

The unimaginable and inspiring strength of the vows

Alberto Toutin ssc
Superior General

INFO SSCC Brothers No 145 – 1 July 2020

Dear brothers,

Fraternal greetings to each of you, to your communities, and to all who serve us in our homes. While some countries are slowly resuming activities and meetings, others remain in confined conditions, trying to control the spread of the coronavirus pandemic.

We know that this time is affecting us greatly. None of us have been spared by this event, which is impacting all dimensions of our lives. Like many others in the world, we

have brothers, sisters and lay people who have been infected by the coronavirus. Some of them died on account of the virus and we were unable to accompany them as we would have liked on their last journey. All of us, I believe, have more or less experienced in our own flesh fears of illness and death and have realistically discovered how radically vulnerable and interdependent we all are. Because of the restrictions of movement imposed by the pandemic, our ministry has had to be reinvented and oriented towards fewer activities; we find ourselves spending more time at home, taking care of each other, and caring for the people entrusted to us in different ways: through the service of accompaniment, listening and consoling, welcoming street people and delivering food.

Each of us has been involved in an interior journey. Conversations that had long been silenced by our routines have begun to resurface in our hearts. Perhaps some fears that we have are emerging more strongly. Without doubt each day will have also brought us some small joys to savour. Moreover, our prayers of intercession have intensified, whether the prayers are those that come from our heart or those that so many people entrust to us for some particular intention. And we have seen more starkly the barely imaginable situations of poverty in which so many people were living before the pandemic - overcrowding, lack of basic services - or the poverty that has arisen as a consequence of the pandemic that will leave many countries with even more poor people living in precarious work and social situations.

None of us have been untouched by all of this. Something in us has changed. We have the opportunity to return to not being the same as before the pandemic, but better than we were before, providing that we allow ourselves to be impacted by the reality we are living through. We must take care not to forget what we have learned and the paths we have walked during this time and see what treasures and energy can be drawn out of our experience that will help us for the path ahead. This has been a time to remember some essential elements of our human and SSCC religious life. In this sense, I believe that the experience of the vows of poverty, chastity and obedience can reveal to us an unimaginable and inspiring strength.



Medellín
(Colombia)

The vows and the Christian life

The reinvention of ministry in the context of the coronavirus restrictions has forced us to rethink what we are for. Against a backdrop of a virus that is no respecter of persons, we are becoming more aware of our planet and the radical poverty and interdependence that characterises the whole human family. This has brought us closer than ever to the common destiny of our humanity and our planet, not so much by doing but rather by suffering the same vulnerability together. And from this radical humility, we perceive that religious vows do not point to anything save introduce us to the Christian life, that is, to the human life according to Christ. Without pretending to reduce the Christian life to these three evangelical counsels - which in fact are addressed to every baptised person - they do offer us three aspects of human living: having, wanting and deciding - which Jesus applied to his own human life, thus bringing it to fullness. In other words, the vows offer us a path, the path of following Jesus, a path that leads to the fullness of human life. His resurrection anticipates the completion of that fullness and impels us to go on a pilgrimage in time, here and now, beginning from his victory over death. Allow me to present a word about each of these aspects that can be found in the vows in the form of an invitation to rediscover their unimaginable strength.

Poverty as a vow of communion

“The pandemic has exposed the precariousness of economic and social gains”.

The pandemic has exposed the precariousness of economic and social gains. Many who had managed to get out of poverty find themselves in it again, and those who were poor are rendered even more helpless. At the same time, we have come to realise that it is possible to live with much less: less consumption of

goods and energy, less waste, fewer people at our service. Our planet, too, is rebelling against our desire for unlimited consumption. When we look at Jesus, we are surprised at his freedom to share with rich and poor, to announce to all the joyful and demanding good news regarding the new relationships he wants to establish: on the one hand, he condemns the rich for their attachment to goods that sadly imprisons them, making them blind to their neighbour and their value. On the other hand, he invites them to live their lives in a way that is based on giving and giving themselves to the poor in order to discover a new happiness. As to the poor, he exhorts them to overcome the shame of being poor by knowing how to share what little they have. Jesus invites them to take on the hard task of simply existing, trusting resolutely in the God who is on their side. So starting from this look at Jesus and adding the questions that come to us from real life, could we not, as religious, assume a more sober lifestyle in our consumption, one that is more in solidarity with the poor, a lifestyle that involves sharing our house and table with them, a lifestyle that is more attentive to our impoverished planet, that seeks to take care of its delicate balances?

Chastity in celibacy as a vow to love more

These times of pandemic have made us see how much we need networks of people and their affections, even beyond any service we might be able to offer them. The affection we weave with people keeps us emotionally balanced. Not having the possibility of being able to physically meet with those we love may have made us experience something that in normal conditions we could forget, namely that we can never do without the other. On the contrary, relationships deepen when everyone grows in freedom and in the desire to be better. We have also seen with pain those people who even before the pandemic lived in loneliness without any ties and how the isolation measures condemned them to death through forgetfulness and abandonment. In our communities, we have relearned that we can love each other, in spite of everything. Our vow of celibacy is not only the deprivation

of an exclusive and stable relationship with a person - as lived by a couple or in marriage - it is also a call to open up our capacity to love more, with all that we are, embracing our shadows and accepting our ineptitudes. Jesus appears as a radically free man capable of expressing his affections and emotions - from joy to anger, to sadness and loneliness - as ways to deepen a relationship and open it up to the more that is contained within: God reigning in our midst. A good starting point for us celibates to love like Jesus would be to acknowledge with humility that it is sometimes easier for us to express affection and care with "those outside" the community than with the brothers with whom we live. Far from this being an observation that could paralyse us, this acknowledgement could lead to the making of a human and religious decision that links us more to the vow of chastity: to decide to love our brothers, both for what makes them lovable and for what is difficult to love in them. Above all, let us make such a decision from the perspective of knowing that we are already loved by Jesus, as his friends, and that this love also comes to us through our brothers. So rather than expecting our brothers to love us or recognise us, let us simply decide to love them, as they are and for what they are. And then, let our capacity to love in the name of Jesus privilege those who are starving for affection: the elderly living alone, immigrants far from their land and kith and kin, people with different abilities, and so many others.

Obedience as a vow to discern and search for meaning

During this time many communities discerned who would go out to do the shopping or who would assist people who requested accompaniment or the sacraments at home or in hospitals. Other communities discerned and decided to collaborate with various initiatives for the preparation and distribution of meals or for welcoming people on the street.

The public hygiene measures to contain the pandemic have made us more aware than ever that life must be cared for and that to protect the lives of others, contact had to be avoided. But from an evangelical perspective, we know that life is not an absolute good that must be preserved at any cost; rather it is a life that is fulfilled to the extent that it is given and offered day by day, in service of our brothers and sisters. If the pandemic or a disease can take someone's life against their will to live, still, it is not imposed on us as a fatality. The vow of obedience makes us actively seek the meaning of life and death by inviting us to turn our gaze to Jesus with our wise intelligence. Obedience is to give meaning to things so that we might be configured more and more with Jesus, from whom nobody takes life; rather it is He who gives it and surrenders it. His secret for a full life is: "Whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it". (Mt 16:25).

“Obedience is to give meaning to things so that we might be configured more and more with Jesus”.

Through religious profession, do we not make *a priori* the gift of our life in order to consecrate it to the service of men and women, in the manner of Jesus? Was this not Damien's memory of his religious profession, under the burial cloth, that made him discover the secret of his strange happiness in Molokai? Is this not the gift of Christ that we contemplate on the cross and celebrate in the Eucharist, a gift that requires us to seek meaning when pain is imposed on us by illness or by an adversity that undoes our plans?

The vows as a way of realising love of God and neighbour

Our Founder discovered the basic logic of the vows: to lose oneself in order to find true life, to die to oneself in order to live, making the centre of life not ourselves but our

“All this can be summed up in a single vow, the most essential one, which is to no longer live for ourselves, but to collaborate with God's salvific action.”

neighbour, whom we want to love. All this can be summed up in a single vow, the most essential one, which is to no longer live for ourselves, but to collaborate with God's salvific action each brother and sister. This same path of meaning was shared with relatives of a prisoner in Siberia when he cites three lines:

“I sought my God and my God I couldn't find;
I sought my soul and my soul eluded me;
I sought to serve my brother in his need, and I found all three;” (William Blake)

May these times in which change is afoot help us to turn our eyes to Jesus and his way to fulfilment through the religious vows. Let us retrace the journey of Jesus that is taking place in the unique history of each one of us. In the choices and decisions that guide our journey and, accompanied by the brothers, we will rediscover as friends of the Lord, and brothers of the men and women of our time, the unimaginable strength of the vows.

Alberto Toutin ssc
Superior General

