

LETTER TO THE MEMBERS OF THE COMPANY OF MARY

1. "Fear not, little flock, because it has pleased your Father to bestow a kingdom on you" (Lk. 12:32).

Fear not, although, humanly speaking, you have every cause for fear. You are only a little flock, so few in numbers that a child can count you. Ranged in opposition against you are nations, worldlings, misers, pleasure-seekers and profligates, all banded together in their thousands ready to fight you with mockery, calumnies, contempt and violence. "They have united with this in mind" (Ps. 2:2).

2. You are of little account. They are influential.

You are poor. They are rich.

You have no influence. They have the backing of all who matter.

You are weak. They are men in positions of authority.

But let me repeat: Have no fear, at least, no deliberate fear. Listen to Jesus Christ who tells you: "It is I, do not be afraid. It is I who have chosen you. I am your good shepherd and I know you for my sheep. Do not be surprised if the world hates you, but know that it began by hating me. If you belonged to the world, it would hold you dear as something of its very own but, because you do not belong to the world, you must endure its hatred, calumnies, insults, contempt and outrages."

3. "I am your protector and your bulwark. I hold you in my hands, little company," says our Eternal Father (cf. Gen. 15:1; Is. 49:16). "I have graven you on my heart and on the palms of my hands in order to cherish and defend you because you have put your trust in me and not in men, in my Providence and not in wealth. I will deliver you from the snares they set for you, from the calumnies they spread about you, from the terrors of the night and from the devil who roams at noonday to seduce you.

I will shelter you under my wings, I will carry you on my shoulders. I will provide your sustenance. I will arm you with my truth and you will find it such a powerful weapon that you will see with your very eyes your enemies falling by the thousands around you: a thousand wicked paupers on your left hand and ten thousand evil rich on your right. You yourselves have nothing to fear from my avenging power. It will not even come near you.

You will trample on the asp and on the basilisk with all its envy and calumny. You will crush underfoot the lion and the dragon of ungodliness with its proud fury. I will hear you when you pray and I will be at your side when you suffer. I will deliver you from all the evils that beset you. All the glory that I have will be yours and will be revealed to you after I have given you length of days and abundant blessings upon earth.

4. Dear little Company of Mary, these are the marvellous promises which God has made to you through his prophets. They will be yours provided you put all your trust in him through Mary.

Entirely dependent as you are on the Providence of God, it is for him to support you and to increase your numbers, saying to you, "Increase and multiply and fill the earth" (Gen. 1:28). Do not, therefore, be discouraged because you are few in number. It is for God to be your defender, so do not be afraid of your enemies. It is for God to provide all that is necessary for your bodily needs. Do not, then, be afraid that you will go short of the necessities of life in these hard times which are hard only because people do not have enough trust in God. It is God who will glorify you, and have no fear that anyone will take this glory from you. In a word, fear nothing whatsoever and sleep in peace in your Father's arms.

5. But it is not enough to be just unafraid. God wants you to hope for great things from him and to be filled with joy by reason of this hope. Our bountiful Father wants to give you the kingdom of his grace. He has made you his kings and priests by the Christian faith and the priestly ordination he has conferred on you, and your voluntary poverty gives you an additional right to be called kings, for blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven (Matt. 5:3). Our Lord does not merely promise the kingdom of heaven in the future but states that, because you are poor in spirit, you possess it now. How is this to be explained?

6. (1) The blessed in heaven feel no need of the things of this world since they have a superabundance of all things, spiritual and eternal. God is theirs in his fullness. Likewise, men such as you who profess voluntary poverty feel no need for the things of this world because they neither want nor desire them. If they did, they would not be truly poor in spirit. As the wise man says, "The poor man's riches are proportionate to the desires of his mind and heart" (Sir. 38:20). If his heart is contented, he is rich and wants for nothing.

7. (2) The poor in spirit are rich in faith and the other virtues. "In this world," says St. Jerome, "the poor are rich in faith and he who is poor with Jesus is rich beyond measure." He is rich in divine consolations. He does not have to live the thorny life of the rich nor share their urge for riches. Like one who reigns in heaven, he has turned away from the enjoyment of earthly consolations in order to enjoy those which God has provided for him in such abundance. He even counts heavenly glory as part of his wealth in spite of not yet being in heaven. One can say that what has the value of gold is gold, and, by analogy, we can say that what is equivalent to heaven is heaven. What is being poor in spirit equivalent to? The kingdom of heaven and heavenly glory.

8. (3) The man who is truly poor in spirit possesses God himself in his heart. "What is more glorious for a man than to sell all he has in exchange for Christ Jesus?" says St. Augustine. What a profitable sale and what a good bargain! "Man does not realize its worth" (Job 28:13).

Understand this, dear brothers, no man realizes the value of your evangelical poverty, "The man who embraces the poverty of Christ is always rich because what he possesses more than offsets what he lacks and he is not afraid of being deprived of anything in this world since he has been given the grace of possessing all things by possessing the Lord of all."

9. To increase the rich treasure your poverty brings you and remain in possession of the kingdom you have conquered, there are three things you must put into practice:

(i) You must set a great value on this real and effective poverty to which you have committed yourself and have a real love for it. No one becomes rich more easily or knows the best use to make of these riches, says a holy bishop, than the man who is truly poor in spirit. He knows that wealth only serves to reduce to poverty and misery those whose heart is centred on it, whereas those who give up this wealth through a holy and praiseworthy contempt for it become rich and happy in the truest sense of the word. "Riches make a man poor and miserable if he loves them. If he despises them for Christ's sake, they make him rich and happy" (Umbertus).

Be careful then and do not look back at the patrimony or benefice you have given up. "No one putting his hand to the plough and looking behind is fit for the kingdom of God (Luke 9:62). Be careful, too, not to glance enviously around you at the thousand and one benefits, ecclesiastical or otherwise, which you could acquire with as much right as anyone else, for "they arouse the fool's concupiscence" (Wis. 15:5).

10. (ii) Feel then for yourselves the effects of poverty, for instance, (1) the labour it entails in the pulpit or the confessional by which you earn your bread at the sweat of your brow; (2) the humiliation and disdain which are usually shown to poor clerics; (3) other humiliations which poverty brings with it: lack of suitable clothing, proper food and accommodation, the fatigue and travelling it imposes.

11. (iii) Let all your longing be centred on eternal things. Knock on the door which opens to you the mercy of Jesus Christ who recognizes and hears without fail those who are dressed in the livery of his poverty.

The man truly poor in spirit sees the world as a frightful wilderness and turns his heart from it. He avoids getting involved in worldly affairs, "No man enlisted in God's army gets involved in other business" (II Tim. 2:4). To his relatives and friends in the world he only . . .

In the same way, therefore, that a traveller bent on reaching some royal city, towards which he is directing his swift passage, and who, wholly taken up with this one idea, passes on indifferently without stopping to consider the beauty of the countries through which he is passing, so the missionary, carefree like St. Francis, walks with great haste towards the heavenly Jerusalem, solely taken up with the charms of the immortal city of peace and glory; he has eyes only for its contemplation; and he can't give the name of pain to what it has cost him to get there, nor the name of pleasure to what could turn him away from it. Like another St. Paul, he doesn't consider visible things but the invisible, because he tells himself, the visible are

passing and perishable; death takes them away, just when one thinks to enjoy them; indeed, they are often lost in anguish before death; while invisible goods, those intangible treasures, which are only tasted in the possessing of God, are eternal.

And so, at last, the missionary, sustained and spurred on by this noble hope, which beats high in his breast, can't deceive himself, and persevering in his holy and sublime vocation, he will have the happiness of being able to repeat with confidence when he is dying, those beautiful, those consoling words of Jesus Christ's most zealous missionary: "*Bonum certamen certavi, cursum consummavi, fidem servavi; in reliquo reposita est mihi corona iustitiae quam reddet mihi Dominus in illa die iustus iudex. Amen*"). (I have fought the good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith. As to the rest there is laid up for me a crown of justice, which the Lord, the just Judge, will render to me on that day. Amen).