

The Challenges facing International Societies of Apostolic Life Today

Address to the XIX General Assembly CPPS

Introduction

To speak about the challenges facing “International Societies of Apostolic Life Today”, we must understand the concrete meaning of these words. So, I would take the word “challenge” to mean both a threat and an opportunity. The word “international” is a word of shifting meaning. A decade or so ago it meant the rich diversity of a similar presence throughout the world. Today, it would refer also to the forces that tend to diminish diversity, forces promoted by the opportunities and the ambiguities of globalisation. Such forces can be both a threat and an opportunity for Societies of Apostolic Life. The essential characteristics of a Society of Apostolic Life are:

- a unique apostolic project;
- a specific type of fraternal life in community;
- an aspiration for the perfection of charity;
- a particular rule of life;
- without religious vows.

Then there is the little word “today”, a little word with a big meaning. “Today” refers to the present state of affairs, the actual situation. Where am I now? Which influences are moving me, and in which direction. This can also mean the hidden situation, perhaps a situation regarding which we have little or no awareness.

Therefore, I think that for the purposes of this talk we can take the word “today” to mean: *a real presence; a focused attention; a connectedness to all the essentials, spiritual and apostolic, that are part of your authentic identity.* To put it in other words, for the sake of greater clarity: “today” is the evangelical attention, by means of faith and reason, that we give, offer, and dedicate, to all that is happening in every moment of our history. At the end of this talk, my hope would be that each of you will have an enriched consciousness of the deep and evangelical meaning of the phrase – “... to be a **real presence**”.

2. In a world of ever-greater participation in decision-making, in a world where free speech and freedom of choice are declared human rights, it is also true that, today, people are becoming aware of the weakness and fragility of such freedoms. In order that people might vote for truth and not for self-interest, we must have a permanently focused connectedness with the spiritual essentials of the revival of faith and the re-enkindling of charity. The mystic lets God decide. The mystic is one who ponders the hidden meaning of God’s word wherever he or she is. The mystic is a cornerstone that can cope with any future, while at the same time avoiding being trapped in any past. There is a universal call to holiness. Holiness is another word for mysticism. Authentic apostles are mystical. Authentic mystics are apostolic – two sides of the one evangelical coin. These reflections were in my mind as I prepared this address. I will now speak of some of the challenges that I feel are very essential if any Institute is to succeed in maintaining a dynamic fidelity to one’s spiritual and apostolic heritage. I hope that these reflections can help animate the discussions and illuminate your reflections with all the gifts of the Holy Spirit.

3. The first contemporary challenge I wish to present is very central to the very nature of being a Christian. It applies to every Society of Apostolic Life because each Apostolic Society is a way of being Church. The soul, the driving force and *essential constituent* of each and

every religious community has to be *the authentic spirit of the most perfect love*. This is love according to Chapter thirteen of the First Letter of St. Paul to the Corinthians. By means of such love, our Societies participates in the dynamic process of the merciful love of the Holy Trinity. We know this love when we know and follow Jesus Christ, Apostle of the Eternal Father. In those hearts where charity is not well formed, Jesus Christ is not to be found. In this context, the word “heart” refers to the centre of man, the place where the unity of man is found, and symbol of the love that saves (cf. Herbert Vorgrimler, *Nuovo Dizionario Teologico*, EDB 2004). The desire of the heart of God is his covenant of infinite love and mercy with all of humankind. In other words, the love of God is unconditional love. Jesus is the incarnation of this love, and as the Father sent him, so he sends us, to love with the love of God (cf. Jn. 20:21). However, the word love, in the world of today, has become a very ambiguous word. Why is this?

4. Before we can build a civilisation of love in the world of today, that being our clear call as Christians, it is first of all necessary to look at the contemporary understanding of the word love. In a recent left-wing political journal (UK), an article appeared with the title: “How we forgot the art of loving” (cf. *New Statesman*, 14 February 2005). The article is based on the writings of the social philosopher, Erich Fromm, writing more than fifty years ago. According to Fromm, “every society produces the character it needs”. Early Calvinistic capitalism produced the “hoarding character”. Postwar capitalism produced the “marketing character” that “adapts to the marketing economy by becoming detached from authentic emotions, truth and conviction”. For the marketing character “everything is transformed into a commodity, not only things, but the person himself, his physical energy, his skills, his knowledge, his opinions, his feelings, even his smiles”. The conclusion of the article is “that fifty years on, contemporary, turbo-capitalist Britain confirms the belief that a healthy economy is possible only at the price of unhealthy human beings”. Yes, there has been an unprecedented period of economic growth. Yet, mental health has declined sharply. More than two million people are on anti-depressants, and “acts of destruction” – violence, self-abuse and vandalism – have reached record levels. Success is seen in purely material terms. Human well-being is no longer the priority. We are encouraged to view all human contacts and contracts as expendable, to be “traded in” whenever we can get a better deal.

5. I am sure that one should not run to the easier conclusion, by simply blaming capitalism, or some other ideology for all our problems. However, one cannot just passively wait for change for the better to spontaneously happen. We must creatively await, hope and expect. We must have no fear. It is more a question of being aware of the real dangers and challenges of various economic and cultural systems and then having the courage to take up the challenges of new evangelisation and re-evangelisation. There are indeed many signs today indicating that the Church can respond, and is doing so. The great question for our communities: How can we concretise the desire of the heart of God? It is first of all necessary to have a clear understanding of what we mean by the word “concretise”. It does not mean having an opinion, or having an interest or hobby. It means having an intimate relationship with God’s word, knowing one’s personal vocation, concrete objectives, all of course directed to the task of evangelisation. I will give a partial response to this question, and I challenge the Chapter to amplify and develop this response.

6. We can concretise the desire of the heart of God in the following ways:

- a) We must love as God loves. We must love as Jesus loves. We must love as our Founder loved. To do this we must have concrete and solid programmes of formation for all members, formation that transforms;
- b) An apostle is one who is sent. Every authentic Christian community becomes ever more missionary. Members of the new movements and Associations of the faithful feel the call to be missionaries. On the contrary, many traditional Institutes suffer a grave, if not fatal, decline in vocations, and in genuine missionary thrust.. There is a growth in individualism. Instead of love as compassion and mercy becoming concrete mission initiatives, we have the lethargy of passivity and maintenance;
- c) We can also concretise the desire of the heart of God by attending to the priority of developing a family of vocations around the ecclesial content of the charism of the founder. When the meaning of the great Christian word “love”, is ambiguous, the greatest victim is the family. God’s love is compassion, that is, the will and wish to suffer with whoever suffers. God’s love is mercy; the will and wish to be a suffering heart “of precious blood”, (i.e. genuinely life giving) before the suffering of another. To be Christian means having a heartfelt love that is a fundamental option for the other. When love is self-centred, family has very little chance of survival. In many European countries, the average life of a marriage is between 7 and 11 years. The same reality is emerging for vocations to the Consecrated Life. Family is in crisis. This has to be one of our greatest priorities. Indeed, it is surprising today the number of people who do not believe that stable family life is the very cornerstone of progress and survival. It is important that we listen to the appeal of the European Synod of Bishops (cf. EE 94): “*Families, become what you are ... a living sign of God’s love ... a sanctuary of life ... the foundation of Society*”. It is said that the rapid development of the age of technology is the main cause of the present crisis of the family. Technology is leading to individualism, a phenomenon that leads to the attempt to be self-sufficient persons, an attempt that leads to the isolation of the person. Even the great symbolic meeting-place – the meal table is all too often an abandoned table. The crisis of the family is having negative effects on all vocations, on concepts such as solidarity and community/communion. When the family table is empty, the Eucharistic Table will also be empty – that is what seems to be happening in many places. “*Evidence of the loosening of family bonds is unequivocal*” (cf. Robert D. Putman, *Bowling Alone*, (Simon and Schuster, 2000). On the basis of such evidence, it is no exaggeration to say that the crisis of the family (within our communities and beyond) has to be one of the main priorities for the future;
- d) Last, but not least, I would like to draw your attention to number 43 of the Church’s programme for the Third Millennium (Novo Millennio Ineunte; Pope John Paul II, 6 January 2001). The title of this number is: A spirituality of Communion — To make the Church *the home and the school of communion*. Our fidelity to this programme would be one of the best possible ways of implementing our understanding of “Family of God”. I would like to refer your attention to the five more important indications of the text. 1) *A spirituality of communion indicates above all the heart’s contemplation of the mystery of the Trinity dwelling in us, and whose light we must be able to see shining on the face of the brothers and sisters around us.* 2) *A spirituality of communion also means an ability to think of our brothers and sisters in faith within the profound unity of the Mystical Body, and therefore as ‘those who are a part of me’.* 3) *A spirituality of communion implies also the ability to see what is positive in others, to welcome it and prize it as a gift from God.* 4) *A spirituality of communion means to know how to ‘make room’ for our brothers and sisters, bearing ‘each other’s burdens’*

and resisting the selfish temptations which constantly beset us and provoke competition, careerism, distrust and jealousy. 5) Let us have no illusions: unless we follow this spiritual path, external structures of communion will serve very little purpose. They would become mechanisms without a soul, 'masks' of communion rather than its means of expression and growth.

7. The following challenges are much more specific. This does not mean that they are of less importance. They are vitally important. When one aspect of the organism is non-functioning or mal-functioning, the full expression of the entire organism is compromised. These reflections are based on my own experiences of my own community:

a) VOCATIONAL IDENTITY

I entered a Pallottine Minor Seminary at the age of 14. By the time I entered the Novitiate at the age of 19 I already had a strong Pallottine identity. Perseverance was strengthened by family support. In difficult times there was the temptation to leave, but it was harder to leave in those days and so you had the benefit of perseverance to overcome such difficulties.

Today, the situation is very different. Imagine a young person very involved in the charismatic prayer movement. After high school he joins our community. He is happy for a while. Then both he and the formation team experience frustration. The candidate, justifiably so, has a great nostalgia for the charismatic way and strives to experience it as much as possible. The formation team will find it difficult to inculcate a strong identity with the charism of the Institute. This is currently causing many problems. Many of such vocations leave in the first few years after ordination. However, this is not the case with the Associations of the Faithful. A vocation from the Sant'Egidio community remains within the spiritual and charismatic atmosphere of the community during formation and also after ordination. The challenge for apostolic communities is to move towards "Family" or "Association" identity. I believe this is the only way to the future. However, I am also aware that there is not great support for such ideas from the clerical branches of such apostolic Families. It is my conviction that this challenge must be addressed, in order to guarantee a future.

b) COMMUNITY CRISIS

With the decline in spiritual exercises together, recreation together, dining together, there is an ever-growing development of individualism in our communities. The very dining-room table is under threat. The concepts of hospitality and welcoming each other is weakening. The same phenomenon is hitting the family world-wide. The resulting individualism leads to not really knowing and understanding one another. Being nice to one another does not mean knowing or respecting one another. Instant coffee with instant, disposable friends can only further destroy community. Even language is changing in order to accommodate to the new reality of relationships. I once asked an old man in his nineties if he knew a famous local political figure. He gave me a wonderful answer: "I had a knowledge of him, but I didn't know him". Today "we know" everyone. However, what we really mean is that "we have a knowledge" of them. There is a universe of difference between the two phrases.

On the other hand, again the ecclesial movements have a very rich experience of communion, community, family and faith-sharing. It is my conviction that the problem to be resolved (with reference to my own community) is to look at the role of the Rector of the Local Community (the responsible for the smallest entity of the Institute). Personal responsibility does not solve problems – it gives freedom. Every group has to have a person with the authority to call the family, the members, together.

In my experience there are at least three types of Community Rector, or Moderator. 1) The Professional – He is a hyper competent administrator. All details of community administration are communicated in detail. He has many other duties. But, he is not present. Everything is organised, posted on the notice-board, but, he is not present; 2) The Co-ordinator – He is present, but takes no responsibility for the questions and problems of the members. In such cases, the Provincial has to take the place of the Local Rector; 3) The Real Presence – This is the Rector who is forever present for the members. This is an urgent priority of the future.

c) INTERNATIONAL COLLABORATION

In countries with few vocations, it make good sense to try and have international centres whereby there can be the experience of community and the presence of a team of formators. It's not just possible to offer a programme to one or two candidates.

A more complex and perhaps more urgent matter is the need of pastoral or missionary collaboration between different Provinces and Vicariates of the Society. I had a good deal of experience with this need and with experiments to make it a viable response to a growing need. The best way I can explain the fruit of various experiences is to share with you two concrete projects. About 15 years ago, three young priests from Province A went to help Province B. In the same year 3 young priests also from Province A went to open a new mission in country C. Fifteen years later, of the three who went to Province B, 2 are now diocesan priests and the third has left the priesthood. Of the three who went to open a new mission - the three have become s community of at least 18, including a formation programme. There was one essential difference between the two initiatives. Those who went to Province B went to help an ageing community and their collaboration was under the direction of those ageing members. The young members had no real space for their own initiatives and so they became very frustrated in a short time. Those who founded the new mission had space. Space gave them confidence. They became founders. There is a valid lesson here. Collaboration needs a just space in order for both sides to benefit from such projects for the good of the mission of the Church and the charism of the Institute.

d) SPIRITUAL ANIMATION

Again, I want to just speak from my experience. By animation all the initiatives that go into “keeping the members spiritually alive and enthusiastic”. That would be my definition of on-going formation. From my knowledge of a number of the ecclesial movements I have come to realise that more than 95% of spiritual on-going formation takes place within the community setting. Spiritual animation is totally within the community. This is the very life-blood of the movements. They are not going out to others for help and they grow in confidence to help each other. I can see the need certain kinds of technical ongoing formation outside the community. However, I think it is better when the community itself can provide all the spiritual animation required for its healthy spiritual and apostolic development. Also, when we take a look at the immense amount of resources invested into on-going formation since the Second Vatican Council, I can't see a corresponding result. I don't say that it has been a failure, but I would argue that it has been totally inadequate. That is not an opinion. The results speak for themselves, especially in the areas of spiritual and community renewal.

e) INTER-RELIGIOUS DIALOGUE, ECUMENISM

The world is rapidly changing and, especially, Inter-Religious Dialogue is rapidly becoming the priority of the moment. The globalisation of migration means that, outside of the Islamic world, every village will be more and more multicultural, multiethnic and multi-religious. The lack of contact with others leads to them feeling apart, isolated. Some become home-grown foreign terrorists. All those who are permanently ignored at least become resentful. This is relatively new mission territory.

f) REAL COLLABORATION WITH LAY FAITHFUL

Where I live, the people's definition of the Church is the Pope and the Bishops, and they don't like that particular Church. In South America recently, Cardinal Humes described the crisis of the Church there as being in the midst of greatest Catholic haemorrhage since the Reformation. On a visit to Bolivia some years ago, I stayed at a hotel in La Cruz. The priest with me told me about the family who owned the hotel, how once they were very good Catholics and then became members of a sect. I had the opportunity to speak with the grandmother of the family. I asked her why she and her family has left the Catholic Church. She said to me very simply that in the Church she is now attending, she has a sense of belonging, she has responsibility, and she has the opportunity to participate in the planning. I feel there is a lot of lay disaffection with the Church. Now, Pope John Paul II, in two different documents, wrote that it will by means of the charisms of consecrated Life and of apostolic Life that the true role of the lay faithful will be revealed. This is a very fundamental challenge for us for the future. The Church must not become a caste system. Mind you, there are signs of a growing clericalism in the Church. Here, we have a great opportunity and obligation to get involved in deep communion with the lay faithful. The lay faithful, this sleeping giant has to be rescued from its chronic passivity.

8. Conclusion

"By their fruits you shall know them" (Mt. 7:16). The great challenge for your community is to be a credible witness of its heritage and convictions. This cannot be done in a rush. We must *"bring forth fruit with patience"* (Lk. 8:15), bearing in mind that *"the fruit of the spirit is love"* (Gal. 5:22). Finally, if we want to live, we must learn to die. *"Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit"* (in. 12:24). We must die to self, transforming carnal self into a *"newness of life"* (Rom. 6:4).

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