

**EVANGELICAL POVERTY:
A WITNESS FILLED WITH FRUITS OF THE SPIRIT,
EVEN FOR TODAY'S WORLD.**

But, what does religious poverty mean today, and how live it?

Fr. J. Rovira, cmf
AMCG, October 18, 2003, Rome

I will divide my reflections into four points, in order to be as concise and clear as possible; almost a series of “flashes” for a topic that seems to me rather complex:

- 1) The situation of quite a few religious today: vow of poverty or of upper middle class?
Is speaking about poverty a fad, or a necessity?
- 2) The anthropological and socio-economic concept of poverty has expanded; and not everything is negative.
- 3) Let's not forget that the significance of our poverty is not first of all socio-economic, but theological.
- 4) A few practical clues for a differentiated and not always easy lived experience, from both the charismatic and social points of view.

**1. The situation of quite a few religious today: vow of poverty or of high middle class?
Is speaking about poverty a fad, or a necessity?**

There is a fact that has always struck me as I look at Church history: the appreciation of poverty or of the poor has been the most fitting thermometer for measuring the sincerity and depth of her reforms, beyond documents and beautiful words, always more or less abundant.

And the same has happened in the history of consecrated life. It is a fact that the evangelical counsel which is at the origin of many foundations, reforms and breakdowns has been neither celibacy nor obedience to a superior, but external poverty; from “calced” they became “discalced”, some dedicated themselves to the poor, the others to the poorest among the poor... And today, in which Constitutions revised after Vatican II is it not said that those religious want to dedicate themselves “in a special way” to the poor? It is also significant that in the Exhortation “Vita Consecrata” they speak: of the gospel counsels in general 38 times, of the ensemble virginal-chaste-celibate 49 times, of obedient-obedience 41, and the poor-poverty 76! (We note in passing that there is therefore no obsession with the sexual topic, maybe for the topic of poverty!) All this tells us that also in consecrated life today the true thermometer of authenticity of life, in terms of gospel counsels, beyond discussions on obedience and difficulties in the affective-sexual area, continues to be (as always) the understanding and lived experience of poverty.

As a matter of fact, contradictions are not lacking. I would like to cite a couple of examples. What Bours-Kamphaus say, quoting the Diary of Sören Kierkegaard (1813-1855) also happens sometimes today:

“Into the sumptuous castle church enters a state court preacher, chosen by a learned public; he comes before an elitist group of notables and learned men and preaches emotionally on the words of the apostle: ‘God chose the little ones and the scorned.’ And no one laughs.”

How many heated discussions have been had in these years:

“...on the Church of the poor..., seated on comfortable stuffed chairs and in front of a small glass of quality. And no one would laugh. Everyone took themselves very seriously and were convinced they

were saying important things for the renewal of the Church. Instead, it was something to laugh at, to cry about, to be embarrassed about...”¹

Fr. Radcliffe, when he was General Superior of the Dominicans, wrote:

“Once, in an American province (Dominican), after a week of debate on poverty, they closed the meeting with a supper in an expensive restaurant. At the end, one of the monks said, ‘Well, if this is the way to finish the discussion on poverty, what will we plan to do next year after having talked about chastity?’”²

In his turn, the well-known Capuchin Fr. Cantalamessa confessed that, after having written two booklets on obedience and on virginity, he did not decide to publish another on poverty. The reason he gave was:

“With what kind of courage do we talk about poverty, when what would be considered today almost a heroic poverty among us, is for millions of human beings a normal fact of every day and of all one’s life, if it is not an absolute luxury? Fasting for life on “bread and water” would for us be the maximum austerity, while for millions of people having “bread and water assured” would already be a type of dream.”³

How can we call a religious in our society “poor”, when he has house, food, work, studies and even the possibility (many call it a “right”!) to enjoy a period of vacation annually, or a sabbatical period (desirably a year!), sure that on his return he will find all that he left when he departed? Might it be that sometimes we have lost even the ability of being ashamed of our complaints as low (or high) middle class people (bourgeoisie)?

In fact, notes Martínez, in religious life the institution offers its professed members an adjustment without special trauma, a “light” solution. They are assured, in word and deed, total assistance to their basic needs, as biological needs, vital needs for survival and sufficient bio-physical wellbeing. It’s hard to find someone among us with serious reasons for complaining about food, rest, personal objects, use of community objects... In general we have a tenor of life that fits between the middle class and upper class of the “first world”, with one exception – he says – we work less than the average of the persons around us who have to earn their living. It may be that our aspirations in this area are to have at disposition more money, more time, do things with less effort, have more things and leisure activities. The community provides for our support, offers us an occupation, company and living together; it gives us support in difficult moments, whether personal or family; it guarantees our future. In a word, it is the “great mother” who cares for the needs of her sons or daughters, with solicitude and generosity. In exchange for all this, the religious is asked to be faithful to his/her commitment, which is translated into living in community, being what we call a “good religious” who fulfills his duties and does what is asked of him. Therefore, an attitude of dependence, order and discipline, of adequate fulfillment of his jobs, without major expectations, in a continuity that safeguards the principles, norms and works of the institution. In this way, he will see his needs for respect, relationship and security answered.⁴

Perhaps not everything Martínez says can be generalized; but it makes one think, because surely there is some truth in it. In the West, in fact, we have often made grand speeches, published in more or less interesting volumes on poverty, but we have stayed with words. On the other hand, not rarely, religious of the Third World have come to the West (at Rome, for example) to talk to us about the poverty of their countrymen and about the urgency of being incarnated in that reality; but,

¹ J. BOURS – F. KAMPHAUS, *Passione per Dio*, Rome 1984, 125. (Not knowing if books are translated, I leave titles in original language.)

² T. RADCLIFFE, *Vita Consacrata e cultura contemporanea*, Ariccia 1996, cicl. 1.

³ R. CANTALAMESSA, *Poverta*, Milan 1996, 5-6.

⁴ Cf. J. L. MARTINEZ, *Construir la vida*, Madrid 2003, 123-124.

sometimes – say I – their words have left their listeners rather perplexed or skeptical, seeing the tenor of their personal life, the devices they were furnished, or the tourist travels they had done before arriving at our place, or those they were promising to do before returning to their poor people... And, how many times, religious here and there, have talked less and simply went to live poor among the poor, and give them a hand with their life rather than with their words! As someone has said, it would be necessary to apply the words of the Bible, “You will not use the name of the poor in vain” (cf. Ex 20:7) to quite a few people today.

The anthropological and socio-economic concept of poverty has expanded; and not everything is negative.

We can distinguish between a negative meaning or content of poverty and a positive one, in terms of a human reality. Misery, instead, has always and only a negative meaning; it is always unworthy of man. Poverty, on the other hand, can even help a person to live certain human values.

a) In our society, when we talk about poverty, we tend immediately to think of something negative: the lack of possessions, especially economic ones; and in general the relationship of man with the material things outside of himself.

To be truthful, the current human reality of poverty is much broader and multi-faceted. In fact, poverty – as we will see immediately – also has positive aspects, from the human point of view. And on the other hand, referring to negative aspects, this includes much more than the simple socio-economic factor.

Economic poverty, in fact, or lack of material goods, is an external aspect, even if important for the human being as well as decisive for bio-physical survival. This is a primary, basic poverty. There is poverty, however, also when there are material goods, but distributed unequally; for example, in a rich society there can be many poor people.⁵

Therefore, we can speak of “relative” economic poverty, not when the goods are insufficient to live a humanly dignified life, but when the economic and cultural possibilities could permit all the citizens a higher level, if corruption or bad management didn’t prevent it. It would be enough, for example, to think that some “poor” in certain industrialized countries would be considered little less than the “rich” in regions of the Third World, and certain “rich” persons of other times, today would be considered poor. They didn’t have electrical current, nor running water in the house, nor refrigerators, radio, television, telephone, computer; nor could they go abroad for vacation (perhaps they didn’t even know it existed...!). They didn’t have the variety in food that we have today, nor clothing, nor heat or air-conditioning, nor train, car, airplane, etc. Many of them were even illiterate. Finally, sometimes people speak of poverty or scarcity simply when they aren’t able to buy goods that are more or less phoney, or the latest thing on the market, stimulated by consumer propaganda. Modern capitalism, in fact, needs persons who consume in a tranquil, continuous, standardized and massive way; that have typified and modifiable tastes. Purchase-possession-rapid consumption-

⁵ In the USA, first world economic power, there are millions of poor. Many countries, then, of the Third World, are not “poor” per se, but “countries with poor people”; they have potentialities not well developed, lack of a just distribution, political and economic corruption, etc. Proof of that is the fact that in almost all these countries there is a minority of the population that is rich, at times even very rich. There are really few truly “poor” countries. Therefore, the Magisterium, while it exhorts rich countries not to exploit the poor ones, warns the latter to change certain internal realities since often the exploitation begins right within the country by some compatriots. (Cf *Ecclesia in Asia*, 40b)

elimination-new purchase... are the phases and the links of the closed circle established by the reigning consumerism.⁶

However, there are other kinds of no less profound poverty. For example, the lack of decision-making power (over one's own life, family, society...); unemployment, because it not only deprives one of having possessions, but also goes against the dignity and rights of the person to earn one's bread; it is something humiliating, unworthy/debasing. There is the poverty of physical or psychic illness, the disabled, the elderly, they lack the possession of health; the addicted, AIDS victims; poverty of the uneducated or illiterate: they lack the possession of learning; those who have no home or family or must emigrate for economic or political reasons, especially the clandestine immigrant, the persecuted, the nomad, the "street person". Also, the poverty of those who have no one to love nor feel loved by anyone; those who are alone and unable to satisfy the need to belong to a group, the need to be recognized in their own unmistakable individual, cultural and social identity (cf. ChL 28); the need for individual and collective security, the need to be valued, loved as a person, and thus see one's existence "justified." And, in general the poverty of those who feel abandoned, forgotten, scorned, hated, regarded diffidently, with indifference or derision; of one who feels exploited, objectified, manipulated, marginalized, plagiarized, incapacitated to think and decide for himself, dependent, powerless, terrified, crushed by structures or the powers in authority; of those who feel poor in quality and in personal human resources, victim of their own limitations, their mean character, their psychological fragility, their faults and sins, or those of others; those who don't see meaning in life or a way out of their problems or suffering...⁷ There is also the poverty of the "opulent poor", that is those who are rich in things, but poor in values, whole life drowns in overwhelming work from which they are incapable of separating themselves; a life full of things, but empty of spirit, of love, perhaps even of health...⁸ There are so many "new poverties"! (cf. VC 63b)

Negative poverty is therefore a very complex and extensive reality, of which to some degree we are all victims.

b) But, we were saying, human poverty can also be a source of values, the space in which certain human virtues appear.

Making reference as before, first of all, to the human person's relationship with things and with other people, poverty means helping the human being to maintain his role and importance in creation, without becoming enslaved (dependent on) to anything or anyone in a way not in accord with his dignity.

Thus it happens, for example, when a person feels free in relationship to things, he does not become attached to them, does not get drawn into yearning to possess things or to dominate over persons, when he uses goods or carries out his responsibilities. He keeps himself free and leaves or renders others free. When he does not get carried away by ambition, greed for possession, exploitation, wastefulness... When he is able to do without useless things, phoney goods,

⁶ To understand how contrary this mentality (which we also find in not a few religions) is to the Christian spirit, it is enough to think that for this mentality, the more one has the more he is: the ideal and goal of life and happiness is in having; whereas for the Christian "There is more joy in giving than in receiving" (Acts 20:35), and "God loves the cheerful giver" (2 Cor 9:7); not only one who gives, but who feels joyful not in acquiring but in giving! Totally opposite to the consumerist promise ("The more you have the happier you'll be"), Jesus and Paul proclaim that happiness is not in having, but in giving!

⁷ Citing NMI, RdC speaks of the "Despair at the lack of meaning in life, drug addiction,... abandonment in old age or sickness, marginalization or social discrimination". (RdC 35b; cf. NMI 50)

⁸ Christina Onassis (daughter of billionaire Onassis who as a certain time married Jacqueline Kennedy) said at the point of death: "I am so poor that all I have left is money..."

artificially created needs (fruit of unbridled and senseless consumerism), both in order to save his freedom in respect to things and in respect to those who would want to exploit him. When he understands it's more important *to be* than *to have*. Poverty as a liberation of one's being: 1) free from the ego: self-possession, 2) free from things: dominion, 3) free to serve others, 4) free to be open and welcome God. In a word, *poverty as freedom and liberation*.

The poor person in a positive sense is one who, aware of her own limitations, opens to others to receive from them simply and humbly, and is able to share with them, to give herself, that little and that abundance that she has, convinced that a relationship between persons is the greatest good, and that the person of the other is more worthwhile than things. She feels and recognizes she needs others and, at the same time, is able to give something, to be enriched and to enrich, to receive gratefully and give generously. She knows she is, at the same time, hunger and bread.⁹ Poor, therefore, not in the sense of one who does not have, but of one who "in her own humanity becomes a dispenser of good" (RD 5c) Poverty as solidarity, sharing, communion; not as privation, but as donation.¹⁰ Thus, a "poor heart" inevitably also becomes a "fraternal heart". It communicates not only material goods, however much or little they may be, but especially and above all, himself, his person (the greatest good that each has, not the billfold!), his time (which means the only life he has!), his gifts and abilities, his humanity, his love. And thus, full and free to give what he has humanly and spiritually, seeing in this self-giving not a loss or impoverishment, but rather an unceasing source of human enrichment. In giving of his poverty, he receives! (as St. Francis of Assisi said) He realizes that it is precisely selfishness, closing in on himself, that is the most tragic process of human impoverishment, because it imprisons the person in the shell of his limitations, impedes his receiving and growing, whereas in sharing and in loving people and things, he finds an inexhaustible source of his human fullness and happiness. Therefore, *poverty as love, humanization, fraternity, solidarity*.

Poverty therefore means acceptance of self, of others and reality as they are, with the possibilities and limitations of each one and each thing. Acceptance which is not passive resignation, but a "yes" to life, to persons (beginning with one's own) to all of creation. But, it is also a point of departure because then, through one's donation, sharing and love, the person tries to bring himself, others and created reality, to an ever greater fullness. Therefore, *poverty as simplicity of life, openness, hospitality, stimulation, promotion, life*.

In this way it happens that poverty appears as the most basic human virtues. It means liberation from concupiscence or greed of possession, from selfishness and from power, from exploitation, narcissism and the manipulation of others or creation; it means mastery of self and regarding things: humanization. Simplicity and even a certain austerity of life are a help so that the person will remain fully him/herself, human, dignified, lord of creation, not a wastrel; free, not slave or destroyer; lover, not exploiter.

⁹ "It is only by accepting ourselves as poor that we become men" (U.VIVARELLI, cit.by A. PRONZATO, *Tra le braccia del Padre*, Milan 1999, 71). Recognizing and accepting ourselves as needy we overcome arrogance and pride, unawareness of our own limitations. But, it is precisely in discovering ourselves and accepting ourselves as "hunger", that we gradually become "bread": humanity to be shared.

¹⁰ Moreover, the early community of Jerusalem is praised, in the book of Acts, not because it is poor, but because it shares what each has (Acts 2 - 4). In the text, we read, in fact: "None of their members was ever in want, as all those who owned land or houses would sell them, and bring the money from them, to present it to the apostles; it was then distributed to any members who might be in need." (4:34-35) We Christians are not pauperists, but sharers, persons who communicate: we feel in communion in all senses: mystical, theological, human and material. We do not love poverty, the fact of now having, as though it were already a good in itself, but poor people, brothers and sisters; we are against socio-economic improvements, but against injustices and exploitation.

Poverty that leads to gratuitousness, to give of self and share, overcoming the continuous temptation of profit, of selfish calculation, of exploitation and manipulation of others, of oneself or things. Rather, finding one's happiness in communicating the self, in giving a hand, in loving. Such virtue we often find precisely among financially weak people: they share gladly, spontaneously what they have, among themselves and with guests; moreover they are happy and honored to be able to share. Not to accept their spontaneous and sincere generosity, is even considered offensive! The words attributed to Jesus: "There is more joy in giving than in receiving" (Acts 20:35) seem to us to correspond to human nature, even before being revelation of something supernatural.

In conclusion, poverty becomes something positive when it is fruit and manifestation of people's love for each other (and for themselves) and for all of creation. This is the human basis for what we will say as we continue. Once more, grace presupposes nature, even though it exceeds and perfects it, as St. Thomas said. Human and Christian poverty are not the same thing; but, human poverty, yes, is the suitable base – the premise – on which the supernatural gift is then engrafted.

2. Let's not forget that the significance of our poverty is not first of all socio-economic, but theological.

Let's go immediately to the more true significance, to the root of our poverty. And, in this regard, let's not impoverish poverty by reducing it to a matter of money! Certainly, money is involved, but because I am involved, and the economic reality is an aspect of my life. But, the poverty revealed by Christ and in Christ is something much more profound. If already talking about the human reality of poverty we discovered that it has a much vaster and richer horizon, the more will this be true when we move into its evangelic significance.

And, in fact, one of the great merits of the exhortation "Vita Consecrata" has been precisely that of bringing us from an economist and basically materialist view of religious poverty, to its real meaning which is the Christological-Trinitarian root. If it is in Christ, that is, in the Incarnate Word, where we must find the significance of the mystery of our life, that to which the Father has called us, whence we come, where we are and toward where we are going..., it is obvious that it is also the meaning of consecrated life and each of its elements; in this case, poverty.

In a summary exceedingly successful and concise, the exhortation speaks to us therefore of the Christological-Trinitarian, prophetic, ecclesial and apostolic significance of the Christian poverty of the religious. I will limit myself to recalling the more meaningful texts, leaving to you what I would say even its "mystical" study/reflection. Afterward we will examine some of its practical aspects and consequences.

Evangelical poverty, says the exhortation, is a clear and concrete way of living and proclaiming that

"God is man's only real treasure. When poverty is lived according to the example of Christ (Christological aspect) who, 'though he was rich...became poor' (2 Cor 8:9; cf Phil 2:5-11), it becomes an expression of that *total gift of self* which the three Divine Persons (Trinitarian aspect) make to one another. This gift overflows into creation and is fully revealed in the Incarnation of the Word and in his redemptive death (again, the Christological aspect)". (VC 21c; cf. 22b)

In this way, religious:

"imitating Christ's poverty (Christological aspect), they profess (apostolic-prophetic aspect) that he is the Son who receives everything from the Father, and gives everything back to the Father in love (cf. Jn17:7, 10) (Trinitarian aspect)" (VC 16c)

If we don't arrive at discovering and rooting ourselves on this base, we are still outside the Gospel; we have not understood anything about life (and it happens!, given that in our culture we tend to understand and judge things from the external, empirical, material point of view). And it is from this then, that also the external, apostolic, witness and prophetic significance of our poverty springs. In fact, before a society in which there is:

“a materialism which craves possessions, heedless of the needs and sufferings of the weakest, and lacking any concern for the balance of natural resources (the ecological problem)” (VC 89a),

our poverty appears as a charism of simplicity, detachment, solidarity and fraternity with all, beginning with the most needy, “the option for the poor” and the “promotion of justice” (VC 82). A charism that urges us to have even a preferential love – not exclusive – for the poor (VC 82, 90). The poor person, in fact, become the first – not the only one – after Him who is the true First and Only: God. And all this, says the exhortation again, the religious lives with:

“*unbounded generosity and love*, and this all the more so in a world which risks being suffocated in the whirlpool of the ephemeral.” (VC 105a)

A charism that demands to be lived as Jesus lived it (Christological aspect): in humility, simplicity, solidarity, and hospitality, overcoming every form of exploitation, of becoming bourgeois (capitalistic) and consumerism.

This said, however, let's look more concretely what poverty meant in Christ and what, consequently, it must also mean in us. Finally, in the fourth point, we will draw some practical consequences.

a) We have to see the significance of our poverty in the context of Christian poverty in general; and this is none other than the representation, prolongation and completion of the story of **Christ's poverty** (cf. Col 1:24)¹¹

So, well, as I already noted earlier, when we think of Christ's poverty we tend to stay simply on something external, superficial. But, in Jesus, the external manifestations of something – in this case poverty – do have value, yes, but a relative one; that is, as expressions of an internal reality. As in each of us. Thus, for example, when we read that “he had nowhere to lay his head” (Mt 8:20; cf. Lk 9:58), it speaks of something external. The significance and root of his poverty, however, must be sought in something more intimate and profound. And, in fact, the reason and meaning of his poverty is found explained in some texts of Paul:

“Remember how generous the Lord Jesus was: he was rich, but he became poor for your sake, to make you rich out of his poverty”. (2 Cor 8:9; cf 5:21; VC 21c)

A statement described at length in the Christological hymn of the letter to the Philippians:

“In your minds you must be the same as Christ Jesus: His state was divine, yet he did not cling to his equality with God, but emptied himself to assume the condition of a slave, and became as men are; and being as all men are, he was humbler yet, even to accepting death, death on a cross.” (Phil 2:5-8)

The fundamental poverty of Christ, which is at the basis of all eventual external manifestations, is this annihilation, emptying (*ekénosen*), divesting, impoverishment; in a word, the Incarnation; the *katábasis*, as the Greek fathers said: the abasement; the Word (*lógos*, from rich that he was) became flesh (*sarx*, he became poor) (cf. Jn 1:14); the Son became Jesus of Nazareth. The Father enclosed

¹¹ To be noted that in the NT more than 500 verses (1/16 of the whole) speak directly of the topic of poverty, without counting indirect references. Jesus, in fact, spoke more of wealth and poverty than about any other subject, including heaven and hell, sexual morals, the law or violence (cf. B.FIAND, *Living the Vision*, NY 1991, 52) And, as to what the exhortation VC says, we have already said that we find the expression “gospel counsels” 38 times; references to obedience number 41; to celibacy, 40; and to poverty, 76!

his Treasure (the Son) into the clay vessel of our human fragility (cf 2 Cor 4:7): in the tender flesh of the baby of Bethlehem, in the human word of the preacher whom not all will understand, in the tormented body of the cross on Calvary, into the Christ risen and glorified, but who still and forever keeps the signs of the nails and the wound in his side. (cf. Jn 20:25-29)

In effect, this fundamental poverty consists in the voluntary renunciation, for love of the Father and human beings who have become his brothers in flesh, of his previous divine situation and its prerogatives: his becoming like us, and therefore “poor”, limited, subject to the human creaturely reality, “in a flesh similar to that of sin”(Rm 8:3), “made inferior to the angels” (Heb 2:9), “in all things similar to his brothers” (Heb2:17), “having himself been tried in all things, like us, except in sin” (Heb 4.15)¹². Which signifies: subject to the poverty of physical pain, of the lack of goods, to having to grow and learn humanly (Lk 2:40, 52), to the passion and death; subject to the poverty of the psychic pain of misunderstanding, of not succeeding in making himself understood and accepted, of lies (Lk 11:15; Jn 6:15), of calumny, insults... Poverty which means renunciation to the divine powers in his favor, as appears in the temptations (Mt 4:3, 6, 9), at Gethsemane (Mt 26:53-54), before Caiphas (MT 26:63-74), and Pilate (Jn 18:37), on the cross (Mt 27:42-43): a constant provocation to make use of the divine powers in his favor which he had renounced! Even, once he had died, when he could no longer defend himself, he is deprived of the reason for which he had lived, and accused of what he had always refused (Jn 6:15), that is the political motive: “Pilate wrote out a notice and had it affixed to the cross; it ran: ‘Jesus the Nazarene, King of the Jews.’” (Jn 19:19) They wanted to destroy and humiliate him completely and forever, depriving him even of the possibility of vindicating his cause. The Father, however, will vindicate him, raising him up.

Summarizing, behind the external manifestations of poverty appears his deep poverty: he became as one of us to make us like him. (cf 2 Cor 8:9) And the reason for this impoverishment (l’Incarnation) is his obedience to the Father. (Heb 10:7; Jn 4:34; 5:30; Phil 2:8; Rm 5:19; Heb 5:8) Obedience, in the end, which is not slavery or oppression, but rather free expression of his unconditional love of the Father which brings him to live in a stance of unconditional love for human beings, his brothers and sisters, becoming their benefactor/ally unto death (Jn 3:16; 15:9, 12-14; 17:21-12; Mk 10:45; Phil 2:5-8): “I give my life because I want to; no one takes it from me.” (Jn 10:17-18) Starting off, then, from the external visible reality, unto the most profound reason, we see that the process is: external poverty as consequence (effect) of internal poverty (l’Incarnation), which is the consequence of his obedience to the Father, which is the consequence of his love for the Father in the intra-Trinitarian life:

“...that total gift of self which the three Divine Persons make to one another. This gift overflows into creation and is fully revealed in the Incarnation of the Word and in his redemptive death.” (VC 21c)

This is the first and final, founding reason/significance of the poverty of Christ and, therefore, of that of his disciples. The Trinitarian mystery and the mystery of salvation are a mystery of “poverty”; that is, of total donation of self, for love, to the Other.

¹² Read the stupendous Conciliar text, later cited also by the Catechism: “Since human nature as He (Christ) assumed it was not annulled, ...For by His incarnation the Son of God has united Himself in some fashion with every man. He worked with human hands, He thought with a human mind, acted by human choice, and loved with a human heart. Born of the Virgin Mary, He has truly been made one of us, like us in all things except sin.” (cf. Heb 4:15) (GS 22; CCC 470)

He was not a ghost, not either after the resurrection, as a doctor, Luke, will testify for us (cf. Col 4:14); the disciples “In a state of alarm and fright, ...thought they were seeing a ghost. But he said, ‘Why are you so agitated, and why are these doubts rising in your hearts? Look at my hands and feet; yes, it is I indeed. Touch me and see for yourselves; a ghost has no flesh and bones as you can see I have’ And as he said this he showed them his hands and feet. Their joy was so that they still could not believe it, and they stood there dumbfounded; so he said to them, ‘Have you anything here to eat?’ And they offered him a piece of grilled fish, which he took and ate before their eyes.” (Lk 24:37-43) If he was truly corporeal, not ghostly, after glorification, so much more “when I was still with you”. (v. 44)

In this way, Christ become *sthe* poor one, par excellence: no one has lived what he lived and, consequently, no one has renounced as much as He did. He gives himself completely, for love and freely (Jn 10:17-18); he lives in an attitude of total availability for what the Father wants of him, detached from all and everyone (poverty), beginning from his natural family (celibacy), in favor of the mission received (obedience). (Lk 2:49; Mt 12:49-50) And on the cross he lived the culminating moment of this poverty, responding with the most deeply rooted Biblical poverty: without possessions (material poverty), without dignity nor recognized rights (social and political poverty), oppressed by the political power (Pilate, the occupying power), and that which was infinitely more traumatic for a Hebrew, by the religious power (the Sanhedrin, the High Priest, the political-religious authority recognized by him...!); even “poor” of a Father, feeling the Father distant now, he who a little earlier had said that, even if all abandoned him, he would not be alone because the Father was with him (Jn 8:29; 16:32)... And in this situation of poverty, uprootedness and total loneliness, he reacts with a cry that is, at the same time, one of anguish (because he is human) and of trust in the Father in spite of everything, the cry of one who has become totally poor, one who is left with no power and no security outside that distant God:

“My God, my God, why did you abandon me?” (Mt 27:46; Ps 22)

Even You! Still:

“Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.” (Lk 23:46; Ps 31:6)

And thus he dies (cf VC 23). It seems to be a total failure; and, instead, it is the beginning of everything. Now the word passes to the Father, and the Father will respond soon: bringing him back to life!

This total availability to the Father unto the moment of the cross (Phil 2:5-11) had already brought him during his public life to live near and detached at the same time, in order to be free for the mission, moved by his love for the Father and his brothers and sisters. He does not avoid contact with anyone (Jn 6:37); and in fact, in the course of the Gospel we find every type of person around Jesus. At the same time, however, he keeps himself free from possessions, from relatives, from politics, from the Law, from powerful groups... His external poverty will just be an inevitable consequence, even though it wasn't sought for itself. He does not worry about being an ascetic in the Greek style; rather, he will be accused by some of the Baptist's disciples of not being austere enough (Mt 9:14; 11:18-19) even though he lived in a situation of scarce possessions and human insecurity: without his own family (Mt 19:10-12), refused by the one he was born and raised in (Mt 12:46-50), chased out by his fellow townspeople of Nazareth (Lk 4:16-30) without property (Mt 8:20), guest in a disciple's house, Peter's (Lk 4:31-41; Mk 2:1), guest of the Bethany friends (Lk 10:38-42), helped financially by some wealthy women (Lk 8:1-3), buried in a borrowed tomb (Jn 19:28; Mk 16:1; Lk 23:56)... His external poverty, in a word is not an end in itself (we are not among the Greek dualists!), but a spontaneous, consequential, free expression of love for his Father and his brothers and sisters, to the point of giving his life for them. (Mk 10:45; Jn 10:17-18; 15:13) His poverty is not, above all, a “renunciation of”, but rather a “choice in favor of”, out of love, with all the consequences, including the eventuality of death on the cross.

b) At this point, what is then the **meaning of gospel poverty in us?**

It cannot but be, in some way, like that of Christ. We can summarize its significance/meaning in three statements, each of them the consequence of the other:

1) First of all, poverty is an internal reality, an attitude and an interiorly lived reality (cf Mt 5:3), fruit and consequence of faith. Concretely, one starts off from accepting God in Christ as center and motivation of one's life; that is, the primacy of God over everything and everyone. And,

consequently, *total donation to God in Christ, as the only One necessary*. In other words – let’s remember the texts cited a little while ago – a life of poverty that:

“...proclaims that God is man’s only real treasure. When...lived according to the example of Christ who, ‘though he was rich...became poor’ (2 Cor 8:9), it becomes an expression of that *total gift of self which the three Divine Persons make to one another*.” (VC 21c)

In this way, religious:

“...imitating Christ’s *poverty*, ... profess that he is the Son who receives everything from the Father, and gives everything back to the Father in love.” (cf Jn 17:7,10) (VC 16c)

and share “an explicit desire to be totally conformed to him”. (VC 18c)

As we said earlier, the true “Christian” root of poverty is the Christological-Trinitarian dimension. For us, God/Christ is the only possession truly necessary. (cf Ps 15; Lk 10:42; VC 21c) All the rest continues to be valid and “lovable”; but, affectively and effectively, it comes later; not only goods, but also persons and even one’s own life: that’s why every Christian must put even martyrdom into the projected budget of life. (cf LG 42b, VC 86) This is the “poor person’s heart” of every disciple, the poverty requested of everyone!

The religious will live it in his/her special way, according to the characteristics of his vocation; but in reality a religious is living an element common to all Christians. His austerity of life, community sharing of goods, etc., will be nothing other than the proclaiming of this primacy of God and this availability to brothers and sisters that are typical of every Christian life.

2) In second place, Gospel poverty is *availability in behalf of the Kingdom*. This is only the consequence of what has just been said. And the practical stance of service, as well as external poverty, will be nothing other than the consequences of that interior attitude of freedom and availability to God and one’s sisters and brothers, as Christ. In fact, in imitation of him (cf Phil 2:7), the religious divests herself, empties herself, detaches herself from everything (persons: family-celibacy, goods: material poverty, and autonomy: obedience) for the purpose of remaining open and available to God and the sisters and brothers. In this regard, she first of all makes her own person (the greatest good she has) available; she gives herself unreservedly, she becomes everything to everyone. (1 Cor 9:19-23) Thus she becomes a visible representation, in history, of the total donation of Christ to his Father and humankind. Poverty, therefore, as donation, as life of charity, and not as pleasure of emptiness, as contempt for someone or something, or as simple asceticism. Asceticism, surely, will be necessary, but as an indispensable help to overcome one’s selfishness and to promote communion. As, in fact, Paul said:

“If I give away all that I possess, piece by piece, and if I even let them take my body to burn it, but am without love, it will do me no good whatever.” (1 Cor 13:3)

St. Augustine, then, will say: “*Martyres non facit poena, sed causa*”.¹³ (“It isn’t the suffering that makes the martyr, but the intention.”[?]) The Christian faith is not a mystery of renunciation or asceticism, nor of pain; but of love and communion (1 Jn 1:3), because that is how God is (1 Jn 4:8, 16); that is how he manifests himself (Jn 3:16f) and that is how he has sanctified us. (Rm 5:5)

In this way, the life of the religious is called to become a state of overall and unconditional availability, or service, solidarity, simplicity, unbounded generosity (cf. VC 104-105), flexibility, continual uprooting according to the characteristics of each charism. He/she becomes a particularly kind, free, simple and available brother/sister. A “professional” of availability, and sharing, “expert at communion”. (cf RPU 24, RD 5, VC 46a) In fact, he places at God’s and humanity’s disposition

¹³ S. AGOSTINO, *Enarr. in Psal. 34, 13*.

(obedience) , his person, his life (the only one he has!), his love (celibacy) his things (external poverty), his gifts, his time. For him/her any form of individualism, of closing in on self, selfishness, lack of openness, denial of a word or human relationship, lack of collaboration, laziness, comfort, etc., are all faults against evangelical poverty, because it means that he does not give, does not share, something that he could give! That's why evangelical poverty also involves, obviously!, the economic reality; but it engages much more than the billfold: life and the person, whole and entire!

3) It has already been said, but let's repeat it: **poverty means sharing of goods**. Let us remember that the ideal of the Jerusalem community, paradigm of Christian poverty, was not the lack of goods, but the sharing of what there was. (cf. Acts 2:42-47: 4:32; 5:16) For the Christian, as a matter of fact, goods are not an evil, but a good to be shared, a means for living and expressing communion.

In the religious this means a double type of sharing and a double type of goods: 1) a sharing within the group or community, among its members, that is, fraternal life (VFC 44e-h) and toward the external; that is, the apostolic mission (VFC 59); 2) and two types of goods: the material and human goods, and the spiritual goods. Each person gives what she can give, welcomes the other as she is and is disposed to receive. Fraternal life and the specific mission are therefore none other than manifestations of evangelical poverty.

Then, regarding external poverty, this becomes secondary and inevitable at the same time. Secondary, because the important thing is interior poverty; inevitable because the human being is a unique reality and, therefore, simplicity of life and austerity become an indispensable help for rendering interior poverty possible and credible. That is why, even though secondary, it is the test-bed (history shows that!) of interior and theological poverty. When we *are* poor, it cannot fail to be reflected in how much we *have*. Even though, when referring to the more exterior and material aspects, we will need to keep in mind:

- 1- the historical moment in which we live,
- 2- the place or society in which we find ourselves,
- 3- and the charism and mission to be carried out.

What might be austere in one era, place or according to one charism, might not be so in another or for another. Creative fidelity to one's own vocational roots (cf VC 36-37) and a watchful and critical attention to the signs of the times (cf VC 87-92) will tell us how it must be understood and lived.

3. A few practical clues for a differentiated and not always easy lived experience, from both the charismatic and social points of view.

Here I would simply like to make a couple of partial and practical suggestions. For the rest, I recommend both the recent documents of the Magisterium (PC 13, ET 16-20, CDC 600, 610, 634-640, 668-670, EE III 20-21, RD 12, PI 14, VFC 28, 44, VC 82, 89-90, RdC 8, 13, 17, 22, 34, 35, 45), as well as every group's Rules, Constitutions and Directories.

It is not easy to offer suggestions on how to live poverty today. The reason is the diversity of circumstances, but also the inconsistency in which we often find ourselves, both in the area of works and of formation of individuals. On the one hand, in their constitutional and chapter documents, Institutes insist on a radicalism both in personal lived experience and in reaching out to the poor; on the other hand, we are in a society that offers us new and useful possibilities, for example, in the area of formation/education; but also it continually pushes us, and almost without

our realizing it, toward a consumerism and progressive “bourgeois-ism” that is one of the most serious and urgent problems of consecrated life today. A mentality contrary to a poor and even austere life, that tries daily to take hold of us and in ways, sometimes brazen and sometimes devious, creating “needs and rights” that don’t stand up in face of constitutional and chapter criteria. And I would also recall that all of this, thanks to the means of social communication, does not have closed boundaries; that is, it does not condition only religious of active life but also contemplatives, the religious of the First World, but also quite a few of the Third World... and these latter, both when they are at our place and when they return to their homes.

Having said this, I would like to look concretely at three prompts/clues that I will leave for your reflection.

1) In the first place, *some contradictory situations* in which poverty – especially collective – not rarely finds itself in today’s consecrated life. For example; works that are more or less grandiose, or with a more lucrative than apostolic purpose, which we built no doubt with a lot of hard work and sacrifice in the ‘50s and ‘60s (and also recently!); physical facilities which didn’t enjoy (maybe it was impossible) that prophetic farsightedness that would have been desirable, but which, due to a change of mentality and scarcity of vocations, become rather a burden or counter-witness. Places where, sometimes, an ever-decreasing number of religious among an ever-increasing number of paid lay workers carry on a work which, gradually, is reduced to an administrative or marginal role. It becomes extremely difficult, and not rarely disagreeable and unedifying (certain colleges, hospitals, farms/estates, boarding homes, hotels, apartments, offices...)

It is necessary to have the courage to discern, according to evangelical and numerical possibilities, and decide. We have been saying this for many years, and are only taking steps with great difficulty. This means also having to close or transform venerable and venerated works, but which have lost the evangelical value they could have in other times; and not only because we can’t manage to continue them because of decreasing numbers, but also because it is necessary to open others according to one’s charism and the “new social poverties”.

On the other hand, sometimes – as I said – individual religious are supporting heroic schedules and jobs in those works. The testimony of an individual person, however, gets nullified by the counter-witness (at least apparent) of the Institute or community. In the same way, as at times, there are also religious, exemplarily poor (as there are even those of high middle class), but who don’t do anything, or much less than they could do.

There are, therefore, religious exploited by the congregational or ecclesial institution. Think of certain work schedules in some hospitals, residences and parishes. Pastors and bishops who take advantage and then pay badly or nothing for the services of women religious. Superiors who exploit their subjects with the excuse of a “spirit of sacrifice” and that it is necessary to carry on a work that no longer has a future, etc. Students who don’t succeed in studying as they’ve been commanded, because they have to do “a ton” of other things in the house... Exploiting the person of the religious is always anti-Christian, as it also is for a religious to exploit the institution by living off others’ hard work. The religious must surely collaborate in community life, as he also has right to a bit of rest, to be able to pray in peace, experience community brotherhood/sisterhood, nourish his/her ongoing formation (cf. CDC 659-661, PI 58-71), according to the characteristics of each Institute. (cf VC 69-71) Communities must not become residences for workers who are more or less stressed, bad-tempered and loners. Work is surely an obligation for all; but exploitation or exhaustion are not good for anyone. Then, perhaps, we are amazed if a religious who is burned out goes into crisis... If we tell families that married couples must spend time with each other and with their children, it is necessary to apply this also to religious.

2) Another problem is *how to form for poverty* today. There is the danger of offering those in formation so many possibilities, helps and conveniences (money, work tools, travel, entertainment, etc.) as to prepare them in a mistaken way for a life of joyous abnegation, as their religious life will have to be later. Certainly, we are not preparing a good future for the Institute and for the Church if candidates grow up humanly and spiritually weak, unmotivated, extravagant or too comfortable. An impending danger not only in case of a candidate born and raised in a sometimes lower economic situation, and who now is “richer” than before, and with a vow of poverty. (cf. PO 9a, RPU 23-24, PI 14, VC 65-68)

Obviously, if it is possible and prudent, as well as in conformity with one’s charism and mission, the new religious should be offered those possibilities of human, cultural and spiritual formation that maybe weren’t available preceding generations, but which today are considered worthwhile and even necessary. In other words, it isn’t valid to say “In my times... this wasn’t there, we didn’t have it, it wasn’t necessary...”, and therefore “neither you...” Life changes, history moves on. Nevertheless, I think we should not be afraid to hold back on the possible youthful request for ever newer and more sophisticated means, or to continual experiences which just lead to dispersion, to flitting around here and there, to superficiality, to beginning many things but concluding little or nothing, or to neglecting the formation of the will, the spirit of personal or community prayer, or collaboration with other brothers or sisters in the tasks, also menial ones, of the community of the Institute.

The person in formation needs, at this time in life, a strong experience of community life, among other things. And this does not happen if individuals are left almost alone, as if their formator didn’t know how or didn’t have the strength to direct their formation, or because he is too taken up with other “interesting” or gratifying activities. (cf PI 28) This can happen especially in the masculine world. Or, on the contrary, the formator is so omnipresent that she/he doesn’t let the candidates “breathe”, have their initiatives and responsibilities (when maybe before entrance they had already had social and apostolic responsibilities!), or when the formator- candidate relationship risks suffocating the candidate-community relationship, which can happen especially in the feminine world.

In addition, it is true that the candidate must, to some extent, experience (like his peers and even more so) the cost of living and that he has to earn his bread. In the formation house there’s the risk of keeping the candidate in a type of unreal and anti-formative greenhouse, while his peers normally are working hard! That way he is not formed for the future, but made childish, kept in an immature and socially false condition. The convent cannot become the “great mother” who has to see to giving everything to her “little children”! But, it’s not said that to avoid this, the candidate has to necessarily go out to a salary-type job outside; even studying, teaching religion, working at the reception desk, cleaning community areas, and other similar tasks, are valid ways for earning one’s keep. Let’s not forget that there are no *unworthy or humiliating* jobs or services for anyone, if charity and humility are involved... And this, not only, however, in the case of candidates; but also for adults, whether or not they have titles or important roles. Suffice it to look at the life of many founders, and especially at Christ, “the Lord and Master”, (Jn 13:14), washing the feet of the disciples and exhorting them to wash each others’ (Jn 13:1-17), to wait on each other (cf. Mk 10:35-45), as VC 75 reminds us. And if some custom or culture would not allow all of this, it would have to be transformed, evangelized and converted, if it wants to be considered “Christian”.

3) Finally, **we must not confuse the spirit of evangelical poverty with misery or the lack of joy and happiness.** When persons enter religious life, they are seeking what they believe will be their happiness, not only spiritual, but also human! It would be the same as entering a mistaken street, to

highlight or understand the radicality of consecrated life as a species of masochism disguised as spirituality, earthly purgatory, or a denying oneself any type of satisfaction while awaiting eternal blessedness... The religious, like every other Christian, must surely accept courageously the joys and renunciations of their vocation; but, she must also be able to demonstrate and proclaim by her life that consecration to God and to others makes her happy, not only spiritually, but also humanly! There is no worse counter-witness than that of an immature, infantile, unsatisfied, frustrated, irritable, sullen or sad religious. Read what VFC 28 says very well on this.

In fact, one does not follow the Risen Lord along the road of an interminable Good Friday, but rather in the Paschal and human joy of belonging totally to him. The religious does not make a vow of perpetual despondency, just as he does not consecrate himself to God to avoid family troubles. His life will be simple, austere, hard-working and responsible, serene, realistic and joyous, humanly and Christianly mature, and thus be as available as possible to God and to others.

So, it is not a question either of becoming worldly or of noise and chaos, nor of creating an atmosphere of continuous partying in community; but, that deep, adult and mature joy, that comes from faith, which illumines the life of the religious and helps him to embrace decisively, lovingly and realistically, both the joy of living and the risks and difficulties of every human life, and his, concretely. "I know in whom I have believed", as Paul said (2 Tm 1:12). This is the inexhaustible source of the seriousness and depth of his life and, at the same time, of his joy and serenity.

I am convinced that these are some of the aspects – among others – of the witness that our world is expecting of us today, as far as poverty is concerned. We cannot cheat it. It has a right to our consistency and fidelity, because our life is a gift that God has given to them in us. We cannot disappoint either them or God.

J. Rovira, cmf.