

12-2008

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#### Recommended Citation

(2008). III. Taking the Vow of Poverty so as to Live Together as a Congregation. *Anima Una*, 61 (61). Retrieved from <https://dsc.duq.edu/anima-una/vol61/iss61/7>

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### 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?

We would become unhealthily pessimistic if we stopped at this statement of failure however. Various communities and circumscriptions are putting structures for solidarity in place so that confreres may have the wherewithal to live and carry out their missionary work. The fact that few confreres actually receive any remuneration for the services they provide obliges us to promote greater sharing. The whole Congregation supports formation and mission thanks to funds such as *Cor Unum*. Other circumscriptions unite their efforts to respond to requests for aid. So, our internal sharing, at all levels, helps us to counteract the wave of individualism which is contrary to our religious commitment.

### 3.2 Sharing Was Necessary From the Beginnings of the Church

**I**nterdependence is not a new thing. From the beginning, Christian communities had to organise themselves so that all their members could live in a dignified way. We know that St. Paul arranged for a collection for the poorest in the community of Jerusalem; it was not just out of a sense of philanthropy that he did this. For him it was a question of “communion”, which on many occasions he mentions in his letters (2 Cor. 8:16; 9:13; Rm. 12:13; 15:26). It was not possible for him to keep saying they were all brothers without creating the conditions for a real brotherhood. In writing that “*no-one was in want*” (Ac. 4:34), Luke wanted to show that the new community, born of faith in the resurrection, reflected the ancient community in the desert (Dt. 6:15). It is precisely from the description of this sharing and solidarity that the Congregation takes its motto: “*Cor unum et anima una*” (Ac. 4:32).

Maybe you could say this is an ideal that has never been attained! It is an accurate observation. Immediately after the

gift of Barnabas (Ac. 4:36-37) came the counter-witness of Ananias and Sapphira (Ac. 5:1-11) and, later on, the complaints of a group of widows who were being forgotten in the daily distribution of food (Ac. 6:1-6). Already, discrimination and lack of transparency nearly undermined the constant efforts at sharing. These early communities had to learn that a true communion depends on a just sharing.

When he began his work for the blacks, **Fr. Libermann** understood that he would have to struggle to find the means necessary for this. For him, money was not a taboo subject. On the contrary, from his correspondence we can see the problems he had seeking the necessary funds. His own idea was that missionaries should lead a life which was *“poor but not to extremes”*<sup>9</sup>. If he said he had what was necessary, he recognises that, without being *“miserable”*, the community lived *“modestly”*, a word frequently used by him. But Libermann had on several occasions to sound the alarm: *“Our income is not enough”*<sup>10</sup>. On occasion he wrote with a sense of humour: *“I do not know if we will reach the end of the year. We will do so, I expect, but our money-box will not”*<sup>11</sup>

Is there a magic formula to reverse this common trend? Going through his numerous letters there are five which, though not offering miracles, lead us to solutions of a kind and are relevant to our present preoccupations.

- The basic rule is that everything is held in common and for that *“it is crucial to divest oneself of the habit of owning things and of seeking one’s own comfort”*<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> ND III p.181.

<sup>10</sup> ND VI p.78; ND VII p.120.

<sup>11</sup> ND VI p.425.

<sup>12</sup> ND X p.354.

- Very early on Libermann tried to arrange some sharing and asked the well-off communities to “*donate their surplus, or at least a part of it, to general funds*”<sup>13</sup>. He turned to confreres by name asking them to “*come to our aid*”<sup>14</sup>. Thus he approached Frs. Blanpin, Le Vavasseur, Laval, and Dossat.
- Libermann did not refuse any gifts given<sup>15</sup> and carefully kept a list of donors<sup>16</sup>.
- But he knew that gifts would not be enough. He tried what we today called projects for self-sufficiency, trying first of all managing a merchant ship. But this experience did not work out: “*The Blessed Virgin does not want to make us into sailors or traders*”<sup>17</sup>. But he was not put off the idea and indicates that other efforts, like the farm producing food for the community, were crowned with success<sup>18</sup>.
- Finally he did the work of an accountant: “*I calculate, I speculate, I work out what you earn*” he wrote to Mr. Blanpin<sup>19</sup>. He kept up with the accounts remembering when promised amounts did not arrive on time<sup>20</sup>. He could foresee shortages and expected confreres to be thrifty and “*to be ready for anything*”<sup>21</sup>. He mistrusted risky

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<sup>13</sup> ND VI p.426.

<sup>14</sup> ND VII p.120; IX p.208; XII p.141.

<sup>15</sup> ND VI p.426; IX p.210.

<sup>16</sup> ND III p.390-392.

<sup>17</sup> ND VII p.120.

<sup>18</sup> ND VII p.121.

<sup>19</sup> ND VII p.147.

<sup>20</sup> ND VIII p.80.

<sup>21</sup> ND XIII p.102.

speculations and expected confreres to have good control of expenditure<sup>22</sup>.

Maybe this portrait of Libermann is disturbing, but it illustrates that poverty chosen in the service of mission does not mean a flight from reality; it requires us to face up to economic facts and find solutions to our needs. At the same time however, Libermann does not cease repeating that we depend on Providence, calling the Blessed Virgin "*our bursar*"<sup>23</sup>. He advocated the evangelical attitude of trusting in the Lord and "*not worrying about our food or our clothing*"<sup>24</sup>.

It is not easy to find the balance which poverty chosen actually means: on one hand there is the spiritual attitude of unselfishness and on the other the need to find funds and manage them conscientiously for our living expenses and missionary commitments.

### 3.3 Efforts at Realising Interdependence

**F**rom experience we know that many tensions arise between us because of financial or material questions. Sometimes there are cases where there is an impression that common resources have been wasted. Then again, mistrust enters into community life when there is no equality between confreres. Evangelical poverty means a brotherly openness with each other, with all our faults and weaknesses. How many communities take time to sit down with a newly-arrived confrere to get to know him and make sure his material needs are taken care of? How many confreres coming in to a new community take some time to understand their situation, before making demands and setting

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<sup>22</sup> ND VII p.432.

<sup>23</sup> ND VI p.425.

<sup>24</sup> ND VIII p.15; cf. Mt.6:24-25.

ultimatums? Mutual respect and confidence brings availability, solidarity, sharing and co-responsibility. At all levels we are invited to make five efforts:

### *Effort at Transparency*

It is not possible for us to live the vow of poverty positively if no-one makes the demanding effort to be transparent. This effort, probably the most difficult because it goes against our natural desire for freedom, is basic to a renewal of our Congregation in terms of finances. It has two aspects:

- On the individual level each one gives an accurate account of his income and expenditure; this can be tedious but it is necessary. This is so important if a confrere gets involved in a commercial enterprise or borrows money irresponsibly. Some confreres have got their circumscriptions heavily into debt in this way. Eventually they will have to answer for their actions and bear the consequences.
- On the collective level, it is becoming urgent for us to manage our goods carefully and transparently; bursars have an important role here. They know that accurate accounts facilitate sharing; they know equally well that the opposite causes serious imbalances. Since the Chapter of Torre d'Aguilha, the General Council has taken steps in the training of bursars and procurators, with a view to helping circumscriptions to keep their accounts accurately. This is the case for our financial management in general and for the financial state of our circumscriptions.

### *Effort at dialogue*

Transparency leads to dialogue; this does not only mean asking for money when needed, but presupposes mutual

listening in order to assess the needs of all. Here we do need to re-affirm the role of the Superior. He is the one we must refer to first, before going to the bursar, regarding expenditure or important loans (SRL 68). He is also the one to render account (SRL 69; 72.6).

### *Effort at Sharing*

Transparency opens us up to sharing and putting our goods in common: “Whatever we receive as a gift or in payment for our work – gifts, salaries, pensions, grants, insurance benefits, mass stipends and every other income we may derive from our work – belongs to the Congregation” (SRL 65). Whether we bring in to the community more than another confrere or receive a salary does not put us in a privileged position; Spiritans can only live together in confidence if all that is received from ministry or from benefactors is put into the common fund. Confreres having private means create suspicion and difficulties in relationships. So often dissensions arise in community when there is no sharing. Faced with an individualistic world, religious life dares to propose the sharing of goods and dependence on one another. This is a challenge for our times, forming a part of our religious commitment, leading to a conversion of heart and the rejection of personal financial independence and individualism.

### *Effort at Solidarity*

It is our belief as Spiritans that we cannot carry out our commitments if there is no solidarity among us (cf. SRL 70.1). For many years now we have been trying to organise this. The last General Chapter went into more details concerning finance than did Itaici or Maynooth (TA 7) in order to reduce the gulf between rich and poor circumscriptions. There was a call on the responsibility of everyone in this domain, even if situations differ a lot.

- in some circumscriptions, confreres cannot realise anything tangible without external help, because of the economic failures in their countries (TA 4.3);
- in others, care for the elderly confreres who gave of their healthy years in the service of mission, has heavy financial implications;
- others again have the heavy responsibility of training the younger ones who wish to join us; this is costly and efforts at self-sufficiency do not produce enough (TA 4.10).

In the end, circumscriptions turn to the solidarity of the whole Congregation when they fail to organise this among the confreres of the same circumscription.

Learning to be interdependent is not easy, because we do not always have a good knowledge of each others' needs or the efforts they are making. Lack of mutual understanding follows whereas, as ultimate goal, solidarity is supposed to increase fraternity and communion within the Congregation, and by this means, assure a better service for mission.

#### *Effort at Co-responsibility*

Like the members of one family, we are all responsible for the goods of the Congregation; perhaps we need to promote a maintenance culture wherever we are appointed. To help us in this, each circumscription has been asked to make an inventory of its movable and immovable goods (TA 7.3).

### **3.4 Where are we?**

**T**o realise interdependence and develop a culture of sharing among us "... we are called by the Spirit to correct irregularities such as individualism, inappropriate relationships, and the lack of transparency and accountabil-

ity in the use of money and inequalities between confreres, communities and circumscriptions" (TA 1.1.1).

### **3.4.1 On a Personal Level**

- Am I honest and open in financial matters?
- Do I give a regular account of what I receive (gifts, mass intentions etc...) and what I spend?
- Do I agree with interdependence as a way of living community life?

### **3.4.2 On a Community Level**

The quality of relationships in a community often depends on the level of sharing of material resources of the community.

- In financial and material matters, what are the respective roles of the superior and bursar?
- Does the community discuss the budget at the beginning of each financial year? Does the bursar give a report of the expenditure (SRL 175.3)?
- Are the community's accounts separate from those of the works or projects?

### **3.4.3 On a Circumscription Level**

- How does our circumscription express internal solidarity?
- How does our circumscription express solidarity with other circumscriptions?
- Does our circumscription send in its contributions to the General Administration and Cor Unum?
- Are the circumscription accounts sufficiently clear?

- Has the circumscription decided on a policy in serious cases of diversion of funds?

### For Reflection and Sharing

A confrere becomes seriously indebted to someone. Since he cannot pay the debt on time, his creditor contacts the circumscription Superior threatening to take him to court. The Council holds a meeting but opinions are divided. Some think that for justice's sake and for the good name of the Congregation the amount owed should be paid on the confrere's behalf. Others however, think that to act like this would just encourage others to behave similarly. What do you think?

## IV. FORMING ONESELF IN THE VOW OF POVERTY

### 4.1 From Enthusiasm to Learning to Live As a Spiritan

When a young person asks to enter the Congregation, he shows a great enthusiasm. He has been deeply impressed by an elderly priest he met in a parish or while on retreat and his generous intentions know no bounds. He wants to be like that elderly priest whose life is worth emulating.

If there is ever a sad moment in a candidate's formation, it is the moment when he loses his first enthusiasm. With time his fervour is tempered and the long training in living in community - "condition sine qua non" of the missionary life - must be faced. The candidate learns about the implications of religious life: the struggle against latent individualism,