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Two Notions Important for Consecrated Life: Poverty, Obedience¹

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Poverty

– term pointing out to the lack (inability to acquire) particular resources: material, intellectual, health, cultural etc. In this meaning, equated with penury or lack of skills required for successes in particular areas, it remains an anti-value.

It becomes a value in a situation when its meaning is transferred from a purely economic sphere (the state of non-possession) into the personal sphere (Pius XII: *ownership is the living space of a person*), it points out to qualitative rather than quantitative categories. Even “natural humanism requires that man does not destroy man, sacrificing him for the sake of money” (F. Perroux), the more so in the

¹ Cf. T. Paszkowska, *Three notions important for consecrated life: Christ-forming – the formation of persons – humility*, “Rocznik Teologii Katolickiej”, vol. XIV/1, 2015, pp. 159-175.

theological doctrine, which highlights the priority of a person above things and refers to the dignity of a human person.

Poverty undergoes anthropological value redefinition when someone consciously and voluntarily resigns from possessing (acquiring) particular goods, assuming another object as the pursued goal for instance acquiring wisdom (eg. philosophers) or ascetical skills (eg. monks). Here the choice of the “being more” option occurs instead of the prevalent attitude of “having more” (John Paul II).

In the Christian context, poverty is inscribed into the logics of evangelical metanoia, which aims at “deepening of the existence” (S. Kierkegaard) and coming to the Kingdom of God, promised to the “poor in spirit” (cf. Matt 5,3). In the liturgy Holy Spirit is invoked as the “father of the paupers” (*pater pauperum*), so those who question the commonly valued instinct of an owner. A spiritual man (that is not obsessed with the lust for material goods) lives not only for himself (using the goods), but undertakes service for the others’ sake (without financial remuneration).

In general, poverty can be classified (R. Cantalamessa²) in several ways:

- *negative material one* – destitution, which dehumanizes as an imposed social condition, it should be countered, since it causes suffering.
- *positive material one* – it is born out of free choice, it is accepted as an ideal (anthropological or evangelical). It prompts the others to participate in it (disciples, followers).
- *negative spiritual one* – means lack of spiritual goods, for instance in people rich in material goods. It is connected with the avaricious attitude (see Ambrosius Aupert, treatise *De cupiditate* about fatal results of avarice), which sees highest value in “having,” distorting the vision of the world and man.
- *positive spiritual one* – means humble trust in God, especially by those who are poor materially, when they “do not worry too much” about today and tomorrow, being satisfied with the minimum necessary to survive. Biblical terms: Greek *ptochos*; Hebr.: *anavim* *Jahwe* do not refer to beggars (voluntary), but to those who are humiliated and disdained and in spite of social oppression, assess the current state of affairs from God’s perspective.

² R. Cantalamessa, *Ubóstwo*, [*Poverta*], transl. M. Przeczewski, Kraków 2006, p. 10.

Poverty as a social challenge

Materialistic desire for possession generates social insensitivity to the fact of poverty, still affecting broad circles. Such attitude, devoid of caring about the preservation of material resources balance and meeting the most basic needs of every human being, provokes social resistance and claims for solidarity and charitable activities.

Material deprivation is clearly inscribed into the context of social injustice, is a state humiliating for a man, often leading to the lack of hope and despair. In this sense “the greatest and most serious poverty of our time is the callous treading upon the rights of the human person” (Instr. *Starting Afresh from Christ*, no. 35), in the name of economic and ideological priorities. Absolutization of material values, the cult of possession and consumerist attitude show that the modern man is losing his internal liberty towards goods.

“Those who are aware of the scarcity of the planet’s resources and who invoke respect for and the conservation of creation by reducing consumption, by living more simply and by placing a necessary brake on their own desires” (Exh. *Vita consecrata*, no. 90) attempt to recover the proper order in the hierarchy of social issues. They confront welfare, which has been made a social ideal, with spiritual ideals. Also modern man reaches the conclusion that “richness needs to be devaluated, money should be deprived of honour” (F. Perroux).

In the Christian perspective there is an ideal of internal liberty which enables to renounce the possessed goods (literally: *give away to the poor* – Matt 19:21; Lk 18:22) when man is confronted with the Highest Good. It is not about condemning the very possession of goods, but about an unbridled will to cumulate and use in an improper way (see Clement of Alexandria, *Who is the Rich Man who is Saved?*). There is a real danger of an “alluring security of possessions, knowledge and power” (Paul VI, Exh. *Evangelica testificatio*, no. 19), taking pleasure in affectedness and vanity (ibid., no. 22).

When poverty becomes integrated with the theological virtues of faith, hope and charity, it acquires theological character itself, that is – is no more focused on the righteousness of the goods usage (horizontal aspect) but is set on the truth of references to God (vertical aspect).

Reference to social economy gives way to the reference to the economy of Redemption. The social motivation for the attitude of solidarity with the poor is enhanced by the evangelical motivation. Christian *caritas* refers to a Christological principle stating that others “can be enriched with one’s poverty” (cf. 2 Cor 8:9). Thus, poverty

becomes a “means” useful in the ministry aimed at eliminating social destitution and injustice.

Valorisation of the poverty attitude does not aim at glorifying destitution, helplessness, lack of involvement and sense of responsibility. It is connected with the First Commandment of the Decalogue (it is only God who safeguards human fate) and the first of Christ’s blessings, which opens the access to the Kingdom of God for the “poor in spirit”, since they suffer poverty patiently in the hope of “receiving better and enduring wealth” (Heb 10:34).

Evangelical valorisation of poverty

Evangelical poverty refers to Christ’s attitude, who “though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor” (2 Cor 8:9), “emptied himself” (Phil 2:7) as the Servant of Jahwe. Choosing a style of life of poverty, in relationships with people he discriminated neither the rich nor the poor, calling everybody to change their attitudes. The Church has undertaken this call, gathering in itself both the wealthy and the poor. In the first generation, in this community many sold their goods so that the common means could eliminate the social differences in this group. In the *vita apostolica* practice “no one claimed private ownership of any possessions” (Dz 4:32). And since God chose “that which is not” (1 Cor 1:29), “the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom” (James 2:5), believers cannot disdain anybody “in dirty clothes” (cf. James 2:1-7). Works of mercy done at the cost of “unrighteous money” (Lk 16:9) make the disciples of Christ in the world “as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything” (2 Cor 6:10).

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While forming such attitudes several significant aspects need to be included:

- the choice of poverty is made “out of joy” (Matt 13:44), flowing from finding something more valuable than the possessed goods (see Matt 6:21: *where your treasure is, there your heart will be also*); abnegation or desperation coming from other reasons are not enough. It is illustrated, for instance, by Zacchaeus willing to give half his possessions to the poor and paying back fourfold to everybody he has harmed (Lk 19:1-10). Voluntary renunciation of many goods is an expression of the *joy of recovering oneself*.
- the principle: “do not worry too much” (Matt 6) about one’s own life (v. 25), clothes (v. 31), tomorrow (v. 34), body (Lk 12:22; Rom 13:14); do not worry exceedingly (Phil 4:6) does not mean resigning from social involvement and work which brings measurable

profits. It has its final goal in strengthening the trust that God will take care of those who devote themselves to fulfilling His plans for man (cf. Lk 22:35).

- the work in order to provide for oneself and to support the poor (cf. Acts 20:17) is everybody's duty and also the source of personal satisfaction. St. Paul attributes to Christ the principle: "It is more blessed to give than to receive" (Acts 20:35). *The evangelically poor* take on joyfully and eagerly many works, expressing in this way their gratitude to God for all gifts. Both work and poverty are values for them, not an overwhelming duty. St. Francis of Assisi, called Poverello, is a special exponent of such spirituality. His brothers are wrongly called "mendicants" (beggars), since he stated clearly: "A friar living in poverty should not have an established income, he should work to receive a modest, everyday meal and if the employers refuse to provide this, he should ask for alms and not be ashamed of that"³. And I worked with my hands and I wish to work and I wish firmly that all the other brothers should work at some labor which is compatible with honesty. Let those who know not [how to work] learn, not through desire to receive the price of labour but for the sake of example and to repel idleness. And when the price of labour is not given to us, let us have recourse to the table of the Lord, begging alms from door to door" (*Testament*). Christianity in no way is situated "in its cultural roots in an idlers' civilization [...]" John Paul II tries to strongly emphasize in his encyclical that, on one hand, Holy Bible, starting with the Genesis, lays foundations for a new civilization of labour (LE 4), on the other – to what degree Christ himself was related to the working world and how much place there is for the problems of labour and the culture of labour in his evangelical teaching (LE 26)" (Majka, p. 109)⁴.
- poverty should not be cultivated for itself or given absolute value, since this belongs only to God. Poverty is a means (*usus pauper* – St. Thomas Aquinas) to perfect the person and the life of an earthly community. The ideal would be to jointly possess modest

³ Rule, chap. 5; cf. A.J. Nowak, *Osoba konsekrowana*, vol. 1. *Ślub ubóstwa*, Lublin 1992, pp. 88-89.

⁴ J. Majka, *Praca jako środek doskonalenia człowieka*, in: Jan Paweł II, *Laborem exercens. Powołany do pracy. Komentarz pod red. ks. J. Kruciny*, Wrocław 1983, p. 109.

- goods, acquired and governed properly, enabling to achieve particular goals in the spirit of brotherhood⁵.
- persons committing themselves to poverty through a *vow*, without demonstrating it exceedingly, give a clear external expression to their ideal. The *Code of Canon Law* obliges to do so: “The evangelical counsel of poverty in imitation of Christ who, although he was rich, was made poor for us, entails, besides a life which is poor in fact and in spirit and is to be led productively in moderation and foreign to earthly riches, a dependence and limitation in the use and disposition of goods according to the norm of the proper law of each institute” (can. 600). The task of consecrated persons is to “remind the baptized of the fundamental values of the Gospel, by bearing ‘splendid and striking testimony that the world cannot be transfigured and offered to God without the spirit of the Beatitudes’” (Exh. *Vita consecrata*, no. 33). However, the antithesis of a vowed poverty “is not riches, but pride, conceit, self-sufficiency. Lack of internal poverty is often manifested through closing one’s own self to God and other people”⁶.
 - in the theological perspective the *mystery of poverty* is indicated, into which man is initiated and introduced by God: “poverty actually enters into the interior structure of the redemptive grace of Jesus Christ. Without poverty it is not possible to understand the mystery of the gift of divinity to man, a gift which is accomplished precisely in Jesus Christ. For this reason also it is found at the very center of the Gospel, at the beginning of the message of the eight beatitudes: ‘Blessed are the poor in spirit.’ Evangelical poverty reveals to the eyes of the human soul the perspective of the whole mystery, ‘hidden for ages in God.’ Only those who are ‘poor’ in this way are also interiorly capable of understanding the poverty of the one who is infinitely rich” (Exh. *Redemptionis donum*, no. 12). The Exhortation *Vita consecrata* stresses the “relation between the evangelical counsels and the Holy Trinity, the source of holiness” (no. 21), discerning here the sense of people’s committing themselves to the practice of evangelical poverty. “*Poverty* proclaims that God is man’s only real treasure. When poverty is lived according to the example of Christ [...] it becomes an expression of that *total gift of self* which the three Divine Persons make to one

⁵ Y.-M. Congar, *Problem ubóstwa chrześcijańskiego w ramach cywilizacji dobrobytu*, transl. A. Turowiczowa, „Concilium” 1-10 (1966-1967), pp. 189-190.

⁶ A.J. Nowak, *Osoba konsekrowana*, p. 101.

another. This gift overflows into creation and is fully revealed...” (ibid.).

Poverty – understood as an internal skill and externalised attitude – is an anthropological and evangelical value, with a great social and educational impact. It is a fact that excessive attachment to riches destroys the sense of fraternity and deforms man internally. From this results the necessity of forming attitudes open to the ideal of spiritual poverty (Phil 3:8: *I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ*) and the readiness to eliminate material destitution using one’s own goods and powers.

Obedience (Latin *obedientia*)

– an attitude expressing the submission of a person to the will of an accepted authority, his/her decisions and resolutions. In the theological sense it is a *virtue* (a moral and spiritual skill), which connects the liberty of a person with the Truth and Good, often implying choosing a situation of a “cross”. It helps to get rid of egoism in order to respect a higher good or social goal, in the service of which both the superior and the subject remain.

The first authority to which man owes obedience is a *properly formed, right conscience*. Every command of those in power needs to be verified with this instance. The norm: *to be submitted* is written into the status of created beings. The incarnated Son of God revealed that the state of internal relations of Divine Persons is also marked by a *submission full of love*, in which the created world finds the highest standards of obedience in love.

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Obedient (Greek: *hypakoos*) – is the listener who, like a disciple, respects the words of the speaker. According to Tertulian, the eternal Word, which God bore inside himself, emerged during the creation of the world (*Adversus Praxeas* VII, 1). Through incarnation the Word went among sinners, for whom listening poses a great difficulty. Sin is, in principle, “non-listening”, disobedience (Exh. *Verbum Domini*, no. 26).

All creation is submitted to God’s authority (cf. Gen 1 – creative power of the Word). Winds and seas, and even demons are obedient to Jesus (see Matt 8:27; Mk 1:27). The spheres of heaven and stars respond joyfully to the *voice* of the Creator: “he called them, and they said, ‘Here we are!’ They shone with gladness for him who made them” (Bar 3:34; cf. Ps 104:4, Sir 42,23; 43,13-26). Sinful humanity excludes itself from this zeal, remaining *closed in its disobedience* (cf. Rom 11:32),

therefore it needs liberation. Before it achieves the proper “freedom of God’s children”, creation “subjected to futility” (Rom 8:20) suffers oppression.

The history of the relationship between God and man focuses on the deepening of the convergence of wills – “God’s will is no longer for me an alien will, something imposed on me from without by the commandments, but it is now my own will, based on the realization that God is in fact more deeply present to me than I am to myself. Then self-abandonment to God increases and God becomes our joy” (Enc. *Deus Caritas est*, no. 17).

Obedience in human communities

– in the family, state, professional relations etc. it concerns *authority understood as ancillary and coordinating instance*, in order to achieve social goals and goods. Submission to this authority facilitates self-fulfilment of individual persons and speeds up achieving the goal through combined forces. Conflicts between individual and social needs are inevitable, they are part of human condition and in Christian sense they are the reality of the “Cross.” There are situations where one should resist the authorities, retaining obedience to God, Who should be “more listened to” than men (Acts 4:19). A Christian person accepts, however, that all authority “comes from God” – even in pagan communities. It is God who entrusts Hazael with the authority over Damascus – 1 Kings 19:15; 2 Kings 48:9-13; He gives Nebuchadnezzar the power over the whole East (Jer 27:6) – so it should not be ignored or insulted. An extensive description of a clever election campaign, vile actions of the ruler and their consequences are included in the ninth chapter of the Book of Judges (9: 1-57).

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Research shows that there is a tendency in the human nature to be obedient, but its value is ambivalent (S. Milgram’s experiment⁷). Entering interaction with the influence of the society directed at creating an obedient man, one is all too quick to renounce the responsibility for one’s own actions and becomes influenced by significant political or scientific authorities. Few people can retain the strength of belief to “openly resist” (cf. Gal 2:11-21) the highest authority in a particular situation. Many use manipulation – in the form of ingratiation – employing flattery and servility towards the ones in power, awaiting due gratifications.

⁷ Cf. S. Milgram, *Posłuszeństwo wobec autorytetu* [Obedience to Authority. An Experimental View, 1974], transl. M. Hołda, Kraków 2008.

Obedience in faith

– Greek *pisteuein* (believe) and *peithesthai* (be obedient) in the New Testament express man's acceptance of the redemption message. Man wholly entrusts himself to the self-revealing God, by displaying "full compliance of reason and will" (Const. *Dei Verbum*, no. 5). And since obedience is a fruit and sign of faith, consequently – lack of faith brings about disobedience and lack of obedience is a symptom of a crisis of faith. The experience of faith and obedience refers to the Word of God (Gen 12:1; 22:2; Ex 24:7). According to St. Paul, no man, because of sin, manages to be fully obedient to God (cf. Rom 7:14). Humans are liberated from being submitted to the "law of sin" by the obedient Servant of Jahwe (cf. Is 50:4), always doing God's will (cf. Ps 40:7nn).

A Christian is formed towards obedience on the Lord's Day, when "on the first day of the week" he listens to the Word in order to later subdue the earth to himself. Such obedience integrates the Third Commandment of the Decalogue with the third Blessing (Matt 5:5), which promises the "quiet" to receive the possession of the earth⁸.

In the Church it is obligatory to be obedient to bishops, who are the "stewards of the Word of God and the power of sanctification," serving the liberty of God's children; they guard them in the obedience to the Holy Spirit (Greek: *episkopoi* – the overseers of the community). Only an "obedient authority", that is, the one who himself is submitted to God, guarantees safe obedience. Submissiveness and obedience in the Church towards the superiors flows from obedience to Christ, Who entrusted His Church to the Apostles and their successors, in the face of the danger of foreign influences (cf. Heb 13:9) in the following generations "have care over souls ... and have to give account for this" (Heb 13:17).

The obedience of Christ

– the mystery of Redemption was fulfilled by "the obedience of the One," bringing about a breakthrough in the state of humanity: "many were made righteous" (Rom 5:19). The fulfilment of the Father's will by the Only-Begotten Son has saved the whole offspring of the disobedient first parents (cf. Rom 5:19; Phil 2:9).

Christ showed obedience towards the Father directly (cf. Heb 10:7; Phil 2:8) and indirectly – through being submitted to parents, events, institutions, earthly authority (cf. Lk 2:51; Matt 17:27). In the Gethsemane absolute submission to the Father's will was revealed

⁸ A.J. Nowak, *Osoba konsekrowana II: Ślub czystości*, Lublin 1999, p. 15

– obedience “until death” (Mk 14:36). Paradoxically through obedience in which He “suffered” a lot (Heb 5,8) He has become “the Lord” (Phil 2:11) and the Author of eternal salvation for those “who obey him” (Heb 5:9). Since then, being submitted to the Son is the ultimate Law and Norm for fulfilling the laws previously revealed by God.

Consecrated obedience – concerns *new* people (baptised, living sacramentally), who want to follow in the footsteps of obedient Christ and publicly vow the readiness “not to do their own will” (Jn 6:38; cf. Matt 26:39).

Such an attitude is a provocation against the understanding of liberty which does not relate it to truth and ethical norm (cf. Exh. *Vita consecrata*, no. 91), it questions the so called “independent life” – slavishly dependent on impulses, drives, fashion, idols, prosperity and mirages of greatness. The temptation of such life appears also among the baptised, so the witness of the truly free life must strengthen the ones who are weak in faith. A vowed obedience is an assurance that “there is no contradiction between obedience and liberty” (ibid.), in the context of a consecrated person – “to be free means to be *occupied* by Christ”⁹.

Consecrated obedience points out to the far-sightedness of faith, which oversteps narrow horizons of changeable personal desires, of giving in to passions or delusive ideas. It makes the person yielding – to the authority of the Church – in a way far from infantilism and servility and, at the same time, from a defensive and distrustful attitude. A voluntarily vowed obedience “practised in imitation of Christ... shows the liberating beauty of a *dependence which is not servile but filial*, marked by a deep sense of responsibility and animated by mutual trust, which is a reflection in history of the loving *harmony* between the three Divine Persons” (Exh. *Vita consecrata*, no. 21). The aim of consecrated obedience is not the submission of the person itself or acquiring an attitude of docility. The proper aim is to achieve eternal life through obedience to God, but including human intermediaries (Instr. *The Service of Authority and Obedience*, no. 9). In practice it has many *functions* helpful in the spiritual growth of a person: the ascetic, pedagogical, moral, mystical, social and apostolic one. Consecrated persons should practice it in the spirit of faith, moved by the Holy Spirit to love the will of God (cf. Decree *Perfectae caritatis*, no. 14), striving for it to be active, responsible and voluntary obedience. Its proper object comprises: the rule and/or constitutions, the good of a charismatic community, the current will of the superior.

⁹ Ibidem, p. 105.

Obedience in the tradition of religious orders

– original ascetes presented absolute obedience, becoming strongmen in the fight against “one’s own will” (John Cassian +435). Pachomius (+348) introduced obedience into the space of *cenobium* containing thousands of people; St. Basil (+379) holds obedience in high esteem, mitigating its character through a family-like atmosphere of communities smaller than the Pachomian ones. In the *Rule* of St. Benedict (+547) there is a clear statement about the “promise of obedience” (58,17), although this is not connected with professing the three evangelical counsels. The monks promise to live in a particular cloister “under the Rule and abbot” (1,2), being obedient to the head of the community as the representative of Christ (*dominus, abbas*). Practising obedience forms humility: “the first step of humility is obedience without delay” (chap. 5).

Franciscan obedience on one hand is aimed at opening brothers directly to the Holy Spirit in order to discover the will of God, on the other hand friars promise obedience to the Pope and Roman Church, combining with it the duty of obeying “brother Francis and his successors” (2 Rule 1,1-3). Francis created a new, decentralized, “evangelical” style of authority and obedience, resembling the apostolic community of Jerusalem. In the face of a rapid growth in the community he had to admonish his brothers more often about obedience than about poverty (C. Esser OFM). In his *Testament* (no. 9) he writes about the obedience in the way of a “prisoner” in the hands of the superior; in the *Admonitions* he speaks about perfect obedience, in which the subordinate who sees a better solution than his superior does, willingly makes sacrifice out of it. Obedience to God includes, according to St. Francis: *obedience to the Spirit* (to acquire the Spirit of the Lord) and *obedience to the Word* (The Son of God, Gospel, the preached Word, the Eucharist).

Dominicans, taking the vow of obedience to the general superior, expressed (for the first time) the unity of all the members of the order in the world. St. Dominic initiated an original combination of authority and obedience – brothers participate proportionally in governing the order; the superior is a *primus inter pares*, so he should be distinguished by intelligence, experience, wisdom, love. J. Woroniecki includes among the duties of a superior: governing (knowing the norms), giving orders (well-thought, clear commands and permissions), reproaching (educational and preventive function of punishments and praises).

St. Ignatius Loyola (+1556) introduced a strict discipline of obedience, which makes Jesuits a skilful tool in the hands of the Church. In a

well-known letter written in Rome on 16th March 1553¹⁰ he emphasizes that perfect obedience concerns not only the submission of will, but also of intellect. The principle is to not to see a concrete person as the superior, but Jesus. Jesuits and other male religious orders created in this time received Holy Orders, without internal discipline proper for cloisters. Instead of it St. Ignatius introduced a complex system of meditation, self-assessment, resolutions in order to eradicate vices and build virtues.

Formation towards obedience, based on biblical assumptions, perceives a mysterious relationship “between renunciation and joy, between sacrifice and magnanimity, between discipline and spiritual freedom” (Exh. *Evangelica testificatio*, no. 29). It does not agree to identify submissiveness with obedience, since submissiveness means renouncing and losing one’s freedom (a low measure of humanity), while obedience requires being free and disposing of one’s freedom (a high measure of the dignity of a person).

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¹⁰ See *Pisma wybrane św. Ignacego Loyoli* [Chosen writings of St. Ignatius Loyola], vol. 1, Kraków 1968, pp. 490-500.

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