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1. LETTER OF THE RECTOR MAJOR

AND MARY LAID HIM IN A MANGER

- Introduction. - At the core of salesian "*significance*". - Light from the Word of God. - The humble frontiers of Christ's Kingdom. - The radical nature of self-donation in profession. - Don Bosco's poverty. - Three Rector Major interventions. - The evangelical project of our Rule of Life. - Suggestions for a "*scrutinium paupertatis*". - Conclusion: the beatitude of the poor in Mary.

Rome, Solemnity of Mary Help of Christians,
24 May 1993

My dear confreres,

You may be surprised at the title of this letter. I am certainly not asking you to think of Christmas in the month of July; my intention is rather to take up with you again the theme of "poverty": it can help us to review our renewal with greater courage. When you come to think of it, this is a topic intimately linked with the obligation of educating young people to the faith as required by our General Chapter. It may be that the confreres who asked me to deal with this theme had in mind an exhortation to stir up our consciences against certain abuses, without realizing how dense the topic could be, and the spiritual richness it contains.

We are living in the midst of a world which loves wellbeing, and pursues it through ever more pressing and attractive ways of life, and there is a

very real danger that these will find their way into our own houses, gradually developing a bourgeois mentality.

Without denying the possibility of a harmful influence of this kind, the reason that prompts me to speak to you about poverty is centred on a meditation in depth on the mystery of Christ, his Gospel and his Kingdom, and on the particular gospel option of Don Bosco. Before going into ascetical considerations, let us seek enlightenment by a reflection that will awaken in us sincerity and enthusiasm.

We may think of poverty as a "generating theme" of our particular character. In fact, "we are called to a life closely modelled on the Gospel. We choose to follow 'the Saviour who was born in poverty, lived deprived of everything and died stripped on the cross'." This quotation from art. 72 of the Constitutions is from Don Bosco in his Introduction to the Rule.¹

I think that a reflection of this kind may stimulate us to renew our testimony of life and action and to understand more realistically the oratorian criterion² which is for us the true parameter for discernment and renewal in every place and activity.

This will also help us to make a specific preparation for the great days on the consecrated life that will be the Synod of '94. For that matter the Church's magisterium has frequently insisted in the years following the Council in putting forward the theme of poverty.³

¹ 1875; cf. Const. 1984, Eng.edn. p. 231

² C 40

³ Some of the more significant documents of the magisterium are the following:

Lumen gentium, especially n. 44;

Perfectae caritatis, nn.

2, 5, and esp. 13;

Ecclesiae sanctae, II,

nn. 23, 24;

Evangelica testificatio,

nn. 16-22;

Evangelii nuntiandi, n.

69;

Redemptionis donum,

nn 4, 5, 6, 9-10, 12;

Religious profession

and human develop-

ment, n. 4;

Code of Canon Law,

can. 600, 640;

Essential elements of

the teaching of the

Church on religious life,

cf. III, n. 20;

Directives on forma-

tion in Religious Institu-

tes, n. 14;

etc.

At the core of salesian "significance".

From the time of Vatican II we have been looking for overall ways for directing the process of renewal. We can list some of them: like "redimensioning",⁴ "insertion among the socially poor", the "ongoing formation" of individuals, the "planning" of community activity, etc. Finally we have reached the all-embracing criterion of "*significance*" (Italian "*significatività*") which includes various aspects,⁵ among them those we have already cited, in an organic and more comprehensive form. The poverty of which we are about to speak is situated at the very heart of this organic significance of our life and work.

Evidently we need to understand what the term "poverty" means for us; its connotation is multiple and tends to fluctuate. As currently used it expresses a sociological idea; in fact it is customary to use it to indicate an aspect of want, especially of a financial kind; and in this sense it is certainly relative: it differs from one region to another and from one century to another. Nowadays too there is reference to "new kinds of poverty" to indicate forms of want that do not refer only to economic aspects, e.g. refugees, immigrants, drug-addicts, etc. It could be said that poverty is linked with human life in various ways; as well as material aspects it also has others of a psychological, moral, social and cultural kind. But in any case there is primarily the economic division between rich and poor which has greatly increased and reveals the inadequacy of certain economical and commercial structures divorced from moral principles. The consumer mentality fosters individual and collective selfishness.

⁴ GC19

⁵ cf. AGC 340, pp. 35 ff.

One feels the urgency of committing oneself to bringing about a new world order.

Without any doubt all this has a practical importance that goes beyond an ascetic witness for a social impact; it is rather a "sign of the times" which calls for the relaunching of the prophecy of evangelical poverty; today the Church feels herself strongly committed to this task and carries it out constantly, not least through her social doctrine.

But how are we to reflect on evangelical poverty? If the meaning in which we are interested is no more than temporal want, we would not be justified in presenting poverty as an element at the heart of our significance.

Already during the 3rd session of Vatican II, in the discussion on the scheme on "The Church in the modern world" (which eventually became the Constitution *Gaudium et spes*, our Cardinal Raúl Silva H., who at the time was president of Caritas Internationalis, had insisted on the great difference between "evangelical poverty" (a fruit of grace) and "social and economic poverty" (a consequence of sin): the first, an outstanding value to be fostered; the second, a disorder to be fought against through a process of social commitment animated precisely by the christian dynamism of evangelical poverty.

The Latin-American Bishops too, concerned in their General Assembly at Puebla to offer a pastoral criterion for liberation from the unbearable social discrimination, insisted on the specific significance of "christian poverty"⁶ as the animating element of an integral liberation in Christ. "In today's world", they wrote, "this poverty presents a challenge to materialism, and it opens the way for alternative solutions to a consumer society";⁷ all christians

⁶ cf. Puebla: nn.1141-1152

⁷ Puebla, 1152

should know that "evangelical poverty combines the attitude of trusting confidence in God with a plain, sober and austere life that dispels the temptation to greed and haughty pride" or, in other words, to the idolatry of riches.⁸

⁸ *ibid.* 1149

Poverty in its evangelical sense not only has a deeply spiritual value for the person of Christ's disciple, but is also a social projection for the evangelization of the present complex and difficult economic and political field; it implies nothing less than a specific vision of the world so as to illumine with the light of the Gospel social projects for change.

This is why we say that it is situated in the very heart of salesian 'significance' which is the overall criterion of our renewal. Pope Paul VI wrote that: the evangelical witness of the religious life clearly manifests to men the primacy of the love of God; it does this with a force for which we must give thanks to the Holy Spirit".⁹

⁹ ET 1

This is an endorsement of what had already been said by the Council about the significance of the religious life within the sacramental nature of the Church: "All the members of the Church should unflaggingly fulfil the duties of their christian calling. The profession of the evangelical counsels shines before them as a *sign which can and should effectively inspire them* to do so. For the People of God has here no lasting city but seeks the city which is to come, and the religious states of life, in bestowing greater freedom from the cares of earthly existence on those who follow it, simultaneously *reveals more clearly* to all believers the heavenly goods which are already present in this age, *witnessing to the new and eternal life* which we have acquired through the redemptive work of Christ *and preluding* our future resurrection and the glory of the heavenly kingdom".¹⁰

¹⁰ LG 44

Light from the Word of God.

We must not, therefore, allow ourselves to be led astray by the many senses of the term "poverty". There has been a certain rhetoric in this connection which we must avoid so as to not fall into commonly used ways which are more sociological than evangelical. We know that earthly goods belong to the order of means and not ends; they are an expression of the love of the Creator for man: "God destined the earth and all it contains for all men and all peoples so that all created things would be shared fairly by all mankind under the guidance of justice tempered by charity".¹¹ All goods, even those forming part of private property, have in themselves a social dimension which evangelical criteria must be able to bring out. Today the christian perspective of poverty acquires its practical meaning especially in the face of social data and its effective approach to the poor, especially those suffering economic oppression; this requires a revision also of the roles played by structures.

¹¹ GS 69

Unfortunately human selfishness has introduced into the lives of peoples and nations a dramatic inequality, which becomes evident in so many examples of injustice and distress. And so it becomes indispensable to read again and study more deeply what is stated by the Word of God.

In Scripture the theme is a vast one, and is both rich and complex; to make here an adequate summary of it is neither possible nor desirable. It will be sufficient for us to recall the basic framework: God is on the side of those who are poor and in need of help. Man in his condition of need is the measure of the authenticity of christian love; the poor constitute a privileged condition for shaping

the option of believers: "as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me", says the Lord.¹² As we consider this picture, we can highlight two very clear aspects which shed light on our meditation about possessions and the use of earthly goods: one a warning and the other a beatitude.

— *The WARNING*: the Word of God laments the destruction of human solidarity through greed for riches. Let us pick out some brief but telling indications.

Psalm 48 declares: "In his riches man lacks wisdom; he is like the beasts that are destroyed"! He who sets his heart on riches no longer understands the sense of total and exclusive entrustment to God; and so he becomes ever more entrapped in the service of idols.

In the Gospel the rich get a hammering: "it will be hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven";¹³ "woe to you that are rich, for you have received your consolation";¹⁴ "he has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty".¹⁵

Severe judgements are expressed which make us think: the tiny contribution of the widow compared with the offerings of the wealthy;¹⁶ the vocational call to follow Jesus addressed to the young man who rejected it because he was very rich;¹⁷ the episode of the precious ointment poured over Jesus' feet at Bethany, and the exclamation of Judas: "Why was this ointment not sold for three hundred denarii and given to the poor!"¹⁸ — one author has pertinently remarked: "What would the Church be now if Judas' purse had been full for the poor and the house at Bethany empty of perfume?".

¹² Mt 25,40

¹³ Mt 19,23

¹⁴ Lk 6,24

¹⁵ Lk 1,53

¹⁶ cf. Mk 12,42

¹⁷ cf. Mt 19,22

¹⁸ cf. Jn 12,1ff

The Apostles well understood the message of Jesus: of St John we may recall the words: "If anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him?";¹⁹ St James' statement: "The flower falls and its beauty perishes. So will the rich man fade away in the midst of his pursuits";²⁰ and St Paul's famous hymn of charity: "If I give away all I have, and if I deliver my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing".²¹

¹⁹ 1 Jn 3,17

²⁰ Jas 1,11

²¹ 1 Cor 13,3

In the Acts of the Apostles there is also the dramatic episode of Ananias and Sapphira, which may give cause to Religious to reflect on their free choice to put all their goods in common.²²

²² cf. Rev ch.5

We know that in the Scriptures earthly goods are considered a wonderful gift of God; it would be a mistake to look down on them. We cannot prescind from their use as means for living and doing good to others, and it is a blessing to know how to use them well. The *warning* is directed against the selfishness that amasses riches and in so doing hardens the heart and obscures the intelligence: riches tend to shut out God from the mind. What Jesus condemns in the rich is the petty selfishness and lack of solidarity, but he does not discriminate on the basis of class distinction. One need only think of his relationships with tax-collectors, with Zachaeus, with Joseph of Arimathea, with Nicodemus, etc. His teaching is that each one should decide carefully where to place his treasure, for where his treasure is there will his heart be also.²³ And so both rich and poor, according to the Gospel, are judged in the last analysis by their attitude of heart. A brilliant author wrote: "Rich or poor, look at yourselves rather in the mirror of poverty; because there you will see reflected your deepest

²³ cf. Lk 12,34

²⁴ BERNANOS, *Diary of a country curate*, p. 71

disappointment; for here below poverty still keeps its place in the Paradise we have lost".²⁴

— *The BEATITUDE*: the Word of God acclaims those who, while not having or seeking after riches, cultivate in their hearts the greater values of piety, solidarity, life-commitment, and self-donation for the service of others.

²⁵ Mt 5,3

Jesus begins the Sermon on the Mount by saying: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven".²⁵ He links their condition of poverty to the coming of the kingdom within them, and hence with something grandiose which will be entirely for them. The consideration of the kingdom of God and Christ is therefore a decisive factor for the correct interpretation of the beatitude of the poor.

²⁶ Red. Miss. 18

And this kingdom, says the Holy Father, "is not a concept, a doctrine, or a programme subject to free interpretation, but is before all else a person with the face and name of Jesus of Nazareth, the image of the invisible God".²⁶

²⁷ *ibid.* 17

At the present day you sometimes hear the kingdom spoken of as though it were in some way opposed to the Church, with reductive concepts of an anthropological kind which tend to present it in practice as "something completely human and secularized; what counts are programmes and struggles for a liberation which is social and economic, political and even cultural, but within a horizon that is closed to the transcendent".²⁷

The Gospel teaches us, certainly, that the socially poor are God's favourites: this is the great theological presupposition underlying the Incarnation. God privileges the concrete situation of poverty beyond moral preoccupations or virtuous merits: he chose this situation in which to become

man; when he was born his Mother “laid him in a manger”;²⁸ and from this so humble situation he dedicated himself to the salvation of the world by evangelizing the poor.

²⁸ Lk 2,7

The reign of God therefore has come and is growing among the poor; no one who wishes to have part in it can fail to be interested in the poor and learn like them to receive Christ.

But we need to probe the matter more deeply still; the kingdom is born and grows among the poor, but is not simply identified with those who are socially poor; among those same poor is also present unfortunately sin, which is constitutionally opposed to God's kingdom. This kingdom has its fullness in the poor Christ and from there spreads in opposition to evil, the evil of each one and the evil of all.

Jesus Christ is not only the prophet of the kingdom but is also its fullness. In him and through the work of his Church the kingdom expands throughout the world. With the communication of the Gospel, the kingdom of Christ grows – that kingdom which at the end of time will be handed over to the Father as the definitive kingdom of God.

The Beatitudes are not only “Jesus’ Manifesto”; they must be considered as a kind of “autobiography”; for a correct understanding of the beatitudes one must look at Christ. In this way the poor-Jesus appears not only as the first and fertile field where was sown and from which springs forth the love of God, but also the model of that deep attachment of the poor heart with which is received the Gospel of the kingdom and through which it grows.

In brief, the Beatitude of the poor is clearly understood when referred to Jesus Christ. It is in

him that we receive fully the illumination of the Word of God, in him we understand what, in fact, the kingdom is that fills the longings of the evangelically poor.

The humble frontiers of Christ's Kingdom.

The frontiers of the kingdom are situated in the territory of the poor, and from there they extend to all. The Council has reminded us that "the world cannot be transfigured and offered to God without the spirit of the beatitudes".²⁹

²⁹ LG 31

The Beatitude of poverty is the leaven for every truly human society and is called to overturn a materialist economic order. It belongs intrinsically to the christian option of every baptized person and is at the foundation of all the transforming energy of humanity. It is not therefore a secondary aspect that can be left aside: the Lord's poor are protagonists in the expansion of the kingdom. Christ has poured into their hearts an abundance of love which brings about in them the growth not of a simple concern for renunciation, but especially the love of solidarity and a vision of faith in the total significance of the world, of society and of economic goods, stimulating a concrete social dimension of overall charity.

To be evangelically poor, to go to those who are socially poor for the purpose of taking the Gospel to them, to direct the attention and solidarity of all to these who are the last because most in need, to proclaim the mystery of Christ as a sure and efficacious source of genuine social renewal – all this is to defend the image of God as impressed in every human being and to combat materialism – in its various expressions of indifference to the dignity of

the individual – so that history may be guided by charity and not by selfishness and hate; it is to invite everyone to collaborate in the building of the “civilization of love”, overcoming the narrow-mindedness of those who have possessions, and the methods of violence.

This is an immensely difficult task, begun by Christ and left as a legacy to his Church. Recall the first time Jesus preached in the synagogue of his own native place: opening the scroll of the prophet Isaiah, he read and commented on the passage: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor”.³⁰

³⁰ Lk 4,18

It is not that God blesses distress and inequality of a social and economic kind; these things remain an evil and a scandal. But a careful consideration, for example, of the parable of Lazarus explains the danger that follows from riches: the possessor who finds in himself the foundation of his security can find no place for God and for his neighbour. It is an indisputable fact that Jesus demands from those most committed to the building of his kingdom their renunciation of the goods of this world. Simon Peter and Andrew, when they were called by the Lord, “immediately left their nets and followed him”; James and John “left their Father Zebedee in the boat with the hired servants, and followed him”;³¹ “as he passed on Jesus saw Levi, the son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax office, and he said to him ‘Follow me’. And he rose and followed him”;³² and, finally, “whoever of you does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple”.³³

³¹ Mk 1,16-20

³² Mk 2, 14

³³ Lk 14,33

We may recall the profound reflection of John Paul II: “Poverty actually enters into the interior structure of the redemptive grace of Jesus Christ. (...) Evangelical poverty reveals to the eyes of the

human soul the perspectives of the whole mystery hidden for ages in God. The poverty of Christ conceals in itself the infinite richness of God; it is indeed an infallible expression of it. A richness, in fact, such as the Divinity itself, could not have been adequately expressed in any created good. It can be expressed only in poverty. Therefore it can be properly understood only by the poor, the poor in spirit. Christ, the God-man, is the first of these: he who 'though he was rich became poor' is not only the teacher but also the spokesman and guarantor of that salvific poverty which corresponds to the infinite richness of God and to the inexhaustible power of his grace".³⁴

³⁴ Red. Don. 12

And so, when Jesus asks for this saving poverty in the apostles as builders of the kingdom, he does not invite them simply to imitate a particular exterior kind of life, but he prepares them to participate in the mystery of the Incarnation in a manner after his own, or in other words to foster constantly in their hearts his own sentiments as bearer of the kingdom. The hearts of his more committed disciples and collaborators must be realistically detached from all that is not God; they must remain "free", like his own, from so many terrestrial bonds. You cannot serve both God and mammon.³⁵

³⁵ cf. Lk 16,13

³⁶ cf. 1 Jn 4,8-16

³⁷ cf. 1 Jn 3,14

If God's very nature is love³⁶ and if Jesus has brought this love to man so that he may pass from death to life,³⁷ it is immediately clear why Jesus proclaimed the beatitude of poverty; he wanted to emphasize the joy of being evangelically poor so as to have in one's heart the love which prompts one to give one's life for one's brethren.³⁸ Cutting the many ties of greed for riches is a saving operation which frees the heart of the Lord's disciples and renders it open and generous for solidarity with others.

³⁸ cf. 1 Jn 3,16

The frontiers of Christ's kingdom are humble, but they enclose within them the energy of salvation. Within these frontiers one can be poor in different ways, but always with the Lord. This is a thought to which attentive consideration must be given after the relaunching of the vocation and mission of the Laity in the Church.

We must not forget that Christ is also the author of creation, of earthly goods, of the family and of society. When he became incarnate he did not come to change the laws inherent in human nature and in creation; he chose as a fundamental service for the liberation of man from sin the path of the Servant of Yahweh for the redemption. His is a historic vocation which is not an alternative to various human commitments (marriage, economy, politics, culture, etc.), but is the light of their truth and the energy for what is good in them. Certainly there is sadly also active in the world, and in dramatic fashion, the mystery of evil; but the latter, rather than disqualifying commitment in the temporal order, demands it with particular intensity in harmony with the indispensable redemptive mission of Christ. Just as, for example, his virginity does not prevent the lay faithful from marrying, but guides them to live their family life in charity; in an analogous manner his poverty does not avert the lay faithful from commitments of the temporal order but helps them in the purification and right ordering of the economic, political and cultural world.

It should be noted in particular that the historic context in which we are living at the present day is built from social and economic aspects on options that are false, that have caused a great deal of injustice and are at present increasing the economic distance between North and South which is an offence to human dignity.

This situation is a strong challenge to christians who should be able to proclaim with priority the prophetic dimension of evangelical poverty, or in other words bring to a focus for everyone the Beatitude of poverty centred, as we have seen, on the kingdom of Christ and of God.

The horizons of this kingdom urge us to overcome the ponderous immanence of materialism and so foster a moral and cultural transformation which can shift the present order.

The evangelizing mission of the Church must be directed in a form suited also to those who belong socially to the "non-poor", if we are serious about the birth of a new order. And so there arises as an urgent challenge and as a specific objective the ability to exert a christian influence on the "non-poor" (e.g. on Northern society, and also on many cities of the South). Hence the pastoral option for the Beatitude of the poor becomes, in fact, not a matter of class-struggle against the "rich", but an urgent requirement for the evangelization also of the "non-poor", guided by the kingdom aspect.

Now in reflecting on the *particular kind of poverty that is proper to us as consecrated persons* we must be able to discern its specific nature in the following of Christ and its function as a sign and stimulus for all – in every country in line with the local prevailing conditions –, ³⁹ and then be able to harmonize it, as an evangelical light and concrete christian stimulus for the young people we are educating to the faith, so that they may be in the world as generous leaders precisely in the lay vocation.

Hence we have seen that one can be poor according to the Gospel in different ways; our specific choice of the *radical religious option* must appear in the Church as an authentic sign of Christ, and be

³⁹ LG 44

a bearer to all (poor and non-poor alike) of the message of the Beatitudes.

The radical nature of self-donation in profession.

Among the disciples of Christ, some commit themselves to follow him in a radical manner. In this way we see that religious consecration implies a particular witness of poverty.

It is worth recalling at this point that the three evangelical counsels professed by vow do not constitute three parallel paths running alongside each other; rather are they three complementary and concrete aspects of a single gift of oneself to God, of a single following of Christ to bear witness to his mystery, and of a single commitment to the building of his kingdom. Certainly each of the counsels has its proper significance and its specific content, but nevertheless it is "together" that they testify to the *sequela Christi*. There is a permanent and mutual interchange between them, so that the profoundly radical nature of each will be found to include the other two in a vital way. To profess the three evangelical counsels means giving oneself to God fully and radically, as though by a single global vow, a single "yes", expressed under a triple evangelical aspect which embraces one's whole person and all one's life.

The salesian practice of the evangelical counsels is centred on the obedience of Jesus as the Son sent for the mission of the kingdom; this obedience in the mission gives a special touch to the radical aspect of poverty and chastity. But because of the mutual inter-relationship of the three, both poverty and chastity bring a particular slant to obedience,

and indeed to the entire mission to be fulfilled and the community dimension of life.

In a particular way poverty renders us keen and anxious to follow the option made by God himself to be poor and to evangelize the poor, it frees the heart from attachment to earthly goods so as to fill it with love and proclaim to the world a prophetic paradox unknown to the rich; this explains in what consists the originality of Christ's kingdom: "I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I have come into the world, to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth hears my voice!"⁴⁰ This is the great paradox of the Gospel; all worldly kingdoms are built in another way, with many riches and violence; that of Christ takes its rise from the poor, and will finally crush all the others: we may recall the famous huge statue of the dream of Nebuchadnezzar reduced to rubble by a stone detached from the mountain without either conspiracy or plotting by powerful conquerors.⁴¹

If we look at consecrated life from the standpoint of poverty, we are compelled to be very concrete in our obedience to God, and to give a daily historical dimension to the kind of life lived by individuals and communities: this so as to give competence to our work, to choose those to whom we shall direct it, and to give life to the mission to be realized through a most genuine application of our identity. If we have inherited from our Founder an "experience of the Holy Spirit" linked in so many ways with poverty, it means that an examination of conscience on our manner of living the evangelical witness of poverty will help us to improve the whole process of renewal and deepen the criterion of "significance" with which to guide it.

According to different places and groups, pres-

⁴⁰ Jn 18,37

⁴¹ cf. Dan ch 2

ent-day society is or tends to be a consumer society; wellbeing is in general one of the principal aspirations of citizens. This is a mentality that pays homage to certain idols which oust the true God and intensify everywhere to some extent a conquering materialistic mentality. It would indeed be harmful if consecrated persons were to offer to the young and to people in general any counter-witness to the possession and use of temporal goods.

Paul VI reminded us explicitly that people of today challenge Religious on this point with particular insistence: "In a civilization and a world marked by a prodigious movement of almost indefinite material growth, what witness would be offered by a religious who let himself be carried away by an uncurbed seeking for his own ease, and who considered it normal to allow himself without discernment or restraint everything that is offered him? At a time when there is an increased danger for many of being enticed by the alluring security of possessions, knowledge and power, the call of God places you at the pinnacle of the christian conscience. You are to remind men that their true and complete progress consists in responding to their calling 'to share as sons in the life of the living God, the Father of all men'." ⁴²

⁴² ET 19

The salesian consecration places us in this environment of radical followers of Christ, and at the same time urges us to be very practical in bearing witness to it; it will be nourished less by reason than by the model of the Founder, and by his options.

Don Bosco's poverty

"The Lord has given us Don Bosco as father and teacher. We study and imitate him, admiring in him a splendid blending of nature and grace".⁴³ The Holy Spirit wove the tissue of his life out of real poverty, embraced with evangelical awareness, treasured for its holiness and surpassing in its dynamism in view of a special apostolate for the benefit of the poor.

His was a testimony both clear and original. To begin with let us recall the moving words said to him by Mamma Margaret before he entered the seminary: "Remember this: I was born poor, I have lived poor, and I want to die poor. What is more, I want to make this very clear to you: if you decide to become a secular priest and should unfortunately become rich, I will never pay you a single visit! Remember that well!"⁴⁴

The historical circumstances of his childhood at the Becchi, followed by the years of his youth at Chieri, left their mark on him and led him to understand that the Lord was guiding him explicitly towards a vocational choice directed wholly to the poor for the animation and defence of their christian faith. In fact the style of his apostolic activity was immediately in the direction of needy youth, and his poverty was of a kind always accompanied by an extraordinary trust in Providence for finding, through a thousand and one initiatives, the means necessary for their education. An enterprising poverty therefore, accompanied by tireless work and aiming even at grandiose projects, but always faithful to the Beatitude of the Gospel. When the Marchioness of Barolo offered him a situation that would have ensured him his means of liveli-

⁴³ C 21

⁴⁴ BM 1, 221

hood but would also have taken him away from his poor boys, he decisively refused it: "God has always helped me, and he will help me also in the future".⁴⁵

It must be said that his style of apostolic poverty differed from that witnessed to by various saints or in other religious institutes: "He lived his poverty in detachment of heart and generous service of others; his manner was marked by austerity, hard work and much initiative".⁴⁶

Evangelical poverty can be manifested, as we have said, in different ways. That of Don Bosco was an evangelical poverty of an active and creative kind, linked with work and a spirit of initiative. He used every means, and was not above humbling himself at times, to find the wherewithal needed for his plans for development (recall the content of his countless letters and the boldness of his enterprises), and he considered organizing ability a good thing. In some activities he wanted to be in the vanguard of progress; he was convinced that for the education of poor youngsters and to defend the faith of the ordinary people he needed to obtain and use adequate and efficient means. Pope Leo XIII himself, even though Don Bosco was advanced in years and not without both ailments and debts, called him to entrust him with the construction of the Basilica of the Sacred Heart at Castro Pretorio in Rome, precisely because he saw and valued in him his enterprising kind of poverty.

Justly Don Rua wrote of him: "Our venerated Father lived in a poor manner to the end of his life and had an intrepid love for voluntary poverty. He was glad when on occasion he had to do without even necessary things. His detachment from earthly things was evident in the fact that although

⁴⁵ *Memoirs of Oratory*,
Eng.edtn., p. 251

⁴⁶ C 73

such huge sums of money passed through his hands, he never showed the least desire to procure any temporal satisfaction for himself. He used to say: you must have poverty in your heart if you want to practise it. And God greatly rewarded him for his poverty and trust, for he was able to undertake works before which even princes would have quailed, and to bring them to a successful conclusion".⁴⁷

⁴⁷ RUA: Letter circolare, Turin 1965, p. 435

In founding the Congregation Don Bosco wanted this kind of poverty to be preserved and practised by his followers. An industrious poverty, without disdain for temporal goods but rather with intelligent initiative in using them for the service of the poor and never for the acquiring of ease and tranquility. He, the Founder, from a humble and needy background, brought up in times which for many people were marked by straitened circumstances of both a financial and cultural kind, wanted a Congregation that would itself be of a popular kind, with members dedicated to work, experts in sacrifice and renunciation, open with greatness of heart to courageous apostolic and missionary initiatives, witnesses to a dynamic poverty, and rooted in a complete trust in the intervention of Providence.

It was an evangelical poverty of a somewhat original kind but authentic and demanding nevertheless, even though in a different form from that of St Joseph Cottolengo, for example.

Let us listen to some wise words of our Father, spoken in an ordinary conversation about why we should be poor: "Poverty is our asset! It is God's blessing. And we should ask the Lord to keep us in voluntary poverty. Did not our Lord begin his life in a manger? The wealthy seek leisure, which in

turn generates a comfortable life of idleness. The spirit of sacrifice then vanishes. Read church history and you will find countless instances when wealth proved the ruination of entire religious communities. They suffered the saddest misfortunes when they failed to abide by their original poverty. On the contrary those who kept themselves poor flourished wonderfully. The poor man leans on God and has recourse to him; and I assure you that on his part God always provides all one needs, whether little or great. Do not be afraid! Whatever we need for ourselves or our boys will never be wanting".⁴⁸ We may also recall his insistence on the motto "work and temperance", so strategically placed on the mantle of the personage in the famous dream of the ten diamonds.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ BM 6, 177

⁴⁹ cf. ASC 300

Especially should we meditate on what Don Bosco has left us in his spiritual testament: "Our Congregation must always glory in its vow of poverty. Divine Providence has prepared a happy future for it and its glory will endure as long as the rules are faithfully observed. When the desire for ease and comfort grows up among us, our pious Society will have run its course. The world will always welcome us as long as our concern is for under-developed peoples, for poor children, for those members of society most in danger. This is our real wealth which no one will envy and no one will take from us".⁵⁰

⁵⁰ Const. and Reg. p. 269;
cf. MB 17 272

Don Bosco's poverty is not only a clear personal trait, but is also a deliberate choice for his mission: a concrete project left as a spiritual legacy to his Congregation.

Three Rector Major interventions.

The Salesian Society has grown rapidly through the years, with a particular intensity at certain historic moments, and with some delicate problems of renewal in the period following Vatican II. We can single out three such moments:

- a first occasion, at the beginning of the present century with Don Rua;

- a second, following the first world war, when first Don Rinaldi and then Don Ricaldone was Rector Major; both of them witnessed an extraordinary explosion of growth;

- and finally, the situation following the Council, with Don Ricceri at the helm in the difficult and uneasy period of the beginnings of the renewal process.

It may be of interest to note that at each of these strategic moments, as we may call them, the Successors of Don Bosco intervened in a concerned and profound form on the subject of poverty, precisely to ensure the preservation of the Congregation's identity during its process of evolution.

With Don Rua the number of confreres rose from 773 to 4,372, with houses rising from 57 to 345, in countries which increased in number from 10 to 29. With Don Ricaldone, continuing the thrust that started during the rectorate of Don Rinaldi, the confreres increased from 8,954 to 16,364, and the houses from 646 to 1,071. With Don Ricceri there began the laborious process of the entry of the Congregation into the orbit of Vatican II, while still to some extent under stress from the 1968 difficulties. All three, as I say, wrote an important circular letter on poverty, which they considered a vital theme for ensuring in practice a linkage with

our origins.

Don Rua, the first Successor of Don Bosco (1888-1910) concluded his circular in symbolic fashion on 31 January 1907, 19 years after the Founder's death: on the anniversary of the "great loss" he thought that "the memorable date would give his words a particular efficacy, and that they could celebrate the anniversary of the death of Don Bosco in no better way than by renewing the vigour of his spirit and the promise to imitate his virtues".⁵¹ Don Rua was convinced that his exhortation would prove to be "of particular importance because of the topic it dealt with". This was in fact confirmed in his next circular which said that many confreres "had not been satisfied with hearing the letter read in public, and had expressed the desire to have a personal copy, so that they could read it again and meditate on it at leisure. And I have hastened to have it reprinted and copies sent to every house."⁵²

⁵¹ RUA, loc.cit. p. 430

Don Ricaldone, the fourth Successor of Don Bosco (1932-1951), set about the task of producing a series of salesian readings. Sometimes his circulars took the form of a commentary on the year's Strenna, and so it was in 1936 with the Strenna on poverty. Once again in symbolic fashion, he finished the lengthy work in the humble house of the Becchi, "the true temple of salesian poverty" and the fruitful source of the great tree of the Congregation. That little house had always been a place of pilgrimage for very many confreres, and rightly it could be called "the salesian Bethlehem". It is a place for meditation and deep emotion: "kissing those poor walls, each one felt himself bound to the Father by ties of greater love, and all went away with the purpose of becoming more worthy of him.

⁵² RUA, loc.cit. p. 449

⁵³ RICALDONE, *I voti*,
LDC 1952, vol 1, p. 202

Now more than ever before we are convinced that only by following him in his poverty shall we be able to attain the heights of his greatness, and gather in the copious fruits of his apostolate".⁵³

The little house is a symbol that can lead us to think in some way of the "manger" of Bethlehem. Don Ricaldone dealt with the theme at length, in its evangelical and spiritual aspects on the one hand, and in its practical and ascetical applications on the other; his reflections throw much practical light on our vow of poverty.

Don Ricceri, sixth Successor of Don Bosco (1965-1977), wrote his circular letter "Our Poverty Today" soon after the closing of the Council, at the beginning of the great work of renewal; he wrote it in point of fact in 1968, the year which saw so much contestation and challenge. It was a question at that time of putting into effect the guidelines of Vatican II. We are, he wrote, "volunteers of poverty"; "poverty makes us free"; "the Congregation was born in poverty, it has grown with poverty, it was founded for the poor"; "outright atheism is born in wealthy countries"; evangelical poverty carries with it "the disavowal of the primacy of economic considerations and the ability to possess temporal goods for satisfying the human heart". Fr Ricceri makes strong references to salesian work, to the missionary spirit, and to the sense of brotherly solidarity. He then goes on to practical considerations and concrete examples, warning us not to be carried away by rhetoric on poverty, when it is not matched by living witness: "Let me say with fraternal frankness: today the virus of comfort is entering in many ways into our communities; life is becoming worldly, and unconvincing excuses are being sought to justify this; and this too

even on the part of those who should be on their guard, intervening or preventing such things. Meanwhile the evil spreads like an oil-stain, the religious level is lowered, worldliness makes great strides and with it the love of ease and comfort that leads on to practical laicism". And he accompanies the circular with a scheme for a "scrutinium paupertatis" to prompt a careful examination of conscience on the practice of the vow.⁵⁴

⁵⁴ cf. ASC 253, pp. 3-56

Fr Ricceri's exhortations were examined more deeply and assessed in the work of the historic Special General Chapter of 1971, with a valuable document in three chapters which gave sound modern guidelines to the process of renewal together with some very practical suggestions.⁵⁵

⁵⁵ cf. SGC, nn. 577-623

These few remarks should induce all confreres to read over again these so meaningful documents that form part of the spiritual heritage of the life of the Congregation.

I think it also a duty to add here some special reflections on the *letter of Don Rua*: it could be considered his masterpiece; it was republished by Fr Ziggotti in 1957, as an act of homage on the 50th anniversary of its original publication. It manifests a solemn promise to Don Bosco to preserve intact the spirit of the origins. His responsibility as Don Bosco's successor was a cause of great anxiety to Don Rua. "To tell you the truth", he wrote from an open heart, "I made our good Father a solemn promise. Seeing myself obliged to accept his legacy and put myself at the head of the Congregation, the greatest of his works, and the one that cost him so much in fatigue and sacrifice, I promised that I would spare no effort to preserve to the best of my ability his teachings and the most minute traditions of his family".⁵⁶

⁵⁶ RUA, loc.cit. p. 431

The reflection on poverty came to be for him the yardstick for the measurement of fidelity. He had practised it for many a long year, ever since he had decided to stay with Don Bosco; he called them "heroic times" and said that extraordinary virtue was needed to remain faithful and "to resist the pressing temptations to abandon it, because of the extreme poverty in which they were living".⁵⁷ Don Rua recognized that "the practice of poverty involves big sacrifices, as we have many times found for ourselves. It is not surprising therefore if poverty is always the most important and at the same time the most delicate point with regard to religious life; it is not surprising if it becomes the touchstone for distinguishing a flourishing community from a lax one, a zealous religious from a negligent one. It will unfortunately be the stumbling block against which so many magnificent intentions will come to grief, so many vocations which promised so well in their origin and development will be shipwrecked".⁵⁸

⁵⁷ RUA, loc.cit. p. 445

⁵⁸ RUA, loc.cit. p. 432

To provide a solid foundation for his reflections, in addition to the Gospels Don Rua had recourse to some authoritative witnesses to the faith. With *St Bernard* he recalls that "the Son of God, not finding in heaven the poverty that is so abundant on earth (where however it is not esteemed), desired it so much that coming down from heaven he wanted to embrace it himself to teach us how precious it is in his sight".

He reminds us of *St Francis of Assisi* and *St Ignatius of Loyola*; he offers for our meditation the profound words of *St Thomas Aquinas* that "the first essential for reaching the perfection of charity is voluntary poverty, by which one lives without possessing anything of one's own".

He gives us the example of our own St Francis de Sales, who "although he was a bishop and as such had to maintain a certain exterior decorum, nevertheless had a holy terror of riches", and observed that "not only are the poor evangelized, but the poor themselves are evangelizers".

He recalls that *St Ambrose* "calls poverty the mother and nurse of virtue"; and that *St Vincent Ferrer*, speaking of the efficacy of the apostolate, declares that a religious who does not put earthly things underfoot does not practise true poverty because, being put off by the slightest inconvenience, he does not have the strength to put up with the privations that poverty brings with it in the exercise of the apostolate".

And finally, with *St Alphonsus Liguori* he criticizes the religious who, after making his profession, becomes attached to little things; they "will be like so many stones in his shoes: is it surprising that he cannot walk on the way of perfection?"

He then goes on to insist on concrete aspects of the practice of poverty, and makes it a matter of conscience for each one, and especially for Provincials and Rectors. It could be said that this letter of Don Rua, at a distance of almost a century, preserves all its force and freshness. Still relevant also is his mild fatherly outburst: "Salesians who want to lead an easy life will certainly not be the ones to undertake truly fruitful works, those who go among the natives of Mato Grosso or Terra del Fuego, or who put themselves at the service of poor lepers. This will always be the merit of those who observe poverty with generosity".⁵⁹

⁵⁹ RUA, loc.cit. p. 438

The evangelical project of our Rule of Life.

At the present day, sensitivity in favour of the poor has become one of the "signs of the times" which challenges the mission of the Church and sparks off the processes of social reform. To prescind from this sensitivity would be to cut oneself off from the future. It constitutes a special modern criterion which belongs inseparably to the new evangelization and is very beneficial for the renewal of religious life, because it helps to revise styles of common life and to give greater thrust to apostolic commitments.

Nevertheless we cannot close our eyes to the fact that in this connection there are some distorted views which could have a negative influence on the identity of the salesian mission; and so it will be useful to see them against a careful reading of our Rule of life. In the latter we find our sensitivity in respect of the poor as a constituent element of the significance of our manner of life and work, within an overall organic balance of all the values inherent in our identity. The Rule is not a collection of abstract dissertations, but the description of a lived evangelical experience.

The first point to emphasize is that the Rule concentrates our attention on Don Bosco as a "model".⁶⁰ It is true of course that times have changed and that today social sensitivity is much more developed than it was in the last century, but nevertheless attachments, basic choices and criteria, remain always those of the Valdocco Oratory;⁶¹ like Don Bosco, so we at the present day contemplate and imitate the faith of Mary, her humble life and concern for the poor:⁶² an educative option in their favour, with a particular motherly zeal.

⁶⁰ cf. C 21

⁶¹ cf. C 40

⁶² cf. C 92

Our Rule assures us that the nature and mission of our Congregation hark back to the apostolic project of the Founder,⁶³ with a courageous and varied educative commitment for the benefit of poor youth and poor people in general.⁶⁴ This commitment of ours is placed in the very heart of the Church⁶⁵ which today asks all the faithful to intensify a practical preferential love for those most in need. On the other hand this is a modern aspect which renders us "deeply united with the world and its history".⁶⁶

⁶³ cf. C 2

⁶⁴ cf. C 24, 33, 41

⁶⁵ cf. C 6

⁶⁶ cf. C 7

The situation of the people varies from one continent to another. In the developed countries, in addition to the need for the evangelization of the "non-poor", new and alarming kinds of poverty are appearing. In the countries of Eastern Europe there is a special situation calling for a new evangelization and an urgent need for the rebirth and the restructuring of Religious Life itself.

In the so-called "third world" the condition of social injustice has become worse, and is challenging our mission in practical ways, especially on the part of young people. There is no space here to develop the multiple requirements of each of the different situations; what we are concerned about at the moment is to point to a more committed reading of our Rule of Life.

We profess a specific form of the Religious Life as we follow the poor Christ,⁶⁷ in which the practice of the evangelical counsels is clearly lived in the spirit of the Beatitudes,⁶⁸ witnessed to as a sign of the power of the resurrection.⁶⁹ This particular aspect is developed in the Constitutions, especially in the articles from 72 to 79; I invite you to meditate on them again so as to examine more deeply, both as individuals and communities, our fidelity to the

⁶⁷ cf. C 60

⁶⁸ cf. C 62

⁶⁹ cf. C 63

profession we made with sincere generosity. We need to recognize the fact that a reading of the Rule from the standpoint of poverty leads us to range over concrete horizons of our significance and of our responsibility in the mission.

Here we limit ourselves to a synthetic presentation of the relationship that exists in the Rule between evangelical poverty and the main elements of the whole of our plan of life.

The valuable Commentary⁷⁰ on the renewed Constitutions, made in 1986, declares: "We can say that the general plan of the Constitutions draws its inspiration *from the basic third article*: the overall structure and the arrangement of the parts and chapters was chosen so as to provide an organic treatment which would make immediately clear the unity of our vocation".⁷¹ Now from this point of view it is important to recognize that our evangelical poverty is vitally present in the whole Rule, even if not specifically in evidence throughout; it characterizes the entire salesian physiognomy, but must be harmonized with various other significant and relevant traits.

The third article speaks of consecration, of mission, of community, and of evangelical counsels, and it is interesting to reflect how in each of these elements the poverty we profess is dynamically incorporated.

In the first place it is intrinsically linked with "*consecration*"; it is not identified with it, and much less does it exhaust it; rather it is characterized by it and makes it concrete in practice through a mutually circular process. Consecration, in fact, implies a covenant with the Lord which demands a heart filled with pastoral charity: "*da mihi animas*". "I promised God", Don Bosco tells us, "that

⁷⁰ *Commentary on Constitutions*, Eng. edtn. 1986

⁷¹ *ibid.* Eng.edtn. p. 68

I would give of myself to my last breath for my poor boys";⁷² the preventive system is a "spontaneous expression of love inspired by the love of God".⁷³ On the other hand our sensitivity towards the poor is linked to the vitality of consecration, moved especially by a convinced concern and vision of Christ's kingdom, but nourished by contact with the poor and a practical commitment to them as those for whom God has a predilection, the "living sacrament" of the Lord who suffers and has such great need: "I was hungry and you fed me". The grace of unity brings about a common growth of the two poles of God and the needy.

⁷² cf. C 1

⁷³ cf. C 20

Our poverty finds its place in practice in the "*mission*", even though it does not define it in a univocal and exclusive manner. The mission, in fact, is essentially of wider extent and is closely linked with educative options; the Constitutions describe its various component aspects in such a way that it "sets the tenor of our whole life, specifies the task we have in the Church, and determines our place among other religious families".⁷⁴

⁷⁴ C 3

The Valdocco experience assures us that it is precisely our mission among young people in need that has given its particular tone to the whole of our charism, to its spiritual originality and to its educational methodology. Dedication to poor youngsters ensures the authenticity of our mission in which we become signs and bearers of the love of Christ.

Next, the practice of our poverty is embodied in the "*community*". This is something personal, but also something lived day by day in brotherly communion: a family manner of living together which seeks expression in the *koinonia* of goods. Placing everything in common is a great help in building

community, even from an affective standpoint; there can be no simple and austere community without this sign. It is well to note, nonetheless, that fraternal community has other values and aspects too, which embellish poverty and give it that family aspect that was so dear to Don Bosco.

Finally, poverty is evidently one of the three *evangelical counsels* which, as we have seen, combines with the other two to give a unified tone to the fullness and radical nature of the gift of oneself to God who is totally loved and to the needy youth to whom he sends us. It is clear, however, that the other two counsels contribute their specifically different values and influences, which have their effect on the manner of living and applying the sensitivity towards the poor through a love of chastity and in organic docility to the Congregation's mission.

Poverty indeed, as far as the constituent elements of our evangelical project are concerned, sheds light on the project's organic nature and, while strengthening the identity's entire patrimony, avoids distorted interpretations.

Even if poverty does not, in itself, constitute the single criterion for renewal, it belongs nevertheless, as we have seen, to the very heart of our *significance*; poverty it is that in the ambit of the grace of unity demands the other important aspects of our apostolic consecration. We can say that the consideration of poverty brings, without any doubt, a determining value to our renewal, even though by itself it is insufficient. The overall vision of the Rule, in fact, describes the totality of Don Bosco's charism; it is the identity card of the whole project of salesian life, with various other criteria organically linked with it that for years now have been pointing us towards the future.

There is also another aspect to consider: that of art. 7, referring to our solidarity with the world and with history. Today, in fact, sensitivity to those to whom our mission is addressed requires us to take a more practical view of human situations like abandonment, emargination and social injustice. Through such things as these the Lord himself is challenging us, and hence they too become for us a stimulus to renewal. Here we have a criterion of evangelical discernment which requires us to revise our works to make them pastorally more relevant and more in keeping with the Founder's options.⁷⁵ Since the mission, with its educational approach, commits us to a plan of integral human advancement⁷⁶ which takes us also to so many of the "non-poor", we need to make sure we are competent as regards our knowledge of the *Church's social doctrine*, and be able to communicate it to others as an indispensable element in the conscience of every christian who lives the Gospel in a manner relevant to the present day. Religious poverty must nourish in our heart a kind of spiritual relationship with the poor⁷⁷ so as to offer to them and others those educative values which lead them to the search for an integral liberation.

⁷⁵ cf. C 77

⁷⁶ cf. C 31, 32

⁷⁷ cf. C 78, 79

Already in his own time Don Bosco "saw clearly the social implications of his work".⁷⁸ That is why "we share in a way appropriate to religious in the witness and commitment of the Church to justice and peace. While not getting involved in ideologies or party politics, we reject everything that encourages deprivation, injustice and violence. We cooperate with all who are trying to build a society more worthy of man's dignity".⁷⁹

⁷⁸ C 33; cf. also C 73

⁷⁹ C 33

Rightly has the GC23 included among the key points of education to the faith "the social dimen-

⁸⁰ cf. GC23, 203-214⁸¹ cf. Commentary of RM on Strenna of 1991 and 1992

sion of charity",⁸⁰ which we have tried to study more deeply and put into effect in the Strennas for the years 1991 and 1992.⁸¹

We must readily admit, therefore, that our Rule of Life reveals how vitally religious poverty is grafted into the entire charism of Don Bosco, strongly shaping his identity and consequently his particular way of looking at the world, his life-style and his commitment to action.

Suggestions for a "scrutinium paupertatis".

We are invited by the Rule to make a periodic verification of the testimony we give by our salesian practice of evangelical poverty,⁸² indicating also the ascetical aspects that characterize each confrere and each community. They define a life-style and we are asked to put them into practice, in the awareness that in this way we are following the "way that leads to Love".⁸³

This verification not only ensures fidelity to a well defined religious profession we have freely made in a public and ecclesial manner, but enlightens and purifies a whole way of thinking, planning and working in trusting dependence on God and in joyful solidarity with those for whom we work. Certain practical norms, small though they may seem, have a particular sign value, and their transgression can have a negative effect on everything: "Fidelity to the commitment made at our religious profession is a response which we continually renew to the special Covenant that the Lord has made with us".⁸⁴

It will be fitting if the verification to be made sets out from an overall view of the demands of

⁸² cf. R 65⁸³ C 196⁸⁴ C 195

evangelical poverty in our charism, along the lines we have tried to set out in the preceding pages. It should have as its objective the fostering and development of a greater evangelical sensitivity in our renewal process. There is in the Congregation, by God's grace, a practical sense of poverty with some admirable personal and communal examples: generous initiatives for the benefit of poor youngsters, enthusiasm in new missionary commitments, the establishment of oratories in the most densely populated and needy areas, works of various kinds for street-children and young people at risk, solidarity with Provinces of Eastern Europe and the third world, etc. But there are also continuous dangers which call for sincere and constant verification.

The principal aspects to be considered should be the following: evangelical detachment; fraternal communion; religious witness; the administration of temporal goods; active commitment. And all this with reference to the person of each individual confrere and to the witness of the whole community, not only at local level but also as regards the Province as a whole and all the Congregation.

Let us try to suggest some items to be included.

— *Evangelical detachment.* We need to check whether detachment from goods stems from the fullness of harmony with the Gospel. Hence it is a matter in the first place of fostering the interior spirit with which one lives the Beatitude of the poor; or in other words of cultivating a manner of listening to the Word of God and of prayerful meditation centred on Christ's option in the mystery of the Incarnation, from the manger to the cross. It is a deepening of that freedom of heart which stems from the awareness that selfishness is the root of all

⁸⁵ Jn 8,32

slavery and injustice: only "the truth will make you free", as Christ has said.⁸⁵

We are "poor in the following of Jesus Christ"; we want to be free like him who, through the fullness of his love, is the supreme model of true liberty; he is completely free because totally poor. The supreme love of charity is what confers freedom from the slavery of the passions, from deviations of the intelligence, and from small-minded egoism.

The first and fundamental sense of true liberation is the redemptive dimension of liberty. Selfishness and sin are, in fact, always the source of oppression, disorder and the idolatry of goods; they lead to a prescinding from God and the development of a disordered love of self and creatures. Experience teaches that all materialism feeds a false emancipation of freedom.

Anyone who does not pray or meditate, a confrere whose heart is not full of "da mihi animas", can never understand the Beatitudes.

The Lord has given us a new commandment to love our neighbour and a desire for justice that transcends every ideology and is opposed to all methods of violence. This is very important for us Salesians who have made, with Don Bosco, the educative option in our social commitment: an evangelizing mission of salvation which, with a preferential love for the poor, dedicates itself to communicating to them the truths of the Gospel; for us this goes hand in hand with concrete human advancement which, while not overlooking the complexity of the problems, keeps in mind the priority of persons over structures. Hence it is well to verify what kind of meditation and prayer fosters the enthusiasm of "da mihi animas", bringing

about in us a growth in the conscious and practical attitude of the choice of the poor in our educative commitment.⁸⁶

Don Bosco gave continual witness to this kind of attitude, both with a daily filial trust in Providence and with a life of "work and temperance". Art. 18 of the Constitutions describes the demands of this practical aspect: the interior conviction of the Salesian becomes translated into an industrious and self-sacrificing manner of life: "work and temperance will make the Congregation flourish, whereas the seeking of an easy and comfortable life will instead bring about its death. The Salesian accepts the daily demands and renunciations of the *apostolic* life. He is ready to suffer cold and heat, hunger and thirst, weariness and disdain, whenever God's glory and the salvation of souls require it".

In his life he depends on Providence after the manner of Don Bosco, i.e. he does not expect everything to fall down from heaven but pursues with zeal what is needed for life and work, in the certainty that he will find it if he remains "evangelically free".⁸⁷

— *Fraternal communion.* Our evangelical poverty is an important value which helps in the practical daily building of the community. Which goods are to be placed in common? The reply is quite simple: all of them except the family patrimony we brought into the Congregation or subsequently inherited.⁸⁸ The Rule tells us: "After the example of the first christians, we share together our material goods, the fruits of our work, the gifts we receive and whatever comes to us from pensions, subsidies and insurance policies. We do the same with our talents, our energies and our experience".⁸⁹

⁸⁶ cf. Doc: Instruction on Christian Freedom and Liberation, 1986

⁸⁷ C 79

⁸⁸ C 74

⁸⁹ C 76

The placing of goods in common also governs the use of instruments for work, means of transport,⁹⁰ and copyrights;⁹¹ it covers also the simple arrangement of one's room, so that it does not become a bourgeois-style refuge;⁹² it covers also the fraternal carrying out of "domestic work and services".⁹³

Next comes solidarity with the other houses and with the Province.⁹⁴ Solidarity in the Congregation requires all members to contribute practical help to the numerous missionary works and to the needy foundations of the so-called "Don Bosco - East". We have seen some wonderful examples in this regard, but there is no doubt that more still could be done if a renewed sense of solidarity were to grow in every house and Province. The special periods during the year, like Advent and Lent, could stimulate particular initiatives for acts of self-denial and sharing that could augment the possibility of communion of temporal goods.

The Code of Canon Law⁹⁵ speaks of religious institutes doing all in their power to donate something from their own resources to help the needs of the Church and the support of the poor. The word used is "donate" (*Translator's note: the USA translation says "contribute what they can"*). Hence it is not a question of waiting till the end of the financial year to see if something is left over, but of assigning something in advance, putting it in the budget! This is a criterion to be kept in mind even with regard to salesian solidarity.

And we do not stop at the sharing of material goods: "In an atmosphere of mutual trust and daily forgiveness", say the Constitutions, "the need and joy of sharing everything is experienced."⁹⁶ "we share our joys and sorrows and we are partners in

⁹⁰ R 63⁹¹ R 57⁹² R 55⁹³ R 64⁹⁴ R 58⁹⁵ can. 640⁹⁶ C 16

our apostolic plans and experiences".⁹⁷ The GC21 insisted on this totality of communion: "Poverty means sharing all that we have, all that we are, and all that we do".⁹⁸

⁹⁷ C 51

⁹⁸ GC21, 40

This list of goods placed in common is fittingly concluded by the phrase: "In the community the good of each individual becomes the good of all".⁹⁹ And the community accepts the responsibility of providing what is necessary for each member in time of both health and sickness.

⁹⁹ C 76

— *Religious witness.* The essence of evangelical poverty is unquestionably rooted in detachment of heart, but to facilitate its authenticity and defend its concrete nature, religious life through the centuries has seen a variety of structures for its practical living; and our own Congregation has its particular methods described in the Rule of Life.

It is a collection of concrete norms, some of them quite small, which manifest publicly (in the order of "*significance*") the evangelical attitude of the heart: "temperance in the use of food and drink, simplicity in dress (recall C.62), the moderate use of holidays and amusements, abstaining from smoking (one of our characteristics!) as a form of salesian temperance and as a witness in his personal work of education".¹⁰⁰ The fact of being "consecrated educators" calls for a salesian style also in a specific decorum in dress, in a dignified external appearance and in particular ways of communal living.

¹⁰⁰ R 55

It is a question of an ascetical methodology explicitly adopted after accepting the relevant demands. Today the signs of the times challenge Religious with respect to the prophetic dimension of their witness; and this is particularly the case as re-

guards poverty. The evangelical values we live, as well as being for the benefit of those we are working for, must also be accessible to them, i.e. they must be "signs" they too can read. In particular "the witness of our poverty helps the young to overcome their selfish possessive instinct".¹⁰¹

¹⁰¹ C 73

Our practice receives light from art. 77 of the Constitutions: attention to the conditions in the environment in which we live; a simple and frugal way of life in unpretentious dwellings; making it evident to others that the use of the means required by our work is for the service of others; our choice of activities and of their location made in response to the needs of those in want; the criterion for our buildings – that they be simple and functional.

Then there is the need to observe carefully a principle and practice common to all forms of Religious Life, i.e. that of administrative dependence. "By the vow of poverty", say the Constitutions, "we undertake not to use and not to dispose of material goods without the consent of the lawful superior".¹⁰² The Code of Canon Law reminds all Religious of this: "The evangelical counsel of poverty in imitation of Christ, who for our sake was made poor when he was rich, entails a life which is poor in reality and in spirit, sober and industrious, and a stranger to earthly riches. It also involves dependence and limitation in the use and the disposition of goods, in accordance with each institute's own law".¹⁰³ The verification on this point should be made carefully by each one, and the Rector and Provincial will know how to guide the confreres in sincerity and observance.

¹⁰² C 74

¹⁰³ can. 600

The Code of Canon Law specifies: "Whatever a religious acquires by personal labour, or on behalf of the institute, belongs to the institute. Whatever

comes to a religious in any way through pension, grant or insurance also passes to the institute, unless the institute's law decrees otherwise".¹⁰⁴ Subterfuges or a disguised dependence open the way to a gradual decline in the fervour of adherence to the charism of the Founder.

¹⁰⁴ can 668 3; cf. C 76

It may be well to recall that nowadays the Church allows Religious to live in complete detachment even from their own patrimonial goods: "Religious congregations may, in their constitutions, permit their members to renounce their inheritances, both those which have already been acquired and those which may be acquired in the future".¹⁰⁵ Our own Rule accepts this indication and specifies that the renunciation may be made "after serious reflection"¹⁰⁶, and "after at least ten years of perpetual profession and with the consent of the Rector Major, and in accordance with the prescriptions of the civil law of his own country".¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁵ PC 13

¹⁰⁶ C 74

¹⁰⁷ R 53

— *The administration of temporal goods.* Here too there is reference to the structural aspect in houses, Provinces, and the Congregation, in all of which there should be a system of administration which certainly has its own regulations, but which is at the same time animated by a living sense of trust in Providence. The Rule dedicates two entire chapters to the matter, one in the Constitutions¹⁰⁸ and the other in the General Regulations¹⁰⁹. This is a service carried out directly by the local and provincial economers, and by the Economer General, "under the direction and control of the appropriate superiors and councils".¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁸ C ch. 14

¹⁰⁹ R ch. 13

¹¹⁰ C 190

It will be well to read over together the articles of these two chapters; they give precise indications for remaining faithful, even in the indispensable organization of structures, to the vocational criteria of the salesian profession.

Today the service of an economer becomes ever more complex and delicate, because of the increasing quantity of civil legislation covering the sector. It requires a harmony between competence and virtue which is not easily attained, and a continual updating with specific meetings for the purpose. Let us show to the confreres who are economers our gratitude for the valuable work they do for all of us.

In the part of the Provincial Directory dealing with economy there should be norms "with a view to establishing throughout the province a modest and effectively uniform level of community life".¹¹¹

The administration should be regulated also by *good family sense*. It is part of our salesian tradition to live our poverty in a family spirit.

It may be well to recall that *real estate* needed for purposes of service must be preserved with care through adequate maintenance; this will ensure saving and the preservation in efficient working order of instruments of work, while those no longer necessary should be disposed of with due consideration.

As far as *movable goods* are concerned a distinction must be made between necessary and superfluous equipment, so that the latter can be suitably disposed of.

Finally, with reference to money, bonds, and the like, it is important to keep in mind the prohibition against permanent capitalization, avoiding anything that smacks of speculation.

Don Rinaldi, speaking to the confreres of the Oratory in December 1930 on the occasion of the exercise for a happy death, recalled a hard-hitting conference of Don Bosco on poverty, while at the same time "he was equipping his printshops with machinery as up to date as anything in the best of

Turin's printing establishments". And Don Rinaldi commented: "We are not to lump together the interior, personal poverty of the Salesians with the requirements of the salesian mission which calls for Don Bosco to be always in the forefront of progress", as he himself had said when speaking with the future Pope Pius XI".¹¹²

¹¹² cf. BM 14, 435

— *Active commitment.* Here we are entering a much wider social field. First of all we have to cultivate an apostolic sensitivity towards the poor, making every effort to stay close to them, to alleviate their needs, making our own their lawful aspirations for a more human society". Don Bosco tells us "Remember well that what we have is not ours; it belongs to the poor; woe to us if we do not use it well".¹¹³

¹¹³ C 79

But then we have to actuate salesian "*significance*" in the revision and planning of the places where we are working. The Provincial and his Council need to carry out a gradual but courageous discernment process, so that "our choice of works and of their location is made in response to the needs of those in want".¹¹⁴

¹¹⁴ C 77

In this era of new evangelization, a very important aspect of our active commitment concerns the renewal of our mission in the education of young people to the faith. The present state of inequality between rich and poor has given rise to different ways of thinking about the renewal of society. The times demand of us a "new education" which will enable us to form young people to "be aware of the role they must play in the christian transformation of social life".¹¹⁵

¹¹⁵ C 27

The Latin-American Bishops at Puebla, as we have seen, considered christian poverty as a powerful evangelical value able, if properly understood

and taken up by the faithful, to give rise to successful alternatives to the interpretations of an exclusively economic type which had guided the social forces of the world in the past. The Church's doctrine on the significance of material goods and their lawful use, according to the universal destination given them by the Creator, needs a substratum of christian formation in all the faithful, and especially in the young. Here then is an active commitment on which to reflect in community: how can we educate young people to understand the social dimension of charity through evangelical poverty; how can we form them to moral, professional and social responsibility;¹¹⁶ how can we pass on to them the social doctrine of the Church?

¹¹⁶ cf. C 33

We are called upon to "help young people to acquire an adequate knowledge of the complex social and political reality".¹¹⁷ But education cannot stop at simple knowledge, it must introduce the young to some concrete kind of solidarity where they can gain the experience of self-donation to those most in need.

¹¹⁷ GC23, 210

It will be worth the trouble to share this active commitment with the *lay members of the Salesian Family and with the collaborators in our various activities*, so that they too may discover more clearly the specific significance of their vocation and christian mission which is precisely to "permeate and perfect the reality of the temporal order with the evangelical spirit".¹¹⁸

¹¹⁸ AA 5, 7

The beatitude of the poor in Mary.

Mary, full of grace, is, after Jesus, the most admirable model of the spirit of the Beatitudes. Her

heart was always filled with joy, even though she had much to suffer: "a sword will pierce your soul".¹¹⁹ She was always happy and "blessed", because always "poor". ¹¹⁹ Lk 2,35

She it was who at Bethlehem laid the child Jesus in a manger. This was not done with any feeling of aversion on either her own part or that of St Joseph, but rather in the joy of motherhood, intensified by the surprising visit of the humble shepherds to whom the angel of the Lord, when announcing the great event of salvation, had given as a sign: "You will find the child wrapped in swaddling clothes, and laid in a manger".¹²⁰ ¹²⁰ Lk 2,12

Taking the child to Jerusalem to offer him to the Lord in the temple, she took with her the sacrificial offering of the poor,¹²¹ and here too marvelled at the manifestations of God. ¹²¹ cf. Lev 12,8

And all she had heard, first from the shepherds and now from the aged Simeon and Anna, she would never forget: "she kept all these things, pondering them in her heart".¹²² It was a meditation that never brought to her mind even the slightest suggestion that she should change her way of life and the humble social condition of her environment, which she considered as having been explicitly chosen by God; she felt that with Joseph it was her task to bring up Jesus in poverty. ¹²² Lk 2,19

Of itself, Nazareth was a place of no great significance;¹²³ Joseph supported the little family by his work as a carpenter; he was a just man and experienced with Mary the beatitude of the poor in the hope of the kingdom. ¹²³ cf. Jn 1,46

The choice made by God in the persons of Mary and Joseph at Nazareth manifests very clearly the path he wanted followed in his divine plan of salvation; in fact, in the incarnation of the Son "who, though he was rich, yet for your sake became poor

¹²⁴ 2 Cor 8,9

so that by his poverty you might become rich.¹²⁴

Then, at the moment of the greatest human poverty of Jesus Christ, stripped and in the throes of death on the cross, Mary received as an inheritance not temporal goods but a universal motherhood for the salvation of the world. And so, as the "handmaid of the Lord" now nailed to the cross in total poverty, she became the Mother of all in a new paschal event, in which she would participate fully through her assumption into heaven.

And from there throughout the centuries, Mary has exercised her motherhood especially in favour of the poor; we may recall the comparatively recent examples at Guadalupe, Lourdes and Fatima, where she appeared to poor persons. And if we look at our own charism, we see that it was to the Becchi (the "salesian Bethlehem") to a humble family that she went to seek the poor young John who was brought up and educated in an environment permeated by the hope of the kingdom.

Against the background of the history of salvation, Mary appeared before Christ. She preceded him also in the prophecy of poverty; and she still continues to precede and to accompany him at the present day. Her heart of the "poor woman of Yahweh" is clearly reflected in her *Magnificat*, which we recite and sing, often with great emotion.

On the occasion of the Marian Year, 1987-1988, Pope John Paul II in the Encyclical *Redemptoris Mater*, declared that the Church in obedience to Christ follows the path of Mary our model: "The Church's love of preference for the poor is wonderfully inscribed in Mary's *Magnificat*. The God of the Covenant, celebrated in the exultation of her spirit by the Virgin of Nazareth, is also he who 'has cast down the mighty from their thrones and lifted up the lowly, filled the hungry with good things,

sent the rich away empty, scattered the proud-hearted, and his mercy is from age to age on those who fear him'. The Church is thus aware that there is a duty to safeguard carefully the importance of 'the poor' and of 'the option in favour of the poor' in the word of the living God. These are matters and questions intimately connected with the christian meaning of freedom and liberation. 'Mary is totally dependent upon God and completely directed towards him, and, at the side of her Son, she is the most perfect image of freedom and of the liberation of humanity and of the universe. It is to her as Mother and Model that the Church must look in order to understand in its completeness the meaning of her own mission'.¹²⁵

¹²⁵ Red. Mater 37

Today we are living in an era of epoch-making change which commits us to a New Evangelization; as a Congregation we have made a solemn act of entrustment to Mary, that she may accompany us as Mother and Teacher as she did at our origins. It was she who "showed Don Bosco his field of labour among the young and was the constant guide and support of his work, especially in the foundation of our Society".¹²⁶ Let us ask her to help us to build up the kingdom of Christ and be efficacious evangelizers and educators in these new times by witnessing and communicating to the young and the poor the great message of evangelical poverty.

¹²⁶ C 8

Through her intercession and guidance, may Don Bosco the educator, poor and enterprising as he was, be always our model!

I send my cordial fraternal greetings to you all.
Affectionately in the Lord,

Don F. Viganò