

Reflection on the Constitutions, Chapter 4
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“Come now, and let us reason together” (Is 1: 18) on Chapter IV, “Our Life Of Poverty,” and what it means to this struggling post-novice. This is a *reflection* piece, so I won’t be telling anyone what to do. That would be a *consulting* piece, and I doubt anyone reading this would be able to afford what I’d charge for that. I write as one forever grateful to a province that took a flier on a high-risk late vocation, and as one who goes right up to the edge of his personal budget (\$4000) every blessed year. And I write as one who before joining the order had the carbon footprint of a Qatari emir (lovely fellow, by the way. Met him in a receiving line at a thing he gave at the UN). Here, then, is one wounded soul’s take on Our Life Of Poverty, knowing that one soul ain’t gonna do it, for as the very doc itself proclaims, N. 65 #1, “Gospel poverty is an essential ideal of our way of life. Therefore, in general, provincial and local chapters we should consider how to observe it ever more faithfully in ways which are adapted to the changing times and the diversity of places and, for that reason, always in need of renewal.”

Let’s begin with a preposition: why a life “of” poverty, and not a life “in” poverty? This question is answered for me just about every year by members prospective and actual of Cap Corps. They find a rare moment when I’m not talking to say something along the lines of, “Whoa – you guys have a *really* nice house. I thought you were supposed to be ...,” then they make a few hand gestures and their voices trail off; you know how the young folks are. This has happened all over the province, by the way. What can I say – “It’s not a house, it’s a friary”? That’s not too invitatory. This oft-heard remark calls to mind N. 62, #1 & #2, “For our individual and communal poverty to be authentic it must be the expression of an interior poverty that needs no explanation,” and “Poverty demands a frugal and simple life-style,” as well as N. 73, #1, about our friaries. Taken together, these exhortations form a kind of inside-outside approach that aligns with the wisdom of the good ole’ Catholic “both/and.” Yet here’s an early/first impression arising from our sisters and brothers who see the friaries very clearly, and who subsequently find themselves in a position to see Capuchin life very clearly. This means that I have to own what they’re bringing to light. I have to own it every time I reach for a Dr. Pepper from the TV room fridge (something I really don’t need), or put a plane ticket on the credit card (something I really do want): “This is a life “of,” not “in.” Score one for the new Constitutions.

Chris Propravak addressed this during last summer’s reflections on the new Constitutions. Call it not poverty but “asceticism,” as he did, and say that voluntary poverty is a sub-routine that aids in the functioning of this larger app. Poverty is the manifestation of everything that works against the Reign of God – it is against freedom; it is against sister/brotherhood; it is against justice; it is against peace. Poverty is founded in manipulation and cries out for deliverance. Asceticism is founded in faith, and is meant to be embraced. So – asceticism works as means and as goal. I can live with that, especially if embracing asceticism means we can also say good riddance to all the torturous analogical ways there are for talking about poverty. Dianne Bergant said it, and I believe it: “Let poverty be poverty.” In short, try spiritualizing *this* – N. 77,

#1: "Since we have been called to the gospel way of poverty, we should accustom ourselves to being in want, after the example of Christ." Asceticism allows this call to be actual rather than aspirational, and can guide the way to the Constitutions' ideal, expressed at N. 77, #4: "Therefore, let us not be inordinately attached to earthly goods, but let us use this world as though not using it, and with praise and thanksgiving render all that is good to the Lord our God, Most High, and All-Powerful, Who is all our wealth and sufficiency."

Ours, and everyone else's – which raises a question. In those same summer talks, John Corriveau said that Capuchin Franciscans have seen our lives and our relationships transformed, that we have gone from drawing strength from poor people to becoming their benefactors, and that this needs to be looked at. Whoa. OK. How did that happen? I doubt anyone sat down one day and decided to re-make Capuchin life in this way. Was it Spirit-led, and if so – really? The Spirit would do that? Whatever for? There are benefactors aplenty, and I thought Francis wanted us to be onto something different. And if it is the case, why stay in the order? What's to keep me from going to work for, say, the United Jewish Appeal? They have more holidays, as I understand it, and I could take a nice place in Shorewood or Birmingham or the South Loop, and go back to the way things were.

The answer is conversion: yours, mine, and ours. Franciscan life is a life of constant conversion and surrender to the providence of God. And a move into asceticism and a life of voluntary poverty found me happier living on \$200 a month in Detroit than I was on a thousand euros a day in Paris. I tried "retail therapy" (buy something I need, feel better; buy something I don't need, feel *much* better); sure, it has palliative potency, but it's short-term and marked by diminishing returns. I know I'm better off, and the province's resources (about \$60K per annum in my case) are put to better use, with spiritual direction. It was in Detroit that I learned that the less I claim as my own, the happier I become. It's a sort of jujitsu take on Alexandre Dumas: not "One for all, and all for one," but "None for me, and all for Thee." So many people have shown me what this looks like, and so many brothers exemplify what this means in the here-and-now life of a Capuchin, expressed so precisely at N. 63, #1: "We should live in conscious solidarity with the countless poor of the world, and, through our apostolic work, encourage the people, especially Christians, to undertake works of justice and charity to promote the common good." A benefactor/client relationship doesn't preclude conscious solidarity, but I find it difficult to say that it empowers it – and empowerment is part of our province's mission statement. That's what Francis wants us to be about.

Which brings me to the other Francis, our Holy Father. When I read in the paper after his elevation that in Buenos Aires he took the bus I thought: good for him. I take the bus, too (I hope that's not all we have in common, but it probably is). I take the stupid bus for two reasons. First, from N. 71, #6: "We should also reflect on what means to adopt in carrying out our tasks and ministries, always choosing those that are suited to our condition as lesser brothers." The second I draw from the wisdom of another Jesuit, James Keenan, who said of the works of mercy, i.e. the life of service to which I have committed myself, that they are "a willingness to enter into the chaos of others." You want that? Well, welcome aboard Green Line run #711, to

Harlem and Lake. Stand clear of the closing doors, and be prepared to meet people where they are. Means matter.

I long for the day when the church starts receiving "Pope Francis vocations." I reckon the attributes of a so-called "JP II vocation" are widely known, if heavily stereotyped – but let's say someone starts to believe what the pope is saying, about simplicity, about "smelling like the sheep," about the joy of giving. Let's say someone wants to see and feel and hear what this is like, to wit, "the challenge of finding and sharing a 'mystique' of living together, of mingling and encounter, of embracing and supporting one another ..." (*Evangelii Gaudium* #87). Let's say there will soon be many who want to bring to life the very things of which the pope speaks so beautifully, in the world and for the sake of the Kin-dom.

Well, the language and the ideals in Chapter IV give form to what Pope Francis is working so hard to bring into being. Let the province form itself into a fraternity where hardly anything from the state religion of consumerism – with its rigid and impatient individualism which supersedes the virtues of common values and works, and with its near-sanctification of every instrument of distraction coming forth from the Book of Jobs – thrives, or is allowed to hinder the doing of the Works of Mercy, or inhibits the pursuit of a vibrant ministerial life, a supportive communal life, and a sustaining contemplative life. We nail this, and we'll gather in men turning from all the distortions and temptations and vacuity of a culture running a full-throttle race toward secularization and materialism, and turning toward the work of remaking the world and the church in accord with the vision of Francis. And Francis. Forget benefactor/client, forget church/world, forget all false dualities: here's where we need to end up, as the Constitutions put so well, at N. 72 #5, that in Our Life of Poverty "... we foster genuine economic and social development based on ethical and religious foundations, rooted in a heightened sense of God, of the dignity of the human person and of justice and peace among people."