



CIRCULAR LETTER TO THE RELIGIOUS OF THE CONGREGATION

My dear brothers,

I write this letter to address an issue within the Congregation which I feel is an underlying cause of much hurt and division and disparity amongst the brothers, and, above all, is contrary to the witness of our life as Passionists. It is an issue that fosters a climate of negativity and anxiety, and breeds relationships marked by suspicion and mistrust. The issue I am concerned about is in reference to the area of **finance and the use of money**. During visits to the various entities (Provinces/Vice Provinces/Vicariates/Missions), I hear of complaints, both from Superiors and others, regarding the misuse and the withholding of money by some religious for their personal gain. Obviously this is a very sensitive and uncomfortable subject to tackle or open up for reflection, and many feel unable to address the issue adequately. So I feel compelled to draw your attention to this matter for the sake of our personal and common good.

There is a saying: *“Money is the root of all evil.”* Greed, corruption, selfishness, injustice, poverty, exploitation, oppression, war, hatred, crime, division – all stem from ‘money’. And if we honestly reflect on our own experience of dealing with money, it is not difficult to confirm the truth of this proverb. We constantly hear complaints about this in the arena of politics, business, corporations, and even church. Of course, money, in and of itself, is not evil; however, the misuse and abuse of money (however cleverly it is justified) leads to so much inequality and disparity, poverty and divisions in nations, groups, families, communities – including religious life. It conveniently contributes to the widening gap between the “haves” and “have-nots”. Then, of course, the more one has, the more one wants – a vicious cycle!

For us, Passionists, this issue touches into the core of our vow of poverty and the community life we are called to live.

Constitutions #14 reminds us:

“In the spirit of poverty, we renounce by vow the free disposition of our personal possessions....we also promise by virtue of the vow to depend on the Superior with competent authority in our use and disposition of temporal goods.”

One aspect of evangelical poverty is 'dependence': dependence on others, and dependence on God. However, innate within us is the need to be 'independent', which gives us a sense of power and control...*"I don't need anyone; I can do it all myself!"*

The life which we are called and committed to, as Passionist religious, is a lifestyle involving witness to Christ in community and mission to proclaim the Gospel of the Passion of Jesus as a work of God's love. It is not a 'job' for which we earn a salary to do with it whatever we personally desire. Rather, *"like the first Christian community (Acts 4:32)...we renounce the free disposition of our goods, (and) we place ourselves, our talents, our work, and our achievements at the service of the community and its mission."* (Const #11) The stipends and donations we receive for our labour, and through the generosity of people, are to be contributed to the community which depends on it for the basic needs and support of all the brothers, and for the works of the community.

Our life and mission must be primary! Naturally we need money to live healthily and contentedly *"in a simple and modest lifestyle"* (Const #11), but the constant preoccupation about money and its innate power to become "the golden calf", can distract and pull us away from our ultimate dependence on God who is our security. Often, the temptation to acquire money and goods for oneself, is so that I can feel secure (both for now and in the future) and free to do whatever I like, whenever I choose. It is about fear and the need to be in control of my destiny! This is contrary to our vow of poverty which is about detachment from earthly things in order to be free to love, and to grow in greater attachment to and confidence in God in whose supporting grace we are secure.

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The misuse and acquiring of money by religious for one self necessarily affects his personal life (dishonesty, selfishness, greed), spiritual life (lack of trust and dependence on God), and community life (distrust, inequality, divisions, deprivation, individualism).

An appeal to all the Religious:

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JESUS...

I invite every religious to make time for personal reflection regarding this matter. We can see that this calls for a conversion and renewal of mind and heart. In order to be at peace with our vocation and live more authentically our religious life, each one of us needs to assess and reflect on how we are living our lives concerning money and material goods. We need to

honestly, and in humility, let go of everything that keep us slaves to the idol of money and let God lead us to live in imitation of the poor Jesus – in total obedience and dependence on the Father, and in generous service and self-giving in love for all people.

As Passionist religious, we have chosen to live in contemplation of the Crucified Jesus, drawing strength and courage from the Passion of Jesus in order that we might, in our mission, bring hope

and meaning to those who are 'crucified' today. Living in this way is not easy, nor comfortable; it involves love and sacrifice – a sacrificial love. It means living without some things I may want or like, but with freedom. Perhaps the following from our Constitutions #10 can aid our reflection:

“Christ clearly showed His love for us by becoming poor for our sakes.

We intend to respond to His love by bringing an authentic and evangelical poverty into our own lives. Accordingly we strive, both as individuals and as communities, to characterize our lifestyle by an attitude of genuine detachment and proper use of temporal goods.

We recognize that this may lead to insecurity, and at times even to the lack of necessities. Nevertheless, we place our full confidence in God, and His supporting grace. We accept each day as it comes as a gift from the Father, without worrying about amassing treasures for the morrow.

This spirit of poverty, awakened in us by Christ's grace, makes us more ready to give service to all.”

The following actions – the spirit of which are contained in our Constitutions - I propose for all the religious to consider:

- ❖ Every religious must declare and hand-over, in its entirety, all stipends (for work and Masses) and donations to the community bursar as a contribution to the needs of the community;
- ❖ No religious is to operate a personal/private bank account, unless for a specific purpose related to his work (or personal circumstances) and with the express permission of the Major Superior. In such cases, the religious is to be accountable to the community/entity bursar - having him as a counter signatory where possible;
- ❖ Transparency and accountability is demanded from those religious who have the legitimate use of credit cards and management of money;
- ❖ Any projects in the name of the Congregation are to have the agreement of and 'owned' by the entity, so that it does not become the privilege and decision of one specific religious "building his own kingdom", no matter how good or worthwhile. Seeking funding for projects is always to be with the support and permission of the Major Superior;
- ❖ Religious who are living, working or studying in another entity (outside their own) should not engage in soliciting funds, either for themselves or for projects in their home entity, without first informing the Local Superior of their new community about their intention;

- ❖ All monies received for projects are to be coordinated by the entity bursar and an account of the spending be given, either by him or by the applicant of the project, to the donors;
- ❖ No money or goods belonging to the community are to be given to people outside the community (even to families and friends) without the knowledge of the Local Superior.

An appeal to Superiors – Major and Local:

- ❖ Plan and organize formation sessions and workshops for all religious on financial investments and management, on the responsible use of money and goods of the community in the light of our vow of poverty, and on the meaning of genuine accountability;
- ❖ Constantly bring to the attention of the religious the Congregation's call to financial solidarity, being aware of both the local and Congregation-wide needs, and also finding ways of *"showing our solidarity with the poor"* (Const. #13);
- ❖ Dialogue with the individual religious concerned regarding private/personal bank accounts with the aim of either terminating or legitimizing them for just reasons;
- ❖ Superiors are to seek, and encourage the religious to accept ministries and projects which are income-producing;
- ❖ It is the duty of a Major Superior to have clear expectations and plans regarding the matter of finances of a religious who is sent to work and/or study in another entity: what financial support is given – by whom, to whom, how much?; what happens with stipends received by the religious – is it to cover his tuition fees, contribution to the community, personal expenses, or is it to be sent back to support his entity of origin?;
- ❖ Ensure that the basic needs of religious, appropriate to the local economy and within the means of the community, are met.

An appeal to Bursars:

- ❖ Local bursars must provide a regular clear finance report to the religious of the community, so that they are aware of the financial situation of the community. This is also important for building trust between the bursar and the community members;
- ❖ It is important that the community annual budget is prepared in dialogue with the community members, before being presented to the Major Superior and Entity Bursar for approval;
- ❖ The Entity Bursar must provide an annual finance report of the entity to the religious;
- ❖ Bursars are to listen genuinely to the requests for monetary assistance by individual religious, and make provisions for allowances to cover such items as personal and recreational expenses. (It is often the case that some religious will make use of their stipends/donations for their personal needs when they are constantly refused assistance from the bursar of superior).

Conclusion:

Brothers, this letter is merely my personal reflection and is not meant to be an exhaustive treatise on the subject of money or on our vow of poverty. Nor are the actions I have suggested meant to be a definitive and 'closed' subject; in fact I am quite aware of its limitations.

The purpose of my letter is rather to open up reflection and conversation on this often uncomfortable and sensitive topic concerning attitudes towards and the use of money, in the hope that it will challenge us all to a personal and communal conversion, lessening tensions in our lives, building trust, and effecting authentic witness in our mission.

I invite each one of you to reflect personally, and for communities/entities to add to the debate in an 'open' and mature manner, perhaps suggesting other actions based on the insight and wisdom of each person's experience.

Finally, I am aware that the question of 'equality' can become an issue when we talk about money. Some can feel that there are different standards in the Congregation. I don't claim to have answers, but being an international Congregation, with presences in various parts of the developed and under-developed world, necessarily means that there will be different standards of living, economy, development, opportunities etc. So I don't believe that we can be 'equal' or 'uniform' in the Congregation when considering finances and money. There is, however, the concept of 'equity' which we cannot escape and must face. It relates to the call to solidarity and is about fairness. One author, Jim Falk and his colleagues define it as follows:

"Equity derives from a concept of social justice. It represents a belief that there are some things which people should have, that there are basic needs that should be fulfilled, that burdens and rewards should not be spread too divergently across the community, and that policy should be directed with impartiality, fairness and justice towards these ends."

As Passionists we must be attentive to this when reflecting on and discussing this subject, deriving our inspiration from the Gospel call to solidarity and from the spirit of our Constitutions.

"May the Passion of Jesus be always in our hearts."

Fraternally,

Fr Joachim Rego, C.P.
Superior General
Rome, 29 June 2014