

Section 28

“A Preferential Option for the Poor ”

After Fr. Chevalier’s death, Fr. Claude Hériault MSC, who for many years had been his parish-assistant, paid tribute to Chevalier’s special care for the poor: *“The poor knew his charity and the kindness of his heart. They used to come constantly knocking at his door. They knew they would not be refused... How many families ... have been supported by his open handed generosity and by his advice... Today the poor realize the loss they have suffered with the death of Fr. Chevalier”* (Claude Hériault MSC, Notes sur le T.R.P. Chevalier. MS. Daily Readings, September 14).

One of the first pastoral projects of the newly erected MSC Community was the celebration of Masses only for men. At the time, in general, men did not attend Mass, not even on Sundays. In 1857, Chevalier, Maugenest and Piperon started visiting all the families of Issoudun to invite the men to attend the “for men only” Sunday Mass. Then, around 1858, during Lenten sermons for about fifty men, Fr. Chevalier spoke about the two main evils of society, namely Egoism and Indifference, which he considered to be the main causes of wide-spread poverty. These evils, he said, could be healed by following Jesus, who, as revealed in the Gospels, loves with a human Heart.

No less than four of his eighteen Lenten sermons, Chevalier dedicated to the practice of charity for the poor, not just the poor in general, but the poor in Issoudun. Chevalier told the men of Issoudun that there were many more poor people in their neighborhood than they realized. There are two reasons, he said, why we should love the poor. First, they are human beings like us, created in the image of God. Even in the most pitiful condition, a poor person still shows us *“a portrait of our Father in heaven.”* Secondly, the poor are *“our brothers and sisters, since we are all together children of the same Father.”* Therefore, he said, we should treat them as brothers and sisters, by visiting them personally at home. (Combattre l’Égoïsme et l’Indifférence par la charité et l’amour du Sacré-Cœur de Jésus, 10. Sur le Pauvre, sa Dignité. Manuscrits sur le Sacré-Cœur de Jésus, Fontes MSC 1,4).

The renewed MSC Constitutions of 1984 declare that *“the spirit of our Society”* implies *“a preferential option for the poor”* (MSC Const. 1985, n.

48). That is totally consistent with the way our Founder practiced a Devotion to the Sacred Heart. Also the Spirituality of the Heart as practically lived and promoted by Pope Francis, clearly involves “*a preferential option for the poor.*” “*The Church has made an option for the poor, he writes, because God shows the poor his first mercy... This divine preference has consequences for the faith life of all Christians, since we are called to have “this mind... which was in Jesus Christ” (Phil 2:5). This is the reason, the Pope continues, “why I want a Church which is poor and for the poor” (Evangelii Gaudium n. 198).*

A reflective moment

*“Our commitment does not consist
exclusively in activities or programs...
What the Holy Spirit mobilizes is ...
above all an attentiveness,
which considers the other in a certain sense
as one with ourselves.
This loving attentiveness is
the beginning of a true concern for their person....
This entails appreciating the poor
in their goodness,
in their experience of life,
in their culture,
and in their ways of living the faith. ...
Only on the basis of this real and sincere closeness
can we properly accompany the poor
on their path of liberation.
Only this will ensure that
in every Christian community the poor feel at home. ...
Without the preferential option for the poor,
the proclamation of the Gospel ...
risks being misunderstood...”*

(Pope Francis, Evangelii Gaudium n. 199)