

THIS POOR ONE CRIED OUT AND THE LORD HEARD

Psalm 34 :7



***Letter to the Congregation on Religious
Poverty***

One winter's evening in 338 at Amiens, Martin is 18 years old and a soldier in the Roman army. This illustration depicts him sharing his coat with a poor fellow benumb with cold. This 19th century water-color painting shows him tearing the inner lining of his fur-lined coat. The following night, Christ appears to him in a dream clothed with this same flap end of his garment.

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Letter # 2 of the Superior General

It is with a certain amount of apprehension that I write this letter on the issue of poverty. I am probably not the one best suited to speak of this theme that is so important and that touches on so many questions of today's world. This topic is delicate because it often makes those who deal with it ill at ease. With what right do we speak of poverty? What 'poverties' are we speaking of? Lots has already been written about poverty and much of it is quite interesting. Can anything else be added?

During the 1960s, Archbishop Veillot of Paris was suffering from cancer, an intense suffering. He remembered how often he had preached about suffering and so he asked a priest friend to convey this final message, « Tell priests not to speak of suffering; they have no idea what it's all about. » Might it be the same for poverty? Are we condemned to silence for fear of saying something banal or inaccurate?

Many religious have asked that such a letter be written and my council has explicitly encouraged me to do so. There are many reasons. The first is that the vow of evangelical poverty is an essential element of our religious vocation. We have made a vow of poverty. What does that mean today? How do we live this vow in our day? Another reason, given current circumstances, is the economic and financial crisis the world is experiencing, that has not left us untouched. The Assumption has also been experiencing serious economic problems. We have more needs than our means can satisfy. From every corner we receive requests for assistance and subsidies aimed at giving communities

the ability to live and to assure their apostolic service. Finally, practicing the vow of poverty in a society profoundly marked by individualism becomes even more delicate to live in the context of community life. Disparities can be seen between the still favored North and the South, growing materially but since fragile. The issue of solidarity is approached in this context.

Since writing this letter, a new pope has been given to the Church. Francis has brought a new way of addressing certain questions. He has expressed a wish for a « poor Church for the poor. » This appeal resounds in us as an irresistible invitation to change the way we do things. Pope Francis has also announced that there will be an encyclical on poverty. We wait impatiently for the fruit of his reflection, which will considerably enrich this modest letter.

This letter is meant to shed light on the topic from an Augustinian and Dalzonian point of view. It is a question of re-reading our tradition in order to see how to approach the question of poverty in our day in a great spirit of freedom and faith. Although he was rich, Christ became poor so that we, although poor, might become rich.

I. AUGUSTINE AND POVERTY

Augustine is our « patriarch ». His life, his writings, his Rule are so many points of reference to help us live our religious consecration. Yes, he lived a long time ago, but his example still speaks to us.

Companions in poverty

Augustine speaks of himself as someone who was « poor, born of poor parents »; in fact, we know that his father Patricius was a small landholder whose revenues were not sufficient to cover the costs of his son's intellectual formation. To do so, he received the assistance of a rich benefactor. Augustine did not think of religious life from the start ; he had to come to know Christ first. It was only once he read the *Life of Anthony* by Athanasius of Alexandria that his heart began to burn for the monastic life. This work recounts how Anthony chose a life of poverty having read a passage of the Gospel where it is written that in order to follow Christ one must give up all one's possessions. Augustine recalls in the *Confessions* that this was for him and his friends Alypius and Nebridius what triggered a change of lifestyle. When he arrived in Hippo, he says, « I brought nothing with me ; I came with only the clothes I was wearing at the time ». He didn't know at that time that he was to become a priest. He was determined to continue leading the monastic life in spite of his priestly ordination and says, « I began to gather together brothers of good will, my **companions in poverty**, having nothing just like me, and imitating me »

(Sermon 355,2). The simplicity of the monastic life is claimed to be the mark of the « new man » that the monk desires to be.

Let us hold on to the fact that we are companions in poverty. It's a beautiful title that we've inherited and that says a lot about our fundamental condition.

Augustine liked to speak of his religious as the *poor ones of God*. To become a companion in the monastic life was to be *God's poor one*. But God's poor one in religious life did more than just renounce his possessions ; he agreed to become humble, that is, to be open to the Spirit's action. « *If I distribute all my possessions to the poor without becoming one of God's poor ones, that serves no purpose. For love does not inflate (I Cor 13:3-4) ; and there is no real love of God in the one who is ungrateful to God's Spirit through whom God's love has been poured into our hearts (Rom 5:5).* »¹

The attitude of humility, standing in opposition to pride, is one that welcomes divine grace. Do we know how to remain humble and modest today ? Do we know how to be one of God's poor ones ?

Placing all things in common

As far as Augustine is concerned, poverty is seen above all in the obligation of placing all things in common in order to live the monastic life fully. The bishop of Hippo was inspired by the example of the primitive apostolic

¹ Commentary on Psulm 71, 3

community, as it is described in the Acts of the Apostles. Let us re-read and never stop reading this landmark text of Augustinian spirituality, « The community of believers was of one heart and mind, and no one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they had everything in common » (Acts 4 :32). It is clear that the one who wants to become a monk must give up all his possessions. He enters a new world, one of duty to the community. In the works of St. Augustine there is the constant opposition between *proprium* and *commune*. One must eliminate the spirit of personal possession and acquire a community perspective. For Augustine, placing all things in common cannot be limited only to material goods; it includes everything that we are as well. We place all our goods in common, but also our persons, our relationships, our spiritual life. In such a way we have « in common an immense sphere, God himself. » Fr. Goulven Madec (a French Assumptionist who was an Augustinian scholar) liked to speak of « spiritual communism » to characterize the originality of Augustinian thinking.

As for Fr. Athanase Sage (another great Assumptionist writer and specialist in Augustinian religious life), he recognized in poverty the fundamental virtue for living religious life: « Since poverty is for Augustine the basic virtue of religious life, the fundamental duty of the superior is to supervise the practice of poverty, in view of maintaining fraternal harmony, the fervent search for God and the apostolic zeal of the community. »²

² Athanase Sage, *The Religious Life according to Saint Augustine*, New City Press, ed. John Rotelle, 1990, p.30.

St. Augustine insists on the voluntary stripping of oneself and the sharing of goods. He had to deal with any number of inheritance disputes, one of which concerned Januarius, a priest in Hippo, who had been married and had two children. Sermons 355 and 356 address this critical episode in the life of the monastery. Augustine recalls that *every servant of God* must give up whatever he has upon entering the monastery: « *Let them do whatever they like with it, provided they are prepared to be poor together with me and we all look together...to the mercy of God* ».³ To be poor means putting all one's goods in common.

This episode allows Augustine to remind his priests that they have chosen the common life, called to the « holy life » in addition to the clerical state and they must respect the placing of goods in common. Each of them is placed before his conscience to respect his commitment.

There is another characteristic pair of words for Augustine, the distinction between *uti* and *frui*, between the use of goods that are ephemeral and the enjoyment that is only possible in God and for God and that has the taste of eternity about it. It is possible to use goods on this earth, but enjoyment can only be founded on the encounter with God. Being poor, we surrender ourselves to God.

« *Blessed are the poor in spirit for the Kingdom of heaven is theirs.* So it is said of the poor who are without means; they can hardly find food for the day and they have such

³ Sermon 355, 6.

need of assistance and compassion from others that they aren't ashamed to beg. If it is of these that is said : *The poor entrust themselves to you*, what will we do, we who are not such as they? Christians that we are, shall we not entrust ourselves to God? And what other hope can we have if we do not entrust ourselves to the one who does not abandon us ? (...) Therefore, learn to be poor and entrust yourselves to God, O my brothers in poverty! »⁴

When Augustine died, « he did not make a last will and testament, since, being a poor one of God, he had nothing to justify one. »⁵

On the necessity of work for monks

There is also the traditional antithesis between *otium* and *negotium*, between leisure and work. In Antiquity, there was more worth given to leisure, which is a characteristic of the elite, than to work, because the latter was associated with the working class that was always bustling about. But Augustine was careful to avoid any dichotomy that was too restrictive in his eyes and that might subvert religious life. Monks are not withdrawn from the life of the world in such a way as to be idle. They have given priority to the search for God, but are subject to the law of work. In the work entitled *De opere monachorum*, Augustine reminds his readers that Eucharistic monks, who desire only to pray, are not models to be followed. He goes on to say that as far as he himself is

⁴ Sermon 14, 1

⁵ Possidius, *Vie d'Augustin*, 31.

concerned he would still like to undertake manual labor but that the episcopal ministry obliged him to give up this practice.

« I would much rather every day at certain hours, as much as is appointed by rule in well-governed monasteries, do some work with my hands, and have the remaining hours free for reading and praying, or some work pertaining to Divine Letters, than have to hear these most annoying perplexities of other men's causes about secular matters, which we must either by adjudication bring to an end, or by intervention cut short.»⁶

The Rule, an aid in helping one grow in the faith

The Rule of St. Augustine should be re-read. Even if it is rather short, it nevertheless offers a wealth of wisdom.

Augustine reminds his monks obviously of the need to place in common all that they have and all that they are. The Rule also reminds them that it is necessary to give everyone what he needs. But Augustine adds : « *Indeed, it is better to want little than to have too much* » (III,5). He knew that in his monastery there were men from very different backgrounds. He invites the poorest not to become proud by virtue of their contact with the rich and he recommends that the rich remain humble and not to be forever calling to mind their former position of prestige in the world. In fact, it is pride that destroys community.

⁶ Augustin, De opere monachorum, 37,
[http://christianbookshelf.org/augustine/of the work of monks
/_section_1_thy_bidding_holy.htm](http://christianbookshelf.org/augustine/of_the_work_of_monks/_section_1_thy_bidding_holy.htm)

Chapter V, 2 is in itself a short treatise on life in community. It recalls the demands of the common good : « for you should interpret charity, which according to Scripture is not self-seeking (I Cor 13 :5), as giving precedence to community property over personal effects, and not vice versa. Therefore, you will know that you are making greater progress to the extent that you care more for community goods than for your own. Let charity which abides overrule all things which are used (I Cor 13:13) out of transitory necessity. »

We must seek the common good. This is a consequence of our commitment with regard to the vow of poverty by which we learn to strip ourselves of our self-sufficiency and make an effort to open ourselves to others. The search for the common good requires self-denial. Even if this word is not in vogue these days, the reality it conveys remains a necessary virtue : the free sacrifice of self. Let us engage in a little personal reality check : do we really care more for the common good than to doing our own personal 'thing'»?

Being poor so as to praise the Lord in truth

For Augustine poverty is the condition *sine qua non* for true praise. We magnify the Lord because he has filled our hearts with his love which leads us to break forth in praise of his glory.

His commentary on Psalm 31 sheds light on another dimension of poverty: the connection between poverty and prayer. God listens to the one who is truly poor. So one must strip himself if he is to truly pray. True prayer is that

of the poor one who expects everything from the hand of the Lord. First and foremost, he awaits the Lord himself.

« *The poor shall eat and be filled.* Happy the poor for they eat so as to be filled. For it is the poor who eat. Those who are rich are not filled because they had no hunger. So it is the poor who eat (...) Jesus Christ gave his body at the Last Supper; he gave us his Passion. The one who follows Him is filled. The poor have imitated Him since they have suffered in such a way that they have followed in the footsteps of the Son of God. *So the poor shall eat.* But why are they poor and in what does their poverty consist?

Those who seek the Lord shall praise him. The rich praise themselves; the poor praise the Lord. So why are they poor? Because they praise the Lord and because they seek him. The Lord himself is their sole treasure. Their house is empty of the goods of the earth so that their heart may be filled with the riches of heaven. The rich think only of filling their storehouses while the poor think only filling their hearts. And once their hearts are filled, these who seek the Lord will praise him. So, look, my brothers, at what wealth the poor possess; they are not the ones who are filling their treasure-chests, storehouses, and cellars. »⁷

The Lord is the sole treasure of the poor and he fills their hearts; that's why they praise him. The rich are already 'stuffed'; they cannot praise. For us, religious, praise is possible to the extent that we are truly poor.

⁷ Commentary on Ps. 22

On the necessity of almsgiving

Finally, Augustine reflects on **almsgiving**. It is a traditional means of sanctification and a commandment linked to love of neighbor. In coming to the aid of those in need, we come to the aid of the Lord who suffers in his members. That which is done on behalf of the least, the smallest, is also done to the Master.

« What are these poor to whom we give alms if not our porters transporting our gifts from earth to heaven ? Give therefore ! It is to your porter that you give ; and it is to heaven that he brings what you give him. How, you say, does he bring them to heaven? To the contrary I see just the opposite, that he is in fact disposing of them by eating. Exactly ! It's not by keeping them in his hands but by eating them that he is transporting them. Have you forgotten the phrase, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father., inherit the Kingdom.....I was hungry and you gave me to eat'; and then this one, 'Whatsoever you do to the least of my brothers, that you do unto me'. If you have not scorned the poor man who was begging before you, look where what you gave has reached, 'Whatsoever you have done,' he says, 'to the least of my brothers, that you have done unto me.' It is Christ who has received what you have given. He who has received is the same as the one who gave you in the first place what in turn you have given. He who has received is the same one who, in the end, will give himself to you. »⁸

⁸ Sermon 389

« So look, my brothers, at the love of our head. He is already in heaven and still he suffers as long as here below the Church suffers. Here Christ is hungry, thirsty, naked, a stranger, ill, and in prison. Everything that his body suffers here, he says, it is he himself who suffers... 'I was hungry and you gave me to eat...Whatsoever you have done to the least of mine, that you have done unto me' » (*Mt 25: 42-45*).⁹

At the time of Augustine almsgiving was also regarded as a way to fight for greater justice and solidarity. Augustine desired that the world become a true fraternity where all could live decently.

Finally, for Augustine, we are pilgrims of the City of God because the City of Man is built on a forgetfulness of God. Our life on earth must be directed to a search for eternal goods and we need to travel light if we want to advance. Poverty and the placing of all in common are one way of reaching the Kingdom of God.

II. FR. D'ALZON AND VOLUNTARY POVERTY.

Emmanuel d'Alzon was born into a wealthy family that owned numerous properties and was financially quite sound. Thanks to the wealth of his mother, Madame de Faventine, the d'Alzon family was sheltered from material need. Although he was raised in such a favored milieu, the young Emmanuel d'Alzon learned early on to lead a rather simple life; it was a conscious choice on his part. Right

⁹ Sermon 137

after his ordination in 1835, he rejected all the trappings of his previous estate and chose a more than modest apartment in the old section of Nîmes. In 1845, when he made the decision for religious life at Notre-Dame des Victoires in Paris, he became even more attentive to his lifestyle :

« I renounce all the property that belongs to me in the sense that I do not wish to use it except for the glory of God. I reserve the right to leave some of it to my family or not to, depending on what seems most prudent in the eyes of those I consult. I commit myself to living poorly as far as clothing, food, and expenses are concerned, without doing anything, however, that might indicate that I have already made a definitive commitment. »¹⁰

Fr. Emmanuel d'Alzon is very demanding when it comes to himself and we can note that he connects the vow of poverty with the need to work. Not to waste one's time meant dedicating it to study or work. That would remain an essential point in Fr. d'Alzon's vision of religious poverty.

It would be important to point out the *generosity* of Emmanuel d'Alzon. For him, it was not a question of amassing, but rather of distributing. Avarice was not in his vocabulary and, as a matter of fact, he often lacked sufficient foresight when it came to providing for the future. After his mother's death, his financial situation became decidedly better because he had access to a significant inheritance. Certain members of the Catholic

¹⁰ In Siméon Vailhé, *Vie du Père Emmanuel d'Alzon*, tome I, pages 373-374.

hierarchy came to covet this wealth especially those who wished to wipeout the debts of the apostolic vicariate of Constantinople. Emmanuel d'Alzon would prove to be generous to the point of making the two congregations he had founded more vulnerable, congregations whose communities and works also needed considerable financial support.

D'Alzon was not a capitalist, even less a person of private means. He trusted in God and gave himself over to Providence for his daily needs. This did not stop him from being realistic, but at the same time very « supernatural ».

« Ah! my God, when more money starts coming in, will we rely on you less for our livelihood and isn't it more worthwhile to suffer from a little poverty? This virtue requires us to work and, in this regard, it has the great benefit of fending off slackers and discouraging laziness. Believe me, this sort of watchman prevents lots of abuses from occurring in many a convent....»¹¹

D'Alzon didn't want his religious to become rich and rely on their wealth like men of private means. He wanted poverty to be a goad encouraging work. In our day, the economic crisis we are experiencing has led us to give renewed value to manual work and community efforts to find new sources of income. In this sense, the crisis can be healthy, if it allows us to be more faithful to our religious consecration.

¹¹ Letter of January 4, 1861 to Mother Marie-Eugénie de Jésus.

Voluntary poverty is a protest against today's world

Emmanuel d'Alzon was a man of his time. He reveals a certain number of ideas concerning poverty and the poor that reflect the spirit of the age. There was, during the Second Empire, a certain diffidence with regard to the poor, who were considered to be lazy. Christian discourse was often an appeal to resignation rather than to changing the conditions of life. Nevertheless, Fr. d'Alzon suggested that voluntary poverty had the power of protesting the values of the world.

*« Above all we want to practice poverty; we consider it indispensable in our day as a protest against contemporary morals. »*¹²

There is a progressive openness of our founder to the realities of the working class. There is no doubt that Fr. Etienne Pernet's influence was decisive in this area. Emmanuel d'Alzon encouraged him to found the Little Sisters of the Assumption and Pernet helped him to understand better the great distress of the simple people of his day. The Assumption became aware of the social character of Pernet's apostolic involvement, in touch as he was with the lower classes of society.

It has been a tradition in the history of our congregation to recall that Fr. d'Alzon connected the vow of poverty to the virtue of hope. God is in fact our sole treasure and we must rely on Him for everything. There is a desire of self-surrender that is quite striking with d'Alzon and that he lived in his flesh. As Fr. Jean-Paul Péri-

¹² Letter of January 7, 1857.

Muzet wrote: « *Emmanuel d'Alzon left everything: his family, his aristocratic state, his relationships, his life of comfort. Emmanuel d'Alzon gave everything away: his fortune, his education, his health, his life in the service of the Church and of his congregations.* »¹³

Emmanuel d'Alzon was an example of one who practiced hope. He never allowed himself to be overwhelmed by adversity even though he had to face lots of failure. One might call to mind the disaster of the Australian venture, not to mention the many aborted attempts to merge with other congregations and the disappointments connected with the behavior of certain religious. Finally, the death itself of our founder reminds us that right up to his last breath he tirelessly had to battle adversity. Hope flowed in his veins. He was a man who placed his trust in God alone.

Voluntary poverty implies the need to work

Finally, Emmanuel d'Alzon insisted that voluntary poverty entailed an obligation to work. A religious is faithful to his vocation when he engages in hard work.

« Apart from what rest and recreation is necessary for human weakness, the religious spends all his time either praying or working – this is what his life is made up of. The work he does is a sacrifice of his body or of his intellect or of his will. And this, I repeat, is worship rendered to God the whole day long. It's a question of wanting to get started

¹³ Jean-Paul Périet-Muzet, notes from a retreat, 1994.

and setting about it with vigour and determination... Let us work, let us work. The time is short. »¹⁴

An Assumptionist works «like four». His apostolic ambition, his zeal for the Kingdom of God, pushes him to be ever active. Voluntary poverty is demonstrated by one's involvement in the material life of the community. We are servants. Emmanuel d'Alzon writes how early on he learned to make his own bed and eliminated the need for a servant to do it. It's a moving account.

« Can I tell you that I am finally getting down to living a life of poverty, one becoming of a future religious? For some time now, I have been making my own bed. The day before yesterday I changed rooms to a new one that I swept, probably not too well, but to the best of my ability. Today I put jugs and buckets in my corridor and the novices who live or will live here with me will try to follow the example that you set long ago in not having any servants apart from their own hands. Should I add that these poor fingers of mine inspire infinite compassion? When I arrange the covers on my straw bed, I usually skin them alive. So, please teach me how you are able to do it without too much damage... »¹⁵

So we see the aristocrat becoming a modest religious who accepts to undertake the humblest of tasks. This leads us to our own involvement in the material well-being of the houses where we live. Are we sufficiently involved in

¹⁴ Emmanuel d'Alzon, *23rd Meditation, Ecrits spirituels*, p.512

¹⁵ *Letter to Sr. M. Augustine Bévier, January 5, 1846*

their upkeep? Do we rely rather on other brothers to free us from what we consider to be tasks that are below us?

Being configured to the poor Christ

It is not possible to speak of poverty without contemplating Christ on the Cross. He who was rich emptied himself « unto death, and death on a cross ». Jesus of Nazareth lived his life as a man in solidarity with all of humanity. His suffering wasn't make believe nor was his death. Our poverty configures us to Christ. This takes place in stages. We become poor over the course of a lifetime by maintaining solidarity with other human beings and with the God of Jesus Christ. Fr. d'Alzon, in his letter on the crucifix, written at Lamalou-les-Bains on June 21, 1857, ushers us into the mystery of love that Christ lived for us. Fr. d'Alzon himself was marked by intense suffering associated with his illness. He discovered the limits to his activity and to his strength. The crucifix allowed him to place his faith in one who can do all things. He invites everyone to take up the crucifix in his hands and allow himself to be transformed.

« Our Blessed Lord loves you, is instructing you, is fortifying you, by means of his crucified likeness.... You will experience the direct action of him who was nailed to the Cross for your sake. Your most earnest longing will be transformation into Him. . 'For me', cries Saint Paul, 'life means Christ' (Phil 1:21). Your life will adopt this new dimension of 'Christ's fullness'. You will uncover vast spiritual horizons to which you will lovingly resort – and every form of life, every degree of knowledge, every extent of

happiness, will be summed up in 'Jesus Christ and Him Crucified'".

So let us allow ourselves to be transformed into Jesus Christ because he is the truly poor one and he is the one who saves humanity from death. The vow of poverty configures us to Christ on the cross but also to the Risen Christ. The more we become poor, the more we become capable of new life, of eternal life.

At the end of this brief overview of poverty as it was lived by Emmanuel d'Alzon, let us remember that our founder always took this vow seriously and found endless ways to put it into practice. As for Augustine, the placing of all in common was essential and work was indispensable. We have chosen to lead a sober and modest life.

III. THE RULE OF LIFE AND POVERTY

The Rule of life is a summary of the Augustinian and Alzonian spirituality. It reflects the experience of our Patriarch and of our Founder. It is often succinct but it offers objective reference points for our daily life. I will not take up the entire chapter on poverty which should be re-read but only a few points.

"Each one bears his share of responsibility for the financial situation of the community. The pooling of information, an active participation in reaching decisions, and a sharing of chores are required of all members." (Rule of life n° 29)

The vow of poverty does not produce irresponsible religious. It is not because there is a provincial treasurer and a local treasurer that the religious can consider themselves exempt from material cares. The Rule of life clearly states : “each one bears his share of responsibility for the financial situation of the community.” We are to take responsibility, as best we can, for the concrete life of the community. This is especially the role of work whether salaried or not. I call attention to the fact that the religious does not have a value tied to what he brings to the community. Each must find his place there including the one who does not have personal resources. We must be careful not to fall into the worldly logic where only those who have goods or resources are interesting. Religious life reverses this mercantile conception of life. A brother who is at the service of the community does not earn a salary, but his work contributes effectively to the life of the community. The question that each needs to ask himself in conscience is this : am I a serious and competent worker who contributes to the well-being of my community? There are in religious life goods that are not identifiable with or negotiable for money, but which have real value.

“The power of money has a tendency to neglect the meaning of gratuity. In today’s world, everything is evaluated. Religious life, by its freely chosen poverty and sharing, opens a space where gratuity and relationship surpass the value understood as riches.¹⁶

¹⁶ Theological Commission of the Conference of Men and Women Religious of France, *L’identité de la vie religieuse. Proposition théologique*. Paris, 2011.

The Rule of life also invites us to solidarity. The underlying idea is that a community should not have reserves that are disproportionate to its needs and that all that is not of use to us must serve those who have less. We need to open wide our horizons and to seek ways to relieve those who are in need. The assumptionist tradition recommends support internal to the congregation but also to be attentive to help all those who contribute to improving the condition of our contemporaries. Certain provinces have instituted the practice of contributing 1% of their proper revenues to finance solidarity projects outside the congregation. Other provinces have chosen to contribute all community surpluses to the provincial account. We encourage these practices which illustrate the traditional disinterestedness of our religious family. They correspond to what Augustine wanted which accentuates the creation of a true community of love among men. The simplicity and the moderation in the use of goods and their pooling together are at the service of the construction of a universal and true fraternity among us.

The General Chapter of 2011 and poverty

It is important that we re-read with attention the Chapter Acts and especially all that concerns the chapter “In Solidarity with the Poor and the Least in our Midst”, that is numbers 38 to 61. The capitulants’ reflection was profound and we have in these few passages a sufficiently clear orientation to deepen our vow of poverty and its daily practice. Have these articles of the General Chapter been read and reflected upon in community? Have they permitted the changing of certain habits?

“Only the love of Jesus Christ, who became poor and the servant of all, makes it possible for us to give our lives for others. Propter amorem ...Our love for Him urges us to imitate Him and live like Him in solidarity with the least among us”.(Acts of the General Chapter, n°38, 2011)

Number 166 recalls the elements of the Rule of Life and insists on the current context:

“The current crisis obliges us to renew our choice of a “sober” life which would be a credible indication that Christ is truly our only treasure”.

IV. SOME BEHAVIORS TO EXAMINE.

We are in a world that is in pain. Pollution has invaded our universe, the waste of resources is colossal, the inequalities are outrageous and overpopulation menaces the fragile equilibrium of the world. I am not a pessimist, but the different conferences on climate warming and the major world assemblies to combat the inequalities don't seem to come to anything. Do you know that close to 4 billion tons of food are produced each year in the world but up to 2 billion tons are never eaten, according to a study of the Institute of Civil Engineering based in London. That figure is chilling. Half of the food produced each year in the world ends up in the wastebasket. The causes: poorly harvested crops, deficiencies in storage and transport or the irresponsibility of distributors and consumers. From 30 to 50% of what is bought at the supermarket ends up in the wastebasket. For example, a French person discards on average between 20 and 30 kg of food each year, an American 110kg.

Conversely, in the less developed countries of sub-Saharan Africa or South East Asia wastage is more linked to badly executed harvests or to poor storage conditions. 180 million tons of rice are lost each year in South East Asia because of poor storage conditions. These figures are all the more frightening when the United Nations predicts that in 2075 world population will peak at 9.5 billion inhabitants, which signifies that an additional 2.5 billion persons will need to be fed.

The defense of Creation has sensitized us to our universe. The world in which we live is fragile. It is all the more precious as we see it dissipate (go to waste) before our very eyes and that we have to protect it with all our might. The Justice and Peace and Integrity of Creation groups are commendable for pushing us to change our behaviors.

The world is profoundly unequal. There are too many poor and too much injustice around us. One need not go to the less advanced countries, those which we used to call the Third World, to find atrocious inequality. It is everywhere.

Our behaviors have been conditioned by the attitude of abundance. But the earth has limited and exhaustible resources. One author, Jared Diamond, has shown that we were at the edge of a collapse of civilization if we did not take measures adapted to an ecological and humanitarian recovery.¹⁷

¹⁷ Jared Diamond, *Effondrement*, Gallimard ou *Collapse*, Penguin in English.

Religious life with the poverty it wishes to live, refusal of “always more” and concerned with the sharing of goods, has an ecological significance. We are called to live a “joyful frugality” and an “interdependent moderation”.¹⁸

Changing behaviors

Fr. Claude Maréchal wrote in 1991 a letter entitled “Men dedicated to sharing in solidarity with the poor”. Since, as far as I know, there has not been an official text of the congregation on the question of poverty and of solidarity. Obviously, our General Chapters have at each occasion dealt with this question, but there has not been a document especially dedicated to the topic.

In re-reading with interest this letter whose essential points remain pertinent, I asked myself the question what changes have there been in our behaviors as religious. Two such behaviors struck me for they seem to be symptomatic of our times. The first is the invasion of information processing. Henceforward, communities and often individual religious have the equipment identified with the computer. Clearly, it is a working instrument useful for implementing our mission. But the instrument, with the arrival of multimedia, has many other functions in addition to simple data processing. The internet has

¹⁸ The concept of “interdependent moderation” concerns the reduction of the production and of the consumption in a certain number of sectors, for the populations of the rich nations and the well-off social classes in the Southern nations. (Cf. General Chapter of the Religious of the Assumption, July 2012).

convulsed our behaviors and the addiction to the Web has become a real concern for some among us. The “geek” culture has made its entry into the convents. Another revolution has come with the introduction of portable telephones. These have been introduced almost everywhere whether one be in the Northern hemisphere or in the Southern hemisphere. As I travel I am often surprised to see this or that religious hitched to a portable phone to the point of interfering with community life. I don’t want to start a quarrel between the ancients and the moderns, I would like everyone to position himself in conscience to see if he is truly free with reference to these technological innovations which are moreover real advances for society. No one today contests the relevance of these instruments, but each should be able to question himself on the way he uses them. These means of communication must not replace direct fraternal communication.

Poverty is concerned by these new means of communication and of work. Do we have a way of using them which allows us to progress in our work or is the gaming dimension dominant? I have seen religious spend a significant, not to say abusive, amount of time before a computer screen occupied by a game software. If recreation serves to maintain equilibrium, let us not forget that we have a duty to work.

There are differences between the communities of the Northern hemisphere and those of the Southern hemisphere. In the latter we do not have a society of abundance and of unrestrained consumption, but we need to be vigilant to not succumb to the risks of this

overconsumption. Already certain signs lead one to think that frugality has been abandoned in certain areas like in that of the means of social communications (telephones).

It seems important to me to visit a few of the areas of our community life to see humbly if it is possible to change certain behaviors to better live sobriety and poverty. A question arises: does the use of these means of communication contribute to advance the Kingdom of God?

• *The means of communication.*

Henceforward community budgets include this as a line of expense. Not long ago, there was a telephone expense account for the community, today most religious have a portable telephone. This has a sufficiently strong impact on the community budget. I do not contest the utility of telephones, but the use of these is sometimes disproportionate. For a yes or for a no the user sends an SMS, or a text message, or calls. With globalization religious who live outside their own country no longer hesitate to communicate with their close ones and the cost of these communications, even if the cost has been reduced, stays high. I think we need to learn to be moderate in the use of this beautiful instrument. It is to be desired that it not hinder conviviality and fraternal sharing.

The presence of the internet has changed the configuration of our communities. Henceforth it is impossible to do without this very useful instrument which is the Web. We have access to interesting information and

intellectual work has been revolutionized. But, we all know, the use of the internet is subject to caution. Free access to numerous sites can lead to an appalling waste of time. We can simply ask ourselves how much time we spend each day on this or that site. Is it very useful? Does this contribute to my human, spiritual, intellectual growth? Some congregations have begun a reflection on these questions. We have every interest in looking at the propositions they have made.

• *Food*

An old Romanian Assumptionist, now deceased and who had known the war, captivity and shortages, said that the day that a religious died of hunger, there will have been before him numerous victims! This was a whim, no doubt, but it conceals some truth. Religious in general are sheltered from hunger. We do not always have a copious table but on the whole we lack nothing. Unlike certain families or populations we do not know hunger. And we can thank God for that. But are we attentive to not being excessive in our food consumption? Do we know what portion of our community food budget goes for alcoholic drinks? I think I can say that there are times when it is very easy to consume such drinks. It seems important to me to be attentive to not break solidarity with those who cannot permit themselves such behaviors for their economic possibilities are reduced. We should give witness to sobriety. Besides, our health depends also on our capacity to feed ourselves: without want, but also without excess.

• *Our residences*

We have the need to occupy spacious residences capable of welcoming a great number of persons. I think that there is no excess at Assumption. But a tendency is being noticed that is leading us to distance ourselves from the average population of the countries where we live. Real estate is an important question to treat. I have no readymade solutions but we should be vigilant so as not to cut ourselves off from the rest of the population. We should not give a counter witness by living in very sumptuous places.

Maybe we can listen to the questioning of a Brazilian, Fr. Clovis Boff, on the subject?

“We no longer today accept vast convents or parish residences, especially if they are situated in great centers of the poor. The fact that the religious or the priests who live there are personally poor does not erase the collective counter witness. Structures be they communal, social and even properties always have an influence on the persons who are therein inserted and reciprocally. Each are both autonomous and interdependent. It is also evangelically very important that the persons and their habitat witness to poverty. Poor religious in poor communities: it is a requirement of the Gospel for today”.¹⁹

¹⁹ Clodovis Boff, Jorge Pixley. Les pauvres: choix prioritaire, Cerf, 1990, p. 147

• *Studies*

We know that: “the day we no longer study at the Assumption, the Assumption will no longer have a reason for being”. We often repeat this and we have reason to recall the pressing call of Fr. Emmanuel d’Alzon to form ourselves so as to be good apostles of the Kingdom. Studies always have an apostolic end. We want to work for God and his Church. But this also obliges us to study with efficiency and seriousness. We cannot be dilettantes of study. The Assumption invests resolutely so that the young and the not so young be formed, but there is the obligation of results. Each one needs to be serious and work with courage and zeal. At times, studies are seen as a time to which we have a right and without there being apostolic implications. This is prejudicial.

Linked to studies, is the question of books and personal libraries. We have an Augustinian rule which foresees putting things in common. I think we need to urge that each contribute to the composition of communal libraries. At times, our behavior in the matter is too lax. The Assumptionist tradition of beautiful common libraries is to be revived.

• *Travel*

The Assumptionist is a kind of Jesuit who travels a great deal said a dictionary of the 19th century. It is true that we have renewed the pilgrimages in modern times. But today, we have at times great facility in our displacements and all are not absolutely justified. We have much discernment to do so as to be sure that we do not spend money uselessly in travels. Vacation times are

perhaps lived in a too personal manner without care for sobriety and life in community.

• **Health**

Health is a very precious good which requires that we take care as best possible. We are fortunate to be able to access quality health care in most of the countries where we are at present. Certainly there are important differences between the national health systems. And the African continent still is visibly behind in access to health care. Despite all, the Assumptionist religious are rather well taken care of. It is a doctor who speaks! But we haven't always the adequate behaviors to protect our health capital and certain behaviors are disastrous for our hope for life. I refer to a certain "waste" that has heavy consequences already for each but also for the life of the congregation. We should be attentive to our behaviors linked to the health of body and spirit.

We need to advance in the reform of our behaviors so as to be more faithful to Jesus Christ. As writes Clodovis Boff : "Evangelical poverty, the ideal for all Christians, has a double face: it is at the same time spiritual and material. It is an internal attitude necessarily translating itself in an external style of life. Both attitudes are linked one to the other as soul to the body.

The deep root, source and first motivation of evangelical poverty, is spiritual poverty with what it means for faith, for humility and for the gift of self. More precisely, it is the willingness to follow Jesus Christ and to imitate him : *nudus nudum Christum sequi*. Such a disposition of the spirit finds its logical continuation in a

style of life which can only be poor. Necessary visible translation of interior poverty. (...).

A spiritual poverty which would be only spiritual is not only not satisfactory but ends up emptying itself of its contents and by disappearing, and leaving of itself but false appearances, a simple spiritualizing discourse on poverty. It is but sterile seed. (...)

A poverty without the primacy of interiority cannot be evangelical (cf. Mk. 7:14-23). It is not authentic and has no power.

On the contrary, a true “poverty in spirit” or “of heart” translates itself necessarily in practical behaviors. In the Bible, the spirit – or the heart – is the vital center of the being and of human acting. Someone who makes himself voluntarily poor lives authentically spiritual poverty”.²⁰

V. TO FIGHT AGAINST INJUSTICE AND INEQUALITIES AND DEFEND CREATION

To change behavior is also and especially to commit oneself within society to fight against blatant inequalities and injustices. Papal teaching since Leo XIII has emphasized social action and the necessity for Christians to contribute to the emergence of a more just society. Benedict XVI has continued the traditional teaching and has enriched it with his encyclical on charity, *Deus caritas*

²⁰ Clodovis Boff, Jorge Pixley, *les pauvres: choix prioritaire*, Cerf, 1990, p. 146.

est. It is not a question of building utopias or even less revolutionary romanticism, but of the necessity for each of us to play his part in the elaboration of a world more in conformity with the Gospel, that is to say a world of brothers and sisters. *"The Church cannot and must not take upon herself the political battle to bring about the most just society possible. She cannot and must not replace the State. Yet at the same time she cannot and must not remain on the sidelines in the fight for justice. She has to play her part through rational argument and she has to reawaken the spiritual energy without which justice, which always demands sacrifice, cannot prevail and prosper. A just society must be the achievement of politics, not of the Church. Yet the promotion of justice through efforts to bring about openness of mind and will to the demands of the common good is something which concerns the Church deeply"* ²¹.

Christians and thus religious are called to work in the world so that it may adapt the values of the Kingdom. The poverty which we live is not an official recognition of misery or of inequalities, on the contrary, it is its refutation. Where societies forget the poorest and the excluded the Christian calls attention to the eminent value of all persons beyond his contribution to economic life. Religious can commit themselves actively to move societies not by playing politics in the trivial sense of the term, but by taking part in the battles for justice and peace. Presence within associations or movements is to be encouraged. Religious life has a prophetic dimension and our behaviors are called to witness to the primacy of the

²¹ Benedict XVI, *Deus caritas est*, n°28, 2005.

search for Christ within our concrete lives. Respect for Creation is an integral part of our witness. It is directly linked to justice and to peace. You can't have one without the other.

Pope Benedict XVI has said with clarity that the economic system must respect Creation.

*"Capitalism should not be considered as the only valid model of economic organization. The emergency of hunger and that of ecology stand to denounce with increasing evidence that the logic of profit, if it prevails, increases the disproportion between rich and poor and the ruinous exploitation of the planet. However, on the contrary, when the logic of sharing and solidarity prevails it is possible to correct the course and to direct it towards an equitable and sustainable development"*²².

Religious life can witness to a happy moderation, that is of a simple life where consumption is moderate and respectful of the environment.

Benedict XVI recalls the example given by the monks and in making precise that it is of a particular witness of a life of poverty he stresses that this one can inspire behaviors for all. A sober life is an example but it also contributes to reducing the inequalities created by the monopolizing of wealth.

"The renunciation of private property, this freedom from material things, as well as moderation and simplicity apply in a radical form only to monks, but the spirit of this

²² Benedict XVI, *Angelus* of 23 September 2007

renouncement is equal for all. Indeed, we must not depend on material possessions but instead must learn renunciation, simplicity, austerity and moderation. Only in this way can a supportive society develop and the great problem of poverty in this world be overcome. Therefore, in this regard the monks' radical poverty is essentially also a path for us all".²³

Religious and laity together

The Assumption is an open family. We are religious and laity, agents for the proclamation of the Kingdom.

The Assumption has every interest in working in the area of "Justice and Peace and the Integrity of Creation". Our sisters have opened the way and we can strengthen our presence in diverse teams and organizations. The opening in the reflection on the defense of Creation strikes me as of capital importance.

The laity associated with us also have their role in our becoming sensitive to questions of poverty. Their attention is often more mature because of their involvement in the city. We need them to help us progress in fidelity to our vow. As Benedict XVI said, our commitment by the vow of poverty, can also indicate to them the preferential love that we have for God and for the poor.

²³ Benedict XVI, *Saint Theodore the Studite*, General Audience 27 May 2009.

Assumption's network of benefactors

At Assumption, we live in part thanks to the generosity of our benefactors. I must thank this immense network which supports us and which allows us to sustain our formation communities and our elderly religious. We know that active religious today are a minority and often the fruits of their work do not suffice to assure the material life of communities. Our lay friends are generous and often they take of their necessities to help us. This implies a heavy responsibility for us who benefit from their efforts. "The widow's mite" contributes a large part to our community budgets. Besides, international solidarity is also covered in large part thanks to the treasurers of the older provinces who each year take from their necessity what is needed to support the young provinces and the general house. Let each be thanked for his disinterested contribution and more particularly all those who work in the Procures or Guilds.

IV. THE PROCLAMATION OF THE KINGDOM AND POVERTY

It is because we are "God's poor" that we can faithfully announce the Kingdom of God. "How happy are the poor, theirs is the Kingdom of God". The Christian responds to Christ's call which asks us to seek the Kingdom and its justice. We need to change our behaviors, our styles of life in order to radiate the values that are proper to the Gospel. There is a periodic review of one's economic condition and of one's relationship to material goods. Are we ready to forgo everything in order to announce the Kingdom? Our

real treasure is the Word of God. Without it we can do nothing. Without it, our life hasn't the possibility of letting eternal life appear.

The Roman Synod of bishops on the new evangelization reflected on the link between poverty and the proclamation of the Kingdom. It recalls the necessity to not forget the poor.

"The other symbol of authenticity of the new evangelization has the face of the poor. Placing ourselves side by side with those who were wounded by life is not only a social exercise, but above all a spiritual act because it is Christ's face that shines in the face of the poor: "Whatever you did for one of the least brothers of mine, you did for me"(Matt. 25:40). We must recognize the privileged place of the poor in our communities, a place that does not exclude anyone, but wants to reflect how Jesus bound himself to them. The presence of the poor in our communities is mysteriously powerful; it changes persons more than a discourse does, it teaches fidelity, it makes us understand the fragility of life, it asks for prayer; in short, it brings us to Christ.

The gesture of charity, on the other hand, must also be accompanied by commitment to justice, with an appeal that concerns all, poor and rich. Hence, the social doctrine of the Church is integral to the pathways of the new evangelization, as well as the formation of Christians to

dedicate themselves to serve human community in social and political life”.²⁴

At the end of this letter on poverty, I would like to close with a word of encouragement. We are experiencing difficult times, but our hope is profoundly attached to the person of Christ. He is the poor of God who shows us the way. Together, we can witness to the priority of the Kingdom in our lives. Our life style should be able to demonstrate that we are *new men* and that our homeland is not of this world. At the same time, our engagement for justice, peace and the defense of Creation illustrates that we are fully of this world and that we are its administrators as God wanted. We are the *poor of God* for we are rich in his promise. May this letter help us to advance always less encumbered towards the Kingdom.

Fr. Benoît Grière
Superior general
September 27, 2013
Feast of St. Vincent de Paul

²⁴ Final message of the Synod on the new evangelization, n° 12, Rome 2012.

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