

CIRCULAR LETTER 14

Reflections on VI PCO (Part One of a series)

“... THAT SUBLIME HEIGHT OF MOST EXALTED POVERTY”

(Later Rule VI, 4)

Dear brothers and sisters,

“This is that sublime height of most exalted poverty which has made you ... heirs and kings of the Kingdom of Heaven ... which leads into the land of the living” (LR VI, 4-5).

1.1 One year ago, brothers gathered in Assisi to celebrate the Sixth Plenary Council of the Order focusing on the theme *“Living Poverty in Brotherhood.”* Conferences throughout the Order are now conducting regional assemblies to reflect upon the proposals put forth by the plenary council and the rich spirituality they contain. I wish to add my own reflections which are the fruit of dialogue with many brothers and fraternal gatherings in various regions of the world. I begin with PROPOSAL 2 which presents St. Francis’ vision of the ***height of most exalted poverty:***

St. Francis’ fundamental intention was to “observe the Holy Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ” (LR I, 1). It was in the Incarnation and the Cross that he saw the pattern of his radical attitude, which was: “Holdback nothing of yourselves for yourselves” (see LOrd 29). This means, first of all, recognising that all the good that is in us and is accomplished through us is a gift of God, and that therefore we must return it to God in praise and thanks giving second component of this radical self-giving is more painful: that “we may know with certainty that nothing belongs to us except our vices and sins” (ER XVII, 7). To these Francis adds a third, equally demanding element: “We must rejoice ... when we fall into various trials and ... suffer every kind of anguish or distress of soul and body” (ER XVII, 8) and “can boast in weaknesses and in carrying each day the holy cross of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Adm V, 8).

The Heart of Discipleship: “Come, follow me”

2.1 There is a striking similarity between the encounter of Jesus and Nicodemus in the third chapter of the Gospel of John and that of Jesus and the rich man in the tenth chapter of Mark’s gospel. Both Nicodemus and the rich man are in search of some deeper meaning in life and both look to Jesus to discover that meaning. Nicodemus asks an implied question: *“Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God”* (Jn 3:2). The rich man – as befits one secure in his wealth – is more direct: “Good Teacher; what must I do to inherit eternal life?” (Mk 10:17). Both Nicodemus and the rich man seek to possess the “eternal life” offered by Jesus, his way of relating both to people and to the realities of life.

2.2 Jesus informs both men that *“eternal life”* requires radical change! Jesus is very blunt in regard to the rich man: *“It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God”* (Mk 10:25). Nicodemus immediately understands the difficulty: *“How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?”* (Jn 3:4). Jesus reveals to the rich man – and also to us – what it is that will open the human heart to the world of eternal life: *“Go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, ... then come, follow me”* (Mk 10:21). And in this, Jesus points the way to a new network of relationships with people and with the goods of the earth. *“Sell what you own, and give the money to the poor”* is how we enter upon such discipleship. The many possessions which impeded discipleship in the rich man were more than just material; they included power: control over one’s own giftedness, control over one’s neighbors, and the ability to demand all that leads to one’s personal convenience and well-being.

2.3 *“Come, follow me!”* Both Nicodemus and the rich man were expecting answers and solutions, explanations and directions – all of which they received, and much more! Namely, they received an invitation to a personal relationship with Jesus. Everything prior to the point when Jesus says to the rich man *“Come, follow me”* can be found elsewhere. What is unique and distinctive is the invitation to a personal relationship with Jesus in a community

of disciples. Mark goes on to explain the consequences of living the choice of discipleship: *“There is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake and for the sake of the good news, who will not receive **a hundred fold now in this age – houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children ...** – and in the age to come eternal life”* (Mk 10: 28-30). Discipleship is an experience that will totally transform our manner of relating to ourselves and our own giftedness, to the earth and its riches, to our neighbors in their dignity, and to God as our Father! Perhaps the rich man was open to receiving a new set of beliefs and outlook on life, but the risk of intimacy with a God who *“hears the cry of his people and comes down to deliver them”* (Ex 3: 7-8) proved too much for him. Intimacy requires a surrender of power and control. The discipleship Jesus described facilitates such intimacy. Through the experience of intimacy with a loving God we are “born again.” There is no other way.

Poverty’s “Purpose”: That we might be lesser brothers

3.1 It is precisely the discipleship described in Mark 10 which Francis describes in Chapter Six of the Rule. Faithful to the command of Jesus, the brothers must sell all they have: *“Let the brothers not make anything their own, neither house, nor place, nor anything at all”* (LR VI, 1). Discipleship – the *“sublime height of most exalted poverty”* – will make them *“heirs and kings of the Kingdom of Heaven,”* and lead them *“into the land of the living”* (LR VI, 4). The *“sublime height of most exalted poverty”* will result in the “hundredfold” promised in Mark. Francis translates that “hundredfold” with amazing concreteness:

*“Giving yourselves totally to this, beloved brothers, never seek anything else under heaven for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Wherever the brothers may be and meet one another, let them show that they are members of the same family. **Let each one confidently make known his need to the other,** for if a mother loves and cares for her son according to the flesh, how much more diligently must someone love and care for his brother according to the Spirit! When any brother falls sick, **the other brothers must serve him as they would wish to be served themselves”** (LR VI, 7-9).*

3.2 It is highly significant and suggestive that Francis describes the “*sublime height of most exalted poverty*” not in Chapter Four of the Rule where he describes our relationship to money (the Constitutions characterize this chapter as the chapter on “Poverty”), but in Chapter Six where he describes the human relationships which will result from this new economy (the Constitutions characterize this chapter as a chapter on “Brotherhood”). PROPOSAL 3 points out that the “*sublime height of most exalted poverty*” embodies three great principles which constitute us as disciples and enable us to relate to the goods of the earth and to one another in the same manner in which Jesus related to the goods of the earth and to his followers. The disciples Jesus must:

“hold back nothing of yourselves for yourselves” (LOrd 29) – since all good in us comes from God and must be returned to God in service, praise and thanksgiving;

have the conviction that “*nothing belongs to us except our vices and sins*” (ER XII, 7) – which gives birth to humility before God, our neighbor, and creation;

and, carry “*each day the holy cross of our Lord Jesus Christ*” (Adm V, 8) – with a willingness to redeem the world by sharing in the sufferings that result from giving birth to new life.

3.3 For this reason PROPOSAL 3 indicates that evangelical poverty is an essential dimension of a larger and more fundamental Franciscan choice – that of minority: “to be ‘lowly’ is a genuine manifestation of interior poverty ... [as is] humility of heart and lack of power (see Adm. II, 3; III; IV; VI, 4; etc.), and solidarity with those in need and those deprived”. An interesting study published in *Italia Francescana* suggests that when Francis used the word “poverty” in his writings, he was speaking in opposition to “power” rather than “riches.” The object of evangelical poverty is to open us to the experience of being *minors* – lesser brothers – and to protect that identity. This insight is confirmed by one of the most reliable witnesses to the Christian tradition, St. Thomas Aquinas. In his treatise on justice, he points out that greed is a spiritual sin, not a carnal sin. Greed – he indicates – is about wanting to see myself as someone who owns things, and finding great delight in that. In other words, it is about creating a false identity around power and control with serious consequences for the human community (see II, IIae, q. 118, Art. 6).

The Door to Discipleship: “o, sell what you own”

4.1 PROPOSAL 3 suggests a hierarchy of values with regard to minority and poverty, while nonetheless underscoring the necessity of poverty: “*Without minority, our poverty would have no meaning.*” Francis heard an emphatic call: “*Go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor.*” This demand of Jesus is, therefore, the door to discipleship and as such, becomes the first stipulation of Chapter Six of the Rule: “*Let the brothers not make anything their own, neither house, nor place, nor anything at all*” (LR VI, 1). PROPOSAL 6 indicates that Francis’ poverty embraced the following very precise and pointed economic choices:

– the non-use of money,

- the non-appropriation of goods and property,
- manual work as the ordinary means of support and help to others, and recourse to alms in case of manifest necessity.

4.2 The economic choices which gave substance and direction to the poverty of Francis and his early companions were made in response to a concrete and critical appraisal of the social and religious conditions of the society of their day. They judged that “greed and avarice disrupt relationships with God,” and that “ambition and competition damage the sense of brotherhood among people” (PROPOSAL 6). As a result, the early Franciscans made specific economic choices which would protect their identity as “lesser brothers,” living fraternally among themselves and with their neighbors.

Those choices were also a conscious break with the more obvious injustices of the growing market economy of their day which was based on the appropriation of power and wealth by the few to the exclusion of the many. Their choice of poverty was a choice for discipleship, that is, to relate to one another and to their neighbors after the manner of Jesus. It was a conscious choice for a more fraternal world, a more human world. It is important to remember that their choice was nourished and strengthened by the mystery of the Eucharist, in which they experienced themselves as one in the Body of Christ. By its economic choices the early Franciscan fraternity did *not* embrace *insecurity*, but rather, by those choices the brothers established a new basis *for* human security and freedom. Assisi was building security based on the appropriation of property and power by a few to the exclusion of the many. Francis and his companions built a new security based on mutual dependence and brotherly solidarity.

Theirs was an alternate economy which, paradoxically, built a stronger basis for human security than the emerging market economy of their day.

What we need to do now: Make Critical Choices

5.1 The destructive human and social effects which Francis noticed in the market economy of his day persist today, and if anything, in more exaggerated fashion: “*Greed and avarice disrupt relationships with God ... ambition and competition damage the sense of brotherhood among people.*” However, the global economy of our day is different than the market economy of 13th-century Assisi, both in its scale and in its complexity. Today’s economic choices – whereby we give flesh to evangelical poverty and in that way

Embrace discipleship – will necessarily differ significantly from the choices of the early Franciscans. The goal is the same; the implementation will differ. In order to do what Francis did, we have to do it differently.

Concretely, for example, the meaning and role of money, and the way in which private property is viewed in today’s society, are radically than what they were when the early Franciscans made the choice to prohibit the use of money and to exclude the ownership of property. Therefore, an essential objective of the plenary council was to discern and characterize contemporary economic choices which would keep us faithful as disciples, protect our privileged identity as lesser brothers, and separate us from the more obvious and flagrant injustices of today’s global economy. The choices proposed by the plenary council were the following:

- austerity of life;
- commitment to work;
- solidarity and mutual dependence;
- a life rooted in the experience of the people, particularly the poor;
- correct use and administration of goods and property; and
- *commitment to sustainable growth* (see PROPOSAL 6).

Where to begin: Ask for God's grace

6.1 The delegates to the Sixth Plenary Council rightly concluded that these choices, when lived in conscious fidelity, would constitute a valid evangelical witness to our world:

“We must live and give witness to our gospel form of life, which, for all its weakness, wishes to counter the prevailing economic system by putting forward a more genuinely human way: with its values of simplicity, gratuitousness, the will to serve, respect for persons and for creation”

(PROPOSAL 7).

6.2 The critical choices contained in the proposals of the Sixth Plenary Council are indeed capable of transforming our relationships and of renewing our sense of discipleship. As we enter upon a new millennium and prepare for our general chapter, let us undertake a serious reflection upon the proposals of VI PCO, in such a way that these two historic occasions might offer us an opportunity to renew “and faithfully reaffirm **the value of gospel poverty as a valid alternative for our times ...**” (and) “**as the option we have made as a family**” (PROPOSAL 7).

6.3 Confronted with this challenge, we might be tempted to say with Nicodemus, “*How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?*” (Jn 3:4). Is it possible; can we really change? We must hear again Jesus' invitation: “*Come, follow me!*” It is that invitation which puts us in close contact with the spiritual genius of Francis and which will make it possible for us to entrust ourselves to the wings of grace that carried Francis along the route of “*most exalted poverty*” – in his words: “*that sublime height of most exalted poverty.*” If only one word could perfectly convey what it is that will lead to the conversion we all need, that simple word would be: “grace.” It is God's grace that inspires in us a will to change, and grace that moves us from desire to action. Nothing less is required if the thoughts I put before you are to bear fruit. Towards the end of his *The Soul's Journey into God*, St. Bonaventure offered some advice that might be good for us to recall: “If you wish to know how these things come about, ask grace not instruction, desire not understanding, the groaning of prayer not diligent reading that totally inflames and carries us into God ...” (VII, 6). The immediate reference of the Seraphic Doctor was to the gift of contemplation, but I believe those sentiments

apply equally to the gift of living according to *“that sublime height of most exalted poverty.”* I urge you to begin and end your reflections with a heartfelt prayer for the grace of God, *“to have the Spirit of the Lord and Its holy activity”* (LR X, 8).

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Questions for Personal Reflection

Do you understand poverty in terms of how we relate to each other or in terms of how we relate to material things? Which is the more important effect of poverty for me:

that it makes me less attached to material things, OR

that it bonds me closer to my brothers and sisters in Christ?

Ideals present us with challenges. When faced with those challenges and what ought to be done, it is important to acknowledge and own any contrary feelings and/or resistance I may have. What are my feelings when I look at the challenges of poverty and minority (fears – anxieties – anger)? In what ways do I experience resistance within myself with regard to the invitation of VI PCO? Have I brought these things to prayer and to my intimate relationship with the Lord?

Questions for Fraternal Dialogue

1. Describe an experience from your life in the Order where the connection between poverty and fraternity became apparent to you.
2. What needs to happen in our community in order to give more authentic witness to minority? What specific sacrifice needs to be made in order to implement what needs to happen?
3. Are we perceived as lesser brothers in the place where we now live? What is the biggest obstacle to our being perceived as lesser brothers in this place?