**SOLIDARITY FOR THE MISSION, SOLIDARITY WITH THE POOR**

It may seem obvious and even redundant to say that the values present in the beatitudes are an integral part of being a Christian. Furthermore, it may seem obvious that within formation houses (because they are religious houses), the values of justice, peace, reconciliation, and care for creation[[1]](#footnote-1) are already somehow integrated into the formation curriculum, the celebration of faith and daily life. But the truth is that this is not always the case, and on the contrary, not infrequently these very fundamental values are disassociated from the daily living of the faith; in the formation houses these values do not always clearly appear as an integral element in formation, in pastoral ministry and the very life of the communities. This situation worsens when, in some areas, formation structures are transposed which, although they have worked very well in other units, once transplanted in poor contexts, seem to drastically uproot the formandi from their family and cultural environment, and from traditional ways of life which were often closer to the values of the beatitudes.

The tendency to disassociate the formative processes from the commitment to the social reality and the values of justice, peace and integrity of creation (JPIC), seems to be the sub-product, on the one hand, of the present individualism, and, on the other hand, of the tendency of certain communities to withdraw into spiritualities and theologies that are alien to reality, as a way of facing a secularized world and affirming one’s religious identity. Hence the urgent need to connect our faith and our charism with the concrete practice in favor of JPIC.[[2]](#footnote-2)

The lifestyle of every community reveals an ecclesiology, a theology, a spirituality, and a set of values that sustain it. Our way of life does not take place in a vacuum but is the result of choices made, individually or together with those who share the same vocation and charism. For this reason, we must always be very attentive to cultivate those values which are non-negotiable, the Gospel values, and the values proper to our charism, which ultimately give us cohesion and identity as Redemptorists. These values are the foundation on which the personality of the Redemptorist missionary is built; they are the “*Ratio Formationis*,” the fundamental principles that guide the being and the work of both the formator and the formand. To lose sight of these fundamentals is to lose sight of who we are, where we come from, and where we are going.

Hence the importance of encouraging insertion experiences during some moments of initial formation. In the beginning, Saint Alphonsus wanted our houses to be located at strategic points where the confreres could be in contact with the poor and abandoned of spiritual assistance. Thus, these could be instructed and have contact with the devout life. Many of our houses today had this same motivation in their origins, but with time and with the progressive urbanistic locality changes, they ended up separated from the poor in exclusive areas of the population. Of course, formation houses have a particular characteristic, and the emphasis often has to be on the academic or community life aspects proper to a formation house; however, one cannot ignore the importance of the connection with a reality, from which even many of us come and within which we are all called to serve. The poor not only have an evangelizing potential - “*evangelizare pauperibus et a pauperibus evangelizare*” - but also a formative potential in contact with our formandi.

For this reason, our formation programs should be oriented not only to the assimilation of abstract principles but also to offer a moral framework for the apostolic work and daily life of each generation of Redemptorists. Our rich tradition of Moral Theology has much to offer formandi and formators in this regard. The formative task in our formation houses would be incomplete without formation in the values of JPIC, which are none other than the fundamental social principles of the whole Catholic Church.

If JPIC values are integral to our Mission as Redemptorists and as collaborators in the Mission of the Church. The challenge is to link these values within formation programs. But not only that but also to integrate them fully into pastoral ministry, prayer, and daily life. In this regard, the words of Pope Francis can be enlightening:

“*Faith passes through life. When faith is concentrated purely on doctrinal formulations, it runs the risk of speaking only to the head, without touching the heart. And when it concentrates on doing, it risks becoming moralizing and being reduced to the social. Faith, instead, is life: it is living God’s love that changes our existence. We cannot be doctrinalists or activists; we are called to do God’s work in God’s way, in proximity: close to him and in communion with one another, close to our brothers and sisters. Proximity, this is the secret to transmitting the heart of faith*”.[[3]](#footnote-3)

**Our spirituality, as understood from the perspective of solidarity**

One of the fundamental aspects of Alphonsian spirituality and Redemptorist spirituality is rooted in the theology of the incarnation, in faith in a God who assumes the human condition and is in solidarity with our misery, lowering himself to rescue us to the point of participating in the very reality of death. This is why it is often relatively easy for Redemptorists to integrate into situations of poverty and misery from which many would flee. Let us think how our Founder, for example, lived the mystery of the incarnation as a continuous *distacco*: of the comforts of a noble family and a profession, of his comfort zones, of his tastes, of his own will, etc., to respond totally to the call he received. Or in Gerardo Mayela, who, living poverty himself since his childhood, easily empathized with the reality of the poor, the peasants, and the abandoned. And in general, in each of our saints and blessed we can find reflected, in one way or another, this same characteristic of our spirituality that led them to be in solidarity with the poor of their particular context, following the example of Christ the Redeemer to “give their lives for their brothers and sisters” (Cf. Jn 15:13).

In our day, solidarity, as central to this incarnation, became evident in the XXV General Chapter, with the motto: “*Witnessing to the Redeemer, in solidarity for the mission in a wounded world*”. The environmental crisis, growing nationalism, migration, the continuing gap between rich and poor, are challenges that have much to do with our mission today. In this sense, the interconnectedness of which Pope Francis speaks is a timely concept that helps us understand that in a globalized world, solidarity is also solidarity with the poor and with all those who everywhere and in many ways are victims of the evils of this world. It is a solidarity which, according to John Paul II himself, “is not a feeling of vague compassion or superficial tenderness towards the evils of so many people near and far; on the contrary, it is the firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good, that is, to the good of all and of each one, because we are all truly responsible for all”[[4]](#footnote-4) and we all form one family.

The Latin American theologian and thinker Gustavo Gutiérrez made this statement: “one believes in God starting from a determined historical situation”.[[5]](#footnote-5) Our history that is not separated from the history of salvation, because “there are not two different histories, just as there are not two superimposed planes of reality.”[[6]](#footnote-6) The tendency, as we have noted above, is to separate the so-called “sacred history” from human history. When this happens, the values of JPIC fail in being incorporated into the formation processes and the individual and group life of our communities, because it is believed that they belong to “another” sphere. In this logic of fragmentation, the “spiritual things” are valued in contrast to and to the detriment of the “things of this world”. Thus, this principle of interconnectivity leads us to understand that we cannot separate life from faith, Christian morality from a commitment to the social, our Redemptorist spirituality from our commitment to the poor; for St. Alphonsus this link was very clear and he never made a separation.

Authentically Christian spirituality cannot remain only in ideas, concepts, or thoughts; it must be translated into solidarity with the most abandoned. The profession of vows is already an attempt to embody this solidarity, which from this starting point, continues to take shape in the actions of daily life. In itself, the true meaning of religious life does not distance the person from the world, but rather strengthens his or her commitment to the society in which he or she lives and helps him or her to be a prophetic sign of the values of the Kingdom in the here and now. In the face of “global indifference”[[7]](#footnote-7) the witness of solidarity can be one of the remedies to help heal the wounds of the world, and a way to find our place as consecrated persons. In this sense, there are many examples of confreres and communities living their vows in areas of true insertion: in contact with those who live on the periphery of society, welcoming immigrants, promoting social projects, in inter-religious dialogue. They help us to see that the closer we come to the miseries of others, the better we discover our identity as consecrated persons and our place in the world. For some, the future of religious life is decided today on the periphery, where we find Christ agonizing.[[8]](#footnote-8)

The Abundant Redemption, of which our Congregation is both messenger and servant, is expressed in the liberation of the human person in all his/her dimensions. Thus, we are also discovering how the concept of Redemption is breaking the shell of the anthropocentric in which it had been enclosed, to touch also a wounded creation and all other forms of life besides human life; because to commit oneself to the values of justice and peace today also means to commit oneself to the salvation of this Common House and all its forms of life, as Pope Francis teaches.

The set of bonds that unite people of all times and places and social groups offers us space where human freedom can take care of the common growth that we all seek. “The message of the social doctrine on solidarity highlights the fact that there are close links between solidarity and the common good, solidarity and the universal destination of goods, solidarity, and equality among men and peoples, solidarity and peace in the world.[[9]](#footnote-9)

In this regard, we are at the same intersection with the Redemptorist laity who share our mission. Many of them perhaps live more closely with many of the realities that affect our societies and are even better able to deal with them than we are. The context of the Redemptorist mission in which they are gradually taking part allows us to learn more about all these links which unite the whole human race. Thus, formation in the values of JPIC in our seminaries also implies formation to work with the laity and to carry out our mission as one missionary body, a mission in which they too have been called to participate.

**Formation for Solidarity**

To understand the link between JPIC values, our charism, and Redemptorist formation, we have pointed out those that are essential values of the Christian faith rooted in the Gospels and the teachings of Jesus Christ. But we must not lose sight of the fact that these are also elements of our spirituality. JPIC values arise from a spirituality centered on God’s redemptive plan for all creation, of which we Redemptorists are collaborators. For this reason, social ministry is not just one activity among many. It is an essential dimension of our Redemptorist vocation, just as our community life and prayer. It is a ministry that is in our DNA and is expressed in a particular way in each context.

Given that solidarity with the poor is not something optional or tangential to our being baptized and consecrated, formation in solidarity takes on special relevance within the formation plans of our formation houses. The ideas expressed below are not intended to become norms to be incorporated into formation plans, but rather to be ideas that can trigger creativity in seeking to ground and concretize our call to solidarity and the living out of JPIC values. If solidarity has to do with the commitment we make to people at a deeper level, especially to the most vulnerable, then it will lead us to make decisions that affect our personal lives and our communities.

First of all, it is evident that there must be an approach to the fundamental principles of the social doctrine of the Church that begins to create the conditions for a formation in the social area. In a processual way, our students could become involved in those issues of daily life that most affect the poor around them, and they would come to understand that our mission as Redemptorists also includes a commitment to the teachings of the Social Teaching of the Church. Critical reflection should lead our students to be able to help their communities see beyond assumptions that are manufactured and communicated by certain sectors of society, especially the more powerful. Without critical reflection, the tendency is to conform to living as spectators of human drama and to retreat into our comfort zones. Formation should empower our young people so that they, in turn, can enable the communities in which they will eventually be inserted.

Secondly, a discipline of regular review of our lifestyle could be established in our calendars. This is not only a matter of formation in a lifestyle but also of reviewing those individual and community behaviors that are not consistent with JPIC values. Conversion is a daily invitation in the life of every Christian, and the measure will always be the person of Jesus Christ, the model for all humanity. The current environmental crisis, for example, confronts us with our faith and leads us to question the existing systems of production and consumption that are pushing our planet to dangerous limits, and us with it. The lives of our Redemptorist Saints and so many others gathered here can be a point of reference, for they have oriented their lives with their eyes on God, as pilgrims and strangers to this world, living, therefore, a life of extreme simplicity, consuming and possessing only the indispensable. The lifestyle they have chosen is derived from that sense of solidarity with the poor, and with God himself, who suffers in the poor. Solidarity with creation is generating new behaviors and ways of relating to the goods of this world. Empathy with the forms of life that are becoming extinct is leading people to live in solidarity not only with those who suffer but also with all living beings.

Therefore, the responsible use of the goods of creation also depends on a deep commitment to justice and peace in the world. It is not possible to want to build a lasting peace in the world while living in a declared war with other living species. Today we are aware of a fact that was not so evident in the periods before the first industrial revolution: the extreme poverty in which so many people live is also closely related to the current environmental crisis; it is the poor who are the first to suffer, for example, the catastrophic effects of global warming.

The simple life of the Redemptorists is something that has existed since the beginning, and today we find one more reason and motivation to take it up and thus enrich our whole apostolic life. We must assume an attitude of simplicity in the use of material goods in solidarity with the wounded world. The practice of a constant examination of the use of the consumer goods available in our formation houses and our communities can lay the foundation for the construction of prophetic signs today and tomorrow, the prophetic signs proper to Religious Life.

Other aspects that could be considered in our formation houses can be:

- The defence of the dignity and sanctity of life in all its expressions and stages.

- The handling of conflict through dialogue and not through manipulation, with particular attention to those whose voice is not heard or is ignored.

- Practicing equality in mutual service without discrimination between people, excluding abuses of power or clericalism in the use of money or authority.

- The fair treatment of employees.

- Promoting material work and the production of consumer items at the local level.

- Showing mercy to those who have fallen into drugs or gangs and are struggling to get out. The same with immigrants, refugees, minorities, etc.

- By offering training, *ad intra*, and *ad extra*, in environmentally friendly behavior and attitudes.

- Administering our goods in an ethical and evangelical way.

- Avoiding the consumption of products that are or give the impression of being signs of power or ostentation.

- Being agents of reconciliation.

- Giving signs of rejection of social evils such as corruption, extreme nationalism, injustice, discrimination, etc.

- Creating safe spaces for children and vulnerable adults

- Developing a life of prayer that integrates and considers important aspects of the social reality of the environment.

- Developing a culture that makes the preferential option for the poor the discernment criterion for their ministry.

- Involving our students in the planning, elaboration, management, and evaluation of social projects with an impact on the surrounding communities.

- To provide experiences of authentic insertion into poor and marginalized communities.

- To promote fasting and sacrifices during Lent and Advent, thus connecting our faith, tradition, and spirituality with social realities.

1. Until a few years ago in Latin America, the expression "social ministry" included all those values related to social justice, peace and reconciliation. Since the promulgation of the encyclical, *Laudato Si,* on June 18, 2015, there has been a growing awareness of the care of our *Common House*, and an ever-stronger link between justice and peace and the care or integrity of creation. Thus, many of the so-called Justice and Peace Commissions, at the level of ecclesial jurisdictions or religious communities, have been taking the name of Social Pastoral - Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation (PS-JPIC). This is the case of the *Justice and Peace Commissions* at the level of the General Government, the Conferences and some Units within the Congregation. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. In this regard, the Church's social doctrine represents a treasure of wisdom that has yet to be explored. It is the Church's proposal for building a better world, and it is there that our formation plans can find guidance to make more effective the proclamation of the Abundant Redemption among the poor by those who are preparing for it. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Homily of Pope Francis at the Holy Mass at the conclusion of the 15th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops; 28 October 2018, 30th Sunday in Ordinary Time [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Encyclical Letter, Sollicitudo rei socialis, 38. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Cfr. The God of Life, (*El Dios de la vida*), Salamanca, 1992, pp.17 y 22. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Cf. Scannone, Juan Carlos, Liberation Theology. Characterization, currents, stages. Selections from Theology, vol 23, p. 092. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Cf. Message of Pope Francis for the Celebration of the XLIX World Day of Peace; 1 January 2016. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Sister Mary Sujita, CND. *Solidarity with Life in the Periphery*, Talk to the UIG, Rome, May 9, 2019. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church, 194. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)