

Reflections on the 36th General Chapter Message

C*alled to the Cenacle...* I would like to share my reflections on the Ministry of Economy and Finance, in relation to the 36th General Chapter Message. I am certain that my reflections will either inspire, awaken, or disturb us toward congregational or communal examen and insight to concretize future courses of action. To begin with, allow me to share with you the thoughts of Sr. Niceta M. Vargas, a well-known lecturer and former Superior General of the Augustinian Sisters of Our Lady of Consolation, when she was invited as a resource speaker in the convention of a group of religious treasurers in the Philippines. Back then, I still vividly remember as a new Provincial Treasurer how she expressed her reflections on ‘*Spirituality and Money*’ by saying that: “*Christian spirituality is the human person’s relationship with God in Christ which affects all his or her other relationships; it is the capacity of the human being for self-transcendence; and it embraces all actual human life’s concerns, including money.*”

The 'Memory and Discernment' Commission of the 36th General Chapter invites us to recognize with gratitude *the gift of a cenacle experience that puts us in communion with Father Eymard*. In an apt manner, if money is a blessing of God, then managing the Congregation’s money can become a venue for religious experience in the sacred space of finance ministry – to some extent, a “*cenacle experience.*” *In communion with Father Eymard*, we need to ask ourselves reflectively, *is our relationship with God becoming manifest, through our eucharistic spirituality* as Local Community Treasurers, Regional/Provincial Treasurers who serve the role as stewards of our Congregation’s monies and properties as God’s blessings? In performing our roles as treasurers, *do we experience the awesomeness of the nearness of the presence and providence of God in our handling and accountability of money?* Truly inspired by our

founder's own experiences of struggles in his lifetime, *does our faith (trust and confidence) in God deepen*, as we face the current challenges of abundance or limited funds in the congregation? *Where do our trust and confidence essentially come from* as we receive and invest funds, create income-generating activities to augment our funds, and spend our monies for the project and mission of the congregation? In our own poverty, *are we generous in giving and thus multiply the blessings of God for others, and for mission?*

It is true enough that the Congregation's limited resources received in a form of ministry, stipend, salary, donation, gift, property income, bank interest income, yield interest on investment portfolios, etc., must be means to faithfully fulfil and sustain the mission entrusted to our care. Following the path that the 'Memory and Discernment' Commission has proposed to the Chapter Assembly: ***“Called to the Cenacle to Live the Eucharistic Mystery Fully in Prayer, Fellowship and Service.”*** Therefore, our financial responsibility is to be a wise steward of the resources God has entrusted to us. We are accountable to our membership and to make sure the resources are handled with the highest level of trust and integrity as possible. Thus, to achieve this, our expression of receiving it, as God's blessings, must be translated into our passion of sharing what we have received for eucharistic mission.

Called to the Cenacle to Live the Eucharistic Mystery Fully in Prayer: *“We ought to pray...” (Romans 8:26)*, in undertaking our roles as treasurers and fund managers. Initially assuming the finance ministry may sometime appear as unwavering pursuit of the common vision coupled with excitement of projected courses of action to introduce (and profit from). However, what if the experiences of the members of the Finance Commission are contrary to expectations; wherein, there are existing conflicts in community life, roles and relationships affecting collaboration and communal pursuit of achieving the goal of good governance, financial management, accountability and transparency. Thus, in effect, the community or the treasurer may either experience dwindling of spirit, loss of inspiration

and innovation, stagnant financial growth in the community, no sense of stability and security, lack of competence in handling the roles, withdrawal and resignation from the ministry, etc.

Father Eymard in a Retreat to the Religious of Paris, on August 12, 1867, in the third instruction on the theme of *Prayer* said: *“You need God's grace...the only way to get this grace is prayer, and because you need it at all times, you have to make prayer a habit for yourself, become a man of prayer.”* Father Eymard added: *“The grace of the Society [Congregation] is a grace of prayer and that in this we must distinguish ourselves from other religious congregations.”* (Eymard, PR 114,1 - OC vol. XIV, p.381).

“Pray without ceasing...” (1 Thessalonians 5:17). Most often, we do not have much financial resources. Then, *“all the more that we ought to pray.”* We live in the providence of God and the generosity of people. Though we are filled with passion for mission and have a lot of adventure and freedom to try new things, we are somehow prevented from doing so due to limited funds or resources. With the reality of limited resources, the present members of the International Finance Commission indicated in their review of the financial state of the congregation that we cannot embark on all the desired projects at one time. Hence, at a local level, all communities are now challenged to take a new approach to financing, that is, how to make the income grow, before going into budgeting. In addition, every community must learn how to pool resources into one, engage in networking, and convert non-performing assets to sources of income. Moreover, it is then very timely and relevant today to reach a congregational awareness of the necessity to expand funds for health maintenance and sustenance to address the future concerns on stability, security and comfort. In like manner, I want to point out that our present formation and mission funds are too limited and not enough to provide future funds for the development of our religious' theological formation, formal degrees/special studies, and skills training. For this reason, a collaborative effort to build up funds must be initiated at a congregational or communal level.

Called to the Cenacle to Live the Eucharistic Mystery Fully in Fellowship: The Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu said, “*The journey of a thousand miles begins with one step.*” Consider this line of thought to embark one great step of stressing the education of our religious for responsibility. Administration of Temporal Goods, as outlined in our Rule of Life No. 98, states that: “*Goods are owned in common, and each one is responsible for whatever part is in his possession. They are for the service of people and of our mission.*” Accordingly, temporal goods of religious are directly connected to the dimension of fraternal communion; they are meant to be shared. The treasurer is a designated steward of the goods of the community. Being a steward is the first function and responsibility of a treasurer. The goods belong to the community and the goods must serve the needs of the community. It is the treasurer’s function, together with the superior of the community, to see to it that the needs of every member and that of the whole community are taken care of.

In the first Christian community of Jerusalem, this was obtained by the practice of stewardship and of radical sharing of goods. “*None of them ever claimed anything as his own; rather everything was held in common.*” (Acts 4:33) “*Those who believed, shared all things in common; they would sell their property and goods, dividing everything on the basis of each one’s need.*” (Acts 2:45). Also, for the same purpose (that the needs of the entire community may be served and that no one will be in want) religious treasurers are to promote effectively within their communities the value of fellowship (of sharing). Therefore, to achieve this goal, *each one shall hand in, for the good of all, whatever he has gained through work and shall receive his fair share according to his needs and without regard to what he earns* (General Statutes No.18.03.01 on Community Practice of Poverty). In turn, treasurers readily share to members whatever the communities have received. As a result, “*no one was needy among them...*” (Acts 4:34).

It bespeaks that money, as God's blessing, multiplies even more when shared. In other words, it is a financial system of sharing resources to meet the needs of every member of the community. *"To follow Jesus, one is called to a total dedication"* (Phil. 2:11-18; Lk 14: 25-33). In this light, treasurers or finance administrators are *called* to share in the responsibility to help members be happy in their vocation. There is a cycle of giving that when impeded stops the multiplication of blessings. When we truly experience the blessing of God, we wish everyone to have the same blessing. Wallace D. Wattles, an American author and a pioneer success writer, in his book, *'The Science of Getting Rich'* says, *"What I want for myself, I want for everybody."* As St. Paul in 2 Cor. 9:8 proclaims, *"And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work."*

Thus, I believe that money is meant to assist our religious to have well-being or fullness of community life. Jesus expresses the dream of God for humanity and the world -- abundance for all: abundance of physical, psychological and spiritual resources *"I came that they may have life and have it abundantly"* (John 10:10b). In other words, well-being, wholeness, peace and salvation for all. In our religious communities, we have the potential to humanly experience the fullness of life that Jesus promised. However, let us be realistic and humbly admit whether we provide these opportunities or not. First and foremost, it is a given fact that our community takes care of our physical and emotional well-being, clothing, shelter, mode of transportation, medical care, and belonging needs. When we joined the congregation, we know how our community takes care of our psychological and spiritual growth, through formation, counselling, spiritual direction, recollections, retreats, special training, and daily liturgical celebrations. However, what if the community falls short in providing opportunities to develop our talents and potential through special training courses, formal study programs, pilgrimages and educational trips, varied assignments and tasks undertaken. Moreover, what if we feel that the community doesn't have enough funds to

support our missionary activities through new strategies, gadgets and instruments, financial assistance and personnel. As a matter of fact, all these opportunities are earnestly desired to be provided by the congregation to enable us to experience fullness of life. All these potentials and opportunities need money. Money, however, cannot buy the fullness of life.

Called to the Cenacle to Live the Eucharistic Mystery Fully in Service: Certainly, I find our congregation as one with inspiring General Chapter Messages, and with beautiful vision and mission statements - applied, concretized and then revised through decades of years in response to evolving signs of the times.

We have been systematized with a clear book of norms. In the aspect of financial concerns, our congregation strived to save and invest common funds to have a certain sense of stability and security. Through the years, there is a passion for mission, the ministries have increased, and the places of involvement have extended. However, my personal reflection on finance concerns in relation to the 36th General Chapter Message ushered me to reiterate the timely need for our congregation to examine communal consciousness in the status of its financial stability to sustain our mission.

True indeed, in this grand and challenging task, unless we start the journey; we cannot achieve our communal goal. For that reason, let us have a congregational examen on how to allocate funds primarily intended for formation, mission and medical. Let us then strive for the collective witness of recognizing the goodness within us: *what we can do together and what our eucharistic Lord can accomplish in us. "For anyone who is in Christ, there is a new creation, everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new" (2 Cor 5:17).* The new creation is within us. It is for us to decide if we will take up the journey of cultivation (process of seeing the goodness) in us and live that new creation. In doing this collectively, what is more important is the discipline and the exercise or process of an objective and systematic assessment, and not so much the rigidity of the amounts to be raised

or percentages to be allotted for each fund. Henri J.M. Nouwen, a Dutch Catholic priest and spiritual writer, in his little booklet, *'The Spirituality of Fund-Raising'* said, "The more we touch the intimate love of God which creates, sustains, and guides us, the more we recognize the multitude of fruits that come forth from that love." Moreover, it is enveloped with the challenge of checking the leadership and religious' attitude of handling finances and how it is mirrored in the present financial state of our respective communities. Let all the figures revealed and shown in our respective community's financial reports reflect our own *doing and being* as an SSS religious.

Conclusion

As an SSS religious, it would be enlightening to know by heart our congregational core values and to align the financial concerns conforming to God's design. The standard of Christ gives us the values that should accompany the task of treasurers and finance managers: poverty in spirit, dislike for honor, and humility. All our financial decisions and actions must be expressions of obedience to God, following the standard of Christ: *Ad intra, Ad extra and Ad gentes* mission of Jesus Christ.

We must act according to our relationship with God (*cenacle experience*), thus, live fully our eucharistic spirituality (*in communion with Father Eymard*).

The crucial step to take now is for the treasurers to be *re-oriented* to see their office with all its functions, not as an end, but as a means. It is a kind of ministry to be embraced with total 'gift of self' - *a cenacle experience of living the eucharistic mystery fully in prayer, fellowship and service*.

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