status to be on the side of the poor (SRL 70.2).

- What kind of people do I willingly associate with?
- Do I take time to visit the poor?

1.4.2 On a Community Level

- What situations of poverty do we see close to our community?
- What are we doing practically to combat such poverty?
- What means are at our disposal?
- How much of our budget do we put aside to show our solidarity with the poor (SRL 71.1)?
- Have we undertaken any dialogue in community to discuss the situation of our families?

1.4.3 At Circumscription Level

In general, circumscriptions decide how to combat the scourge of poverty during their assemblies; they also

know that a commitment to JPIC issues is a priority (TA 3).

- What practical efforts have been made to carry out circumscription decisions?
- Has our circumscription worked out its JPIC programme (TA 3.2)? If this has been done, has it been implemented? If not, what is blocking it?
- What areas will we need to think about in the future? What orientations would circumscriptions need to take to combat poverty?
- Does the circumscription have any kind of plan to help our families in emergency cases?

For Reflection and Sharing

Out of concern for simplicity of life, a confrere who was a chaplain to young people in a large African town, was happy to have only a small two-door car. Thus he was limited in the number of young people he could carry when it came time to go away on retreat, for example. Very quickly the young people dubbed the car that of a selfish man. What do you think? Would you have advised the chaplain to buy a bigger car?

II. TAKING THE VOW OF POVERTY TO BE LIKE CHRIST

2.1 How do people look upon us?

*I*n comparison to deprived peoples, can we in fact say we are poor? How can we seriously say that at our