

Poverty, the Periphery, and Praise
Panel Presentation by Timothy Scott, CSB

Introduction

Good morning and thank you for the invitation to this meeting.

First, I would like to begin with my own background. I'm 55; I've been ordained for 29 years; in vows as a Basilian for 35 years. My religious community is clerical; we don't have religious brothers; only priests and seminarians. We were founded in France almost two centuries ago; we came to Toronto in 1850; now we minister here, in the United States, Mexico, and Colombia.

Our demographic is not much different from that of many other communities with a similar history. We have a little over 200 professed members; of those less than 90 are under seventy years of age. We've experienced over the past couple of decades the need to withdraw from parishes, schools and colleges formerly in our care. In the not too distant future our last French confrere will die and so will conclude a ministry that had its origins in the turmoil of the French revolution. On a brighter note, we have experienced a modest up-tick in vocations in Colombia, and more recently in the United States, where something important may be happening.

Second, I suggest we can pass over the usual gloom and doom that occupies much of our thinking: declining numbers, aging population, widespread secularization, our institutional response to dreadful history of violence against children. These remain important issues for many reasons, but that they are not the issues we need to talk about today.

Third, I think we've all been amazed at the "Francis effect" of the past six months or so. That a group of 115 conservative-minded cardinals, the majority appointed by Pope Benedict and the rest by his predecessor Pope John Paul II, could choose from their number someone this extraordinary has caused me to believe in the Holy Spirit who clearly blows where she wills, even apparently in the Sistine Chapel. As the journalists tell us, "this story has legs."

Francis' homiletic method is to talk in threes; three points, three themes for consideration. This isn't a homily, but I think I will imitate him and suggest three areas that are relevant for Canadian women and men religious as we look at our circumstances and imagine our future. Coincidentally, these are themes that are figuring prominently in the new pontificate. The words are **poverty, the periphery, and praise**.

I. Poverty

In Francis' first week as pope, we had this wonderful phrase: "Vorrei una chiesa povera e per i poveri." (Address to members of the communications media, March 16, 2013) My interpretative translation: "How much I want a Church that is materially poor and orientated toward the poor!" Too often, discussions about poverty and religious life provoke a collective weariness; eyes glass over as we try to square the circle of our own material comfort in the face of more and more poor people on our streets and at our doors.

Our collective institutional “success” has given us a legacy of schools, hospitals, centres of all sorts that were at their origin designed to serve a Catholic population that was for the most part poor. But as Catholics moved upward socio-economically and various levels of government took over or funded the services we previously provided, our remaining institutions have lost their connection with the poor. There’s a comfortable settling with institutional realities that tend to self-perpetuate. Francis has this collective *stasis* in the crosshairs.

Different religious communities have undergone de-institutionalization to varying degrees. Most of us have unloaded our large buildings, or have converted them for other purposes like eldercare. But I believe, at least in reference to my own community, that institutional thinking still predominates. I also think it’s true in general that communities of women are further ahead in abandoning this mindset than many communities of men.

Who are the poor?

Particularly in the European context, economic migrants are the constant face of the poor in major cities, including Rome. Before travelling to Brazil, Francis first visited the Italian island of Lampedusa. Situated only 110 kilometers from the Tunisian coast, it has become a magnet for refugees and economic migrants fleeing the poverty and chaos of the African continent. Crowded into flimsy boats, hundreds have died attempting this dangerous crossing. Pope Francis went there without any entourage, met with Moslem migrants, and wore purple vestments to preside at a mass of reparation for our collective callousness in the face of such human suffering. Here’s what he said in his homily:

“Has any one of us wept because of this situation and others like it? Has any one of us grieved for the death of these brothers and sisters? Has any one of us wept for these persons who were on the boat? For the young mothers carrying their babies? For these men who were looking for a means of supporting their families? We are a society which has forgotten how to weep, how to experience compassion – “suffering with” others: the globalization of indifference has taken from us the ability to weep!” (Homily, July 8, 2013)

What he is teaching and we are learning is that poverty understood in a narrow ideological sense isn’t a value: Poverty is a value when it demonstrates radical solidarity with the poor and marginalized. This brings me to my first question: Where are religious women and men today in Canada choosing to serve?

In Canada, the face of the poor is less often found in economic migrants than is the case in Europe or even in the United States. But following Vatican II, we did respond to the call for solidarity with the poor and marginalized. Many religious communities and even dioceses established missions in Latin America and Africa, as did my own. As well, there were individuals and small groupings who went to a periphery closer to home and who for years, even decades have served the poor: single mothers, immigrants, particularly undocumented immigrants in the United States, sexual minorities, persons suffering from drug addictions, sex workers, street people, aboriginals in the inner city, isolated aboriginal communities in the far north.

A third response was to continue working in traditional apostolates of education and health care, while gradually increasing lay presence and participation, accessing

government funding and finally relinquishing control while seeking in some way to perpetuate the charism.

Because of its inherent ambiguity, the third option seems the most problematic, and it's the one that has caught the Pope's attention. If I am interpreting the early signs from Francis, we need to ask ourselves: is the only way forward for our more established ministries in Canada a continued systematic de-institutionalization?

II. The periphery

The second major term I want to reflect upon is what Francis calls the periphery. We are hearing again and again about the importance of the Church getting out of its ecclesial rut and moving to a different place where we can encounter the poor and marginalized. Obviously poverty and the periphery are closely related. Francis chooses to lead by example in making his first Roman parish visit to a community on the outskirts of the city, and his first trip outside Rome to Lampedusa, southern Europe's geographic periphery. Travelling to Brazil for World Youth Day, he visited the inhabitants of the slums of Varginha; again, the economic periphery of Rio de Janeiro.

His orientation toward people who do not occupy the centre was already in place during his ministry as Archbishop of Buenos Aires. His very modest lifestyle, his daily commute on the subway, his regular visits to the slums gave him the mindset he brought to Rome for those all-important days in March this year. In one of the private meetings of cardinals before the election, Francis gave a short talk, the notes from which were later made public. It's arguable that this reflection sealed his election.

There is a tension between the center and the periphery.... We must get out of ourselves and go toward the periphery. We must avoid the spiritual disease of the Church that can become self-absorbed: when this happens, the Church itself becomes sick. [...] Between a Church that goes into the street and gets into an accident and a Church that is sick with self-referentiality, I have no doubts in preferring the first. (Cardinal Jorge Bergoglio. Address to the pre-conclave General Congregation of the Cardinals, March 2013)

This theme of a self-absorbed and clericalist Church (I would suggest 'hierarchy') is reappearing in as a leitmotif. Shortly after his election, he wrote to the Argentine bishops' conference excusing his absence from their regular meeting: "[...] urgent business elsewhere." But again, the same unsettling call for de-institutionalization and declericalization:

A Church that does not go outside of itself sooner or later will fall ill in the stifling atmosphere of its own closed-in world. Of course, it is also true that a Church that does go out may experience what might happen to any person who goes out into the street: there may be an accident. Faced with these two choices, I want to say frankly that I much prefer a Church that has had an accident than a Church that is sick. The typical illness of a closed-in Church is that it has no objective point of reference: it is only looking at itself; it is hunched over itself like the woman in the Gospel. It is a kind of narcissism that leads us to a mediocre spirituality and to a shallow clericalism. This narcissism then keeps us from experiencing "the delightful and comforting happiness of evangelizing." (Letter to the 105th

plenary assembly of the Argentine Episcopal Conference, March 25, 2013)

Those final words in Spanish: “la dulce y confortadora alegría de evangelizar” are taken from the *Aparecida* document promulgated in 2007. It is the final report of the Fifth General Assembly of the Bishops of Latin America and the Caribbean (CELAM), and it has Jorge Bergoglio’s fingerprints all over it. If you wish to understand where Francis wants to take the Church, it’s worth reading.

Beyond the ecclesiological dimension, an orientation toward to the poor and marginalized of course has practical implications for us as religious. De-institutionalization has all kinds of consequences. Following his visit to the slums of Varginha, in an impromptu speech to young people in Brazil, Francis said:

I want a mess. [...] I want to see the church go out in the streets. I want to get rid of worldliness, anything static, anything worldly, anything clericalist, anything that closes us off in ourselves off within ourselves, in our parishes, schools or structures. (Meeting with the youth from Argentina gathered in the Cathedral of San Sebastián, July 25, 2013)

Closer to home, in a meeting at the Jesuit Refugee Centre in Rome, Francis chastised communities who were creating tourist “bed and breakfasts” from strategically-located former religious houses:

My dear religious men and women, empty convents do not serve the Church by being transformed into hotels to make money. Empty convents don't belong to you; they are for the flesh of Christ, the refugees. The Lord calls us to welcome them courageously and generously into empty communities, religious houses and convents. (Visit to the *Centro Astalli* for Refugees, September 10, 2013)

This is not the first time we find this reference to the poor as the very flesh of Christ. He said much the same thing in a meeting with major superiors of women to which I will refer a little later: “A theoretical poverty is no use to us. Poverty is learned by touching the flesh of the poor Christ, in the humble, in the poor, in the sick and in children.” (Address to the Plenary Assembly of the International Union of Superiors General, May 8, 2013). He used the same expression four days later at first canonization ceremony of his pontificate. Appropriately, he declared saints two Latin American women religious: Mother Guadalupe García Zavala and Mother Laura Montoya.

The internet allows us to hear how intensely Francis believes that Christ is incarnated in the poor:

[<>>](http://www.romereports.com/palio/pope-celebrates-his-first-canonization-ceremony-those-who-help-the-needy-touch-the-flesh-of-christ-english-10005.html#.UkhS-byHZak)

Francis the Jesuit, Francis the religious, is saying something very important to his fellow religious, to us. The invitation is not merely for us to go from our own comfort to serve at the periphery and then return to our comfort, but rather to bring the periphery to the centre, where we are. This seems to me to be even more challenging. So this becomes my second question: As religious, how do we move from the centre to the periphery, or rather, how do we bring those who inhabit the periphery to the centre?

Lest we interpret poverty and the Church's mission to the poor too narrowly, Francis presents a more sophisticated understanding of our mission:

The Gospel is for all! Going out toward the poor doesn't mean that we must become paupers or some sort of 'spiritual bums!' (It. *diventare pauperisti, o una sorta di 'barboni spirituali'*) No, that's not what it means! It means that we must go towards the flesh of the suffering Jesus, but Jesus' flesh also suffers in those who don't know it, with their studies, their intelligence, their culture. We must go there! That's why I like to use the expression 'go to the outskirts', the existential peripheries. Everyone, all of them, [who suffer] from physical and real poverty to intellectual poverty; this is also real. All the outskirts, all the intersections of paths: go there. And there sow the seed of the Gospel by word and by witness. (Address to the Diocese of Rome Pastoral Convention. 18 June 2013)

III. Praise

The third theme that I would like to suggest for the future of religious life in Canada is perhaps an unusual one: praise. As religious, we need to explore the inner dynamic of our very relationship with God who reveals himself in Christ through the Holy Spirit. I fear that, without this Trinitarian dynamic, our apostolic engagements risk becoming ideological.

I chose the word praise because I think the Christian life at its heart needs to be joyful. And we know that religious life needs to express that joy that is a fruit of the Holy Spirit. Joy is something rather beyond happiness.

Pope Francis links this dynamic of praise to the evangelical poverty necessary for Christians to build up the Church.

The proclamation of the Gospel must follow the path of poverty. The testimony of this poverty: I have no wealth; my wealth is the gift I received, God: this gratuity is our wealth! [...] The other sign is the ability of praise: when an apostle does not live this gratuity, he or she loses the ability to praise the Lord. [...] When we find apostles who want to build a rich Church and a Church without the gratuitousness of praise, the Church becomes old, the Church becomes an NGO, and the Church becomes lifeless. (Homily, June 11, 2013)

We know that popular culture is vacuous and that public discourse has coarsened. Family life is eroding. Human sexuality is being redefined in ways that were unimaginable even a generation ago. Social media is radically restructuring the way we communicate. These too are things we can talk about another day. The internet may be useful but I've never heard it described as joyful. Communication in this way is at best robotic and utilitarian. *Friending* and *de-friending*, *texting* and *sexting*: it's joyless and inhuman, and in its more ugly forms, violent and even fatal.

The very quest for God is not I think a sophisticated form of narcissism. It's rather intrinsic to the evangelizing mission of religious women and men in the Church. Francis is reminding us that as apostolic religious, we don't work or pray merely for ourselves. Worship of God in all its forms from the personal to the communal to the contemplative is the opposite of self-referential. It is radically Other-centered.

In August, Francis spoke to the General Chapter of the Augustinians. In a reflection on the famous quotation from St. Augustine: "our hearts are restless until they rest in you," we read the following:

We can ask ourselves: are restless for God, to proclaim him, to make him known? Or do I become fascinated by a spiritual worldliness that prompts us to do everything for love of self? We consecrated men and women think of our personal interests, of the mere functionality of our works, of careerism; well, of so many things ... Do I think I'm "well set up" in my Christian life, in my priestly life, in my religious life, even in my community life; or do I cherish the power of restlessness for God, for his Word, which moves me to "go out" to others? (Homily for the opening Mass of the General Chapter of the Augustinians, August 28, 2013)

I have to admit that Pope Benedict XVI suffers by comparison. Many of us felt a collective embarrassment with the Vatican's awkward attempt to rein in canonically the LCWR. For Francis, the niceties of canon law and the long arm of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith seem to be among the least of his concerns: in its place we get a unusual message directed to women religious: a call to fecundity and spiritual motherhood. These are very traditional, even antiquated concepts that on his lips sound surprisingly modern. The theme got a little lost in his talk to IUSG with his reference to "zitelle" (old maids).

The consecrated woman is a mother; she must be a mother, not a 'spinster'! Excuse me for speaking like this, but motherhood in the consecrated life is important, this fruitfulness! May this joy of spiritual fecundity motivate your life; be mothers, as a figure of Mary, Mother, and of Mother Church. It is impossible to understand Mary without her motherhood; it is impossible to understand the Church apart from her motherhood and you are icons of Mary and the Church. (Address to the Plenary Assembly of the International Union of Superiors General, May 8, 2013)

It is beyond the scope of this short talk, but Francis is using a variety of feminine images, both positive and negative, to describe the Church. They constitute an important insight into his psychology, his spirituality and his ecclesiology.

The other thing that stands out for me is the constant invitation to joy. In a relaxed address to young women and men religious and seminarians, we get this:

If you find a seminarian, priest, nun, with a long, sad face, if it seems as if in their life someone threw a wet blanket over them,' then one should conclude 'it's a psychiatric problem, they can leave - `buenos dias'. (Address to novices and seminarians, July 6, 2013)

As an aside, for those of us called to leadership in religious life, we cannot fail to take seriously Francis' warning to avoid careerism.

Let us think of the damage done to the People of God by men and women of the Church who are careerists, climbers, who "use" the People, the Church, our brothers and sisters — those they should be serving — as a springboard for their own ends and personal ambitions. These

people do the Church great harm. (Address to the Plenary Assembly of the International Union of Superiors General, May 8, 2013)

But back to our third theme of praise: To be “spiritual” is to be rooted in joy and in solidarity with the poor. There are still people of all ages experiencing the restlessness that St. Augustine wrote about. In this joyous, hope-filled moment for the universal Church, I believe people will be drawn to a very ancient call in the midst of our own restlessness. A chattering internet-infused culture tries to drive this out, but the call of the Gospel is stronger: to become fishers of men and women, to take up the Cross, to die to self, to live in love with the God we cannot see, the God who reveals himself in the poor, the suffering, the marginalized, those whom Francis calls repeatedly, “the flesh of Christ.”

From this dynamic of praise and poverty, in a movement from the centre to the periphery, we find a heart transformed by grace:

Faith tells us that only a new heart, one regenerated by God, can create a new world: a heart 'of flesh' that loves, suffers, and rejoices with others; a heart full of tenderness for those who, bearing the wounds of their lives, feel themselves to be on the outskirts of society. Love is the greatest force for transforming reality because it breaks down the walls of selfishness and fills the chasms that keep us apart from one another.”
(Address to the Diocese of Rome Pastoral Convention, June 18, 2013)

My religious community was founded in 1822; in nine years we will celebrate our bi-centenary. In all likelihood, in that year of celebration we will be fewer in number than we are today, but I don't think that our apostolic religious life will be concluding. Our challenge is the same as it is for many of you; to the extent that as religious women and men we can en flesh the Gospel call to embrace poverty for the kingdom, move toward an existential periphery and bring to our life and ministry an attitude of joy and praise, God's work and our own will continue.