

9. POVERTY

Introduction

- 274 1. In response to the powerful calls of recent General Congregations¹ Jesuits have made noticeable efforts to live a more authentic poverty, both personally and in communities. Work with and for the poor has been promoted; the generosity and hospitality of our houses has increased; separation of community from work has brought greater clarity regarding expenses; there is more financial cooperation and a sharper sensitivity to justice. All in all, we have advanced in detachment, simplicity of life, solidarity and fraternal sharing – attitudes which mark the evangelical poverty we promised.² For all of this, we must be grateful to God.
- 275 2. At the same time, despite this progress, we must admit that we have not yet reached the deeper renewal that GC 32 in its Decree 12 asks of us in this regard. The postulates sent to this Congregation show dissatisfaction with our comfortable style of life; they call on us to consider whether our way of life bears credible witness to the vow of evangelical poverty.
- 276 3. This is not a marginal concern. We know well that, for Saint Ignatius, poverty is "a safeguard of religious life," whose lack "weakens, wears out and ruins" our way of being.³ Moved by the Spirit of Jesus, Ignatius and his first companions felt called to "preach in poverty."⁴ The authenticity of our poverty is the test of our being or not being Jesuits, manifestly following Christ "poor and humble," as we learned in the Spiritual Exercises.⁵

¹GC 31, D 18; GC 32, D 12; D 2, nn. 20, 28; D 4, n. 49; GC 33, D 1, nn. 23-27; D 2.

²GC 32 already expressed the "analogic" character of the religious poverty (D 12, n.7): "In a world of mass starvation, no one can lightly call himself poor. It is perhaps regrettable that we have no other word to designate this note of religious life, since poverty means very different things to different people. At the very least, religious poverty would try hard to limit rather than to expand consumption."

³Cf. *Const.* [553], [816]. Cf. also Letter to the Fathers and Brothers at Padua (7 August 1547), MHSI Epp.S.Ign., I, 572-577. Although written by Polanco at the request of St Ignatius, it contains the attitude of the Founder regarding poverty understood as a gift of God which draws Jesuits to the poor, "the friends of the (Eternal) King."

⁴To Jaime Cassador, 12 February 1536, S.Ign., Epp. et instruct., MHSI I,96, Cf. *Spiritual Diary*, (MHSI, *Const.* I 86-158, n.15); *Deliberation on poverty* (MHSI *Const.* I.78-83).

⁵Cf. *SpEx* [116].

The Apostolic and Prophetic Dimension of Our Poverty

277 4. Our poverty is apostolic because it witnesses to God as the one Lord of our lives and the only Absolute; it distances us from material goods and frees us from all attachment so that we can be fully available to serve the Gospel and dedicate ourselves to the most needy. In this way poverty is itself a mission and a proclamation of the Beatitudes of the Kingdom.

278 5. Our poverty is also prophetic. In recent decades the cry of the poor has become more piercing. But the gap between rich and poor is being reinforced rather than diminishing. Unbridled capitalism produces disproportionate growth for some economic sectors, exclusion and marginalization for many others. Contemporary society is infected by consumerism, hedonism and lack of responsibility. The values considered important today are personal fulfilment, competition, efficiency and success at any cost. In view of this panorama of contrasts, our personal and community poverty becomes a sign and message of a different logic, that of evangelical solidarity.

279 6. Poverty is the unequivocal condition of our credibility.⁶ In the face of the attitudes and values that dominate the mentality of the world today, the radical exercise of evangelical poverty becomes a counter-cultural witness to the value of gratuity which Saint Ignatius praised so much.⁷ By this gratuity we profess the boundless and freely bestowed love of God who gave his Son for us in the total emptying of the Incarnation and the Cross. By our poverty we also show that we as persons and as "body" consider ourselves the "least Company" which lives from God and for God rather than putting its trust in material goods, since the powerful love of the Lord acts through our littleness.

Guidelines and helps

280 7. In order to renew our apostolic poverty GC 34 wishes to insist again on some of the more pressing recommendations given us by recent General Congregations.

281 8. 1. Our *manner of our life* personally and in communities has to be simple, hospitable and open. There are certainly Jesuits and communities which live an exemplary austere life. However, we must admit that in some instances the style of our life is far from that lived by modest families of the locale. We must sincerely examine whether in certain spheres (travel, personal cars, private use of television, meals in expensive restaurants, vacations, the number of domestic employees, etc.) we live according to the requirements of our poverty; we must also ask

⁶Cf. GC 33, D 1, n. 48.

⁷Cf. *Examen* [4]; *Formula* [4]; *Const.* [398], [565], [816].

whether we truly earn our livelihood by our labour.⁸ A community life of shared poverty is a source of joy, and unity of hearts is strengthened by sharing of goods.⁹ The testimony of simplicity and sobriety of life can also be a means for awakening in some who visit us the desire to become companions of Jesus. We firmly believe that a separation of living quarters from workplace, as recommended by GC 31,¹⁰ helps to strengthen the simplicity and intimacy of our community life.

282 9. 2. *Economic openness* and dependence on the community for income and expenses are indispensable for a life of fraternal poverty. From the community we receive what we need; to the community we give everything that comes to us – as remuneration for our work, stipends, alms, gifts or in any other way.¹¹ This desire to share with one's brothers without holding back anything as one's own must remain characteristic of a Jesuit who desires radically to follow Jesus. Since the use of modern conveniences such as credit cards and personal bank accounts may bring one to live financially on the margins of the community, all should be fully honest with the superior regarding the use of money. Those who have influential and well-salaried positions must be especially alert; even though the acceptance of these positions must be discerned with the superior and the gain coming from them can never be a determining factor in choosing them, they carry within themselves the temptation to live a more comfortable lifestyle.¹² In the same way clarity and austerity of life is not helped by appropriating for personal use the economic or material means pertaining to one's apostolic work.

283 10. 3. *Spiritual discernment* will make us "vigilant servants" regarding the evangelical quality of our lives.

28411. a) The *personal* discernment so recommended by Saint Ignatius can be practised in prayer and the examen. Only the intimate knowledge of the Lord who has given up all for our sake will enable us to love him more deeply and follow him more closely in his detachment. The examen will help us to notice God's footprints in our lives, the God who calls us daily to dedicate ourselves "more" freely, since he himself desires to give himself "more," "to give himself to us as much as possible."¹³ An aid here is spiritual direction which can make our personal discernment more

⁸Cf. GC 32, D 12, n.7.

⁹Cf. GC 31, D 18, n. 13.

¹⁰Cf. GC 31, D 19, n.7.

¹¹GC 32, D 12, n. 8.

¹²*Ibid.*

¹³*SpEx* [234].

sound, and safe from any self-deception. A frank and trusting relationship between the members of the community and the superior is also desirable, so that he is not limited to giving permissions, but can really help each one to observe poverty in its purity and to overcome its difficulties.

28512. b) An important topic for *community* discernment should be our lifestyle. What is required is that the community make a common plan that reflects its desire to live simply and in solidarity, a plan which can be easily evaluated at regular intervals. It must include the concrete means to attain simplicity, the manner in which the spirit of gratuity is manifested by the community, and how goods will be shared among the companions and with the poor. The time prior to the annual visitation of the Provincial can be a suitable occasion for evaluation. Drawing up an annual budget, with careful and complete presentation to the community and not merely as a routine, has been found helpful as a means to evaluate lifestyle to see if it is comparable to "modest families of the region." Effort is needed to keep within the budget, and the community must be informed about how well this is being accomplished.¹⁴ When these helps are neglected, "private incomes" can easily appear in the life of Jesuits and money can easily be spent on superfluities.

286 13. 4. The changes in our administrative structures introduced by GC 32 are intended to enable communities to live more modestly and with a greater sense of shared responsibility. For this reason the *sharing of goods* has been established, so that community surplus is annually distributed: to the apostolic work dependent on it, to other communities or works that are needy whether within the Province or outside it, and to the poor.¹⁵ As far as possible, apostolic institutions are also subject to the same fraternal law regarding other apostolic works in need of help.¹⁶ The reform which separates the economic structures of community from those of the work has generally resulted in positive steps towards a greater solidarity of sharing and the greater economic openness so necessary in our communities and institutions. However, the desired results have not been achieved everywhere; at times there is simply a separation of administration and accounting, without having any effect on the economic standards of community life.¹⁷ GC 34 asks that these reforms be carried out with sincerity; when observed carefully, they can transform both our personal and community life and our apostolic activity.

287 14. 5. In order to "feel [sentir]" the anxieties and

¹⁴Cf. GC 32, D 12, n. 24.

¹⁵Cf. GC 32, D 12, nn. 25-29, GC 31, D 19, n. 6b.

¹⁶Cf. GC 32, D 12, nn. 12, 34.

¹⁷Cf. GC 33, D 1, n. 25.

aspirations of the dispossessed in an Ignatian way, we need *direct personal experience*.¹⁸ Profound experience is what changes us. We can break out of our habitual way of living and thinking only through physical and emotional proximity to the way of living and thinking of the poor and marginalized.

- 288 15. a) The *lived experience* of poverty and marginalization should accompany each Jesuit during his life, even when his main occupation will not be work with the neediest. It is "when occasions arise, the [feeling] some effects of [poverty]"¹⁹ which has to motivate our finding time for such experiences. They can be occasions for radical conversion. It was among the poor of the hospitals and slums of Venice and Rome that the first members of the Society "experienced privation and need," but they also came to know that "a life removed as far as possible from all infection of avarice and as like as possible to evangelical poverty is more gratifying, more undefiled, and more suitable for the edification of others."²⁰ Therefore their desire for each one who would come after them was that "his food, drink, clothing, shoes, and lodging will be what is characteristic of the poor," and that these followers would seek "to reach the same point as the [first members] or to go further in our Lord."²¹ From the witness of many companions who live with the poor we know that, along with the hard lessons of poverty, such experiences bring the evangelical values of celebration, simplicity and hospitality which so often characterize the life of the poor. Superiors should facilitate such experiences and allow the required time to those who want them.
28916. b) Solidarity with the poor cannot be the concern only of some Jesuits; it has to typify our life and our ministry. So whatever the mission given us may be, we have to work within it for the benefit of the poor and for a more just and fraternal world. Moreover, the insertion of communities in areas of poverty and marginalization is a special witness to love for the poor and for the poverty of Christ.²² Fortunately the number of these communities has grown; in them, Jesuits serve selflessly, working *with* the poor and living as they do. Provincials must continue to promote such communities so that, while maintaining a strong sense of belonging to the body of the Province, they be a visible application of our preferential option for the

¹⁸Cf. GC 32, D 12, n. 5.

¹⁹*Const.* [287].

²⁰*Formula*, [5].

²¹*Examen* [81].

²²GC 32, D 12, n. 10; D 4, nn. 35-36, 49-50.

poor and contribute by means of fraternal exchange to increasing the social sensibility of the Province.

290 17. 6. We frequently make use of means and institutions in our apostolates which in themselves are not poor (since they must in fact always be suitable to their apostolic purpose). Here it is fitting to recall that effectiveness and apostolic poverty are two values which must be kept in ongoing tension; this should be the rule for each individual as much as for communities and works.²³ Maintaining this difficult equilibrium requires constant discernment and a readiness to abandon such institutions and means when they no longer result in the "greater service" of God.

Poverty as Grace

291 18. For Saint Ignatius the material poverty of a Jesuit was a grace; he asked that "it be loved as a mother," called it a "jewel" and "beloved of God."²⁴ Grace always brings joy and peace, and we must appreciate poverty and desire it as a grace. However, for many of us, this has not always been the case; we live it incoherently and, often, as an imposition. Let us decide "with great spirit and freedom," putting aside our fears, so that we may come closer to him who "makes all things new," to ask him, personally and in community, for the grace of poverty and the wisdom to live it as a gift. Renewed poverty will have the simultaneous effect of evangelical renewal in the quality of life of the Society. To live poverty as a grace in an egotistic world lacking a sense of responsibility for others will place us joyfully with the Son and with those among whom the Son wants to be, the poor and neglected of the earth.

²³Cf. GC 32, D 12, n. 9; GC 31, D 18, n. 4.

²⁴*SpEx* [147]; *Const.* [287] "Letter to the Fathers and Brothers at Padua," *op.cit.*, n.2.