

## THE SONS OF CHARITY IN THE CHURCH'S MISSION

*“Whatever God’s views on us, we will only cooperate in so far as we reach them through the perfection of our correspondence to our vocation.” (Fr. Anizan, Charity for the Poor, 1909)*

### Introduction

Two facts have contributed to revive the subject matter of this letter.

1. This year the Pope proposed to the Church a “year of the priesthood”, to renew and strengthen the priestly ministry, to recall its importance in the life of the Church, to deepen and put in value its meaning for the world. The model chosen was that of the Curé of Ars. The different dioceses where we are have organized all kinds of activities and made proposals, to which we have taken part more or less intensely.

An Institute like ours, “*dedicated to the apostolic and pastoral ministry conferred by the ordination*”, although “*including also lay religious*”, could not but feel concerned by that question, not only each of its members but the congregation as such.

From the beginning a question arose: **As Sons do we have something specific in the way we understand and live the priestly ministry?** Times of sharing in the teams. Some reflections such as Jacques Robbe’s letter to the French Region, some testimonies, some talks asked for here and there to know about our experience, maintained the question.

2. In January 2010 was held the second and last International Committee before the Chapter. Two subjects came out strongly in our reflection :

- We feel that we are in communion the ones with the others, beyond our ages, our cultures, our pastoral sensitivities or our different personalities. **What makes of us an apostolic body?** Does our pastoral and apostolic activity have some essential features that come from the fact that we are religious Sons of Charity?
- Traditionally the Brothers have had difficulties finding their place in the Institute. It is a complex question that for some time now we are to trying analyze under its different aspects: historical, ecclesial, theological, etc., and that question is shared by most clerical

congregations that have Brothers. In our reflection a question arose. Would there be a link between that subject and the priestly ministry “in the manner of the Sons”? **What is there in the priesthood of a Son of Charity that can be shared with another Son who is a layman?** Isn't that what appears in that relationship, what makes a body of us and what the Church is asking us to bring to that mission?

Starting from these questions, I only pretend here to express what I feel we can offer to the Church, what it has the right to expect from us. To do so, I will first try to describe the context in which these questions arise, with the look of a pastor and apostle of the working people; secondly I will explore the ecclesial perspective that is ours; finally, I will put that in relation with the grace received through Father Anizan, and with our mission. The result should highlight the value of our place in the Church. Said in a somewhat more provocative way: to know of what use we are. The guide for these reflections is our mission, the love for that mankind, especially in its most fragile part, and for the Church, wanted by the Lord to be the sacrament of salvation for the world.

Without going into the details of each situation, which is impossible, I propose that we look into some fundamental elements that we are called to live in the mission in which we all recognize ourselves. It is the purpose of this letter, like all those before: to confirm our common mission. Which can help us to better understand ourselves as a “body”. Each one and each team will be able to relate this to their own experience.

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### ***1. A reality that questions us***

*“Great crowds came to him, having with them the lame, the blind, the deformed, the mute and many others... At the sight of the crowds, his heart was moved with pity for them because they were troubled and abandoned, like sheep without a shepherd.” (Mt 15,30; 9,36)*

Meditating these lines of the Gospel, Father Anizan writes: *“Jesus had mercy for these crowds. Nowadays who has mercy for them?”* And he goes on with his meditation by pointing out different situations endured by the poor people of his time, who need *“men who love these crowds, who understand their distress and spiritual abandonment.” (Misereor super turbam. 1916)*

What can we say today about that distress and that abandonment? What calls for our love and our understanding? Here are some of the calls that we perceive, what comes back most often in our meetings and our writings.

- A machine to crush human beings

Apart from the standards of living, the social or economic development, of the system or the political tendency of our countries, everywhere, the poor and the workers that we meet feel that they are being carried away by a machine that, although it is managed by identifiable wills and decisions, gives the impression of not being controlled by anyone, and even less by them. The fact of the matter is that it is moved by the only wish to produce financial benefits and power, of which only a small minority profits. It crushes every thing in its path mostly the most fragile persons. The list of “the lame, the deformed, the blind, the mute...” that it produces would have no end: institutionalized unemployed, workers with precarious jobs or who are subjected to unjust and inhuman working conditions,

compelled or rejected migrants, youth without any future perspective, old or forgotten persons, families torn apart, victims of all kinds of violence... But probably the worst of the present situation is the feeling of powerlessness in front of systems that seem to have no alternative. The last economic and financial crisis with its consequences showing the selfish face of neoliberal capitalism and its lack of ethical references has been a supplementary proof. The first victim of that machine is the people among whom we live who feel *“troubled, prostrate and abandoned, like sheep without a shepherd”*.

- Fractures and isolations

These facts reach us profoundly; they are about concrete faces that we meet from day to day. But they have a common feature: “the tearing apart of human fabric”, the breaking up of relationships and ties, the isolation that weakens the person. Let us think about the experience of so many migrants and unemployed persons, about the fear in front of the other who is different and of the walls that come up here and there. But is not the fracture of faith the most fearsome one, notably in the Northern hemisphere and in many youths (breakup of its transmission, lack of reference points, superficial environment...)?

- Refuges and placebos

For the most exposed and weakened people, the situation becomes unbearable, even if the human being’s capacity of resistance seems limitless. That is how all kinds of refuges and placebos are developing in our neighborhoods; among the most religious populations we find churches and sects that sell cures and financial or affective dreams. And not only in the countries of the Southern hemisphere. Others try to find a refuge and to forget in a whole range of offers that the most materialist consumer society is able to make. Pagan divinities that play a role of “mattress”: esotericism, way of living and understanding sports as a spectacle, leisure and activities transformed in pure means of letting off steam, sometimes violent against oneself or the others, fairy tales of the “high society”; the use of alcohol, drugs and sex, mostly among the youths; endless new instruments generated by the new technologies, in particular in the world of “communications”, a probable sign of an unsatisfied thirst for relationships. Naturally, all that at different degrees according to the real capacity of consuming, but having an ever more important place in the heads. All these recourses have a common element, that of producing some relief, but just like a placebo would do. Reality is occulted, therefore the problems increase. An added perversity of the system.

- Dynamisms that carry hope

Amid these situations, the first thing that draws our attention and leaves us in admiration is the capacity of resistance of the poorest and the most wounded. That fact already carries hope. On the other hand many are those who transmit courage and confidence around them. Many are Christians, others not or they do not know, but bring something essential to our mankind. We meet with people who come from outside the world of the poor and of the workers, but who have made a clear option for them, as we have done. They are precious gems. But above all we meet some men and women who belong to the world of the poor and who are real lights, hands extended to the other, hearts filled with compassion, creators of ties, and actors of real transformations. I let you put names on all those that you meet in your neighborhoods and your communities. They suffer the same situations and the same problems, but they have a gift, an interior strength, that makes them think of the others first. Compassion, solidarity, love lead their lives. “The Spirit of the Lord rests upon them”. They are contagious. A gift from God.

## 2. *And the Church?*

- The real Church, our home

The Church is first of all our home, our nourishing womb. All that we are, all that gives meaning to our lives -beginning by Jesus Christ and our faith in him- we received it in the Church it and by it. That Church of which we are part is not a dreamt or virtual Church, it is the Church of Jesus Christ, that is in God's heart, it is also the real Church, with its greatness and its miseries and its historic and present contradictions. The latter which we sometimes share, hurt us, it reminds us the weight of our humanity, but most of all it makes us admirers seeing what the Lord does for it and does for us.

We note every day how important it is for a good number of men and women of our people to belong to the Church. This belonging gives them their identity. That is where many find their nourishment, their home, the dignity that is often denied them elsewhere. We learn from them the sense of the Church, and in turn it happens that we allow them to make that experience. The catholicity and the diversity of the Church are part of our life as a body given that we are an international institute, present on four continents, in countries of the North as well as countries of the South and with different Church histories, and also given that we are often in international and multiethnic neighborhoods. It is a grace to be acknowledged and to make fruitful.

- Disconcerted, at times we wonder

The place we occupy in the Church and the diversity of the places where we are present, not only allows us to notice the importance that it has for our people, but also brings up some questions. Disconcerted, we often notice a gap between the real life of the people and the language, the concerns and the forms that the Church has. We spend much of our time explaining, making closer and translating what the Church is and communicates, to make it understandable and valuable for our people. The liturgy, the theology, the spirituality, the moral, the catechesis... always need to be acculturated in the working and popular world, and that in spite of progress made in the last fifty years. But our main question is: do most of the poor and the workers really feel at home in the Church as it is today? Do they feel that it is theirs? Or for most of them -including in a context of greater popular religiosity- the Church is a place to go to ask for a service, a help or a temple, but without seeing it as their own house, where they can get involved and take responsibilities?

- Prevailing winds

The Church is two thousand years old; it has known evolutions, currents, moves ahead and many steps backwards. They will always have to be measured according to the criterion: is it Sacrament of Salvation by Christ for the world, particularly for the most wounded portion of mankind? Does it get closer to or further from the mission it has received?

We are obliged to notice the sort of relationship Church-world, put into value by Vatican II and its consequences on the internal functioning of the Church, and for its relationships with the other confessions, have known a reversal in the last years. It is neither the place nor the time to dwell into details, but the time to note a prevailing wind: confidence, dialogue and benevolence toward society, that have presided during the years after the Council, have been transformed in many Church places, in fear, affirmation of a truth closed to any dialogue, almost permanent suspicion. To generalize is always unjust for there is a whole range of attitudes, but the dominant current appears clearly. One of the especially serious features in the pastoral ground is the difficulty in recognizing the signs of the Holy Spirit's action in mankind and to make the Gospel land in the real life of the people. And when

the poor are involved, it is much more of a drama -while it is already one when we think of evangelization- than the difficulty to enter into dialogue with the present philosophical, moral, political currents of thought.

- Some signs

That tendency I have just spoken about is worrying, but it would be schematizing and simplifying to much a reality as complex as the Church if one does not see the signs that speak about the faithfulness to the fundamental intuitions of the Council. Two of them seem to me deciding: the evermore great awareness of the importance of the laity -including feminine- that we also notice in our community of the popular world and the role played by religious life in the apostolic, spiritual and theological fields, especially its involvement with the poorest... However there is a great challenge within the “signs”; that of the youths, in particular in the Northern hemisphere. But a challenge is not a drama, it is a call.

### *3. Our ecclesiological perspective*

In my last letter (March 2009), I expressed briefly some theological data that, according to me, are behind our way of understanding pastoral and apostolic action, understood as a love and fecundity encounter, around three keys: Trinitarian love, the Covenant, the creation and the grace. I will not come back to that. I simply underline that such a theology carries with it an ecclesiology. Among all the possible images of the Church (LG 6), without ignoring them evidently, especially the Pauline image of the Church Body of Christ (LG 7), I believe that the ones that help us to better situate ourselves in the Church, are that brought by Vatican II: the Church People of God and Sacrament of Christ’s Salvation for the world (LG II, 48; GS 45).

- People of God

The image of People of God places us at once in a history in which God has progressively revealed his love and his faithfulness. It is an unachieved history, which suggests a personal and community future of reconciliation of man with man, with the world and with God. With that “historical” aspect the word “people” reminds us that nobody is alone; that it is together, with others, that man is always “of God”. Finally it allows living the mystery of the Church not only in its mystical aspect, of union to Christ, but in its reality of men and women sinners, always on the move. Besides, a Church that has a center (a head, says Saint Paul), but with porous, flexible borders, and different levels of belonging, while being tied to its Lord and assisted by Him.

- Sacrament of salvation for the world

The image of the Sacrament reminds us that the salvation does not come from the Church but from Christ. What it gives, it receives from Another, which should immunize it from any temptation of becoming itself the center. Neither does the world “acquire” its salvation, it greets it. To be a Sacrament implies proximity, an otherness, both in relation to God and to the world. To be a sign is one way of being “announced”. The mission is not an attribute; it is part of the being of the Church. Finally the word sacrament speaks to us of hope, for the Church signifies what mankind is called to become, that is not yet reality, but that we await with faith.

- The privileged ecclesial center

The Institute was born in the human fracture caused by the sin, visible on the face of the broken brother, the poor. God speaks in a thousand ways; no one can pretend to run the Spirit that sends us its coded messages. But, one way or another, they all revealed the merciful heart of the Father. Since the “*I have witnessed the affliction of my people*” of God to Moses, through the prophets, men and women of God, mystics, through councils and the faith of the people of God... the Word of the Lord has not ceased to ring out: “*whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me*” (Mt 25, 40). We are not at the periphery of the Church, but in its center: Christ became poor so that the poor of this world may receive the Good News and evangelize all of mankind. The poor are not an option for the Church, meaning that it could take another one just as worthy. They are at the center. Only, the center of the Church is at the periphery of the world. That is where Father Anizan received the call, at the periphery of the world, at the center of the Church. We Sons, religious, pastors of the working people, have our specific way of situating ourselves in that centre-periphery and to put ourselves at its service. Others do it differently, but whatever the way, if it is Christian, it will have that central reference point. That is where the Lord reveals himself, that is where we can read his will for the world. It is in that human, theological “locus” that the verb “to love” is conjugated, the Christian norm. That is where Father Anizan gave substance to his project whose spirit already appears in his wonderful 1909 letter to the Brothers of Saint Vincent de Paul, “Charity for the Poor” and that we find in all his writings, notably in our Charter, Our Triple Ideal.

Among all the openings put forward by Vatican II, two have a special incidence in our mission: the dialogue with the world and with the other religions and Christian confessions; and the need to put the poor at the center of the Church. The two subjects are more tied one to the other than one would believe. For to dialogue is to listen, understand and say. And in doing so let oneself be transformed. What to say? That God is a God-Love, dead and risen from the dead for us. That Good News must have a very special incidence in the life of the small and forsaken of this world. A God who transforms first of all whoever announces Him. Two subjects dwelt on once more by Pope Paul VI in two remarkable encyclicals: *Ecclesiam Suam* (1964) and *Populorum Progressio* (1967). Questions on which the Church has not stop reflecting and dwelling on since: Episcopal and diocesan assemblies, papal documents, theological research, symbolic gesture, missionary movements, and initiatives from communities all over the world... We often find religious life in the forefront. But in spite of the great richness existing in these fields, the challenge is far from being addressed.

Our small Institute wants to bring its share, above all in the ground of ministry to the poor and the workers. We are well aware, like many others, that we have to let ourselves be evangelized by the Lord who speaks to us (who yells at us!) through so many faces of poor and workers among whom we are living. If we do not listen to him there, if that does not influence our lives and our behaviors, we will indeed not listen to him anywhere including in our prayer. Everything leads continuously to the privileged place of his presence.

#### ***4. Grace, task and mission received***

Until now we have dwelt –indeed in very schematic manner- on our social and ecclesial context, while trying to express the ecclesiological perspective that is ours. It is an explanation well known to everyone, but that seems to me good to recall nowadays in order to situate better our vocation. Having said that, what does the Church have the right to expect from us today? That is what I will try to develop briefly.

We have received from the Lord a grace and a task: *“to be both pastors and apostles, who live and announce the Gospel in the working world.”* (Constitutions 3). Our Constitutions are a development of that statement.

A grace is made to be greeted. It determines all. Even if it is related to a wish of who receives it, a wish that is already part of the grace, the grace does not come from us; it is not the fruit of our action. To be pastors and apostles, before being a task and a mission is a gift granted graciously by the Lord. Because of that, it is always new, it is not subjected to any human rule. It is the fruit of God’s charitable will, unforeseeable in its gratuity. That fact colors the task and the mission; it purifies them from any “Prometheism”. It makes us thankful for the fact that our Lord has associated us to his Charity for the poor and the workers. Our life and our mission would be marked by his way of acting, by his passion, by his liberty. Let us make one more step to understand the contents of the grace we have received.

### **5. Pastors and apostles**

The formula that we find in our Constitutions is not used as such by Father Anizan, but it expresses very well his intuition about our place in the Church. Father Anizan speaks of “pastoral ministry” and of “apostolic action”. He speaks mostly of “parish and charities”. The formula “pastor and apostle” puts the stress on the subjects of the action, “parish and charities” aims at the action itself. In the densest formulations of our vocation Father Anizan always puts them in relation one with the other. For example at the 2<sup>nd</sup> article of the first Constitutions: *“Its special purpose is the evangelization of the popular and poor class through pastoral ministry and charities, in workers' parishes erected in conformity with canonical rules, without prejudice to other social and charitable institutions and charities, aimed at supporting and completing their apostolic action”*

In 1985, after the updating of our Constitutions (1983), a two year study on the topic “pastors and apostles” was concluded, with an International Session and a document (“Pastors and Apostles of the Working People” in *Échanges Interbranches* 3) that I invite you to read once more, especially the synthesis commented by A. Rebré.

Our vocation as pastors and apostles are the two sides of a coin. One sheds light on the other. The pastor does not exist for himself; he is always related to those under his responsibility, with whom he shares his existence. It is always so in the Bible. To be a pastor does not mean to reproduce a model pre-established once and for all, it is a task that has to be continuously made over in permanent interaction between pastor and people. The pastoral ministry is about accompanying an assembled community, about a shared life, the knowledge of that people, with the intelligence and the heart; it is about leading to open new roads for an encounter with the Lord... The apostolic ministry with the meaning we are using here, refers to going further, to those “who are not in the fold”. It “colors” pastoral action and in turn is “colored” by it. The dialectical tension “pastors and apostles” is seen in the pastoral choices that we make, in the will to found the Church where it does not exist or is very weakened, in the testimony of the Kingdom that we are expecting and that is coming, in the prayer that adjusts us to God’s project.

That tension that Father Anizan also expresses through the dialectic “parish-charities”, “pastoral ministry-religious life” and “priests-brothers” is the great richness in our way to understand and situate ourselves in the Church. *“The joining together of religious life and pastoral ministry is a great strength and should give us an incomparable apostolic power... Let us also add that our Institute*

*grants our priests the immense advantage of finding in our Brothers a priceless collaboration, and to our Brothers that of collaborating to the great sacerdotal action and to find in our priests exceptional spiritual help.” (Our Triple Ideal, p.12 of the manuscript text)*

## **6. Our contribution to the evangelization of the popular and poor class**

All through his life Father Anizan discovers the social and religious reality of the “forsaken crowds” in the explosion of the industrial development in France at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. He is obsessed by one thing: that these crowds may not be lost for God, he wants “to give them the true understanding of Christianity”. His generous believer’s heart sees immediately the resemblance between these crowds and the crowds that follow Jesus according to the Gospel. What to do? Imitate Jesus in his way of being close to the people, to cure, to understand, to love that people. He wants to identify himself to Him, to become for the people “another Jesus Christ”, “Saint of saints”, “Good Shepherd and Apostle of the poor”. The Sons were created to realize that mission, that he summarizes in six points in the conclusion of Our Triple Ideal: holiness as the foundation for all; the care of the apostolic body with all its element; the creativity and apostolic openness; sharing the gifts that each one has received having in mind the mission; the faithfulness to the evangelization of the poor; the configuration to Christ. (see Our Triple Ideal p. 21 of the manuscript text)

Why does Father Anizan insist so much on the union of the different elements in evangelization, to the point of making it an essential feature of our identity? Because fraternity, openness, proximity with the people, missionary dynamism that this dialectic allows, are the strength of our apostolate that will make it possible for the poor and working people to listen to the Good News of God’s love, to live by it, to celebrate it and to transform it in an involvement for the Kingdom and in hope for the world. In other words, it is what identifies our pastoral charity. Finally, the crisis that Father Anizan has known in his past congregation can be read under that light. The crisis began because of the incapability of his adversaries to understand the openness of the pastoral vision and of the richness of the apostolic body dreamed by Father Anizan and by those who supported him. By founding the Sons of Charity he tries to be faithful to this gift from the Lord for his Church that he cannot accomplish with the Brothers of Saint Vincent de Paul. Everything in him is openness, apostolic creativity, the will not to fence himself in. The “dialectic binomials” about which we are continuously speaking are its expression, but what is important is the spirit that gives them life. It can give a place to new expressions, why not? Our history shows that this is what the Church appreciates in us and expects from us. Each time that we have been inventive by creating new fields of apostolate or that we have had evangelical boldness in our pastoral action, the Church has been thankful. I let you put names on these initiatives in our history, in France as well as elsewhere.

## **7. Together**

I said above that the rupture of the relational and social fabric constitutes probably the main drama of the world of the poor. In spite of the progress in the means of communication and the possibility of relationships it gives, the relational fracture has only grown. It has always existed. As shown in the

Gospel, it is the common feature of all social and religious exclusions. The crowds perceive in the action of Jesus a Good News, for it reveals a God who is near, it rebuilds ties, a God who is himself a relationship. Jesus goes through life building over the ties of the sinners and of the excluded with God and with the others. He creates a community of disciples who through compassion, humility, unselfishness are called to become “one”, as the Father and the Son are “one”.

It is not astonishing that fraternity, a fruit of charity, is at the center of Father Anizan’s project, both between Sons and in the mission: *“My God, impregnate them with your love and love for the poor; sanctify them, that they always remain faithful to the religious spirit, and most of all to the spirit of mutual charity about which you are so keen; may they put above all the practice of true charity. Without it our family has no more reason to be. And if, it should not be in the Church, a leaven of evangelical charity, it is better that it disappear. At least, it could not pretend to hold a necessary place that it would not fulfill.”* (Spiritual testament, 1927)

Creativity, liberty and apostolic boldness in apostolate, the creation of “small Christian groups” as he says, thinking of the communities at the beginning of Christianity, all that will depend on the quality of the fraternity of the pastors and apostles between them, and of the community scope of their action. It is the condition of any fecundity.

#### **8. To unite, to enlarge in order to be fecund in the Lord**

Apostolic fecundity goes through life, prayer and action together. But Father Anizan goes further. And that is what gives its “trade mark” to his project. He feels that the Lord is asking him something particular that can do much good to the Church. **To unite and to enlarge** could be the two words to express that. We find them everywhere in his writings, notably in Our Triple Ideal and in the Commentary of the Constitutions, two writings at the end of his life that are keys to understand his thought. Let us try to enter through the two dialectics that he proposes: “religious life and pastoral ministry” and “priests and brothers”. With “pastors and apostles/parish and charities” we have just talked about, they are part of the evangelization project.

- Religious life and pastoral ministry

*. Uniting religious life and pastoral ministry is “an incomparable apostolic power”*

The pastoral ministry belongs to all the Church, always linked to that of Jesus Christ, the only Pastor. All the ministries and charisms, that the Spirit has given rise to, are linked to him. Always keeping in mind that there are not ministries in and for the internal life of the Church and others for the exterior. The ministries, particularly the pastoral ministry, are always in and for the Church, but for a Church that is sacrament of salvation for the world. Christ calls the Twelve to continue his pastoral ministry. In their steps some in the Church are sacramentally called to represent him personally (bishops and priests), to be signs and servants of the pastoral responsibility entrusted to the whole.

As we know religious life was born within the monastic current. It is the mendicant orders (Saint Francis, Saint Dominic) and later Saint Ignatius and others, that will develop apostolic, roving religious life, with specific apostolates to answer the needs of the Church in its mission. When the religious take charge of the pastoral ministry conferred by the ordination, they imprint in it that apostolic life, mindful of the most urgent needs that arise from the announcement of the Gospel to the world. The pastoral ministry that is lived there has that imprint. Each congregation expresses it by its way of living, praying and doing.

Father Anizan does so through the image of Christ Good Shepherd, surrounded by a group of disciples among the forsaken crowds, to announce to them the love of God. He says that nowadays those crowds are made up of the poor and the workers “*who earn their living at the sweat of their brows and who live from day to day*”. In the Institute, the pastoral ministry, joined to religious life is directed toward the evangelization of that people. To join means that all the pastoral ministry of Sons is marked by that priority, aroused by the Spirit, that apostolic religious life brings into light.

What motivates that union? Father Anizan is clear: that the crowds may meet God and live from his love. What supports it and strengthens it? The permanent relationship with Jesus Christ. The apostolic passion would only be human generosity if it was not nourished and supported by an experience of God. The pastor-apostle Son of Charity is a mystic that has his life as a Son in the Son, or does not exist. A truth that will fill the days and nights of our founder during the last years of his life: “*Right now, they would need zealous, active apostles; apostles full of God's spirit, saints!*” (*Misereor super turbam, 1916*)

#### . *Mutual fecundation*

Religious life and pastoral ministry fecund each other mutually. The identity of the priest Son of Charity is built at the center of that union. Religious life makes the priest a Son and his ministry makes a religious Son. As Sons we cannot think the pastoral ministry without its religious component. Religious life is not added to a pre-existing priestly ministry. It owes what it is to religious life that moulds him in a manner of understanding and of experimenting himself. And vice-versa, the religious life of the Son of Charity contains in itself the pastoral ministry. That is the reason why we can speak of a clerical congregation: “*In these institutes, the sacred ministry is constituent of the charisma itself and it determines the nature, the goal and the spirit*” (*Consecrated Life, 60; CDC 588§2*). To separate them means to separate oneself from the vocation of Son- of Charity. That is what has happened sometimes when a Son of Charity has lived his ministry like a diocesan priest. The parish ministry that most of us are doing requires a special attention about that if we want to avoid a danger that would impoverish the Church.

- Brothers and priests

#### . *A change of ecclesial perspective*

What do the brothers have to do in this idea of religious life of Father Anizan? Precisely, they also come to unite and enlarge. They do not come to “bring”, if we can say so, religious life to the pastoral ministry for, as we have just seen, that union is part of the identity of the Son who is a priest. The difficulties that their integration has known in history come from the enormous richness of that union and of the “price” to pay in order to live it. It demands a total change of ecclesial perspective, in relation with some “mundane” influences that may have impregnated the Church along the years. Father Anizan himself, who opens evangelical paths in that field with a great liberty, when he refuses the idea that was so spread in his days of “lay brothers”, is not totally free of these influences. Neither are we. We are all called to a permanent conversion. Let us reflect on that.

The goal is always the same: evangelization of the poor and the workers in the steps of Jesus the Good Shepherd, in the widest and most creative way possible. Father Anizan speaks of: “*The union of these two elements (priests and brothers) working together at the same mission, each according to its status, and both exercise apostolate*” (*Commentary of the Constitutions, Ch.II, Preliminaries*). He refers to the brothers as “precious auxiliaries of the priests”, but “being an essential part of the Institute”. He has these terse words: “*There lies a providential organization to which the entire*

*Institute will always have to adhere... One is not compelled to accept this conception of our Institute, but a difference on that point is reason enough not to be admitted or to be expelled". (Ibid.)* Therefore, for Father Anizan that union is essential because it would give an extraordinary apostolic fecundity. But the difficulties to accomplish that have been enormous. His project has not been able to be realized, if not only timidly.

. *What have been and still remain the main obstacles?*

The main one has been the difficulty in understanding the priestly ministry freed of any clericalism and of any superiority within the people of God... In spite of the steps forward allowed by Vatican II, the difficulties are far from having disappeared. A consequence is to understand the exercise of authority as domination. The theology of ministries and charismas has made great steps ahead. In respecting the different identities and responsibilities, all Christians find their dignity in Baptism, all are configured to Christ, "*who though he was in the form of God... emptied himself, taking the form of a slave*". (Phil 2,6) But in the ordinary run of things it is always difficult to get rid of pagan or Old Testament vestments.

A second stumbling block is the great difficulty to think of ourselves as a community. There is a fear, probably rooted in the human being, that the community may erase or make diffuse the individual identity. Each one defends his territory, his competence, his "power". The other who is complementary, the one who means a contrast to me, or who questions my "excesses" must be kept far away or neglected. That anthropological and sociological data is found in the difficulty we have to live the union and openness required by the binomial priests-brothers.

. *What signal would we send to the poor of this world!*

And nonetheless if we come to live Father Anizan's intuition, what richness for our lives and our mission! What signal would we send to the poor of this world who have a so great need to repair broken ties and to enlarge the frontiers!

Our Constitutions (10) use the passive voice to speak of the participation of the brothers in the common mission. As for Fr. Anizan he speaks of "precious auxiliaries of the priests", since it could not be otherwise given the theology of his times. How can the terms "made participants"<sup>1</sup>, "auxiliaries" be understood?

Let us first say that in Christian terms there is no formula that can be understood as a power or a precedence of one Christian over the other. We are all made "participants" in the mystery of Christ. We all receive the mission from Him through the Church. In this case (since one has to make distinctions one way or another) it is a way to express that the pastoral ministry, which belongs to the religious identity of any Son, is institutionally represented by the ordained ministers. We should avoid any comparative ministry such as "*which of them should be regarded as the greatest*" (see Luke 22, 24-27). Whatever formula is used, passive or active, the brothers are part of the identity of the Institute. Without them the Institute cannot develop its vocation and its mission. The same must be said of the Sons who are priests. Each one brings its specificity to the common mission. We can say, with Father Anizan, that it is in the union of the two elements that is found the identity of the Sons of Charity.

In order to live that, history proves it, it is essential to think the life and mission in communitarian terms, in terms of fraternity. And among other things this has to go through the purification of the

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<sup>1</sup> See the document "Religieux-laïcs Fils, un défi dans nos gènes?", Michel Retailleau, 1996, p.12-13

priestly ministry from any clericalism, of all remaining authoritarianism, of prestige and of mundane power. The priestly ministry of a Son must be molded in the crucible of religious life, of a common apostolic passion. It must move far away from any theological formulation (ancient or recent) that would prevent understanding the ministries and charismas in the Church in terms of People of God, of a community that shares the same aching for God and the same aching for ministry to the people. We have to go from clerical to ecclesial, from the individual at the center to service, from vertical to collegial.

All that in order to help us live our being as pastors and apostles of the workers, at the image of Christ Good Shepherd of the forsaken crowds that they may listen to the Good News and live from it in a Church servant of the Kingdom of God growing in the world. A mission given to the whole of the Institute and to each Son, rooted in Charity: *“Such is our vocation which we receive from the Spirit of Jesus Christ in a life dedicated to evangelization of the working world. All of its dimensions are rooted in Charity, the fruit of the Spirit. It is the Spirit which will keep us faithful to the name of Father Anizan gave us: Sons of God who is Love, Sons of God who is Charity, Sons of Charity”.* (Constitutions 8)

It is the grace that we have received; it is what we can offer to the Church and what it can rightfully expect from us.

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