

CIRCULAR LETTER 16

Reflections on *VI PCO*: Part Three

“THE POOR – OUR TEACHERS”

Dear brothers and sisters,

“Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food ...”

(Mt 25:34b-35).

1.1 Few gospel texts have had greater impact upon the popular consciousness than this passage from Matthew. This text has inspired countless Christians to dedicate themselves to the disadvantaged of our world. In the popular consciousness, to “be Christian” is to love and serve the poor. No one has built or beautified a church without questioning and being questioned about whether it might have been better if the money spent had been given to the poor. The coherence of the church’s teachings is most often judged by how she lives this passage of Matthew.

1.2 Yet the parable has a deeper meaning. In the parable, “all nations” are gathered before the Son of Man. In the understanding of the day, “all nations” referred to the pagans. The parable poses an implicit question: “How can non-believers encounter Christ and participate in the mystery of salvation?” In reply, Jesus tells all people of good will that they can encounter his living presence in the hungry, thirsty, poor, and imprisoned, “*the least of these who are members of my family.*” In this manner the parable becomes a powerful call to the church to reveal Jesus to the nations by being poor, powerless, and dependent upon the very world it is sent to save. We are reminded of the words found in that visionary document of the Second Vatican Council, *Lumen Gentium*, (8): “Just as Christ carried out the work of redemption in poverty and oppression, so the church is called to follow the same path if it is to communicate the fruits of salvation to humanity.”

1.3 The Sixth Plenary Council saw this as a central element in the conversion experience of St. Francis. Noting that “his conversion journey took a decisive turn when the Lord led him among the lepers ...,” PROPOSAL 9 also describes the process in which he “left the world” as a transformation which “changed his social condition and his residence, leaving the center for the periphery of Rivo Torto and Our Lady of the Angels.” For the same reason, among the critical and fundamental options necessary to live Franciscan evangelical poverty today, *VI PCO* lists: “***a life rooted in the experience of the people, particularly the poor***” (PROPOSAL 6).

1.4 The Fifth Plenary Council had already noted: “The oppressed and outcasts will be our brothers and sisters. They will also be our teachers” (*V PCO*, 91). PROPOSAL 10 of *VI PCO* –

following the logic of Matthew 25 – goes a step further and makes one of the key affirmations of the Plenary Council:

“We recognize that ***closeness to the culture of the poor*** enriches us from a human point of view and ***is a necessary hermeneutical tool with which to reach the heart of our Franciscan heritage***” (PROPOSAL 10).

Closeness to the culture of the poor is a ***hermeneutical tool*** – i.e., an Instrument that helps us understand, interpret, and live that which lies at the heart of our Franciscan heritage, namely, evangelical poverty. Furthermore, and equally important, we are enabled to do all of this in ways that speak to our age. This hermeneutical tool is not an option, an “extra”, which we can take or leave as we please. We are obliged to avail ourselves of it if we are to be effective gospel witnesses in our day and age. If we fail to do so, we will not be credible witnesses, because we will have failed to understand our own poverty and thus remain at a superficial level of our heritage.

While we are on the subject of “hermeneutics,” in Greek mythology, one of the attributes of the god Hermes was to illustrate and explain the wishes of the gods to human beings. In the sense intended by *VI PCO*, ordinary poor people present and embody qualities that lie at the heart of God himself, qualities God wishes to see in his people. We believe, after all, that if we are to have a “preferential option for the poor,” it is because God himself has first shown us such a love, embodied in Jesus and instinctively grasped by Francis. When a missionary brother was asked what the poor people in his mission saw and valued in the gospel, he immediately replied: “Jesus on the cross because there he is one of them.” This anecdote speaks volumes about the point of view of the poor and about our need to share their experience.

1.5 In Circular Letter 12 entitled, “*On Compassion*,” I reflected on the Fifth Plenary Council’s vision of our Capuchin presence with the poor. In the letter I will limit myself to the manner in which *VI PCO*, reflecting on our presence to the poor as a dimension of our life of evangelical poverty, builds upon and completes the vision of *V PCO*.

The Preferential Option for the Poor

2.1 The preferential option for the poor, first articulated in *V PCO* (29), is a necessary precondition if the poor are to be our teachers in the school of evangelical poverty. Living our option for the poor, we gradually take on the poor” (see *V PCO*, 86). The Fifth Plenary Council treated the preferential option for the poor as the option or choice of each individual brother. A Capuchin must be both poor and a man of the poor, while the Capuchin fraternity must lead the brothers to embrace the poor. *VI PCO* expanded this option or choice to the fraternity as such:

“With the whole church we reaffirm our preferential option for the poor. This choice is not at the discretion of the individual brother, but challenges us as a fraternity ...” (PROPOSAL 9).

2.2 “What do you want me to do for you?” (Mk 10:51) was probably a question the blind beggar had heard often, usually spoken in condescension or even derision. It was a question which he invariably answered untruthfully, more concerned with what he thought the other person wanted to hear than with the truth in his heart. He couldn’t see the compassion on the face of Jesus, but he sensed it in his voice. And so, he blurted out: “My teacher, let me see again!” The aspirations of the poor often seem so impossible and even absurd. Jesus’ response astounded everyone: “Go, your faith has made you well!” There are a number of other remarkable elements in the encounter between Jesus and the blind beggar in Chapter 10 of Mark. First of all, the beggar has a name and a history. He is Bartimaeus, son of Timaeus. Within the global economy of our day, the poor person is depersonalized, faceless, nameless, without a history, without an identity, defined by what he or she lacks: a needy person, a mother without food, proper clothing or her children; a youth deficient in education or lacking employment; a senior citizen wanting in medical attention. In this society, the poor are not human beings with faces and names, they are cases, their needs determined by others. The poor are not asked what they want, they are told what they Will get! By contrast, the compassion of Jesus touched Bartimaeus and called forth from his heart his deepest aspiration, a longing which he had not dared admit even to himself: “My teacher, let me see again!” The option for the poor which we make “as a fraternity” must be marked by this compassion of Jesus. It must involve us in a ministry of compassionate listening. This present us with an immediate and logical challenge:

“(This choice) ... *must be visibly shown*: by living with the poor by serving them, preferably with our own hands; by sharing bread with them, and defending their rights” (PROPOSAL 9).

Only in this manner can the poor become for us persons rather than cases. Only in this way can we encourage them to express their deepest needs and claim the freedom and dignity that belongs to them in virtue of their creation and redemption.

2.3 In “*On Compassion*,” I distinguished four different levels on which the Order lives this option for the poor: welcoming the poor when they come to our door; involving ourselves in social works among and on behalf of the poor; inserting fraternities among the poor; and working for justice (Circular Letter 12, see 4.3.1-4.3.5). *VI PCO* challenges the Order, each province, and each local fraternity to ask how it is living out its option for the poor on each of these four levels. Concretely lived in this manner, our option for the poor becomes “*a necessary hermeneutical tool with which to reach the heart of our Franciscan heritage*” (PROPOSAL 10). Without this visible insertion into the world of the poor we are incapable of understanding evangelical poverty:

“Being poor with the poor and becoming their brothers is part and parcel of our Franciscan charism and of our tradition as ‘brothers of the people’” (PROPOSAL 9).

2.4 Among the various choices whereby we express our solidarity with the poor, the proposals give privileged place to fraternities of insertion among the poor. The brothers participating in the Sixth Plenary Council were able to profit from the experience of the relatively numerous insertion experiences which sprang up in our Order in the years

following the Fifth Plenary Council. The first reason given for such insertion fraternities is the cause of justice:

“We believe that solidarity with those on the edge of society is one of the prime responses against the injustice of our times”
(PROPOSAL 9).

At the same time, PROPOSAL 10 wanted to ensure that it is the fraternity as such which is inserted among the poor, and that the experience of insertion does not lead to the isolation of the brothers within the context of the provincial fraternity. Building upon the conviction that insertion fraternities are “not at the discretion of the individual brother” but commitments of the provincial fraternity as such, the proposal suggests a “careful selection of the insertion fraternities and the formation of the brothers who are their members.” Thus conceived and energized, fraternities inserted among the poor are intended to assist the entire provincial fraternity to embrace the culture of the poor, and in this manner enrich and deepen the province’s understanding and practice of the charism of evangelical poverty.

The culture of the poor

3.1 The object of our option for the poor is not simply that our fraternity identify with the poor in their need, but also that we encounter “*the culture of the poor*” which “*enriches us from a human point of view.*” After all, we are not enriched by a lack! When we “take on what is valid in their [the poor’s] way of believing, loving and hoping,” we are provided with a privileged view of the gospel of Christ which enables us “to reach the heart of our Franciscan heritage” (see PROPOSAL 9 and 10). The gospel parable of the rich man and Lazarus makes this very point. The key statement in this regard comes toward the end of the parable: “... *between you and us a great chasm has been fixed...*” (Lk 16:26). It is evident that this chasm was not created after the death of the rich man, but rather, during his life: “*There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores*” (Lk 16:19-20). For the rich man, Lazarus simply did not exist! He was faceless, nameless. He walked by Lazarus day after day without seeing him, feeding his dogs richer morsels from his table than what he offered the poor man. This had devastating consequences for Lazarus who had a closer relationship with those dogs than with the man himself! The dogs at least licked his sores. Still, the parable clearly makes the point that this chasm also had radical and decisive consequences for the rich: “*I have five brothers ... warn them, so that they will not also come into this place of torment*” (Lk 16:28). A lifetime of security, privilege, having every whim answered, commanding and controlling creates a “culture” – away of being, thinking, and acting. Despite the many human comforts and enrichments it may provide, it can also impoverish the human person, robbing him of his capacity to feel and love. And on the other hand, a lifetime of want and insecurity, being at the beck and call of others also creates its own “culture – its own way of being, loving and hoping.” Despite the many human discomforts and needs it may evidence – aspects which can devastate a human person – it can also be enriching. Isn’t it significant that Luke gives a name and an identity to the poor man, Lazarus, while the rich man remains nameless and without identity? In this manner, Luke gives an evangelical evaluation of the two “cultures.” VI PCO, heeding the message of Luke 16, declared that exposure to the “culture of the poor” is a “hermeneutical tool” necessary reach the heart of our Franciscan charism.

3.2 *VI PCO* proposed that every Province “draft and implement plans to establish and monitor our humble presence among the poor” (PROPOSAL 10). The motivation proposed is that by “sharing their culture from within and being accepted as members of their society, we will be able to promote its integral development.” This vision was already present and at work in the Fifth Plenary Council. However, *VI PCO* makes an important addition: the establishment of a plan to monitor our presence among the poor is also to “ensure the constant support of the circumscriptions, as well as ways of fraternally sharing their experiences.” In this way, our presence among the poor might become a true “hermeneutical tool with which to reach the heart of our Franciscan heritage.”

An austere lifestyle: “The minimum necessary, not the maximum allowed” (Const. 67, 3)

4.1 Consistent with our Capuchin tradition, *VI PCO* underlined the importance of an austere lifestyle in defining our embrace of the culture of the poor. In this regard, perhaps the most important statement of the Sixth Plenary Council is found in PROPOSAL 1: “The foundation and model of our gospel poverty is Jesus, the Word of God.”

Jesus is the model of our poverty. Jesus is also the model of our austerity. It is interesting to note that Jesus is not the most austere evangelical model! St. John the Baptist was considerably more austere than Jesus. Furthermore, there was a qualitative difference between the austerity of John and that of Jesus. The austerity of John put him outside human society. John lived in the desert, apart from his neighbors. “*John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea ... John wore clothing of camel’s hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey*” (Mt 3:1, 4). The austerity of Jesus allowed him to celebrate with the excluded: “*And as he sat at dinner in the house, many tax collectors and sinners came and were sitting with him and his disciples. When the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, ‘Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?’*” (Mt 9:10-11). Imitating the austerity of Jesus, the object of Franciscan austerity is to identify ourselves with the outcasts and the poor, to build communion with them, “to take on what is valid in their way of believing, loving and hoping” (PROPOSAL 9).

4.2 As the sixth paragraph of Circular Letter 13 pointed out, this was precisely the object of the prescriptions of the Constitutions prior to 1968. Circular Letter 13 indicated that the Order took as its “model” of austerity the “working poor” of Western Europe, and situated Capuchin life within that social setting. Like the working poor of their time, the brothers lived by the fruits of their daily work and filled very few offices to which fixed stipends were attached. They received no pensions. They lived from the occasional stipends of preachers and confessors, the produce of their gardens and orchards, the quest and the occasional offerings given by the faithful in their churches. The identification of the Order with Western Europe allowed it to give very detailed prescriptions for buildings and their decor. The friaries were in solidarity with the homes of the working poor (Circular Letter 13, see 6.2-6.2.3).

4.3 No such clear model of austere simplicity exists today. Lacking such a model, PROPOSAL 13 takes the norm which the *Constitutions* (67, 3) give for individual brothers and applies that same norm to the fraternity: “The minimum necessary, not the maximum allowed.” By stating that “the Constitutional norm ... can only be meaning fully applied in the context of the societies in which our friars actually live,” PROPOSAL 13 recognizes the lack of a

single, universal model valid for all. In light of this challenge, PROPOSAL 13 points to a manner in which we might be able to re-establish some external norm for our poverty lived in fraternity:

“With the introduction of budgetary controls and spending limits, local communities and provincial fraternities can limit their use of resources and give an appropriate example of moderation and even austerity” (PROPOSAL 13).

The budgetary standard whereby we establish the norm of our poverty must, of necessity, vary from culture to culture:

“Inculturation of poverty affects our dwellings, buildings, lifestyle, the poor means we use in the apostolates, and our external appearance” (PROPOSAL 12).

4.4 In those societies where a basic standard of human welfare is guaranteed by the state, could a local fraternity identify with the poor by adopting a “budget of the poor” – one based on the minimum offered those who receive social assistance? We live in an age when, even on the roof of the poorest hovel you can find a satellite dish, the poor themselves are often victims of consumerism. For this reason, the poor cannot always help us delineate those elements excluded by our poverty. However, by taking a starting point “a budget of the poor,” could we not give witness even to the poor of a discerning and austere use of resources and thus re-establish our identity as “brothers of the people”? Even more, could we not witness to the contentment that comes when we shake off the tyranny of material possessions and goods? Greed destroys happiness and makes people restless. Simplicity brings peace of mind and freedom. The gospel does not say to us: *join the ranks of the poor and be miserable a long with them*. The gospel says: *walk with the poor, learn from their virtues, and show them that they need not remain victims, but rather become survivors and eventually teachers and evangelizers to those who oppress them*.

Many nations are unable to guarantee even basic human needs for all of their citizens. In such societies, if we adopted the norm of “the budget of the poor,” pluriformity would necessarily have to be applied to the norm itself. Our austerity is a joyful simplicity; it is not the embrace of misery which afflicts a large part of the poor of our world:

“We do not seek to establish one Capuchin lifestyle throughout the world. At the same time, *brothers in any part of the world must be freed from misery and enjoy acceptable living conditions*” (PROPOSAL 24, c).

In the footsteps of the poor Christ

5.1 The church must “reveal Jesus to the nations by being poor, powerless, and dependent on the very world it is sent to save” (see paragraph 1.2 above). PROPOSAL 11 forcefully echoes this challenge of Matthew’s gospel:

“... being and living, powerless and totally defenseless, was not a method or condition of evangelization, but was already in itself a proclamation of the gospel” (PROPOSAL 11).

PROPOSAL 11 concludes by saying that the culture of the poor can also teach us how to proclaim the gospel: “We should be more ready to learn from the poor and to place our trust in God alone.”

5.2 The Sixth Plenary Council asks the Order to look carefully at its evangelizing tools:

“... we must seek to implement models of evangelization that are less bound up with the power and security that comes from having many expensive resources” (PROPOSAL 11).

It is interesting and perhaps prophetic to our Order that the church chose to beatify Br. Nicholas of Gèsturi one year almost to the day after the conclusion of our Sixth Plenary Council. Nicholas was a classic questor of the Order. Known as “Brother Silence,” he quietly walked the streets of Cagliari in Sardinia for 34 years. His biographer describes the effect of his silent passage:

“It became almost an expectation for people to stop him as he passed by, to confide a personal suffering or a family difficulty ... And with humility and patience he listened to each person, consoling each one with a few, simple words, a gesture, a promise of his prayers. He became an almost ‘indispensable presence’”

(Luciano Cossu, Beato Fra Nicola da Gèsturi, p. 9).

5.3 There is no doubt that efficiency very often has evident priority in our ministries. For example, most brothers who have the exclusive and personal use of an automobile justify this fact by reason of their apostolic commitments. In honesty, we must admit that very few brothers refuse the use of such means of transportation because of the evangelical witness of poverty and minority.

“Capuchins have placed particular emphasis on ... **closeness to the people** ... These values, when they are lived in brotherhood,... are a powerful witness to the gospel and a stimulus for the advancement of the weakest of people” (PROPOSAL 5).

Having been blessed with the opportunity to view the life and ministry of thousands of brothers in 90 or more nations, it becomes more evident to me that our fraternities must develop new criteria for transportation. Might not this simple rule be helpful to us: “*That means of transport should be used which keeps us closest to the people.*” Such a norm would mean that we never use an airplane when a train would suffice. We would never use an automobile if public transit would suffice. We would never use an automobile if a bicycle

would suffice. We would never use a bicycle if walking would suffice! This norm might also help us to judge the type of automobile suitable for the brothers. The perspective of the norm is not simply financial. A variation of the norm suggested above might read: *“That automobile is to be preferred which least isolates us from the people.”* In general, the more steel that encloses us, the harder is it to maintain fraternal contact with people! Cost is not the only measure. Rather, the more compact the automobile, the less we are separated from the people.

If we must choose new criteria flowing from poverty and minority to judge our means of transportation, such new criteria are equally important for judging other tools for our ministry. How often have the people been edified by our Capuchin preachers of popular missions, not only by their preaching, but more by the cheerful bonds of affection among the brothers themselves as they went about their ministry. Capuchin tradition teaches us that the evangelical values of our fraternal way of life proclaim the gospel of Christ more effectively than all our instruments. This gives every local fraternity ample material for reflection.

5.4 “Our solidarity towards the least ones and the suffering is also well expressed in social and charitable works or structures” (PROPOSAL 25). When read in conjunction with PROPOSAL 11, we might add this insight: “The poor are not evangelized by power but by fraternity.” This challenges us to transform our social ministries from a series of services which we provide to individuals into an expression of our fraternal insertion among the poor and our solidarity with the poor. In *On Compassion*, I stressed one important aspect of our fraternal presence to the poor, namely, that it be a fraternity of brothers at the service of the poor and a fraternity within which at least some of the brothers serve the poor with their own hands (Circular Letter 12, see 4.3.2). Another important component of this transformation is to be found in the implementation of a fraternal vision of the economics of our social projects. When monies are under the control of an individual brother, the ministry does not easily build communion. Money too easily becomes an instrument of personal power on the part of the individual brother. Poverty requires that we relinquish personal economic power. A fraternal administration of monies builds communion.

My eyes have seen your salvation

6 The holy couple, Mary and Joseph, for whom there was no room in the inn at Bethlehem, are certainly to be counted among the poor. When they entered the temple precinct, their poverty was evident to all: Joseph carried two young pigeons, the offering of the poor (see Lk 2:24). Like the silent passing of Blessed Nicholas through the streets of Cagliari, the poor and humble entrance of the Holy Family was a proclamation of hope and love:

“Simeon took him in his arms and praised God saying, ‘Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation ...’

(Lk 2:28-30).

As we reflect on our call to evangelical poverty during this Christmas season, the Word of God invites us as brothers and fraternities to approach the poor families in our midst as Simeon approached the poor family from Bethlehem Closeness to the culture of the poor

can lead us to the heart of our Franciscan heritage (see PROPOSAL 10), thus making our lives a light of revelation to the nations.

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*December 2, 1999, Feast of Bl. Mary Angela Astorch,
Capuchin Poor Clare*

Questions for Personal Reflection

1. Do the material demands of apostolic efficiency sometimes conflict with my closeness to the poor? In such cases, what choices have I made in the past, and where might I need to re-evaluate those choices?
2. To what extent do I share the lot of the poor of this world?

Questions for Fraternal Discussion

1. With regard to poverty in the use of things and of money, our Constitutions (67, 4 and 5) state that the fraternity should frequently reflect in common on all these things in the local chapter. How many times did we engage in such reflection at the local chapter in the past year? What emerged from these reflections?
2. What steps can we now take as a community to draw close to the poor?