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Studies in Passionist History and Spirituality

REFLECTIONS ON SOME TRADITIONAL CHARACTERISTICS OF PASSIONIST CHRISTIAN SPIRITUALITY

Part II

POVERTY:

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POVERTY AS A CHARACTERISTIC OF OUR CONGREGATION

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Abbreviations:

WH "WORDS FROM THE HEART," Gill & MacMillan, Dublin, 1976.

AC "ACCOUNTS" sent by Paul to various interested people concerning the Congregation. 1747 and 1768.

1741 "RULE OF ST. PAUL OF THE CROSS-1741." English translation, Rome, 1978.

1. POVERTY IN ST. PAUL OF THE CROSS

a) The Area: Evangelical Poverty.

“No single word, perhaps, in the entire tradition of Christian spirituality, has proved itself so capable of creating such instant confusion as the word ‘poverty’.” (*The Way*, Supplement, n. 9, 1970).

With that in mind I thought it might be good to try to say what I’ll be talking about. When they hear the word “poverty” some people think of “destitution, deprivation”; others, “simplicity of life, modest living, frugality”; still others, “spiritual poverty, dependence on God, trust.” What we have in mind in this discussion is evangelical poverty, *Gospel poverty*, related to Christ and His kingdom, however else we may qualify it. McKenzie (*Bib. Dict.*) speaks of Jesus “making a total renunciation of wealth a condition of following him, that is, of joining the group of disciples who lived as he did and had given up homes and income. His recommendation to give all to the poor was not part of his general preaching to all listeners, though he does point out the difficulty wealth creates to admission to the Kingdom.”

We remember that the occasion of St. Paul of the Cross’ conversion was precisely a sermon on the call of the rich young man... and he regards himself as following the example of those who left all to follow Christ... and he sees us as disciples in that following too. In n. 3 of 1747 “Account” he writes that “their life is like that of the apostles... the apostles’ conduct is the norm for the Constitutions which endeavor to form a man totally God-centered, totally apostolic, a man of prayer, detached from things, from himself, so that in all truth he may be called a disciple of Jesus Christ.”

In another place he speaks of the Constitutions being “founded on the infallible truth of the Gospel.” In the years after 1970, Father Theodore Foley, our late and beloved General, went to various Provincial Chapters and spoke of Paul’s last testament to us, in which Paul addressed not only those present but all future generations of Passionists. You remember Paul’s words: “I recommend the spirit of prayer, of poverty, of solitude. Be certain that if these three things are maintained in the Congregation, it will shine like the sun in the sight of God and the nations.” Father Theodore was making the point that what Paul is speaking about there (prayer, poverty and solitude) are evangelical realities: “What is essential for our conservation is that wherever we are we be poor men, men of prayer, men who know how to integrate the practice of solitude into their daily living. The how, the when, the where – in other words, the modalities of being poor, of praying, of practicing retirement – are left to the wise discernment and choice of each generation of his disciples.”

I was interested the other day in Father Tom McDonough’s distinction between charism and spirit in this regard. The invitation of the Lord to the rich young man is a creative invitation, like the invitation to the disciples who did follow. So, is poverty a gift to us, a call from God to which we respond, or is it a “spirit” in the sense of our effort to incarnate it, to respond? I think it has to be both. The call is from God first – that’s the way the apostles experienced it and the way all the great founders experienced it: Anthony, Francis of Assisi, Benedict and our own Paul of the Cross. The call came first and the working out of it took, among other things, the form of poverty.

b) Paul’s Basic Motivation Regarding Poverty.

Paul's model for poverty is the self-emptying Christ. He looks at the self-emptying of Christ in the Incarnation and in the Passion. Father Aelred mentioned how clear that is in Corinthians, and Father Fabiano put it to us that Phil. 2 is perhaps the key biblical expression of our spirituality. Because he is the poor one of Jahweh, Jesus is now risen and clothed in power and glory. Paul of the Cross reminds us that we must be poor like Jesus, and in this way we can hope to participate in his victory over death and join him in the power of his resurrection. "The Kingdom is attained by those who, like the grain of wheat, die, in order to bear abundant fruit" (Cf. French booklet on Passionist life: *Un pauvre de Jesus*). Paul often speaks of the power of the Passion, the *life-giving* presence of Christ. This relates also to his teaching on our nothingness: knowing our true situation, our emptiness before God and allowing him to fill it: "We lack knowledge, power, possessions. The man who knows his own emptiness is most easily disposed to being a great saint. This is all that counts, to know how to give to God all that is his, and to keep what is our own, the truth of our nothingness" (Paul: *Letters*).

"God, by essence, is Truth itself. When he sees someone who lives in the knowledge of his own nothingness and always remains in the truth, not in falsehood, he draws that person by love into the depths of his own self, and with his life-giving grace he refreshes him continually. So that man becomes like a tree which is able to bring forth fruit not simply in the spring, summer and autumn of consolations but even in the winter of desolation, for even in time of mental anguish or physical pain, he can bring forth fruit through charity, obedience and all sorts of good works" (Paul). The self-emptying and the deep knowledge of our own nothingness allows the richness of God to come through, the "being rich unto God" that Christ spoke of in the Gospel. And he spoke of a grasping attitude and a preoccupation with riches as dangers to the entrance of the Kingdom into a man's heart.

Paul writes to Bishop di Gattinara in the Preface to his Rule: "At the same time I had the idea of wearing a poor black tunic of coarse cloth of arbaggio, a wool fabric found in these parts, of going barefoot, of living in a very deep poverty. In short, by God's grace, of leading a penitential life. This never again left my heart." And then during the retreat, he says that "the Rule of life of the Poor of Jesus" (and he called us "the Poor of Jesus" for about the first ten years of our existence while he and at least John Baptist lived this Rule) "was infused into my heart", and he felt as if it had been dictated, etc. So he sees this Rule of the Poor of Jesus as itself springing from the special grace of God, giving him an infused understanding.

N. 41 of the 1741 Rule is an illustration of this mystical Gospel-based motivation of Paul's: "Oh, happy is that soul who faithfully practices the love of holy poverty and detachment from every created thing. In this he will imitate Jesus Christ, who had not so much as a place to rest His Most Holy Head and finally died naked on the hard wood of the Cross. God will then, in his infinite mercy transform him into His most holy love. Amen."

c) Apostolic Thrust.

Paul had a great sense of God's love, God's desire to enrich us, and for him *the* poverty was ignorance of, or forgetfulness of, this tremendous lover. And so his apostolic thrust easily flowed from his life and his prayer, and he showed himself willing and eager to go to the poorest areas, neglected by other apostolic ministers, rooted in this ignorance and the direst spiritual as well as physical poverty-areas like the Maremma, the swamps, so that these poor and ignorant people

could be evangelized. In fact, the rescript of May 1741 read that “His Holiness approves these Rules and Constitutions *on condition* that the clerics of this Congregation, whose unique end is to promote missions, shall give them especially in the localities, villages and hamlets situated where the air is less healthy (by which was meant malarial), on islands and uncultivated regions and where there is no other house of missioners, that the spiritual welfare of the faithful who dwell there and are deprived of holy missions may thus be provided for.”

So, built into our existence in the Church, from the beginning, was this condition regarding the poorest. The times in which we came to birth as a Congregation were times of decline for religious life. The Church was far from eager for new Orders, rather it was trying to renew some of the existing ones, which partly explains the difficulties of Paul in getting approval from successive commissions of Cardinals. But his willingness to minister in these neglected areas was in his favor and was built into the rescript of 1741, the first approval we received. N. 70 of that 1741 Rule reads: “Let them never go to preach missions in the cities” (the Lenten preachers held forth in the cities), “but let them show themselves desirous of going to poor and more needy places. As a matter of fact, the members of our Congregation should consider it their particular concern to go to remote places, to the marshes, to islands, and to other such places that seem neglected by apostolic ministers.”

That survived up to our 1969 Rule with the “poor, incommodious and troublesome” places, “subject to the inclemencies of the weather”; and in our Chapter Document (Ch. I) as our “desire to participate in the distress of men.” So that part of our apostolic thrust is important, our thrust towards the poor. But in Paul’s eyes the greatest poverty was religious poverty. He didn’t see himself as a social reformer as such. Maybe if you had pushed him on it, he’d have replied that if you help people to understand the depth of God’s love for them in the Passion of Jesus, they will begin to be able to treat one another as brothers in that love.

d) Background: Conditions in Founder’s Time.

We are all aware that in the history of religious life there have been many different expressions of evangelical poverty: the poverty of Anthony in the desert, of Benedict or Francis or Basil, all very different styles. Reading the history of religious life we can see the foolishness of any dogmatism in this area.

But poverty has also been one of the very crucial areas in the history of religious life in terms of deterioration and collapse: Benedictines, Cistercians etc, and Paul was very well aware of that. Another difficulty in his time was the suspicion and jealousy aroused in the hermits and mendicants when they felt their questing areas and rights were threatened by the arrival on the scene of a new Order. That’s why Paul didn’t want questing at all. His ideal of poverty was that we be sustained totally by the spontaneous offerings of the faithful, without either questing or being offered any stipends for our ministries. He found in the end that he had to avail of the permission to quest that the Popes had granted, but kept questing on a limited basis.

Another feature of religious life at the time was the distinction between choir religious and lay religious. The choir religious were often sons and daughters of the nobility, and the lay religious were the children of the poor who served the choir religious. Paul abolished that distinction and he did not want any distinction between priests and brothers among us.

The economic and religious situation of the time made possible a certain kind of evangelical poverty in Paul's time. There were virtually no bills to be paid, in that patronage provided money and materials for the building of the monasteries. No food bills, in that people either sent food spontaneously to the monasteries or were receptive to the lay people and brothers who requested if there was need. No travels expenses; much of the travel was done on foot and where there was need or the journey long, a benefactor would send a horse or a coach. No medical costs and no fuel costs. For religious, postage was free. So a poverty lifestyle was possible in Paul's time that is difficult to conceive in ours.

e) "Poverty Is the Standard Under..."

"Poverty is the standard under which the whole Congregation serves," wrote Paul in the 1741 Rule, n. 32, and that sentence has echoed down the decades to us in all the revisions, including our present Rule, Chapter Document, n. 13. A few words on some of Paul's main motivations behind it:

- i) The *mystical* motivation was the primary one as discussed already. It was so with most of the Founders. They wanted to be poor because Christ lived and recommended poverty. For our Founder, Christ's final poverty in his Passion and self-emptying on the Cross invited the response of the 'Poor of Jesus'.
- ii) Perhaps in that motto too there were "*political*" reasons, for want of a better word. Paul recognized early on the difficulties in being a new group setting up a religious life alongside more established hermits and the mendicant Orders. He didn't want us to be entering into competition with them, so even when he was forced by circumstances to accept questing, he placed severe restrictions on it. And we were to take no money for our ministries so that people would see clearly we were "after their souls and not their money (AC: 1786, n. 7).
- iii) The *apostolic* outreach to the poor was vital. He urges us not to preach in a lofty style but to break the bread of God's word simply, in language even the uneducated poor understand... a special kind of "poverty" of the word. As mentioned above, our willingness and eagerness as a Congregation to go to the poorest and most neglected areas was written into our Rule from the start and is still strongly seen in our Chapter Document, especially nos. 3 and 12.
- iv) *Economically* (as he saw it) Paul was able to say "poverty is the standard..." because of the circumstances of the time. It was a viable enterprise to live poverty in that way then – it was understood and supported – he could afford not to accept stipends for missions, etc., and still survive.
- v) Lastly, the *ascetical* reasons were very much part of his thinking in AC 1786, nos. 5, 6, 7. He was looking for a certain quality in his apostolic workmen and he saw particular obstacles to this, "impediments which delay perfection in the religious." And one of them was "attachments to temporal goods which can fill the human heart and prevent it from soaring to the supreme Good. This impediment is removed by holy poverty as practiced by Jesus Christ." If we are effectively detached from earthly things and dead to ourselves,

we are better able “to receive the impressions of divine grace” to allow God to enrich our poverty, to enter into our receptivity.

f) Since Our Founder.

What follows is by no means a detailed analysis, but rather some personal impressions. Father Fabiano gave us some history of the transfer of our Congregation from its roots in Italian soil and culture to other nations and language and culture groups, to other times and epochs: to England during the Industrial revolution, to America seething with European Catholic immigrants. Much correspondence between Rome and the new ventures and a number of General Chapters were needed before the beginnings of understanding emerged.

My own impression is that the sense of poverty has considerably weakened in us. It doesn't seem at all clear that “poverty is the standard under which the whole Congregation fights.” Poverty is hardly central to our lifestyle. Perhaps it's been reduced over the years to a kind of legalism, a looking to superiors for permissions, a dependence merely (though dependence on the community and its superiors is one real ingredient of religious poverty).

Chapters, General and Provincial, have tried to legislate for the practice of poverty among us (as Father Fabiano pointed out there was quite an amount of legislation and exhortation on the need to preach the Passion, too). Necessary and useful as legislation is, it will always be a good deal behind life. It was out of the experience of Paul and his early companions that their poverty developed; and if in our lives, we are relating deeply and personally to Christ Crucified then poverty, in whatever form it takes, will become part of us. Otherwise, at best we'll be doing our duty as religious because it's in our Constitutions, but it will not be a poverty that enriches others. The rules structure the charism, the gift of God; they do not create it.

2. POVERTY AND OUR CONTEMPORARY SITUATION

a) Religious Poverty in Our Times.

My impressions of what's happening is that most of us are in a state of honest confusion regarding poverty. At least I think it's honest; it is certainly confusion. And I've no illusions about clarifying it.

But if this is true, if this is our situation, at least there are some things that can be done. We can face the fact that things are not too clear in our hearts in an area the Church regards as important, and in which once again in our time she calls on us to lead, to find new ways (*Perfectae Caritatis* n. 13; see also: *Priestly Life*, n. 17, and *Redemptor Hominis*, n. 16 and footnote n. 103, listing areas of social teaching relevant to our thinking here). We can search and pray together for the necessary wisdom and will to come to see where the Spirit is calling us in our times. Obviously if the confusion isn't so honest, then it doesn't want to be unconfused because the foggy status quo is just fine; if the going is good, why change it?

That's why we have to look at our interior freedom in all this. Ironically, though, evangelical poverty is precisely geared to increasing that freedom. We know that the way we view things can often arise from our own needs and our lifestyle. We have to ask ourselves: Am I sufficiently free interiorly to choose a lifestyle compatible with (or more compatible with) evangelical

poverty? I'm not asking you to agree with anything I'm saying here... in fact there's quite an area of me that would prefer you didn't. But perhaps we all have an investment here (!), because the question of poverty touches our lives and lifestyles in quite real and substantial ways. And so the need not to presume our freedom but to check if it's still there, and even to explain to one another in honesty where our own motives may be suspect.

Together with most of the religious Orders in our times, we're not, perhaps, living a poverty that is evident and credible before the Church or world. This isn't necessarily due to any malice on our part. The whole economic situation in which we find ourselves is a very different one from that in which our Rule was first formulated in 1721. And the whole surrounding area – political, cultural, environmental within which we live our Passionist life – has very substantially changed, as Father Tom Berry has illustrated for us so fully. All this affects the way we see ourselves and the way people around us read us in terms of witness. I'm by no means arguing that we should so style our lives that people think “poverty” when they see us. It isn't just a matter of a good P.R. job, an image-making, so as to produce the desired effect on those who see. Rather, what we do and the style we live has to flow from what we are and from how we see ourselves in the Church and world of our times.

Some factors in the transformation of our economic situation today to which we have yet to find adequate response in regard to poverty: the security of man today in the Industrialized West. To some degree it was precisely this security that voluntary poverty used to give up in earlier times (relying on crops or alms or barter for support; when these failed the religious was among the first to feel the effects). Today, even if we reduce our personal living to an extremely modest and frugal level we would still be wholly secure. Abstemiousness with regard to material good is easiest to acquire and maintain of all the evidences of evangelical poverty. And abstemiousness does not, clearly, stand on its own as the truly significant factor involved. In industrial societies work has been available (until recently) to most and so mendicancy has been reduced to a merely peripheral phenomenon, especially with the presence too of the welfare state. Living in an economy of work and money, spiritual and intellectual and apostolic endeavors come to be regarded as work and to a large extent many Orders live by the remuneration of their activities. So in the eyes of most people we have passed from the class of the poor in any ordinary sense, into that of those who receive something for their work, however simply they live.

More recently, with widespread unemployment, we sometimes find ourselves in competition with lay people for scarce jobs.

Further, the quantity of goods available to a member of an Order today has increased considerably on former times. This is not necessarily because of development in the Orders nor does it necessarily mean a decline in the religious ideal, but is a consequence of the general economic development. But even as such, this constitutes one of the elements of present day problems with regard to poverty and its witness.

Most of the above points (and some more) are made by Fr. Karl Rahner in *Theological Investigations* (vol. 8) on the “Theology of Poverty”. He goes on to point out that the corporate expression is precisely the crunch issue; one cannot have poor members in a rich Order. Personal lifestyle may be frugal but that is only one ingredient, and finding ways to express corporate poverty in the Church is the bigger issue and one we have scarcely begun to face.

Perhaps we tend (coming out of our “permission” mentality) to leave our communal thinking on poverty to General and Provincial Chapters to work out for us. Our present Rule puts the responsibility for a credible lifestyle of evangelical poverty squarely at the level of local community and Vatican II spoke of the need to find new expressions. It’s important for the Church that our poverty speaks because the whole witness of the religious life today (including the poverty aspect) is involved. We’ve to witness to the supremacy of God’s coming kingdom before the Church and the world. And if a whole area of this witness is weakened (e.g., poverty) by the shifting of culture, economics and ways of thought, then we have to address ourselves to the problems this creates.

In the following paragraphs I want to present very briefly some of the viewpoints expressed regarding poverty today in the continuing dialogue and search for a credible lifestyle. One put forward by Fr. Quentin Hakenewerth (*For the Sake of the Kingdom*) has to do with poverty as sharing: No matter what kind of plant or building we have as part of our resources, if we’re seen to be open to others, especially to the poor, and to sharing our facilities with the surrounding community, that is one obvious and adequate answer, credible in terms of religious poverty. This sharing must be done in a way that makes us brothers, not any old sharing will do. We share so that the Kingdom of Jesus may be the primary experience: reconciliation, peace, joy. The sharing of our material gifts and facilities is the medium for the spiritual. There is danger of pride and smugness if we choose to become poor for its own sake, in a sense preferring spiritual to material comfort; danger (just that, not a necessity) of having a poor man’s budget and a rich man’s soul. Jesus gave all because he loved us to the end and love must be the primary motivation and experience. Then the poverty will be right.

Fr. Eric Doyle (*Poverty and Credibility*) suggests another approach. Forget about the word “poverty” altogether because it strains the language beyond credibility. “Poverty” – when we hear the word in today’s context – means that half the world is starving, that thousands of men and women roam our world as displaced refugees, etc., and to say that we vow “poverty” in this context strains meaning to breaking point.

He suggests using instead the word Equality, deriving the word and the idea from the motto of the French Revolution: liberty (which he feels will relate easily to obedience), equality to poverty, and fraternity to our vow of chastity. For him, the poverty of Jesus at his birth and at his death are the showing of God’s unlimited love for humanity. And the itinerant life of Jesus was for the sake of the Kingdom ... his *free choice* in order to share the word of the Kingdom with others. God shares his life with us and we are equal before him as human beings. God’s coming reign doesn’t make of material poverty a virtue, it requires its elimination, oppression has to cease. So religious, in vowing poverty (equality) take on a lifestyle of *surrender* (life is God’s gift and we accept it and give thanks, becoming communities of affirmation, adoration and thanksgiving), of *self-denial* (God’s justice has not come and those pledged to him cannot accept consumerist standards based on unjust structures), and of *sharing* (we are brothers in the Kingdom of God’s love and cannot grasp at his gifts so as to exclude any).

Fr. Arrupe, Jesuit General, makes a strong call to action on poverty in an article entitled “The Service of Religious to Humanity” (Suppl. to *Doctrine and Life*). He sets the discussion in our present world context of the dialogue between North and South, of rich and poor nations. He feels it is absolutely crucial for religious to hear what Pope Paul VI called “the cry of the poor” in our day. Man has become in our day not ‘homo sapiens’ but ‘homo consumens’, consumer

man, who eats up his own world out of artificially created needs: “the superfluous becomes the convenient; the convenient becomes the necessary; the necessary becomes the indispensable.” The situation and its causes have been by now well analyzed and everybody admits the need to take some effective steps, but who is ready to take them? He urges religious to an effective and affective solidarity with the poor and to a “conversion to frugality.” He calls on religious in the Northern Hemisphere to present this teaching of all the recent Popes to a society on whose attitudes and orientations depends the destiny of millions of people who suffer oppression and misery. Statesmen and economists of very high world standing are seeing very real difficulties ahead and the need of a restructuring of the world’s economic and monetary systems (see, Brandt report).

Fr. Rahner has a very short article in one of the recently translated volumes of *Theological Investigations* entitled “On the Reluctance of Christians to Accept Poverty,” in which he discusses the same point: the causes of our situation have been revealed and Christians are very often operatives of this scheme of things. Certainly they have a very real power and the responsibility that goes along with it, but as a Church we show no signs of responding anything like adequately. Metz urges the same response, feeling that religious can give the lead and quoting the Synod of German Bishops: “In our service of the Church we must not let the life of the Church in the western world give the appearance of a religion of well-being and satiety while in other parts of the world it has the effect of a popular religion for the unfortunate, whose lack of their daily bread literally excludes them from our eucharistic fellowship; otherwise the world would see arise before its view the scandal of a Church which brought together in itself the unfortunate and spectators in their misery, many sufferers and many Pontius Pilates, and called all this the one eucharistic community of the faithful, the one new people of God. The one universal Church should not simply reflect yet again in itself the social contrasts of the our world. Otherwise it merely gives aid and assistance to those who interpret religion and the Church as only a sublimation of existing social relationships” (pg. 54).

These are some of the views currently being expressed in the Church in an effort to address this question of evangelical poverty in religious life today.

b) Possible Themes for Ourselves.

A brief attempt to relate some of what we have been discussing to ourselves as a Congregation. Rahner has remarked on the increasing ‘standardization’ (though that is not his word) regarding the practice of poverty among religious Orders, indicating, of course, its causes in the underlying economic and cultural situation which affects us all. The ‘standardization’ has, though, to some degree also sprung from the fact that our response to this developing situation has been largely unreflective, largely merely reacting in an ‘ad hoc’ way without any serious or critical discerning of the signs of the times. And he goes on to argue (Theology of Poverty) that it is still desirable that religious Orders find expressions of poverty consonant both with our own times and with their own particular charism in the Church.

For St. Paul of the Cross the greatest poverty was ignorance or forgetfulness of the fundamental meaning of life revealed in the love of God, demonstrated above all in the Passion of Jesus. For him this was the great poverty, the great wastefulness. *This* is what ‘scandalized’ him and energized him (and not the evident socio-economic poverty around him which at that time in Italy was almost an accepted fact of life, rather than a matter of argumentation or class

war or social struggle). So, in addressing himself to this religious poverty, he taught people prayer and techniques of interiority by which they could come alive, awaken to the reality of their situation in God's eyes and come to restructure their lives accordingly. That was his apostolate and for this end also he gathered companions. And he wanted this and our *lifestyle* to back this up, to be a support to it and to make it credible in human terms that God is enough (or as Vatican II put it regarding religious life as a whole, to show "the overmastering realities of the Kingdom of God" and its relation to all earthly reality (*Church* 44). Seeing the coming reign of a loving, suffering and crucified God confers quite a different light, understanding and power on the human scene and can encourage us to take care of our brother and of our "one earth" in a responsible way. If people were to see the full reality of God's love, all sorts of changes would take place in their hearts and in their values.

Thinking of what was said above about man as "homo consumens", we can see that Paul was the very opposite. Here was a man truly in love with creation, with something very really Franciscan about him, seeing the flowers and trees preaching the love of God to him, leaving a growing olive tree in the middle of the choir of the first monastery he built on Monte Argentario, seeing in it the depths of scriptural symbolism.

Paul lived at what we might call the beginning of our technological age, at the start of those attitudes and scientific stances that have led progressively to our modern age. It had at the time (and to some extent still has, though to a lesser degree, being more soberly conscious now of the darkness in man), the time of the Enlightenment, elements that were very critical of the received religious tradition and that set new empirical criteria for all of life's meanings (and not just for scientific progress). Paul saw himself as helping to stem the tide, as addressing the situation in some way. Two-hundred-and-fifty years later we can see something of the sequence, see the unprecedented technological advances, see something of how a gap has emerged between this scientific world and its leaders and the Church (as Fr. Tom Berry was pointing out), see the dark side of "progress" and join with Pope John Paul II when he tries to address men's fear and fright and threat in the face of what he has created and before which he lacks wisdom (*Redemptor Hominis*).

We need very much not to take this all for granted, not to presume that the 'catechism of the vows'— good as it was in its day — is any longer a sure guide for the living out of our religious poverty. Be more explicit among ourselves in teasing out the culture we're part of, trying to see where we're almost unconsciously 'buying into' (literally!) this consumerist mind, and begin to wonder how we can be counter-cultural in this respect by a frugal and simple lifestyle, by a genuine sharing with the poor by a preaching that sensitizes God's people to wider realities, by trying to identify more clearly who are the poor, where are the "poor and incommensurable" places of our times.

All this certainly depends on our personal response to the Lord's Spirit in our time, on our personal willingness to recommit ourselves to a genuinely simple and frugal lifestyle for the sake of the poor, etc. However, that will not be enough, given the corporate side of the issue. As the present Chapter Document puts it in n. 12: "Each community (as well as each religious personally) must ask what can be done to meet the challenge effectively."

BERNARD LOWE, C.P.

REFLECTIONS ON POVERTY: A PASSION FOR PRESENCE

2 Cor. 8:9 – The scriptures are normative as putting before us a vision of the totality of life as granted us by Christ, the Son of God. In Christ’s unfolding of God we are presented with the pattern upon which every Christian has to base life. Transcending every personal interpretation, the Gospel presents every age and every group of Christian believers with a critical blueprint for living.

The word of the Cross proclaims God at his human and divine best. It is here that the vision and pattern are most clearly and starkly presented for our imitation. If we are seeking the meaning of poverty as an aspect of Christian and Passionist life, it must be on Calvary that the word has to be found.

It seems to me that this can be summed up in the statement that poverty as portrayed supremely on the cross is a real dispossessing of one’s self, joyfully chosen as the way of being present to humankind. Poverty is the result of a passion for presence: (Cf. *Hebr. 12:2*). It involves:

Poverty Before God

We, like Christ, are “Borrowers” of Being. So we are to be accountable for the acceptance of dependence. Life is on loan to be returned to God enriched by our human endeavors. In this light riches are seen as a revolt against dependence. The Kingdom of God is a free gift and only those who are deeply poor with a sense of real need of God are open to that gift.

Poverty Before the Gifts of Life

We, like Christ, are called to “Share being”. There must be a deep and clearly accepted sense of responsibility to share gifts, talents, possessions with others. The world, society is interdependent.

Gratitude is a mark of the poor person as they realize how much they receive from many others: food, clothings, housing, care, etc. There is a close link between the Eucharist, the “Sacramentum Passionist,” and poverty at this level of receiving gifts, love and the thanksgiving which ought to spring from the consciousness of such giving. Joy is the response of the poor person to the abundance of God’s giving experienced in life.

Poverty Alongside Humanity

2 Cor. 8:9 – Becoming poor to make us rich, Christ is the symbol of the “Give-Away God”. He refused to possess divinity where this would have prevented his real BEING-WITH us in our human condition (cf. *Phil. 2:6f*). It was this alignment with sinful humanity which caused so much hostility against Christ. It is too easily assumed that Jesus gave priority to the materially poor and physically deprived. In my opinion the Gospels highlight the priority He gives to Sinners whether they were rich or poor – Zaccheus or the Widow of Nain. He sought to be with and to enrich the lives of anyone in need (cf. *Lk. 19:10* – to be with and to seek the lost.)

Those whom society scorned or left behind were sought by Jesus. His chosen option was to enrich and be enriched by all levels of human tragedy and conflict.

The “problem” of riches is that they create a self-dependence which leads separation both from God and from one’s fellow human beings. Riches wither the human spirit. Riches lead to an overconfidence in human resources and human capability to the neglect of God and inner values.

Hence the prophetic role of poverty is to proclaim the sovereignty of God and the protest of Christ against all forms of “be-littlement” of the human person. Such a poverty stands against the exclusivity of the pious and “saved” who see God as in debt to them! It demands a being alongside of those who are unable to choose, who lack the freedoms needed by the human person to grow and realize potential.

The world needs to hear the word of the poor God. It is the word of the Cross – of a God who stooped low in order to lift humanity to the heights of its capabilities. If there is anything in our lives which make that word an empty or hollow word, if there is any structure in our Passionist living which prevents us being-alongside humanity in its needs, then we have failed the word of the Cross and failed to follow the poor man of the Gospel.

- AELRED SMITH, C.P.

SOLITUDE – IN SEARCH OF A VALUE

OUTLINE:

– Introduction

1. Modern Apprehensions Concerning Solitude
2. The Evangelical Roots of Solitude
3. Solitude and Prayer
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Introduction

It certainly can be stated that solitude has been remarkably stressed within the history of our Congregation. We should not conceive of it, though, as of a characteristic that would be specific just of our Congregation. The whole of religious life, from its very beginnings and through the Middle-Ages, was characterized by a desert spirituality, a strong current of withdrawal from and even contempt of the world. This tradition is clearly reflected not only in the *Imitation of Christ* and in the whole movement of the *Devotio Moderna*, in the writings of the Blessed Paolo Giustianiani (1478-1520), but also in the Franciscan movement around S. Leonard of Porto Maurizio, contemporary of our Founder, who promoted the foundation of *Ritiri* (cf. A. CRESI, *S. Leonardo di Porto Maurizio ed i conventi di Ritiro*, “Studi Francescani”, 49 (1951) 154 ff.).

During the 19th and the first half of the 20th century the documents of our Congregation reveal a continuous struggle between the traditional prescriptions on solitude and the demands of an expanding apostolate in completely new settings. Important sociological factors, such as the urbanization of modern life, were hardly taken into account. Even less attention was given to the consequences of a new vision of life that shaped a new cultural era and so a new context for the life of faith.

J.B. METZ, in his book *Theology of the World*, describes the main characteristics of this new context: “The historical situation, on which faith has to rely, is the situation of change from a divinized to a hominized world. This change is related to a reorientation of thinking from world to man, from nature to history, from substance to subject, from a more ‘cosmocentric’ to a more ‘anthropocentric’ form of thinking. To understand the world is not so much to understand nature as to understand history.”

Linked up with this evolution of what is optimistically called “man’s becoming of age,” was the discovery of human interdependence. On the individual level the I-Thou relationship is regarded as essential for any human being to grow to full maturity, and on the collective level solidarity between groups and peoples is stressed as an inescapable task. So the community

dimension, almost completely lacking in former times, became an important element in any form of religious life.

The word ‘solitude’ occurs only once in our Chapter Document (par. 1) and even then it is rather a historical reference to St. Paul of the Cross. This very fact reflects the changes that occurred in recent times. It also confronts us with the question: is the ideal of solitude as a legacy from our Founder totally out of place now that its material realization has almost become an impossibility? Are we to abandon completely even the idea of it? Or does solitude continue to have a meaning also in the cultural and religious environment of our days?

1. Modern Apprehensions Concerning Solitude

a) Fear of Solitude:

Fear of solitude is a widespread phenomenon in today’s society. There are many factors contributing to this phenomenon. Technology and industry may have expanded man’s producing possibilities, at the same time they have estranged man from himself. He does not participate anymore, at least directly, in the process of providing in his vital needs. The things he makes are not shaped with his hands or from the inspiration of his heart. He is cut off drastically from primary groups and often even from family life. He is manipulated by a society that creates artificial needs without giving the means to fulfill them. Interaction takes place on the level of functions, rather than on the level of real people. The passion to dominate the world has also estranged man from nature itself. The world has become a place for competitive work rather than for meaningful living together. Everything seems geared towards filling up or killing time in order to avoid that one experiences the emptiness of life. The flight from solitude is in fact a flight from the confrontation with the fear of loneliness.

What an American Jesuit says about the American fear of solitude could generally be applied to almost any Western nation: “Individual identity is sacrificed in an effort to stay close to the herd, to be no different from others in thought, feeling or action. To stand aside, to be alone, is to assert a personal identity which refuses to be submerged. Society will not tolerate this. Innumerable social features are designed to prevent it: stadiums to accommodate thousands at sports events, open doors of private rooms and offices, club cars on trains, shared rooms in colleges and boarding houses, countless clubs, organizations, associations, societies, canned music (for silence is unbearable) piped into hospitals, railway cars, and supermarkets.

The unwritten code of our culture prohibits aloneness and this is a causative factor for a prolonged identity crisis: the obstacle our society imposes to prevent personal reflection”. (Barry McLaughlin, S.J. *Nature, Grace and Religious Development*, pp. 46-47; quoted by Th. Merton, “Contemplation in a World of Action,” p. 61).

b) Fear of Escapism

Another factor, of a quite different type, which makes us apprehensive of solitude is the spreading awareness of and involvement with the poor and the oppressed all over the world. Gone are the days in which any given situation in the life of human society was attributed to the Divine Providence in an almost deterministic way. We should but read the pastoral letters

of European bishops in the 19th century to sense the distance that separates our view of society from theirs.

A quote from a pastoral letter of Mgr. Fallot de Beaumont, bishop of Gent (Belgium), who wrote in 1806: “Some live in poverty, others in wealth. That’s a situation wanted by Providence and one of the most tangible proofs of God’s goodness and wisdom. It is the strongest tie of society... It may seem, as if God abandons people who live in a state of misery. He does so in order to entrust them to the hands of the rich.” And another Belgian bishop, in 1871, speaks of “the monstrous dogma of the equality of all people... God has willed that there be difference in social situation... and it cannot be tolerated that the power of the masters over their subjects be broken.”

Useless to say that we now live in a totally different climate. Without necessarily denying transcendence, the emphasis is now put on human responsibility. The process of desacralization of society has been parallel to the search for human liberation. There is a new sense of dignity in being human and a greater challenge therefore when one is confronted with the injustices of present day society that tend to deny to many people the basic possibilities for being really human.

The growing awareness of unjust oppression that continues to be imposed by the first world powers on whole nations and continents, the awareness of the state of poverty that continues to be the situation of many groups within the rich countries, cannot but create a bad conscience with regard to the idea of solitude or disengagement.

Religious life in our days will have to present its credentials, particularly also in the way it conceives its necessary solitude.

Maybe the tradition of “fuga mundi” is less in opposition than in harmony with the current call to involvement. Within an earlier social order which was seen as static and unchangeable, a mirror image of the physical order, there was little or no place for social critique or involvement; the existing structures were considered holy and could not be transformed. Under such circumstances the “fuga mundi” was in fact a radical contestation of society; it could not be changed from within, but it could be contested by a refusal to identify with it.

The situation in our current society is different and therefore our radicality can get a different expression: not by flight, not by living in mountains and forests, but through lucid engagement with those excluded. The power of the Cross is not confined to words – it demands the unarmed emergence into the crucifying world of the unmentionables of our day. So, solitude, which continues to be needed, will necessitate other forms of expression than in times past.

2. The Evangelical Roots of Solitude

In recent Christian thinking and spirituality important corrections have been made to a sometimes unilateral and submissive mysticism of the Cross. Or it may be more true to say that the anthropological and cultural climate of our time has raised new questions and favored a new reading of the christian sources.

We have come to see that Jesus' death on the cross did not occur as a blind fate. Jesus' sufferings came from his commitment, from his preaching of the immanence of the kingdom as a kingdom of unconditional grace, from his freedom toward the Law and from his table fellowship with sinners and tax-collectors. It was his uncompromising attitude, his liberating message that brought Jesus into conflict with his contemporaries.

This stress on Jesus' commitment is extremely valuable and inspiring.. But it should not make us bypass that other dimension in Jesus' life which is clearly documented in the Gospel and on which his commitment is founded, namely, his relationship with the Father in sustained and sought solitude.

Jesus continuously left his apostles to enter into prayer with the Father. He speaks about his Father as the source of all his words and actions. When he withdraws himself from the crowd and even from his closest friends, he withdraws to be with the Father. "In the morning, long before dawn, he got up and left the house and went off to a lonely place and prayed there" (Mk.1.35). All through his life Jesus considers his relationship with the Father as the center, beginning, and end of his ministry. All he says and does, he says and does in the name of the Father.

In an article with the title: *Die Evangelisten als Schrifstedler* (The Evangelists as Authors) Walter JENS tries to discover the most striking characteristic of Jesus as given by the Gospels. At the end of his enquiry he concludes: "What the four evangelists wanted to show was that Jesus dwelt in a profound solitude. This is symbolized by the scene in the Temple: "How is it that you sought me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" And they did not understand the saying which he spoke to them" (Lk. 3.49-50). In Gethsemane he withdrew from his disciples, knelt down and prayed to the Father. On Golgotha his solitude was expressed in the cry of despair: 'My God, my God why hast thou forsaken me?' But he was solitary also when he got involved or where other people, in whatever way, became acquainted with him. He was worlds apart from them even in the very contacts. The attributes used by the evangelists to characterize him as the Other are: solitude, mystery and night. They point to silent places, to sun settings, to mysterious places in the dark."

A honest reading of the Gospels cannot but face us with the profound motivation and inspiration behind Jesus' commitment. We falsify the evangelical message if we'd leave out the dimension of solitude and prayer that is omnipresent in Jesus' life. To stress that dimension is not diminishing the dimension of commitment which should continue to inspire us. We need not return to a dualistic opposition between commitment and solitude, between action and contemplation. We should rather live the inescapable tension inherent to the following of Him whose nourishment it was to do the will of the Father. The tension is at the heart of Jesus' words at the Last Supper: "I have given them my word; and the world has hated them because they are not of the world, even as I am not of the world. I do not pray that thou shouldst take them out of the world, but that thou shouldst keep them from the evil one. As thou didst send me into the world, so I have sent them into the world" (Jn 17:14-18).

3. Solitude and Prayer

When A.N. Whitehead, in the frequently quoted line in his *Religion in the Making*, says that "Religion is what man does with his solitariness," it is clear that he means more than aloneness. For when solitariness moves into a religious dimension, a man is not only physically apart but he

has begun to ponder who he is and why he is as he is and what his life is meant for. Whitehead also seems to be implying that solitariness is the right climate for this further dimension. He wraps up the matter with his blunt statement: “If you are never solitary, you are never religious.”

Solitude, as any other human situation, is an ambiguous reality. It can lead us into despair, into melancholy, into life-flight. It cannot as such be equated with religion or prayer. It is only when we do something with it, that it reveals its specific potentialities of binding (re-ligare) us to God, of making us discover that in our aloneness we are not alone, but that He is with us.

That’s why, in the letters of St. Paul of the Cross, the emphasis is much more on *interior* than on exterior solitude. To quote a few examples:

“Physical solitude is a good thing, when it is accompanied by holy virtues and prayer; but a better thing is the solitude of the mind in that holy interior desert in which the soul is completely immersed in God.” (*Lettere*, III, 745).

“If you went into the desert of Nitria or Thebaide without that (= the interior temple of his spirit), then the solitude of those deserts would be of no profit to you at all; but with that spirit you always live in that sacred desert, even when you are in the midst of crowds” (L. III, 754).

“Take to heart divine interior solitude, enter with faith and love into the deepest of that sacred desert, and get completely lost in God. Love and be silent...” (L. III, 191).

An echo of these admonitions is to be found in many places of Thomas Merton’s writings: “A man becomes a solitary at the moment when, no matter what may be his external surroundings, he is suddenly aware of his own unalienable solitude and sees that he will never be anything but solitary. From that moment, solitude is not potential – it is actual.

“However, actual solitude always places us squarely in the presence of an unrealized and even unrealizable possibility of ‘perfect solitude’. But this has to be properly understood: for we lose the actuality of the solitude we already have if we try, with too great anxiety, to realize the material possibility for greater exterior solitude that always seems just out of reach. Actual solitude has, as one of its integral elements, the dissatisfaction and uncertainty that come from being face to face with an unrealized possibility.

“It is not a mad pursuit of possibilities, it is the humble acquiescence that stabilizes us in the presence of one enormous reality which is in one sense already possessed and in another a ‘possibility’ – an object of hope” (*Thoughts in Solitude*, New York, 1958, p. 81).

“As soon as a man is *fully disposed* to be alone with God, He is alone with God no matter where he may be – in the country, the monastery, the woods or the city” (ibid. p. 98) (St. Paul of the Cross’ practice and doctrine of living ‘in the presence of God’ should be developed here, but I presume that this will be part of the presentation on prayer). To stress the priority of interior solitude is not to deny the value of exterior solitude, especially of moments of silence during daily activities and of periods of protracted withdrawal from involving occupations. Religious life won’t remain authentic and inspired without creating and cultivating forms or expressions of also exterior solitude.

Dr. William Sullivan, a spiritual leader of a generation ago, expresses the debt he owed to his seminary training in the use of solitude: “There is no species of training that I ever underwent to which I owe more than to the habit of regular periods of inner solitude. Solitary we must be in life’s great hours of moral decision; solitary in pain and sorrow; solitary in old age and going forth to death. Fortunate the person who has learned what to do in solitude and brought himself to see what companionship he may discover in it. What fortitude, what content. By a great blessing I had an aptitude for these hours of quiet reflection and grew to love them... To be alone and still and thoughtful bestowed upon me the richest joy I knew and for this priceless cultivation I shall be thankful always” (quoted in “Worship,” May 1981).

The ground of solidarity as the ground of interior solitude is one and the same. It is to discover at the heart of things that our solitariness is transcended and that we are not alone but that He is in this whole scene with us, and that we are all in this together. This view is wonderfully gathered up in a letter of counsel thought to have been written by the anonymous author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* that says: “Silence is not God, nor speaking; fasting is not God, nor feasting; solitude is not God, nor company... He lies hidden between them and no work of yours can possibly discover him save only your heart’s love. Reason cannot fully know him for he cannot be thought, possessed or discovered by the mind. But loved he may be and chosen by the artless, affectionate longing of your heart. Choose him, then, and you will find that your speech is become silent, your silence eloquent, your fasting a feast, your feasting a fast, and so on. Choose God in love... For this blind thrust, this keen shaft of longing love will never miss the mark, God himself” (*A Letter About How to Read One’s Interior Inspirations*, in “Contemplative Review” 10 (1977) p. 15-16).

By leaving behind from time to time our many self-affirming actions and becoming ‘useless’ in the presence of God, we transcend our inner fears and affirm our God as the one in whose love we find our strength and security. Worship together, although extremely important for the life of the community, should not be the only form of prayer. It is crucial for the long-term life of a community that we continuously encourage one another to spend time alone with God. This might be difficult or sometimes painful but it is a real service to our life together. After all, a house is stronger when the pillars on which it rests do not depend on each other but have their own separate foundations.

It may not be superfluous to stress the need for reading and study if we want to nourish our experience of solitude. Prayer is the experience of communion with God. Theology is the attempted description of that experience and its implications. But if theology thus feeds on prayer, it is also true that prayer feeds on theology.

Our knowledge about God in terms of doctrine and so on, for all its blatant imperfections, provides the fuel by which alone the fire of prayer can burn, particularly when we do not limit prayer to moments of enthusiasm or spontaneous personal need.

The study of theology does not often feed our prayer directly. But what we learn is stored within us rather like coal in a cellar. And the time comes when the coal will be used. What we have learnt intellectually by, say, the study of a book, may be kept within us unused for a long time as far as our communion with God is concerned. But the time may come when we are ready to receive existentially what we have known so far only intellectually. And at that moment the

flame of love will feed upon what so far has been only mental coal and use it to maintain and extend the fire of our communion with God.

Theology and prayer thus belong together for all the contrast there is between them. Knowledge *about* is dead without knowledge *of*. But knowledge *of* runs into bankruptcy without a plentiful supply of knowledge *about*. We cannot take refuge from study by trying to be men of prayer, for study provides the food of prayer (especially, again, when prayer is a daily practice and not just an occasional act at privileged moments). If we were simple uneducated people it might be different. God does not require his children to be theologians. But God always treats us as the sort of people we are. If we are educated, study for us is an essential preliminary to prayer. (Cf. H.A. Williams, *Tensions*, London, 1976, p. 76).

4. Solitude and Community

Certainly in a period of history in which we have become so acutely aware of our alienation in its different manifestations, we are led to think that the final solution for our experience of loneliness is to be found in human togetherness.

Human togetherness is surely a great value, but it remains superficial unless it unites people who are not in constant flight for the realm of their own solitude. In the words of Kahlil Gibran:

Sing and dance together and be joyous,
but let each one of you be alone,
even as the strings of a lute are alone
though they quiver with the same music.

“In a time with strong emphasis on interpersonal sensitivity, in which we are encouraged to explore our communicative capacities and experiment with many forms of physical, mental and emotional contact, we are sometimes tempted to believe that our feelings of loneliness and sadness are only a sign of lack of mutual openness. Sometimes this is true and many sensitivity centers make invaluable contributions to the broadening of the range of human interactions. But real openness to each other also means a real closedness, because he who can hold a secret can safely share his knowledge. When we do not protect with great care our inner mystery, we will never be able to form community. It is this inner mystery that attracts us to each other and allows us to establish friendship and develop lasting relationships of love” (H. Nouwen, *Reaching Out*, London, 1976, p. 32). (Besides, we should never forget that religious communities are communities *of faith*. and not just groups of people who are in search for a cosy and sheltered place to live. This dimension will further be treated when we discuss community life).

Without the solitude of heart, our relationships with others easily become needy and greedy, dependent and sentimental, exploitative and parasitic, because without such solitude we cannot experience the others as different from ourselves but only as people who can be used for the fulfilment of our own, often hidden needs.

Dr. J.H. Van den Berg, psychiatrist, warns against the trend to consider aloneness as an aberration, as something that should be fought with all possible means: “The imposed togetherness makes suspect any individual who appears to be able to be alone and that without being lonely. He is accused of atavism. It is openly said that the wish to be alone always means flight and should therefore be blamed. Whereas it is a matter of experience that the best, the newest idea, as also the best, the most daring and lasting action is born in Solitude... We seem to

go on talking because we fear solitude. But whoever speaks out of fear, sooner or later will speak on nothing at all” (*Wat is psychotherapie*, Nijkerk, 1970, p. 40-41).

That solitude as such is not opposed to community, but on the contrary is one of its fundamental demands, is a theme that often recurs in the writings of Thomas Merton. On January 12, 1950, he wrote in his diary: “It is in deep solitude that I find the gentleness with which I can truly love my brothers. The more solitary I am, the more affection I have for them. It is pure affection, and filled with reverence for the solitude of others” (*The Sign of Jonas*, London, 1953, p. 281).

Solitude as such is not opposed to involvement either. The same Thomas Merton wrote after a short visit to Louisville where he has watched people in a busy shopping district: “... though out of the world we (monks) are in the same world as everybody else, the world of the bomb, the world of race hatred, the world of technology, the world of mass media, big business, revolution, and all the rest. We take a different attitude to all these things, for we belong to God. Yet so does everybody else belong to God... This sense of liberation from an illusory difference was such a relief and such a joy to me that I almost laughed out loud. And I suppose my happiness could have taken form in these words: ‘Thank God, thank God that I am like other men, that I am only a man among others’... I have the immense joy of being man, a member of a race in which God became incarnate. As if the sorrows and stupidities of the human condition could overwhelm me, now I realize what we all are. This changes nothing in the sense and value of my solitude, for it is in fact the function of solitude to make one realize such things with a clarity that would be impossible to anyone completely immersed in the other cares, the other illusions, and all the automatisms of a tightly collective existence. My solitude, however, is not my own, for I see how much it belongs to them – and that I have a responsibility for it in their regard, not just my own. It is because I am one with them that I owe it to them to be alone, and when I am alone they are not ‘they’ but my own self. There are no strangers!” (*Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, London, 1968, p. 141-42).

In all areas of life, particularly also in spiritual life, we should again discover and value the inevitable reality of tension. Any easy and one-way solution bypasses the richness and the complexity of human existence. “People frequently talk about tension nowadays in the same manner in which piously helpful people once used to talk about sex. You will remember the sort of thing – the mastery of sex, living with sex, and so on, as if sex were a dangerous enemy which some brute or blackguard had inflicted upon the human race, instead of being one of the main sources of human vitality and joy. Tension is now given the same bad name as sex once was. It has to be endured, coped with, lived with, as if it were a misfortune. I am not denying that people can be – and sometimes are – torn apart by internal conflicts which are destructive. But I believe that, in general, people are caught up in destructive conflicts because they have failed to recognize those internal conflicts which are necessary, healthy and creative.

Tension, in other words, is the price of life, a price to which every newborn infant bears its unconscious but by no means silent witness. It is when we refuse to recognize and welcome tensions which are life-giving that we fall a prey to tensions which are “death dealing” (H. A. Williams, *Tensions. Necessary Conflicts in Life and Love*, London, 1976, p. 12-13).

So we are challenged to live the tension between solitude and community. Solitude is not a private space over against the public space of community, nor is it merely a healing space in

which we restore ourselves for community life. Solitude and community belong together, each requires the other as do the center and circumference of a circle.

Solitude is essential to community life because in solitude we grow closer to each other. When we pray alone, study, read, write or simply spend quiet time away from the places where we interact with each other directly, we are in fact participating fully in the growth of community.

It is fallacy to think that we grow closer to each other only when we talk, play or work together. Much growth certainly occurs in such human interactions, but much growth can also take place when we enter into solitude. There we can recognize a bond with each other that does not depend on words, gestures or actions and that is deeper and stronger than our own efforts can create. If we base our life together on our physical proximity, on our ability to spend time together, speak with each other, eat together and worship together, community life soon will become tiring and demanding. Only when all these activities are experienced and lived as an expression of a deeper unity can they remain free and open.

Solitude is indeed essential to genuine community. There we grow closer to each other because there we can encounter the source of our unity. One way to express this is to say that in solitude we are given the awareness of a unity that is prior to all unifying actions. It is the place where we come to realize that we were together before we came together and that community life is not a creation of human will but an obedient response to the reality of our being united. Every time we affirm that solitude belongs to the essence of life together, we express our faith in a love which transcends our interpersonal communication and proclaim that we love each other because we have first been loved (I Jn 4:19).

Solitude is the ongoing return to this sustaining love from which the community draws its strength. In the actual life of the community, this means that it cannot be left to individual members to decide upon and deal with solitude. A religious community is supposed to be more than just a bunch of people joyfully living together. Solitude is so central to life together that a religious community is responsible for structuring in such a way that it ceases to be simply a day to day decision of the individual and becomes instead part of the daily rhythm of life together. Should not time for silence, individual study, personal prayer and meditation be of as much importance to a community as eating together, working and worshipping together? (Cf. H. Nouwen, *Solitude and Community*, in "Worship" 1978, p. 14-23).

5. Solitude and Apostolate

No less than there is a monetary inflation in our days there is an inflation of words. The unending flow of spiritually castrated words threatens any professional speaker or preacher. For language and particularly for religious language to keep meaning, there must be intervals of silence to divide word from word and utterance from utterance.

With all the apparent differences that exist between Paul of the Cross' time and ours there remains a striking analogy as far as preaching is concerned. In his time there was an amazing amount of priests and clerics, hardly trained and living in suspected circumstances. (The three dioceses of the Maremma, with a population of 30.400 people, had no less than 326 priests and 156 clerics). If missionaries wanted to have any impact on the faithful, they had to avoid staying

too long in the same place, or else they would come to be considered as belonging to the same group as the local clergy and thus be little estimated.

In our days there may be far less priests, but there is a constant flood of words poured meaninglessly over everybody, everywhere, from morning to night. The preachers-language, to really reach the audience, must have a distinct quality. The sphere in which the word echoes now is totally different from that dating before the transistor radio. To preach in such a climate means to create silence. But how can words create silence if they were not born in silence?

The situation of missionaries in foreign countries is, of course, quite different and certainly not easier. They have to bear the burden of a particular form of solitude and maybe often loneliness. For they can never really become one of the people among whom they are living.

So they are in need, to be able to continue their task in a fruitful way, not only of the support of their community, but in a special way also of a deep prayer life. They may often share the painful experiences described by St. Paul in his second letter to the Corinthians – a letter that deserves to be read and meditated especially by missionaries in times of hardship, of failure or lack of success.

They may need also the comforting voices of their companions, the prophets of old, who often lived in painful solitude, but who drew their courage to be from the One who commissioned them to speak. As did that poor shepherd, Habakuk, in times far away:

Although the fig-tree does not burgeon,
the vines bear no fruit,
the olive-crop fails,
the fields yield no food,
the fold is bereft of its flock
and there are no cattle in the stalls,
yet I will exult in the Lord
and rejoice in the God of my deliverance... (3.17-18).

–Harry Gielen, C.P.