

Conforti: Circular Letter #5

Parma, Italy, Motherhouse July 2, 1921

In Omnibus Christus! Christ in All!



To all the missionaries, present and future, of the Saint Francis Xavier Foreign Mission Society

1. As you know, on 6 January this year, the Supreme authority of the Church gave its final approval to our Society's Constitutions. I am now sending you the updated version with the minor modifications introduced by the Sacred Congregations in Rome. We have good reason to rejoice and thank the Lord for this decision, since it is clear evidence of the holiness and timeliness of the Institute to which we have given our name.

At the same time, I draw your attention to the serious and solemn commitment we undertake in the eyes of God and the Church as a result of this approval. The importance of this event must not pass us by unnoticed; therefore, we must strive to fulfill the sublime goals of the Institute, working with ever increasing zeal for the spreading of the Gospel among the infidels, thus giving our own modest contribution to the fulfillment of Christ's wish: the formation of a single Christian family embracing all humanity.

Every one of us should be intimately persuaded that the vocation to which we have been called could not be greater or more noble; it draws us close to Christ, the author and consummator of our faith, and to the Apostles who, leaving everything behind, pledged themselves entirely and without reserve to following Christ. They are the best models for our life. The Lord could not have been more benevolent towards us!

2. The apostolic life, combined with the profession of the religious vows, is in itself the most perfect life possible according to the Gospel. Through the profession of the religious vows we die to all earthly things in order to live a life hidden in God with Jesus Christ, thus fulfilling what the Apostle Paul wrote to the early believers: "You have died, your life is hidden now with Christ in God" (Col 3: 3). The religious vows bind us more and more to divine service; they are a total deliverance from Satan, from the world and from the flesh; they are a continuous aspiring to ever better things; they are a kind of martyrdom which, if it lacks the intensity of the supreme agony, is compensated by the life-long gift of self.

Therefore they increase our merits, since the common doctrine of the fathers teaches that what is accomplished by vow is doubly meritorious in the eyes of the Lord. Saint Anselm wisely observes that the man who is not bound by vows can be compared to one who offers the fruit of a plant, whilst the man who takes vows offers both the fruit and the plant. Saint Thomas Aquinas states that religious profession is akin to a second baptism because it is the beginning of a new life.

3. It is precisely because the apostolic life, united to religious life, enjoys such a singular excellence that the Evil One leaves nothing untried to dishearten those who live it, and dissuade those who would embrace it. He sows the mind with doubts, fills the heart with anxiety, clouds the imagination with false apprehension and numbs the will with discouragement. He magnifies the difficulties of the vowed life and attempts to portray it as impossible and often enough he succeeds in this endeavor.

We should not be disheartened by this. The Holy Spirit admonishes those entering the Lord's service to prepare for such trials. In times of discouragement, let us turn to God in prayer, renew our resolve and increase our fidelity to our commitments. The words of the Apostle assure us: "Let everyone stay as he was at the time of his call" (1 Co 7:20).

If we remain faithful to the Institute to which we have given our name, observe its Constitutions and work under the direction of its superiors, we will acquire much merit, save many souls and obtain the reward reserved to those who put their hand to the plough without looking back: the hundredfold that Christ promised in a special way to his Apostles.

Those who are tempted by the Evil One into leaving our Society, convinced that they can do better elsewhere, will not be any happier at the moment of death, to say nothing of the bitter disillusionment they will experience during their lifetime, for God cannot bestow his grace on those who are unfaithful to him and abandon the higher state to which they were called.

Therefore, let us always treasure our vowed life, ever mindful that our religious profession makes us like Christ, the divine prototype of those predestined to eternal life.

4. Let us love poverty, which is the first sacrifice Christ demands of those who aspire to perfection and would follow him more closely. He wishes to reign unchallenged in our hearts and, therefore, he demands that they detach themselves affectively and effectively from all worldly things. How often did he repeat: "He who does not renounce all his possessions cannot be my disciple"; he instructed his disciples to have but one tunic, keep no money in their pocket, not to worry about the future, because those who leave everything to follow him will lack for nothing.

May the words of the Apostle apply to us too: "As long as we have food and clothing, let us be content with that" (1 Tm 6: 8). All else is contrary to the spirit of evangelical poverty. Such a spirit of poverty should make us live our poverty joyfully, out of love for Christ, even when we have to face suffering, hardship and humiliation. An affluent poverty, which lacks none of life's comforts, cannot possibly be pleasing to God, nor does it measure up to the poverty of the apostles and those who follow the Lord. Whether in the missions, or other houses of the Institute, let each one of us be content with whatever food and clothing is provided, seek nothing more, and possess nothing as his own. This is the poverty we freely embraced in our religious profession: this poverty will free us from all attachment to earthly things and secure for us the Kingdom of heaven, where precedence is promised to the poor in spirit.

Although our Constitutions, in compliance with Canon Law, allow for the legal ownership of property, no-one can administer or dispose of property on his own behalf, without the consent of his superiors. Anything less would prove detrimental to one who has stripped himself of everything.

5. Let us love and cultivate with great care that virtue which makes us similar to the Angels and pleasing to God, and worthy of the admiration and respect of all who cannot but appreciate its appeal. How unfortunate it would be if we were unable to preserve this precious gem and shamefully cast it aside. If this were to happen we would lose favor with God and the Angels, our thirst for goodness would be diminished, our love of virtue and holiness placed in jeopardy.

Lest this occur, we must never forget that, precious as this priceless treasure is, the vessel that holds it is even more fragile. We must avail ourselves of every necessary means to preserve our chastity, mindful that our weak human nature is ever rebelling against the spirit in this corrupt and corrupting world. Idleness, dangerous occasions, familiarity with women, and ever harmful exclusive friendships are to be suppressed. Let us keep a check on the senses, especially the eyes, let us be moderate in eating and drinking and, not content with this, we are to follow Christ's teaching and the example of the saints and practice Christian mortification, in order to discipline our body and bring it under our control.

We must never forget that humility is the best protection of our chastity; in this case, the words of Ben Sirach are most appropriate: "He who despises trifles will sink down little by little" (Si 19:1). In time of temptation we should turn above all to God in prayer; without God's special assistance, which is always granted to those who ask for it, we cannot possibly preserve our virtue of purity, as the experience of the wisest of men has shown.

If the practice of this virtue demands struggle, our efforts will be repaid a hundredfold by the Lord through the gifts of peace, heartfelt joy, enlightenment of our mind and the abundant graces bestowed on the pure of heart whose endeavors are always blessed from above.

6. Let us treasure in a particular way the sacrifice of our will to God through the vow of obedience. The obedience of those who offer themselves as victims is far more acceptable to God. Through obedience we offer to Him the greatest natural gift he has bestowed on us: our free will.

The greatest Doctor of the Church tells us that the sum total of all other virtues is to be found in true obedience; and Saint Bonaventure does not hesitate to state that all religious perfection consists in the suppression of one's own will through the practice of obedience.

After we have vowed obedience to God, we are to consider ourselves as instruments in the hands of the superiors for the glory of God and the salvation of our brothers. We should be totally indifferent with regard to roles or assignments, destination to this or that mission, and equally prepared to remain at home and serve the Institute in one of its houses or leave for the mission field to which we have been assigned. We are equally willing to undertake easy tasks as well as difficult ones, to do things that we like or dislike. Even though we are not forbidden from informing superiors about our feelings regarding assignments and tasks allotted to us by obedience, we must not be upset when superiors do not deem our remarks worthy of consideration.

No-one should claim exemptions or privileges in return for services rendered, or in deference to positions held in the Congregation. This kind of mentality is seriously detrimental to religious discipline. Even if someone has held the highest office of authority in the Congregation, even for a lengthy time, to

the satisfaction and benefit of all, he should make his own the words of the Gospel: "We are unprofitable servants" and consider himself, when all is said and done, the least of all the confreres, subject to the rules like everyone else.

Those who hold positions of authority in the Congregation should resolutely repress every unsavory desire for reform and every tendency to division and splinter groups. These are the mortal enemies of all religious communities, and the reason why some have broken up and been dissolved.

Every house of the Institute, and every mission, has its own immediate superior. Everyone is to obey the superior, out of regard, not so much to the person, as to the authority invested in him. No- one should plot to get his own way nor pester the superior to comply with his own wishes. Whoever behaves in this way does not accomplish God's will but his own; such a person cannot expect to receive from God the graces and assistance bestowed on those who seek to do His will alone, and who surrender themselves to Him with filial trust.

The life, strength and prosperity of the Institute will ultimately depend on the spirit of obedience. The Society must strive to become a compact and well-ordered militant force obedient to the orders of the Vicar of Christ, for whom it will always nurture a profound veneration and unconditional loyalty. We will also show sincere devotion to the pastors of the Church, the successors of the Apostles. If this spirit of obedience wanes, the Society would soon be doomed to decline and ruin.

I cannot but quote here a passage of the writings of Saint Alphonse de Liguori to his Redemptorist confreres: "I am not saddened by the news that the Lord has called a confrere to the other life. I feel the loss because I am human and, besides, I am consoled that he died a member of the Congregation: therefore, I believe he is saved. Nor am I afflicted when someone leaves the Congregation through his own faults; I am grateful for this, since the Society has been freed of a bad apple that could infect others. I am not upset by persecutions; on the contrary, these encourage me because I am convinced that God will not abandon us if we do our best to endure them. What worries me is when I hear that there are some among us who do not obey often and pay little respect to the rules". This was the concern of the Holy Doctor, and I too, share his apprehension: were such a thing to happen among us, I would regard it as an initial symptom of the gradual and inevitable break-up of our humble Congregation.

7. In order to avoid this, we should strive to always live that life of faith proper to the just in general, and more so to the priest and apostle in particular: a constant desire and quest for God's will rather than our own. We will live in this way if we make faith the absolute norm for our conduct and allow it to shape our thoughts, motives, sentiments, words and deeds.

We will live this way if in all circumstances we keep Christ in mind; he will always be with us, when we pray, at the altar, when we study, in the many activities of our ministry, in our dealings with others, in times of distress, sorrow and temptation. In all things we will draw inspiration from him, in such a way that our external behavior will become the manifestation of the interior life of Christ within us. This intimate life of faith will protect us from the dangers of the ministry, multiply our strength and our

merits, purify our intentions and give us the indescribable joy and consolations that will ease the burden of the apostolate.

8. We must constantly cultivate this supernatural life through the pious practices prescribed by our Constitutions and suggested by the circumstances of the moment. We should never omit daily meditation, spiritual reading, the visit to the Blessed Sacrament, confession, if possible, every week, the recitation of the rosary, a general and particular examination of conscience, the annual retreat, monthly days of recollection or at least the prayer for a good death. May Jesus, the Eucharistic Lord, in whose name we are priests and apostles, ever be the focus of our thoughts and affection. Each day, close to the Tabernacle, we must renew our strength to meet ever new challenges. We should also cultivate a tender devotion to the Immaculate Virgin, Queen of the Missions, to her most chaste spouse Saint Joseph, patron of the universal Church, to the Apostles and to our illustrious patron and protector, Saint Francis Xavier.

While we work for the salvation of others, we must ensure that we do not neglect our own. This would certainly happen if we were to deny our spirit the daily nourishment provided by these powerful means to holiness. Experience teaches us that indifference to piety, a diminished interest in things eternal, a waning interest in goodness and feeble resistance to temptation are one and the same thing. Saint Alphonse Liguori used to say: "I love Jesus Christ, and I ardently wish to win many souls over to him; first my own and then countless others". This is the rule we should follow.

9. We must love God above all else, and foster a heartfelt love for ourselves and our brothers, especially those who are members of the same religious family and share our life, struggles, merits, direction and all else, whilst we prepare to share one day the same heavenly reward. We must not harbor any doubts about the essential nature of this commandment to love: "This commandment was given by God", says the disciple that Jesus loved, "that he who loves God must also love his brother".

In my unworthiness, I pray the Lord to grant us that unity of mind and heart that the divine Master left as his final and treasured legacy to the apostles and those who would believe in him; may this unity reign among those assigned to the houses of the Society to prepare the missionaries of the future. May they be ever united among themselves and show an unreserved and unconditional respect for the directives of the General Direction. Every form of dissent, every divergence, every contrast among them would be gravely detrimental to peace and mutual fraternal edification.

"How good and pleasant it is when brothers live together in unity!" says the psalmist. May the lord grant that our Society always reflect such a comforting image. This will come about if the love of Christ, described by the Apostle of the Gentiles, governs our relationships and forms of all the confreres a single heart and a single mind.

Let each one carefully protect the bonds of this sacred unity and avoid anything that could weaken it. Everyone must suppress his own egoism, criticism, contrariness, ostentation and desire for the limelight. Everything should be generously offered on the altar of fraternal harmony, which makes the communal life of any institution strong and prosperous.

10. I wished to share these thoughts with you, my dear brothers, as I send you the new Constitutions, out of concern for your sanctification and the welfare of our humble Society. In concluding these reflections, allow me to sum up all that I have said above in a personal wish: that the distinguishing characteristic of the present and future members of the Society be the result of the following components: a spirit of living faith which enables us to see God, seek God, love God in all things, intensifying our desire to spread his kingdom everywhere; a spirit of prompt and ready obedience in everything, no matter how costly, in order to achieve the victories promised by God to those who are obedient; a spirit of intense love for our religious family, that we must look upon as a mother, and a spirit of intense love for all the members of our Society.

This is my wish, and I ask you to accept it as a father's final testament. I entrust this desire to the Sacred Heart of Jesus and I ask him to fulfill it with the help of his grace. Although we may be workers of the last hour, if we do our best to bring this about we will give our own modest contribution to the edification of the mystical body of Christ, and we will receive the same reward granted to the workers of the first hour.

11. Right now, as I feel the love of Christ in all its fullness, a love by far superior to any natural affection, and I see clearly the greatness of the cause that unites us in a single family, I warmly embrace the present and future members of our Society, as if they were here present. Unworthy though I am, I ask the Lord to grant everyone the spirit of the Apostles and the gift of final perseverance.

In the hope that we will one day meet together in heaven, and share the same heavenly homeland, after having been members of the same family on earth, I bless you all.

From the Mother House, Parma, 2 July 1921.

Affectionately in the Heart of Christ,

+ Bishop Guido Maria Conforti,
Superior General
The Society of Saint Francis Xavier for the Foreign Missions