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II. Taking the Vow of Poverty to Be Like Christ

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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

profession we are taking a vow of poverty? Appearances sometimes suggest the contrary.

If in today's world, many Spiritans are happy with what is strictly necessary, none of them lack the basic necessities. What is more, our houses, the number of cars we have and the expensive make of some of them, the ease with which we travel about and the modern means of communication we use, offer us possibilities which millions of people just do not have. These things and the level of education we have received give us in fact a high social status. Some people resent this contradiction and consider that we are not credible. For them, the vow of poverty needs to be seen differently, so as not to confuse real poverty with a voluntary simplicity of means. This gives rise to the following four observations.

- Ancient Biblical tradition regarded the possession of earthly goods as a blessing; it was up to the possessor to help all those who depended on him.
- Wise men denounced the risks of wealth: "The rich man lords it over the poor and the debtor is the slave of his creditor" (Pr. 22.7; cf. 28.11). Jesus gave similar warnings about wealth (Lk. 12:13-21) concluding: "Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also" (Lk. 12.34) - this is an invitation to be careful not to get attached to our possessions.
- On another level, not all members of the Congregation have access to the same resources; whereas some give little witness to their vow of poverty, others live frugally, either because they do not have sufficient means, or, like our founders, they have made the choice to make do with the basic necessities

- Finally we are aware of what it means to be involved in missionary activity in these times and the ambivalence it implies: we can bring great benefits to people, but also create too much dependence and waste a lot of our time.

2.2 Evangelical Self-emptying

Poverty chosen, in itself, would have no sense unless Jesus had first of all chosen it. Was he materially poor? The Gospel says little on this but his itinerant ministry made him dependent on the support of others. Very early on though, the early Church reflected on the way he had given up his whole life. The hymn in the letter to the Philipians summarises in a few verses how he “became as men are”: “He did not cling to his equality with God “. This goes to show that he did not count on what was his real richness – the Father’s glory. In accepting for himself to be “emptied”, he consented to give up his place as “lord and master”, making himself a servant and sharing our condition (Ph. 2:6-8). Thus he became a “brother” to us all “able to help those who are in any kind of need” (Heb. 2:17-18). In Jesus, God lowered himself in order to bring life, love and reconciliation.

Poullart des Places is clearly among those who lived this self-emptying. From a comfortable background, destined for honours and a brilliant career, he voluntarily gave up his wealth and lived the life of a poor student, accepting the harsh rule of his community. He only accepted his life annuity required by the bishop for ordination, an annuity which he shared with the whole community. In the end he died in Paris and was buried in a pauper’s grave.

Such a way of life is completely in line with a person who has made a deliberate choice. He was well aware of the

dangers of a desire for fame and *“all that raises a man above others due to merit”*. One of his prayers illustrates this: *“Destroy in me all the worldly attachments which follow me everywhere”*⁶. He would repeat this in 1702: *“Grant me the grace of total detachment from all creatures and from self”*⁷. Such a renunciation was clearly the fruit of prayer. Is it not here that every human being comes to understand God’s will for them? Poullart des Places wanted to be free to be at all times in the presence of God and to do his will.

2.3 Choosing to live in simplicity

The link between Poullart des Places and Christ is that of apostolic availability. It is still a matter today of losing one’s life so as to attain greater interior freedom and brotherly love. Because of this, the commitment to following Christ goes hand in hand with taking on a lifestyle which does not make us slaves of material goods, but opens us up to a greater solidarity (SRL 71).

In choosing to do this, we are making a decision in complete contrast to society around us, where publicity posters promote consumerism, and the attractions of wealth and success. By choosing a simple and modest lifestyle we are being counter-cultural. We are saying to our contemporaries that the ultimate goal of man does not lie in material wealth (Lk. 12.15). Poverty chosen thus challenges the tendency to consumerism. This is also reflected in the letter of Libermann to the confreres on the island of Bourbon: *“Do not seek the things the world seeks, giving a life of ease and an external impression of wealth”*⁸.

⁶ “Choice of a State of Life”.

⁷ “Particular Rule”.

⁸ ND IX p.15.

This choice takes us even further. The majority of confreres, from all continents, are called to leave their families and their countries - to lose their basic security and become one with those who have nothing. There are numerous confreres who have lost everything they had because they stayed right to the end with peoples affected by wars. Others in this situation of insecurity have paid with their lives. So as to live this extreme form of renunciation, one has to be imbued with the spiritual strength which empowered Jesus who, "though he was rich, became poor in order that we might become rich" (2 Cor. 8:9; SRL 61).

2.4 Where are we?

No-one can say that it is easy just to content oneself with what is necessary and to be done with anything superfluous. Fifty years ago to have a personal transistor radio could be considered a luxury, today it is something very ordinary. In a world where information is so important, it is a duty to be aware of what is happening around the world and sometimes to be able to respond quickly. Our Rule of Life however, still enjoins on us simplicity and modesty (SRL 71).

2.4.1 On a Personal Level

The spiritual experience of the novitiate is already something of the past; it is on the basis of this experience that we committed ourselves to following Christ in his poverty.

- Each one of us remembers the steps which led us to take the vow of poverty. Which of them can be considered decisive?

- What more do I need to give up today to re-discover the enthusiasm of my first commitment?
- How much time do I spend watching television, talking on the telephone, using the internet? Are these part of my work or formation or are they forms of escapism or pleasure?
- How do I spend my annual holidays? Do they resemble those of a rich person or a poor one?
- Do I manage my patrimony in conformity with SRL (SRL 64, 66, 67)?

2.4.2 On a Community Level

Our daily choices of food and drink, our cars and houses, give a real indication of how faithful we are to the demands of SRL.

- Do we consider our style of community life to be simple? What signs of wealth are there?
- Are our possessions in proportion to our needs?
- What kind of social environment do we live in?

2.4.3 On a Circumscription Level

- Has our circumscription seriously reflected on the vow of poverty?
- What are our collective signs of wealth?
- Are our collective goods proportionate to our needs?
- Is our common property well used and well-maintained?

For Reflection and Sharing

A confrere has a friend who is very wealthy and who offers to pay for him to go on a luxury cruise. Neither the confrere, his community or his circumscription need to pay anything. Should he accept or not?

III. TAKING THE VOW OF POVERTY SO AS TO LIVE TOGETHER AS A CONGREGATION

3.1 Between Individualism and Sharing

*I*t is enough to re-read our chapter texts to see the number of times when calls have been made for sharing and transparency. The last one to do so was Torre d'Aguilha: "Amongst us there will be openness, honesty and transparency and a real willingness to share in all matters relating to finance" (TA 7.5). No doubt we have to read between the lines to see the difficulties facing us; in financial matters there is a certain individualism which is leading to serious inequalities. Possession of private means leads to mistaken attitudes. Some confreres have large amounts at their disposal allowing them to have a high standard of living, while others have to be content with the basic minimum. Others feel they have the right to impose their own views and project attitudes of self-sufficiency with regard to those who are not in a position to contribute. More serious again, are confreres who fraudulently use money to their own profit. Such things discourage confreres and bring a lot of mistrust into community life. What has happened to the promises we made when we pronounced our vows?