

The Image of Jesus Christ, the Divine Poor, and its Correlation to the Mission of Serving the Poor

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Abstract: This work studies the image of Jesus Christ, the Divine Poor and its correlation to the mission of serving the poor. The context of the study is a response to the continuous call of renewal. Pope Francis has asserted: “God constantly renews his faithful ones, whatever their age” (EG 11). The entire Catholic Church has been continuously re-proposing Christ and his Gospel in response to the profound questions and needs of contemporary people especially the poor. All need to understand that the poor must not only be the privileged recipient of the Good News but they are the very “heart of the Gospel” (Francis, 2015).

This study expounded the fundamental insight that the Divine Poor, Jesus Christ, identifies himself with the poor and commands his follower to serve them. This charismatic face of Christ is meant to renew and build up the Church; it is “not an inheritance, safely secured and entrusted to a small group for safekeeping” (EG 130) but it must be felt and integrated into the body of the Church. As Pope Francis notes: “A sure sign of the authenticity of a charism is its ecclesial character” (EG 130).

This exposition focuses on one particular Christological image: Christ the Divine Poor. The elucidation of the said image followed a systematic sequence: (a) general overview of their Scriptural basis, (b) selected reflection in the Tradition of the Church teachings, and, (c) how these are defined and lived in the Writings of Blessed Savina Petrilli, the Mother Foundress of the Sisters of the Poor of Saint Catherine of Siena and its impact on the life of mission in serving the poor. It explores how a charismatic image of Christ can be re-discovered and become point of reference in value formation.

Key Words: image of Jesus Christ; Divine Poor; mission of serving the poor

1. INTRODUCTION

“The Church is always in need of renewal” (LG 8) to be faithful to Christ and to his teaching. Pope Francis continuously calls for Church reformation not only in structures and ways of evangelizations but in the Church’s lifestyle; he said: “Without new life and an authentic evangelical spirit, without the Church’s ‘fidelity to her own calling’ (UR 6), any new structure will soon prove ineffective” (EG

25). The sense of disorientation experienced by Christians facing powerful changes and divisions (IL: NE 10) reveal that the contemporary humanity is thirsty and nostalgic for God and hungry for spirituality (Nolan, 2006). Pope Francis states that the present realities are opportunities for every Christian to proclaim the Gospel with joy, and this is only possible if one would have a renewed personal encounter with the risen Christ (EG 1-3).

Christ is the content and the very source of evangelization (CT 5; GDC 98). The prime movers

and agents of making Christ known and loved are Christians themselves whose lives are touched by his love and grace. The testimony of saints and unnamed martyrs of the modern times, the stories of founders and foundresses of different religious, secular and lay apostolates, attest to the enticing mystery of Jesus Christ. Teachings and quotations from the missionary saints and martyrs and their life story are effective sources and ways of proclamation (SEB:NE 9; GDC 95).

The researcher takes into account the plight of many poor and marginalized Asian people. In Asia, the sharing of the lived spiritual experiences is of incalculable necessity, the poor are important in the tasks of evangelization and integral development. The FABC continuously calls for a return to the very sources of Christian life. "And this return would have to be in dynamic interaction with a pervasive sensitivity to the aspirations of all, and especially of the poor peoples of Asia. For the spirituality of the new way of being Church is the spirituality of those who place their complete trust in the Lord. It is the spirituality of the powerless, of the *anawim*" (FABC 1990, p. 288).

Fully inserted into the ecclesial communion, the Consecrated people contribute with their own proper gifts to an integrated pastoral activity (SEB:NE 42, 43, 44, 50). In the Year of Consecrated Life (30 November 2014 - 2 February 2016), Pope Francis asked all men and women Religious and members of Apostolic Societies and Secular Institutes to live their identity as consecrated persons radically and with joy. The witness of a life which manifests the primacy of God, community living and selfless service to the marginalized is a powerful proclamation of the Reign of God (Francis, 2014).

In line with this effort, the study aims to explore the Image of Christ, the Divine Poor in the writings of Blessed Savina Petrilli, the mother foundress of the Congregation of the Sisters of the Poor of Saint Catherine of Siena (SdP), and their impact on the missionary life of the Sisters of the Poor. The entire exposition is enriched by biblical and exegetical reflection, selected writings in the Tradition of the Church teachings and related Christological readings and materials on religious life, especially the Writings of Blessed Savina Petrilli, the Mother Foundress of the Sisters of the Poor of Saint Catherine of Siena and the documents

of the Renewal Chapters of the SdP Congregation after Vatican II (1965-2009). These congregational documents are examined in view of the ministry with the poor.

2. METHODOLOGY

The initial research assembles the manuscripts, documents, original writings of Blessed Savina from the Archives and library of the Congregation both in the Mother House in Siena and in the General House in Rome, Italy. The oldest and the newest biographies of the Mother Foundress, including the two volumes of the *Positio Super Virtutibus*, magazines, leaflets and articles written about her life, are collected and are made available for the study. This project involves examining the original manuscripts and the earliest circular letters, not just relying solely on their English translation.

This method affirms the call of Pope Francis (2014) to all the Consecrated to draw wisdom from the spring of the past. The study pushes forward the challenge of "going back to the original sources" (EG 11) so that one's history, tradition and customs can be fully appreciated and understood. When deeply rooted, one can find creative means to express key values in present realities with a language comprehensible and acceptable to contemporary times. Pope Francis (2014) invites the Participants in the Third World Congress of Ecclesiastical Movements and New Communities to always preserve the freshness of one's charism.

The present study considers the "Christological Approach through Titles" (Dupuis, 1995 p.19) towards developing particular selected Christological theme.

3. CONTENT

3.1 Scriptural Basis and Church Tradition

The Judeo-Christian Scriptures reveal first of all a God of life who opted for the poor in the past and continues to opt for the poor in the present. Pixley and Boff (1989) offer a range of fundamental biblical insights which guarantee God's intense and thoroughgoing concern for the poor. Similarly, the study of Hoppe (2004) aims to look at every text in

the Bible in which a word having 'the poor' in its semantic field appears. In treating the Torah, the Prophets, wisdom literature, the Psalms, apocalyptic literature, the New Testament, and the rabbinic tradition, Hoppe comes to a conclusion that the Biblical tradition "is unanimous in asserting that material, economic poverty is an outrage, that it should not exist, that it is not in accord with the divine will ... and finds the experience of the poor to be an apt metaphor for the universal need for salvation" (Hoppe 2004 p.171).

Pope Francis (2014) affirms that the ancient hymn (Phil 2:6-11) proclaims that Jesus total self-emptying and servanthood are the reasons of his exaltation as Lord. The Gospel narratives portray Jesus as one of the poor, one who lives in solidarity with the poor and a sign of hope for the poor (Schottroff and Stegemann, 1986). The poor are central to Jesus' ministry. He healed them, fed them and made them children of God. He preached the Good News to them made them examples in entering the Kingdom of God (OC 1011).

It is because the leader and the Master "shares the life of the poor, from the cradle to the cross; he experiences hunger, thirst and privation. Jesus identifies himself with the poor of every kind and makes active love toward them the condition for entering his kingdom" (CCC 544). "Just as Christ carried out the work of redemption in poverty and oppression, so the Church is called to follow the same path if she is to communicate the fruits of salvation to humankind" (LG 8; cf. AG 5).

The Christian Fathers recognized the poor as the wealth of the Church, a precious part of the mystical body of Christ. Emphasizing the living temples, John Chrysostom says: "Do not, therefore, adorn the church and ignore your afflicted brother, for he is the most precious temple of all." The teaching of the Fathers in both West and East can be summed up in two basic principles: (i) The surplus goods of the rich are the needs of the poor (Saint Augustine); (ii) Human beings are merely managers of the goods they possess, never their owners (Saint Basil).

Church history attested to Church's struggles in confronting poverty and concern for the poor. In the year 500 alone, there were no fewer than forty-one councils and synods which revolved around the social problem of the poor. The bishops were seen

as advocates and providers for the poor. The council of Macon in 585 declared that the bishop's house was the house of the poor. Anything that would deny the poor free access to the bishop was prohibited, even bringing along dogs. There were councils who radically put into life their understanding that the temporal goods of the Church are also the patrimony of the poor. That is why the Gallic Councils of the fifth and sixth centuries excommunicated those who withheld goods from the poor, even bishops themselves. The actual, practical love of the poor was considered essential to Church communion; for this reason, the Church of the Fathers refused gifts from those who exploited the poor. In the early Middle Ages, the poor had the right to appeal to ecclesiastical tribunals against injustice done to the poor and so bishops were given a function as appeal judges as seen in the canon 26 of the Council of Tours in 567 (Pixley & Boff, 1989).

Over the centuries, the monks embraced voluntary poverty and the abbeys became centers to feed the poor; the hermits and mendicants, by living with and like the poor helped foster a better appreciation of the state in which the poor lived and the need to rescue them from it. The theologians thought about the problem of the poor and appreciated their work force in the society. Some secular clerics and laities fought for the right of the poor and led them to revolt. Other religious leaders dedicated themselves in working for the poor; thus, there was an enormous proliferation of various institutes of Charity in response to new forms of poverty. The contrasting image of the poor and poverty could be observed. On one hand, poverty is seen as unworthy of human beings therefore to be rejected, hence, the need to be remedied and the poor uplifted. On the other hand, the suffering of the poor was sublimated with that of Christ; the title given to the poor was "*pauperis Christi*," therefore, the mystical veneration of the poor (Pixley & Boff, 1989).

The Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC), in their Manila statement in 1970, called for the Church to be a Church of the Poor; FABC has consistently worked towards that vision, advocating a dialogue of life especially with the poor. The FABC also advocated this in the final statement of 1974 Plenary Assembly and onward. Aware of the massive poverty in Asian Countries, the concrete call is to live in solidarity with suffering

humanity and to work for the liberation from whatever oppresses and degrades human life and creation, especially sin. The poor of Asia are the materially poor, indigenous people, displaced persons, victims of misguided economic and political development, victims of wars and divisions, victims of sex tourism, especially children and women (Eilers, 1997). The Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Asia* (EA) specifically mentions the Church's commitment to promote the dignity of persons and a preferential love of the poor; these are essential aspects in order to nurture the Gospel of Life.

The Second Plenary Council of the Philippines (1992) spells out amply the meaning of the Church of the Poor; the message of liberation becomes an urgent need for social transformation. The Church of the Poor is a precondition for becoming a community of disciples, a true mystery of communion and mission. True communion is to bridge the gap between the poor and the rich. Mission is not to condescendingly help the poor, but to liberate them from every structural oppression. Poverty in the sense of destitution is not the will of God. It must be noted that the call of God to be the Church of the Poor did not come from the heavens but from the widespread poverty and suffering of the Filipino people. The poor are blessed, not because poverty is a blessing, but because God comes to the aid of the poor. In order to become credible witnesses of Christ, the Church must be the Church of the Poor (PCP II 23-27).

3.2 In the Writings of Blessed Savina Petrilli

Savina recognized the "Divine Poor" in the person of the poor, the sick and the needy (Petrilli, 1942). "The poor are precious before God because they are clothed with dignity of the heavenly king, and share his glory since they represent him" (OC 1006). Savina said that the sisters can never call themselves a true spouse of Jesus, the Divine Poor, if their love can never be felt and seen effectively by those people entrusted to their care, especially the poor (Petrilli, 1875). They need to see Christ in the Poor through faith because the poor can be likened to a mystery (OC 1008). In the poor, God is met in poverty and thus one could deepen one's relationship with God and discover the profound mystery of

Christ. Faced with the poor, the Spirit gives grace to the believers to respond in love, service, solidarity and justice (OC 1007). One could experience the divine power and saving grace in recognizing Christ in the Poor. The works for the poor become concrete means of salvation and light (OC 1036-1039).

Savina inherits this love for the Poor from the long tradition of the Church. Preferential option for the poor is the reason why Savina calls the Congregation she founded the "Sisters of the Poor." The sisters need to dedicate themselves to the cause of the poor even to the point of sacrifice, "unhesitatingly and unreservedly" (OC 1008). Just like Saint Catherine of Siena, the SdP sisters must venerate the poor like a sacrament (RL:SdP 5). Faithful to their Charism, the sisters are "never permitted to abandon the poor whom God gave them as brothers and sisters" (Dir 15). Savina warned the sisters that they can never undertake works that are contrary to their identity as Sisters of the Poor (RL:SdP 111, Dir 291) and that they live a simple and poor life.

The vocation and mission of an SdP sister is to heal the suffering of the poor through compassionate words and actions (OC 1022, 1025), to alleviate their pains by bringing the gentle love of Jesus (OC 1012, 1023). The sisters are to give not only material goods, but God who is the greatest good. The family spirit purifies an SdP sister from a condescending attitude towards the needy or any beneficiary of the apostolate and missionary work (OC 1006). Working with the poor is just a consignment, an act of the infinite mercy of Jesus Christ. All this is within the charity of God (Petrilli, 1899).

3.3 Creative Fidelity Through General Chapters (1965-1983)

The SdP Congregation affirms that creative fidelity becomes the appropriate method that keeps one's spirituality alive in spite of the changes in time and space, culture and mentality. The General Chapter is the occasion par excellence for the Institute to become newly aware of its links with the Church in whose mission it plays a part, and with the world to whom it has been sent by Christ. The general chapter holds supreme authority in the institute (CIC 631) and its principal task is to protect

the spirit, character, nature and traditions of the Institute (CIC 578, 631). The Rule of Life of the Sisters of the Poor which was written by Blessed Savina has undergone revision and updating in the spirit of renewal from 1968 to 1983 through Special and General Chapters. The revision is based on: the Gospel as the highest rule, the Documents of the Second Vatican Council, the New Code of Canon Law (1983), the essence of the spiritual heritage, the directives of the General Chapters, the recommendations of the SdP Sisters with regard to the revisions sent to the Communities, and the suggestions of the consultants to the Rule Revision Committee. The Rule of Life sets the ideal vision of being an SdP sister; it becomes the gage of fidelity. The experience and reality are constantly reviewed to hone the elements of mission in serving the Divine Poor.

3.4. The Divine Poor and the Mission Delineated in the Rule of Life of the SdP (1983)

Charitable acts and the assistance given to the poor are necessary but one needs not to forget and underestimate their dignity as children of God. The image and likeness of Jesus, the Divine Poor, must be recognized in them; they too have so much to teach and thus enrich the lives of others, especially those who are ministering to them. Every apostolic activity is the continuation of the mission of Jesus, “the Lamb of God destined to be immolated for many” (RL:SdP 104). Apostolic zeal leads the SdP sisters to practice charity to the point of heroism through sacrifice, the holocaust of one’s own life. The sisters strive to offer a communal testimony in their apostolates; they have been sent, entrusted and supported by the community. Intimate union with Christ and unity in the community make the ministry more effective and efficacious (RL:SdP 105-110). Although there is no particular work which must be considered more important in the service of the Lord, the preferential option for the poor must always have its primacy. The sisters care for families, youth, children, the sick and elderly; they make themselves available for pastoral and medical care; they are involved in education, catechesis and evangelization. Through their missionary work, they

become witness of living faith and active charity (RL:SdP 111-120).

3.5 The Renewal Chapters from 1990-2009

The aspects to be improved in the area of apostolates are found on theological, spiritual and practical levels. There is always a need to deepen the theological understanding of the apostolates; these cannot be reduced to the many works, but they are relative to being consecrated, chosen and sent. Individualism and workaholicism can harm prayer life and community relationships. The SdP General Chapters (1990-2009) urged the Sisters to remember Jesus, the Divine Poor, who empowered the apostles and shared his ministry. This image of Jesus, the Divine Poor, challenges the SdP sisters to acknowledge with humility the growing isolation from each other and the need to grow in communal sharing, as well as in the planning and evaluation of the ministry. The integral promotion of the human person is to be intensified. Small communities near to the poor are to be created. Sisters must be disposed to “*missio ad gentes*.” The pastoral involvement with the local Church is to be fortified. These demand a reduction of the institutional and traditional apostolates, and necessitate the sharing of the SdP charism and spirituality with lay collaborators. The SdP sisters ought to have practical creativity to discover the different faces of the Divine Poor in the broad strata of human poverty.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The Congregation of the Sisters of the Poor is of European origin. The challenge is how the continuity of its history, recognizing the richness of its founding spirit, be enhanced with the multiplicity of cultures. “When properly understood, cultural diversity is not a threat to Church (institution) unity” (EG 117).

4.1 Propose an Ongoing Formation Program

The present study revealed the need to grow in a healthy and hospitable relationship with the poor. The integral promotion of the human person will lead to empowerment. The spiritual aspect of letting them experience the liberating

power of Christ through prayer and scriptural study can also allow them discern the structural and personal causes of their poverty. There must be a shift of views from merely treating poor families as nothing but mouths to feed to considering them as minds to educate. Furthermore, the poor must be treated as capable individuals who can participate in the conversation, planning, and implementation of programs for them. A healthy relationship with the poor, treating them with dignity even if they may be illiterate, can help them better understand their history, issues, and resources. This can restore their dignity and they can become productive members of society.

4.2 Facilitate Sharing, Planning and Evaluation of the Ministry

The Sisters who are actively engaged in the apostolic and pastoral activities are directly exposed to the struggles and pains of the poor and the needy. They have a special vantage point for observing the surrounding culture and the concrete realities of the marginalized members of the society. They have a heightened awareness and concerns about the plight of those to whom they are ministering. They are credible “voices” of the voiceless. They can be effective facilitators to initiate communal sharing, planning and evaluation of the ministry.

4.3 Form a Network of a Community Support System on Local and International Levels

As Saint John Paul II has stated that “today, often as a result of new situations, many Institutes have come to the conclusion that their charism can be shared with the laity. The laity are therefore invited to share more intensely in the spirituality and mission of these Institutes” (VC 54). The SdP Congregation acknowledges the laity’s “special and indispensable role in the mission of the Church” (AA 1). The Document on the Apostolate of the Laity asks religious communities to hold lay apostolic works in high regard and help in promoting them in accordance with the spirit and rule of the institutes (AA 25). One of the focuses of the Apostolic Missions in the recent General Chapter is the Family Apostolate and the Youth. In this line, the lay collaborators have a broader and

intense engagement. The present study can serve as content for their spiritual formation so as to heighten their awareness of their mission.

As an Asian religious woman, the researcher re-proposed that “the religious congregations in Asia should pull their efforts together in the formulation of an Asian spirituality. Imbued with the charism passed on by their founders/foundresses, religious congregations are structurally equipped to develop a spirituality suited to the present times and especially to the context of Asia” (Bastes, 2000, p. 12). Without genuine mystical experience Consecrated persons cannot with credibility share their God-experience in Asian countries. This section must summarize the key findings of the study and describe potential areas for further research.

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