



THE PORTAL TO JESUIT STUDIES

A New Service of the World Today, Pedro Arrupe (1977)

Montreal hosted the Third Inter-American Congress of Religious in November 1977. Pedro Arrupe, as the President of the Union of Superiors General, was invited to address the assembly. In light of the congress's theme – “The Future of Religious Life that We are Building Together for Tomorrow” – Arrupe's remarks, appearing below, seek to answer the question, “What is the greatest service which religious can give today to humanity and to the Church?” Arrupe believes that the Church and humanity are in need of “religious who believe, who have that experience of God, who act with courage in the name of God, aware that the great power of God is with them, and yet at the same time, never lose sight of their own insignificance.”

Your invitation to address you on this occasion is a privilege for which I thank you sincerely. It gives me the opportunity, first of all, to convey to you the cordial greetings of the International Conferences of Religious (U.S.G. and U.I.S.G.) and, in their name, to tell you how much we appreciate and admire your untiring efforts for the renewal and the fostering of religious life. So, in their name and mine: Thank you very much!

The theme of your Congress is “The Future of Religious Life That We Are Building Together for Tomorrow.” I would like to make a contribution to your study, by sharing with you my reflections on a question which is prior to this vision of the future, and which, in great measure, can condition this vision. The question: *What is the greatest service which religious can give today to humanity and to the Church?*

Our starting point is the idea that religious life has meaning to the extent that it is a service of the Church and of humanity, and that it has a future to the extent that it can continue to provide this service in an effective way. The religious institute of men or women which sees itself – or is recognized by others – as incapable of such service would be, from that moment on, the “fig tree that bears no fruit” with no right to a place in the sun, destined for uprooting.

What is the service which religious life should provide “today?” The accent is on *today*, because today is the first step to the future. The World changes; and changing with it is the concrete service it expects from us. The service which each religious institute – of men or women – can render is different because the original, the fundamental charisms are different. And such concrete service must be subject to evolution if it is to remain efficacious in the ever-changing “here and now.”

But, is there not some common denominator which remains constant and necessary for all religious institutes? Yes, there is – given that religious life, whatever be the particular modality adopted by each



institute, is the gospel brought to life, the imitation of Christ. From this fundamental aspiration which all share—the following of Christ—arises the concern which all share for offering the best possible service to Christ in the future, which is the theme of your Congress. From this source rises also the need to know first and foremost what is that special service which the newness of the gospel demands of us today. The future depends on how we answer this question. Or better: The future is already embodied, like an embryo, in our response.

1. The newness of the Gospel

The newness of the gospel lies in its fundamental law: You shall love your neighbor as yourself, for in this precept alone the whole law is contained. And, “as I have loved you, so you should love one another.” This “as I” is the true characteristic: “In this shall men know that you are my disciples.” And this unconditional love for God and for the brothers and sisters is service, like the service of Christ, unto death, not seeking to be served but to serve, not content to give of our possessions, but giving ourselves, laying aside all self-centeredness, just as Christ who “took on the condition of a slave.”

This newness of the gospel is a guiding principle of life for every Christian. That which brings a Christian to a qualitative leap and makes him a religious is the all-demanding radicality of that love and service, given concrete reality in a profession of life according to the gospel, and publicly dedicated to God and to the Church.

In other words, the vocation of one who is chosen by Christ (“you have not chosen me; I have chosen you”) is not only to announce or preach Christ, but to implant the gospel dispensation and way of life, to bring men and women to love one another as Christ has loved us, to bring them to the awareness that this love has been given to them freely by another—another who has loved them to the point of wanting to share his very own love with them by dying and rising for them and making himself their food in the Eucharist. This is the way to arrive at Christian maturity.

2. Service to the world of today

a. The state of the world

We are all aware of the amazing achievements of contemporary civilization: material, scientific, technological, as well as in the religious, humanitarian, and ethical fields. And yet, our world is threatened by two ghosts: poverty and war. There is no way to abolish war unless we first do away with hunger, malnutrition, and the lack of human dignity which proceed, at least in part, from intolerable injustice and oppression. In the next thirty years, when the number of human beings will have reached six billion, how will five billion of them put up with being deprived of their natural



rights, especially when the number of nuclear powers will have increased beyond any control? In the year 2000, if there is no change in present trends, the situation will be much worse. The rich will have grown richer; the poor, poorer. The numerical difference between rich and poor and the qualitative difference between their standards of living will have become gigantic. How long can this go on?

b. The place of the human

Today it has become evident that human beings (or *we*) could make this a more just world, *but that we do not want to*. The inequalities and injustices can no longer be considered as the result of a certain fatalism of nature; they are the work of human beings and of our self-centeredness.

Whose self-centeredness? It would be very convenient and pacifying to place the responsibility for this structured and institutionalized injustice on the anonymous and sinister multinational corporations, or on one or two of the industrial giants or political powers. If those corporations or states exist at all, it is because – together with others – Christians have built them, promoted them, or are their submissive customers. Many governments are what they are – insensitive to brotherhood or community and incapable of restraining the forces or agents of injustice – because their citizens will never agree to make a sacrifice, to cease being driven by hatred, to allay their passion to have more and more, to accept a more modest lifestyle, all this for the sake of easing the poverty which keeps the vast majority of mankind under the whip. Turning the antenna towards other parts of the world: it is because we do not look for an alternative solution to guerrilla warfare or violence in the establishment and advocacy of rights in justice.

c. "Homo consumens"

An enormous percentage of the men and women who live in countries that abound in material goods seem to have changed the name of our species from "homo sapiens" to "homo consumens." From infancy we are sculpted and shaped into consumers by the hands of an advertising which is now like the air we breathe. And once this "homo consumens" is produced, he or she and the ads, exert their influence in turn on the economy, creating and justifying more and greater needs. The superfluous becomes the convenient; the convenient becomes the necessary; the necessary becomes indispensable.

Advertising techniques are studied expertly in order to get beyond the rational and conscious level to the unconscious, with decisive influence on our psychology and on our decisions. It has gone so far that some are asking if we have any freedom left to behave independently.

d. Consumer society

They do not rest content with shaping the personality of the consumer. They create as well the consumer society, with its own values, attitudes and laws, with overt awareness of class superiority. In this society "liberty" means the unlimited use of goods, services, and money. "Development" means to possess more, industrialization, urbanization, increasing per capita income. "Freedom of information,"



in this scheme of things, is assured provided it comes from a certain source and moves to certain goals. The overriding purpose is to open or enlarge markets, to build up profits, and to this end, to turn the “global village” into a “company town.” The central point: myself. Other people: things to serve my purpose. The motive: profit. The moral norm: efficiency. The means: whatever works – let the chips fall where they may.

e. Youth and consumer society

By intuition young people have revolted against this state of affairs, rejecting consumer society. Everywhere there are groups of young people who break with the society around them and adopt a simple style of life. They reject all discrimination beyond that which is required by the diversity of needed services for the community. They hold their possessions in common. This is an open break with consumer society, and, aiming beyond capitalism, they are fighting against industrial society itself, radically upsetting the logic of abundance, even in its collectivist version. Without denying the conflict between classes of society and the conflict among nations, young people perceive and denounce a more radical and profound abuse: that of man against nature.

f. How construct a “society of sufficiency?”

From all this it seems clear that frugality or austerity of life emerges as absolutely necessary for the material and social survival of the human race. Even the leaders of the materialist-Marxist parties recognize this:

Austerity is not just an instrument of political expediency, to resolve temporary difficulties; it is the means of getting to the root – and of establishing the possibility of a solid reconstruction – of a system undergoing a deep structural crisis, affecting the foundation, not just the joints. A system whose trademark is waste, extravagance, more and more unbridled consumerism. Austerity establishes a new scale of values: rigor, efficiency, sobriety, justice.... A politics of austerity, of rigor, of war on waste, is an unavoidable necessity for everybody. It is the driving power of the struggle for the general transformation of society, or at least of the ideas on which society is to be built.

How much more could be said by one who analyses contemporary society with Gospel criteria and means. Everybody admits the necessity of taking some effective steps, and this cannot be done without great sacrifices. But who is ready to make them? Nobody does anything, because no one has the motivation sufficiently strong and persuasive for the kind of sacrifice that a more frugal life demands. The poor person says: Let the rich begin. I have had enough frugality already! The rich person says: Why should I give up what I have legitimately gained? It will not do any good if others do not do the same. Let *them* begin, then we shall see. And so, nobody does anything.

And so, just as to create the consumer society, one begins by creating and educating “homo consumens,” its basic element, so in the same way, in order to create a just and balanced society, with the possibility of survival, we have to begin creating “homo serviens” who has a sense of solidarity and



being brother or sister to all. On one side we have “homo consumens,” egocentric, egotistical, obsessed with *having* rather than with being, a slave of self-created needs, unsatisfied and envious, whose only moral principle is to pile up wealth. On the other side, in contrast, is “homo serviens” who has no desire for more possession, but for more *being*, who seeks to develop a capacity for service to others in solidarity, with a modest sense of what is “sufficient.” Our first obligation as religious will be to become “homines servientes” who live with what is sufficient.

3. Urgent need of a solution

The universality of this mental and social malformation, the depth and complexity of what it implies, and the gravity of its effects has made this problem number one in importance and urgency. Each and everyone here present should feel it in our flesh. “We must make haste,” cried the Holy Father, “there are situations whose injustice cries to heaven.” “The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men and women of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these too are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ.”

The same Holy Father, speaking to religious, said: With greater attention than ever before you must listen to the “cry of the poor” out of the depths of their personal need and collective misery.... This cry obliges you to rouse your consciences.... It moves some of you to join the poor in their poverty, to share their sharp anxieties. It limits your use of material goods to that which is required by the tasks of your vocation. You have to manifest in your daily lives the evidences, even external ones, of authentic poverty. “The needs of today’s world, if you let them touch you as part of your intimate union with Christ, lend an urgency and depth to your poverty.” If it is obviously necessary to take into account the human milieu in which you live in order to adapt your style of life to it, your poverty cannot be a pure and simple conformity with the customs of this milieu. Your poverty’s value as witness will come from a generous response to the challenge of the gospel in total fidelity to your vocation, and not just from a concern about appearing poor.

To this “cry of the poor” there is joined in the hearts of religious the echo of the unconditional “yes” spoken personally to Christ when we accepted his invitation: “Sell what you have, give it to the poor and come follow me.”

But does this obligation and necessity for action mean that we have to go to the barricades – to revolution? No. It does not even imply preference for a particular form of apostolate. Each institute has its own forms and priorities. But it does call all of us to solidarity – not only affective but also effective – with the poor. We should relinquish many things that seem necessary. We are gambling for the credibility of the gospel and of the Church with this solidarity, frugality and authentic poverty. The Council has told us: It is necessary for religious to be poor in deed and in spirit.



This frugality and relinquishment has to extend to our means of evangelization as well. We must not be led astray by the false lure of efficiency. Rather we should make sure that the means of our labor are no more than just that, means, justified by a proportionate end. Applying the “*tantum quantum*” principle of St. Ignatius, we will make use of them only to the extent that they are genuinely indispensable for the extension of the Kingdom of Christ, without any personal gain or any impairment of our detached freedom.

But enough of argumentation. What we need is reflection and, above all, execution, *action*. If in the face of this challenge we do not give an answer that is radically evangelical, then religious life loses its reason for survival. If, however, we respond to this challenge with the depth and the energy which Christ and many worth-while candidates for religious life expect of us, then we shall see a flowering and exuberant growth.

I think we have reached the point of asking ourselves the following questions:

- What does religious poverty mean for me?
- What is my feeling when, in intimate colloquy with Christ poor, I think about all that I have and use? How many things do I have that are superfluous?
- When I say that I want to give up something to help the poor, what do I in fact give up? It is not to the point to say that it is a symbolic act. We are not interested in symbolism at this stage, but in real and effective action which accomplishes what it proclaims. Recall the words of St. James: If you do not give them what they need to live, what do your words profit?

This “conversion to frugality” demands that we first return to the very foundation of our spirituality. Only there can we find the spiritual energy indispensable if we are to feel ourselves inspired, impelled, enlivened by the power of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is the only one who can bring us victorious through the head-on collision with the powers of egoism organized in a network of power which enthralls the whole world and ourselves as well.

The world needs the kind of obvious and unarguable witness that shakes it forcefully, indeed “shocks” it, forcing it to open its eyes to the reality of its problem and of the only solution. We will not achieve this with declarations and words lightly tossed off, nor with more of the ambiguous statements with which the world is sated. We need words of witness so clear and striking that it will be impossible to ignore them, words that will leave perfectly obvious our single-minded message, through a life which is only possible with the power of Christ, our only savior and the only Son of God.



4. Based on Evangelical Principles

This Third Panamerican Congress of Religious is a privileged place for reflection in the presence of God on this issue about which we all want to help and be helped by one another, based on our sharing of certain evangelical principles which are common to us all and which are unanimously accepted.

– that we are all children of God. In respect to the goods at our disposal, we are not masters, but stewards. And we have to render our accounts to the Lord of all.

– that we should love everyone as we love ourselves and as we love Christ, treating others the way we would want them to treat us.

– that the poor are blessed.

– that it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven.

– that those who would grow rich enter into temptation.

– that God has preferential love for the poor in this world. “He has sent me to proclaim the gospel to the poor.”

– that we should be content to have enough to eat and to be clothed.

– that we should not be anxious for tomorrow; sufficient for the day is the evil thereof.

– that we should put on the mind of Christ who emptied himself and took on the condition of a slave.

Permit me to say to those of you who come from the industrialized countries of the Northern Hemisphere that you have the great responsibility of presenting this teaching to a society on whose attitudes and orientations depends the destiny of millions of people who suffer oppression and misery. There is a danger that a partial and sugar-coated reading of the gospel would allow people to believe that they are in good conscience while making use of the gospel values of freedom, property and progress, all the while turning them into tools of selfish ownership, exploitation, and enslavement of the neighbor. A word to you who come from Latin America. I see you identified with the immense multitudes whose human dignity has been debased, and who are deprived of the necessities of life even, perhaps, within sight of the minority who have more than enough of everything. Latin America! Kaleidoscope of culture, of wealth and misery, the hope and anguish of the Church. While helping your people get what has been unjustly kept from them, you must not allow them to make use of some values – liberation, equality – while forgetting others – brotherhood, peace, patience, and that value of simplicity and poverty which makes “the little ones of this world” the favorites of Christ.



But let the witness of the lives of all be in clear view – evidence of your sincerity and justification of your liberty to denounce. Neither with the rich nor with the poor, with the oppressors nor the oppressed, with the faithful nor those without faith, will our words have any force if the frugality of our personal lives – beyond the reach of anyone’s suspicion or malice – does not back up the doctrine we preach.

We shall have to give this witness, even when the demands of authentic apostolate require that we be immersed in an urban milieu at a high social level, in a salaried position, etc. These are all circumstances which demand all the more visibility of the witness of frugality and renunciation on the part of anyone who exercises an apostolate. Furthermore, it should be clear why one has come to be in such circumstances. There should be an evident disdain of money and power, simplicity of diet, clothing and transportation.

How will they receive our harangues about justice if they see us enjoying a standard of living superior to many of our fellow citizens, if all we do smacks of privilege, if our connections tie us in with the rich, the oppressors, the ruling classes? On the other hand, how will anybody recognize the evangelical character of our message about justice if we set in play guerrilla tactics or violence, urging rebellious radicalism, or corrupting our work of conscientization with atheistic methodologies or ideologies? How will people be convinced that we believe what we preach if they see that we are too cowardly to denounce injustices in the spirit of the gospel out of fear of reprisals on our persons or our works?

5. Let us give an irrefutable witness against consumerism

Here, then, is the answer to my question, as I see the matter. The greatest service which religious can offer to mankind today is to give irrefutable witness against consumerism by a life that is austere and frugal, offering to the world in our own persons that interpretation of the gospel, authentic and liberating, for which it is longing. Austerity, furthermore, is that which the world must adopt if it wants to survive, and it will have to do this in one of two ways: either by the force of a totalitarian state of whatever stripe, which will *impose* it by brute force and at the cost of freedom and the highest personal values – claiming at times paradoxically the inspiration of Christ and His message – or by the way of evangelical love in virtue of which we all accept the sacrifice which the good of all demands of us. Our option as religious is beyond doubt. But are we ready now to take a step forward?

This frugality, from which no religious can consider himself or herself dispensed, will in many cases unfortunately be the only level of solidarity with the poor which is possible. But it alone is not enough. For if the force of our testimony as religious is to be really, even irresistibly effective, then many other religious, impelled by the Spirit, will have to live lives of even closer solidarity with the poor, working directly among them and for them in pastoral, auxiliary or social works. Surely more convincing and definitive is that exclusive and thorough solidarity of those religious who, whether individually or through institutions, are inserted among the poor, sharing their life, their needs and their hopes.



Effective *solidarity* of the religious with those who are truly poor will be accompanied by *solitude* among the poor. The religious will feel as his or her own the just aspirations of the dechristianized world of the laborer. But, at the same time, we will feel ourselves alone when we see that the laborer's world does not understand our ideals, our motives and our methods. In the depths of our soul we find ourselves in complete solitude. We need God and his power to be able to keep working in the solitude of our solidarity – in solidarity, but solitary – and, in the last analysis, misunderstood and alone. This is why we see that many religious men and women who are inserted into the world of the laborer have found a new experience of God. In the experience of finding themselves alone and misunderstood, their soul is ripe for the fullness of God. In this simple experience, they feel themselves very small and yet open to value in a new way how God speaks to them through those with whom they stand in solidarity. They see that those people, the marginated, even though not often believers, have something divine to tell them through their suffering, their oppression, their abandonment. Here one understands true poverty; one rediscovers awareness of one's own incapacity and ignorance; one opens one's soul to receive very profound instruction in the lives of the poor, taught by God himself, by means of these rough faces, these half-ruined lives. It is a new face of Christ discovered in "the little ones."

The testimony of this style of life is highly effective; and in the long run it will be imitated, or, at least, understood and recognized by others. At the same time, it is a paradox. On the one hand, we become aware of how inadequate our own witness is when we look at the magnitude of the problem. On the other hand, we are convinced that it is a necessary witness which the Lord demands of us so that He can fill it with the power of His grace.

I recognize the extreme difficulty of the enterprise, and still I believe that this Congress – or better, this community – is a privileged occasion to reflect on the task ahead, joined together before the Lord.

It is crucial that we believe in the power of the Holy Spirit. And we can only know that by experiencing interiorly the impulse of the "Dynamis" of God, who draws us and, without forcing our liberty, accomplishes all that He desires. That force of the word of God, which never, returns to Him empty, or like the violent wind of Pentecost which made it possible for poor fishermen to become mighty apostles among the powerful and wise of the earth. That is what we need today – religious who believe, who have that experience of God, who act with courage in the name of God, aware that the great power of God is with them, and yet at the same time, never lose sight of their own insignificance.

This is the service which the Church wants from us today. And at the same time, it is the beginning of a new future and a new image of religious life. The Lord is calling us; the response is up to us.

Original Source (English translation):

Challenge to Religious Life Today: Selected Letters and Addresses – I, ed. Jerome Aixala. St. Louis: The Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1979, "A New Service of the World Today," pg. 239–252.

Provided for research, teaching, and private study. All rights reserved by the copyright holder, pursuant to the Portal's policies.