

STUDIA

SAMUEL J. BOLAND

THE VOW OF POVERTY AMONG THE REDEMPTORISTS

as formulated by their first general congregation, 1743

On 31st August 1909 Pius X issued a decree « in order to preclude all future controversy concerning the terms of the vow of poverty in the Congregation of the Most Holy Redeemer founded by St. Alphonsus Maria de Liguori ». And after spelling out the authoritative interpretation the decree concluded that its declaration had the force of a « permanent statute or constitution », so that « even General Chapters were deprived of the authority to mitigate it or change it either in part or in whole »¹. Shortly afterwards, however, the Superior General, Father Patrick Murray, found he had to trouble the Holy See once more. And so a further decree of Benedict XV on 7th May 1918 made the slight adjustment needed to bring the earlier declaration into conformity with the new Code of Canon Law, about to come into force².

If it is possible to detect a note of some exasperation in the wording of the decree *Ut tollatur*, there is reason enough for it. Redemptorists had expended a great deal of effort as well as paper and ink in trying to clarify what was meant by the simple vow of poverty they had made at profession. This was the sort of controversy the Holy See wished to prevent recurring in the future by giving a final verdict in the disputes for which it had on more than one occasion been summoned to act as umpire³. The documentation that the controversies generated shows that

¹ *Constitutiones et Statuta Congregationis SSmi Redemptoris*, Rome, 1982, 60-61.

² *ibid.*, 62.

³ There are some published works on the topic, namely, [R. von Smetana], *Dissertatio historica de voto paupertatis in Congregatione SS. Redemptoris*, Rome, 1856; [Idem], *Memorandum circa votum paupertatis in Congregatione SS. Redemptoris*, Rome, s.a. [1855]; Idem, *Propositiones ad refutandas accusationes et assertiones Patris Joannis P[ilat]*, s.l., s.a. In addition there is a large amount of documentation in the general archives of the Redemptorists in Rome (quoted AGR). Included in this material are important manuscripts of Father M.A. Hugues. A convert of German origin, Father Hugues had joined the Redemptorists in Belgium and was ordained in 1838. He was appointed associate Procurator General for the affairs of the Transal-

the wrangling (and that is not too harsh a term) was of the nineteenth century and among Redemptorists outside Italy. Formed to their religious life with very little knowledge of the developments among their brethren in the south, these men of northern countries were profoundly disturbed when information at length eluded the obsessive regalism of the Neapolitan court and made them aware of various differences in observance. Poverty was the most serious issue. The members of the « Transalpine Vicariate » rejected with some indignation the practices of the Neapolitans⁴ and then went on to argue among themselves as to what the vow really meant.

Looking back now at these controversies from the comfortable distance of a century or so they have about them a distinct air of unreality. Here were men of northern Europe arguing most earnestly about the meaning of their rule, composed in Italian about a hundred years earlier. When the Holy See finally put an end to the debate it was by declaring how the rule was to be understood. It would seem, then, that one looking for an understanding of the Redemptorist vow of poverty would have little to gain in turning over all those nineteenth century arguments. It is necessary first of all to see what the dispute was all about; and for that one needs to trace the evolution of the vow taken in the Congregation. That is what this article proposes to attempt. For the present we shall take the story only as far as 1743, when the members of the institute first bound themselves by the religious vows, leaving to a later occasion the continuation of the account as far as the controversies about how to interpret the final formulation.

There is a further value in studying the evolution of Redemptorist poverty. In the early eighteenth century Congregations of simple vows were still quite new to the Church⁵. And at that time religious poverty was a particularly delicate issue with regalist governments in various

pine Redemptorists with the Holy See 1847-1848 and was Consultor to the Vicar General, Father Trapanese 1849-1850. His close association with the Neapolitan Redemptorists makes his two small treatises particularly useful: *Beiträge zur Geschichte der Congregation and Additamenta quae spectant ad historiam Congregationis Sanctissimi Redemptoris a primo schismate a. 1780 usque ad perfectam unionem sub Rectore Majori residente Romae, Nicolao Mauron, anno 1869*. Of particular value in connection with the study of poverty is the collection in AGR marked XVI Appendix, which is a bulky file of manuscripts under the name of Father B. Queloz, associate Procurator General 1850-1853 and Procurator General 1855-1882. A thesis not yet published was presented in the Pontifical Gregorian University in 1964: F. van de Laar, *De voto paupertatis in Congregatione Sanctissimi Redemptoris ad mentem S. Alfonsi*.

⁴ Father Thaddeus Hübl wrote from Warsaw in 1807, possibly in the name of St. Clement Hofbauer, to the Rector Major, Father Pietro Paolo Blasucci, protesting at certain provisions of the general chapter held in 1802 concerning poverty. Cf. R. von Smetana, *Dissertatio historica*, 55, 145.

⁵ Concerning the evolution of the Congregations of simple vows cf. G. Lesage, *L'accession des Congrégations à l'état religieux canonique*, Ottawa, 1952; J. Creusen, « De iuridica status religiosi evolutione brevis synopsis historica », in *Periodica de re morali, canonica, liturgica*, Rome, 31 (1942) 143-155, 216-241; E. Gambari, « De votis simplicibus religionis in Societate Jesu eorumque momento in evolutione iuris religiosorum », in *Ephemerides Iuris Canonici*, 3 (1947) 87-122; *Dictionnaire du Droit Canonique*, IV, Paris, 1949, 182-194.

parts of Europe trying to control monastic ownership and its consequent *mortmain*. In the circumstances of the times the care of the Redemptorists to formulate their vow of poverty in terms that would protect their life as religious without provoking suspicion among the Neapolitan regalists must be informative.

BEFORE 1743

From the beginning in November 1732 when St. Alphonsus and his companions formed themselves into the Congregation of the Most Holy Saviour, the institute had its own distinctive character. In Naples tongues at once began to wag, as St. Alphonsus was warned by his close friend and associate, Gennaro Sarnelli. There was much talk, he warned, about three things: revelations and nuns, nuns and revelations, and the new religious order being founded⁶. Sarnelli went on to say how he had dealt with this sort of talk:

« I shut them up by saying that we are a Congregation of working priests, who go about doing what we can to help souls in those poor districts that are most neglected, and that we try to make God known to people who do not know Him, and nothing more »⁷.

That is an excellent description of the small group of founders. But what did they mean when they called themselves a Congregation? That was a name quite commonly used at the time to designate what in our days we would rather call sodalities or pious associations of priests. At the beginning of the eighteenth century there was quite a large number of these Congregations in the Kingdom of Naples, many of them having been established for the purpose of providing an opportunity of theological and pastoral training for their members⁸. But about the Congregation founded in Scala in 1732 there were features that gave some grounds for the suspicions that Sarnelli had heard being noised abroad in Naples. The members lived together with a regular regime of prayers and spiritual exercises under a superior, and they were trying to formulate a rule of some sort⁹.

⁶ The letter of Sarnelli to St. Alphonsus, dated late in 1732, is in the archives of the Redemptorist Postulator General in Rome. The passage quoted has been published in *Analecta Congregationis SS. Redemptoris*, Rome, 6 (1927) 110-111. Cf. Maurice De Meulemeester, *Origines de la Congrégation du Très Saint-Rédempteur*, I, Louvain, 1953, 67.

⁷ *ibid.*

⁸ Cf. M. De Meulemeester, *Origines*, I, 12-13.

⁹ *ibid.*, 65-90.

If in fact it was a new Order they had in mind, the life of poverty they would have been envisaging would have been that of the solemn vow, renouncing all ownership of material things. It was to take more than ten years, however, before the early members were able to make their status clear.

Franciscan Poverty?

The fact that the new institute was inaugurated precisely at that time was due largely to certain revelations announced by Sister Maria Celeste Crostarosa of the newly established monastery of the Most Holy Saviour in Scala. Their substance, which she at once communicated to Mgr. Thomas Falcoia, director of the monastery, must have been very much as she recalled them some years later in her autobiography¹⁰. On 3rd October 1731, « the vigil of St. Francis of Assisi », she saw « Our Lord Jesus Christ with the seraphic father, St. Francis, in the light of glory, and the Father Don Alphonsus Liguori was present; and the Lord said: This soul is chosen as head of this My institute: he will be the first superior of the Congregation of men ». When the Sister went on to spell out the details revealed to her, she described the new institute as living « in apostolic poverty, like that beloved servant ».

This first indication of what the Congregation was to be spoke of a practice of poverty as in the primitive Franciscan rule. That is to say it implied a total renunciation of ownership, both individually and in common. There is some evidence that St. Alphonsus worked conscientiously at putting this Franciscan ideal into practical shape. The earliest of his papers concerning the development of the Redemptorist rule is a small collection of jottings¹¹ in which he notes: « Never possession of capital nor fixed income; but money or yearly alms like the Franciscans ». It does not seem that his heart could have been in the work, because at what must have been about

¹⁰ The autobiography itself has not been published, but the passage referring to the institute of men appeared in *Analecta*, 5 (1926) 40-43. On Falcoia see O. Gregorio, *Mons. Tommaso Falcoia, 1663-1743 (Bibliotheca historica C.S.S.R. I)*, Rome, 1955.

¹¹ They have been published in *Documenti intorno alla regola della Congregazione del SS. Redentore, 1725-1749*, edited by O. Gregorio and A. Sampers (*Bibliotheca historica C.S.S.R. IV*), Rome, 1969, 436-438. See also *Spic. Hist.* 16 (1968) 436-438. The Franciscan ideal proposed to the first Redemptorists is treated by M. De Meulemeester, *Origines*, I, 37-38.

the same time, late in 1732 or early in 1733, he compiled a careful argument against the ideal of renunciation of ownership in common¹². It is easy to believe his earliest biographer, relating the saint's spontaneous reaction to the Franciscan ideal. « We would never have enough gravediggers to bury the Ananiases »¹³. In fact it would not be at all unkind to voice the suspicion that the preoccupation with the primitive Franciscan observance was due not so much to light from heaven as to the good Sister's devout reflections in preparation for the feast. In any case, the Redemptorists never again returned seriously to that notion of absolute poverty.

Solemn Vows?

And yet right from the start the question of poverty had appeared as a matter of some grave urgency for the new institute. One of the earliest and most promising recruits, Cesare Sportelli, could not be with the original group at the beginning of the institute because of the difficulty of arranging his ordination. In a letter of 5th September 1732 Mgr. Falcoia explained the problem to St. Alphonsus. « The point is that he can't be ordained on the title of poverty, because that will not be possible until there are solemn vows »¹⁴. Since at this time on account of certain financial difficulties he could not be ordained either on the title of his patrimony, Sportelli had to try and find a suitable benefice that would help him to his goal. Falcoia had occasion to return frequently to the same topic in later correspondence. And it was not always the case of Sportelli, as he came to be reluctant to accept candidates who were not yet priests.

Falcoia, in fact, from the beginning as Director of the Congregation held a position like that of a major superior: all the more important decisions, like admitting candidates, making new foundations and elaborating the rules were his responsibility¹⁵. Besides the

¹² His thorough elaboration of his reasons, both theoretical and practical, has been published in *Spic. Hist.*, 30 (1982) 293-302.

¹³ A.M. Tannoia, *Della vita ed istituto del Venerabile Servo di Dio, Alfonso Maria Liguori, Vescovo di S. Agata dei Goti e Fondatore della Congregazione dei preti missionari del SS. Redentore*, Naples, 1798-1802, Book II, 90.

¹⁴ Tommaso Falcoia, *Lettere a S. Alfonso de Liguori, Ripa, Sportelli, Crostarosa*, Rome, 1963, 107.

¹⁵ Falcoia's authority over the Congregation is treated by M. De Meulemeester, *Origines*, I, 70-82.

obvious inconvenience of being so dependent on a bishop occupied with his diocese, the early development of the institute came to be recorded principally in Falcoia's correspondence. It is very much to our present point that we ask how seriously he meant that phrase « until there are solemn vows » as providing a title of poverty for candidates.

Certainly, the question of Sportelli's ordination was an immediate reason for trying to define the status of the institute. Falcoia at Sportelli's request applied to the Holy See, but without much hope. « From Rome we can only expect permission for ordination, but not to be ordained without a title »¹⁶. In May of 1736, more than a year after this unproductive attempt the situation had not improved, and Falcoia was gloomily inclined to think that Sportelli might find himself compelled to accept parochial duties in order to be ordained¹⁷. It is perhaps significant that after that first suggestion, which was indeed vague enough, Falcoia's correspondence gives no evidence of his again thinking seriously of the title of poverty and solemn vows as the means of rescuing Sportelli from his impasse. This thought may help one to evaluate the occasional mention of solemn vows as Falcoia and Alphonsus worked at the elaboration of the rules and constitutions for the institute.

The earliest indication that such a thing might have been contemplated is probably to be found in those jottings of St. Alphonsus to which there has already been reference. They belong to the earliest days of the Congregation. Under the heading *Costituzioni* there is the rather cryptic entry: « The professed are bound to the Order (*Religione*), but the Order is not bound to them until after thirteen years of profession, and for those professed earlier than the age of twenty not until they are thirty-three years old »¹⁸. Of itself that passage is somewhat puzzling, but its meaning is clarified by a later tentative text, a short list entitled *Regole principali*¹⁹. The first of these « principal rules » reads:

« There is to be a year of novitiate, at the end of which one is to take the simple vows of chastity, poverty, obedience and perseverance

¹⁶ Falcoia to St. Alphonsus, 10th January 1735, T. Falcoia, *Lettere*, 246.

¹⁷ Falcoia to St. Alphonsus, May 1736, T. Falcoia, *Lettere*, 306-307.

¹⁸ *Documenti intorno alla regola*, 437.

¹⁹ The document is found in AGR, XXXIV, S. Alfonso Manoscritti, IX, 12. It has been published in *Analecta*, 9 (1930) 227-228. The contents suggest that the manuscript was not completed before 1740.

in the Order (*Religione*). Thus the Order will be free to dismiss the subject until he has made his profession, which will be after seven years in the Order, and then besides the solemn vows there is to be taken the fourth vow of the Missions, by which one puts oneself in the hands of the Superior to go to whichever Mission one is sent, even *ad infideles* ».

This project clearly envisaged a regime similar to that of the Jesuits, with the simple vows preliminary to the solemn profession. If this was seriously contemplated, then the poverty visualised for the new institute had to be that renunciation of ownership entailed by the solemn vow. But it seems most unlikely that St. Alphonsus would have favoured the taking of a solemn vow of poverty any more than he would have that Franciscan dream of Crostarosa. As in the case of the Franciscan poverty it is most probable that he was merely noting down what was being discussed. And it is more probable that the suggestion of solemn vows came from Falcoia. One may be sure that with his practical knowledge of the law and of Neapolitan regalism St. Alphonsus would have been most reluctant to contemplate anything so calculated to arouse the hostility of the court.

Right from the beginning of his legal studies in 1708 he had come into contact with the thinking that governed relations between Church and State in Naples throughout the eighteenth century. He attended the lectures of Nicola Caravita and was one of the group of earnest students who used to gather in the master's house in an informal and friendly academy whose tone must have been distinctly regalist²⁰. In 1707 Caravita had published a treatise which may be taken as crystallising the spirit of Neapolitan law, thoroughly Catholic, even devout, but with a hardy independence²¹. The regalism current in the Kingdom of Naples throughout the eighteenth century is known to historians as *giurisdizionalismo*, because it was so largely the work of jurists precisely of the type among whom St. Alphonsus studied the law.

He could scarcely have been unaware that these « jurisdictionalists » whom he knew personally were very much preoccupied with the grave economic problems of the kingdom, for which they blamed, not without reason, the large Church possessions as being particularly responsible. He must have been familiar with the theories of pro-

²⁰ Cf. Th. Rey-Mermet, *Le Saint du siècle des lumières*, Paris, 1982, 71-74.

²¹ N. Caravita, *Nullum ius Pontificis Romani in Regnum Neapolitanum*, Naples, 1707. See M. De Meulemeester, *Origines*, I, 4-11 for a discussion of writings of this kind and their influence on eighteenth century Naples.

perty rights which were to be invoked when Carlo III became king in 1736. Since Neapolitan jurists were especially resentful of the corporate possessions of the established Orders, it is hardly to be thought that St. Alphonsus, accomplished jurist as he was, would seriously consider provoking the authorities by introducing one more religious Order with its increase of the odious *mortmain*.

Seeking Royal Approbation

It was certainly a sensitiveness to this sort of thinking that prompted the cautious description of the institute in an attempt early in 1736 to gain royal approbation. The zealous Dominican preacher, Ludovico Fiorillo, a friend of St. Alphonsus and of Falcoia, and most sympathetic to their project, informed them that the royal minister, the Marquis Giuseppe Montallegre, might be favourable. On 16th January he wrote to say that the Marquis had expressed his willingness to support an application, and he asked for an outline of the rule²². The brief statement forwarded in answer to this suggestion was the work of Falcoia in the opinion of Father De Meulemeester²³. The members of the Congregation, it is said, « seek to be troublesome to no one, but they support themselves by that which they have brought from their own families, and which they place at the feet of the Superior, and by that which is voluntarily offered to them by the faithful for the love of Jesus Christ ».

As it turned out, the prudent formulation achieved nothing. The Marquis, on whom the petitioners had pinned their faith, simply handed on the application to Celestino Galiani, *Cappellano Maggiore*, a dyed in the wool regalist, who gave it cavalier treatment, summarily dismissing the plea, declaring that the whole project of the missionary Congregation was merely the result of « a visionary impostor » who had succeeded in hoodwinking « a few simple and discontented priests » to occupy themselves with missions, « as though there were not religious Orders enough in the kingdom engaged in

²² His letter is quoted in *The Complete Works of St. Alphonsus de Liguori (The Centenary Edition)*, ed. E. Grimm. XVIII, New York, 1891, 70. See also *Lettere di S. Alfonso Maria de Liguori*, Rome, I, 1887, 48. The reply follows in the same volume in each language.

²³ M. De Meulemeester, *Origines*, I, 79.

that holy work »²⁴. No doubt this was a sample of the gossip that Sarnelli had heard about Naples a few years earlier.

This summary rejection of their petition was hardly unexpected by the members of the new Congregation. It did at least spell out plainly the temper of the court and it was to prove only the first of many similar disappointments. Whether or not it was on account of this first failure to win royal approval, it is to be noted that the suggestion of solemn vows does not appear again in the correspondence of Falcoia after January 1736. At any rate there is little doubt that the repeated experience of regalist sensitiveness made the Redemptorists in the kingdom careful in their manner of speaking about themselves, as their confrères from northern Europe discovered. When Father Hugues came to Rome and Naples in 1846 as associate Procurator General, he was surprised to find that the Fathers of the south avoided mention of the Order (*Ordo*), insisting that they were « merely secular priests living in common in order to be able to give missions », adding caustically that « *frati* are of no use to the people in the Kingdom of Naples »²⁵.

Common Life

There could well be some important significance in that description of the Congregation favoured among the Neapolitans. That was the way Falcoia and St. Alphonsus spoke about the new institute in their approach to Montallegre, no doubt as the fruit of careful forethought. The beginning of the Congregation was said to have been the group of priests who « have been living in community in Scala ». In the other places where they had become established the members « live a perfect community life, subject to their own Superior, engaged in various labours for the people »²⁶. Whatever earlier thinking there may have been, in any case, about an Order of solemn vows and possibly even a strict Franciscan ideal, it seems safe to say that speculation of that kind did not survive for long. In all probability within less than half a dozen years the members of the new Congregation were clear enough as to their identity. They had come together to live in common in order to do good to the

²⁴ *Documenti intorno alla regola*, 279.

²⁵ M.A. Hugues, *Additamenta*, 54-55.

²⁶ *The Complete Works of St. Alphonsus*, XVIII, 70-71; *Lettere di S. Alfonso*, I, 49.

people. And from that it follows that the poverty they visualised for themselves was such as to make possible their « perfect community life ».

During the years they waited for Falcoia to complete his elaboration of their rules the members of the Congregation regulated their lives by an outline (*Compendio delle regole*) containing the substance of the longer formula in preparation. This shorter form, in existence from an early date and probably the work of St. Alphonsus²⁷, puts the community life in this context of poverty. « No one may possess anything as his own, because they must live most perfectly in community »²⁸. The text of Falcoia, unfinished at his death and probably completed by St. Alphonsus, is less explicit, speaking rather of a « poverty of spirit » shown by indifference to all material things, even those small articles allowed for daily use²⁹.

In an attempt to give some stability to the Congregation and to its already highly successful missionary apostolate it was decided after some unhappy experience of departures from the small band to introduce a vow of perseverance. The first members took the vow on 21st July 1740 after some preliminary discussion in which the example of Falcoia's own institute, the *Pii Operarii*, and others such as the Vincentians must have been considered³⁰. While this step gave the little group more of a sense of the bonds of a religious commitment, it probably did not change the way they had previously seen themselves — living in common by reason of a sharing of temporal goods and for the purpose of devoting themselves to pastoral works. It seems that this was the notion of the Congregation that prevailed when Falcoia died in 1743 and there emerged a clearer and more assured leadership under St. Alphonsus.

In fairness to Falcoia it should be said that such a notion was probably his own as well right from the beginning and that even in his case the occasional mention of solemn vows was no more than exploratory. St. Alphonsus had remained during the earliest times of the institute in touch with his old superior of the Congregation of the Apostolic Missions, Canon Giulio Torni. Writing in December

²⁷ *Documenti intorno alla regola*, 280. There exist four texts of what the editors of the *Documenti* call the *Compendio*. There is evidence that a text of the same kind was in existence from as early as 1734.

²⁸ *ibid.*, 302. The Italian text reads: « Niuno potrà possedere cosa veruna particolare, perché devono vivere in perfettissima comunità ».

²⁹ *ibid.*, 330-333.

³⁰ On the vow of perseverance see M. De Meulemeester, *Origines*, I, 251-264.

1732 the latter expressed the wish that the new institute would develop « according to the Rules I have thought well in the Lord to forward »³¹. There is reason to think that the Canon was more than a little chagrined to learn that his suggestions had been rejected by Falcoia in what he regarded as too abrupt a fashion. In any case, Falcoia wrote to St. Alphonsus in April 1733 in terms which seem clearly enough to have been intended as a conciliatory gesture. He was pleased, he said, to know of « the agreement of our views with those of Sig. D. Giulio Torni regarding the substance of the Rules; and in those on poverty, we seem to agree in seeking a way to free the subjects from preoccupations »³². This attitude of Falcoia, which was probably his basic one, confirms our conclusion as to how the institute would develop under its new leadership: an observance of poverty aimed at removing the obstacles to a common life which was to free the members for their preaching vocation. And this evolution manifested itself without delay.

GENERAL CONGREGATION 1743

Falcoia died 20th April 1743 and a couple of weeks later, 6th May, seven Fathers of the two existing houses assembled in Ciorani in their first General Congregation³³. The little group took itself very seriously, as is apparent from the rather laconic formal report. After the Mass of the Holy Spirit, « as our Constitutions prescribe », the president was elected as were a secretary and three scrutineers. Then followed three inconclusive ballots, in which nobody gained the necessary five votes to be elected Rector Major, and after a break for prayer a fourth ballot. The rest of the report is best given in the secretary's own concise style:

« It pleased the Divine Majesty to have Father Don Alfonso de Li-guori named Rector Major, all the votes except his own agreeing. In the

³¹ Cf. *Documenti intorno alla regola*, 274.

³² T. Falcoia, *Lettere*, 148.

³³ The terminology is that of the secretary of the gathering, Father Giovanni Mazzini. In his *Acta* on one occasion he used the word *capitolo*, but among Redemptorists the name general chapter is not used until there is occasion to report that held in the year 1749. The few members who made up this first assembly came together again in September 1743, August 1744 and October 1746, but these gatherings are not designated distinct Congregations by contemporary reports. The name was used again for the second General Congregation on 17th October 1747. Father Mazzini's *Acta* of the Congregation held in May 1743 have been published in *Analecta*, 1 (1922) 87-90.

Congregation all the Fathers and Brothers made in the hands of the elected Superior the four vows: Obedience, Poverty, Chastity and Perseverance in the Congregation. The newly elected Rector Major also took the same four vows in the hands of the Chapter ».

Repeating the happily chosen phrase of Father Domenico Capone, Father Rey-Mermet calls this first General Congregation « the Redemptorist Pentecost »³⁴. Right from the start the small assembly showed a firm assurance of its identity, something that had been hard to find during the eleven years the institute had been dependent on the Director. As they followed out « what our Constitutions prescribe » the seven members of the gathering showed a consciousness of observing the sort of formality familiar in long established more venerable religious institutes. And the decisive step of taking the four vows committed them to the religious life. There is no doubt that a large measure of credit for this improved self-awareness must be given to St. Alphonsus, now elected Rector Major for life.

The General Congregation went on to formulate nineteen decisions³⁵, the first three of which are particularly important, spelling out the nature of the institute and its vows and giving special emphasis to the understanding of poverty. These require more detailed consideration. The first decision, the only one to bear any special designation, bore the heading « Concerning the Rule of Poverty », and it comprises three paragraphs which it will be well to translate in full. In the beginning there is a very severe prohibition of what was a current practice obviously seen as an abuse.

Poverty

« The subjects are never to be permitted an allowance of any kind under pain of being and being considered *ipso facto* excluded from the Congregation and the Superior, even the Rector Major, who grants or tolerates such a thing is also to be held *ipso facto* deprived of his office and of both active and passive voice *in perpetuum*. This rule obliges both subjects and superiors in such a way that violation is gravely sinful ».

³⁴ Th. Rey-Mermet, *op. cit.*, 357. This first General Congregation is treated at some length by M. De Meulemeester, *Origines*, II, Louvain, 1957, 30-63.

³⁵ These decisions are in a manuscript in AGR, I, E, 37, which bears the title *Punti proposti nel Capitolo generale del 1743*. It has been published by M. De Meulemeester, *Origines*, II, 240-242.

The Italian word translated « allowance » is *vitalizio*. It is hard to find an equivalent in English or for that matter in modern usages for what was familiar to a bygone age. It was the sort of thing St. Alphonsus had in mind when in *The True Spouse of Jesus Christ* he wrote disapprovingly: « Some religious under pretext of providing for their necessities desire the possession of riches »³⁶. It was a fairly widespread practice that on the occasion of profession a religious would reserve a certain income or that some living allowance be made by his relatives to provide for his personal requirements. A similar practice was the *peculium* permitted in some institutes. Usages of these kinds had persisted in spite of repeated prohibitions by the Holy See, which uncompromisingly called them abuses. St. Alphonsus gave the matter a thorough treatment in his *Moral Theology*³⁷.

In discussing the morality of the practice St. Alphonsus explained why it had proved so hard to eradicate. It happened frequently that Orders had pleaded their inability to provide for their members and so had to allow them to make other provision for their upkeep in spite of the Church's disapproval. Even so, he concluded that to introduce the *peculium* could not be excused from grave sin on account of the harm that would follow for religious observance. Undoubtedly it was thinking of this kind that inspired the very severe prohibition of the *vitalizio* made by the first General Congregation. The grave penalties attached to this particular violation of poverty remained through subsequent formulations and were eventually included in the rule approved by the Holy See in 1749³⁸. The decree then goes on to explain the vow of poverty:

« Therefore, when each makes his profession, in addition to the simple vows of chastity and obedience he shall make the vow of poverty, but in the following form: that as long as he remains in the Congregation, except for what is granted him by the Congregation, he may not have, hold, possess, claim or acquire anything, no matter how small, for his personal use or convenience, in no circumstances and under no pretext, neither directly nor indirectly. And in this rule and vow not even the Rector Major may dispense or interpret ».

This, of course, is spelling out that « living most perfectly in common » which had been formulated at an early date in the *Com-*

³⁶ *The Complete Works of St. Alphonsus*, X, 1888, 269; *Opere ascetiche di S. Alfonso Maria de Liguori*, XIV, Rome, 1935, 330-331.

³⁷ St. Alphonsus, *Theologia Moralis*, Book IV, ch. I, n. 15, ed. Gaudé, II, Rome, 1907, 454-458.

³⁸ *Documenti intorno alla regola* 418.

pendio. This uniformity of the life in common was to be « most perfect » so as to entail a complete indifference³⁹ in the use of material things. This was already an established attitude in the young institute, spelled out at some length in Falcoia's *Regole grandi*, which required even that the rooms be changed by lot once a year³⁹. The first decree then concludes with an important statement:

« It is declared, however, that with regard to property or titles to possession the subject may have, in ownership or usufruct, or by any other lawful title he may not dispose of it after profession except in favour of the Congregation or of his relatives *up to the third degree inclusively*; or for some other purpose, but only by reason of a scruple of conscience »⁴⁰.

The precise terms of the simple vow of poverty had been stated by Pope Gregory XIII in the Apostolic Constitution *Ascendente Domino* of 25th May 1584, by which he clarified the status of scholastics and coadjutor Brothers among the Jesuits. Having declared that their simple vows admitted them to « one and the same manner of life and obedience as the professed » the Constitution explained the obligation of the poverty they had undertaken. They retained ownership of their property and could « distribute it among the poor or for other pious purposes according to their devotion », but that « they may not use anything for themselves without the superior's permission »⁴¹. This important declaration concerning simple vows made possible the rapid development of the religious institutes that followed, Congregations like that of the Redemptorists. With regard to the simple vow of poverty Gregory XIII had expressed its obligations in terms of a limited right to dispose of property and the prohibition of the independent use of material things.

Having declared their strict standard concerning the use of things, the seven Fathers who assembled in 1743 went on to state the limits within which one might dispose of property. The terms were different and rather more restricted than what had been proposed by Gregory XIII for the Jesuits. The first two conditions, in favour of the Congregation or of relatives, were to remain with only slight variation until the decrees of Pius X and Benedict XV. The third

³⁹ *ibid.*, 330-333.

⁴⁰ The emphasis is in the original text.

⁴¹ *Bullarium Diplomatum et Privilegiorum Sanctorum Romanorum Pontificum*, Taurinensis editio, VIII, 1863, 460-461.

condition no doubt emerged from something that had come to light during discussion: the tender conscience in question has not affected later legislation.

This first decision of 1743, therefore, has defined in clear enough terms what was to be the Redemptorist obligation to poverty down to the present time. There was a very severe prohibition of private funds, an almost equally stern prohibition of the independent use of things and concise limits to the right to dispose of property. It is very likely that there is some significance in the fact that this declaration on poverty was put in the first place by the General Congregation. Certainly, the corporate holdings of the Orders by reason of the solemn vow of poverty was the main reason why religious life was so repugnant to the Neapolitan « jurisdictionalists » and to regalism in other parts of Europe. Having made clear what it hoped was an unobjectionable stand in this delicate matter, the Congregation proceeded to declare in its second decision what was the juridical status of the new institute.

Nature of the Institute

« It is not an Order (*religione*) but a Congregation of priests like the Fathers of the Mission and like the Fathers *Pii Operarii*; but with this difference that the Fathers of our little Congregation must attend most particularly to helping country people; and they must therefore always live outside the cities and in the middle of the diocese ».

This statement is a description of the status of the Congregation and it is put in terms calculated to be understandable and it was hoped acceptable in eighteenth century Naples. The Vincentians, or Lazarists, under which name they were better known, and the *Pii Operarii* were already established in the kingdom. No doubt the members of the new Congregation hoped that by drawing attention to the similarity they might have a better chance of putting down roots even in the unpromising Neapolitan soil. A notebook of the time in the handwriting of St. Alphonsus gives reason to think that the comparison was his suggestion⁴². Among the rather scattered jottings there is one that reads « Congregation like the Fathers of

⁴² The notebook is in the possession of the Servi della Carità in Como. It has been dated as of about 1743 by Father O. Gregorio, who published its contents in *Spic. Hist.*, 6 (1958) 345-352.

the Mission with the difference... ». The more specific character of the institute, its particular devotion to working for the country people was to be rephrased in later formulations. Following on this fundamental statement the third decision treated the religious profession and the vows taken in the Congregation.

The Vows

« In the profession, which is to be made by the Fathers after a year's novitiate and by the Brothers after one of two years, each must make besides the simple vows of chastity, obedience and poverty in the prescribed form the vow of perseverance and the vow to go on the missions, even to unbelievers, when they are sent by the Supreme Pontiff or by the Rector Major with the knowledge of the Supreme Pontiff; and in addition with regard to ecclesiastical or civil dignities or offices outside the Congregation, as well as benefices with or without pastoral care attached, each will take the vow not only not to seek them or procure them directly or indirectly, but positively to resist them and to renounce them unless required to accept by a formal precept of obedience by the Pontiff or by the Rector Major. All the aforesaid vows are to be taken to the superiors for the time being ».

Of especial interest are the so-called « additional vows » (*voti annessi*). As given in the decision of 1743 they are merely mentioned after the three usual religious vows, but in the Pontifical Rule of 1749 the renunciation of dignities and benefices is attached to the obligations arising from the vow of poverty⁴³. No doubt that was the intention of the General Congregation that first formulated the vow, a further reinforcement of the perfectly common life. And that completed the shape of Redemptorist poverty as it was first defined by the founding members of the institute.

It was a simple vow which did not deprive the members of the ownership of their property or of its revenues (usufruct). The right to dispose of what they possessed, however, was restricted to limits peculiar to the Congregation. In addition for the sake of preserving the perfect life in common the independent use of funds was forbidden under very severe penalties, and the independent use of things was also forbidden in grave terms which allowed of neither dispensation nor interpretation. And the additional vow closed off a further approach of danger to the perfect common life. In spite of

⁴³ Cf. *Documenti intorno alla regola*, 418.

the controversies and clarifications that were to follow, this first definition of Redemptorist poverty has remained unchanged down to the present⁴⁴.

Some remark is indicated by the considerable prominence accorded poverty in this first General Congregation. It is not only treated at greater length than the other basic statements, but by its being put in the first place the impression is given that it was seen as the most fundamental of all the decisions. To be sure, as was said earlier, it was a matter of extreme delicacy on which it was necessary to reassure the sensitive « jurisdictionalists » of Naples. But it would not be reading too much into the text to see the detailed exposition of poverty as providing for that perfect common life which was to make possible the existence and activity of the institute. That is very much the same thinking as that which earlier described the members of the Congregation to Montallegre. « They live a perfect common life, subject to their superiors, engaged in various labours for the people ». This serious and basic view was frequently echoed in the circular letters St. Alphonsus wrote to the Congregation. On 8th August 1754, for example, he wrote: « I recommend also the love of poverty, and beg all to take notice that faults against these two virtues — poverty and obedience — are not and cannot be tolerated in the Congregation, for if the practice of these two virtues fail the spirit of the Congregation is wholly destroyed and at an end »⁴⁵.

Writing in the following century, Father Smetana made a point that is worth noting. Since there was no general rule or norm for the simple vow of poverty, he wrote, everything depended on the intention of the person making the vow⁴⁶. Of course, there was not such a complete lack of norm as he would seem to suggest, but those of Gregory XIII were broad enough to need closer definition in various institutes; and that is the point that Father Smetana wished to make. He went on to show quite correctly that in the beginning the Redemptorists took pains to define their observance of poverty in such a way as to protect the common life, which for them was an

⁴⁴ The Decree of Benedict XV, 7th May 1918 forbade the disposal of capital in keeping with the newly promulgated Code of Canon Law, so that from that date Redemptorists could dispose only of their revenues. The additional vow to renounce offices and benefices was removed by the General Chapter of 1967.

⁴⁵ *The Complete Works of St. Alphonsus*, XVIII, 340; *Lettere di S. Alfonso*, I, 263.

⁴⁶ *Dissertatio historica*, 4. See also p. 71, where Father Smetana expands the point in a note, invoking the authority of St. Thomas.

essential element of their religious life. Even though he seems to have been unaware of the first formulation of the observance made in 1743, he does quite accurately represent the thinking of the decisions of that year. The General Congregation was most careful in the choice of words to express such an important piece of legislation. Just the same, while the substance of the law was carefully preserved, later formulations made some accidental alterations, especially in the terminology; and this was to occasion those disputes which tried the patience of the Holy See.